A Monster for You

by Amicia

Summary

When ambition and desire are at odds, which is the force that will dominate? It's a question the Sith Lord Astridel and Imperial Captain Malavai Quinn must some day settle, once and for all. (Spoilers, naturally.)

Notes

This fic has been shlepping around in the background in the back of my brain and my computer for quite a while now, and I've finally decided to start posting it. I'll be playing a little fast and loose with the order of events to make some of the emotional narrative mesh with the active one, as dictated by in-game events.
Imperial Space

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So we were up
Throwing dice in the dark
I saw you late last night come to harm
I saw you dance in the devil's arms

The night kept coming
Really nothing I could do
Eyes with a fire unquenched by peace
Curse the beauty, curse the queen

So fuck your dreams
Don't you pick at our seams
I'll turn into a monster for you if you pay me enough
None of this counts, a few dreams plowed up

- Mumford and Sons, "Monster"

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On the bridge of the Fury, Captain Malavai Quinn weighed his options. Almost by definition, Sith were, to be succinct, rather volatile. His personal experience with them had not been extensive, but they were not universally feared without reason.

Yet, for all her ferocity in battle, Lord Astridel had repeatedly demonstrated a certain forbearance, proving herself as one who gave careful consideration to her situation, her options, and the advice she received – indeed, the advice she openly sought from her retainers, strange as that seemed. He considered, as well, that on more than one prior occasion, she had exhorted him to not shrink from opportunities to speak freely, a circumstance which underscored the reminders he gave himself that although she was his superior, she was not, after all, a member of the Imperial military, and that Sith pursued their secret ambitions and vengeances outside the realm of a disciplined chain of command. Whether that boded well or ill for him, he hardly knew. Quinn took a breath, and opened his mouth.
“My lord, you’ve caused me some difficulty, and I’d like to confirm that it was unintended. Forgive me if I am mistaken, but some time ago it seems you expressed an interest in me beyond our professional relationship.”

There. It was out, and that in tolerably respectful terms. Know Thy Enemy – that ancient military precept – was his guide for life, but he had learned that close on its heels came Know Thy Friends.

Friends? Could such a word be applied to himself and his lord? Or was that presumption? As much presumption as his questioning her aims and motives? In any event, from all he had observed of Lord Astridel, he felt certain she would not instantly blast him with the powers under her command. Well – fairly certain, anyway.

Aware of the captain’s state of internal deliberation, Astridel had been letting him take his time to collect his thoughts while she surveyed a star chart more intently than was necessary. Sensing his decision to speak, she turned and favored him with her full attention. There was a playful note in her voice as she replied, “I’ve left you tossing and turning in your bunk at night, have I?”

Quinn was far more comfortable with the structured modes of accepted military communication, but he was determined not to let her teasing, flirting tone discommode him, although it was nettling that she had hit so close to the mark. A liaison with a Sith Lord was a hazardous scheme to pursue, and not one he had planned on being included in his personal ambitions. It was more than time to establish some firm boundaries; he reinforced his resolve, and aimed for a response that was as delicate as it was honest.

“In a manner of speaking,” he offered. Let her draw what conclusions she would from that confession. “Which is why I bring it up.”

“I see,” she said, her answer as vague as his had been. “It is a more interesting question for me to know why it has caused you difficulty. But please, do continue. You know you may say whatever is on your mind.”

Again that curious openness, he noted, that seemed so unlike the stories of wrathful autocrats he had heard told of the Sith, and occasionally had witnessed for himself. She could have let him squirm under the scrutiny of her more interesting question, but in the past, she had shown an equally curious penchant for exhibiting a certain degree of mercy, when it suited her, and she appeared willing to exhibit it again now. Her sincerity pleased him, and he hoped for the best, rather than feared the worst. He could meet mercy with honesty, at least, and at the same time set a limit that was as much to govern his own behavior as it was to suggest hers. Of course, he could never scold a Sith Lord for ignoring a rule, but he could at least take himself to task for his own transgressions.
“I admit you have a knack for…” Quinn noticed his thoughts were starting to scatter, and he unconsciously squared his shoulders, a refocusing ritual he had long ago stopped being aware of doing, before continuing. “…surprising me. I'm typically swifter on my toes. I should have immediately said that any personal involvement between us could cloud judgment—” – he didn’t specify whose – “—and compromise your campaigns.”

In terms of strategy, it wasn’t a bad tactic. He had made a clear and flattering distinction: he wasn’t rejecting her, he was rejecting their circumstances. To have the gall to overtly reject a Sith Lord – that legendary volatility came to mind again – was a hazard he could not imagine anyone, including himself, undertaking. To reject her herself, as a woman, was a prospect he could not deny he found equally unappealing, though for different reasons.

On board the *Fury*, Astridel typically left her battle mask off, and it was off now. In the tradition of her people, she still wore a form of veil over her sightless, vestigial eye sockets; it covered the upper half of her face, and he had not yet been able to decide whether or not it was a benefit or a detriment that he could thus never make direct eye contact with her. Strictly forcing himself to refrain from letting his gaze wander down the athletic edges of her battle-honed body, Quinn nonetheless still felt his own eyes betray him as they remained fixed below her veil upon the sensuous curve of her full lips – those lips which were moving now to voice her saucy response.

“She was going to kiss him, and Quinn needed neither Force sensitivity nor an extensive tactical study to know it. He had observed her take many a risk before, and was aware that she never did so recklessly, so this – this did not entirely come as a surprise, although he had not calculated this to be the likely outcome of their talk. What *did* surprise him, he realized when he had the leisure to reflect on it later, was the immediacy of his own response. Before his brain had finished analyzing the situation, his body reacted, a half-step to match her whole one to meet her in the distance between, his hands already reaching for her waist and his head already bent to her upturned face, and all his new-made resolutions tossed straight out the nearest airlock.

For a moment, he heard the rapid surging of his heart loud in his ears and felt the taste of her lips against his before his cautious consciousness caught up with him. Astridel sensed the change, and did not force the contact to continue, letting the kiss come to its natural end and stepping back, dropping her hands from where they had rested on his arms. She knew exactly how far she had enticed him out of himself, and that victory was sufficient for now. She would gain nothing, and perhaps might lose her favorite, by pushing it. Astridel quietly let Quinn have a moment to gather himself.
“This...” Quinn paused, trying to assemble his disordered thoughts to form a sufficiently politic answer. “My lord, I am drawn to you, make no mistake. But this should not continue. It's improper.”

Astridel didn't see a point in stating she was drawn to him, as well – for had she not told him as much just now, without words? She was not averse to letting him wonder over their situation and their relationship. He had such a talent for strategic analytics that she considered it a favor to give him a puzzle to work out as he lay awake at nights. Too often, Astridel thought, Sith were so goal-oriented that they rushed through their actions, speeding their plans to the most desired outcome with a feverish and futile urgency. And once achieved, a new scheme promptly took place of the old, with the executors never stopping to enjoy the outcome of all their toil and plotting, yet never realizing the thrill of the chase was more than half the fun. Astridel had been very much enjoying the slow burn of this affair, and was anticipating continuing to enjoy it.

“Perhaps,” she acknowledged his objection, “but you might find that the very impropriety of it is what makes it so exciting.”

She had more than enough self-assurance to know that the impropriety was just an added spice to a delicious dish, and suspected that he realized that, as well. This was something other than a simple temptation to cross a regulation. When he analyzed the events later, as she had no doubt he would, she was satisfied that he would come to much the same conclusion, and it would not be likely to help his moments of sleeplessness. So let him have his boundary, she thought – it would be a temporary one.

“I'm in no rush, Quinn,” she relented, and she could sense the disappointment that mingled with his relief. She was certain he would analyze that, as well.

“You've given me much to think about, my lord,” Quinn conceded. Quite the understatement, indeed. And now he was faced with the awkward necessity of extricating himself from this situation as gracefully as possible. Most at home with responsibility, he concluded, “I will return to my duties, then.”

“You can have the bridge,” Astridel stepped aside, clearing the path to the command chair. To know when, and how, to make an exit was a skill not enough people were attentive to. “I am retiring to my quarters. When you need a break, call Vette to take over for you. Good night, Quinn.”

With that, she was gone, and he listened to the sound of her footsteps fading down the corridor for a moment before sitting down and turning his thoughts to her final words. Were they meant only as a dutiful briefing? An emphasis that she did not wish to be disturbed? Or, with a clear indication of where she would be and that Vette would be occupied, was it actually an unspoken invitation? How much did she intend for him to read between the lines? He was not a fanciful man, but he imagined he could still feel the warm pressure of her lips against his, a phantom tingle that persisted in his flesh.
and tricked his blood into running warmer than he felt it normally did. Her lips were soft, he recalled, then he shook himself: Of course they were. She wasn't a droid!

His aborted resolution arose, confronting his speculations and condemning his behavior, and he felt his irritation at his own uncharacteristically weak-willed inability to maintain it for even just moments from its inception. Pursuing these taunting what-ifs would do nothing to reinforce the edict he hoped to lay himself under, and their undermining influence was something he could little afford to indulge. It was clear what her desires were, and he was forced to admit that he would need to sort out his own, and that sooner rather than later. It was said that no man could serve two masters, and Quinn, with the disgrace in his military career apparently on the verge of diminishing completely, was acutely aware that he had more than one master claiming his loyalty and skill. So long as their various aims aligned, there was no danger, but how much longer could such a scenario last? A dangerous game. Quinn, he told himself, sighing, a dangerous game, and one you need to stop.

Still, his overactive mind kept turning the matter over and over as he sat up the long hours, pacing between the bridge consoles rather than returning to his own quarters. Sleep was not likely to come for him, and on the bridge, there was the welcome prospect of work to keep his thoughts in order. He did not call Vette. Quinn was uncomfortable with the notion of the undisciplined Twi'lek having an Imperial ship in her hands. She was a mouthy little baggage, and he wasn't in the mood to handle her chatter, particularly if she ever caught an inkling of what was on his mind. She could be amusing enough, to be sure, and he didn't waste time wondering why Lord Astridel kept her around – Vette was Astridel's slave, after all, although he felt that distinction had been eased long before he met the pair on Balmorra.

At the time, he had been somewhat shocked to see the level of confidence Lord Astridel placed in this alien girl, and belatedly, he had only then properly registered in his mind that Astridel herself was an alien, a Miraluka, something he still often forgot to take conscious note of. Quinn had grown up with the conventional Imperial knowledge that humans and pureblood Siths were, by simple fact, the superior races. The lesser races had their purposes and their talents, of course – why send a loyal Imperial citizen to work a mine when there were so many Advozse to do the job instead? – and it had been eye-opening to realize that Darth Baras had handpicked Astridel as his apprentice in spite of her inferior blood.

Inferior? Quinn reflected that he could not but acknowledge that she was his superior in several ways, and the superior to many another human Sith or Jedi that she had cut down throughout the lengthening string of successful missions that stretched behind her. She had a raw power that the Empire as a whole was only just beginning to gauge the depths of. How far would that alone take her? How far would he help her on that path? He didn't know that any more than he knew how deep her skill with the Force ran.

He moved down his mental roster of the ship to their newest recruit, Jaesa, the Padawan that Lord Astridel had so cunningly enticed away from the Light side under the very noses of her Jedi Masters. Although young and uneducated in the ways of the Dark side, she more closely aligned with Quinn's notions of the intemperate Sith: swayed only by her personal hatreds and passions, power-hungry,
cruel, and ambitious. He had felt some alarm when Lord Astridel took Jaesa as her apprentice, but the girl seemed loyal – so far – and deeply grateful for the education Astridel was bestowing upon her.

At this point in his contemplations, it dawned on him that a less scrupulous man would take full advantage of being the only man on board a ship otherwise populated by three women. Of course, any man that pursued that course of action was not only truly unscrupulous, but also highly unlikely to enjoy a substantially long life. As an officer and a gentleman, he instead had the dubious honor of living alongside three non-military women aboard a ship that was small enough to boast only a single lavatory. He might speak to the ship’s droid about that. Just the installation of a basin sink would be a boon for his daily shave, even if it had to be placed in the cargo hold.

A flicker on the comm console caught his attention, and he turned to it gratefully, welcoming the interruption of a train of thoughts that fared promising to continue uncomfortably until they had exhausted themselves of their own volition, disregarding his attempts to the contrary. He pushed all these unsettling contemplations to the back of his mind and set his restless energies to the task of working through the static of the message.

Chapter End Notes

New fic! I wrote a lot of this quite some time ago, and am just editing it to post now. It's not finished, by any means, so I'll need to get back to work on it soon - but I would like to finish "Clouds and Colors" first.

The work title comes from the song quoted at the beginning of this chapter - "Monster" by Mumford and Sons. It seems to fit this pair rather well.
In space, there was no such thing as a proper night or day, so on the *Fury*, “night” was any time personnel headed to their bunks to sleep, and “morning” was any time personnel returned from such. With the rotating shift schedule needed on a ship with so small a crew, “night” and “morning” easily became the same thing, depending who was rising and who was retiring. And so, when Astridel returned to the bridge, refreshed from her nap, her greeting was not unusual, and her tone was casual. “Good morning, Quinn. Still at it? Your diligence never fails to impress. And I think you have something to report, unless I miss my guess.”

To business straightaway, then. He was pleased – again Lord Astridel displayed her talent for quickly sensing a serious situation, and leaving personal considerations out of the picture for the moment. Pleased, and grateful.

“Yes, my lord,” he went promptly to the point. “I've been tracking a series of broken Imperial signals on an encrypted channel. Tremendous interference. I've identified the source – Major Ovech, commander of Moff Broysc's elite infiltrator unit – but that's all.”

“Moff Broysc,” Astridel repeated, with a grimace of distaste. “Again his name comes up. How often is that man given license to make a mess of things?”

“He oversees a considerable Imperial force, unfortunately.” Quinn refrained from voicing his disgust overtly, but it was there, hidden in the measured tones he carefully employed.

“This Major Ovech. Do you know him? Is he the sort to lose his head in a crisis?” In short, was this a wild goose chase, or a distraction to squander our own resources?

“I served with Major Ovech under Moff Broysc. The man is an unmatched officer,” Quinn answered honestly. “Moff Broysc's command ship does not respond when hailed. My gut says there's trouble. Permission to investigate further?”

Without hesitation, Astridel answered, “Of course. I know you wouldn't waste time with anything that wasn't important.”

Quinn was gratified by this mark of confidence, and made an effort to keep it from tweaking at his
emotions. Major Ovech's situation was potentially dire, and if so, it would require his focus without
distraction. Replying, “Thank you, my lord,” he then turned back to the comm console while Lord
Astridel settled into the command chair and awaited his results. She didn't have long to wait; Quinn
had already had a fair start on decrypting the scrambled messages, and he was already working at
piecing them together to get a clearer view of the matter.

Quinn raised his head from the console. “My lord, I was able to clear the channel and get to the
bottom of Major Ovech's relays. He's in a state of emergency. I've managed to get a message to him,
and he is available to respond. Patching him through now.”

Without a reply, Lord Astridel engaged the autopilot and led the way from the bridge to the large
holocommunicator in the adjoining room, where Quinn dialed up the frequency codes to Ovech's
communicator. In a moment, the blue-white hologram flickered to life, showing a middle-aged man.
He was clearly a lifelong campaigner, and held himself with an air of confident competence, even
under what was undeniably stressful circumstances.

“My lord,” the major began with evident satisfaction, “your captain there is one in a million. I'd given
up hope that anyone out there would hear my distress calls.”

Astridel smiled. “Quinn is indeed the best. He's proven himself invaluable to me on many
occasions.”

He wasn't entirely comfortable with being so openly praised, but neither could he avoid the small
flush of pleasure the words gave him.

Ovech gave a curt nod. “Wish I still had him in my detail. Probably would have avoided this. But
enough pleasantries; I'm sure you're not interested in this being a social call. To get to the point, Moff
Broysc dispatched me and my officers to a secret weapons storehouse on Cato Nemoidia. Trouble is,
it ain't a secret no more. We're holed up, surrounded by Republic forces. Trying to get Broysc to
send the rest of my unit – but he's gone radio silent.”

“It's worse than that, my lord,” Quinn interposed. “The major's ship has been commandeered by
Broysc's personal commandos and ordered to stay put.”

“That tears it,” Ovech snapped in exasperation. “Seen is a hundred times with Broysc. Better to cut
bait and let good soldiers die than to admit a mistake.”

Astridel frowned thoughtfully. “I don't think it's a mistake, Major. I think you've been set up. Sounds
more like Broysc wants you dead, Major. Any idea why?”
“Same reason he demoted and exiled your Captain, I'm guessing.” Ovech shrugged. “I'm his only officer who's not shy about my opinion.” There was a sudden flurry of blaster fire overheard in the background, and Ovech glanced over his shoulder, his serious face going even more grave. “Enemy was pausing between breaths. They're gearing up to charge again. Looks like the end of the line for me. But I'm not going out without a fight. Ovech out!”

The holocommunicator flickered and the image of Ovech vanished. Quinn turned to Astridel, his face intent. “My lord, Major Ovech would be a terrible loss. I served on his ship, know it like the back of my hand. I can infiltrate and try to restore command to his men. Then they would be free to join the fight.”

Cato Nemoidia wasn't far from their current position. If the Major could hold out for a few hours more, and Quinn were successful, he and his men stood a decent chance of survival. But one man against a Moff’s personal elite?

“All by yourself?” she asked, “You're going to take on an entire troop of commandos alone? It's not that I doubt your abilities, Quinn, but those are some long odds.”

He was as amenable to a calculated risk as she, and he had had time to calculate those risks as he worked to decrypt Ovech's transmissions. “A frontal assault would take too long and risk losing or damaging the ship. Given Moff Broyse's incompetence, I can't know what orders he might have given regarding a Republic attack, and an armed response on our part might lead them to believe they have been boarded by Republic troops. My plan is to infiltrate and liberate.”

“Best done as a solo operation; I concur,” Lord Astridel nodded. “You know the men; you know the ship. Make your preparations. I am setting course for Cato Nemoidia.”

Quinn inclined his head respectfully. “Thank you, my lord. I'll give you a full report when I return!”

Short hours later, the Fury lay in quiet hiding in the umbra behind a small, misshapen moon orbiting Cato Nemoidia. After setting the comm to radio silence outside the system, she had fired the engine in a short sharp burst, then cut the ship's power, coasting it carefully into position by the orbiting asteroid with only a few touches of the maneuvering thrusters. It wasn't an easy stunt to pull off, and Astridel gave it her full attention, only dimly aware of the captain standing silent a few paces from her elbow. Quinn appreciated competence for its own sake, and he boosted his assessment of Astridel's piloting skill.
“This is as close as I can get you,” Lord Astridel turned towards him. The Major's ship hung in a low orbit above the planet. “The transport pod is small enough to get you through their shields. I can hold this position safely for eleven hours. If you are ready, then go now.”

After that time, the rotation of the planet would bring them into the fringes of the Nemoidian dust cloud, which risked both detection and damage to the ships engines.

“Thank you, my lord. I hope it will not take that long. I will depart at once,” Quinn answered, crossing to the door of the bridge.

“Malavai.” Astridel's voice had not risen, but it stopped him short. It was the first time she had addressed him by his given name, but there was no softness to her tone. “I intend to have uses for you in the future. It is my expectation that you will return unscathed. Am I clear?”

“Perfectly, my lord.” Nonetheless, as he slipped the tiny transport pod under the bow of the major's ship, aligning it with the docking port, he noted that it was anything but. She was not generally given to sentimentality, and, but for the use of his personal name, he would not take her words as anything other than face value – her plans for her future would rely in some measure on his tactical input. But that one word, his name, spun all the rest of her speech into a muddle. Perhaps she intended it as a double meaning. Perhaps she didn't. Perhaps she wasn't even entirely certain herself.

He typed in the protocol override that would prevent consoles on the bridge from alerting the crew to the use of a docking airlock, and hoped the Moff hadn't changed the security codes since Major Ovech had transmitted them to him. It was the sort of simple matter that the Moff was likely to overlook.

Quinn smiled to himself as the docking port light clicked to green, and opened. No alarms. It appears that the Moff hadn't considered changing the codes after all. Slipping noiselessly into the ship, he paused at the first wall panel he came to and glanced over a quick scan of the ship's lifeforms. A concentration on the bridge – those would be the commandos, exactly where he had expected them to be, with one or two milling about various corridors on some sort of desultory patrol. The remainder of Major Ovech's men appeared to be split between the brig and a couple of cargo holds, all indicated to be locked. He reflected, once again, on how a man as stupid as Broysc could have been given a Moff’s command, even with the number of influential friends he had.

Slipping along the empty corridors, Quinn headed straight to engineering, where he knew a console with direct access to the ship's security systems stood. The security codes from Ovech worked their magic here, as well, and he disabled the ship's alert systems, locking down the bridge and overriding the bridge consoles. With luck, he would still have some time before anyone on the bridge figured it out. Less cautiously now, he hurried to the first cargo bay, where a single guard stood lazily beside the door. Two swift steps were enough to bring him within arms' reach of the man, and before he
had the chance to turn, Quinn had slipped his arm around the guard's neck. Caught unawares, the guard flailed ineffectually, his eyes bulging as he gasped. In a moment, Quinn felt him go limp, and he quietly laid the unconscious man out on the floor and turned to the cargo bay control panel, rapidly releasing the locks. Speed was now of the essence over stealth – the troops must be freed, the ship reclaimed, order restored, and a rescue force mounted to rush to Major Ovech's assistance.

The door opened, and he stuck his head inside. “Any man who would like to save his commander, come with me.”

The Moff's commandos on the bridge gave up without a fight to the squad Quinn sent up. Doubtless, Broysc would be furious, but Quinn rightly predicted that the Moff had not ordered them to fire on their comrades-in-arms.

“We're ready to head to the planet,” the Red Squad leader reported. “Transport is ready to leave. Are you joining us, Captain? We're not sure what we will find down there, and you seem like you might be handy in a fight.”

It wasn't strictly within the latitude of action Lord Astridel had permitted him, although he considered it within the purview of his mission: to rescue Major Ovech and his troops. “I'll come,” he answered.

On the Fury, on the single console retaining power, Astridel noted the signal of a transport ship heading for the planet's surface. Good news, presumably, and she turned her attention back to the game of dejarik she was playing with Vette. She had given the captain eleven hours. Let him have his time.

Chapter End Notes

Quinn is perhaps one of the most polarizing characters in the game, and perhaps because of that, he quickly became a favorite of mine - at least, out of the companions I have met so far; I still haven't finished all the story lines, and am only familiar with about half the romances available to female PCs - Vector, Quinn, Iresso, and Torian, although I haven't finished that last one, either. Sadly, I haven't had time to play much - or write - over the last 4-6 months.

Anyway, I've found that there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of indifference where Quinn is concerned - either a player really likes him, or really hates him (or likes him until they really hate him). But he has a great backstory, and is very well written; while Vector remains my all-time favorite thanks to his extremely nuanced and layered history, Quinn's is a worthy second. He's so repressed that Astridel took a wicked glee in making him uncomfortable. (Hey, I never said this was going to be a story about a
healthy relationship!}
Armed with fresh blasters from the quartermaster, Quinn burrowed down into cover alongside the troops, worming his shoulder down into a hollow behind a rock. The Republic forces had dug in hard, and had been pressing their advantage against Ovech's forces; the arrival of reinforcements had not, as he had hoped, led the Republic troops to cut and run. He was a little surprised at their discipline and ferocity; they appeared to be determined to fight to the last man rather than retreat. Quinn stretched up and hazarded a glance over the top of the protecting rock, then jerked down as the top of it exploded in a cloud of shattered stone fragments.

“They've got a sniper, damn it all,” he frowned to the sergeant beside him.

“Yes, sir, and I think I was able to pinpoint him on that last shot. There, in the shrubs on that outcrop,” the sergeant gestured.

Quinn risked another brief look. “I think you are correct. Sharp eyes, my friend. Give me a grenade and some cover fire. I'm flanking around.”

“Right you are, sir,” nodded the sergeant, who then raised his voice to his troops. “All right, mates! Give the sons-of-bitches another!” When he looked back, Quinn was gone. Moments later, a roar erupted from the shrub-shrouded hillside above the Republic position. Quinn's grenade had found its mark. Little thinking their sharpshooter vulnerable, the Republic forces were caught unawares, and the Imperial troops rapidly seized the opportunity. With ferocious shouts, the Imperials surged from cover, and the broken Republic line was, at the last, utterly shattered.

“Quinn!” Ovech shouted in clear delight, crossing the field as the troops secured the area, “I knew it was you, you magnificent bastard. Who else, I said to myself, who else would be so timely?”

“I am glad to have been of service, of course,” Quinn answered with a bow, modest in spite of the pride he felt. “And your ship is secure. Your men hold the bridge, and you may return Moff Broysc's commandos to him at your leisure.”

“Broysc,” Ovech spat, “I'm sure he'll come up some other way to discredit us, just give him time. But that's thoughts for a later point.” Ovech's relieved exuberance couldn't be quelled. “For now, I'm just glad as many of us are alive as are! It won't take but an hour or so to finish here – seize what weapons we can from the cache, and destroy the rest. I've got men emptying the depot now, and then
it will just be up to Boomer to set the charges. You don't mind staying? Be some damned fine fireworks, I think.”

“Of course, sir, I am at your disposal.” Sending a transport back to the Major's ship with but one man aboard was a waste of resources. It made more sense to return alongside Ovech and his troops.

Watching the fire-laced dust cloud carry the remains of the weapons depot into the sky, Quinn took a few moments to allow himself to relish the feeling of a job well done. Ovech rescued, his troops saved, a bloodless coup to restore Ovech to his rightful position aboard his own ship, and Broyse's schemes thwarted. Perhaps the Moff had been taken down a peg or two, as well, although he agreed with Ovech's assessment that this would but make the man the more determined to destroy the lives of his more competent subordinates. But for now, he could enjoy the victory. Lord Astridel could not fail to be pleased when he reported to her.

Astridel. During the battle, he had succeeded in locking away all this thoughts of her and their situation, but now, they returned in a rush. They dwelt in his brain as he sat in the transport, chatting with the exultant troops as they returned to Ovech's ship, and as he took his leave of Ovech, and as he undocked his transport pod from the ship's port. He suddenly felt very tired. He tried to count how long it had been since he had slept, working back from the fight on Cato Nemoidia, through his single-handed seizing of the Major's ship, then planning the mission after hours of decrypting Ovech's messages, which had been preceded by – he paused, tripped up in his calculation by the thrill of excitement that had abruptly gripped him as his memory flooded with the recollection of the sensation of her lips on his, despite his resolutions for self-control. And it had been a full enough day before that particularly memorable display. It seemed ridiculous that the prospect of returning to Lord Astridel's side unsettled him more than the prospect of facing down a Moff's elite commandos and fighting skilled Republic soldiers.

He piloted the pod around the asteroid, and flicked the lights, the pre-arranged signal to end radio silence. Someone would be watching for it. He suspected it would be Lord Astridel herself, and he wasn't sure how to feel about it. Get a grip, he told himself. You are acting like a Nautolan schoolgirl. Where is your professionalism?

The comm crackled to life. “Four hours to spare,” came the Sith Lord's keen voice. “I'll take this as a definitive sign of success.”

“And indeed, my lord,” he answered. “I will dock and provide you with an immediate report.”

As Quinn stepped from the pod onto the Fury, he caught a distorted glimpse of himself reflected in the shiny metal surface of the airlock wall. He glanced down at himself, chagrined at his appearance. His uniform was rumpled and dusty from lying in the dirt, the leather of his boots and belts scuffed and dull. A day's – or more? – growth of stubble covered his cheeks, and a lock of his dark hair,
normally strictly combed into place, drooped over his brow from a disordered tangle. Privately, Astridel, leaning her shoulder nonchalantly against the hatchway door to the pod hangar, thought he had never before looked so adorable.

“Welcome back, Captain, and congratulations on your victory,” she greeted him.

“My lord, I am pleased to report, Major Ovech and most of his soldiers have been saved. I was able to infiltrate Ovech's starship and seize control of the operating systems. I identified where his men were being held, freed them, and locked Moff Broysc's occupying force on the bridge.”

Astridel nodded approvingly. “Bloodless and brilliant. Nicely done, Quinn. In truth, I'm once again thankful you're on our side.”

Quinn wished he did not get such ready pride from her approbation, or that he could more easily restrict his gratitude for her praise to the professional level he told himself he wanted to maintain. This was becoming more and more difficult to keep from affecting him personally. He continued his report.

“You're too kind, my lord,” he acknowledged. “Ovech's men promptly rescued him.”

“Which I think you had a hand in, as well,” Astridel surmised knowingly, sweeping her eyes over his disordered uniform.

“I did, my lord. I beg your pardon for my appearance.” He could feel a self-conscious heat beginning to creep into his cheeks.

“Think nothing of it. The disheveled look suits you.”

That did nothing for his embarrassment. He cleared his throat and continued his report. “Ovech's mission on the planet has also been a success. I am aware it was not exactly part of the mission parameters I had originally relayed to you, but I felt bound to continue until knowing for certain that the situation had been resolved to its most optimal conclusion.”

“No, no, you did right,” Astridel approved, with a wave of her hand. “Governing you too strictly would be an error; you do your best work when unconstrained by too officious oversight. I think you were quite wasted in the regular military rank and file. While the military has need of those like you and Major Ovech, I wonder what you could accomplish if you were less restrained. Too often in the military, talent can be overlooked, or deliberately suppressed. But these are things you already
“Yes, my lord,” Quinn could not but agree with her; he had felt the same many times since the disgrace he had received at Moff Broysc’s hands. “The Empire is stronger with Major Ovech. It would have been a shame if he was squandered. Thank you for the opportunity. I’ll return to my duties.”

“Quinn.”

“My lord?”

“Get some sleep.”

“Yes, of course, my lord.”

In his quarters, Quinn flung himself on his bunk still fully clothed, weary to the bone. Normally, he enjoyed the simple rituals of brushing his uniform and hanging it neatly, and there were very few times he did otherwise. He had hoped that his mission would have helped to drive the thoughts of Lord Astridel from his mind – thoughts he had rebuked himself as being unworthy of entertaining towards his commander – and so it had... briefly. When it was over, she had returned to what he now realized was her accustomed place, even without her physical presence near him. Even just thinking about her – the sardonic smile, the keen wit, the peculiar grace she displayed in battle – was enough to prod his heart into a more rapid beat, and that was before his mind turned again to the kiss she had given him, and that he had found himself eager to return. Given half the chance, he would do it again, and more. It was a damnably annoying thing to find his own body so eager to betray him and the self-control he generally held over himself. He had never had an issue before overcoming physical urges before by a simple exertion of will, which meant that either his will had failed him now, or that this was something other than a mere physical urge.

Had his will failed him? He wondered. He was as astute and conscientious of his duties as ever -indeed, even more so now that he had a second chance at a decent career. And was that second chance the only reason he was so assiduous in the performance of his duty? A second chance was a powerful motivator, and an opportunity he had no intention to let slip through his fingers, and yet he could not honestly say that it comprised the only driving factor in his life.

Was it that he was striving for her attention and praise? It was an uncomfortable line of thought to pursue, but he opted not to shirk. He had sought the commendation of his superior officers before, but Lord Astridel was not an officer. She was a Sith. What benefit would that bring him or his career? She was but an apprentice to a more powerful Darth, subject to the commands he laid upon her. And Baras himself was beholden to the Dark Council member Darth Vengean. If either of them
took it in his head that Quinn was expendable, it likely would be Astridel who would be ordered to bring him his death. She could not save him, nor could she directly advance him. She could bring him no immediate gains, except to let him ride her coattails like a contemptible toady as she rose higher in the ranks of the Sith, and to fall alongside her, should that come to pass.

So again, when mere adequacy would suffice to keep him useful to Lord Astridel, why did he continually seek accomplishment that would bring him her esteem? Was it just his personal pride? Why did his otherwise stalwart will falter in the face of her approval? He had been circling around the crux of the matter for days, and he would not permit himself to have the shame of shrinking from it any longer. To deny it further would be a lie: he was already emotionally compromised.

Tossing and turning in his bunk, indeed.

Quinn was irritated to note that the admission had not had the calming effect he had hoped. In fact, the recognition seemed to have increased his agitation rather than diminished it, for he was again faced with the unsolvable issue he had been dodging: what to do about it. His attempt to ensure a professional boundary had had the opposite effect, and it was clear that Astridel was content to let him torment himself until he responded to her advances of his own volition. He sighed and sat up, scrubbing his hand over his face, then stood and began his usual routine, unbuckling the belts of his uniform and slipping off the jacket. By going through the methodical ritual, it would perhaps relax him enough to allow him the sleep he knew he badly needed. With rest, he would be more equipped to shelve his inconsiderate feelings, maintain his usual dutiful efficiency, and face a new day at Astridel's side.

Chapter End Notes

One of the things I found quite intriguing about the Warrior storyline is that it placed the female main character in the somewhat less usual role of being the sexual harrasser instead of the sexually harrassed. Just about every story line in SWTOR has a hint - or more - of ethics violations when it comes to the romances, most of them in the form of a workplace romance between a boss and a subordinate. It's more-or-less of necessity, just because of the way the game must be structured to be playable with companions. But there is a reason every corporate workplace with an HR department with any amount of awareness has an annual training on workplace ethics, with romantic engagements being always, always, always part of that.

If you're looking for a primer on how to handle a workplace romance, THIS IS NOT IT. Planting a kiss on an unwilling direct report is never a good idea. Just sayin'.

Come to think of it, planting a kiss on anybody unwilling isn't a good idea, either.
It had been some few weeks since Astridel had claimed her title of Sith Lord and begun training Jaesa as her apprentice. Much of her time had been occupied with launching Jaesa on the path of an adept of the Dark Side, and Jaesa was an eager student. Unexpectedly, Astridel treated her with the same sort of free affection she used towards Vette, and with the same openness she had encouraged in Quinn. He was again surprised; Astridel seemed to act far aside from the usual mold of a Sith – and yet, he saw she was in no danger of turning into a milksop Jedi, that much was clear.

Darth Baras had sent them to Nar Shaddaa to assassinate a Republic general and push the galaxy towards the open warfare that Darth Vengean so fiercely desired. Darth Baras' intelligence indicated a number of Imperials were meeting the Republic general to feed him information, and Astridel didn't flinch from demanding the privilege of schooling the defectors in the rewards for treason. Quinn actually had found himself biting his cheeks to prevent himself from laughing at the confusion of the pathetic creature Fawste, a weakling Chiss who had thought to betray the Empire, as Lord Astridel blithely lied that Fawste had been acting as a double agent, leading her right to the General. Whether it was true or not was irrelevant: the General was dead, and the traitors had received their just desserts.

Darth Baras was happy, which boded well. Lord Astridel was equally pleased; she had Vette call up a few acquaintances for a night out; apparently, a repeat of some prior victory celebration. Quinn was even more startled to discover these friends were an assortment of alien races, and he was working out a way to respectfully excuse himself to the ship when Lord Astridel leaned towards him. He swallowed down a sudden tremble of emotion that choked him and which he could not immediately define as either a hope or a fear that she was about to kiss him again. Her scent filled his nose and her breath was warm beside his ear as she uttered in a low voice, “Lighten up, Quinn. This is a party. You are allowed to enjoy yourself. But if it is so much a torture, you can keep an eye on the ship.”

He could not help but feel it was a magnanimous gesture, and he felt equally sure she would be disappointed if he took her up on it. After all, she had chosen him to assist in the assassination of the General, and she was generously feting the success of their joint endeavor. He heartily approved of her decision to execute the traitors, so he had no reason to appear sullen or ungrateful. And, for all their inferiority, these fellows of Vette's did seem to know how to have a good time. What harm would there be in one evening? “You are right, of course, my lord,” he agreed with a genuine smile. “If nothing else, I would accompany you to ensure you all don't get into too much trouble. Just trouble enough.”

It was hours later that they at last made their way back to the *Fury*, with Jaesa supporting the stumbling Vette, who had found she had needed, in fact, *many* more drinks. Who knew that Captain Fussybritches, the rigid Imperial officer, had had such a sense of humor hidden under all that stuffiness?

“She's going to be feeling that one for a while,” Astridel shook her head, but sounded amused nonetheless as she watched the two young women stagger through the door to their joint quarters.

“I doubt Jaesa will be feeling much better,” Quinn agreed. He noted that Astridel had been moderate with her own consumption, and seemed unaffected now, although she had behaved as merrily as any of them. It was a side of her he had never seen: her battle mask off in public, her mouth open as she laughed uninhibited, the grace of her movements now entangled with a sort of eager joyousness unlike what he typically observed in her battles. He had heard her speak of the power of emotion to connect to the Dark Side of the Force, and had assumed that it was only anger and hatred that linked the two, but he saw now that this had been an incorrect supposition. Most Sith, it appeared, did use rage to fuel their use of the Force, but that was perhaps not the only emotion to feel to do so. Another instance, he noted, of how she set herself apart from the common Sith, yet without being even remotely at risk of shifting towards the empty, passionless sterility of the insufferable Jedi. With everything he saw of her, the more he respected and appreciated her, and the more he liked her. The more – dare he use the word, even to himself? – he loved her.

“Force sobering,” Astridel broke into his thoughts. “If Jaesa can figure it out, she'll be better off.”

So it wasn't only an matter of moderation. That explained some things. “You won't tell her, my lord?” he inquired.

“I could. But it's the sort of thing where it's better if you have to work it out for yourself. It gives you a *much* stronger appreciation for the technique. Fortunately, I don't think you or I will have any such trouble.” He had kept a temperate pace, as well, disliking the feeling of impairment when surrounded by such unknown circumstances, but he recognized he wasn't perfectly sober.

“No, my lord.”

“Always the prudent one. Well, we leave for Dromund Kaas first thing in the morning. Darth Baras wishes to personally congratulate us on our achievement.”

“Congratulate *you*, my lord,” Quinn clarified.
“But where would I be without you to patch me up?” She favored him with a smile that made him ache to seize her in his arms. He shifted his weight and stood at ease, with one hand gripping the other behind his back. “It’s nearly as much your victory as mine. Don’t be too quick to give away praise you’ve fairly earned; it reeks of false modesty, which is a disgusting habit. Good night, Quinn.”

“Yes, my lord, good night,” he murmured.

She vanished into her quarters, and for the faintest of moments, Quinn was on the verge of following her, then he turned sharply and headed for his own. He would not fall victim to the humiliating prevarication that he would never have done it except for the alcohol. When he went – he caught and corrected himself – if he went, it would be of his own deciding. He pressed his fingertips to his forehead and sighed, rebuking himself for having had the thought in the first place. No, he scolded himself, he wasn’t going to go, period. Full stop. It was all too improper – and yet, more and more, he felt himself in a trap that was closing slowly about him, from which he was making no genuine move to extricate himself.

In her room, Astridel set aside her armor, the durable protection she wore like a second skin every day, and laid her lightsabers on the desk within easy reach. Stripping down to her undergarments, she pulled a loose robe about her shoulders, then seated herself cross-legged on the rug that separated her skin from the cold metal flooring of the ship, taking a deep, slow breath.

She had some time ago learned that meditation was somewhat more of a Jedi habit than a Sith one, although it wasn’t unheard of among those devoted to the Dark Side. For many Sith, it required a level of discipline that might be annoying to cultivate, or perhaps that the confines of its structure felt too much like interference with the unbridled power of the Dark Side of the Force; maybe that was why it was not taught as a necessary part of training. Or perhaps many Sith wished to avoid affiliation with so common a Light Side practice, a ritual of communing with the Force that the Jedi frequently engaged in to restore their health and spirit by contemplation of balance, or emptiness, or passivity, or whatever such nonsense was so central to their tedious dogma.

Astridel had no use for such an avenue of thought, but after her experience with the Sand Demon of Tatooine, confronting the Light Side shadow of herself, she had come to pursue the activity in her own way. Instead of purging her emotions as a Jedi, she took this time to engage them. She used the meditation to call up the memory of all she had felt that day, or in days or weeks past, and probed each, letting the feelings wash through her, down to each nerve and sinew. Every irritation, every delight, every hatred, every pleasure, every bolt of anger and every dart of glee, she focused on each in turn, nursing them into establishing a greater connection to the Force. It was a satisfying activity, one that turned her inward on herself without the distractions of the emotions or morals of others around her.

Having finished this reflection, Astridel turned her Force-tuned senses outward. She could detect
Vette sprawled on her cot, not truly asleep but not either fully awake to the misery of her queasy stomach. Poor Vette. She would find the morning worse than the night, no doubt, and Astridel smiled to herself without malice at her companion's self-inflicted plight. Jaesa was faring marginally better; through her haze, she had apparently muddled out some Force technique to purge some of the alcohol from her system, and she seemed to have fallen asleep. Astridel noted that Jaesa was genuinely content with her lot, and had no regrets for the Jedi path she had left behind. So much the better.

After Tatooine, before finding Jaesa on Alderaan, Quinn had ventured to ask Astridel why she had chosen to spare Jaesa's old Jedi master, Yonlach, contrary to the command Darth Baras had given. Astridel wasn't often one to provide liberal explanations for her actions, but she could tell he was poised to disapprove of her decision to do so, and it suited her more that she kept his approbation.

“My lord, Yonlach is a Jedi master and a prominent teacher of their padawans. Tactically, it is dangerous to let him live,” Quinn had pointed out.

“It is,” Astridel agreed. “But there are worse things than death, particularly for an old man who was so ready to peacefully welcome his own.”

“My lord?”

“Think of it this way, Quinn. For all that the Jedi flaunt the supposed virtue of their detachment, they are no more emotionless than you or I, that much is plain. If they were so empty, that would mean they truly care about nothing. What could be more nihilistic? What could be Darker? Yet they are proud to make these claims, boasting these emotional voids. This instead makes them liars and hypocrites, and that is something we can use to our advantage. You could see yourself how much Yonlach cared for his padawan, and Darth Baras is relying on her love for her master and her other emotional ties to be the factor to drive her into our hands. I am as determined as Darth Baras that Jaesa will join the Dark Side. I will make this happen. And Yonlach, with his affection for the girl, cannot fail to feel it when she crosses over. He will know the exact instant that the Dark Side claims her. By granting him the small mercy of the remnants of his paltry life, I have ensured that he will know the torment of his failure, and the irrevocable loss of the padawan the Jedi have so foolishly pinned all their hopes on. He will live out the remainder of his pathetic days haunted by this thought.”

Quinn blinked, momentarily stunned. Darth Baras, he was beginning to think, might be underestimating the ruthless cunning of his apprentice, and he made a mental note not to make the same mistake.

Jaesa, for her part, seemed to give no further thought to her old master, unless it was to lump him in with the entirety of the Jedi order whose edicts and regulations had left her feeling so chained and
restricted. For the first time in her life, she had a taste of freedom, and Astridel intended to ensure that her new apprentice would not come to resent the guidance she gave as a new hindrance. For now, all was well on that front.

And this now brought her to Quinn. What a deep one was he! So starched and responsible, but so clearly possessing a passionate heart hidden below. He kept it well in check, but it flared out at times, when his ambition and intensity overrode his abiding sense of duty and decorum. Nothing fired him up so quickly as the incompetence of Moff Broysc, and Astridel liked that about him: she valued effectiveness and decisiveness, which Quinn had in abundance, and she liked, too, the disgust he had for useless military boot-lickers. Through her introspective ritual, she had long ago queried her own feelings on the matter and found she liked her captain very much. He provided useful strategic advice, he handled practical ship matters with attentive detail, and he was a superb field medic.

She cast her mind back to the fight with Fawste and the general; she had not come through it uninjured. As had become their standing habit by some tacit arrangement, she had sat quite still after the battle, catching her breath as he ministered to her. While kolto injections did the bulk of the mending, there were still occasions when it was best to save their resources and treat a mild scrape the old fashioned way. Her glove had been off and her sleeve rolled back as he wrapped a gauze around a blaster burn she had taken on her forearm while charging in. Astridel smiled to herself now as she recalled sensing how severely he had focused himself to his task, pushing away the thought that she was close by and breathing hard. His fingers had been cool against her heated skin, and the memory of it gave her a shiver she relished. Handsome, she added to her mental list of qualities. In terms of form, he was a delight: the intent brown eyes that were so quick to appraise, the strong broad shoulders under the uniform jacket, the finely-cut shape of the bones of his face, the dark hair combed neatly across his intelligent brow, and not, thankfully, shaved clean off as so many military men did. Yes, decidedly handsome.

She could tell he was awake now still, and still struggling with the temptation she had given him. She had planted the seed and cultivated it well; he would come to her eventually. It was only a matter of time, and she would not make the mistake of rushing it. She could have invited him that night, and thought he was likely to have accepted, but she decided she would prefer it if he came to her of himself, no longer able to fight against the urging of his own feelings, when he had reached the full pitch of a delicious agony from which the only escape was in her bed. And, to be honest, Astridel herself was enjoying the denial. Once again, she found herself considering that the Sith, or many of them, were so prone to demand and expect immediate gratification of their every whim that they never learned to enjoy the process. The patience of waiting made the payoff all the more satisfying, and she meant for that satisfaction to be mutual. The one thing she had left to fear was that the prize would prove itself not worth the having – was there anything more disappointing? – but she felt that was remote. It all only required a little more, just a very little more!

Astridel rose from the floor. If she had been inclined to tell him so, Quinn would have had the opportunity to relish a little sort of veneful delight in the knowledge that her own sleep would be as slow in coming as was his.
I did have Astridel spare Yonlach, even though it gave her LS points, because I did it for the Darkest of reasons, as she explains to Quinn in this chapter. I had a similar dilemma any time I played the Brentaal Star episode with the defecting General. The LS option was to let him live, and allow him to be imprisoned by the Empire, which, as the General explained, meant the torture of an injured man and a slow, horrible death. The merciful option, to end his life and pain and allow him to take his secrets to the grave, was the DS option.
Quinn was carefully observant as he walked through the streets of Kaas City, apparently nothing more than another military man acting as an escort and guard for a Sith Lord. As usual, he kept himself aware of all around him – a Sith's position was always precarious, and the higher one rose in power, the greater was the likelihood of being targeted. This was not his only focus, however, and he found himself a little concerned at Astridel's silence.

They had just come from the Citadel and a meeting with Darth Baras, who had been predictably puffed up with glee at the outcome of Astridel's assassination of the Republic general. He had waxed large with praise, even, and introduced Astridel to his own master, Darth Vengean, a member of the Dark Council, with whom he had been speaking via holocom when Astridel and Quinn arrived. Darth Vengean, if possible, had been even more delighted with Baras's gift of war than Baras had been in offering it, and had lavished praise indirectly on Astridel by complimenting Baras's choice of apprentice. Lord Astridel had been respectful and obedient, perhaps more so than Quinn had ever seen of her before. She had been known to offer Baras a piqued answer on occasion, but there was no sign of that effrontery this time.

She had hardly spoken since they left the Citadel late that evening, and they now were winding through lamp-lit streets under the inevitable lowering storm-clouds that routinely shrouded the city and the surrounding mountains. After their celebratory outing on Nar Shaddaa, he expected seeing a similar, if more restrained, jubilation from the kudos offered by her master, not this all-absorbing reticence. Half a dozen times, his questions were poised on the tip of his tongue, ready to leap, and each time, he held them back. Even if she were inclined to answer, the unsafe streets of Kaas City were no place to have the conversation.

Lord Astridel was no more talkative when they boarded the *Fury* at the shipyard. Jaesa and Vette were out, sent on some small missions for supplies earlier, and Astridel issued a few small commands to the ship's droid before absent-mindedly bidding him good night and departing to her quarters. Quinn wandered between the cargo hold and the bridge, occupying himself with a number of light duties – ship logs, fuel stores, maintenance and spare parts – while inwardly considering his Lord's behavior. By the time he shut the door to his own room, he had decided that if Astridel were the same tomorrow, he would make it a point to ask her about it. He had unbuckled the belt of his uniform and was beginning to unfasten his jacket, when he paused, hands still poised at the button at his throat. With an abrupt impatient motion of his head, he strode out the door and crossed the deck to Lord Astridel's cabin. He raised his hand to press the door's intercom button when his hesitation caught up with his purpose. Quinn yanked his hand away, and asked himself what he thought he was doing as he turned aside, and then as quickly returned. His finger at the door panel hovered, and he paused, irresolute.

“I can hear you shuffling your feet,” Lord Astridel's voice came muffled through the door. She
tapped a panel on the wall beside her desk and the door slid open with a soft hiss. “So you might as well come in. Close it behind you.”

“I beg your pardon, my lord,” Quinn said uncertainly as he stepped into the room, embarrassed at having disturbed her. He had never seen the room before. It was spartanly decorated, with the head of a broad bed against one wall, and a desk opposite, along with a large dark wood cabinet. There was a single luxury, a plush dark red rug covering much of the floor. She was seated at the desk, partially turned away from him, so it was not until he had fully entered the room, letting the door hiss shut at his back, that he could observe what occupied her full attention.

Her lightsaber – he recognized it as the one she used in her main hand – was stripped down to its many assorted fragments, all of which lay arranged in a precise line along the desk. She took each piece at a time and polished it diligently with a cloth she held in her ungloved hands.

“Ah, I apologize, my lord! I see you are busy,” he exclaimed, taking a half-step back. “This is nothing that can't wait until tomorrow. Forgive the intrusion.”

“If it were intrusive, I wouldn't have opened the door,” Astridel pointed out with practical sensibility, still focused on the saber pieces before her. She gave a slight motion of her head toward a second chair placed at the end of the desk against the wall, then holding her hands with fingers splayed on either side of the saber parts, raised the line of components slowly into the air with the Force and began inspecting them closely. “Sit, by all means. I will be finished with this shortly. It might interest you; I imagine you have not had many opportunities to observe this.”

“Indeed I have not, my lord,” he answered, slowly lowering himself onto the chair as he looked at the saber pieces with great curiosity, yet still part of him wondering, with a curse, why he had come at all, and grateful for the distraction of having something novel to focus on. He watched the process closely, observing the particular care she took as she replaced worn old parts with newer, more powerful components. At this position, he could look through the floating array of saber parts to her intent face as she reviewed each component and it afforded him the excuse to stare at her simultaneously with the pieces of her favorite armament. At length, she finally decided she was done, and the pieces spun suddenly into motion, interlocking as she twisted them together with the invisible threads of the Force that sprung from her outstretched fingers. The assembled saber descended gently into her hand and she rose from her seat. Quinn made a motion to rise as well, in respect to her status, but with a brief gesture of her hand, she indicated that such a courtesy was not necessary.

Standing in the open space of the room between the desk and bed, Astridel ignited the saber, the purple-black blade leaping to life with a low, growling hiss. She held the saber before her face and sighted along the hilt and down the length of the blade, checking the alignment of the crystal within. It was a motion that Quinn had not expected from her, as a member of a race without eyes. She saw everything using the Force, and he wondered how it made the world look to her. He was struck with a fleeting desire to remove the black masked hood that covered the upper half of her face – it
occurred to him that he did not even really know what she looked like, or the color of her hair. He had imagined it dark, like his, or perhaps just a few shades lighter.

Astridel swung the saber slowly in an experimental arc, feeling the change in the weight distribution after the maintenance and upgrades, then, encouraged, swung it again, harder, the angry, droning buzz of the blade sounding loud in the chamber, otherwise quiet but for the hum of the ship's generators. She whipped the blade around in a more complicated pattern that Quinn recognized as one of her favorite and most lethal strikes, nodded her approval of the feel, then inspected the alignment of the crystal again, ensuring that the motion had not caused it to slip out of true. In short, Quinn thought approvingly, she gave the saber all the minute attention to detail that might be expected from one who routinely entrusted her life to it. Given how often she trusted her life to him, or to Vette, did she give the same intense review to her companions? He wondered. And if she did, what parts would she wish to swap out for better? With a small terse breath that seemed to be a sound of satisfaction, Astridel switched off the blade and laid the hilt on her desk alongside its companion, and finally broke her silence.

“There is, Quinn, something on your mind,” she said directly, seating herself again in the chair. Her armor was off and set aside, and she had loosened the collar of her jacket, showing him a flash of her white throat. He had half-expected a teasing, flirtatious comment, but none seemed to be forthcoming.

“In a manner of speaking, my lord.” Quinn inclined his head slightly. “I could not help but notice that your lordship has seemed... preoccupied since our meeting with Darth Baras. I don't intend to pry, but as you have expressed a value for a certain openness in the past, and permitted me to voice my personal concerns to you even when they are unconnected to your own aims, I felt I would like to offer the same opportunity to you. Speaking as a strategist, I am best able to advise and assist you when I understand your goals and thoughts. Speaking as a friend,” he continued, hoping his use of the word sounded casual, “if I may be that bold, I would be pleased to listen – if you should wish to discuss whatever may be on your mind, that is. It strikes me that something in the meeting with Darth Baras bothered you.”

Astridel’s lips curled in a small grimace of irritation. “Darth Baras himself bothers me. It will be a pleasant day for me when I no longer obey his commands.”

“Yes...” Quinn mused, treading cautiously. “I do recall you once indicated your aim to eliminate him. That is still your intention?”

“Without fail.”

“And something about this troubles you.” Quinn was aware he was stepping into dangerous waters here. Sith secrets were not often shared. “Might I ask, my lord, why? Aside from being an expedient
Astridel put her head to one side, regarding the captain thoughtfully for a moment before answering.

“It is a long and time-honored tradition of the Sith,” she replied, “for the student to kill the master. I think, in fact, that many a Sith lord feels a sense of pride when their apprentice has proven skilled enough to take on that fight and win it, and I think many would rather than to greet their last moments in their beds, feeble and infirm and dying slowly of nothing. To meet death on your feet, battling a skilled and hated enemy, is a great thing. The potential for a sorry death means that it is only slightly less personally humiliating to be eliminated by a paltry rival; for your last thoughts to be the shame of having been bested by someone you think unworthy. But for your own student – well, if your own student brings you down, then you know you trained them well.”

“I never thought of it in such a way, my lord,” Quinn answered, intrigued.

“But such an esoteric philosophy is hardly my primary drive; there are not many actions more stupid than to blindly follow a course just because it is a tradition.” Astridel dismissed it with a wave of her hand. “I could not give less care for the question of whether Darth Baras will think his death at my hand to be an apt finale to his life and my training. My reasons are somewhat more concrete – particularly, that I do hate him.”

“Although he has done much for you?”

“Only inasmuch as it attains his goals. I would not expect him to be personally invested in my progress were I not doing his work. Such sentimentality is ridiculous. Similarly, I, also, am not personally invested in the progress of his career or his schemes, other than how I can use them to my advantage – as taking Jaesa as my own apprentice, rather than turning her over to him. In many ways, I find Baras contemptible and narrowly-focused, and too mired in petty aims while too self-congratulatory. And so I do hate him, but only so far as that hatred gives me power. I do not let it blind me to the advantages of continuing to serve him, or to the extent where it would compromise my own progress. I recognize that he is a means to an end, and I am ambitious. For now, he raises me as much as I raise him. At some point, that balance will no longer be maintainable, and the status quo must needs change then. I intend for it to change in my favor.” She leaned on one hip in her chair, bracing her forearm on the desk, and Quinn noted how this position brought her so many centimeters closer to him. “Quinn, I am sure you recall the circumstances of our meeting?”

“To be sure, my lord. Darth Baras sent you to Balmorra to eliminate a compromised member of his intelligence network.”
“This was not the first such errand, and you know it wasn't the last. Which brings me to my third, and most important, I think, reason: Self-preservation. Baras has sent me on many such little clean-up chores. Not all of his spies that he has sent me to kill were disloyal, which means two things – either jointly or individually: the first, that Baras' extraordinary sense of paranoia is preventing him from sensing where true danger lies, and is overwhelming the sense of keeping good operatives, and second, that Baras doesn't allow for the quality of those operatives to hold sufficient weight with him: he would sooner betray and murder them as soon as they have fulfilled their mission rather than find new uses for them.” To Quinn, Astridel's voice seemed to take on an extra tone of gravity and significance, although it was possible it was just his imagination. “He discards his assets carelessly. I will not allow him to live long enough to place my name on his list of expendables. And I have zero doubt that, sooner or later, he will put my name on that list.”

Quinn shifted on his seat uncomfortably, troubled. “And by association, your own retainers...”

“He will kill you, too. Never doubt it. He will kill you, no matter what you have done for him, no matter what allegiance you declare to him.” Astridel's voice was intent with seriousness, and it was as much this as her prediction that caused an icy hand of fear snake around his heart. “And Vette, of course, instantly, likely first. If he thinks he can use her, he may spare Jaesa, and take her as his new apprentice, but at the instant he suspects her, or thinks her too loyal to me, or she displays too much power, she will also die. And therein lies reason number four: To save your lives, as well as mine, I must strike Baras first.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter and the next comprise a very lengthy conversation that took me some hunting to find a natural chapter-break point for. It also comes to the end of what I had pre-written, so to continue, I'll need to go back to the videos I saved of the story to refresh my memory on the next events. This was actually a very fun conversation to write.
“My lord, with taking on Jaesa as your apprentice, does that not doubly expose you?” Quinn exerted his strongest effort to suppress showing how Astridel's assessment of the danger, and her desire to avert it, was deeply affecting him, and he steered the conversation away from the uncomfortable topic of Baras cleaning house. “If she acts according to the pattern, she will one day try to kill you, too. You are at risk from both fronts, are you not?”

Astridel smiled in spite of herself, leaning back in her chair. “Your eternal concern for my well-being never fails to be charming, Quinn. But I think, too, you have noticed,” she continued, the momentary playful mood passing, “that I am taking a somewhat different track in my training of Jaesa.”

“You are very liberal with all of us, my lord,” Quinn agreed. “And I speak for all of us when I say that we are grateful for it.”

“I have been struck with how common a tactic it is among Sith to use the customary channels of fear, intimidation, and bribery to maintain their power base, but this has its limitations. A person may be trusted in such a circumstance only as far as their fear may be pushed. When they face something that terrifies them more, they are useless. Loyalty that is bought with coin may be bought by another at the expense of a few more credits. Mercenaries should never be more than fodder for the cannons, because they can never be entrusted with anything more important than the money that was spent on them. There is another type of loyalty, Quinn,” Astridel's voice dropped as she leaned in again, underscoring a fiber of import and latent excitement. “A loyalty that springs from authentic trust and a unification to a common purpose. A loyalty that arises from mutual respect and genuine appreciation – even affection. You know that type of loyalty -”

Quinn blinked, his startled heart giving a rapid beat, and he forced himself to relax as she finished, “- and I know this because I saw the seriousness with which you defended Major Ovech. You respect him, you trust him, you consider him a friend and a valuable addition to the Empire’s military goals. That is the type of loyalty Baras will never understand or appreciate, were it ever offered him, because he has never conceived of holding that loyalty to anyone else, or anything other than his own desires. He thinks loyalty is due him because of his rank or his power, and so it is – a weak form of loyalty that he takes as for granted. But he never stops to consider the loyalty that is due from him in return.”

“Then this is the type of loyalty you seek to cultivate among your crew?” Quinn inquired.

Astridel gave a single, short hoot of mirthless laughter. “Quinn, you make it sound so calculated!
Well, I am found out – and yes, I do. Think of what we have already achieved, just the four of us – and before that, just three, and before that, just Vette and myself. We have attained accomplishments that other Sith lords with extensive arrays of lackeys and hangers-on have scarcely seriously considered, and would never be able to pull off even if they could consider them. Do you think we would have done this if we were each worried about another stabbing us in the back? In this respect, yes, it is calculated. Don't you agree that all relationships are in some way self-serving as well as self-motivated? Why engage in anything, including friendship, if there will be no benefit from it? The key is to make it mutually beneficial until such trust is established that even an imbalance of power will not disrupt it. This is what I hope for us."

She was speaking about the group as a whole, but a pernicious part of Quinn's brain nudged at the idea that there was a double-meaning to the final word.

“This is why I have been so kind to Vette,” Astridel continued, pulling Quinn away from that prodding internal whisper. “She was a slave, and expected a miserable life, having heard and experienced the usual tales of Sith cruelty. To misuse slaves for a momentary fleeting glee of seeing their pain is the mark of a sorry and narrow individual, not worthy of the power they wield. Short of complete incompetence, slaves have their talents, and incompetence, of course, pervades every level of society, not just the slave ranks.” She threw a brief, wry smirk in Quinn's direction. “Competence should be commended; excellence should be rewarded. As Vette has proved her excellence, so have I rewarded it. She may have started as my slave, but I now consider her a valuable member of my staff, and have been sure to let her know it. Gratitude, I find, is a strong pillar of loyalty. Vette supports me utterly, because I have not treated her the way she expected to be treated.

“And this is a signal part of how I intend to train Jaesa,” Astridel turned her thoughts to her next retainer. “I admit, I am not particularly interested in feeling the pride of a Sith Lord that I trained my own apprentice so well that she conquered me. Instead of making the usual demands of ultimate obedience – you know how well I adhere to those that Baras has commanded of me – I have shown her that I am interested in her thoughts and opinions. I am making it clear to her that I don't think of her as a mere tool to be used to further my own ends and then discarded, as Baras thinks of me. I have bestowed upon her the gift of the knowledge of the Dark Side, which she treasures, and I will continue to do so. In time, when she has come into her own full power, my intent is that she will direct her ambitions outward, instead of towards me. To unite, rather than destroy each other from within, until we sit side-by-side on the Dark Council. It presents a fair prospect of what we could achieve!”

“You would present a formidable force,” Quinn agreed, marveling at the idea, then ventured, “And my lord, what of me? How do you plan to ensure my loyalty?” He was not sure he wanted to hear the answer: a serious answer might overset him, while a flippant one would be, he feared, keenly disappointing.

“You present a puzzle, to be sure,” Astridel admitted. He waited, still uncertain if the serious or flippant answer would be forthcoming. “Your motivations are none so simple as those of Vette and Jaesa. My first answer would be that I am your second chance.”
It touched so closely to the thoughts that had occupied him recently that he was momentarily nonplussed. A serious answer, it seemed, it was to be. He braced himself, one hand to his chin with the hope it could mask any emotion before it outwardly betrayed him. Much good it may do me, he thought, when most Force wielders could read the emotions of others easily!

“But I have no doubt,” continued Astridel, “that your ingenuity would have worked out a way to get you off that rock of a planet sooner or later. Your career would have continued in some way, however it had already suffered a critical blow, giving it a delay that someone of your talent and ambition would find unendurable. But still, you would have somehow advanced of your own volition. So in terms of your own timetable, it was fortuitous for you that I spoke highly of your skills to Baras, and pulled you from Balmorra before your usefulness was completely withered away there in futile anger. In that respect, I am the progenitor of your second chance, but your confidence in your own abilities limits the amount of gratitude-based loyalty I might expect from you. In short, you have had less need of my help than either Vette or Jaesa. You are also less sentimental, and more pragmatic, so I cannot rely on the sorts of emotional manipulations I know will keep Vette and Jaesa with me. You are too shrewd for that, and I know that when I can no longer serve to further your career, you are likely to move on to bigger opportunities.”

Quinn was astonished at such a frank assessment, and the one phrase burned in his ears - “I cannot rely on emotional manipulation.” He had considered that Lord Astridel’s overtures were exactly that: a power play to tie his future to hers beyond the extent that it already was. But she seemed to be saying that she knew the prospect of a liaison between them would not be something she depended upon as a means of securing him to her. If she wasn't doing it to manipulate him, then why? Was she bored? The thrill of the chase? The base physical release? Or had she taken a genuine liking to him? Clearly, she had an authentic affection for Vette and Jaesa, and was not shy about admitting to the benefits of it. She had already said it herself: Who ever maintained a friendly relationship with another who provided nothing of any use or value in return? Might as well be friends with a stump, in that case. Her observations on self-interest and self-motivation in any relationship were correct. No one was ever wholly disinterested; everyone gained something from a friendship. Some friends were useful for nothing but joining for a stiff drink at the end of a long shift – but when wanting a drinking buddy at the end of a long shift, they were the perfect choice. When the gains were no longer there, or were overwhelmed by the negatives, then the relationship ended. Still, he smarted a little under the notion that she thought he would be so quick to move on.

“Therefore, I must work to ensure the furthering of your career. I think,” Astridel mused, “that for now, I may operate from the position of your adherence to duty and responsibility. These are things you value highly, and so I provide for you the duties and responsibilities to give your existence meaning. As I rise, so do you.”

“My lord,” he said in a low voice, aware of the flush spreading through his face. “I am – that is – I hardly know what to say. I would – I must state that serving you has been an honor and a pleasure. I assure you I do not consider you a duty or a responsibility.”
“I didn't say I was an unpleasant one, or imply that a responsibility is necessarily a disagreeable thing.”

“True, my lord, but nonetheless, my thoughts have been less of duty or responsibility of late, and more of -” he floundered, seeking words that expressed his feeling without being too suggestive. “More of concern and affection. But my lord,” he hurried on, glancing aside from the smile that played around her lips, “these are matters I can see you have considered clearly for some time. They are not new, from this evening. What has changed?”

Astridel's amusement vanished. “Darth Vengean.”

“Darth Baras' master seemed to be exceptionally pleased with you.”

“And therein lies the trouble.”

“My lord?”

“Did you note Darth Vengean's comment that he had not known of Darth Baras' apprentice? And that he had been wise to keep me secret?”

“Ahhhh,” said Quinn, enlightened and grave. “And now, you no longer are. Our untimely arrival awakened Darth Vengean to something Darth Baras apparently has taken pains to conceal.”

“Exactly.”

“But if Darth Vengean should wish to poach you from Darth Baras, that could be a significant step up for you. A master on the Dark Council, my lord, after all.”

“I have thought of that. Baras would be furious, but could likely try to save face by offering me to Vengean as a gift, cultivated for him. But I doubt that, for it would put Baras in an uncomfortable position – in essence, his former apprentice almost on equal footing with him. I doubt his pride will be especially accommodating to share that space with me. And although Baras is a Darth, he still refers to Vengean as his master. Even when apprentices are set on their own courses, with the title of Darth, the covenant between master and apprentice only truly dissolves with death. Were Vengean to take me as an apprentice, what would that mean for Baras? Vengean's first task for me could very well be to eliminate his former apprentice. If not that, then Baras' first act on my ascension would be
to eliminate me as Vengean's new apprentice. He would risk Vengean's anger if it meant removing me from Vengean's grace."

“And you would be in a situation not particularly different from that which you are in now: a cold war with Darth Baras.” Quinn frowned grimly.

“There is an additional consideration. Baras is ruled by only a few things: ambition, pride, and control. I don't think the revelation of my existence was intentional; Baras is likely seething that he failed to control the timing of my arrival relative to his conversation with Vengean. If Baras was hiding the existence of his apprentice from his master, then he had a reason for it, and the discovery now renders that reason void.”

“I see, my lord. As you assume Baras has always intended to eliminate you the moment either your usefulness ends or he views you as a legitimate threat,” Quinn pondered aloud, “his desire to keep you hidden must be tied either to your usefulness – that is, that he does not want Darth Vengean to usurp your missions – or to your status as, so far, not a hazard to him. But with Darth Vengean's backing, you would become a far more creditable threat.”

“Precisely. And what have we established so far of Baras' character?” asked Astridel rhetorically. She made a gesture of her hand as she tallied the list. “That he is paranoid, that he eliminates his assets on the merest suspicions, that he does not hesitate to waste resources that could still be useful to him, and that he has no concept of authentic loyalty. I have even less expectation of survival at his hands now than I did just this morning. This revelation of my achievements as his apprentice may be the spark that drives him to set his plans for me – or rather, against me – into motion earlier than he intended to. He is coming for me, and all who hold to me.”

Quinn wasn't sure if she expected a response, and before he had formed one, she turned her face aside and spoke again, almost as if to herself. Her voice was low, barely above a whisper, and he was alarmed to hear a husky undercurrent of horror and uncertainty as she murmured, “And I am not yet ready!”

As she had let Quinn into her deepest thoughts on the subject, laying out her considerations in the logical fashion she felt Quinn's analytical mind would most appreciate, she had kept the emotional costs of the matter at bay, and now, coming to this point, she felt these aspects beginning to overtake her, until abruptly, they had erupted at the last, just as she had touched the raw and painful heart of the matter. To indulge in emotion to connect to the Force could be done wantonly – many a Sith lord did it in just this way – but she preferred to have a more refined tether. By controlling herself and focusing her emotional connection to the Force, she found she could draw significantly more power than when she pulled at it haphazardly, on the whim of a passing rage; as a corollary, that meant having a greater control over the sways of her emotions than most Sith bothered to learn. It was a skill she had well developed through her meditations, and it was disconcerting when the strength of her feelings overcame her control. She had felt that control slipping away from her as she spoke, and it broke though at the end, just as she had fought it the hardest. And for what? Fear. Fear of the man
she had just vowed to kill. How humiliating – and most particularly humiliating that Quinn should see her at such a disadvantage! How he must think her so weak now – and to be in the service of such a frail, contemptible thing – how even more deeply humiliating for him!

There was a pang deep in his chest, and he clenched his hand, more profoundly affected by the unexpected sight of her vulnerability than he would have ever guessed. Far from thinking even remotely of humiliation, he longed to offer some word or gesture of comfort – he had a foolish yearning to take her in his arms and swear futile, foolish vows of protection – but he was frozen in place by the paralysis of his own emotions. Before he had finished the struggle to overcome it, she had already shaken off the weakness, raising her head and squaring her shoulders. The illusion of fragility vanished, and the warrior Sith Lord resumed its customary place before Quinn's eyes as she faced him.

“But I will be,” she finished with grim determination. “I must be.”

Unsettled, Quinn swallowed, hoping his breathing sounded more even than he felt it was. “My lord,” he said at length, “if there is anything I can do to assist you, you must not hesitate to inform me.”

“Thank you, Quinn,” Lord Astridel replied quietly. The lines of tension around her lips were slowly beginning to relax, and she was aware she must look tired. She felt tired – not as after a well-fought battle, the sort of physical tiredness of a good exercise of her body, but an uncomfortable sort of agitated weariness, the sort that often came hand-in-hand with a nervous energy. He was very close to her, close enough that she could hear the faint sound of his breath and sense the rapid beat of his heart, unsteady as her own. She stood up abruptly, and he immediately did the same, aware that the interview was over. Perhaps she regretted saying as much as she had; perhaps she had betrayed herself to him. She was clearly unnerved by the admission of her fear of Darth Baras.

“My lord, I will give serious thought to this matter,” he assured her again merely to break the awkward silence. A long speech, he thought, would give her the opportunity to recover her equanimity, to rebuild the shell she kept about her. “You are correct in that my future is tied to yours. I have a much deeper understanding of your concerns and I thank you for sharing them. I pledge to do all I can for you, as I see now, very clearly, the inevitability of a confrontation with Darth Baras. I am quite sure, my lord, that with the skills of all our allies, we will be successful in creating a plan to ensure that you are not defeated.” Over-promise and under-deliver and damn yourself! Quinn cursed himself inwardly. “I will work to analyze Baras' strengths and weaknesses, and how we may best turn them to our advantage. I will not let you face him unprepared and alone. Your death would be a great loss,” Quinn paused again, wrestling with how much to admit, while yet admitting nothing, and his voice dropped low, “...a great loss...”

“Thank you,” she repeated, her voice quiet and flat. He couldn't tell if she were disappointed in his answer, or if this were a manifestation of her disappointment in herself and how much she had revealed.
“I will leave you to your rest,” he added quickly. If he stayed – if he stayed – he stopped the thought in its tracks, and took a step backwards as she simply nodded her acknowledgment. “Good night, my lord.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Quinn, you silver-tongued liar, you.

Astridel's assessment of Baras, and what he will inevitably do, were exactly my thoughts at this point in the game - I hadn't even played much beyond the events described in this chapter at the time I wrote this, although I finished the story not long after, as I was thoroughly hooked. I need to refresh my memory before writing the rest of the story, though.
Quinn awoke the following morning to the usual subtle hum of the *Fury*’s engines as they made the deck plating shiver faintly beneath his bunk. Despite its familiarity, it nonetheless confused him inexplicably, and he bolted upright as his waking brain caught up with the obvious conclusion: They had left Dromund Kaas.

She had said nothing of her intention. Quinn was both perplexed – there hadn't been the slightest indication that they were to leave so soon after their arrival – and annoyed. Lord Astridel had given him authority over this ship; how was he to fulfill his duties if she did not see fit to share her schedule with him? What if he had ordered the droid to perform ship maintenance overnight? What if the engines hadn't been in order for their departure? He flung aside the wardrobe door and snatched at his uniform, feeling mulishly irritated. What if he'd had other plans, things on the ship or on Dromund Kaas that required his attention?

He caught himself as he jabbed an arm into the sleeve of his jacket, abruptly shifting the focus of his sullen mood to his own assumptions and arrogance. *Lord Astridel* was in charge of this vessel, he reminded himself sternly, not he. He operated it in obedience to her, and solely by the virtue of her allowance, and he had best keep himself mindful of it. She was, of course, entirely at liberty to share or withhold information from him as she pleased. His errands on Dromund Kaas would simply have to wait.

With his typical penchant for self-inspection, he surveyed himself, inside and out, before the mirror. His jacket was tidy, his boots shined, his face still tolerably clean from the previous day's shave, his hair brushed to meticulous neatness. At least he looked the part, even if, internally, he was still working to put his pieces in their proper places.

Where were they going? Why wouldn't she have told him of her plan? Was this voyage by command of Darth Baras? Speculation was pointless, but he couldn't seem to keep himself from wondering, and his memory pulled up the image of her as she had appeared, so briefly, last night: anxious and daunted, and, if he had read her rightly, mortified at his seeing her so. Would her embarrassment have been as keen if it had been seen by another? Would any other have even ever been privy to it? Perhaps that was why she had not informed him of their leaving. Could she be regretting her confidences? Did she feel that in refusing him this communication, she was counteracting her volubility of the night before?

Quinn flicked an invisible mote of dust from his jacket sleeve before stepping onto the bridge. Lord Astridel was there, as he had expected, sitting in the pilot's seat, one hand resting loosely, almost negligently, on the controls. A glow from a small panel indicated that the auto-pilot was engaged; it
explained her casual attitude. It also told him that they were well away from the approach to any planet or major system – which means that they had left Dromund Kaas behind hours ago.

What he had not expected, however, was the presence of Vette, standing close behind Astridel's chair. She appeared eager and intent, almost agitated; there were traces of some undefinable emotion on her bright blue face.

“Good morning, Captain,” Astridel said easily. If her overstepping of her caution the night before were causing her concern, she didn't seem to be poised to display it in awkward stammers this morning. She had far too much self-possession to blush. For all that, was there a certain reserve about her, or was that an impression from his own imagination?

“Good morning, my lord,” he answered politely. “Vette.”

“Morning,” the twi'lek replied, her tone wavering with an odd tremor of something he thought must be hope or fear – perhaps both. She had only barely turned her head toward him, and her focus returned now to the screen before them, past which flowed streams of light, bent into unreal hues by the physics of hyperspace speeds. It was as if she were watching for something, but what could be seen at speeds in excess of the speed of light was beyond Quinn's guessing. But then, he had never been particularly generous in his estimation of Vette's general knowledge of space travel mechanics – she likely had no idea that she was watching completely in vain.

“I wasn't aware we were departing Dromund Kaas so quickly,” he said, a hint of an apology in his voice. “I would have prepared the ship for you, my lord.”

“No matter,” Astridel shrugged. “I couldn't sleep. I would rather do something.”

Quinn managed to keep himself from blinking more than once at that admission. So innocuous! What had kept her, tired as she had been, from her rest? Regret, perhaps – but of going too far, or of going not far enough? Of course, he could never ask it; he could but ask, “And what, my lord, is our destination, if I may?”

“Nar Shaddaa.”

“Again, my lord?” Quinn blurted, surprise prompting the question before he could stop himself. They had, after all, just left the place. Hastily, he added, “I beg your pardon, my lord. I was unaware Darth Baras had additional business there.”
“We're not going on Darth Baras' business,” Astridel replied. So far, she had not turned her head to face him, not even as she had greeted him. For her, he guessed, it hardly mattered what direction she faced; she could, he assumed, sense in all directions equally well. The consequence of this was that he was never precisely certain how much of her attention he truly occupied at any given time, and it was, depending on her mood – or depending on his own – alternately off-putting and intriguing. “I'm returning for my own reasons.”

Quinn accepted her word, but for all that, his eyes flicked involuntarily to the twi'lek hovering nearby. Lord Astridel's reasons, he knew, were not always independent of the personal concerns of her staff. Whatever her motives, it obviously had something to do with Vette. She could sense his doubt; she could feel his questioning uncertainty and curious concern as if she could have physically prodded them with a finger. It amused her; between Vette, who had once been her slave, and Jaesa, who was her student and apprentice, there was no one, other than Quinn, who would have the nerve to inspect her actions, however circumspectly he approached them.

There were Sith – plenty of Sith, indeed – who were so enamored with their authority that they stocked their retinue with toadies and yes-men, disposing of any who disagreed, and thus misused one of their greatest assets. If Quinn could keep her on her toes, if he could highlight her weaknesses and her flaws, so much the better. He had done so last night without doing anything more than listening. Her fear of Darth Baras: this was a flaw, and a deep one, one that she would need to overcome, and do so quickly. She must drive herself onward, relentlessly, if she ever meant to defeat him, and Quinn was the whetstone on which she would hone her edge.

In truth, it bothered her: while Astridel held to her expressed idea of mutually-beneficial friendships, she disliked the notion that she might need Quinn's expertise more than he needed her influence. If there were to be any imbalance in how matters stood between them, she would much more prefer it rested in her favor, not his. Perhaps she relied on him too much – too much on his tactical assessments, too much on his military medical skills, too much on his ability to challenge her, too much on all the things that made him useful to her. Well! Yes, he might keep her on her toes – as she wanted – but she could do the same in return. No one should ever let themselves get too comfortable, too accustomed to a status quo, or too routine. Comfort and routine would not let her face Baras and win. For now, until she had the means to do that, she would have to make do with engaging in these minor acts of whimsical rebellion, silly as they were.

And it was silly, no question. “We're going,” she clarified, not without some internal malicious glee at the consternation this would throw Quinn into, “to ransom Vette's sister from slavery.”

A smile tugged at the corners of Quinn's mouth. “Yes, of course, my lord,” he answered with equanimity. “Just as you say.”
“Oh, it is, I assure you,” Astridel replied with a small toss of her head, enabling him to catch a glimpse of her face for the first time since he had entered the bridge. There was laughter slithering through her tone, but she was unmistakeably honest about her answer. The warm amusement Quinn had felt at the idea of her teasing him – she had done this sort of thing before, enough for him to interpret it as a sign of some sort of affection, although of what kind, he could hardly estimate – tumbled out of his chest, replaced by a chilly splash of astonishment.

“My lord!” Quinn exclaimed, astounded and incredulous. “This is quite – ” He broke off, gathering himself quickly. “My lord, I naturally am not about to question your orders -”

“Naturally,” Astridel interjected drily.

“- but would you not agree that this is... somewhat irregular?” He took a step forward, bringing himself almost in line with her chair.

“Not at all,” she returned evenly. A smirk slid over her lips, and Quinn wondered if it were her stated objective or himself that most amused her. “I would say it is very irregular. If I keep this up, I'm going to make a reputation for myself as the Sith slave-freer. Wouldn't that throw those bleeding-heart Republicans into a tailspin when they heard!” Astridel sounded genuinely tickled at the prospect of hoards of Imperial slaves freed by a solitary renegade Dark Side adept.

“Ah.” Quinn hoped the monosyllable sounded more like entertained understanding than the stunned bewilderment it actually expressed. Vette's sister? A slave purchased with the Sith Lord's own purse? For what purpose? She had hit upon a strange idea when she laughed at freeing Imperial slaves. Likely, the slaves would make a beeline straight for the fabled Republic, which would face the humanitarian crisis of handling an influx of millions, perhaps billions, of refugees, with all the attendant security and financial costs associated with keeping them... but surely, this had been a joke! They didn't have the resources for such a campaign, and it would throw the Empire into as much chaos as it did the Republic. This was a personal matter. If Astridel's history with her first slave was any indication, it was highly unlikely that she intended to keep this unknown woman as her own slave in front of her own sister. Ransom from slavery, she had said. That, and Vette's barely-repressed excitement, was more than enough to tell him that this was a rescue mission, not a recruitment. Never before had Astridel's whimsical mercies been so astonishing. What was her goal in all of this? Was she questioning Vette's loyalty, that she made this gesture to re-secure her allegiance? Or was it really nothing more than a passing fancy?

His mind gave up turning over the unanswerable questions of motivation and turned to matters more concrete and solvable. Where the hell was he going to put her? Vette and Jaesa shared a bunk room with little room to spare. The only other open place on the ship was the empty berth in his own cramped quarters, which was absolutely and utterly out of the question.
A fourth non-military woman on board. The need for a spare sink was becoming more and more critical. And what if – stars of hell – what if Vette's sister were as much of a nuisance as Vette herself? All bold impertinence and saucy answers one moment, and then shying fearfully away from the vicious realities of life the next? What if she were worse? Quinn pursed his lips and tried to refocus on the issue at hand, rapidly flicking through his concerns – areas of the ship must be made off-limits; how frequently should security codes be changed? – hardly aware that Lord Astridel had risen from her seat until she spoke.

“Well, I see no reason why I can't get some sleep now,” she announced, stretching herself a little after a prolonged sit. “Vette, alert me when we cross into Hutt territory.”

“Sure thing, my lord,” Vette answered, smiling and shuffling her feet with a nervous fidget. “Thank you, my lord. I'm very grateful. Honestly, I can hardly believe it! Really grateful.”

“I know,” Astridel replied, a trifle smugly. “I leave the bridge in your hands, Captain,” she added, recalling his attention abruptly from his thoughts. Apparently, there were circumstances where Astridel, even with all her lenience, wouldn't trust the ship to an agitated twi'lek.

“Of course, my lord,” he answered automatically as she swept past him, then swiftly tacked on, “My lord – about accommodations - ?”

Astridel paused at the door of the bridge and looked back with an indifferent gesture. “Oh, I don't care,” she shrugged. “Put her in your room if you like.”

“My lord!”

“There's an open spot there, isn't there?” Astridel returned practically, her voice tinted with a faintly mocking hue.

“It simply wouldn't be appropriate, my lord,” Quinn replied, with a terrible sinking feeling. Nonetheless, the words were out already. He could see what was coming – what her response would be - it was so very obvious. He was forced to admit that she had outmaneuvered him in two moves, and it was his own doing for bringing it up in the first place. Why had he, when he had known that she would necessarily toss the decision back to him? So much for his skill as a strategist. Pathetic.

“Fine, then, if it's such a problem, you can bunk in my room,” Astridel smirked. She had time to detect his face cycling through two rapid color changes before she flounced away down the corridor;
behind her, Vette made a spluttering noise, one the twi'lek swiftly converted to a manifestation of her own restless expectations.

“Tivva – after all this time! I wonder – will she even recognize me?”

Chapter End Notes

I went back to my notes and saved videos for when I played through my Sith Warrior, and realized that I had played most of it before I started recording the cut scenes. I don't have any videos of her storyline until the end of Belsavis, so a lot of what I'll be writing is gathered from others' playthrough videos and descriptions. I also don't recall any longer the exact order I did the companion quests, or where they are gated based on the main storyline, so I'll pretty much be putting event in an order where I feel like they make sense to occur. I put this event here, regardless of when I actually played it, because the idea of Quinn, with all his military training and desire for order, being stuck on a small ship with only non-military women cracked me up. And it's an interesting makeup of women, comprising a variety of social positions and methods of handling or responding to authority: one his boss and a Sith, one a very volatile Sith who is subject to the commands of the other, one an impertinent former slave, and then that former slave's also-enslaved sister. It's enough to make you feel sorry for him.

Quinn is a little older than I had expected when I played the story. I had pegged him as perhaps 33 or 34, but according to the Old Republic Encyclopedia, he was born 3680 BBY, making him just shy of 40 during the game. The Battle of Druckenwell happened in 3653, the same year of the Sacking of Coruscant by Darth Angral while Darth Malgus destroyed the Jedi Temple, leading to the Treaty of Corcusant. Thus, Quinn was 27 when he saved Broyse's forces and was flunked out to Balmorra as his reward. The Jedi Yonlach, if slain on Tatooine, is listed as dying c. 3643, placing Quinn as roughly 37 at this point; the Sith Warrior's slaying of Darth Ekkage on Belsavis is given as c. 3641, when Quinn is about 39. I haven't been able to determine/remember if Quinn, at Druckenwell, was a lieutenant rank or if he had been made a captain and was demoted back to lieutenant by Broyse following the battle, but either way, he had been stuck on Balmorra as a lieutenant for a decade before his assistance to SW got him both his promotion and his escape from the planet. If he had been made captain through his decisions at Druckenwell (or had not been demoted, if that was the case), he likely would have been promoted to major within five years (certainly before the age of 35, at least). Thus, when he meets SW on Balmorra, at 37 and still a lieutenant, he is at least 2 ranks behind where he expected he would be at that stage of his life. No wonder he's so pissed off.
Tivva, as it turned out, had not recognized Vette, at least initially. But the abrupt reappearance of her sister in her life was but the first and smallest of the shocks in store for her, followed closely as it was by the discovery that her life as a slave was over, and she had a Sith lord to thank for it. She gaped in wordless astonishment as Vette led her proudly on board the Fury.

Vette nudged her sister with her elbow. “You see now why I hang out with a Sith lord?” she whispered. Tivva had no words to reply, but froze abruptly at the sight of a dark-haired man in an Imperial uniform standing by a hatch door of the lounge. He was handsome – at least, more handsome than the majority of the clients she had been forced to entertain – but in truth, the effect was spoiled by the stern expression on his face. With the instincts bred from years of slavery, she bowed her head to him in submissive respect, the one thing she had found, in her time, that seemed to automatically please all Imperial officers.

“It's alright,” Vette assured chattily, grabbing her sister's hand and tugging her along. “That's just Quinn. Sometimes I call him Captain Fussybritches. He's fine.”

“Thank you for an impeccable introduction, Vette,” Quinn replied drily.

“You should have heard the one she concocted for me,” Astridel put in. “Not one of your strong points, Vette.”

“Sorry, my lord.” Vette said, although in her ecstatic excitement, she didn't sound particularly apologetic. To Tivva, she added, “There's also Jaesa; we bunk together. I'll introduce you to her later. She can be a little scary at times, but she's cool, too.”

“Speaking of bunks,” said Astridel, turning towards Quinn, “I assume you have made all the appropriate arrangements?”

“Yes, my lord,” he replied serenely. In their absence, he'd had the time to come to the only gentlemanly decision that could be made, and conquer any embarrassment that might arise from it. “Tivva is entitled to use my quarters for the duration of her stay, until a more permanent solution is found.”

A shift in the muscles on Astridel's cheek hinted to him that, beneath her veil, she was raising a non-visible eyebrow. “If you will let me know our destination, my lord,” Quinn continued imperturbably,
“I will lay in a course.”

Astridel looked back at the two sisters. “It's your call. Where do you want to go?”

Tivva blinked blankly. It had been such a long time since she had held any sort of autonomy over her own actions that the idea of consulting her own free will to determine her future gave her a sort of paralytic and fearful uncertainty. Where should she go? What should she do with her life now? What opportunities were there for a freed slave? Within her fist, she curled her fingers more tightly around the valuable little chip that decreed her contract was closed, and that she was a free woman. For now, she merely wanted distance between herself and Nar Shaddaa, where she had spent the last two years of her life in degradation and misery.

“Someplace,” she began slowly, aware that Vette was subtly prodding her. It wasn't wise to keep a Sith lord, even one as genial as this, waiting for an answer. “Someplace not in Hutt territory, at least for a little while. Someplace where I can get back on my feet again. Someplace with people... job prospects.”

“I think I know a place,” Astridel answered after a moment's thought. “There's a civilian Imperial trading station on the Parlemian Trade Route; they handle a lot of the mining shipments from Donovia and the Roche system. Plenty of business, plenty of traffic, and you'll be under Imperial protection. It's on our way.”

“Yes, thank you, that sounds perfect,” Tivva replied eagerly. In truth, she hardly knew one way or another if it was perfect or not, but she wasn't about to answer a Sith lord negatively.

Quinn fell in step at Astridel's shoulder as she led the way to the bridge; he inquired, “On our way, my lord?”

“To Taris,” she answered. “And Darth Baras' next errand.”

“Very good, my lord.” Taris was a dilapidated planet, shredded three hundred years prior by the powers of an outraged Sith lord. What had been once a planet of great cities and industry was now nothing more than a tangled mess of ruins and swamps, and who knew what else? What Baras wanted there was more than he could guess.

As he programmed the navicomputer, Quinn waited for the expected teasing from Lord Astridel regarding his decision to turn his quarters over to their guest, but none was forthcoming. Since their
strange, late-night heart-to-heart, it felt as though there was a distance between them, at least in private; when there was an audience, a Vette on hand to giggle at Astridel's humors or his discomfort, for example, all seemed so normal that he was inclined to attribute his suspicion to his imagination. But as he guided the ship away from Nar Shaddaa, he felt more and more convinced: something was different.

Not long ago, she would dally on the bridge for no obvious reason; ostensibly, it was to oversee the ship, but he had so quickly proven his skill in this that it had become clear to them both that this was a ruse, permitted to stand by a tacit mutual agreement to draw no attention to it. Today, once underway, she merely instructed, “Call me if anything changes,” and had left him and the bridge alone with his thoughts. Something had changed, but it wasn't something he could ask her about. She no longer rested her hand on the back of his chair, or leaned over his shoulder, provocatively close, to inspect a console readout. She was not so talkative as she once had been, either on matters personal or professional. There was a reservation about her, in both her words and actions. It was subtle, but Quinn was extremely good at subtle, and it was certainly there.

And, fool that he was, he missed what had been, now that it was gone. It was what he had been pushing himself towards for months now, a barrier of professionalism and detachment, and now that he had it, he regretted its existence. He had, at last, what he wanted, and it resulted in a disappointment that tasted bitter and drab on his tongue. This was the proper course of action. This was what was necessary; this was what was right. The strict observance of his duty should be sufficient for him, as it always had been in the past.

Despite himself, he couldn't refrain from snorting derisively at his own conclusion. A strict observance of his duty, the decision to do what was right, had exiled him to Balmorra for ten years. And while there, a strict observance of his duty had kept him trapped on that rock, an exemplary officer pinioned by his own scruples and adherence to military code. So what good had his strict observance of his duty really done for him that he should be so considerate of it now?

It kept him useful, he reminded himself. It kept him functional, in his best capacity to serve, and was that not what Lord Astridel needed the most from him? Responsibility, not these mawkish desires and absurd fantasies. That his emotions had so extensively muddled his thoughts was a clear indication of how much he had strayed from his tenets, and how much of a blessing it was to have this line of demarcation drawn between him and Lord Astridel. This was how it should be – how it needed to be. In due course, the disappointment would fade, and all his feelings would be back in the places they belonged. It just took time. Considering every aspect of his situation, logically, it was better this way.

Down the corridor, in the lounge, he could hear Vette and Tivva in quiet conversation.

“And you're really not a slave anymore, Ce'na?” Tivva asked. “You could go, any time you want?”
Ce'na? Quinn repeated mentally. He hadn't known that Vette was not the twi'lek's original name, and he wondered if Lord Astridel was aware of this fact. It was an automatic reaction, speculating on what she did and did not know, what she thought and felt. How much of that habit would he have to break to maintain the distance and yet still anticipate her needs and wishes? Needs and wishes, that is, that were directly related to the mission at hand, and not... he stopped his train of thought for a moment as the memory of her kiss sprang again to the forefront of his mind. He could indulge it one last time, and after this, it must stop. Think only of the mission, and not anything else.

“I could,” Vette replied. “But I wouldn't want to.”

“Really? But – a Sith lord?”

“Lord Astridel – she's not like that. Not like what you think,” Vette said. “Yes, she's a Sith lord, and she's a powerful one. But she's also... my friend.”

“Oh, Ce'na,” Tivva said softly. “Be careful. I've known Sith lords. They might seem one way on the surface, but beneath that... they're all the same.”

“Not Lord Astridel,” Vette asserted firmly. “She really is different. I owe her everything. My freedom, my food, my clothes, all the money I have now – it's all due to her.”

“So... she keeps you like a pet?”

“No! Well... maybe at first, a little. But that was a long time ago. Now, we're friends. She's treated me... almost like a sister.”

“A sister!”

“Oh, not like you, Tivva,” Vette smiled affectionately. “I'm just saying – Lord Astridel is being real. She's not going to hunt you down later and demand repayment, if that's what you're worried about. She's not going to give you up to your old Hutt masters. She's not going to stake a claim on you. You're free. Really and truly free.”

“I still can't figure out why.”
“Because... I guess because I asked her to. Lord Astridel is,” Vette paused to hunt for a word, “loyal. Really loyal. We can ask her for just about anything and she'll do her best to make it happen.” There was another short silence, as though each sister were closely reading the other, and when Vette spoke again, her voice was more serious than Quinn had ever heard it before. “Tivva, I've never been in a place as good as this my whole life. I don't want to screw it up, and I'm not going to walk away from it. So please don't ask me to leave and go with you. I know you want to ask. But please don't, because I'll have to tell you no, and I know you'll be disappointed. But I won't leave Lord Astridel.”

There was nothing for a moment but the sound of the ship's engines; Tivva was drawing a long slow breath, far out of Quinn's hearing. “Ok,” she said at length, so low that Quinn could only guess at the word. “I was going to ask you to go with me. We could do a lot together. But I see you could do a lot more here, with your lord. It sounds like you've earned it.”

“So has Lord Astridel,” Vette said. “She might not keep a tally, but I do. I owe her, big time. More than I could ever repay. But I don't stay with her because she demands it; I stay because I want to.”

“Because you want to,” Tivva repeated, her voice vague and wondering. She shook her head, unable to fully comprehend Vette's wish to serve where it was not a contractual obligation.

After another pause, somewhat longer, Vette piped up again. “Credit for your thoughts.”

“I was thinking,” Tivva said slowly, a moment later, “about Mother. I was going to ask you to come with me to find her... but maybe we'd be more successful if you're here. Do you think – Lord Astridel – might she – ?”

“Probably. If nothing else, she'll let me use the Fury's resources to get in touch with a few contacts to try to track down some leads between our other jobs. It might take a little while, but I'm sure I can turn up something. Lord Astridel won't mind,” Vette stated confidently. “You don't know her like I do.”

It was an innocuous phrase that would continue to ring in Quinn's ears all the long lightyears to the trading station, where they bid farewell to Tivva, and from there, the distance to Taris. He thought he knew Lord Astridel; so often, he could anticipate her plans, and yet, she so frequently surprised him. She showed him a different side of herself than she did Vette, and a different side still that she showed to Jaesa, yet all of them laced with that curious open liberality that, he was beginning to see, adhered each of her retainers to her with bonds that even the ties of close family could not compete with. The logic she had explained to him that night was, so far, holding sound. Would it hold true for him? He considered her observations on his own motivations and ambitions, and felt so unbalanced
by fault of his own rebellious feelings that he could hardly guess. At this moment, the emotional manipulations she had referenced held much more sway over him than he would ever have expected.

_You don't know her like I do._ At this point, could he even say he knew himself?
Malavai Quinn lived his life by a number of personal rules, divided more or less equally between those regarding conduct he considered as becoming an officer and an honorable man, and those that served to make him a superb strategist and tactician. Of late, he was considering adding a new axiom to his list: Be careful what you wish for, as you might just get it.

He had his separation from Lord Astridel, and as if that were not enough to teach him his lesson, he now had a new consideration in the not-insubstantial form of Lieutenant Pierce. No more was Quinn the lone military officer on the *Fury*.

At first, he had been poised to welcome his fellow soldier to Lord Astridel's service. Life on board the *Fury* was occasionally shockingly lacking in discipline, as was apparent when he entered the cargo hold several days prior to find it so full of fumes from Jaesa and Vette's experimentation with an ornate Hutt hookah that he had initially thought the ship had caught fire. What they had been trying to smoke was something he didn't care to guess, but it was acrid and cloying, sending him instantly into coughing fits that, in turn, sent the girls into unending peals of hysterical laughter. It had been almost two days before they could make themselves useful again, and when he complained of it to Lord Astridel, she merely shrugged and said she hoped they invited her to join them next time.

Another military man could only but add to the order on this ship, Quinn thought. He was wrong.

Not, that is, that Pierce seemed disposed to join in on Jaesa and Vette's hijinks, but he was patently not cut from the same methodical cloth as Quinn. Pierce was brash and blunt; rarely before had Quinn met a man so clearly designed for brute force. In learning that Pierce had been black ops, he had hoped to find a wellspring of tactical expertise within, but the lieutenant seemed content to leave the planning to others, so long as at the end of it he had a target to destroy. He was a sledgehammer where Quinn was a scalpel.

And Astridel, to Quinn's dismay, had opted for the sledgehammer when it came to eliminating Darth Baras' list of Republic generals on Taris.

“My lord,” Quinn had objected, “isn't it dangerous to trust Lieutenant Pierce so freely? You know precious little about him.”

“He has provided me with valuable intelligence and support in eliminating the Republic War Trust,
Captain,” Lord Astridel replied, a trifle pithily. “He knows the territory, he knows the terrain, he knows the hazards. He has made our tasks here much easier than they would otherwise have been; we could have spent months here drawing the generals out. Instead, we've handled three-quarters of the job in just a matter of weeks. I would have thought you, in particular, Quinn, would appreciate competence.”

“And so do I, my lord,” Quinn answered, hiding his bruised feelings under a matter-of-fact tone. “But Lieutenant Pierce is merely on loan from Moff Hurdenn. He has no stated allegiance to you.”

“Yet.”

“You intend to offer him a position with us, my lord?”

“I am considering it, pending the outcome of our search for General Faraire.”

Quinn hesitated, then began, “My lord – ”

“Go ahead, Quinn.” Astridel, as she always had in the past, gave him her usual allowance, but again, he was struck with the shift in her demeanor, the tone that was all business, and no buoyancy.

“I should inform you that I have looked into Lieutenant Pierce's records,” Quinn admitted. “While he does have some praise for missions accomplished, he has a high number of reprimands for recklessness and utter disregard for authority. I am concerned that, if he joined us, his disobedience combined with his carelessness could expose you to great danger, my lord.”

The earlier Lord Astridel would have razzed him for his concern, or would, at the very least, granted him a saucy and suggestive smirk over his use of the word *expose*, but the current Lord Astridel showed no such levity. With a pang in his heart, Quinn felt how much he missed it, and how much he would give to have her sardonic grin flash his direction once more. He had thought he would have recovered by now, but to be near her day by day, and yet have all the piquant dance of their old interaction gone was an affliction he had never expected he would continue to endure. The longing for her had not diminished, and the reminder that he was pursuing the proper course of action was a paltry and cold comfort.

“I think I can handle Pierce,” was Astridel's dry reply.
“Of course, my lord.”

Astridel could, indeed, handle Pierce, as adeptly and securely as she handled the assault on the Republic base. It came as some small astonishment to Quinn. While he had a thorough appreciation of Lord Astridel's abilities in a two-person strike team, the way she typically operated, she was untested in a leadership role for a larger group. But she announced the assignments with a calm, cool deliberation, setting each of them to what they were best at: Vette to disarm the traps protecting the power station, Pierce to assault the Republic spaceport, and Jaesa to accompany her on the frontal assault, with Quinn coordinating the joint attacks. It was a brilliant and beautiful thing to watch, seeing her step so naturally into command, and when she agreed with the tactical advice he offered, he felt the old warmth of pride in her approval curl through him. He even had the pleasure of giving her a last-minute save, with he and Pierce blocking the exit of Faraire as the general attempted to flee like an ungainly chicken.

His reward for it all was to discover that Lieutenant Pierce was now his bunk mate. Moff Hurdenn had granted the transfer, and Lord Astridel, Quinn saw with a sinking heart, appeared generally pleased with the arrangement. Satisfied that he was alone on the bridge, Quinn slumped, uncharacteristically lax, in the command chair, and stared morosely at the void of space. Stars above, had it really come to this? That he was, in a word, jealous of Pierce? Yes, jealous! Because Lord Astridel had welcomed him into her service with the same civility and courtesy with which she continued to treat all of her retainers, himself included. Jealous, of that meat-brained lunk of a bruiser! What a mortifying position to be in!

But he didn't want civility and courtesy. Quinn was brave enough to confess that much to himself, and coward enough to feel the despair into which the desire unfulfilled plunged him. Once he had thought he could simply continue to work alongside her, that the daily responsibilities would be sufficient. He had tried to believe in that lie, and had failed, and all he could do now was acknowledge how few options were left open to him. There was only one path, in truth, that he could take, and he had been turning aside from it since their arrival on Taris, all the while recognizing that he was only delaying the inevitable. With their mission on Taris finished, and finished well, he could offer himself no more prevarications. At least, he thought grimly, he would be going out on a success.

Nonetheless, the prospect of his decision filled him with such despondency that the heavy sigh he vented might almost have been a groan.

“Are you feeling all right, Quinn?” Astridel's keen voice interrupted his obsessive funk so abruptly that he started violently in his seat, his breath and heart surging as one. There was something in her tone that touched some inner part of him, a part he always strove to keep hidden and secure; it was, a little, like the tone she used to use when she spoke to him. That voice, and its owner – how could he be thinking of leaving them?
“I – yes, my lord,” he stuttered slightly as darted abruptly to his feet, automatically tugging his uniform jacket into place and squaring his shoulders into the very image of propriety. He had failed in his resolutions so often in the past; so many defeats on the many times he had tried to separate his personal feelings from their professional relationship. This time, he had demanded of himself that he keep this one, and there was no time like the present.

Half-suffocated, he stood formally before her, determined to do this properly.

“My lord. Thank you for your attention,” he took a breath, not quite a gasp, and forced his voice to hold steady as he continued. “I must officially request to be reassigned.”

Astridel held very still for a moment, for once, taken by surprise. Since her confession of how greatly she feared Darth Baras, she had shied away from indulging in her periodic emotional survey of her crew. That was, at least, what she told herself, although even she knew that she checked on Jaesa and Vette more or less as frequently as she ever had. It was only Quinn that she had begun to exempt. She had limited herself to the knowledge that he was miserable, but she had needed no special abilities to discern that. In her meditative explorations of herself, she had confessed to herself why she refused to search him further: once again, it was fear.

Fear that she would discover that Quinn now held her in contempt for her weakness. Fear that he would no longer respect her if her fragility meant that she could no longer advance his career. Fear that he would remain with her only until he had created a viable exit strategy, and could leave with his dignity intact. Fear that in him, she would find her humiliation justified. And now, here he was, asking, with all his damnable dignity, to leave.

Her first impulse was to flatly deny him, to punish his question with a barren refusal that brooked no argument. She pinned her lips together momentarily, preventing her knee-jerk reaction.

Instead, she asked quietly, “Why in the galaxy would I want that?”

Of all the possible responses he had considered as likely, this had not been towards the top of his list. The keen edge of her voice had softened, and he glimpsed all his old fantasies dancing before him again. Once before, her mercy had been enough to prompt him to repay her in honesty, and the fiber of sincerity in her voice now, he felt, demanded the same. He must tell her the truth.

“For the sake of you and the crew,” he began, although he felt that even this, in a way, was at least a partial obscuring of the facts. He was leaving for himself. He swallowed the lump in his throat, and continued, aware that his own voice was not without its share of emotion, try though he might to keep it at bay. “I am compromised. Thoughts of you have begun to...” Quinn took a breath. “Distract
me. My feelings affect my ability to concentrate. I cannot, in good conscience, continue to serve.”

Again, she was silent, and again, Quinn found himself wishing that, just once before he left, he could raise the hood that veiled her eyes, and look on her face with nothing in between them. Astridel, non-plussed, was working her way through Quinn's words, and finally daring to reach towards him with the Force, half-expecting to find this all some sort of twisted joke.

When she read the truth in him, and found the truth matched his words, she took a slow breath, uncertain of how she would answer until she began to speak.

“Are you sure you want to go?” she asked, her voice still mild. “If you insist on reassignment, it will be a shame, but I'll grant it.”

A shame? That was the best she could do? She bit the edges of her lips again. It would be more than a shame – a damn sight more than just a shame, but if he wanted so badly to go, she would not hold him against his will, nor would her pride let him see that it hurt her as he left. While she struggled to understand an impulsive gesture she could only think of as bizarre, Quinn gaped at her. In truth, he had expected she would refuse categorically, keeping him uncomfortably on his tether. Instead, he had, for the first time in well over a decade, complete autonomy over his future, and he had her to thank for it. The memory of her words, weeks ago, to Tivva sprang into his mind: *It's your call. Where do you want to go?*

*And this*, he asked himself scornfully, as his blood sounded loud in his years, *this is what you wish to run from? Oh, you are a fool, indeed!* He raised a hand to his temple, as though to forcibly contain all the turmoil that threatened to strangle him. A phantom suspicion reared up before him, that Astridel was not, after all, indifferent; that her behavior of late had nothing at all to do with her discarding him, but in fact something quite otherwise.

“No...” Quinn choked out raggedly. “No – I'm an idiot.”

Moments earlier, he had been certain of his course, convinced in its rightness, resigned to its consequences, and resolved to see his decision through. It had only been the work of second to undo all his steadfast intentions. His next decision was made and launched before he even considered it, for the delay that would be caused by that consideration might mean his chance would be gone. With his heart beating wildly beneath his ribs, he blurted, “Permission to kiss you, my lord.”

Her smile was slow in blossoming, but it dazzled him when it did, familiar now instead of formal, with the little arch quirk to its curves that he hadn't seen for so long. More than this, it was the way her smile spread naturally, suffusing through her in a signature of genuine delight, that took away his
remaining breath.

“I had wondered when you would get around to it,” Astridel said, pert but undoubtedly pleased. She sidled a step closer, and he, finding her approach much too slow, took a rapid step to meet her, his arms moving automatically to embrace her even as some inner voice asked him stupidly what he though he was doing, but crowning the act anyway with his mouth on hers, this time, for the first time, yielding to all the urges to open his lips and taste her as deeply as she sought to taste him. To indulge, to satiate, to satisfy – could there ever be enough, now that this little bit left him wanting more?

He breathed in her scent as he lifted his face from hers; her cheeks below her veil were flushed and her lips were parted, and within the confines of his arms, her shoulders moved with her sped breathing – stars, he could feel the brush of her breasts against his chest, and was suddenly very aware of the slight movements of her body against his. Carefully, Quinn slid his hands from where they rested against her back, retrieving himself from a position he wanted very much to remain in, but for the trouble that it might rapidly become awkward. By the look she gave him, she likely had a very good inkling of why he had inserted a fresh, though short, distance between them. Eyes might be the window to the soul, but he had never realized before how very much a person could read just in another's lips and chin.

“Do you still wish to leave, Quinn?” Astridel asked, low and breathless.

The blush that was beginning to fade from his pale cheeks flared into darker life. “Not at all, my lord,” he murmured. “Now more than duty and honor will be driving my work.”

“You won't regret it,” Astridel promised. “There's no need for denial and sterility. Passion will make you stronger.”

It was, after all, the Sith way. Quinn inclined his head.

“I am growing open to the idea, my lord.”

Chapter End Notes

I actually had Quinn along on all the bits of Taris, and I <3 the little bit in hunting down General Minst (?) where they are trying to shut down an overloaded reactor on a limited time table. I had Astridel take the option of, "Any last requests? If you have anything to say, now's your chance," which got a very rewarding, "I believe you already know how
I feel about you, my lord." Well, maybe she does and maybe she doesn't, Quinn! You haven't exactly been a reliable boyfriend, after all.

In truth, I think at this point, I might have had them through their first kiss (mutual kiss, anyway) prior to this event on Taris, but since I'm changing the pacing a little here, I had to leave that part out - it just wouldn't fit with the way I restructured Quinn's behavior and emotional state. Poor Quinn. I'm kind of tormenting him a bit. (Oh well?)

Edit to add: OMG, what is with all the typos? It's like I didn't proof this chapter at ALL. Sorry; I'm trying to catch them all now.
“Thank you, master.” Jaesa bowed her head slightly as she extinguished the blade of her saber.

“Any time,” Lord Astridel answered smoothly. Sensing a visitor, she added, “Hello, Vette.”

“How’s it going, my lord?” Vette asked from the doorway. “If the lesson’s over, I assume it’s safe to interrupt, right? I don't want to risk meeting the wrong end of something that slashy.”

“We're done,” Astridel replied, returning her two sabers to their accustomed places on her belt and stripping off her gloves. “What news?”

“I thought you might want to know – I got a message from Tivva. She's landed on her feet. She's started seeing a moff stationed in the Outer Rim. He's apparently like sixty years old, though.” Vette made an uncertain shrug with her shoulders. “I don't know what to think.”

“If I were in her shoes, I'd think it pretty disgusting,” Jaesa said, “but if he's a moff, then he's probably rich, and if he's rich, he can be old and ugly and your sister will still end up on top.” She paused. “So to speak.”

“OK, gross, that's a mental image I really didn't need,” Vette protested.

“If she is happy with the arrangement, does it matter?” Astridel inquired. “It's her life. She may make her choices, and reap the benefits. Or pay for them. It's all on her shoulders now.”

“I guess that's true,” Vette conceded. “It could work out in our favor. Moff Oldguy apparently has all sorts of contacts in Imperial Intelligence. And I guess he's helping her find mother.”

“Then it sounds like your sister has made some wise decisions,” opined Astridel. “Or at least, decisions that will help her get what she wants. It shows strength.”

Vette, however, still looked uncertain. “I have dreams about the night they took me from her,” she confessed. “Came in the night, pulled me off my sleeping mat... I just screamed and screamed.”
“You should hunt down those responsible,” Jaesa advised. “Make them pay for what they did to you. You'll feel better for it.”

“I think I'd feel better if we could just find Mother.”

“You found Tivva,” Astridel offered generously. “One lonely twi'lek in a galaxy full of them. You'll find your mother. Give Tivva some time to work her magic on Moff Oldguy. You'll reunite the whole family soon enough.”

“Hope so. It's nice to know you believe in me.” Vette granting Astridel a look of absolute trust and gratitude. “There's something else, my lord – not another favor for me, though,” she added hastily. “Quinn's looking for you on the bridge. I mean, he's not looking for you; he knows you're down here training Jaesa. He just asked if you could stop up.”

Jaesa smirked. “Moff Broysc?”

Astridel's lip curled, albeit with amusement. “You're not teasing him about the moff again, are you, Vette?”

“No!” The twi'lek threw up her blue hands in a rapid gesture of denial. “No, I swear, I haven't mentioned it.”

“Then I had better go and see what the fuss is all about.” Nonetheless, as Astridel left the cargo hold, her sharp ears distinctly heard Vette mutter, “Moff Broysc,” with a comical snicker and, no doubt, an equally comical face, sending Jaesa into gales of derisive laughter.

On the bridge, Quinn was as focused as ever, and instantly attentive as Astridel stepped through the bulkhead hatch.

“Captain,” she greeted him politely. "You wanted to see me?"

“My lord,” Quinn said, with a token struggle not to sound too proud, “I've just been informed that I have passed the trials for captain, second grade.”
“Well done, Quinn,” Astridel replied. The quirk of her mouth broadened slowly into a more authentic smile, one Quinn could not fail to notice. “Shall we throw a party in your honor?”

He inclined his head towards her, partially in respect, and partially to break his eyes away from the sight and its attendant temptations. *You're on duty, man,* he chastised himself, *the least you could do is act like it.*

“Thank you for the offer, my lord, but I don't seek acknowledgment; it requires your approval to go into effect.”

“Done,” she answered readily. The distracting smile still hovered on her lips. “Is that all, captain?”

“Not exactly, my lord,” he admitted, with a small huff that only hinted at the depths of his aggravation. “I've been dealing with a situation that's getting out of hand. Moff Broysc contacted the ship and was incensed to find me at the helm. He's been sending recorded messages that are progressively more nonsensical. He's always been scattered and aggressive – but now he seems completely unhinged.”

The smile faded as he spoke, settling, at first, into her usual reserved look, and then transitioning into a mocking curl. “The next time he comes calling, alert me. I will speak with the man.”

“I would appreciate that, my lord,” Quinn replied with full sincerity. He had been reluctant to lay this problem on Lord Astridel's shoulders: she had her own missions and her own concerns, and his job – and his desire – was to alleviate those to the best of his ability. On some level, he felt ashamed that he had not been able to put a stop to this nonsense, and that his inability hinted at some hidden incompetence on his part – but what could one do against an officer so much his superior? “Tens of thousands of soldiers and some of our most critical campaigns are at the mercy of his commands.”

Astridel folded her arms. “The man is a liability. Clearly, something must be done.”

“I find myself agreeing with you.”

“Anything else?”
“We shall arrive at Quesh and Darth Vengean's flagship in seven hours, my lord.”

“Very well, thank you,” Lord Astridel replied, turning to depart. Her tone was inscrutable, but Quinn had a nagging sense that there was some latent disappointment in her demeanor. She paused at the door.

“For the record, Quinn,” she informed him, “occasionally, when a woman prompts you with ‘Anything else?’ it's because she's waiting for you to kiss her.”

Quinn flushed to the roots of his hair. “I... will keep that in mind, my lord,” he said. “I confess I am not yet adept at negotiating a personal relationship that has intersected so exactly with a professional one.” He made a hesitant step in her direction. “If your lordship wishes....?”

“You're adorable, Quinn,” Astridel answered with a sardonic smirk, “but you're a little too late now.”

The crimson shade on his pale cheeks darkened. “I understand, my lord. I see I quite spoiled it.”

“Let me know when we near Quesh,” she ordered. “Jaesa will accompany me.”

“Very good, my lord.”

Quinn had a fair amount of time to think while Lord Astridel and Jaesa confronted their target, Admiral Monk, breaking the siege the admiral and his Republic forces held on Darth Vengean's ship. The only communiqué of note in the interim was a brief message from Jaesa, indicating that Monk had escaped to the planet's surface and that she and her master were in pursuit.

He was troubled by the news; there had been no real expectation that the action would spill over to planet-side, so he had provided Astridel with little more than a cursory summary of the mining planet Quesh, brief and incomplete. It was, if anything, worse than Taris, at least in terms of environment. The one benefit Quesh held was that Imperial outposts were better established here than they were on Taris. Otherwise, it was a trash heap of toxicity and pollution. Who knows what effects such an atmosphere might have on a person? he thought, which brought him to the conclusion that it was fortunate that Astridel had selected Jaesa. If any could naturally resist the vile air of Quesh, it would be those who could protect themselves with the Force. Still, he wished he had given her a more
thorough dossier on the planet below.

But despite the amount of time Quinn devoted to considering the mission, he spent as much time contemplating Astridel herself, reviewing her ideas and deeds, her motivations and ambitions – not for her sake, but for his own. Once, he had felt this scenario too dangerous a scheme to pursue, and yet, now he sat in the middle of it. It made him alternately tremble with excitement and shake his head in bewilderment. He was no closer now to the answer of any of his old questions than he had been months ago: Was this just a whim to idle away her time? Did this have anything to do with her curious ideas on ensuring the loyalty of her crew? Was this just a mere dalliance? Or was she looking for something else? And moreover, would she find it in him?

She appreciated competence – he prided himself he had this in abundance, notwithstanding matters with Moff Broysc – and she approved of diligence, another trait he felt he displayed with more than casual regularity. She had an analytical mind; he smugly flattered himself how his own strategic logic made him so much more suited to her compared to the crude and unplanned actions of Pierce. As for looks – well, he was aware he wasn't by any means entirely unattractive.

He reviewed their most recent interaction, and placed it in context of all she had displayed to him in the past. Astridel had wholeheartedly approved of his daring plan to rescue Major Ovech, and far from being angry at his stretching the leeway she had given him to its utmost, she had praised his decision. In retrospect, she had been at her most commendatory, granting her highest estimation, when he had been at his boldest. When, that is, he had thrown out a request as a basic pro forma, and then simply seized her in his arms. And his tentative follow-up had been that milquetoast, 'If your lordship wishes...?'

Ugh. Yes, he had spoiled it indeed. He resolved not to make that mistake again.

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“Welcome back, my lord; Jaesa,” Quinn greeted as the pair emerged from the transport pod. “I am pleased to report this ship is in as fine an order as when you left it.”

“I would hardly doubt otherwise,” Astridel answered. “Who is on the bridge?”

“Lieutenant Pierce, my lord. His shift is ending now, however, and I will resume my station there.”

“Pity,” Astridel commented, reaching up to unfasten her battle mask. “I could use your perspective
“I am, as always, at your disposal, my lord,” Quinn offered swiftly. Was that the only reason Astridel found his duties a pity? He rapidly revised his plan. “If you care to join me on the bridge shortly, I will be happy to provide whatever advice I am able to.”

“Then it’s a date,” Astridel said, just as her battle mask dropped into her hands, enabling him to catch a glimpse of the slow smile that always contrived to make his heart stumble faster.

“A date?” Jaesa rolled her eyes.

Astridel laughed as she sauntered through the bulkhead hatch. “Don’t read too much into it, Jaesa,” she tossed back over her shoulder. “Nor you, Quinn.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, my lord,” Quinn replied to her retreating form. Behind him, Jaesa gave a snort, and, belatedly, he recalled her peculiar abilities with the Force; her talent to see through anyone – all their constructs and prevarications, every wall a person used to keep the galaxy out and their hidden selves in.

With a chuckle that wasn’t, to his surprise, wholly malicious, she brushed past him, offering only a one-word response in a teasing, sing-song tone.

“Liar...”
Quinn had spent at least some part of the latter half of Astridel and Jaesa's absence envisioning various means and modes of welcoming his lord back to the ship, each one requiring varying degrees of boldness and carrying varying degrees of risk, and each more satisfying than the next. Circumstances, however, had somewhat changed by the time she arrived on the bridge, refreshed from her shower. There was a soft faint cloud of some sort of pleasant-scented soap that hung about her; Quinn had smelled it once or twice before, and it always surprised him. His general idea of a Sith Lord didn't include an odor of herb-like florals, but then again, Astridel was always one to buck conventional assumptions. At any rate, he was as glad as she seemed to be to have rid herself of the chemical stench of Quesh's polluted smog.

It was an enticing, distracting perfume – one that would have been fine if Quinn had been prepared to succumb to his most daring fantasies – but that was before she had made her specific request for his input, and he had hastily shelved his daydreams with mingled disappointment and relief. Professionalism and restraint must be foremost; he must, he was sure, show that he was as capable as ever he was regardless of whatever this was between them. But show whom? he wondered. Her? Or himself?

“Good day, my lord,” he greeted her simply, waiting for her to introduce whatever was on her mind.

“Anything of interest while I was out?”

“Very little, other than some mediation of a situation arising between Vette and Lieutenant Pierce. There was a minor squabble regarding use of the communications array, which they both wanted simultaneously.”

“Oh?” Astridel's voice rose with both question and amusement. “What did they each want it for?”

“My lord, I hope you do understand I would not stoop to spying on my colleagues' private conversations.”

“Of course I do, Quinn,” Astridel's smirk curled the edge of her mouth more deeply. “You're a man of principle, and an efficient one, at that. You'd just check the call logs.”
Quinn opened his mouth, shut it again with a tilt of his head and an acknowledging bob of his eyebrows, and admitted, “Vette spoke to her sister, and Pierce was trying to contact members of his former Black Ops squad.”

“Understandable for the first, and potentially useful for the second.”

“Indeed – if Pierce’s friends can be trusted, my lord.” His tone indicated that his dubiousness on that point.

“I doubt you’d hardly let them within a parsec of the ship if they didn’t pass your background check.”

“I could have dossiers prepared on each in a matter of days, if you wish it.”

Astridel was already waving a disinterested hand. “I’m not particularly concerned at this point,” she said, turning to take her seat in the command chair. This was clearly a prelude to what was on her mind, and Quinn observed her with eager interest; the fact that she had seated herself suggested this had the potential to be an involved conversation, a prospect he found exciting.

“What I am concerned about,” Astridel continued, “and what I would like –” Astridel broke off, her attention clearly trained on one of the console, and her next words were in tones of thorough puzzlement. “Quinn, were you in the middle of a holocall?”

He pursed his lips. This, as much or more than any of the other altered circumstances, had put aside his idle notions of boldly offering Astridel what he thought might be a proper welcome on her return. Quinn sucked in his breath in a long, sharp draught.

“My lord, Moff Broysc’s holotransmissions have increased,” he explained, mentally tallying that he now had yet another reason to be frustrated with his former commander. Leave it to that consummate ass to disrupt what might have been the first serious conversation Astridel was about to have with him in weeks! “They are beginning to disrupt operations. He’s nearly incoherent – I can only assume some sort of dementia has set in.”

“Vette, Pierce, and Broysc vying for the holo? My, my, Quinn, and here you said there was only little of interest while I was gone.”

“To be fair, my lord, Broysc’s call came in only a few moments ago,” he explained, a shade of
wryness in his speech. “And if he has not hung up, then he is still on the holo right now. I believe it's going to take your personal touch to assuage the situation.”

Astridel made a noise beneath her breath, a sound of either agreement or scorn. “He’s starting to annoy me,” she declared, rising from her seat with a rather majestic air. “Let me see this idiot for myself.”

With a phlegmatic introduction of, “Here he is, my lord...” Quinn pulled up the call on the main holoterminal in the lounge, revealing the image, drawn in blue and white, of a compact and wiry man of indeterminate but advanced age, dressed in an Imperial uniform that, while passing regulation, seemed nonetheless nebulously untidy in comparison to Quinn's meticulously pressed appearance. The moff’s oversized mustaches flopped absurdly on his upper lip as he ranted wildly in a high-pitched, tight-throated voice.

“...flew the coop! Your new cage will be smaller and tighter! Coffin size! Urn size! In a locket I'll wear around my neck!”

Quinn wrinkled his mouth in a moue of irritated disgust. “He's unlikely to stop, my lord. He didn't even know he was on hold.”

“Druckenwell proved my point!” The moff howled. “My glory is mine! Mine! You're nobody!”

“The man has lost all sense.” Astridel found herself marveling, despite her trust in Quinn's earlier assessment. Indeed, he had not overstated the case.

“As I said, my lord,” Quinn agreed dryly.

“Where's my blaster? I'll shoot your face!” Broysc gesticulated wildly. “Personally! And again! Druckenwell won't save you! I could blow Balmorra away! I'll blow Balmorra away this time! Wait! What?” The moff seemed, at last, to have experienced the briefest of moments of clarity, sufficient only to recognize that his target was far out of his sights. “Gone? Where'd he – there's a Sith on this! Why did you transfer me, Rodjnik? I'll ship you off to Balmorra too!”

Leaning slightly towards Astridel, Quin explained in a low voice, “Rodjnik is his communications officer. This is how it's been.”
“Lucky Rodjnik,” quipped Astridel.

“Rodjnik, am I through?” Broysc demanded, “I’m through? Yes or no? I don’t see – is this broken? All I see is a Sith!”

Astridel lifted her chin and sliced her edged voice into Broysc’s tirade. “You see a Sith because you have called my ship.”

“Your ship? I was talking to – wait, you're the one who dared to liberate the admiral! Have you lost your mind?” Broysc squawked.

“He calls me Admiral Malcontent,” Quinn clarified. “He seems to think that's my actual rank and name.”

“Don't you know,” Moff Broysc screeched, “he's the one who lost the Battle of Talay?”

“Broysc's earliest command. Before I was born,” Quinn commented.

“It was his blunder that allowed the escaped Jedi targets to flee Taris before the bombardment!”

“Ancient history. Broysc wasn't even born.”

“He sabotaged the Glory Space Station, for crying out loud!”

Quinn shook his head. “I have no idea what that is.”

“I hear him!” Broysc shrieked, holographic flecks of spittle flying from beneath the mop-like mustaches. “I'm talking! His insubordination is lethal! Paralyzing! It threatens the Empire! And you do nothing!”

Astridel shook her head, clearly unwilling to waste her time in attempting to reason with a mind so obviously delirious. There was a mocking twist to her lips as she bent towards Quinn, saying, “This is amazing. It's like a space wreck. You can't look away.”
“You will not defy me!” Broysc bellowed. “Fight his disease, Sith! Save yourself and deliver him to me for execution! Now! Are you listening?”

Quinn made a small noise; having been plagued by the moff’s whims for over half his professional life, he could no longer find the humor in Broysc’s deranged rantings. Although he could not agree with Lord Astridel's wry laugh, he could at least agree with her exasperation, and he gratefully welcomed her next words.

“But even a space wreck ceases to amuse after a time, Quinn, end the transmission.”

“Right away.” Quinn stepped to the holoterminal console with alacrity and cut off Broysc mid-diatribe.

“He must be ended once and – ”

The lounge was plunged into relieving silence. Quinn stood at the console for a moment, and when he turned around, Astridel's face was unexpectedly serious.

“Well, now Moff Broysc knows who to thank for your removal from Balmorra,” she commented.

“Yes, my lord. I'm sorry.”

“The easiest way to be rid of the trouble would be for me to hand you over to Broysc.”

Quinn looked at her uneasily, his eyes widening faintly as one eyebrow twitched.

“I'm kidding, Quinn,” Astridel relented. “Come now, give me at least a little credit.”

“Of course, my lord. I wasn't worried in the slightest.” Forestalling any additional uncomfortable pleasantries, he hurried to add, “With Broysc in command, the Empire is in critical danger. It's clear I must implore High Command to do something about him.”
“Sound thinking. But...” cautioned Astridel, “is there not a risk, speaking out against an officer so much above you in rank?”

He took a breath, considering. “There is, my lord. I understand I could be undoing all the progress I have so far achieved. But I cannot see a way aside from the official channels.”

Astridel was again silent; she was considering how her own method of solving the problem would be quite different, and involve far fewer official channels, than Quinn’s. But this was his difficulty; she could see he would be reluctant to burden her with the situation any further than was necessary. Already he seemed uncomfortable with even having to bring it to her attention. He needn't be – it was interesting to her to watch him handle this drawn out crisis, to see how he attacked the problem: how far would he pursue the official channels? To what ends would his hatred of Broysc drive him? At what point lay the fulcrum upon which he would pivot, and bring forth that sudden, dashing audacity, dazzlingly sure and decisively swift to save the day? Privately, she hoped for the official channels to be fruitless. She wanted to see Quinn challenged, and rising to meet it.

“Do as you feel best,” was all she said.

“I'll update you when I can.”

Chapter End Notes

Most of this chapter is more or less verbatim from the Broysc ranting scene, which was just too hilarious not to include in its entirety. "I have no idea what that is" was entirely giggle-worthy. But then it ended up being too long for the next part of the conversation that I wanted to write (and haven't, yet).
“Now that Moff Broysc is out of the way, my lord,” Quinn said as he took up his usual lance-straight stance beside the command chair on the bridge, “we are entirely at leisure to discuss your missions and concerns. Am I correct in assuming this has to do with Admiral Monk?”

“It does,” Astridel answered as she settled herself once again in her accustomed spot. She did not continue for a moment, measuring her words and secrets before speaking. Quinn, his eager devotion carefully masked, projected an outward demeanor of attentive calm.

“Would it surprise you to learn that Admiral Monk, the decorated Republic military man, was, in fact, an agent of Darth Baras?” she began.

“It would, my lord,” Quinn breathed, stunned. “Monk was in command of a considerable force – to have achieved such a rank and keep his allegiance hidden – ! You are quite sure?”

“He and his men defected to the Empire over a decade ago. Jaesa checked; he wasn't lying.”

“And Darth Baras revealed none of this to you, my lord.”

“Not a word, not a wink. Not, of course,” Astridel added with a grimace, “that anyone could ever see Baras wink under that mask of his. Monk was understandably bitter that Baras cut them loose. As far as Monk knew, their covers were intact.”

Quinn pressed his lips together, head bowed in thought. “Another,” he murmured, “instance of Darth Baras wasting good assets.”

“Very much so,” Astridel answered grimly. “There is more to it, however. On Darth Vengean's ship, Moff Maskin is dead.”

“Monk, my lord?”
“Me, Quinn.”

“I see, my lord.”

“Not quite. I dislike,” said she, crossing one leg over the other at the knee, “I extremely dislike wasting useful Imperial lives. Maskin could – could, mind you – have been useful, if handled properly. Unfortunately, Baras used him up. He pushed him too far.”

“How so?”

“The usual. Machinations and scheming, at the expense of the Empire. Maskin saw through it, at the end, and decided he had had enough. It was unfortunate for him that he chose me to take it out on.”

Quinn mulled on that for a few seconds. “What, my lord, did he see through, specifically?”

“Admiral Monk had Moff Maskin's force field and docking codes. We of course know the reason for this is that Monk was in Baras' employ, but a child could have made the connection. Maskin assumed there was a leak in Baras' organization.” Astridel rested her chin lightly against her fingertips.

“The evidence would strongly suggest that Baras himself is the leak,” Quinn observed. He raised his chin slightly as a dawning terrible idea broke in his mind. “Which means that Darth Baras set up his master Darth Vengean.”

“My conclusion as well, captain,” Astridel agreed, her tone shrouded.

Quinn softly let out a long exhalation through slightly pursed lips. “As for what purpose...” he mused, low-voiced, almost to himself, “Darth Baras could be angling for Darth Vengean's seat on the Dark Council – weakening Vengean's power base. Or...”

He raised concerned eyes to Astridel. “Or this could be a move to ensure you cannot rely on Darth Vengean's resources or backing should it come to a schism between you and Baras. To remove a potential support before you could ever turn towards it.”
“I have considered both of those possibilities,” Astridel replied. The tips of her first two fingers absent-mindedly traced the line of an old scar that spanned the length of her neck below her right ear, its ends lost beneath her hood and below her collar. It was an old habit, a motion she made when either deep in thought or when she sought to mentally survey her hurts, recent or not. Something about it bound her to herself, tethering her soul to her form. “It’s as likely that Baras is doing both – laying plans to elevate himself while kicking down a growing threat. But were Vengean’s men meant to survive this all along?”

Quinn folded his arms across his chest, burying his chin thoughtfully in the fingers of one hand. Baras had set Astridel ostensibly to rescue Vengean's flagship and kill Admiral Monk. Monk had been loyal to Baras; Maskin had been loyal to Vengean. If Baras wanted to weaken Vengean by removing Maskin, giving Monk the codes to Maskin's ship was a solid way to do it. But then, Baras had sent Lord Astridel. He was fully aware of his apprentice's skill; Astridel was ruthlessly efficient in battle. Astridel would certainly rescue Moff Maskin – and so she had, until Maskin lost his temper. That meant that Astridel's saving of Maskin and the ship was Baras' gift to Vengean – to create the appearance of an emergency, and send in Astridel to save the situation. In that case, only Monk should have died; Maskin and his crew should have survived – and again, would have, if Maskin hadn't acted on his suspicions. If Monk alone were supposed to die under Baras' plan, that meant Baras was sacrificing his own pieces to portray a sham, a pantomime of a rescue, to Vengean. For what? Vengean's gratitude? It seemed like a terrible waste of resources for a rather nebulous reward, and Quinn said so.

“Given all we've seen of Darth Baras, my lord,” he added, “I think it far more likely that this was done to undermine Darth Vengean. By Monk's hand or yours, Maskin was never going to outlast this day. Vengean and his seat on the Dark Council is Darth Baras' goal, I am sure of it. If you will forgive my putting it this way, my lord, you are very much a secondary or tertiary concern to Baras. Rather,” he tacked on with a faint flush of self-consciousness, “to my relief, my lord.”

Astridel's smile was narrow, but it nonetheless tugged at the corners of her mouth. “Indeed?” she asked, her voice treading water somewhere between amusement and danger. The recollection of her tense confession of inadequacy shot through Quinn's mind; surely, at least one of the layers of meaning in that single word of hers flirted with the question of whether or not he held her fear against her.

“Merely because I have not completed my assessment of Darth Baras' weaknesses,” Quinn replied with a display of prim propriety that was only half authentic. “I am unsuited to advise you currently, my lord.”

“Anything else?”

A fluttering warmth stuttered through his veins, tripping over an irregularity in his heartbeat. She had schooled him thoroughly on the various meanings of Anything else? and he had perhaps three-
quarters of a second to decide if this fell under that educational umbrella or not.

_On duty be damned,_ he thought, suddenly bending at the waist, bringing his breath and eyes and hair and scent startlingly close to hers.

“And because,” he added in a tone both soft and saucy, “I shouldn’t like for him to scrutinize my doing this.”

It was a surprisingly chaste kiss, as if he were determined to demonstrate that he could and would balance this matter among all the others without toppling the pillar of his responsibilities or overstepping his bounds, as though he had given himself a line which he would not cross – the very thing, to be sure, that Astridel had most hoped to entice him to do. But for all that, it was not a sterile kiss, void of passion and as reverential as a salute placed on a marble idol. No – his lips caressed hers with a tenderness as startling as it was warm, so gentle and so brief that when he lifted his face from hers, she was both mildly astonished and highly gratified to find the pulse of her heart leaping and her nerves tingling on the edge of an electric-like current. Perhaps she had underestimated her attraction to this man. Perhaps she had underestimated him.

She exhaled slowly. “Indeed,” Astridel repeated with emphasis, leaning forward in her seat as though her muscles were straining towards further contact. Her expression curled slowly into one of feline contentment. “Then I see I had better continue keeping myself low on Baras’ list of priorities.”

Quinn straightened, giving his uniform jacket a small tug, more to give his hands something to do than any other reason. Limiting himself to just the kiss had been a somewhat of a struggle, but aside from the ordinary consideration of decorum, he as yet had no concrete idea how to go about pursuing anything more active with a woman so much his superior in power and rank. Expectations were bound to run high and heady, and he knew he was by far unprepared for such a contest.

Not that that didn't mean he wasn't tempted. Not by a long shot.

“You did, I believe, say this was a date,” Quinn reminded her slyly, hoping he had mastered himself sufficiently that she could not detect the tremor that threatened his voice, the product of a two-step danced between excitement and agitation within his breast.

Her smile turned roguish. “I also said not to read too much into it.”

“Fortunately, my lord, I have not. Otherwise, I would be forced to consider it perilously close to a
failure,” he replied, warming to her banter. He was not frequently mirthful, but just because he often masked his wit, it did not mean that he didn't have one; Astridel knew it, and had witnessed it herself – as had Vette, to her inebriated detriment. It amused her; it pleased her to see him drop a few of his barriers.

“A failure?” she prompted.

“I would think of better ways to employ our time on a date than spending it discussing Darth Baras.” He just managed to keep himself from making a grimace of distaste.

“Is that a boast or a promise?” If possible, her attitude became even more arch.

“Well, An invitation, my lord, if you would be pleased to consider it as such.”

There was a pause in time, a few seconds in which his heart quietly faltered out of measure, and he was certain she was raising an eyebrow at him behind the facade of her veil. He couldn't know that she was focused equally on her own concealment, carefully drawing out the taste of her own eager response, relishing the little thrill of anticipation that ran its fingers along her spine.

Aloud, she only said, “I would.”

If Quinn had thought his pulse had stuttered in the asking, that was nothing compared to the wild flailing it engaged in now at the acceptance. It took him a moment to reply, but when he did, he had reigned in the excess sufficiently to give her simply a genuine smile. “Thank you, my lord. Is there anything you would particularly care to do on this date?”

He stood at patient attention as she regarded him meaningfully, resignedly letting his face flush in reaction to the suggestiveness encased within his question, and quietly waited for her answer.

“I would rather leave it up to your own ingenuity, Quinn, to come up with your better ways of employing our time,” she said, coyly adding no further provocation to his own double entendre. “Although, if it helps, we are returning to Kaas City after we break orbit.”

“Which will be when, my lord?”
“As soon as I have updated Darth Baras on Monk's demise. Which brings me back around to my final point for your consideration.” Astridel sat back, draping one leg over the other at the knee, her poise both thoughtful and faintly regal. Back to business, then, now that the pleasure had been entertained. “Can you think of any advantage to my indicating to Baras that I am aware of his schemes?”

Quinn scrubbed his fingers over his chin, working swiftly through the ramifications of the options. “I see no tactical benefit of admitting what you have discovered, my lord. If Darth Baras does intend to kill you at the point where you have either outlived your usefulness or you pose an imminent threat, telling him what you know will only speed him on his conviction towards the latter. It may hasten his plans.”

“How can lead to errors. Errors I can use to my advantage.”

“True. But Darth Baras...” Quinn shook his head. “His plots are deep, my lord. He has laid his plans with care and well in advance. There is even a chance that he expected you to learn these truths, although I could not guess for what reason. By remaining silent, however, you give up nothing; he can only speculate on what you know. He will be in the dark about you as you are about him.”

Astridel was making a slight motion of her head, a faint and contemplative nod of agreement. “I thought the same,” she stated, “but I needed another set of eyes on it; ensure I didn't miss anything.”

A slow flash of her winsome smile crossed her features.

“After all, it's your job to keep me on my toes, is it not, Captain?”

Chapter End Notes

It's fun writing the exchanges between these two with full knowledge of what is to come. It prompts me to bury things in the meanings; Quinn and Astridel both are experts at hiding their thoughts and feelings from each other. Additionally, where I often tried to end chapters on generally personally upbeat notes for Paha and Vector in *Drones* and *Clouds and Colors*, for Astridel and Quinn I try to hint at something unsettling or troubling - Quinn's uneasiness, Jaesa calling him a liar, and so forth.

I've not been terribly chatty in the notes for this story - a variety of reasons, including time, and work demands (at work today I sussed out what I have to do between now and a year-end deadline, and I don't know how it is physically possible to complete
what I need to do in that amount of time). We also got the lousy news yesterday that a great friend's cancer has metastasized throughout his skeleton, which is some hella unfair bullshit, if you ask me.
It took Malavai Quinn some portion of the return journey to Dromund Kaas to overcome a certain sense of intimidation whenever he considered the subject of their upcoming outing. Just what did one do on a date with a Sith Lord? He viewed the prospect with almost as much trepidation as he did eagerness. After a decade of insipid stagnation on Balmorra, he was discovering that this unbalancing intertwining of uncertainty and excitement had become his new state of normalcy, thrumming in his sinews and speeding his blood without even a moment's provocation – was it always thus, when negotiating a new affair, or was it only because of the power she wielded and the danger that posed? In his private moments of introspection, even he could tell how he felt himself waffling between extremes; each time he hazarded some bold move, he then overcompensated the other direction, withdrawing to his staid reserve and taking too many pains to appear in his unruffled demeanor and dutiful stoicism. It led him to wonder whom he was most trying to convince: himself, or Astridel.

But the pazaak cards had been dealt now, and there was no returning them to the deck. He must play the hand he had, and play it well – so he had better damn well work out a plan. He fussed about cultural bulletins and announcements in between drafting his letters to nearly every contact he could think of in the Imperial military, painstakingly outlining the increasing threat of Moff Broyse's incompetence and myopic lunacy, hoping that his anxious zeal on that front would mask the similar feeling he had towards his more personal mission.

When at last he was satisfied with the schedule of activities, Quinn finally allowed his contentment to manifest itself outwardly in a smile that was only a trifle smug. Astridel noticed it at once, and vented her curiosity, naturally, by teasing him, hoping to trick or exasperate him into revealing the secret.

“An evening in a ridiculously expensive spice den,” she guessed, “followed by a penthouse suite at the Grand Kaas Plaza.”

“My lord, you must think that the military pays much better than it actually does,” Quinn answered with a quirk of his eyebrow.

“Cliff-jumping from the Kaas Falls ledges.”

“I regret to inform you that I am not suicidal, my lord.”

“Underground rancor-baiting arena fight.”
He merely shook his head, and turned his attention back to editing his draft of a message he was about to send off to an admiral under whom, long years ago, he had once served when that admiral had himself been of nowhere near so high a rank. In truth, Quinn was enjoying the novel sensation of having the upper hand, for once; so often, he felt a vague shadow of inferiority to Astridel – one that, he admitted, was only natural for him to feel. She was a Sith Lord. There was no comparison between them. Perhaps that was why he found a perverse titillation in this current scheme, and in the fact that he could torment her just a little with the knowledge he wouldn't let her have. From all appearances, it seemed to amuse her, too – after all, had she really minded, she could have forced it out of him easily enough. But quite contrary to that, she appeared to enjoy the dance, and he only relented, just a fraction, when she pointed out that she would at least need to know if she should dress for a battle or for a ball.

“It's not exactly a ball, my lord,” he replied, “but it wouldn't be amiss to assume a similar dress code.”

And that was how, several days later, Quinn found himself standing at the ship hatch, wordless from either his heart in his throat or his breath anywhere but in his lungs, staring openly as Astridel descended the three short steps from the ship lounge to meet him.

In all their time together aboard the *Fury*, he had never seen her in anything other than her sturdy, everyday garb, black and red and unadorned, covered only with the armor she donned for missions. She avoided robes, capes, and skirts, anything that might bind her movements or hinder her limbs, anything that might be caught and used against her in a fight. He suspected she kept her hair short for much the same reason.

This night, however – this night, she wore a dress of so deep and saturated a purplish indigo that it could have been cut and sewn from a midnight sky, and like a midnight sky it fluttered with the faintest glistening of silvery light, as though scattered with the very palest of stars, twinkling only when seen at just the right angle. It was closely tailored, arcing sleekly over her figure from her breast to her hips; the neck was not cut particularly low, but the cloth swept up in broad bands over her shoulders to the scoop of a voluminous cowl back. She had set aside her usual hood in favor of a more fanciful veil, a longer one that cascaded softly to her nape in elaborate, delicate folds, fringed with a filigree of dainty beadwork, and the portion of her already pale face that it framed she had lightened to near white, even to her lips. She had finished the makeup with a narrow stripe of purple down the center of her lips, an entrancing spot of color that kept his eyes focused on her mouth – when, that is, they were not straying down the glorious starlit paths of her gown to the floor-length skirt and – holy hyperspace, that slit really was cut all the way up to there? The apple of his throat bobbed as he swallowed.

“My lord,” Quinn murmured, extending his hand. “You are indeed exquisite.”

Her replying smile, slow in its bloom, indicated that she clearly knew it already, and signified her
appreciation that he acknowledged it, too. She slipped her fingers, slender and smooth, into his outstretched grasp, and it surprised him to realize how small her hands actually were. When gloved and wielding her lightsabers, they were so strong and formidable that he had somehow thought they would be large, as well. Quinn had seen them bare before, of course – on the ship, in casual moments on the bridge, at a party on Nar Shaddaa – and he had touched them before, as well – when tending to one or another of her post-battle hurts – but never before had their fingers met like this, and he felt a shiver run through him, as though his hair were all standing on end.

“Thank you,” she replied demurely, with sincerity. It was one of the more genuine statements of their relationship, untinted with her usual sardonic tone or undercurrent of satirical cynicism. The last time Quinn had heard Astridel's voice sound in such a way, she had culminated her speech in a moment of pure, unadulterated honesty, confessing her dread of Darth Baras like a shameful secret staining her soul. Before Quinn could wonder what it might bring this time, it had passed, and her smile turned arch.

“If I am to be seen on the arm of the Imperial military's newest rising star, I had better not look slovenly,” Astridel continued flirtatiously. While it was true her veil hid her sightless eyes, there was no mistaking the motion of her head, giving him a long and lingering survey from head to foot. “The new uniform suits you, Malavai Quinn, captain, second grade.”

She enunciated his name and rank with precision, dawdling over the syllables as if each were a flavor she sought to relish. It was accurate, too; even Quinn himself felt that he cut a dashing figure. With his improved circumstances, he had been able to afford a higher quality than he formerly had: excellent material of a fine, dense weave, and the crisp gray fabric had been perfectly tailored to his trim musculature. The insignia and cylinders of his rank gleamed silver and gold, and the leather of his belts around his waist and across his chest shone blackly, sleek and glossy under the lights of the ship's foyer. Even his boots were new, barely broken in, and polished as dark mirrors. Not a wrinkle, not a scuff, not a speck of dust, not even a hair out of place, combed to match the fastidiousness of clothing. His meticulousness paid off; he was just standing there looking so damned desirable that were it not for her curiosity to discover what he had planned, Astridel wasn't entirely certain she would have been able to resist the temptation to drag him to her quarters and give him a thorough – and thoroughly enjoyable – mussing up.

“The honor and privilege is entirely mine,” he replied, smiling down at her. “I am unlikely to be noticed when the jewel of the Empire is beside me. You eclipse me utterly, my lord.”

Even his compliments were elegant. And true. Oh, this fared promising to be a very good night, indeed.

Quinn stood aside to permit her to exit first, as both a lady and his lord. He had once – only once – reasoned that he should be the first through any door, to flush an ambush out of hiding or be the recipient of a sniper's bolt, but Astridel had dismissed this: any ambush or sniper that would post a
credible threat to her would be canny enough to be sure of their target before striking, thus his
gallantry, though noted, was quite pointless. Plus, she would not have it be said that she sent her
team where she would not go first; the implication of cowardice was intolerable to her. She was, she
pointed out unnecessarily, a Sith, and thus more capable of taking a hit. Quinn found he could not
argue with the logic.

As Astridel glided past and down the *Fury'*s ramp, Quinn took just a second before following to
watch her: how her dress shimmered faintly under the bald and utilitarian lights of the spaceport, how
the fabric hugged the curves of her figure, how a shadow of the scar down her neck peeked from
beneath the edge of the voluminous cowl along her shoulder, how strange and stunning a picture she
made with all her battle edges suddenly softened in this manner. It occurred to him belatedly that she
wore no belt.

“No lightsabers, my lord?” he inquired, surprised into asking as he fell in step beside her.

“Perhaps I will have to rely on you for protection tonight, Captain.” Astridel raised her chin as she
raised her face towards him, and the beads of her headdress made a faint musical sound as they
moved, crystalline and remote. “If you think you can handle the challenge.”

“I think that all depends on how much trouble you intend to get us into, my lord,” Quinn replied,
returning her teasing with aplomb. Now that he was embarked on this course, his nerves, which had
made him fuss endlessly over his attire and shaving, seemed to have calmed themselves, and he felt
as though empowered, ready to conquer half the Republic with his bare hands. Ready to conquer far
more than that, perhaps, if granted the opportunity.

“And *that* would depend on where you intend on taking me,” she rejoined lightly. “But in light of
my ignorance... I can only hazard a guess: as much as I can, and as much as you can manage.”

“Then I look forward to it, my lord.”
Dromund Kaas

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The *where* began to resolve itself rapidly from an overheard fragment of the directions Quinn gave to the taxi droid, but Astridel relaxed on the bench seat behind the driver and affected not to hear, or at least pretended not to guess from the information thus exposed. Nonetheless, when the transport glided to a stop below the porte cochère that formed part of the grand front entrance to the Imperopolitan Museum of Fine Arts, she had to admit she was both surprised and impressed. It was a gala evening for the opening of a new exhibit, doubling as some sort of military fundraiser, and from the sight of the couples trailing up the vast staircase before the imposing structure of polished heavy stonework, quite a number of the movers and shakers of the Empire had turned out for the event. Tickets must have cost Quinn a heavy number of credits.

It was a fine night. It was rare enough for there to be a break in the rain, but in addition a cooling breeze was coming over the jungle-choked peaks surrounding Dromund Kaas, speedily sweeping through the heavens and pushing along enough of the cloud cover to permit a bare handful of stars to wink down on the city unhindered. Humid steam sifted languidly upwards from the pavement; doubtless, there would be fog later.

Quinn once again gave her his hand as she stepped from the taxi, and, spurred by the excitement of her smile, he was lightly placing his other against the small of her back to guide her up the marble stairs when his fingers brushed something hard and cold secreted beneath the gathered folds of the cowl, something decidedly not the supple warmth of her figure. He cocked an eyebrow at her.

“No lightsabers, my lord?” he asked again, wryly.

“Just the one. This dress doesn’t exactly allow room for both,” Astridel replied, unperturbed. Her mouth quirked in amusement at the look he was giving her. “What? I never actually said I was unarmed. Besides, you’re a practical man, Quinn. A man of strategy and planning – admit it, you would think less of me if I were so foolish as to wander about unprepared.”

He laughed at that, and confessed, “I expect I would, my lord, it’s true. How fortunate for me that you have such insight into my character. It would be embarrassing for me to find cause to like you less.”

“More embarrassing for *me*, I think,” she chuckled. “But don’t think this means I don’t rely on your skills, Quinn.” She paused momentarily on the top stair, and as she turned to look at him, he was surprised by the appearance of an abrupt expression on her features – something he classified as seriousness, but which he wondered later was perhaps earnestness. It was just a flicker, and gone in
so quick a breath he wasn't even sure he had truly seen it. Some part of her wanted to admit how much she did depend on his abilities, and how much she appreciated them – how much she appreciated him, even – and she was tempted to say more, but felt it was rather too early in the evening to let down that many of her walls and guards. She was not often open with her deeper or more solemn emotions, something some Sith would consider strange, but she had observed that sometimes, waters that appeared the most tranquil on the surface hid the most raging turmoil in their unfathomable depths. Shallow puddles, on the other hand, were frequently disturbed, but could hardly damage the feeble grass that ringed them. Outward show, the forms and guises of emotion made manifest on her face, things that could betray her to an enemy's eye; these were not her way, not in battle and not in public. They were out together, and for once not on the ship or on a mission, so let that be enough. This was a party, not a confessional.

“And if it means so much to you,” Astridel continued in a jocular tone, “if we get into trouble, I can simply step back, wring my hands, and let you rescue me. I believe there are old stories that say that's the appropriate course of action for a damsel in distress.”

“If I were able to really picture you as a helpless lady, my lord,” Quinn retorted, “that might be the first time in my life I could be justly accused of having a hopelessly fantastical and overactive imagination.”

Her answering laugh was musical, and rang like the echo of a bell in his ears as they stepped into the museum proper, gleaming in white and gold stone, glittering under the chandeliers with a pristine cleanliness unlike the veneer of moist slime that clung to many of the lesser buildings of the rain-soaked metropolis. The schedule of the evening allowed a generous portion of time for strolling the galleries, cocktails in hand, and as they passed one of the temporary bars that had been set up Quinn promptly asked Astridel her choice.

“Surprise me,” she replied with an enigmatic smile. He was back moments later, and handed her a low glass of something that ran through an array of claret shades in layers, from a deep burgundy to a translucent ruddy pink.

“What is it?” she inquired, lifting it to her lips.

“A surprise, of course,” he answered, waiting for her reaction as she sipped the mixture, and hoping that this was yet another test passed. It was pleasantly sweet, but not cloying, rich with piquant, aromatic spice, and velvet-smooth, and her curious expression brightened to one of enjoyment as she rolled the liquor over her tongue.

“It's positively decadent, is what it is,” she assessed. “But that won't help me order another one in the future.”
“A Raxulan sunset,” Quinn supplied, warmed and pleased. “Made from the finest Raxan brandy.”

They meandered along the halls, their attentions vacillating between the stationary scenes affixed to the walls and the more dynamic tableaux of the other assembled guests. With only a touch of arrogance, Astridel displayed her rarely-indulged knowledge of art, to Quinn's astonishment.

“My expertise is hardly comprehensive, though. I only know most of these because of their importance in Sith history,” she confessed. She came to a stop before a massive canvas, over three meters tall and at least two wide, depicting an imposing warrior, face shrouded behind a mask and lit by the glow of a red saber, pausing mid-battle to look inexplicably at the artist as cities crumbled behind him, presumably in obedience to his raised hand, its fingers curled in a powerful, gripping gesture. “Like this one: Taris Falls to Malak.”

“It is an impressive work, my lord.”

“And likely wildly inaccurate,” Astridel snorted derisively. “Darth Malak ordered Taris bombed. He would have commanded that from his ship, not the surface; he didn't pull down all those buildings on his own. But that is Sith pride for you, may I be exempt from that number.”

Quinn looked at her in some surprise. “You don't wish to be honored in such a way? A great portrait of you, for all the Empire to see, to remember your deeds and victories?”

“If it amuses an artist to paint my deeds, I have no objection, but I hope I will never be memorialized for a victory that was not truly my own,” she shook her head. “If my danger is shared, then so should be my triumph.”

“Very egalitarian, my lord.”

“Credit granted where credit due, is all. I'll not have my accomplishments diminished when someone stares at conquest of mine, painted with lies, and whispers behind their hand, 'She was never on the surface,' as I have just done. A formal portrait is one thing, but a scene? I would not consent unless it also depicted Jaesa. Or Vette.”

“Or me, my lord?” Quinn inquired, a faint and indefinable thrill trembling in his chest, and a malicious little joy at finding Pierce not included in her list.
"Or you." Astridel looked away from the painting, facing him with one of her rare genuine smiles. "I think you have had quite enough of having your achievements claimed by those who not only had no part in them, but actively worked against you."

"More than enough, my lord," Quinn agreed fervently.

Turning her back on the portrait, Astridel gave a questioning nod towards a couple at the far end of the gallery, absorbed in a study of Darth Nefara's Cavalry. She had found in Quinn a valuable encyclopedia regarding many of the assembled crowd; he seemed to have a mental dossier on nearly everyone whose path they crossed. She exploited his knowledge voraciously, and he was only too happy for the opportunity to flaunt his intelligence before her.

"Moff Caina Alberard," he said, glancing discretely at the somewhat stern-looking woman handsomely attired in a highly formal dress uniform, her gray-streaked hair pulled back into a complicated twist. "I have never served with her directly, but from what I've heard, she is an excellent commander. She used to be stationed along the border of Hutt territory, but that was some time ago. Her husband is somewhat less successful; although he has attained the rank of admiral, he generally doesn't command much more than a desk these days."

"Perhaps that is why she isn't here with her husband," Astridel observed with a droll smirk. With her veil, she had the advantage of being able to stare more or less openly about her without appearing to be noting anyone in particular. They had the additional advantage of being generally fairly unknown persons here, neither of them yet important enough to garner the sorts of notice and speculation others earned merely by entering the room, although there had been a handful of acknowledging looks in their direction, both from Sith and military personnel alike. "I've seen that one around the Citadel a few times, but I don't know who he is."

Quinn risked a second glance. "Darth Kolar. He has been instrumental in furthering some of the Empire's goals on the frontier regions of the Outer Rim. I believe he and Moff Alberard have been working together for some time."

"And sleeping together for only slightly less," Astridel shrewdly deduced as the Moff brushed a piece of lint from the Sith Lord's shoulder with a light touch.

"I wouldn't know that much, my lord," Quinn answered, feeling a shadow of a blush creeping along his cheeks.
Astridel's mouth curled slyly. “Neither would her husband, I'd wager.”

They progressed on to the museum's airy central atrium, ringed with private tables laid out for the gala dinner; the center area was left clear, save for the tuneful presence of a quintet of musicians set up to one side of the dance floor.

“I thought you said this wasn't a ball,” Astridel accused as Quinn pulled out her chair for her at their tiny, circular table.

Quinn waited until she had settled in before taking his own seat and correcting her archly, “I said it wasn't exactly a ball. It isn't. It's an art exhibit and fundraiser for...” He picked up a card from the table and read it with precision, his face composed into an expression of innocence. “…the Grand Moff Cushing Memorial Benefit Fund. Though I confess I have no idea who, exactly, benefits.”

She threw a wry moue his direction, an expression that made him laugh openly. He was enjoying himself thoroughly; for this one evening, it seemed as if they were just as they appeared at this moment: a man and a woman, without the military – despite his uniform – and without the Sith or the Dark Side – despite the lightsaber hidden in her dress. It was as though their rank and status had been falling from them, draining away as the night crept in, leaving nothing behind but the simplicity of their physical beings, unhindered by ambition and secrets and schemes and tricks, sweeping clear the path for the lust that had been kindling for months. Quinn's gaze was drawn again and again to the streak of purple on her lips, fascinating him in its intricate pattern of bobbing and weaving as she spoke and smirked, and most especially when she smiled. At times, he was so entranced that her words barely registered, as now, and he reigned in his wandering attention.

“The Cushings, like enough,” Astridel was replying. “I admit, it is incredibly pleasant to hear something other than the usual Huttese pop tunes. At times it feels like the whole galaxy only listens to the same half-dozen songs.”

The food was delicious and the musicians were skillful, and somewhere after they had finished lingering over a wickedly sumptuous dessert, a piece glided from the quintet's skilled hands that was slow, sleek, and sophisticated, with a certain sultry, seductive undercurrent winding through its melody. All had been going in his favor all night, and Quinn felt emboldened to see how far his luck – or charm – would stand by him.

“My lord, would you care to dance?”

She had been resting her elbows on the table they shared with her fingers loosely tented before her chin; the pose bringing her even closer to him across the forced intimacy of the tiny surface. She
dropped her hands from before her face in surprise.

“You know how to dance?” Astridel asked with some incredulity.

“Why should I not?” Quinn replied reasonably. “It's a worthy part of the education of any gentleman.”

“I would make a terrible gentleman, then,” Astridel answered, “for more reasons than the obvious. You're one up on me, Quinn, I can hardly dance a step. It wasn't ever part of my curricula; the Sith Academy isn't a finishing school.”

“And you would let a fault of your teachers inhibit your actions, my lord?” Quinn challenged, rising to his feet.

“Never!” she declared roundly, taking his proffered hand and permitting him to lead her from her seat. “Although I should decline your invitation, just to punish you; you are too obvious in how you go about manipulating me.”

“If it were something you really didn't want to do, my lord, I'm certain no amount of cajoling or chicanery would drive you to it,” he smiled down at her as he shifted his grip on her hand, turning her as he slipped his arm around her waist below her hidden lightsaber and became for the briefest flash of time simultaneously one of the happiest and most nervous creatures in the galaxy. He had at times lain awake in his bunk, torturing himself with visions and fantasies, each one different in scene and plot, but each one alike in its culmination of her in his arms, just as she was at this second.

He bent his head close to her ear, close enough that his lips brushed the beads on her veil as he whispered, “Just follow my lead,” and she barely repressed the shiver that threatened to shake her from head to toe at his touch. There was something novel and exciting in all of this: to relinquish control, to allow another ascendancy over her direction and actions, to place herself quite literally into the hands of another and let those hands guide her through the unknown. She had not expected to enjoy it this much, this feeling of some strange partial abandon, where she was no longer master of all around her. There was a dreamlike quality to it all, from the graceful swoop of the music humming through her ears to the warm pressure of his bare hand on her back, the heady flavors of the brandy and dessert, the fingers of his other hand curled through hers which felt oddly detached from her, the barely-audible crystalline tinkle of the beads as they swung gently with the beat or perhaps with the waft of his breath, so near to her – it was all simultaneously one of the most vivid scenes her senses had ever processed and somehow one of the most distant, as though she floated above it all, straining to touch every part of it but forever falling short.
“Are you sure you have never done this before, my lord?” Quinn inquired, his voice was low, but nonetheless held a playfully skeptical note, pulling her consciousness back to herself.

“I haven't, I swear,” Astridel avowed, letting out a surprisingly girlish giggle that seemed to astonish even herself. She wasn't inebriated, but neither had she bothered with her usual Force technique for maintaining sobriety; she was more astounded to realize that it hadn't even occurred to her to use it. Her use of her abilities had been aimed in quite a different direction. “I'm just doing a little Force-read to understand your motions more quickly, that I can move accordingly.”

“And here I thought this was all due to my expertise,” Quinn quipped. “And how deep, my lord, can your Force-reads go?”

“Not very,” Astridel explained. “Emotional states, mostly, and some physical – conditions of well-being, movements and motion from very subtle tells, that sort of thing. It's not really mind-reading; Jaesa is the closest a Sith can come to that.”

Quinn's motions had slowed, his dark eyes fixed on her face with a covetous look smoldering in their depths.

“Then you cannot tell what I am thinking now?” he asked softly.

There was a moment where he was deaf to the music, his ears hearing only the tiny shimmer of the beads as they kept swaying even as she came to a stop, straining to hear the answer that seemed slow in coming.

“Yes,” she murmured. “I can. Shall we go?"
dancing). Even this ties to one of the central linchpins of his character: he is forever caught between what he really wants to do and what he thinks he's supposed to do. This conflict defines him, and molds almost all of his behavior. I'll leave it to you to decide if his question regarding how deeply Astridel's ability to read others goes is innocent or not.

I have been a little imbalanced in that I spend much more time on Quinn's psychology than I do Astridel's, so this was an opportunity to explore her a little more. She's very cautious, very closed and guarded when it comes to matters of the heart, and overcompensates with the excessive flirtatious teasing. She's also a bit of a control freak, so admitting to even just herself that she trusts Quinn enough to yield any amount of autonomy or decision-making to him is a major thing for her - and of course, her skills make her self-assured enough regarding her ability to get herself out of any problematic situations, which plays no small part of her apparent yielding. There is a definite thread of a power struggle between her and Quinn at times (even in-game), and some part of both of them enjoy it; they're both the type to keep score. Astride is a sex-with-no-strings-attached kind of woman, and she hasn't anticipated that as she was drawing out this lengthy seduction of Quinn, it might end up entangling her, as well. She's got her reasons for doing it this way (to be revealed, I promise [it's written already!], but only much much later), but it won't be without a cost to herself.

The Grand Moff Cushing name comes, of course, from Peter Cushing, who played Grand Moff Tarkin.
They were not the only guests looking to depart; the event was winding down and the staircase descending from the museum's front facade was full of couples awaiting their vehicles and drivers. The valet droid blandly informed them that the wait for a transport was likely to be close to an hour, perhaps more. The weather was not helping the situation; as predicted, the slow drop in temperature over what had been a moderately warm and humid day summoned up a thick gray fog that slithered through every street and lurked in every alley and crouched on every doorstep and portico. At the bottom of the expansive staircase, cabs and private liveries were nothing more than dim outlines marked with muted, hazy glows, slowing all guests from finding their rides, adding to the confusion and muddled exodus.

“A pity,” Astridel observed in a voice Quinn could not determine was sincere or mocking, “particularly if you hoped to spend the return trip making out in the back of a taxi.”

For all that she could express herself with eloquence, she could be shockingly indelicate at times, most often, Quinn had long ago noted, when she sought to elicit a reaction out of him, and he couldn't entirely mask his now. He turned his head slightly and made an embarrassed cough into his closed hand, blessing the fog for whatever cover it might provide for his flushing cheeks. His thoughts had, he knew, been tending very much in that direction.

“Will you wait, my lord?” Quinn asked when he had sufficiently recovered his equanimity to speak. “Alternatively, we could walk. It isn't far to another hub.”

“Walk,” Astridel replied decidedly. A close crowd could be dangerous, and the fog more than doubled the potential peril. Even using the Force, the fog diminished her vision, and with so many minds and voices and feet surrounding them, it would be difficult to notice a hazard before it became a threat. And a threat could arise anywhere, even in a place and an event such as this. Considering the number of important persons arrayed across the museum steps, perhaps especially a place and event such as this. Astridel took Quinn's arm and together, they swiftly descended the staircase, vanishing into the fog and the night in an instant.

In barely a block, the museum lights had diminished into the faintest of indistinct glows. The fog seemed to muffle sound as thoroughly as it did light, and the sounds of the crowds and cabs behind them muted rapidly to a dull hum that receded further and further into the distance. In the empty silence that took its place, the fog, perversely, seemed now to amplify their footsteps, suddenly preternaturally loud. They had attempted to keep up their flow of talk as they walked, but if their shoes were strident, so much more so were their voices, even dropped to whispers, and it felt somehow profane to disrupt this weighty cloud with inane chatter. Overhead, occasional streetlamps
burned a cold bluish-white, creating phosphorescent orbs of mist that cast eerie shadows. Quinn and Astridel had drawn close, their shoulders pressed together without either being aware of it, and accordingly, without either commenting on it, thus without either being flustered by the natural manner in which it had occurred and in which it continued.

Five blocks from the museum, Quinn's alert ear caught a noise, a sort of shuffle in the dark, as though someone were attempting to quietly keep step in time with them and had scuffed the sidewalk. Careful to maintain his pace, he listened closely, striving to catch it again, and then was sure. They were being followed.

“My lord,” he murmured a warning, barely moving his lips.

“Yes, I heard it,” Astridel whispered. “At least two. It looks like you'll get to rescue me after all, Quinn.”

Ah, those keen senses of hers! Of course she would have detected the danger already. How long had she known? How long had she intended to keep her observation to herself? Still, she did not seem perturbed, or give any indication that she thought less of him for being slower than she, and he took heart from it. He answered, “I shall, my lord, but I will not hoard all the fun for myself if you've a mind to join in.”

“I don't think it's in me to distress as a proper damsel. The pragmatism of your imagination remains intact.”

As they had bent their lips towards each other's ears to speak, whatever lurked in the dark took advantage of their apparent distraction to sidle closer, large steps to the couple's ambling ones. The change had not gone unnoticed, and Quinn slowed further, drawing them to a gradual stop.

“Then, my lord, I shall again request: follow my lead,” Quinn said in a low and husky tone against the beaded veil, turning himself and her together and simultaneously sliding his arm around her again, as he had when they danced. The motion was similar, but the act was altogether different, as he pulled her tightly against him and bowed his head, his lips bare centimeters from her own and the warmth of his speeding breath against her cheek. Astridel knew at once what he was doing, but nonetheless her pulse gave a leap in her veins, with a rush of adrenaline that sent a shiver along her spine.

There was the sound of hasty steps, no longer furtive; as Quinn had intended, their pursuer chose that moment to strike. Quinn was well-prepared, whipping his polished service blaster from its holster as a humanoid shape loomed up suddenly in the fog. He fired, the green bolt flaring lurid and blinding
in the dark fog, and the attacker fell with a cry that seemed violently loud in the night.

Astridel was no less quick; with a swift, smooth motion, she whisked her saber from beneath her cowl, in a single practiced act, igniting it and flinging it towards where she sensed the second enemy, and its purple blade described a viciously whirling arc through the air. Whatever it struck produced a shower of burning red sparks, and the saber, buzzing angrily, sailed unhindered the remainder of its course back to her hand. She snatched it from the air not half a meter from Quinn's head, and she promptly gave him full credit: he didn't flinch. Not so much as a bat of his eyelashes.

“On your left, my lord!” he cried, dropping his hold on Astridel's waist to turn and fire again as a blue bolt whizzed past them. They had counted two, but the fog seemed suddenly to boil with foes erupting from the unknown of the surrounding dark, and in the turmoil, Astridel spun right and left, deflecting blaster bolts with swift skill as Quinn traced them to their sources, shooting with lethal precision.

And then, as quickly as the footpads had shattered the calm of the night, all was silent again. Then entire attack could have taken no longer than forty-five seconds.

“Seven in all, my lord,” Quinn said, surveying the bodies on the pavement.

“Identification?” Astridel inquired. Quinn was already pawing at the bodies.

“None, my lord.”

“Then there is nothing more to be done,” she declared, stepping over one that had taken her saber full in the chest. Quinn rose to follow her; in ten steps, the slain band had been engulfed in the mists in their wake, wrapped as though the fog had become their burial shrouds.

Astridel paused before him; her lightsaber was still lit, swathed in cloud, thick wisps of purplish vapor rose from its blade, wreathing her with a violet haze, making the faint sparkles in her dress glow like minuscule lوردian gems. It illuminated her pale face from below, highlighting the deep orchid line on her lips, slightly parted over teeth set in a hungry, wolfish expression. With a slow step towards her, Quinn could see her breath was yet still hastened; the fine beadwork winked in the dim light with her slight movements. Even when she extinguished her lightsaber, plunging them again into the fuzzy, desaturated twilight of the streetlamps, he could see her still, her teeth white in her pale face, with just the narrow, vertical streak of her lipstick to determine her mouth.
He had no idea how it happened. Had he moved, or had she? All he knew was that one moment, there was a meter of fog between them, and the next, she was in his arms and in his hands, in his eyes and ears and breath, every bit of her, with her lips tangled wildly with his, and her fingers gripping the belts and folds of his uniform that he had put on with such care hours earlier. He wrapped his arms around her, one hand splayed across the bare skin of her back below the nape of her neck, clutching her against his chest so fiercely she nearly staggered on her feet, drunk on adrenaline and desire.

“To the ship, my lord,” he gasped when he had the air to, and neither one could tell if it were a request, a command, or a beg. Whichever way, she was not inclined to contravene it.

Much later, Quinn sat glumly on his bunk and considered the evening, contemplating where, exactly, things had gone wrong. It had all started with the ship's droid. Not that it was Toovee's fault – no, that distinction belonged to Quinn himself – but that had been the origin, when the droid had met them at the hatch when they entered.

“Tooovee?” Astridel remarked. “Did I not say you could power down overnight?”

“You did, master,” the droid replied anxiously. “Please do not worry that my memory cores are failing, master. I assure you, they are in perfect working order. There are still many years of reliable service I may offer you. It is only that,” Toovee hastily moved on, seeing Astridel's gesture of impatience, “a message has come in for Captain Quinn. Ordinarily, I would never bother you over so small a thing, but it was marked as important.”

At last, an answer to his missives! Quinn had grown more frustrated and impatient as day after day passed without any indication that his reports had been received, much less read or heeded. And now, the hoped-for response. Surely, there had to have been some curious alignment of the stars to have so much of his life now prepared to go so well. In ten years wasted on Balmorrah, he had dreamed, but never truly expected this success. Impatient curiosity and anticipation began gnawing at him almost immediately.

“Then,” Astridel spoke indulgently, sensing Quinn's buoyant confidence and anxious eagerness as she led the way to the ship's lounge, “you had better see what it has to say.”

Quinn seized the datapad the droid held out to him, flicking open the message with restless fingers. His eyes flicked rapidly over the words it contained, and then, with a frown, moved more slowly as he read it with more thorough attention. After his third perusal, he held it out to Astridel, his face
darkened in a scowl of sharp disappointment. Without a word, she took the letter and read it.

Quinn –

I was wondering, honestly, when you'd get to me. There's hardly a person in the Admiralty Office or the Bureau who isn't aware of your vendetta against Broysc by now. You've certainly made no secret of it. I'm not sure what you think I can do, lowly warrant-sergeant as I am. I haven't got the sort of clout you need.

But what I can tell you, old friend, is that yes, your messages have been received. Many of them went straight in the rubbish bin; many more of them were shuffled to the bottom of the inbox to be dealt with later, which, as you know, around here means never. The most you got was a few sympathetic nods, and a shrug of the shoulders. You're not going to get more of an answer than that. I'm Head Clerk; I've seen how things work around here.

To put it in plain terms, they already know about Broysc. No one here is going to stick out their necks to cut off a Moff like him – one with connections – at the knees. No one is going to stick out their necks for a man who spent 10 years on Balmorra. It's just the way it is, sir.

I wish I could give you a better answer – the whole reason I'm not on Balmorra still myself is because of your command there, and I'm grateful for it. I can give you some advice, though: a man doesn't get as secure as Broysc without cultivating some powerful friends. I don't know who they are, but I'd wager they're well aware of your crusade by this point. Watch your back. You're off Balmorra, you've been promoted – enjoy what you've got, and drop this.

– Ferault

When Astridel lifted her head and looked again at Quinn, all his satisfaction and exhilaration from the evening had been effaced under a black expression of bitterness.

“I've gone as high up the chain as I can,” he seethed, almost to himself. “No one will confront Moff Broysc. He's simply too powerful and entrenched. And this!” he spat, “this friendly warning that comes an hour after an attempt on our lives? It's all too convenient for my tastes. Clearly I'm supposed to heed the cautionary attack, shut up, and return to my obscurity with my hands tied.”

“Is that what you intend to do?” Astridel asked composedly.
“I'm not sure what more I can do,” he fumed. Quinn ground his teeth, the muscles of his jaw clenching with anger. He made an effort to stop himself, to calm his fury, to return to the heated euphoria that had marked so much of the evening, and he turned back towards her, wiping his disappointment from his face. “It's a decision for another time,” he concluded, reaching for her again.

Passively, she let him place his arms around her, but as he bowed his head, plainly intent on picking up where they had left off, she forestalled him, placing her open hand with both surprising gentleness and surprising firmness on his chest. He froze, looking down at her.

“I am no consolation prize,” she said quietly. “Good night, Quinn.”

And as he stood there, mute and dumbfounded, she stretched up on her toes to place a soft and simple kiss on his cheek, leaving behind a final trace of purple lipstick, then slid out of his arms to head for her quarters – alone.

Chapter End Notes

One thing I've not found answered to my satisfaction are the many questions that are necessary ramifications to being a species with vestigial eyes but seeing with the Force. If Miralukans see with the Force, can they not be blinded by a sudden bright light? Can they look directly at the sun? Would they ever be night-blind? Is fog a hindrance? Do they need to face what they are looking at? Do they need to look at something to read it? How do they even read a smooth computer console or screen, anyway?

In-game, Miralukans are subject to the same advantages and limitations as anyone with normal vision, partly, I'm sure, because this prevents having to redo any scene where the SW is looking at a computer screen, or creating other plot holes. So I've followed the same convention here - that atmospheric effects do negatively impact visibility even using the Force.

I feel like the fight->fuck link is an old cliché, or at least a common trope, but it actually really works for them. In a way, each of them are the most alive when they're in a battle. Of course, it didn't pan out to Quinn's hope, and he will certainly dissect the hell out of how the whole thing went south so instantaneously over the next chapter or two. He's rather good a that sort of thing.
When Quinn emerged from his room in the morning, after a long white night spent in a brown study, he found that Astridel had been up betimes and had already headed out with Jaesa. It was just as well: frustrated both professionally and personally, he had had difficulty chasing down the solutions to either of his troubles, torn as his thoughts were between them. It was a state of mind that looked fair to continue, until he fell into his routine duties about the docked ship, ensuring maintenance had been performed and documented, that stores were resupplied, and dozens of other similar chores. The activity busied him, occupying his hands and his surface thoughts, and moreover, made him feel useful, thereby both improving his mood and freeing his brain to organize and review the events in evidence.

The issues were linked; the failure of one appeared to lead directly to the failure of the other. Lord Astridel had, he recalled, commended his decision to pursue Broysc via official channels, so it was not this strategy that was to blame, whether it had failed or succeeded. If it was neither the venture nor the outcome, that left only, to his chagrin, himself. As he played through the evening in his memory, she had been amused by his witticisms and charmed by his invitation to dance, and even by the way he had blatantly maneuvered her into accepting it; she had been true to the esteem she held for audacious brilliance. When he was daring, she was dazzling.

And his response to the letter? Open disillusionment, indecision, and something that was nastily close to whining. Quinn frowned at the conclusion. He thought he had put his disappointment aside swiftly, considering that it had been engendered by the ruin of many of his plans. Not wanting to let it intrude further on their time, he shelved the entire matter as something to deal with later, only to discover that he had been yet too slow.

But was she really this exacting? That he should have to muffle a justified rage over an indolent leadership that refused to heed his warnings of danger? That he should never display before her his anger that Broysc would continue his insane and wasteful career through the galaxy lest she be irritated by it? It made no sense, not in the light of all he knew of her character and attitudes – how she had prodded him to speak openly, how she had incited him to indulge his emotions and embrace his passions, how she had demonstrated that these were things that would drive him and make him stronger. If this were true, then she would approve of his resentment, not deprecate it. She knew full well, too, the care he took in planning his strategies; she would not expect him to have formulated a response to the bad news so promptly, not without weighing each aspect of his options in turn. Logically, it seemed neither his frustration nor his hesitation had been what had condemned him.

Her parting words burned in his ears: *I am no consolation prize.* It was an odd expression – who would ever give a trophy to comfort someone who had, presumably, lost? It sounded like something for children – *Republic* children, at that. There were victors, and there were losers. That was the nature of the universe, and anyone would be a loser until they took the necessary steps to place
themselves among the victors.

Had he taken those steps? Not to their furthest course, he admitted to himself with a sigh. Broysc was still secure in his position, and Quinn understood all too well that he had exhausted his possibilities within his military contacts. To place himself as victor over Broysc would require him to take a more active role in the matter, as he had when Broysc had hung Major Ovech out to dry. And then, no longer would Broysc stand as a barrier between Quinn and his hopes for the future. No more would his wasted figure cast its withered shadow over Quinn's happiness.

At that, Quinn paused, his head rising abruptly from the maintenance ledger as realization struck him. Lord Astridel had been right – so astutely right, so immediately, and it had taken him half a day to figure it out for himself. It hadn't been his indecision, it hadn't been his displeasure – it was that he had, unwittingly, sought to use her.

Well, and what of it? Lord Astridel, he reasoned, had been the first to point out that no relationship between any two people manifested itself in the complete absence of self-interest. She was well aware that in her service lay his most expedient route to advancement; he had long known that a good portion of his value to her sprung from his tactical expertise and willingness to oversee the day-to-day matters of the ship. They were already using each other, and they both knew it.

But this – this was different. Was it that it was more personal? That he had transgressed against her pride? Quinn pursed his lips as he dug deeper, grasping at last the crucial conclusion. In his haste, he hadn't considered how it must have appeared to demand her attentions as the analgesic to the wound of his defeat, however temporary. She was not a thing to make him feel better. It wasn't her responsibility to make him happy.

She was no consolation prize. She was the victor.

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“So, master,” Jaesa asked somewhat saucily as she stalked through the streets of Kaas City beside Astridel, “how did the date go? I see Captain Quinn was too worn out to make an appearance this morning.”

“The date went fine,” Astridel replied neutrally. “But I have no idea how well Quinn slept. On my part, I slept as serenely as a child.”
“What!” Jaesa exclaimed, incredulous, before recovering herself. “Forgive my speaking out of turn, master. But I thought – no, I apologize, it is not my place to pry.”

“Oh, you may pry.” Astridel vented a short bark of laughter. “I might not answer, but you may pry.”

“In which case, master, why do you not simply order him to do what you want? If you want to bed him, then why deny your desires? Why would you willingly chain yourself?”

“Any number of reasons, apprentice mine,” Astridel answered. “For one, in this I chain Quinn, too, and that amuses me.”

Jaesa narrowed her eyes slightly as she stared at her master, and Astridel could feel her apprentice reaching out with the Force. “Amuses,” she echoed, mostly to herself. Raising her voice again, she added, “I don't understand, master. Far from amusement, you disappointed your hopes. Deliberately.”

“My intentions for the evening might have been disappointed, yes,” Astridel clarified. “But I personally am not disappointed in the outcome. Think of it this way: Have you ever seen a caged beast? I don't mean a docile pet; I mean a predator, imprisoned in a space too small for it.”

“I recall a circus on Alderaan, master. As a servant girl, I could only watch from a distance. There were animals that paced restlessly and circled in enclosures barely large enough for them to turn around.” Jaesa's reddish eyes flared with the anger of an old memory. “I felt like them, pinioned and constrained, held back from all I wanted and wished.”

“And did you never see one of the beasts ever freed?”

“No, master.”

“But you do know how you felt when you were liberated from your servitude to the Jedi.”

“When you gave me the knowledge that I could liberate myself, master,” Jaesa corrected gratefully.

“In that moment, you and those circus creatures were the same, but for the fact that you were free,
and they were not. You were released from your bonds.”

“It was the single happiest moment of my life.”

“Then you understand already the strength of denial, and the exhilaration that comes when the cage bars are broken. How mighty you felt. Understand that passion is power, but passion need not be indulged to channel that power. Don't underestimate the strength of a passion denied or suppressed.”

“Tease the beast, and only then open the cage?”

“Something like that.”

Jaesa gave a small pout of her lower lip. “You don't tease me, master,” she objected, already arriving at the logical progression of exploiting the idea for her own benefit.

Astridel threw back her head and laughed. “You hardly need it, my dear,” she replied affectionately. “I will be forever grateful to the Jedi, because they did a lot of that work for me.”

Jaesa made no answer for a moment, and something in her silence made Astridel look more closely at her apprentice. “What is it?” she asked finally. “What troubles you?”

With a grimace, Jaesa replied, “You mention the Jedi – and I now consider the Sith. Something has been nagging at me... disenchantment, I think. No, not strong enough. I'm feeling rather... betrayed.”

“How so?” Astridel inquired, concerned but not alarmed.

“It's becoming clear that the Dark Side is as flawed and undependable as everything else.”

“Very likely,” Astridel answered imperturbably. “There are few things in the galaxy whose perfection is absolute.”

“Using my power to reach out into the galaxy,” Jaesa explained, “I'm becoming aware of false Sith lords who are secretly leaning toward the light.”
“I would call that less a flaw with the Dark Side, and more a personal flaw in those who feel that is a temptation to indulge.”

“It’s a flaw that should be eradicated.”

“By you?”

“Why not? Who better than I? It will take time for me to pinpoint who and where they are. But believe me, I will find them,” Jaesa vowed.

“And do what with them?”

“Destroy them, of course, master.” Jaesa seemed surprised that this was even a question. When Astridel did not immediately answer, Jaesa, more with curiosity than misgiving, prompted, “Master?”

“I don’t disagree with you,” Astridel replied. “However, I would ask only that you listen closely to your gifts. If any of these that you identify may be turned away from the Light, I would encourage you to exploit that path. Operate with subtlety: there may be those among them that may be secured, but may be able to maintain a veneer of interest in the Light, and may be planted among the Jedi as spies – or even, work to corrupt the Jedi from within.”

“Wouldn’t that place them at risk of falling further?”

“Perhaps – but the more a Sith adheres to the Dark, the more difficult it would be for them to infiltrate the Jedi. A genuine curiosity or hidden pull to the Light would be more likely to fool the Jedi. There is nothing a Jedi likes better than second chances and redemption,” Astridel observed sardonically. “Use what you can; destroy only what you must.”

“Unlike Baras.”

“Exactly.”
“Does my mission trouble you, master?”

Astridel again waited a moment before replying. “No,” she said at length, and then flashed a smile at the younger woman. “I just would not want to find myself on your list.”

Jaesa stared at Astridel, shocked and aghast. “Master!” she gasped, horrified. Astridel held up a hand, cutting off Jaesa's appalled protests.

“Don't get the wrong idea. I am not,” she emphasized, “harboring secret inclinations towards the Light. I am in no danger. But that doesn't mean that I am untouched by it.” And, as Jaesa still regarded her with an open expression of skeptical suspicion, Astridel added, “Go on then, read me.”

Jaesa's brows drew down as she concentrated, and, puzzled and troubled, she then whispered, “I sense – I do sense some Light in you, master.”

“And do you think I belong on your list?” Astridel asked, even-toned.

“I – no... No, I don't believe you do. But I don't understand.”

“There is a difference between being aware of the Light and leaning towards it. Before I met you, Jaesa, I was faced with a trial where I confronted the Light Side shadow of myself,” Astridel explained. “I was presented with a choice. I could destroy all Light within me, or I could accept it. I chose to accept it, and live with it.”


“It makes me stronger.” Then, as Jaesa remained unconvinced, Astridel added, “Think of the Jedi. Think of their zealotry, how they so strictly forbid anything that even hints of the Dark. Think of how you were shackled by their tenets, forced to deny all that made you you to adhere to their code. Think of how they confined you and by so doing, drove you away. Two things to learn from this: The Jedi enforce these rules because they know that alone, they are weak against temptation; they live in terror of all the Dark Side offers. Would you likewise live in terror of the Light? I would never! Second, the fragments of Light within me pose as much danger to me as a splinter in my thumb – no hazard to my life or my future, but they chafe as they struggle against the Dark, and I may draw power from their irritation.
"I show you this,” Astridel concluded, “so that you may keep perspective on your quest. If your gifts tell you of a true threat, then act, and the Sith order will be the stronger for it. But if you sense only these hints, then let it be – if nothing else, you don't need the annoyance of the enemies that course may bring you.”

Jaesa made no reply as she mulled this speech over. “I am capable of seeing the difference,” she said at last. “And I believe I do understand now, master.”

Chapter End Notes

I hadn't meant to spend as much time on Astridel's conversation with Jaesa as I did - originally, I intended it to be a brief interlude to break up all the Quinn Quinn Quinn Quinn Quinn and his navel-gazing. But then I got into the conversation a bit as I realized that Jaesa wouldn't have known about the Sand Demon confrontation on Tatooine, but would have been able to sense the outcome of it - and how would that appear to her, with her sadistic stated mission? And Astridel brings up a real concern: if Jaesa goes around eliminating EVERYONE who might have a hint of Light Side to them, she'll likely end up making a lot of enemies, and that's a pain in the ass they just don't need right now.
Evening twilight was settling again on Dromund Kaas when Quinn heard the hiss of the hatch door opening, followed by the sound of Astridel's and Jaesa's voices. He emerged from the bridge to greet them; Astridel answered him with easy civility, apparently entirely unruffled at meeting him now, the first time since the abrupt and – to Quinn – rather ignominious end of their date.

“Tooovee has dinner prepared,” Quinn reported. “The ship has been fully restocked and refueled. It awaits your commands, my lord.”

“Good!” Astridel declared. “First, because I am famished, and second, because we have our marching orders. Hoth awaits.”

“Hoth?” Quinn racked his memory. “That frozen wasteland? The only thing there is derelict ships!”

“And, apparently, an old friend of Baras’s – one he'd like thoroughly dead.”

“Ah. That kind of friend. When would you like to depart, my lord?”

“Certainly not before eating.” Astridel dropped casually into one of the lounge chairs and stretched her legs. She flicked one of her habitual lopsided smirks at him. “Tomorrow is fine.”

“Very good, my lord.” Quinn bowed slightly, and Astridel sensed a faint hesitation in his movement.

“Something else you wish to relieve from your mind?”

He gave her a tepid smile, one that just tugged weakly at the corners of his mouth. “Certainly not before eating,” he replied.

More than that, it was a matter he wanted privacy to discuss, and the lounge, the central hub of the *Fury*'s activity, was perhaps the single most spot on the ship least conducive to privacy. It wasn’t
“You may enter.” Astridel’s voice, muffled through the electronics, wafted tinnily from the comm panel, and even more indistinctly through the layers of durasteel between them. He obeyed, and drew up short as he entered at the sight of his lord, seated cross-legged on the plush red rug, her hands at the wrist draped over her knees, and her head slightly bowed, the weights on her veil barely wavering with her breath. More than her posture, however, he was struck by her garb, or rather, her lack of it; her armor and customary clothing already set aside, and a sleek, voluminous robe swathed her shoulders instead, crossing softly over her breast.

“I apologize, my lord, for interrupting your meditations,” Quinn hastened to say, more to force his attention away from the notion that he had never seen her in such an enticingly casual and, in truth, intimate attitude before.

“No matter,” she shrugged without rising. “I expected this; otherwise, I would be meditating in my usual manner. Which is,” she added unnecessarily, merely to add one more coal on his fire, “naked.”

She had to admit, he was increasingly improving at taking her teasing in stride. Three months ago, this speech would have turned him to a fascinating shade of mauve, punctuated with a number of stammers. The Quinn of today still had the grace to pink across his cheekbones, but he retained a better control over his elocution.

“I will only take a moment of your time, my lord.” He was tempted to cheekily tack on, “and then you may be as naked as you please,” but he thought the better of it. It wasn’t that he feared his impertinence would anger her – far from it; chances are, she would be so amused she would double down on her teasing by dropping her robe before him then and there – and therein lay the danger. Even as focused as he was now, Quinn was reasonably certain that such a display would, in fact, completely drive his purpose straight out of his head.

“Sounds serious,” Astridel mused, sensing the determination simmering within. She stood up on the rug, drawing the silky material more closely around her. There were limits she would push, and barriers she would gleefully ignore, but when Quinn clearly wasn’t in the mood for it, she relented. “I’m all ears.”

“I have had some time to consider the matter,” Quinn began, and Astridel feared, for a flash of a moment in which her heart felt abruptly like it had simply decided not to bother with beating, that he was about to reference how matters stood between them. Before she had the opportunity to investigate her reaction, her pulse had tumbled back into its normal rhythm as Quinn continued, “and
I have reached a simple truth about Moff Broysc. He will serve until he's killed or willingly steps down. And he will never willingly step down.”

He took a breath, setting his jaw, and his tone was an inscrutable mix of frustration and determination as he concluded, “My path is clear. I must deal with Broysc myself. Once and for all.”

Astridel stood still for a moment, regarding him thoughtfully. “I see,” she said. Quinn had hoped for a little more than so nebulous a response, and he waited, hands clasped behind his back, willing her to add more by extending his silence. Finally, she inquired, “Are you asking what I think you should do?”

“No, my lord,” Quinn said. This was his decision, his problem. He must own both. Just as it was not her mission to make him happy, neither was it her role to smooth his path for him. As his lord, the relationship was supposed to work in the other direction. “Only asking your indulgence while I settle this issue.”

“Better and better,” Astridel opined. “I agree, Moff Broysc must be confronted. It is irresponsible to do otherwise – and if there is one thing you are not, Captain, it is irresponsible. This is your calling, Quinn. Get to it.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“When you are finished, you'll likely still find us at Hoth. Meet us there.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Also, alert Jaesa that you are departing; she may wish to share some of the journey with you. A mission of her own devising.”

“I hadn't expected this,” Quinn said in surprise. “I hesitate to leave you, my lord, down two of your staff. Would you rather I delay my errand?”

“Quinn,” Astridel said, half in exasperation although not without a note of amused affection, “you have requested a leave of absence, and I have granted it. You would discard my gift mere seconds after receiving it?”
"I would not," Quinn protested warmly. "But I would subjugate my mission in deference to yours, of course."

"'Even though yours benefits the entire Imperial military, while mine benefits only Darth Baras?'"

"I know my priorities, my lord."

"Ha! How politic an answer!"

"One can never be too cautious, my lord."

"Oh, but one can, if caution turns to timidity."

"Am I in danger of doing so?" Quinn challenged.

"No, but some part of me is tempted to say yes, just to see what you'd do about it," Astridel's white teeth flashed as her smirk broadened. She crossed the room to stand near him, close enough that he could sense the warmth of her form, and catch her scent, just as her smile turned winsome. "But since I cannot be so dishonest, I will merely have to content myself with pointing out that this now leaves Vette as the sole chaperon over Pierce and I."

"If," Quinn breathed, his voice and his head dropping with the closed distance, "you are interested in speeding me on my mission, my lord, this is hardly the way to do it."

"Nonsense," she replied with a pert lift of her chin, tilting her face towards him. "It's just to ensure you come back."

"My lord, I hardly think I need further incentive," he answered, and anything additional he was about to say was lost as she kissed him. Or he kissed her. Much like the prior evening at the museum, he was again bemused at exactly how it happened, even when he saw it coming; there seemed to be no transition, just a flip of a switch. One second apart, and the next, tangled together in the most curious sort of unsolvable knot.
It was he who ended the kiss, somewhat to his own surprise. But he had sworn to handle Moff Broysc, and the connection between that issue and this persisted in his mind. As daring as he could imagine himself being, he knew he yet still held back around Astridel, always cautious, forever wary of his own desires, letting other matters – matters of duty and responsibility – take precedence. Valid reasons? Or just excuses? What was it he feared so much? And so he would handle this crucial situation, an ultimate matter of duty, and then see if his two problems were truly as interlinked as he conceived they were.

Astridel seemed aware of his inner tumult, and his conviction to face it head on and deal with it, and didn't push further, although there was once a time in her life that she would have.

“Make your preparations,” was all she said as she stepped back. It was not an unfeeling dismissal, but it was clear – he was now more free than he had ever been in his life, save for what chains he chose to shackle himself with. For all that, he felt himself bound inextricably, bound perhaps more than he had been even on Balmorra. And yet – it wasn't as unpleasant now as it had been then.

Once before, and only once, as Quinn had been similarly departing, Astridel had called him by his given name. Perhaps she intended to make it a habit, because she did so again as he turned to depart, and, just as it had then, his heart stuttered as he heard it, starting up a dozen fantasies that flared and vanished in paltry fragments of seconds.

“One last thing to know, Malavai,” Astridel said seriously. “Whatever you decide to do, I will back it. I trust you to choose wisely.”

As he left Astridel and the Fury behind, the memory of her words, erupting on his thoughts at sporadic intervals without rhyme or reason, thrilled his pulse as much as did the memory of her kiss.

_I trust you to choose wisely._

_I trust you._

_I trust you._

Chapter End Notes
Writing delays due to work, other projects, holiday preparations, and a weekend vacation to New York City for my husband and my's second anniversary. (We went to see the Star Trek exhibit at the Intrepid Museum. We went in Star Trek costumes. Because we are nerdy AF. It was awesome.)

And there was a period where I just didn't feel much like writing; my friend recently diagnosed with metastasized bone cancer passed away suddenly at the beginning of November. Utter crap, and that makes two within the span of a year. Hard on the heels of that, this whole election fiasco. I'm not okay with being governed by yet another out-of-touch old white dude, particularly when his campaign significantly relied on the sort of hate-speech that would have gotten him fired from any self-respecting company that cared about its image.

Thanksgiving is this week, and I'm hoping I can take some time to get some writing and editing done - as I am today; I'm laid up on the couch with a wrenched back, which I got from - not kidding - bending over to put food in the cat's bowl. Yeeaaah.
Hoth was in essence every bit as miserable as reports indicated it would be. Howling winds, bitter cold, and kilometer after kilometer of blinding, icy wastes. How this planet supported any life at all was a mystery Astridel didn't feel inclined to fathom. Vette shivered, but kept her complaints to a minimum, and Pierce shrugged off the crippling cold with the same nonchalance as he did most things he wasn't at liberty to blow up.

The individual that seemed most suited to the climate was, however, not even a member of her crew: it was a Talz, a tall creature covered in heavy fur, like most of his kind, but who, decidedly unlike most of his kind, was distinctly solitary, and even more distinctly blood-thirsty. Their paths had crossed several times, each time wary, but just shy of open hostility. To hear the Talz describe it, he was on some sort of mission of vengeance, and so long as it didn't interfere with Astridel's activities, nor hers with his, they were likely to get on just fine.

At least, that was what Vette reported to Quinn when he arrived on Hoth. But, she added, Lord Astridel was with Pierce. She was perfectly safe.

“If anything, she'll probably be the one saving Pierce, not the other way around,” Vette pointed out. “To hear you talk, Quinn, you'd think she didn't know how to take care of herself! Stars, Captain, if you like her that much, you aught to trust her more.”

Quinn flushed, feeling the truth of the accusation, but didn't feel particularly reassured. Pierce was reckless, and his opinion of the lieutenant had not improved on further acquaintance. Despite all the promising signs between himself and Astridel, he still felt an unaccountable jealousy where Pierce was concerned, much as he knew that Astridel's parting words had simply been designed to prick at his emotions, as all her teasing was, and that recognition made him push away the feeling even more strictly than he normally did. He hoped to demonstrate to her that he would not be so easily manipulated, but she had a talent for pushing his buttons in a way that was entirely impossible to ignore in the end, regardless of his best efforts.

“It's a valid point; you're right,” he conceded, causing Vette to open her eyes in astonishment.

“That's something I never thought I'd hear out of you,” she said. “So... thanks. I think? But hey, I know you're just back and all – how did it go? Something about- ...well, never mind,” Vette said hurriedly, recalling Astridel's admonishment. “Anyway, do you mind if I'm on the comm array all afternoon? I was going to get in touch with my sister.”
“That's fine, Vette,” Quinn answered, inwardly pleased at her own wish to be occupied for the rest of the day. “I have some matters to attend to in the cargo hold.”

The matter destined for the cargo hold was currently sitting outside in a heap in the snow, shivering to the extent that the diatribes that would have spewed from his mustached lips were muted under the force of his chattering teeth. It had cost Quinn a considerable number of credits to ensure the staff at the Imperial base had their eyes and ears firmly occupied while he hauled Moff Broysc off the transport and dumped him unceremoniously at the foot of the Fury's access ramp, but he considered the money well spent. He dragged the half-frozen Moff into the ship and, without further fuss, chained him to a cargo tie-down in the hold. Quinn then sat down comfortably on a nearby crate, opened a data pad to survey the ship's activity and logs in his absence, and settled in to wait for Astridel's return.

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Some hours later, a bustle of activity from beyond the bulkhead signified that Lord Astridel and Pierce had arrived, and Quinn emerged quietly from the cargo hold, hovering unobtrusively at the edges of her return until she was more at leisure. To his great shock, trailing far in her and Pierce's wake was a large beast that seemed to have been sculpted almost entirely from white fluff – this must be the Talz that Vette had mentioned. And from all appearances, Astridel seemed to have adopted it like some sort of pet!

“Where is the fuzzbucket going?” Pierce inquired in his usual gravelly growl with its clipped working class accent.

“Conduct him to the cargo hold, if you please,” Astridel commanded. “It's the coolest place on the ship; he'll be most comfortable there.”

Quinn cleared his throat at that point. “I beg your pardon, my lord...”

“Captain Quinn!” Astridel exclaimed. She spoke in her usual sardonic tones, but to Quinn's ear, there sounded a note of delighted pleasure at his unexpected appearance. Genuine pleasure, yes, but not genuine surprise – she had already sensed his return, likely the instant she had set foot on the ship. “You aren't on the bridge?”

“Vette wished to use the communications array, my lord,” Quinn said with a short and respectful bow. “And I wished to use the cargo hold.”
“The cargo hold?” Astridel repeated, and this time, Quinn was certain her surprise was authentic. It gave him an oddly nice feeling, discovering that he had the capacity to surprise her, or even that he could keep some matters hidden from her. To have all his secrets openly read – where was the mystery, the enticement, the fascination in that?

“Yes, my lord.” Quinn didn’t elaborate. A moment later, Astridel, divested of her cold weather gear, crossed the ship’s lounge to the hall entrance that led to the cargo hold, and drew up along side him for a more private conversation. The pale skin on her chin and lower cheek was reddened and chafed with cold despite the protections she had worn.

“The cargo hold,” she repeated once again, deeply curious and intrigued. Reaching out with her senses, she had a strong suspicion of just what was hidden in the cargo hold, and she found the scenario highly entertaining. “And will you be using it long?”

“I think not.”

“That’s good, as Broonmark needs a space of his own, and the bunk rooms are full,” Astridel said with thorough pragmatism.

“The Talz?”

“And my new retainer.”

“Is this wise, my lord?” Quinn inquired, genuinely concerned. He had only just now returned to what he felt was his rightful place at her side, and he was instantly confronted by the prospect of adding to the crew some Greedo-come-lately who, at best, hadn’t even been properly vetted – if such a creature actually could be – and at worst, was more than prepared to slaughter them one and all, if reports were accurate.

“Worried about me? How sweet,” she teased, favoring him with a saucy smirk that made his heart stutter.

“Vette tells me he has threatened your life more than once, my lord,” he answered neutrally. “I would be remiss in my duties if I didn’t express my reservations on this arrangement.”
“Mmm, yes, I do understand your adherence to duty.” Astridel’s look, if possible, became even more cheeky. “Otherwise, I’d be offended if you really thought I could be bested by Broonmark. You wound my pride, Quinn.”

“Oh course I don’t think any such thing, my lord,” Quinn assured hastily, half-exasperated at her teasing, willful misunderstandings. “And I should think it would take far more than myself alone to cause any such damage, my lord.”

Astridel hooted a laugh, her white teeth flashing in her cold-flushed face. “Join me for dinner, captain, just us two, and you can tell me all about your adventure and your prize.”

“I welcome it,” he answered. A small smile tugged at his lips. “If I may also hear of how your mission on Hoth here progresses?”

“Naturally. How does that saying go?” Astridel made a show of hunting for a phrase, and her chin dipped coyly as she continued, “Ah, yes – I’ll show you mine, if you show me yours.”

Leaving Quinn to contemplate the various meanings of that little gem, Astridel turned back towards the lounge, raising her voice. “Vette!”

The twi’lek appeared promptly at the hatch door of the bridge. “How’s it going, my lord?” she asked brightly.

“Well enough that we can shake the frost off our feet. Landing gear up in two hours, if you please.”

“Sure thing, my lord,” Vette answered before vanishing back into the bridge to set about preparations to depart.

“Then I think I may take this to mean your mission has sped itself to completion, my lord?” Quinn inquired.

Astridel looked back over her shoulder. “Ah-ah-ah,” she admonished playfully. “No advance hints. You will simply have to remain unsatisfied until dinner.”
Cold played no part in the blush that flared briefly once on his cheeks.

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Quinn dangled his fork over his plate, unaware of how tightly he was squeezing it between his fingers, his meal all but forgotten. “I found Moff Broysc on a pleasure barge,” he nearly spat with scorn. “He was on R&R while countless battles are raging. Despicable. Yet one more sign of his unfitness for command.”

“I'm surprised he let you on board.”

“He thought I was surrendering myself to him for execution. His final triumph over Admiral Malcontent.”

Astridel made a derisive sound as she cut another slice from her broiled nerf. “And his men?”

“Conveniently made themselves busy with a number of other pressing duties.”

“Opportunists,” Astridel judged them with a moue of irritation. “Waiting to see who comes out on top before declaring their allegiance.”

Quinn was more neutral. “Perhaps, my lord. They had no intention of interfering, and that was what mattered to me. As for Moff Broysc – I am sure you have sensed it by now; I abducted him, and brought him here to present to you.”

“Not what I had expected, I admit,” Astridel said, and to Quinn's ear, she sounded largely approving of that fact. “Why did you make that choice?”

“He insulted you disgustingly, my lord. His behavior and language towards you was unbecoming an officer, and I thought you, as a Sith Lord, should have the first opportunity to strike, should you wish.”

Astridel delicately wiped her lips with her napkin, and as she set it on the table, she sat back in her chair, regarding Quinn thoughtfully for a moment. Quinn waited in silence, motionless, his gaze level
and steady as he gauged her possible responses.

“Even though you,” Astridel asked pointedly, “are the more injured party? He has wronged us both, but you the more severely. To me, Broyse is a gnat. To you, he is the military titan who destroyed your career.”

“He is that, my lord.”

“And yet you would have me be the one to cut him down?”

“I would let you have the right of first refusal, my lord,” Quinn corrected quietly, with such cold calm that Astridel barely needed her Force-attuned senses to look beneath his exterior. He was not attempting to deflect his responsibility onto her shoulders – on the contrary, ever nerve and sinew in his body was striving towards vengeance, was willing her refusal that he might, at last, destroy with his own hand the spectral anchor that dragged at his steps. At this moment, he wanted – even more than he wanted her – to become Moff Broyse’s murderer. “I know have resisted this all along, but it is personal.”

“Then you have my refusal, Quinn,” Astridel replied with equal solemnity. “And my permission.”

Quinn rose from the table and his half-finished meal, each morsel of which had seemed to lodge in his anger-tightened throat. The prospect of freedom, at long last, from Broyse’s insane ravings made the food flavors dull in comparison. Without a word, Astridel followed him to the cargo hold where the Moff remained tethered, his voice muffled by something that appeared to be one of Quinn’s socks. With a tiny smirk, Astridel hoped it was a dirty one. She stood a step or two behind Quinn as he yanked the gag roughly from the Moff’s mouth. Broyse wasted little time.


“You’re not in much of a position to commandeer anything, madman,” Astridel replied contemptuously. “You have no allies here. No troops to command, no men to abuse. No one is coming for you simply because no one wants to. No one cares. Look upon Quinn, and see who has bettered you.”

“No. Never. Not possible,” Broyse cried, his arms pulling wildly at the manacles and chains. “I shunned him. I exiled him. He was to waste away!”
Quinn held very still, his silent, statuesque motionless a sharp contrast to Broysc's flailing and noise.

“You are my men now! I command you! You scabs! Scabs, all! Kill yourselves! I have spoken!”

When Quinn finally moved, it was to draw his blaster with a slow, smooth, and deliberate action. Broysc's eyes bulged, and his struggles became even more frantic. Leveling the blaster, Quinn raised his chin, looking down his nose in disdainful antipathy and repugnance at Broysc's cowardice. Stars above, could he not even face his own death like a man and a soldier?

“No! You cannot kill me! You are nothing! I am a Moff!

Two words, cold and cutting and viciously soft, rose from Quinn's lips as his finger moved on the trigger.

“No anymore.”

Chapter End Notes

This act - this scene of Quinn taking revenge on Broysc - is really a linchpin for his character. It is a major turning point for him. Sure, he's killed people before - Republicans, in battle. This is something very different - a member of his own side, a highly-connected member of the ranking elite, and a superior officer significantly above him in the military - and one he used to report to! And this isn't a battle, it is a cold-blooded murder of a person who has no possible defense. Quinn is more than smart enough to see the consequences and ramifications of such an act, although I think he might not really understand the repercussions to himself and his moral code (who could, really?).

As for Astridel, this is a sort of test of Quinn - how far is Quinn willing to go for his revenge? Will he shy away at the last minute? Or would he (as he does) own his decisions and his responsibility? Quinn's life had been haphazardly dismantled by Broysc, and she wants to understand what extent he will go to to ensure it does not happen again, particularly as she sees that what happens to Quinn will certainly carry over to impact herself. Thus, she needs to have a clear understanding of where the limits of her crew lie. Most of her other retainers are quite straight-forward - Vette clearly has no stomach for brutality, while Pierce revels in it; Jaesa's cruelty might beyond limit but Astridel knows how to direct it to best effect. But Quinn's subtlety requires a bit more probing, in Astridel's eyes, and in a way, her drawing him on (without seeming to
overtly do so) is but an extension of her flirting - how far can she entice him to go? Where is the wall, and what is the act at which he will balk? And she doesn't even really have to do much more than give some little smile of approbation or frown of disapproval to find out more and more about Quinn's limits - and how to push them.
Toovee had cleared away the dinner plates, and Astridel lounged before her untasted dessert when Quinn entered and seated himself again at the table, drawing a long intake of air before raising his eyes to her. He felt drained; over ten years of rage and pent-up frustration had been fired out of his blaster along with its bolt, and he had no idea what would fill the space it left behind. Some part of him, he suspected, would miss that furious fire that had smoldered for a decade without either dying to embers or consuming him in its flames. What would he do without its strangely comforting warmth to rely on?

When his gaze focused at last on Astridel's face, he saw there one of her uncommon authentic smiles, small but beautiful, beaming across the table at him. There were other, he recalled abruptly, fires that could warm a man, body and soul. He propped his elbows on the table, his fingers interlaced to disguise the tremor in them from the residues of adrenaline that coursed through his veins.

“The body has been disposed of, my lord,” he reported quietly. Moff Broysc's mortal remains would spend eternity perfectly preserved in the vacuum of space, an organic satellite orbiting Hoth forever. Or at least until his frozen carcass was smashed to pieces on the hull of an arriving Imperial cargo ship, that is. “No more of Moff Broysc’s men will have to endure his whims and incompetence.”

Astridel's smile quirked to her usual sardonic smirk, and Quinn saw it.

“Yes, I know, my lord,” he forestalled her observation. “I may hide my actions behind noble words, couch them in terms of service to the Empire and her soldiers, like a martyr to some great cause.”

“I was only going to say that the Empire is better for it.”

“My sentiments exactly, my lord – but... I know what I’ve done, and I know why I did it.”

“Which does not mean that there was only one reason, or that the benefit of the deed is singular only to you,” Astridel pointed out. “I find it rare that there is only one cause or effect of any action. Count your victory, Captain. This was a battle just like any other. Who knows but our wars we fight against our supposed allies are more vicious than those we fight against our foes?”

“Perhaps they are, my lord. Thank you for seeing this through.” Quinn picked up his fork. “And my
lord, how was Hoth?"

“Cold,” Astridel quipped glibly. She took her time in relating the events, allowing Quinn the leisure to come slowly back from the heady, wicked heights of his decision through her smooth voice, a recitation calm and soothing for all the perils of battles and fights contained within it. She described the hunt for the Jedi, Xerender, who had abandoned his frightened padawan to the anger of Broonmark – “A bit of a shame, honestly, as I think it would not have taken much to push the boy to the Dark side,” Astridel mused. “We could have used a recruit, after Commander Lanklyn's demise.”

“The Talz again?” Quinn surmised.


“From over –” Quinn ran over a mental map of the galaxy. “– what, 60,000 parsecs away, my lord?”

“Yes,” Astridel confirmed tensely, masking her discomfort by taking another sip of the brew. “And before you ask, no, I am not powerful enough to do that. Yet.”

Quinn pursed his lips, trying not to let his astonishment show. Astridel was certainly unnerved by this display of her master's power, and he heard, in the recesses of his mind, her voice as it once had sounded, lost in fear, grieving the foreknowledge of her inability to face Baras and survive the encounter, let alone emerge victorious. She was more powerful now, much more, and she knew it – and yet she knew, as well, that she still was not strong enough. If he displayed a similar dread, it would not help her.

“Yet,” he repeated, offering her a look he hoped was kindly encouraging. “But you will be. Of that I have no doubt, my lord.”

Her replying smile was forced and uncomfortable, but she shook her brief malaise away and continued her tale: that Xarender's goal was the rescue of his master, a great Jedi named Wyellett, who had been captured during the war – a stroke of triumph for Baras, as Wyellett had claimed Baras' lightsaber, taken as a spoil of victory.

“Baras lost to this Jedi Wyellett?” Quinn repeated, incredulous.

“By his own admission, even,” Astridel confirmed. “Thus Wyellett's capture was an immense
personal victory for Baras. But the transport was caught in the Battle of Hoth, robbing Baras of his revenge. He assumed Wyellett destroyed, but he survived the crash and had been living on Hoth all this time. Baras's senses directed us to the quadrant where his lightsaber was located, and Broonmark's abilities got us the rest of the way. Wyellett had been frozen in the ice, preserved by the Force, and had just been freed by Xarender when I came upon them.”

“Fortunate, then, it must have made him weak, and the more easy to vanquish,” Quinn reflected.

“I didn't kill them.”

Quinn couldn't hide his surprise this time. “My lord,” Quinn said, “I understand your reasons for leaving Yonlach alive, but what possible reason could you have for doing the same for these two?”

“It's your own fault, really,” Astridel replied saucily, detecting a shade of disapproval in his tone.

“Mine, my lord?”

“Well, you and your ideas about Knowing Thy Enemy. I don't just sit around examining my nail polish when we're not on a mission, you know.”

“You don't wear nail polish, my lord,” Quinn observed, his voice just hinting at wryness.

Her lips twisted in amusement. “What I do do, Quinn, is study. I study Sith, I study Jedi, I study the Empire and the Republic. I learn their ways, their methods, their beliefs...”

“And, my lord?”

“Wyellett kept himself alive for years by communing with the Force. Even Baras spoke of it: sustenance drawn from the power of the Force itself. It would take great concentration, great skill, to do this, and even more to be able to also reach out to a former student like Xarender to beg for a rescue. Wyellett may have spent years without saber training, but the same could not be said for Xarender. To go up against these two, together? I am not such a rash fool as that.”

“Surely, my lord, they would not have simply let you go?”
“Baras' apprentice?” Astridel laughed. “Hardly; you are right in that, Quinn. Xarender was eager to fight, and I gave him what he wished, until Wyellett intervened. He would have kept Xarender from attacking, if he could, he said. The chamber of ice we were in was weak, and failing further by the minute, and there was a choice to be made: kill the pair and entomb myself with them, or retreat. I chose the latter option – but not because I feared an ice prison.”

“Then...?” Quinn prompted with a shake of his head, still not understanding, ignorant as he was of Sith and Jedi secrets.

“In my studies, I have learned there is a great Jedi belief,” Astridel explained, “that they, and most especially their great masters, become one with the Force when they die. Some say that Jedi become even more powerful in death than they are in life. Perhaps some Sith believe this, too; I have no idea. Whether it is true, or mere Jedi superstition, it was a risk I could not take: to kill two Jedi that had already exhibited such skill, one who was so adept as to keep himself alive for two decades by communing with the Force alone. Such an action would have added two heavy weights to the scale on the Light Side, and for almost no benefit to me – or even to Baras! Not when there was another way.”

“And what way was that, my lord?”

“It was, in fact, Wyellett's suggestion. I speed the collapse of the chamber and trap himself and Xarender again in ice, permanently, forever. I saw at once that it was the most logical course: they are removed from the galactic stage without enriching the Light by their dying, nor the Republic by their living.”

“What of Darth Baras' orders?”

“If he wishes them to die so badly, he may travel to Hoth and dispatch them himself,” Astridel tossed her head in a gesture of scorn. “But I think he will agree with my reasons, should he care to ask after them. He likely will not.” She returned her attention from an imaginary argument with Baras to her companion across the table. “Quinn?”

Malavai was staring down into his teacup, swirling the dregs of the leaves that had filtered through the sieve. He looked up at her after a moment.

“I was merely appreciating the irony, my lord,” he said with a mirthless smile. “That you, with a clear directive to kill a foe, stayed your hand, while I, tossing my life and career to the possibility of a
traitor's label, murdered an ally and commanding officer.”

“Regret, Captain Quinn?”

Quinn bit his lips a moment. “None whatsoever, my lord,” he replied honestly. “As I said – merely appreciating the irony. We both of us have done the right thing, for at the heart of each lies the good of the Empire.”

“What will you report? I'm surprised that some one of Broysc's men hasn't stirred up a hue and cry against you.”

“I think, of all Imperial forces, they are perhaps most apt to be the ones who feel the greatest relief,” Quinn replied, raising an eyebrow.

Astridel hoisted a shoulder nonchalantly. “Perhaps. But even such a crew as that is likely to have some toady all too keen on finding a boot to lick, even if it means selling out a savior.”

“I will report the events as I recall them,” Quinn decided. He had meant it when he had determined to own these actions. “If I am to face court-martial, I will, and I will keep your name out of it, my lord.”

“Unless I choose otherwise,” Astridel reminded him. “I did say I would back whatever decision you made.”

“A declaration for which I am exceedingly grateful, my lord,” Quinn answered. “But the responsibility is mine.”

“Ah, you are that, Quinn.” Astridel stood and sidled around the table, perching against its edge as she leaned over him. “Responsible, dutiful, steady...” In the way her voice dropped to dark and husky tones as she spoke, she made the words sound far more erotic than such staid sentiments had any right to be.

“...The noble, selfless defender of the Empire.”
“Not so very selfless as all that,” he murmured, his pulse choking him as severely as his food had earlier. But it had been rather too stressful a night to move so quickly; even she seemed to recognize that it would be a mistake for him to pursue her to her bed with his hands so recently stained with blood. Always in his head the curse of Moff Broysc's shadow was linked to his passion for Astridel, and damn him if it would persist still, with memories of Broysc's futile struggles against his impending death intermingling with his fantasies of Astridel entwined and writhing in his arms, gasping with the ferocity of life. No, it would not happen this way, not yet, nor with the possible threat of a court-martial suspended over his head like an axe. When he was free and clear of Broysc, for good, then Astridel would see quite a different response to all her flirtatious teasing. Even now, her fingertips rested on the shoulder of his jacket; it felt as though her touch was burning a hole through the fabric.

“I know,” she said softly. Her hand skimmed over the jacket as she stepped quietly away, and behind him, he heard the humming hiss of the hatch as she left, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Chapter End Notes

BOOM. Chapter 17 I'd had written for a while, just not posted due to some edits I was pondering; as of this morning, Chapter 18 was only half-finished, and this, Chapter 19, wrote all of and posted in the time since posting 18 - so... 2 hours? Maybe less? It feels good to be writing again :) Guess back pain is good for something! But I need a break now; I need a shower and maybe a trip to the grocery store, but it depends on if I feel like trying to drive.

Anyway, Quinn is coming to terms with his murder - pretty rapidly, all things considered, since he's apparently ok with going from dumping the body to sitting down for dessert. But he is entirely convinced of the correctness of his decision, and that it really is a benefit to the Empire that Broysc is gone, and he DID try multiple other channels first (Christ, I'm actually justifying this guy's behavior? What? Damn you, Quinn!) He's at least not so comfortable with it that he's ready to instantly hop the nookie train to Boinksville, though. Guess I have to give him at least a little bit of credit for having SOME scruples. Astridel would probably think less of him if he did try that, but mostly because she wouldn't want to be this afterthought, inevitable conclusion, or cherry on top of a murder sundae. She knows she's worth more than that.
Quinn waited tensely for the expected summons. One simply didn't just murder a high-ranking officer and skip off like a Rodian on a holiday spree.

And yet, it did not come.

Which was not to say that the comms were silent. Far from it now, although that had taken a little bit of time. It had started with a whisper, like static, an expectant electronic hum as rumors and gossip flew wildly through the ranks but bypassing him, like a wave that broke around a solitary island. He occupied a hushed sanctum in the center of a buzz, as though merely talking to him made all the rest of the military complicit in his crime. But someone, somewhere in the mix, breathed a sigh of relief, and did it openly enough to be witnessed – and if the word of Quinn's action had moved fast, then even faster moved the hint that there were people, powerful people, who had precious little problem with what he had done. While Quinn waited on tenterhooks for official notice, a slow-growing surge of approbation swelled through the silence that surrounded him.

The response, when first it broke on him, left him so incredulous that he was certain he was being played for a fool.

You don't know me, we've never met, so I hope you don't take my plain speaking amiss, sir. But I would shake the hand and buy a drink for the man who has rid me of the biggest bastard I ever had the shite luck to serve under. Here's to the solid durasteel balls of Captain Quinn! - Lance Cpl. Jo. Higglers

One such letter, particularly in such uncouth terms, was easy enough to shrug off, but with this, it seemed the floodgates had opened. In short order, the comm panel was lit up like a Hutt palace on Boonta Eve, as message after message poured in. The sturdy, straight praise of the enlisted troops rolled in first, heavily and strong. Then came the lower ranking officers, circumspectly praising him to each other, but cautious of addressing him overtly, with some one or other in the chain breaking the code of discretion to anonymously forward to him portions of the conversations. Major Ovech's enthusiastic lauds shattered that trend swiftly, and Quinn began to feel faintly encouraged. When Astridel joined him on the bridge, she found him mulling over one letter in particular.

“My lord,” he looked up from the data pad as she came to stand beside him, “I'm fielding reports from across Imperial forces. Among the men there's universal relief that Moff Broysc is no more.”
“Universal?” Astridel inquired, intrigued. She wouldn’t have considered it normal for so controversial an act to be greeted with a reaction of any type that could be counted as ‘universal.’

“Even Moffs,” Quinn confirmed. “Oh, they do make the expected speeches of this being irregular behavior – but in terms so weak that they can hardly be termed a proper condemnation. And they are unequivocal about the benefit – that Broysc was a ‘loose cannon,’” Quinn quoted, scrolling back to an earlier letter, “that he was ‘poised to ensure a multitude of disastrous outcomes’ for the Empire, and a ‘bungler.’” Quinn sounded amused at that particular epithet, and flicked back to the letter that had been absorbing him when Astridel had entered. He handed the data pad to her, adding, “And then there’s this.”

“Anonymous?” Astridel noted the carefully blanked metadata of the message.

“Several have been anonymous, but this one has been scrupulously cleansed,” Quinn nodded.

Captain Quinn –

Before any other consideration, I extend my personal apology to you and to the Sith Lord you so honorably serve. I am sure you may guess why; had I understood the depths of your connections, I would never have consented. There are lines, as well as people, I would not cross.

I dislike being importuned; I greatly dislike transgressions on my indulgence, and there is one – now one less – who has done both too often, which brings me to my second point: I am no longer fettered by the inconvenience of this person. For this liberation, you have my most sincere and deepest gratitude.

“Sincere and deepest gratitude,” Astridel repeated. “Which holds little weight when there is no identifying mark to it.”

“I thought so, too,” Quinn agreed, “And it is true we may never know the full truth. I’ve even considered that this could be a hoax. But there aren’t many who could scrub a message so thoroughly. High-ranking members of Intelligence, some powerful members of the government or military, a handful of Sith, perhaps. But the language – humble, in reference to you – suggests that this was not another Sith Lord.”

“No, I doubt many Sith Lords would agree to protect such a liability as Broysc.”
“Whoever it is, this suggests they were, at Broysc's instigation, behind the attack outside the museum,” Quinn reasoned. “And that they were unaware, at the time, that we were connected to Darth Baras.”

“Which suggests not Intelligence,” Astridel put in. “Unless their agents are slipping.”

“As I felt, as well, my lord. It must be someone who respects, or at least fears, Darth Baras. Someone in government – or perhaps one of the Syndicates or Corporations, I would speculate. I doubt we will ever really know who... but it appears that Moff Broysc's high connections were as fed up with him as everyone else was.”

Astridel's mouth twisted in a moue of disgust. “They should have acted. The rest of the empire should have acted. Their indolence is inexcusable and sickening.”

“Perhaps,” Quinn said pensively. “But I was guilty of that for a long time myself.”

Astridel tilted her head to one side slightly, the weights on her veil dangling along her nose.

“What's this?” she asked, her curiosity piqued. “Such leniency for so many who lazily trusted to someone else to fix a major problem for them? This doesn't sound like the uncompromising man who snapped 'If that is your best, then you're useless to me,'” at a poor recruit when I first meet him!”

Quinn's cheek tightened as a smile tugged at the muscles around his mouth. “As I recall, I also said that I could shoot that corporal without it troubling my sleep in the slightest. I am not so very different as I was, my lord. I have simply realized that the same applies here: Moff Broysc was useless – worse than useless – not only to me, but to the Empire as a whole.”

Quinn took the data pad from her grasp and set it on the console beside them, using the motion to sort his thoughts and words.

“I shot the Moff with a clear conscience. I do not feel conflicted in the least,” Quinn confessed. At last, after years of frustration and setback, he was free of Broysc's toxic influence. There would be no court-martial. No reprisals. No more insane demands at the whim of a power-hungry madman. And that meant, he had realized earlier as he had stared at the torrent of messages cascading over the comm panel, he was free, at last, to pursue what he had come to want so badly. At this, his nerves trembled with the abrupt surge of his pulse.
As Quinn found himself approaching the point that had occupied his mind for so much of the day, he was suddenly aware of Astridel's nearness, the warmth that radiated from her, the strange interlocking of her outward calm and her inner hunger, the eagerness that cried out to him in his blood and heartbeat, and yet, for a fraction of an instant, he hesitated, and then, just as promptly, cursed himself it. Strange! this thing he had struggled against for so long that now threatened to reach up and engulf him, why had he ever fought it in the first place? Even when he had given himself all manner of edicts and regulations to follow, was this not what he had wanted all along? Had not all his actions, for months, been conspiring to bring him to this point, regardless of whatever feeble protests he had half-heartedly made? Had he not used any excuse, any pretense, to seek her out, to stand by her side, to serve her, to pleasurably bask in the warmth of her approval? And after all this, how could he now shrink from all he had gained from it?

He inhaled briefly. “Not about anything. Including you.”

Sensing there was more, Astridel held quite still. Even to herself, her breath seemed to barely move her chest, although some part of her dimly wondered if the force of her own heartbeat wouldn't fracture her in two.

“I've held back long enough. Been too rigid, too inflexible,” Quinn continued, his voice dropping. “I won't suppress my feelings and desires any longer.”

“And what are those feelings and desires?” Astridel said softly, her self-assurance barely cracking to reveal the faintest of tremors in the sultry depths of her voice. She had underestimated how much she had wanted this, how much she had wanted him. When had it stopped being a game? Where had it crossed the line from an idle amusement, a mere physical pursuit, to a need that was as impelling as it was precious? She recognized that, in her long-fought task to bring him to this tipping point, she had worked herself into a similar state, without ever having seen the extent to which she was doing so.

Quinn was a complex creature, a man of thought, a man of words, and a man of action. Astridel knew this, and she was yet surprised when, after his thought and his words when there remained but the action, he acted at last. With a sudden movement, he swept her into his embrace, pressing the lithe length of her form to his chest, his arms once more full of her, just as they had been when they had danced, but his mouth – ah, now that was different, for although she had kissed him, or he had kissed her, or however those prior tangles had happened, this time, unhindered by his own fears and scruples, he abandoned himself in his thirst for her, lost in his devouring desire, so full of her taste and scent that his knees threatened to mutiny.

And she, she kissed him like she claimed him, like she owned him, wholly and completely, at last, and yet within her, she felt as though she would let herself belong to him in a way no one had ever claimed her before. It wasn't exactly a comfortable idea, but that could be on account of its novelty; certainly, she could be very comfortable with being kissed like this, and more. The feelings she had once probed up out of curiosity surged up in a flush she realized she was unprepared for, bringing
with them a need that was like an ache at the core of her being. Beneath her hands, it seemed she could feel every heated sinew of his arms and back, even through the sturdy material of his uniform jacket.

“Is this payback for all the teasing I’ve put you through, Quinn?” she murmured as he paused with a small gasp.

“Hardly.” he breathed, his voice barely more than a rasp. “I don't play games, my lord. You should know that by now.”

“No? That's a pity,” Astridel chuckled, her lips and laughter brushing the edge of his ear.

He drew his head up, looking down into her shrouded face with eyes dark and warm and desiring. “Not with this, my lord.” He bowed his head to hers again, and his whisper against her cheek was achingly full of all his long-denied hunger. “Not with this.”

Astridel gave him a slow nod, and noted she was beginning to have difficulty distinguishing her feelings from what she sensed of his own. Was it her desire that was so strong, or was it his? She could feel the swift rhythm of her heart pulsing throughout her body, in her chest, her throat, her fingers, which she curled into her palms reflexively, trying to still the tremble that shook them. She came to a swift decision.

“Come to my room,” she murmured. “Not later. Not with duty rosters. Now, as you are.”

“My lord!” Quinn exclaimed his agreement with quiet fervor. He felt a rush, as though all the blood in his veins had flared briefly with fire, and he was as suddenly cold as she slipped out of the grasp of his arms.

“Now,” she breathed, as if he had need of the reminder or the repeat, as she stepped back towards the hatch of the bridge bulkhead. Then she was gone, with a noise that sounded like a giggle, delighted, girlish, and innocent.

Chapter End Notes
Yay, back to writing my favorite dysfunctional pair :)

Happy Holidays!
Deep Space

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

For all her insistence on now, he nonetheless took half a moment to compose himself, lest his haste lead him to a blunder, and to let her have time to do the same. When Quinn, looking every inch the proper officer, pressed the door chime, he was admitted instantly and found that she had used those seconds to remove her armor and loosen the top fastenings of her shirt.

For a wordless moment, he regarded her, openly appreciating the sight. The open throat of her shirt revealed a tantalizing flash of white skin, and beneath that view his vision was filled with the material tightly clinging to every curve of her form, outlining the rounded swell of her breasts. Her weight was on one foot, her hip cocked at an angle from her slender waist, her closely-fit pants smoothing down the slope of her leg.

The door hissed shut behind him as he huskily repeated his last words: “My lord.”

She was about to speak, but there had been words enough already. In two strides, he closed the distance between them, his hands already reaching for her waist, his heart in his throat at the prospect. She welcomed him and at the first pressure of her hand against the chest of his uniform, he enfolded her in his arms with a deference that was almost reverential; he lowered his face, seizing her lips with his own. She kissed him with an intensity that shook him, and he responded eagerly, clutching her like she held the only hope for his life or future. He ran his hands down the slender curves of her frame as she deftly unfastened his jacket and slid her fingertips under his shirt along the bare skin of his ribs. Impatiently shrugging the garment off his shoulders, he threw it hastily on the floor, followed by his shirt, never having cared less before in his life about the tidy storage of his uniform. Shortly thereafter her own shirt joined it; as he peeled the material away from the pale skin beneath, seeing more of her than he ever had before, he made a gasp that was quite a separate sound than that of their hurried, joint breaths.

The skin was marred, badly. Over her right shoulder and part of her back, the flesh was mangled, healed but indelibly crossed with scars. Long ago, he had ceased to notice the scars that marked a portion of her right cheek, from her ear to her neck, only just visible beneath her mask, and the arrangement of the cowl of her dress at the museum had masked the extent of the damage. The sight of such devastation gave him a shock. She paused, noting his hesitation.

“I was a slave myself. As a child.” Her voice was sharply edged, and Quinn knew that his reaction here could destroy him in ways he had never before considered. She drew herself up stiffly. “If it’s a problem, just say so and get out now.”
Instead, he buried his face in the maimed skin, kissing her neck and delighting in the warm pressure of her bared breasts, smooth and round, against his chest, and he wrapped his arms tightly across her back, holding her close as though he would have absorbed her into himself, or let himself be absorbed into her, and melt their beings into a single essence. “I didn't know,” he whispered. “Tell me.”

“It was a slave trader,” she began slowly, her voice no longer holding that dangerous note. She twitched against him as his lips began to work over a sensitive spot just below her ear. “I was to be sold, and I didn't like my buyer. I let them know that, and I wasn't polite about it.”

He progressed down to the hollow at the base of her throat. “What happened?”

“The trader had a name for selling obedient slaves, and I had made him look bad in front of an important man. He thought to break me while the buyer watched. He usually used a baton, but his buyer carried an electrostaff. And I was particularly defiant. Ah!” Quinn's lips had traversed the space from her throat to her breast, tracing the hills with his tongue to their peaks, and she trembled in reaction. The sound of her sighing cry sent an electric jolt through his nerves, from his fingertips to the weight of the ache in his loins.

“...awfulness,” he murmured into the smooth, pliant flesh.

Astridel made a dismissive noise as she fumbled with his belt. “Pah. Without it, I would not be here, now,” she replied, and something in her tone gave her words added significance, making him pause. On impulse, he slowly reached up and, with a careful, delicate touch, gently lifted back the hood that covered half her face, its metal weights cold against his hand. She made no move to stop him. For the first time, he saw her full countenance – he noted that he had been right, her hair was dark, but with more auburn in its highlights than he had expected, and a little longer, pulled back with an array of clips that served as anchor points for the veil – and he stared into the vacancy of her useless eyes.

What could have been written on that blank slate? What pain, what drive, what ferocity, what passion? What might they have seen as they stared back at him?

But before he could respond, she drew his face down to hers and kissed him, surprisingly tenderly at first, drawing him gently away from his speculations on her fractured past, and then more hungrily, as she filled his senses, and not his curiosity, once more. He responded vigorously, his fingers wandering over the curve of her hips; he glided his hands down the slender expanse of her back, sliding them over her firm, round buttocks to her legs. She made a small hop as he hooked his hands under her thighs and he lifted her – once again, he was surprised at her petite form, for her commanding personality made her often seem so much taller – taking her weight easily while she wrapped her legs around his waist, pressing herself against the heated hardness that awaited her, a few meager lengths of of fabric intervening between them. It was only a step or two to the bed, and he tumbled them down upon it, pulling at the fastening of her pants and as yet incredulous that this startling being, the house of that admirable, valiant spirit so unfettered by serenity, was in his hold.
and desiring him as passionately as he desired her.

He traced the sleek terrain of her bare thighs with his broad palms, spread-fingered, and she pulled at him urgently, bringing his hands, his lips, any part of him that she could direct, into contact with her flushed skin, all desire and wordless demand, parting her legs to catch his hips between her bent knees. At this point, he had no clear idea if he were obeying her commands or the dictates of his own need, and she arched against him with a shiver and a sharp gasp of pleasure as he slid into her – stars above, it had been so long since, and this had been such a long time in coming, and longer in the torment of his self-imposed denial, he felt the breath rush from his lungs in a desperate groan.

It was as much like his hopes and yet as unlike his expectations as he could have imagined. He would never have expected at how fervently she would match his energy with her own; he would never have expected the sound of her voice, gasping with the pressure of her desire and the intensity of his; he had hoped, but never expected, the way she sought to satisfy him as he did her. He had never expected how she, typically so permanently and exquisitely in command, would surrender herself beneath him with such abandon. He had never expected – never even had imagined in his fantasies – that within the clutching wreath of his embracing arms, she would actually tremble beneath his heated touch, crying out with ecstatic delight as he drove her beyond the borders of her shaking self, and pulling him tightly against her as he followed on the crest of her wave, gloriously reveling in the joining.

Limbs entangled, Quinn fell back on the disarrayed bed, drawing Astridel down beside him and breathing hard. She lay still against him, face down with her arm draped languidly over his chest, letting the cool, filtered air of the ship settle over their sweat-slicked skin, and indulged in the sweet notion that she had been right; he had been worth the wait and well worth the having. She had been, too, she smiled to herself. It would not be soon – if ever – that the memory of this night would fade, nor be regretted.

Regretted, no, never – but as Quinn awoke in the dark, much later, it occurred to him that his life had now become inextricably more complicated. He tilted his head and pressed a soft kiss to her temple, beside the lids closed over the withered eyes, not knowing if she were awake or asleep.

“Mmm?” Astridel murmured, shuffling slightly and curling into the crook of his arm, the brush of her breasts against his ribs enticingly distracting.

“How old were you?” he inquired softly.

“Mm?” she repeated, more quizzical.
“The slaver. When he did this,” he traced a gentle fingertip over the scars.

“I'm not sure,” Astridel admitted, running her fingers through his hair. “Ten, maybe? Old enough to understand what was happening when the buyer decided to try his hand at breaking me.”

Quinn froze, wondering if he had truly understood what she meant by her implication.

“I had a sister – my twin, identical in all things but the Force-sensitivity. I was supposed to protect her. Instead, they raped and tortured her. In front of me, as they had done to me in front of her, using one sister to break the other. For myself, I didn't care. But for Selestine – for her, oh, I cared. She was not strong; she was dying of what they had done to her. I could see it, though I didn't understand how at the time.” She propped herself up on one elbow, placing one arresting hand on his chest. “Don't get any funny ideas of trying to fix me. I'm not broken.”

“I didn't think you were. I don't know what to say,” he confessed softly. “I am sorry you had to endure such a thing.”

“At first, so was I,” she said. “But not anymore. It happened, and that is all. It was an event, and one that does not control me, although I am aware of its influence. It did not destroy me, and it does not define me. Do you recall my telling you that you owe Moff Broysc a debt of gratitude for his incompetence making you the man you are?”

“Of course, my lord. In truth, there is not much you say that I don't remember closely.”

“And so I have a debt of gratitude to the slaver and his client.”

“My lord!” Quinn exclaimed, completely floored. “Gratitude, for – such unspeakable -!”

“Because,” she said quietly, “it was in that moment that I understood the Force and my connection to it.”

Quinn swallowed back the burst of rage that choked him, trying to control his reaction. It was her life, and her past, her story. It was not, it occurred to him, for him to pass judgment on how she had come to terms with it. He pulled her close again, breathing in the scent of her cropped hair as she settled her head against the hollow of his shoulder, and he asked softly, “What did you do?”
“I killed them,” she answered in as low a voice. “It was the first time I was aware of the extent that I could use the Force, and I used it to rip them both apart. I heard later they had trouble sorting out the pieces.”

“A fitting end,” Quinn said, “I expected nothing less. Barbarians.”

“Perhaps so. But because of that, I was sent to a tutor, rather than to a prison. The Academy could not ignore such power as mine.”

Quinn lay quietly for some time, reaching out for the peace he had felt until the horror of these revelations had shaken it, his fingertips absently stroking the patterns of smooth and roughened welts down her back. Each time, it seemed, that he thought he had gained some understanding of this woman, a new facet of her life would come into focus, one that had been hidden under a mantle of obscurity, and that dazzled him with its terrible beauty. As each of these facets came to light, its brightness enchanted him, and yet, with all this in her power, here this astonishing, captivating being lay, in his arms, as directed by her, chosen long ago. Why him?

“And just as you said,” he murmured, “without that, you would not be here, now.”

“With you,” Astridel added unnecessarily. Beneath the sheets, she drew up one leg and draped it over his, using the movement to deliberately wriggle the perfection of her breasts against his skin.

“With you,” Quinn echoed, as his blood rekindled. Peace, he decided could wait its turn. With apparent casualness, his thumb traced idle circles around the tip of those rounded features that she persisted in presenting so tantalizingly to him. “I'm glad we got that settled.”

“Oh,” Astridel promised coyly with an inflaming smile, “What makes you think that anything has been settled?”

Chapter End Notes

The nookie at last! *confetti* Hope it satisfies.

I actually had written a good part of this chapter ages ago - it actually was a segue from
the early chapters where Quinn goes to Astridel's room for the first time, and she betrays herself by admitting her fear of Darth Baras. At the time, I hadn't played enough of the story to see how the romance actually played out, and I had just written that for my own amusement. I was able to rework, re-arrange, and re-use a good portion of it. A major part of the revisions is the unusual topic for the post-coitus cuddle - initially, I had this take place as part of the "I was a slave myself" conversation, but on re-reading, it slowed down the nookie narrative too much - when they are THIS CLOSE they're probably not going to stop (she won't, anyway) for long chats about her past. So I bumped that to later, and shortened the earlier portion.

Additionally, in my original draft, there was no sister; the abuse happens to Astridel herself. But I feared it being cliché, and worse, using sexual trauma as a convenient plot point. I once read some comment or article somewhere that amounted to "Why can't a heroine have a motivation OTHER than, 'I was raped.'? Isn't there ANY other reason a woman would have to get revenge?" Ergo: the invention of the sister. Despite that change, I did keep Astridel's other speeches unchanged - her claims that she isn't broken, and doesn't need fixing. Just because she is a survivor of trauma doesn't mean that she can't enjoy sex or have normal sexual encounters. And she doesn't need or want a White Knight handling her with kid gloves. Her Sith training had a lot more impact on her choices and morality than her prior trauma does. I didn't want her to be a "survivor trope;" I don't want her to be defined by it.

Happy Holidays, again! :)

This marked the beginning of one of the strangest and happiest periods of Quinn's life. He could not recall a time, even prior to the ten-year Broysc Blight, in which he felt that, for once, all the galaxy was conspiring in his favor. But the galaxy, he reflected, was by-and-large wholly indifferent and had precious little to do with his present success. This he owed all to himself, to Astridel, and, he reflected, Darth Baras. After all, one could not take advantage of an opportunity if one were never presented with one. And now that the death of Moff Broysc had wiped away all his roadblocks, past, present, and future, Quinn found he could even be properly grateful for the insane commander's perverse vendettas. Without those, who knew where he might be now? Fortune had at last begun to smile on the rising star of Captain Malavai Quinn.

His elation changed him, making him less rigid, even to the point that he might have called himself almost careless; he was less wary of Broonmark, trusting to Astridel's impression of the Talz; he was less domineering towards Pierce; he was compassionate to the point of genuine sorrow when Astridel and Vette returned from Tatooine's sand-swept surface with all of Vette's high hopes dashed: the inconsolable twi'lek fled to her bunk, tortured by sobs, as Astridel quietly informed him that they had been too late by mere hours. Vette's mother had died in slavery, never knowing the fates or futures of her daughters. It was Quinn who thought to send Toovee to her with a glass of warm blue milk.

Jaesa noticed it immediately when he met her at the airlock and escorted her to where Astridel waited on the bridge.

“Well?” Astridel inquired laconically.

Jaesa smiled. “I feel like I should be asking you that, master,” she answered saucily. “But I found the false Sith I sensed. I slaughtered them. I slaughtered them all.”

“All?”

“Welllll,” Jaesa hedged with a smirk, “Those that truly were false, yes. But not before getting confessions from each and making them beg. I've never felt such satisfaction.”

“Very good. And the others?”
“The confessions and begging were consistent, but I sadly left off the death part. And the curious thing, master, is that I believe it worked.” Jaesa dug her gloved knuckle thoughtfully into her chin. “Those I left no longer seemed to waver. Some even are capable of maintaining a veneer of interest in the Light, and could be used to infiltrate the Jedi. And here’s the best part of all – when they understood who I was, and that I was but the apprentice, many were prepared to swear allegiance to you.”

“To me, or to Darth Baras?”

“As far as they are concerned, those are the same thing. But as I read it, it was to you, specifically, master.”

“Excellent!” exclaimed Astridel, rising from the command chair and crossing the room to take Jaesa by both hands with delighted congratulations. “Well done, apprentice mine. Let this experience feed you – there is much it can teach you. The ways of manipulation are many, subtle or overt, and all are useful. Our power base expands.”

“Yours does, master,” Jaesa replied respectfully.

“Through your action,” Astridel said fairly. “I return to you the glory of your achievement; be proud of it.”

“One aspect does trouble me, however,” Jaesa offered. “Despite my reading the authenticity of their allegiance in the moment, I fear that some could changes colors again just as easily. I would not want my recruitment of these Sith to weaken you at a critical moment. Should that happen...”

“Should that happen,” Astridel ordered, seating herself again in the command chair with a regal mien, “then I trust you will instruct them in the error of their choices. There are few greater experiences than dealing with traitors.”

“When you put it that way, master, you make me almost wish for a turncoat in the ranks.” Jaesa followed her master and took the seat at the right hand ops console, tucking her legs up beneath her on the cushioned chair, and swiveling it to still face her master. As there was no further need to rehash the additional details of her mission – details of names and the assets thereof – she raised an inquisitively impudent eyebrow and asked again, “Well?”
“Oh, very well,” Astridel answered, a flicker of a smile crossing her lips.

“And?” prompted Jaesa, when no further information was volunteered.

“And the teased beast was released from his cage at last,” Astridel replied. “And he discovered the truth of the Code: There is only passion. From passion comes strength, from strength comes power, from power comes victory.” Astridel settled herself smugly down into her chair. “He is mine.”

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Quinn pressed the door chime of Astridel's penthouse and skimmed his eyes over the daily log and duty roster displayed on the data pad in his hand. He never approached her quarters on board the *Fury* without this provision, for he never wanted to suffer the humiliation of knocking on the basis of an assumption and being turned away on account of it being a presumption. The log offered him both an excuse and a dignified way out, and although he knew it would not be needed, given the trials of the day, he saw no reason to change the habit.

The *Fury* was back on Dromund Kaas, docked securely at the spaceport outside Kaas City, and both congratulations and new orders, courtesy of Darth Baras – light on the first, heavy on the second, to be sure – had been bestowed upon Astridel that morning. Quinn had been surprised to find himself somewhat nervous at the thought of presenting himself before Baras; it struck him as critical, for some reason, that the Darth not know the deepening connection between himself and Astridel.

Astridel didn't exactly help matters; for the entirety of the approach and landing sequence at the spaceport, she amused herself with running delicate fingers of the Force across his neck and hair, doing her level best to distract him and giving him an expression of the most counterfeit innocence he had ever seen whenever he shot a look her direction. Rather stupid of him, he told himself, to think that she would stop her teasing just because he had now succumbed to their mutual desires. If anything, she had become even more coy in her playful moods. He spent most of the speeder journey to the Citadel worrying that she would do the same throughout their interview with Baras, which would be, concisely, horribly awkward.

But thankfully, she subsided for the duration of the interview, and was even downright serious as Baras' plan unfolded before them: ascension to the Dark Council via the murder of his old master, Darth Vengean, with the assistance of Lord Draahg, another former apprentice of Vengean's. Vengean's desire for open warfare with the Republic, granted so graciously by Baras through Astridel's actions, had put him at odds with the Dark Council, with his position now so precarious that they would not stir a finger to protect him. Paranoid – with good reason – Vengean had secluded himself in his sanctum, private chambers below the Citadel, and Draahg, his secret allegiance to Baras uncovered, was there, too, awaiting rescue.
While they neither of them had anticipated being flung directly into their next tasks, Astridel, eternally ready for battle, drew her twin sabers and didn't shirk. Quinn, grateful for the dictates of one of his many personal rules – Be Prepared – checked his blaster and mentally tallied the medpacks he methodically replenished on his service belt after every engagement. In the labyrinth of chambers below the Citadel, they freed Draahg and pushed on, culminating in the confrontation with Vengean.

That Quinn was capable of calling on her now was enough to signify that they had been, indeed, victorious.

As Quinn waited beside the penthouse door, he considered the day. He had never been in the physical presence of a member of the Dark Council before; now, he had not only done so, he had killed one, and so paved the way for the ascension of another. It was not a comfortable thing to be a kingmaker, he decided. Inadvertently, he glanced back over his shoulder, down the hallway lined dark wood dadoes and lush, heavy carpeting that would muffle the sound of any approaching footstep, as though he felt a target affixed between his shoulder blades, and he nearly jumped when the door opened revealing the blank mechanical face of a droid.

“Tooovee?” Quinn exclaimed, covering his unease. “You are not on the Fury?”

“I am a model attached to the master's apartments, sir,” the droid answered, stepping back to admit him. “This way, if you please, sir.”

The delay in answering the door was soon made apparent; the apartment, as he followed the droid up a long curving staircase, was needlessly large, and from the extraordinary silent stillness of the place, it seemed that Toovee was the only servant who inhabited it. From a security standpoint, Quinn approved. But why on earth would she take such a large place, when so much space was unnecessary? The whole place felt spacious and impersonal, more like a hotel than a residence, with hardly a sign that it was inhabited. The light fixtures were dusted to perfection, the glossy tabletops showed no fingerprints, the couch cushions showed no indentation of a body having sat on them. The place was so little used that this iteration of the droid servant had nothing to do but clean the same surfaces day after day, to keep all in readiness for the hour his master might enter.

Perhaps it was just that he had become so accustomed to the cramped spaces of the Fury and the paucity of room that was a hallmark of military life that all else seemed oversized and expansive. He looked out a massive set of duraglass plate windows at a broad terrace, set with cultivations of plants and three matching outdoor couches arrayed around a firepit, waterlogged now in the steady drizzle that beat against the windows. Stars, the apartment even had its own speeder pad. The opulence was overwhelming; he'd had no idea that Astridel could afford such a place.
“Good evening.”

He turned quickly at the sound of her voice, and although he was not startled to find that she was already in casual clothing – Toovee was doubtless already cleaning and polishing her armor – what did surprise him was that she had removed her hood, replacing it with a simple band that fit across her eyes, her dark chestnut hair unpinned and loose, curling softly along her ears and neck.

“The log, my lord,” he held out the data pad, observing the custom.

She took it from him, and gave it a glance, gesturing for him to sit down on the untouched couch as she skimmed through it. “Thank you. Although that's not the reason I asked you to come here tonight.”

“I imagine not, my lord,” Quinn answered. With a satisfied smile, he reached out to take her by the hand, to draw her down beside him on the couch, with an idea to give the couch a use as it had never had before.

“Not that, either,” Astridel answered, and he froze, suddenly fearful. Instantly, his mind darted to the memory of Lord Draahg – the competent, intelligent, complimentary, handsome, powerful Lord Draahg, who was as much a strategist as was Quinn, and who was every bit the match of Astridel. The dual apprentices of Darth Baras, united in battle against Darth Vengean. There was an elegance in their symmetry, and an instantaneous, reviling feeling of jealousy churned in his chest. Was this to tell him that he was no longer wanted? Astridel didn't seem to notice.

“At least, not only that,” Astridel clarified. “Strategy meeting.”

“I see, my lord,” Quinn nodded, the tension already beginning to ease. He was not being dismissed. Far from it.

“But,” Astridel added, one of her rare authentic smiles budding on her lips, just for him, “dinner first. You look hungry.”

Chapter End Notes
I actually signed into the game for the first time in months yesterday morning. I hadn't played Paha in such a long time - and I was very vexed to find that they had nerfed her class and she no longer has her electroknife stab. It's been changed to a thrown knife attack. This makes NO sense: she now has zero hand-to-hand attacks, and the electric shock of the vibroknife stab move was the BEST attack for interrupting the action of an attacker. I used it so often - stab a guy and while he's getting fried, take a few steps back and re-enter cover, which was also usually enough time for one or other of her snipe attacks to refresh. I'm way peeved; most of the changes to powers I shrug off, but this one really irritated me as it has a big impact on how I play her, and there was no sensible reason for changing it. I assume it was only done because some PVP'er whined about getting killed by Agents too often, and so ruined it for the rest of us instead of learning to play better.

I don't often have a good opinion of PVPers - perhaps it's just that in so many games I play, it seems like developers bend over backwards to meet the whims of the PVP crowd while the rest of us PVE/storyline crowd keep getting shafted when they nerf another aspect of the game. While I do like the change over to using the Mastery stat, I'd be pretty happy, too, if they shifted things back to the way it used to be before the big expansions came out and the whole game got overhauled.

Or, I'm just an old cantankerous crankypants who can't handle change and wants all the kids to get the goddamn hell off my lawn. I'm cool with that, too.
Toovee – “The same model,” Astridel explained, “because I didn't want to have to learn a new name” – was prompt with the meal, which was simple, but very good. Astridel pushed aside her empty plate and poured a second glass of wine for both of them, then settled in with a sigh – one of concern, not one of satisfaction. The light chatter that had flitted through their repast died away, and in the quiet that followed, Astridel took a moment to look around the open room, the high chandelier, the long views of Kaas City in the rain. It was a heavy, dreary drizzle, one that chilled the evening air and seeped dampness into all the corners, and Quinn was glad he had no reason to be out in it.

“I think,” Astridel said at last, as she finished her survey of the vast chamber, “this may be the longest I have ever spent in this room.”

“I'm surprised, my lord, that you would take so much space.”

“It was a sort of inheritance. Left to me as a token of gratitude for a kindness performed.”

“A kindness?”

“I spared a life. At the Academy. I had just cause and full orders to kill; I took but the hand, and not the life. The owner of that life understood the necessity of vanishing for good – he was supposed to be dead, after all – so in his divestiture of his property, he gave me this.” Astridel spun the wine in the glass. “And that severed hand bought my apprenticeship under Baras.”


“Then I have been deceiving Baras from the first that I entered his service? Yes.” Astridel craned her head back, looking into the depths of the vaulted ceilings. “I feel like I'm on display here,” she confessed quietly. “All these tall windows, that anyone flying by could simply look in, and see me, like a thing in a museum. A beast in a cage, suspended high in the air.”

“You are freer, though,” Quinn answered. “More powerful. You can leave any time you wish. If there are chains – well, then, your victories break them, do they not, my lord? Is that not the Code?”
“It is,” Astridel replied. She fell silent for a moment, and then pulled her head down to face him again. “There are whole parts of this place I have hardly ever set foot in. There is only one room I call mine, or feel that it is. Would you like to see it?”

Without a word, he rose, seizing the bottle of wine with his other hand, and followed her through the lofty corridors to a bedroom – generous in size, but without the imposing expanse of the rest of the apartment – where a large bed stood against one wall and a plush maroon couch faced a fireplace, its flames flickering and beating back the damp chill of the rain outside. It was a cozy space, surprisingly so, since even on the **Fury**, Astridel's quarters had been somewhat short on creature comforts. She curled promptly into a divot on the couch, clearly, her accustomed spot, and he took the corresponding position on the other cushion, facing her, and waited, pleased with the notion that his half of the cushions had little appearance of use. There were few, he was certain, who were admitted to this asylum.

Astridel sipped her wine, observing him as his eyes roved over the art on the walls and the large potted plant beside the sleek gray desk under the rain-streaked windows. “I'm afraid my inner sanctum looks nowhere near as imposing as Darth Vengean's did,” she said with a tepid smile.

“But it is more comfortable, and, I think, more secret, my lord,” Quinn offered. He tilted his head to one side. He knew already what occupied so much of Astridel's mind, so he might as well bring it up, even if in a roundabout way. “Now that Baras is a member of the Dark Council, I assume he will vacate his offices at the Citadel. You could always take over his rooms.”

With a snort and a sputter, Astridel burst out laughing. “Oh, no, no, decidedly, most certainly, no!” she cackled. “I could never stomach it, those rooms that have witnessed every stroke of his disgusting habits – they would need to be purged with fire, first. I would sooner use the rooms of a Hutt.”

Sobering, she added as an afterthought, “I doubt he will abandon those chambers, not entirely, whatever he might say. He likely will have recording circuits and holocams in every light fixture and panel throughout the whole to spy on the next tenant. Or, even if he should move to Korriban, he would still want to retain some foothold in the Citadel. He might say he is done with that office, but he is never done with something until he destroys it. Like Vengean. Like his spies.”

“Like you, my lord?” Quinn asked softly.

“The time draws nearer, Quinn.” Astridel pursed her lips. “Baras's ambitions may be limitless, but there are only so many rungs on any ladder, and with his ascension to the Dark Council, he comes very near the top.”
“The twelve most powerful Sith in the galaxy,” Quinn mused. “What remains above that?”

Astridel hefted a shoulder. “The Emperor.”

Quinn let out a low whistle. “You think he would go that far? To usurp the Emperor?”

“Not directly. There is more to it. The Dark Council gives the Sith a focus for their ambitions. But although the Council busies itself with the day-to-day political maneuverings of the Empire, there is more power to be found in the Emperor's inner circle – his advisers, whose identities are closely-guarded secrets. Baras could be aiming for that – to stand at the side of the Emperor himself, and whisper in his ear. And as he climbs higher, his need for me lessens.” Astridel ran her finger around the rim of her wine glass; she wrinkled her lip disdainfully and spat, “Particularly with his under cover pretty boy Draahg restored to his rightful place.”

Quinn's eyebrow twitched at the bitterness in her voice. Apparently, he need not have been jealous of the Sith's insinuating charm.

“I agree our list of assets has dwindled,” he reasoned. “Vengean, obviously, can no longer be considered as a potential ally. Additionally, Baras would hardly have revealed the existence of Draahg to you had it not been imperative, and Draahg's allegiance is clear: he would hardly have spent years under cover with Vengean were he not convinced of Baras' inevitable supremacy.”

“The fact that Baras let me know about Draahg is foremost among the signals that Baras will soon move against me. A secret, kept so long? He is unconcerned about my knowing it because he thinks I will shortly be dead. The secret of my existence he kept from Vengean, and now look where he is. A disappointment – Vengean, I mean, all the way around,” Astridel frowned. “He was clearly uninterested in forming an alliance or taking me on as an apprentice.”

“Perhaps,” Quinn offered hesitantly, “Perhaps he thought Draahg could be turned?”

“A potential alliance with Draahg, and yet contempt for an alliance with me?” Astridel tossed her head with scorn. “Your observation is of great value, Quinn, as I am now overjoyed that Vengean is dead. It is just as well; his hubris made him underestimate Baras. He was sloppy to have kept Draahg alive. He would have been a liability, not a help. And so, in truth, this leaves me no worse off than I was before. Under the thumb of a man I cannot yet beat.”

“But as I said before: you are not powerless, my lord.”
“No,” Astridel raised her chin. “I have myself. That I know I may always rely on.”

“And you have your crew,” Quinn reminded her.

“I do,” Astridel agreed. “I do have that.”

With her veil removed, and so much more of her face revealed, he could trace the lines of tension that crossed her brow, the weight of this deadly dance that took her all over the Empire, and yet kept her chained to the whims of a man nearly as mad, but far more shrewd, and infinitely more subtle, than Moff Broysc. She, too, sought to murder the man who was both her architect and her ruin. It was enough to give anyone a pensive turn. Outside, beyond the mountains ringing Kaas City, an electrical storm lit the lowering clouds with sharp flashes of cold blue. Under the flickering light of the fire, glints of ruddy gold danced in the highlights of her dark chestnut hair, and the warmth of the embers and the wine flushed his cheeks. The couch, unlike so much of the penthouse, was not large; seated side-by-side as they were, her knee pressed against his thigh, her scent mingled with the polished cleanliness of the room and the tang of the burning wood, with all of her so close to his reach. She could have asked him then and there to kill Darth Baras for her, and he would have instantly jumped to do her bidding, despite knowing he would be torn apart before he ever got within a dozen meters of the man.

“I still have faith that Baras will not defeat you,” he murmured, quelling some inner part of him that still worried how it could ever be accomplished. He shifted on the couch, setting his glass aside and reaching to brush back a strand of her hair. “My lord – ”

Before he finished whatever he was about to say, she had moved, with that same decisive swiftness he saw her use so often in battle, in the same way of how she seemed to not have actually moved at all, just transferred instantaneously from one place to another; in this case, from where she had sat a bare second ago to where she sat now, astride his lap, her glass on the floor and the taste of wine on her lips, smashed against his. Something about her seemed suddenly quite fragile, and although she, with her wine and her fervor, didn't even realize she showed it, he knew it at once – the vulnerability, the fear, the turmoil that surged below her surface, shown to him but a single time before, as captivating now as it had been then. And yet how could he, a mere mortal man, protect her? What could he do for her but love her? How could that ever be enough?

“One thing,” she mumbled into his ear as she rose up, giving him space to pull at her shirt. “One thing, for me – !”

“Anything,” he gasped foolishly. Quinn flung aside his uniform jacket, half-maddened by his desire and the musical little sound of the hitch in her throat as she breathed, and pulled her hard against him,
crushing her to his chest as if trampled under their own concupiscence. Stars above, he was stupid; what had he just consented to?

She folded herself against him, pressing down with her hips as he braced his hands beneath her, clutching the flesh of her thighs and bottom, her heart beating rapidly beneath the white hills of her breasts, and her request, when it came, was wholly unexpected.

“Just for now – just for a little while –” she panted, barely audible, “– just... just call me Astridel.”

“My lo-!” Quinn just stopped himself from exclaiming the full word. “I –”

“Just Astridel.” No lordly epithets, no Sith postures, no tokens of superiority, no signals of power, no titles of authority. Her name, alone.

He began to protest, to say that he could not, that it would not be right, it would not be proper, but he choked on the words an instant later, as she hovered over him in her exquisite nakedness, and took him as thoroughly and fiercely and ardently as he had ever been taken before in his life, so that his breath and his senses were half-torn from him.

“A – Astridel, my stars, my l-” he gulped hoarsely, and word lord that had been poised to drop from his lips turned suddenly in his mouth. “My love, Astridel...”

Chapter End Notes

I figure after 20 smut-free chapters, loyal readers deserve some extra fluff. :)
Quinn awoke to the methodical beeping of a Imperial medical bed and an overwhelming sense of bewilderment in his aching head. It took some effort to arrange his wits in such a manner where they could be in any way useful, resurrecting fragments of his recent memories. Quesh, the planet of mines and pollution. A bomb – somehow, Draahg was involved – and Astridel – Astridel!

He sat bolt upright, disrupting the monitor that tracked his heartbeat, and it squealed loudly in protest, startling Vette, who had been staring down at her interlaced fingers resting on her crossed legs as she leaned against the wall of the Fury's medbay.

“Lord Astridel!” Quinn cried anxiously as the faces of the Fury's crew wobbled into focus. “Is she all right? Where is she?”

Pierce folded his arms and shifted his weight. “We were hoping you could tell us that,” he said pointedly, his voice gruff and barely short of outright insubordinate.

“You were supposed to be with her,” Jaesa accused.

“I was.” Quinn retorted, rapidly trying to piece together his scattered thoughts.

“Then why are you here, and she isn't?” Jaesa demanded. “Broonmark found you dumped at the bottom of the access ramp.”

Quinn passed a hand across his eyes; the bright lights of the medbay exacerbated his headache. Something along his temple stung sharply as he touched it, and when he shied away from his own investigation, he found his fingers smudged with hot, sticky blood. Carelessly, he wiped his hand on his uniform jacket – it was torn beyond repair, anyway. Jaesa pursed her lips with a frown, then pulled a jar of kolto paste from the cabinet and began slathering it rather brutally on his brow.

“On the ramp?” Quinn repeated vaguely, wincing slightly at Jaesa's less-than-tender ministrations. “Then... someone must have brought me back –”
“Someone' brought you back?” Vette piped up. “You gotta be kidding me.”

With this stab to his pride, Quinn straightened, squaring his shoulders. “I did not abandon Lord Astridel. We went to the mine, as ordered. The information was good: there were Republic people there, and they did have a bomb. Their detonator – it malfunctioned; Lord Astridel wiped them out. It was all over...” His voice trailed off in the haze of his recollection. “But no... it wasn't that the detonator had malfunctioned. It was the wrong one. They never knew they had a fake. The real one... Lord Draahg... on her holo, he taunted her...”

“Baras' other apprentice?” Jaesa asked flatly.

“Knew we hadn't seen the last of him,” Pierce growled. “So he blew the bomb, then?”

“Yes... we were buried...” Quinn answered indistinctly. He still looked dazed, and if they thought him so, that was fine by him. He didn't want to tell them the rest – the raging sound of the deafening explosions reverberating through the cavern of the mine, a futile leap for safety when there was no safety to be had, and the last thing he had felt: a surge, like a concussive wave, that thrust him away faster than his legs could bear him. A wild, tumbling rush that dashed him against the chanlon struts of the reinforced cave wall, as the rocks and rubble fell, burying the ground on which they had just stood. He’d had only an instant to face the terrible knowledge that she lay there somewhere beneath that horrific debris before a tumbling stone struck him on the head, and he went numb to all knowledge of any kind.

But this did not explain how he ended up here, on the Fury. Someone had dragged him back – maybe Trey-yen, the Republic captain who had been set up by Baras to bomb the mine? Was Quinn's preservation part of Trey-yen's assignment? Unlikely... and with Astridel gone, what further use could Baras have for him? And no - this was impossible since Trey-yen was dead; Astridel had seen to that. Quinn shook his head, trying to clear away the last of the cobwebs and the speculative tangle that muddled him further. It didn't matter. What mattered was mounting a rescue – or, if it must be, a recovery. If she were alive, he would save her; if she were dead, it would not be real until he saw her body.

“He's telling the truth,” Jaesa reported, and Quinn glanced at her sharply. Of course she would read him; tactically, it was the correct course of action, and he approved of it at the same time he felt insulted by it. Resolutely, he swung his legs over the side of the medical gurney.

“I intend to return to the mine,” he declared decisively, ignoring the objections of his bruised skull. “I will not rest until we have Lord Astridel with us again. If you wish to accompany me, make your arrangements. We leave in one hour.”
However, Quinn's granted hour still lacked a good twenty minutes when Vette entered the cargo hold where he and Pierce were tethering the Fury's lifter droid to a tow sledge behind the speeder.

“There's someone on the holo for you,” Vette reported.

“Yes, well, I'm sure it's important, but it will simply have to wait,” Quinn replied peevishly, yanking sharply at one of the securing clamps that simply didn't seem to want to budge.

“Mm, I don't think so,” Vette shook her head dubiously. “It's actually for all of us. You're both going to want to see this.”

For a heady instant, his heart leaped with the thought that it was Lord Astridel on the holo; she had contacted the ship, she was perfectly well, she would be home soon – and just as quickly, his logic intervened, dashing the hope his imagination had falsely raised. If it were Lord Astridel, Vette would have said so from the start. He threw down the spanner wrench and swiftly followed Vette and Pierce to the lounge, where Broonmark and Jaesa already waited. On the large holo table before them, two Siths – pureblood Sith, Quinn noted with astonishment – stood in bluish, muted colors. The taller of the two spoke, his voice a deep and imposing bass.

“You are the assembled crew of the Sith known as Lord Astridel?”

As captain, it was Quinn's responsibility to answer for the crew under circumstances of Astridel's unavailability. He inclined his head respectfully. “We are, your lordships.” The Sith's words provided no hint as to her life or death, and with earnest concern, he added, “We are troubled, your lordships, at her prolonged absence. Is there any information you might be at liberty – ”

Quinn broke off as the tall Sith raised a silencing hand.

“We contact you to explain that she has been chosen.”

Pierce made a huffing sound. “Chosen? What the bloody hell does that mean?”

While Quinn wouldn't have used the exact words of the lieutenant, the essence of his feeling was the same. These two seemed to know something of Astridel's situation; were they responsible for his mysterious rescue? Far from answering questions, there seemed to be more erupting around them, and he was already damned sick of the mystery. He wasn't in the mood for Sith riddles.
The shorter Sith, with amusement in his high-pitched voice, observed cryptically, “Five fingers to do her will. The Wrath has a hand of her own.”

“We are the Emperor’s hand,” announced the tall Sith. “I am Servant One. This is Servant Two. We oversee the will of the Emperor.”

“Isn’t that the Dark Council’s job?” Jaesa inquired.

“The Council is blind,” Servant Two replied. He seemed to enjoy speaking in vague epigrams. Servant One, fortunately, was more concrete in his conversation.

“While the Hand moves at the will of the Emperor, the Emperor has need of another: his Wrath. Your Lord Astridel has been called to serve.”

“Then –” Quinn blinked several times, feeling as though his comprehension were still hampered by the effects of the earlier knock to his skull. The wave of relief that drained the blood from his head made his legs wobble beneath him. “Then Lord Astridel is alive?”

“If she rises from the ruins, she rises as Wrath,” quipped Servant Two.

“So you're saying she's still in danger?” Vette said, a nervous squeak in her voice that was equal parts fear for Astridel and fear of the two pureblood Sith. “She needs our help?”

“This is her final test,” Servant One answered. “It is for her alone. If she comes to us by tomorrow's sunrise, our choice is confirmed. If she fails, then she is not worthy of the mantle. Your loyalty deserves credit, but you may not interfere.”

Quinn slowly let out a breath he had not been aware he was holding. “We understand, your lordships.”

“Within a days' time we will have our answer,” Servant Two said unnervingly, “one way or another.”
The holo winked out, and there was nothing but silence for a moment as Astridel's retainers stood blinking away the afterimage of the holo light from their vision, and trying to wrap their brains around these startling revelations. Quinn raised his fingers to his aching temple. Astridel had mentioned there was an inner circle, something above the Dark Council, but she had only ever guessed the nature of it – and clearly, Jaesa had had no idea of its existence either.

“Personal enforcer of the Emperor, eh?” Pierce mused in an appraising tone. “Not altogether a bad promotion, that.”

“But why, I wonder?” Jaesa answered.

Vette scoffed. “Because Lord Astridel is the *best*, obviously!”

“Not that part,” Jaesa clarified. “I meant – has there always been an Emperor's Wrath? If there has been, who was it before now, and why does the Emperor need a new one? If there hasn't, then why appoint one now? It implies there is a threat. I want to know who I get to kill.”

“Hooobwoo wuzzzz-whoo,” Broonmark declared, indicating his opinion that if Astridel were superior to some unknown previous Wrath, that was reason enough.

“Well, what does our resident strategist think?” Vette looked at Quinn.

He had only had half an ear in the conversation, pursuing his own thoughts as he was – *Astridel was alive!* – and his speculations on what this meant for Darth Baras' plans – *She was alive!* – for certainly, Baras' move against Lord Astridel – *alive!* – and this great epiphany were not unrelated – *Astridel was alive!* – and although she was still clearly in some danger, he had no doubt she would surmount it as completely and gracefully as she always did, for, after all, she was *alive* – alive and invincible. At Vette's direct question, he made an effort to pull himself out of his thrall of euphoria and apprehension, raising his head to find them all staring at him.

“I think,” he said with quiet authority, “that she is our lord, and that no matter what the Emperor demands of her, she may trust in us to serve her as we always have done.”

There didn't seem to be anything more to say after that.

Late that night, Quinn sat up and wakeful on the bridge, having spelled Jaesa, whose turn it was
according to his orderly duty roster. Sleep would not come for him, not while Astridel were still out there, alone, and not for other reasons, one of which was sitting in his hand, displayed across his data pad as a simple message. It had no sender, but it needed none.

*I expected your report this evening. I trust I will not have to ask a second time.*

Quinn ground his teeth as he read the message again, then threw the pad back down on the console in disgust. Finally, he had been free, he thought; with Moff Broysc’s death, his future had opened. But this bald, basic notice had broken his illusions, and had coldly reminded him of unwanted fetters he had hoped he had slipped. He should have known better. He was not as free as he had imagined himself to be, and it galled him. Was he never to be his own man and own master?

“There through victory, my chains are broken,” he softly quoted the Sith Code to himself. Every way he turned, there were chains – chains he didn't want, and yet also chains he welcomed, like the chains that bound him to Astridel, the shackles he held to tightly. What if he didn't want those chains broken? What if someone else's victories conspired to break chains he wished to secure?

There was the sound of a distant click, and a mechanical whir from the belly of the ship. Someone had activated the gantry ramp. His heart darted into his throat, and with trembling fingers, he snatched at the data pad and dashed off a response.

*Your plan was a success. Lord Astridel is dead.*

Burying the pad in his tiny storage locker along the bulkhead wall, Quinn hurried away from the bridge, heading with long, rapid strides to the hatch door that, he was certain, Lord Astridel was just now stepping through, well in advance of the Hand’s dawn deadline. She deserved a proper homecoming.

Chapter End Notes

(Rant alert!)

Another change in SWTOR I'm not happy with: the flashpoints. Last night, I tried to run good ol' Hammer Station with Astridel (Level 65 Marauder) with my husband's L 65 Juggernaut Kursse, with companions set on tank (Pierce) and heal (Shae Vizla), and both of us fully equipped for DPS with rating 210 gear. While the flashpoint does auto-boost us to effective level 70, that ended up being pretty pointless. We made it through the first two boss encounters (the excavator and the trio outside the engineering security
console) with a minor bit of planning and not too much trouble (never even needed the kolto stations), and only died when overwhelmed by one or two large mobs, which was fine - it just made us play a little smarter. And then we hit the final fight against Battlelord Kreshan.

And we died. And died. And died. Over. And over. And over. We swapped companion roles to 2 healers, and then 2 tanks, and neither made any difference, even with the kolto stations. We never got Kreshan below 50%. This was normal mode, not hard mode; after we had been at the flashpoint for nearly 2 hours and at least 10 deaths a piece at Kreshan's hands, I threw in the towel, left the mission, and went to bed: that's not fun anymore. I have major issues with a game that lets you think you are winning for the entirety of a mission only to artificially ramp the difficulty to "nigh impossible" on the final fight. There are no rewards that offset the frustration or the expense of getting your gear fixed repeatedly. If the flashpoint were structured to have a similar difficulty from the beginning that would be one thing, but that was not the case - it went from "moderate" to "impossible" in one encounter.

These kinds of things are why I drifted away from the game for months - when I play the class story lines, I like to play solo, so when my husband and I play together, it tends to be things like heroics and flashpoints. The last thing we were doing before I effectively quit the game for a time was attempting some Operations with our guild - and we never won a single one that we attempted, partly because the Insta-60 DPS I was using only had rating 208 gear, not 216. It got wearisome dying repeatedly, and just as wearisome grinding trying to get top tier gear. That's not how I want to spend my time in game.

Ok, sure, make the Operations that hard - I don't care. But why do the same with flashpoints? With flashpoints being stupid difficult on even normal mode, and thus not even being fun (OK, seriously, from a story point of view, we are both incredibly powerful Sith, both the Emperor's Wrath - some podunk Advose on a a suped-up mining colony should not even be a CHALLENGE), it makes me not even want to play them. It's like - I have to play these flashpoints to get high level gear, but I can't even complete the flashpoints to get the gear I need because I don't have high enough gear to beat the final boss... it turns into a catch-22 of annoyance. I shouldn't have to be a nerfy power-gaming min-maxer just to complete a flashpoint. If people want flashpoints to be difficult - fine, there is already a Hard Mode (I've never even attempted a single thing on Hard Mode), and a nightmare mode (I guess these are now "Veteran" and "Master" modes?) Just don't entice me into thinking that this flashpoint is doable only to yank the rug out from beneath me at the final boss battle. There were a lot of other things I could have done with that two hours of wasted time. No wonder I spend more time writing fanfic about my characters than actually playing them these days.

Maybe it's just that those 5 levels, regardless of the level boost, really makes that much of a difference. But if the effective level boost to 70 doesn't help in the long run, then flashpoints shouldn't even be open to sub-70 players. Why bother allowing some lowbie to even try a flashpoint when there's no chance of success? And sure, I've been known to say, "learn to play," but when your play style works fine for 95% of a flashpoint and then suddenly NO play style works to beat the final boss, it's just discouraging. Or maybe it's that you need more than just 2 real people to beat a flashpoint - which is also crap. Lots of people like to play in just pairs. I dunno, maybe I'm just missing something or it's also possible I just actually suck as a player, but really?

tl;dr version: I liked it better when the flashpoints were all at individual levels. Those
actually let you feel like you accomplished something, or that if you couldn't win, you just went out and leveled up once or twice and then you could beat it, giving a real sense of progress.

OK, whiney rant concluded; back to your regularly scheduled ficcing.
“So it's true?” Quinn asked, glancing around the crew assembled at the conference table as Astridel finished her summary. “You've been chosen as the Emperor's Wrath. And... we now fight against Darth Baras.”

“It is,” Astridel replied. She had answered no questions as she sat in the medbay, precisely where Quinn had sat perhaps twelve hours earlier, while he, burning with desperate curiosity, tended to the injuries she had incurred beneath the collapse of the mining cave. When he had finished, she had ordered him to rouse the others for an emergency meeting in so solemn a tone that he dared not delay even to give her the kiss that would relieve his pent-up anxiety. Despite the upheavals of the day, she remained serious and unflappable. How did she always manage to remain so cool?

In the conference room, she confirmed what the Hand had told them: she was now chosen to serve as the Emperor's Wrath, and the phantom threat that Jaesa had suspected was revealed in the considerably solid form of Darth Baras, now a pretender to the position of the Emperor's Voice. Where the Hand oversaw the Emperor's galaxy and the Wrath executed his commands, it was through the Voice that the Emperor spoke. The true Voice, according to what Servant One had told Astridel, was missing, and Darth Baras intended to take his place. Eleven of the twelve members of the Dark Council were prepared to endorse Baras' claim, with only Darth Vowrawn in objection, ostensibly because there was no proof in support of Baras. But what use was the support of proof if he had the support of the Dark Council? He would then hold sway over the entire Empire, unchecked but for the apprentice he believed dead.

“Whoob huzz gwooz,” Broonmark insisted. *Vengeance feeds us. The clan must be cleansed!*

Pierce tossed a dismissive hand. “Didn't care for old man Baras anyway.”

“It bothers me,” Jaesa put in, “that so many of the Dark Council would roll over for Darth Baras. Have they no self-respect? So ready to bow down to a fake? While you, master, you have maneuvered even closer to the true heart of the Empire. Great strides can be made. I agree with Broonmark; I would cleanse the Dark Council of all these weaklings who would follow a false banner.”

“The Hand tells me that doing so would be wasteful,” Astridel replied. “It is not unlike your mission, Jaesa; we will need the Council's support, and cannot risk their open animosity by striking in their midst. Without direction from the true Voice, we must have the Council's mandate before we can move against Baras; if we alienate them, we may be destroyed before we can expose his deception.
We will need their allegiance, if only to prevent a civil war in the power vacuum their removal would leave behind.”

As Jaesa nodded her understanding and acquiescence, Vette hugged her arms across her chest. “I don't know,” she remarked, “those Hand weirdos kind of creep me out. You sure you want to sign up for this?”

“A directive from the Emperor to scrape Baras off the bottom of my boot?” Astridel asked rhetorically. “You bet I do.”

“It's just,” Vette frowned, “my lord, it's just that we don't even know that these Hand guys are the real deal. Who's to say that they're not fakes, too, with an vibroaxe to grind against Baras? I mean, I get the whole 'enemy of my enemy is my friend' thing, but how do we know this isn't, I dunno, some sort of trap?”

“We don't,” Astridel answered directly. “Jaesa?”

“I found them legitimate,” the young woman replied promptly.

“Good enough for me,” Astridel averred. Her head moved slightly, panning her face around the table. “I won't lie to you; we are embarking on the most dangerous course we have ever taken. Nothing we've done yet is even in the same category. But the time has come for us to pick a side: we either stand against Baras, or lie down and let him slaughter us. We are on a broader stage now, however, and the side we pick appears to place us directly in support of the Emperor, or in defiance of him as traitors. Each of you must decide for yourself. I have made my choice. If you are still on board when we depart for Belsavis at dawn, I will know how you have chosen, as well. You are dismissed.”

During the long voyage to Belsavis, the Republic prison planet where the Hand had informed them lay the first step of destabilizing Baras's plans for domination, Quinn found himself preoccupied. It began as a nagging feeling of instability, a sense of insecurity that chafed at the contentment he had so recently obtained for himself, and initially, he was somewhat pressed to discover its source.

For a few brief moments, he attributed it to a trick of his conscience, but for what transgression? Surely not the death of Moff Broysc; he had been entirely truthful when he said that he felt no
conflict on that regard. He had, he rationalized with defensively meticulous logic, done nothing wrong. He had executed every one of his duties with scrupulous attention to detail. The ship ran smoothly under his command; he had seen every mission to successful completion; his strategic advice made him valuable to Lord Astridel, and she had told him so more than once. He had worked for her, fought for her, and killed for her.

Now he had lied a terrible lie for her. He had protected her through whatever means had been within his power, whether she knew it or not.

And wasn't that part of the problem? Or even the very crux of it? That all of his actions, all of his decisions, almost from the time of his entering Astridel's service, were shaped around the ever-increasing feelings he held for her. Even months ago, he had imagined, in the frustrating lust he had for her, that he loved her; he understood now that that had been such a naive idea, a mere neophyte's concept of the sensation when it had been nothing but a scant adumbration of what he felt towards her now. Before, he had loved her as a thing to be desired, with a covetousness that even yet kept its talons in him; he had loved her as a being that would elevate and ennoble him and bring him a veritable parade of advantages. Now it was altogether different; he loved her with a burning, self-effacing devotion, to the extent that he had crossed his core principles. He had broken his personal rules, sacrificing his own honor for her – and yet even that he did not consider a sin.

There was no way she could know – no way he could ever tell her what he had done, not without immolating himself on the altar he had mentally built to her. While he was not generally a seeker of accolades, for a long time now Astridel's approbation gave him both motivation and reward; the realization that she could never and would never smile upon him for his deception was a pain in his heart that he was truly afraid she would sense in him. This dangerous game, the one he had told himself so long ago that he needed to stop playing but which had kept him on the board like a dejaik piece held in reserve, had increased its stakes terribly, but so incrementally that it had more or less caught him unawares – he, the master tactician, nearly blindsided! But his blindness, Quinn found he was forced to confess to himself, was in great measure self-imposed. A man, after all, could not serve so many masters, and he who tried was bound to run up against a devilish choice sooner or later. He had known that this crossroad was a possibility, even a probability; he simply had cherished an indistinct notion that he would see a way to extricate himself before he was genuinely imperiled.

He had known peril before, of course, but it had not been so fixed an entity in his life until Astridel had made it so. In truth, all the acute joys and anxieties he found as part of his current daily existence he could attribute, one way or another, to her presence. Did she know it? Or, if she knew it, did she care? Was she as tied to him as he was to her?

Before, Quinn had lain awake at night tormented with his desire for her, and had once believed that addressing that fire, either by succumbing to her blaze or by quenching it completely, would free him from his sleeplessness, but throughout the journey to Belsavis, he realized that the panacea he had imagined he had found in her had been too simplistic. The issue had not been resolved, only converted. His thoughts returned again and again to the question of Astridel's feelings. Her body he knew, but her heart remained obscure. For more than the past ten years, Quinn had always had a
focus for obsession – his dead-end appointment on Balmorra, his derailed career, his hatred of Moff Broyse – and Astridel had stepped unwittingly into the void left by Broyse's death, first in her physical form, and now in her emotional one. Strange, he thought, Sith were reputedly so open with their emotions, using them to fuel their power, and yet, again, Astridel broke what many thought of as the mold. In her own way, she operated as subtly as Darth Baras, keeping much hidden.

Ever since the word love had slipped out weeks earlier, at her penthouse in Kaas City, the idea had preyed on his mind, forming the true wellspring of his growing uneasiness. He found security in her arms, or when she was in his, and when the bulkhead door of her quarters separated them from the broader concerns of the *Fury* and the galaxy beyond its transparisteel windows, but when he was alone, and subject to the deviations of his solitary imagination, it became a fixed point around which nearly all his thoughts revolved. When he touched her, he was sure, when they were apart, he was consumed with uncertainty. That he loved her, wholly and passionately, he knew. That she felt anything at all for him, he had no idea, and no risk-free avenue for discovery. When he'd had nothing in the past, he had been ready to gamble everything on hazardous chances, but now that he had something to lose, he agonized to jeopardize it by pushing for more. Quinn, whom she had praised as bold and brave, felt entirely unmanned at the idea of asking one question to which her answer might be no.

Thus he suffered anew, burying his secret and miserable anxiety, determined to be pleased with what he had attained, and let his questions erode him. Was this it? The physicality of their congress, the basic animal passions, the natural enjoyment of release? Was there nothing more, no deeper fathom to plumb, no emotional connection between them? Was the love he felt for her pointless and unwanted, a burden she was uninterested in carrying? In short, did she want nothing more from him than mere fucking?

Chapter End Notes

I've found it's pretty straightforward to write two people getting together - overcoming their various trials to finally be free to be in love/lust with other; it's more difficult to write how things start to fall apart. Often, even in professional/published works, the basis for the deterioration I sometimes find flimsy - weakly presented, or ignoring established character traits, or based on absurd conclusions; these, to me, always read like the author is trying to shoehorn in drama for drama's sake.

One of the biggest challenges for me on writing *Monster* was laying little bits of groundwork well in advance - little hints of trouble that are harbingers of bigger problems to come, but without highlighting them too strongly too early. It hasn't been easy, but they're there: Quinn's idea in the first chapter about serving too many masters (reiterated here), his jealousy towards Pierce and Draahg, her emotional remoteness (while I'm at it, an attribution note on the final line of this chapter, essentially a palette-swapped line from "Halloween" by Dave Matthews Band: "Tell us are you satisfied with fucking?"), and having these issues be related to aspects of their personalities that have been otherwise demonstrated. Astridel, for example, with all the authoritarianism
of a Sith, doesn't feel she has to (or should) explain all of her commands, motivations, or reasons for her actions, so to her, it honestly doesn't even occur to her that Quinn would be feeling insecure about any of this.

The game indicates that Quinn has, at intervals, secretly reported to Baras on the Sith Warrior's activities. When the SW has been doing Baras' bidding, this is likely unnecessary - a Quinn trying to be faithful to the SW would likely not try to contradict whatever the SW's official report to Baras had to say. The trouble arises when Baras is elevated to the Dark Council and assumes the SW is dead. Players may notice that this is the point in-game where SW's actions against Baras really start consistently earning negative affection points with Quinn. Prior to this, stating "I'm going to take out Baras" actually earns Quinn's approval. One interpretation of this apparent inconsistency is that it indicates that he really doesn't want to be under Baras' thumb, but once Baras moves against SW, Quinn begins to realize he's caught in the middle of a bad situation, and every action against Baras makes the situation worse (hence, negative affection) - by this point, Quinn is darned near completely terrified, and with good reason. By lying to Baras about the status of Astridel's existence, Quinn really thinks he has handled this the best way, and has bought himself (and Astridel) some time to operate and plan. (EDIT: I was extremely sleepy when I posted this late last night, and didn't really finish going through my analysis, so after some more thoughts, there is additional analysis in the first set of comments below.)

In other news, I'm on vacation, so there may be some delay in getting chapters written. But! For New Year's Eve, we went and saw Rogue One and it was awesome!
Belsavis

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nearly the entirety of the inhabitable portions of Belsavis was devoted to the Republic prison – either as wards, or as administrative functions, and, as Astridel discovered in a short briefing before descending to the surface, nearly the entirety of these areas were currently under the upheaval of a broad-scale prison riot.

“So much the better,” Astridel opined, staring intently at the pockets of tropical warmth in the midst of the snow that blanketed most of the planet. “Any mayhem that distracts the Republic is a help to me.”

She could only hope that the mayhem was not, also, a help to the party Baras had already placed on the planet, with orders to liberate his sister, Darth Ekkage. Prior to her capture and imprisonment, Ekkage had been a member of the Dark Council herself, and a powerful one. Her return would bolster Baras, most especially if she were placed again on the Council at the expense of Vowrawn’s life.

Necessity made strange bedfellows, thought Quinn, tugging at the sleeve of his new uniform. During the voyage to Belsavis, Astridel had run a critical eye over his old jacket – clean and tidy as ever, but undeniably showing the effects of many a battle in its scuffs and worn places. She had plunked a credit stick before him on the bridge console.

“Get yourself a new uniform,” she had ordered. “A nice one.”

He was flattered initially; top-end uniforms were not cheaply bought, but then he discovered that she had done the same for the entire compliment of the Fury, with the observation that they were now no longer the crew of a mere Sith Lord. They were the valued retainers of the Emperor’s Wrath, and they deserved to wear something befitting their new stations in life. Quinn’s brief delight at the gift tarnished a little under the realization that in this, he was not special. This was not indicative of some unique mark of regard. Astridel might have done this as a general kindness to her inner circle, but it was as much motivated by her own pride.

Disappointed, and trying again to convince himself it was unimportant, and moreover, irrelevant to the mission at hand, Quinn squared his shoulders under the unfamiliar cloth and viewed the Jedi, conversing warily with Astridel, with disdain. He was quite certain they could cope just fine without the Jedi’s help – or interference, as the case may be – but Astridel seemed to be leaning towards a temporary alliance. Strange bedfellows, indeed.
Their conference ended, Astridel returned, just catching sight of Quinn's face before he managed to efface the traces of contempt from his features.

“I know,” she held up a forestalling hand. “But consider this: any blaster bolt that Jedi takes is one less that is aimed at either of us.”

“I do understand, my lord,” Quinn fretted. “I just don't trust him.”

“Good. He doesn't trust me, either. Not that I grudge him that,” Astridel shrugged, then a sardonic smirk flashed across her face. “After all between the two of us, I am the Sith.”

Self-deprecating humor? Was she looking for him to agree with her, or to jump to her defense against her own declaration? Quinn pursed his lips. “I am not entirely sure how to respond to that, my lord,” he confessed. He should have, of course, known better.

“Oh?” Astridel replied with brash sauciness. “And what, pray tell, are the various options you are torn between?”

Feeling an unaccountable flush creep into his cheeks, he answered, “This really isn't the time or the place, my lord.” By way of explanation, his eyes flicked skyward. “It is drawing on late. Whether we camp or whether we are to return to the ship before nightfall, we will need to get moving.”

“We're not going back to the *Fury* tonight,” Astridel decreed. “It's wastes too much time to traipse back and forth. We camp.”

“Very good, my lord,” Quinn inclined his head, simultaneously pulling out the hand-held holoprojector to call up the topographic map of the area. “We need only a suitable location. There are plenty of supplies in the speeder's saddlebags; I checked.”

“How thorough,” Astridel appraised with a sly grin.

“Necessary, my lord,” Quinn said almost absently, his attention focused on the map. “I'm quite certain no one else would think to look.” Belatedly, he realized how that sounded, but before he could call it back, she had already tossed her head back with an impertinent laugh.
“Is that a criticism, captain?” Astridel inquired, and despite the use of his title rather than his name, there was amusement enough in her tone to restore Quinn pretty much to his ease – or at least, to no fresh concern. She could be so gracious; he, in turn, could be flirtatious, something he had hardly known about himself before.

“Not at all, my lord, I simply would hate to disappoint you by being unprepared.” He allowed for a slight beat of time before he added blandly, “For the mission, that is, my lord.”

“Oh, of course,” Astridel concurred, although her coy manner of saying it indicated quite otherwise.

At length, Quinn identified a short, rocky tor that jutted from a much larger butte on the fringes of this particular tropical pocket, and pointed out the advantages of the narrow grassy clearing it circled. The terrain offered decent protection on two sides, and ensured seclusion on a third, which stretched up a slope of slick, ice-frosted boulders, leaving only a single passageway into the clearing to require defending. It was convenient; well away from the beaten paths, but not excessively out of their way. Marauders, thieves, guards, and convicts would pass the spot by, and they would be sheltered from the wind. The most they would need to cope with would be the creeping cold that oozed down the mountainside and slouched about the campsite and surrounding plains. It was a well-chosen spot, and Astridel, surveying the location as she paused in unpacking the portable heater from the speeder saddlebag, observed as much.

“I would have taken care of that, my lord,” Quinn offered, gesturing to the heater as she got to work priming the attached fuel canister while he set up the tiny thermal shelter. It was designed for one, but could accommodate two if needed, and he had no doubt it would be needed tonight.

“While I sit idle? Or do you think I am simply incapable?” Astridel laughed, unaffectedly. It was a strangely unguarded sound, different from her usual acerbic snickers; one that kept him from exasperation at how she was so often adept at deliberately misunderstanding him, and it caught his ear with its startling musicality.

The chilled air sifting down onto the humid grasslands drew up a soggy fog, growing heavier as the gray evening light faded, like a massive drape shrouding their little camp from the chaotic world and its hazards beyond. There would be little worry that any lights of their shelter would be seen, and the memory of the museum gala and their late walk under the cold blue lamps along the misty streets of Dromund Kaas arose swiftly in Quinn's mind. It was like that now, the damp chill, the serpentine fog that lurked about them, the ethereal way it veiled her in a filmy gauze infinitely more intangible than the mask she wore daily, like a fichu of fine septsilk spun in gossamer fibers the color of powdered ash. In a manner, she appeared exactly as he thought of her: a half-glimpsed mystery of unusual beauty and unfathomable power, elegant and enigmatic and ineffable, and it took him a moment to hastily recall himself, forcibly pulling his attention back to driving into the ground the last stakes of
the shelter's anchor cords.

“Out with it, Quinn,” Astridel prodded.

“I'm sorry, my lord?” It took Quinn a moment to look up at her. Ostensibly, that was because of the work beneath his hands, but that time had served to give him an instant to compose his features.

“I can practically hear your brain howling from here, it's tumbling over itself so much,” she observed. There were always depths to Quinn's emotional state that remained obscure to her, and those continued to intrigue her – her other members of her entourage were so much more straightforward, their feelings and motivations distinct and conspicuous, while he excelled at being more ambiguous, so often canny and concealing, despite all the many things she had discovered about him through means both mundane and Force-driven. She had sensed that, regardless of his considerable self-control, he had been more troubled of late – in truth, it dated almost precisely from Darth Baras' ascension to the Dark Council and her supposed death.

Astridel had, for a time, attributed it to his concern over Draahg's attack on them; she knew he reproached himself vehemently for what he thought of as his abandonment of her when she, buried in rubble, most needed assistance. But it persisted after she had been proved safe, and even after she had been elevated to Wrath; if anything, her promotion had seemed to simply underscore his apprehensive feeling. She then chalked it up to the very real danger posed by their stance in direct opposition to Darth Baras, or even their current mission to target his imprisoned sister – but Quinn had been in many a hazardous conflict before, and had faced death many times. Why should this time be any different? And why should the fall of dank twilight among these moist and moss-covered stones intensify his inner perturbation?

She put her head a little to one side. “What's got you so wound up?”

Quinn hesitated. He could lie. He could do it, he thought, and go undetected; he could prevaricate and put her off the scent of all the things that pulled at him, things that felt like burning vipers searing him from within, things he wanted and feared and wanted so much that he feared them, and feared so much that he buried them. And yet, as the light had faded from the heavens, its vestiges mere silver filaments in the dying luminescence of the thick vapors engulfing them, she had seemed to soften, just a little, as the cloud touched her, just in how her laugh a minute ago had sounded melodic instead of mocking, just in how, in this vague and unearthly twilight that seemed a part of her, he could begin to believe she was asking out of concern for him, and not concern for her mission. If he could not summon his courage now, then he never would, and never deserved to. Had she not told him, a dozen times, her preference for boldness? He rose from his knees, the mallet loose in his grip, and as he set it down almost silently on the top of the speeder's metal-walled saddlebag, he swallowed the breath that had lodged in his throat.
“There's much I wish to communicate to you,” he confessed, and even to his own ear, his voice sounded soft to the point of near-infirmity, and with a faint flicker of a smile at his own qualms and foolishness, he added, “but I'm waiting for a moment of privacy.”

Astridel looked up at him from her low perch of rock for a moment, setting down the portable heater by her feet. The dim hum of its fan blade was as indistinguishable as the world beyond their hazy glen, as though it, too, were a part of the fog. She craned her head back a little, making an exaggerated show of regarding their secluded surroundings.

“If this counts as insufficient privacy, Quinn, then I'm afraid you will be silent for a very long time,” she observed. While her words were teasing, her tone was more solemn than he expected. Clearly, she had some inclination of the seriousness of the battle within him. The quiver of his smile flared again, with a small and noiseless huff of a wry laugh.

“As perceptive and correct as ever, my lord,” Quinn conceded. He looked briefly away, as though there were answers or guidance written on the mist if he could only but read them, then as swiftly turned back to her, and when he spoke, his voice almost shook with his earnestness. “What I wanted to say, my lord – What I wanted to say, Astridel, is – I'm falling in love with you.”

Now that he was embarked, he must commit to the whole, and before she had a chance to process his words or react, he crouched beside her seat to look into her shrouded face and rushed on, “What's more, I think you're falling in love with me.”

Chapter End Notes

Home from vacation! Due to a nor'easter, our red-eye fight was delayed 4 hours, so I wrote some of this while sitting up in the airport, waiting for our plane to arrive. I meant to work on it more on the flight, but by that point, it was after 3 AM and I was wiped out, so I just slept (badly) for the remainder of the flight. A friend drove us home, where I had a snack, and then went out to spend 4 hours shoveling and snowblowing. Wheee.

One thing I find myself interested/amused by is that this story here is, ostensibly, my Sith Warrior's story - but I have spent the majority of it focusing on Quinn, his thoughts, feelings, motivations, and such, and much less on Astridel. I've finally figured out I have two reasons for this, one of which I wasn't even deliberately conscious of. The first is obvious - I find Quinn a very complex, deep character, and fascinating to explore. The second, that I realized - part of Quinn's interest in Astridel is that he is intrigued by her mysteries; she's a secretive enigma to him much of the time, even when he considers that he probably knows her best out of everybody. If I were to spend too much time digging through Astridel's psyche, she is no longer a mystery to the reader. While it's fun to be privy to some information that Quinn doesn't have, part of the fun of writing Quinn is
him working out how Astridel ticks. So, if I've already explained her once, it gets redundant going through it again when Quinn works it out himself.

This chapter and the next were originally one chapter when I wrote it, but then I realized that they came to almost 5000 words, quite a bit longer than all my other chapters (which are roughly 2000 words a piece, or a little more). I used the most natural break point I could find.
Astridel made a faint movement, an amorphous slight gesture of surprise; she likely had some conjecture of his first statement, thanks to his utterance that stormy night in her penthouse, but she seemed genuinely taken aback at his second. With making his assumption public, Quinn found that he craved some response: a confirmation, or even a firm denial, but in either case, some indication one way or another if all of this had been one-sided. He shifted, sliding onto the rock beside her, and, gently urgent, asked, “Am I wrong?”

Aside from the one instinctual motion of astonishment she had made, she held entirely still, as though she were part of the rock beneath her, for once feeling herself somewhat at a loss. What should she answer? That she preferred him to all her crew and any man she had known previously; that she relied on him, depended on him, confided in him; that she enjoyed his company and appreciated his intelligence and delighted in his body; that she had, in one blazing moment, exerted her powers to save him from a messy death even at a cost to herself; that she was vested in his success and his happiness and was genuinely happy to have his respect and confidence – that fucking bloody stars, she was in love with him.

Inwardly, she nearly recoiled at the idea, it felt so much, so instantly, like entrapment. Was that what this was? A game, a trap, a distraction? She remembered, with shame, the night she had outlined her plans and her conclusions about Darth Baras to him, how, at the very end, she had exposed herself in a raw moment of utter weakness, and there was something just perceptibly similar in how she felt now – laid open, as bare as if she were naked, and she abhorred the sensation of susceptibility that came with it. It had been deeply, disastrously humiliating to know he had seen her so vulnerable and feeble; she had been certain then, and was still, that he had disdained her for it. She had lost respect for herself when she had fallen apart, so it was not conceivable for her that he would not have done so, too. She couldn’t do it again, not when there was so much on her shoulders, not when they faced such peril.

To crack open the armor of her detached and egotistical cynicism was to jeopardize her focus, and worse, the ignominy of him seeing her frail and unguarded, emotionally, risked ruining his confidence in her ability to be the fearless bastion she was – and yet – and yet! There was something in her she found she could not gainsay, and nor could she coldly and flatly deny him, for he was sincere, and there could be only two outcomes: he would see that she lied and respect her the less for it, or she would stab him to the heart and would do as much damage as she imagined her unfettered emotional liability would. The truth was too difficult to say, the lie was impossible, but she needed to speak. He was, even now, waiting for her response.

“You...” Astridel faltered momentarily; she despised herself for her failure of resolution. To appear indecisive was the worst of all possible options, but still, she found herself tripping on her words, distracted by the sound of her own pulse in her ears. She tried again. “You aren’t – wrong.”
Anything else she had been about to say was cut off by the instantaneous pressure of his lips on hers, warm in the midst of the cold miasma around them. In his elation, Quinn only dimly recognized that she had not, after all, specifically said that she loved him, but this was close enough — it was, if nothing else, a start. Someday, if he were very lucky, perhaps she would say it, entirely of her own accord. For now, it was more than the best he had hoped for, and he saw no gain in continuing to push.

As for Astridel, she was more than entirely content to leave off conversation. Emotional introspection was something she reserved for her solitary meditations. She was by far more comfortable staying in the realm of the physical now, with Quinn's arms around her, his hands energetically traversing the terrain of her thighs and her back, seeking the warmth of her body beneath her clothes, and her nose filled with the scent of this morning's aftershave, faint and mingling with a hint of his sweat from the day's travel.

"Let me show you," he breathed against the scar of her neck, "how I love you."

She had blanched at the thought of love confessed, or the emotional ties that it would use to bind her, but if there was one thing Astridel despised in herself more than weakness, it was cowardice. Would she shrink from his avowal? Plug her ears to it, even if she could not state her own? Or would she let him act it as well as speak it? How could she accept his body if she could not accept his love? The sand-scraping feeling of a hint of stubble on his cheek rubbed against her skin as he traced her collarbone with his lips, descending as the clasps of her armor and the fastenings of her jacket and shirt were undone until he reached her breasts. As simultaneously his hand pressed between her parted legs, she flung back her head, arching her neck, her veil fluttering from her features to reveal the paleness of her breathless face.

"Fuck," she gasped, barely audibly.

"Command me, my lord," Quinn demanded, tracing the supple lines of her body with his tongue. "Whatever you want; command me."

Astridel grabbed at his arms, trying to gather her thoughts. She would never have guessed that his emotional confession would have worked her into such a resulting physical passion; in him, it was understandable, but in herself, she thought it was wholly unexpected. She had once thought she had better control over herself than this, but in her discovery that she had not, after all, been able to keep the two separate, perhaps it was not so surprising, even if she could not admit it aloud. And although the declaration might be locked behind her lips, there were other things she could say.

"What I want — " she echoed indefinitely. Clarity was coming back into her senses; with an arch
smile, she tossed aside her mussed veil and disarrayed clothing, and, bare to the waist, scooted swiftly forward to straddle his lap. Leaning against him, feeling the rapidity of his heart as she slid her fingers inside his jacket, her lips ghosted against his ear as she spoke.

“I want to know what you would do,” she challenged, low and tantalizing, “if you could do anything. No titles, no powers, no restrictions. What would you do with me?”

It was the ultimate expression of trust, and her husky voice in his ear made his nerves thrum like plucked strings. He wanted her so fiercely it was painful, and as she pressed against him, her legs tightening along his hips, he grasped her waist with both hands, sliding them up until his thumbs rolled the points of her breasts beneath them.

“I would,” he answered, so readily that she had no doubt he had fantasized about it, “lay you bare to the night air and my hands. I would touch you as you have never been touched, I would please you as you never have been pleased, I would tease you, as you have teased me. I would torment you; I would bring you within an hair's breath of it, again and again, until you couldn't bear it, until nothing but I could satisfy you.”

The throaty growl of his covetous voice made his chest rumble beneath her fingertips, the rasping hiss of his beard stubble making a sharp counterpoint to his breath as he scuffed it against the flesh of her stomach; it made her tremor with eager desire. She sank down into his lap, brushing the soft, round hills of her breasts against his face, bringing them once more to his mouth, and with a smile of supreme approval and wickedness, she invited, “Then get to it, captain.”

Quinn was as good as his word; she knew he would be. In an instant, he had her stretched her length on one of the bedrolls that had not yet made it into the shelter, with the tall, dewy grasses arched over her form, exquisitely and frighteningly pale in the dark, lit only by the faint and sidelong ruddy gold glow of the portable heater. He was excruciatingly tender at first, his fingers gliding over her skin like phantom moonbeams, almost indistinguishable from the brush of the fog but for their warmth, sliding her feet from her boots, her pants from her legs, her underwear from her body until she was, as he promised, naked before him and the night. As he traced the lines of her muscles he tasted the salt of her skin with his lips and tongue, and had the satisfaction of feeling her twitch compulsively beneath his touch, and hearing her breath hitch more rapidly in her lungs, and still he continued, working his way across swaths of her body, drawing gradually closer, but never quite reaching, the apex of her thighs as she instinctively squeezed them together, as if she were straining to contain the urge that seized her there.

When she made as if to sit up, reaching for him, he mockingly deprecated; clicking his tongue in a counterfeit scolding. She had left the power in his hands, and he meant to be a thorough and jealous guardian of it.
“These hands of yours,” he drawled, kissing her wrist, “will be trouble, I can see.”

Strong as they were, her wrists were slender enough that he could mostly imprison them in the grasp of one hand, and he pinned them in the wet grass above her head and recommenced his exploration of her body, puckeried with gooseflesh from the chill of the air and the heat of his lips. She squirmed, far too proud yet to give in and beg for the firmer, more forceful movements she was craving, and as Quinn momentarily paused while she wriggled one arm free of where he held them, he realized that he had her as he had imagined: writhing with passionate desire in his hand. Only the stronger force of his fantasy to have her as he had described, helplessly in his power and lost in her urgency for him, kept him from throwing aside his clothing and taking her immediately.

Instead, he moved to kneel above her head, capturing her hands between his knees, wet through the damp and grass-smudged uniform, and he bent to kiss her again, upside-down from this angle, over the perfect and marred skin of both sides of her neck, into the valleys of her collarbones and throat and up to the twin apexes of her breasts, along the toned muscle around her navel, leaning over her to work still lower to what he had not yet touched.

As he scraped the soft smooth skin of her thigh with his rough cheek, the tension of her legs eased, opening her, and she gave a startled and startling cry, high and tremulous, when his tongue tasted the spicy tang of the folds she revealed. She shivered and jerked; he almost thought she didn't like it, but she arched, canting her hips towards him, urgent for more. Quinn obliged, but carefully, gauging her reactions and measuring his intensity. In this position, it had long since become impossible to keep her hands hostage, he felt them clutch at his legs, braced either side of her head, and when he felt her fingers tugging importunately at his belt and pants, he had no capacity to dissuade or resist her.

“Two,” she panted vengefully between twitches, “can play at this!”

It was his turn to gasp and cry out, his voice vibrating against her flesh, as he felt her lips close around him, drawing him into that clever, saucy mouth of hers, and they both knew she had him at her mercy just as much as she was at his. It would be a ruthless contest to see which lasted the longest, and who begged the other first. She seemed to know perfectly how to lead him on without crossing the invisible line at which he would lose himself; to be equitable, he had figured out how to do much the same, based on her responses beneath him.

It would require a truce; it came in the form of Astridel yanking at the interfering creases of his uniform pants, bagging about his knees and shackling his legs.

“Shall I get rid of those?” he offered, shifting aside to suit the action to the word, his remaining inhibiting clothing soon following.
Astridel had sat up slightly as he undressed, and as soon as he had finished, she pulled him down beside her. She didn't need to ask, and he didn't need to hear it; at this point he was as lost in their lust as she was, dizzy and drunk on it. They had brought each other to such a pitch that it would hardly take long, and it didn't, their motions fervid and ferocious against each other. As he stiffened, shaking violently with frenzied spasms, she arched and bucked in her exultant euphoria, and their joint cries sounded like shouts of triumph, reverberating off the rocks above them.

They lay still for several moments, breathing hard, and Astridel made no indication that his weight on her was a bother. Her head lay back, her sightless eyes closed, her Force senses relishing the calm that followed the storm, bringing both its wayward riders safely through. If he had pressed her, in that moment, she might have confessed that she loved him, but she shied from breaking this placid lull in the trials of the galaxy and their lives. There were things that were more meaningful than words, anyway.

For a moment, Quinn was tempted to tell her again that he loved her, but he, too, said nothing. He felt like he had been flung completely out of himself, as though to the verge of death, and if this were the impact of one avowal of love, he wasn't sure he would survive a second.

Chapter End Notes

In *Drones* and *Clouds and Colors*, I realize in retrospect that Vector and Paha's sex scenes or other pivotal emotional scenes for them (post-Voss wedding, for example) mostly take place either in the privacy of their sanctum on the ship, or outdoors, surrounded by nature - written that way mostly because Vector is like the ultimate Nature Boy, but also because it just seemed to suit them. There's lots of light and peaceful feelings and giving an loving.

For Quinn and Astridel, I have just realized that I've made a lot of their pivotal or sex scenes take place in adverse conditions - heavy fog, storms, rain, etc. I didn't mean for that to be intentional, it just sort of happened that way (I hadn't planned this, for example, when I decided to have them camp at the fringes of one of the habitable zones on Belsavis in these chapters - I just thought that it would be an out-of-the-way place where they wouldn't get attacked, and then it occurred to me that where there would be humid warmth, and an overlay of chilly air, there would almost certainly be fog. It was just a natural progression of the geography and climatology of the planet as laid out by the game designers.).

But it is fitting for them, since their relationship is fraught with secrets, subterfuge, and uncertainty, along with power plays (there's a lot of that in the subtext of the smut in this chapter) and hints of hazards or death (as the final line of this chapter - it's also a tiny bit of a play on words; in French, the orgasm is referred to as "le petit-mort" or "the little death"). When Quinn feels like he really seeing Astridel, he's viewing her through a eclipsing fog. So, it hadn't initially been intentional, it's just something that I did without planning - but it was a happy accident!
Deep in one of the tombs of Belsavis, converted to holding in stasis the most insidious of Sith, Astridel pressed herself silently against the plinth of a massive stone pillar, Quinn at her side, and, as swearing over her late arrival earned her nothing, eavesdropped instead as Baras' minion, Lord Melicoste, spoke to Lord Ekkage, Baras' newly-freed sister.

“Baras has ascended to the Dark Council,” explained Melicoste, “and with your help will soon be named the Voice of the Emperor.”

Ekkage lifted her chin, and the light cast by the lava at the fringes of the chamber ghoulishly highlighted the haggard wrinkles carved in her face. “If my dear brother has everything under control, then where are my assassins?”

“I sent my commandos to release them,” Melicoste claimed.

“I sensed my assassins being freed,” Ekkage declared darkly, “and then someone turned their hearts against me.”

Jaesa's handiwork, no doubt. Quinn felt a quiver run through Astridel beside him, her shoulder brushing his, and he realized she was smothering her laughter. She did relish the bafflement of her foes; in that, it occurred to him, she was indeed like a typical Sith. It was perhaps her amusement that clued Ekkage in to their presence, but by then, it was too late for Ekkage, now standing over Melicoste’s prone body, to do anything but regret her rash vengeance inflicted on her savior. Astridel stepped out from behind the monument, pleased to have one less enemy to fight.

“Truly Baras' kin, to betray someone so loyal to you,” Astridel observed, a keen edge to her voice.

“A family tradition,” replied Ekkage, quite unconcernedly for one so recently freed from a stultifying prison. “Now, exactly who are you?”

Astridel was spared, or usurped, in her reply by the entrance of the Jedi, the Mirialan master called Timmns. “She's with me, Ekkage.”
Quinn's lip curled slightly, but Astridel did no more than fold her arms casually. If the Jedi wanted to leap in front of Ekkage's lightning-throwing fingers first, that was his prerogative. Who was she to deny him his suicide? But as Ekkage sneered at their partnership, dubbing the younger woman a traitor, Astridel gave in to the proud desire to correct her.

“I am the Emperor's Wrath, unleashed by his Hand, and the Emperor has marked you and your brother as enemies of the Empire.’

“The Emperor's Hand now works with the Jedi?” Ekkage scoffed incredulously. “No wonder my brother defies him. He will be Voice, and we will rule.” Ekkage drew her lightsaber, and the blade hissed venomously to life in her grasp. “I won't miss that, but it is almost a pity that you will.”

There was a corresponding hum, lighter and less distorted, as the Jedi Timmns did the same. “We fight together, Sith.”

Astridel's twin purple-black blades erupted from their sibling hilts. A contradictory alliance, but an alliance nonetheless; their three weapons against Ekkage's one and her excruciating lightning powers. If Ekkage were anything like her brother, this would be good practice for their future meeting - a meeting that would be inevitable even if through nothing more than the force of Astridel's hungry will.

The years spent metaphysically chained by the Republic did not appear to have atrophied Ekkage's strength nor diminished her skill, and, albeit reluctantly, Quinn found a grudging gratitude for the Jedi's presence. With his own hands full alternating between firing kolto darts at Astridel and blaster bolts at Ekkage, he could not deny that, tactically, having the Jedi there was a help, if only to split Ekkage's attention between two opponents. Quinn's blaster shots were barely more than insect stings even when they did connect, and most of them Ekkage deflected with rapid twists of her saber. Without Timmns, their position would have been much worse, indeed.

Astridel was in top form, all speed and grace. She had to be. A single mistake here would be her undoing, and her armor bore deep, red-ringed scratches that indicated how much she risked drawing near a lethal error. With a snarl of rage, Ekkage flung out her hand, and lightning blossomed from her fingertips, blasting past the Jedi's motion of warding, and, wracked with agony, he fell to his knees with an anguished cry. But Astridel had no thought for her ally; this was her opening. She darted forward, bringing down her sabers almost in unison, severing Ekkage's hands from her body. The aging Sith howled in pain and rage, collapsing to the floor.

“Impossible!” she gasped. “Have my powers waned as I languished here?”
“Perhaps,” Astridel stood over her fallen enemy. “Or perhaps I am simply that good. Mull on that as you die, Ekkage.”

Ekkage flung her head up. “Baras will avenge – !”

Her defiant claim to revenge was cut short as Astridel severed the life from her body with a deft twist of her wrist that snapped the woman’s neck. Timmns, pulling himself up from the floor, was aghast.

“She was defeated, done!” he scolded. “You shouldn't have killed her like that! We could have locked her away again.”

“You could have,” Astridel answered dispassionately, her shoulders bobbing as she caught her breath, “But I could not. Sith business. You would not understand.”

“Sith business?” Timmns echoed. “I hope you realize that to defy your master, you will need to walk a different path.”

“Thank you, but I don't need the lecture, Jedi,” Astridel said. As the adrenaline of the battle faded, she was beginning to be aware of her injuries, things that her Force abilities had kept from hindering her as she fought but which now were insisting more and more strongly for her attention. Right now, her greatest wish was to part from the Jedi – well-intentioned, maybe, and a good fighter, but sanctimonious, like all his ilk – and allow Quinn to tend to her hurts.

“Fine.” Timmns gave up. “So what's it to be between us, Sith? Do we part as friends or as enemies?”

“We made a truce, and we have both honored it. Should our aims align again in the future, we may find a benefit in a second truce,” Astridel answered. There was a sort of fuzziness clouding the edge of her senses, and she felt a burning wetness creeping along her ribs. “If they do not, then I will kill you. Or you may kill me. Either way, go on your way now, Jedi.”

“Right,” Timmns said slowly, as if he were uncertain what to make of this. Perhaps he was beginning to sense her fading consciousness, despite her erect stance and aloof attitude. He shot an apprehensive glance at Quinn, then hurried away as agilely as his hobbling steps would take him.

“I am surprised, my lord,” Quinn observed, watching the Jedi go.
“I’m not without honor, Quinn,” Astridel replied pithily.

“No, of course not, my lord,” Quinn assured.

“I simply recognized that I,” she added, feeling the blood draining from her head more rapidly, “was in no position to tackle another fight.”

With those words, her struggle became futile, and she sank as gracefully as she fought, slowly collapsing to the floor and Quinn’s hastily outstretched grasp. The last things she recalled was seeing Quinn’s anxious face, far off at the end of a dark tunnel, and his voice, indistinct and muffled, calling her name.

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He’d had no idea. He knew her well enough by now to know how much she hated anyone, even him, to see her weaknesses, and he wondered how much of her attention she'd had to give to holding herself together during her fight against Ekkage. It was not until his hand encountered the drenched edge of her shirt beneath her scarred armor and came up crimson with blood that he even knew where she had been wounded.

Quinn had used nearly all of his kolto injections on her during the battle, and he gave her the last now, but he nonetheless searched frantically through every pouch on his belt, despite knowing how carefully he sorted and prepared each, seeking some forgotten medpack, even the most feeble, that he could apply. He had nothing – but Melicoste might. Melicoste had been a rather meticulous sort, a planner. He raced to the lord's body and began rifling the corpse's pockets until he came up victorious, using every kolto pack he recovered. Astridel was still bleeding, still unconscious, and he knew that this had been only the most rudimentary of stopgap measures. Astridel needed real medical attention, immediately. He scooped her in his arms, and began jogging through the corridors that would return them to the speeder outside.

It was only a kilometer or two to the nearest outpost, naturally equipped with a basic medical droid, but it was much further to the nearest Imperial hospital, in the opposite direction. With Astridel flopping limply over his arm, he kicked up the speeder's engine with a vicious motion of his foot, and sped at top speed for the field hospital.

Yes, they had a bacta tank, a young orderly dutifully told him, but his great relief was shattered as the hospital assistant, trotting worriedly in his wake, apologized: it was being serviced. The bacta had
“Into what?” Quinn snarled, spinning on his heel to face the orderly, a small and nervous-looking boy, hardly more than a child with a pimpled face.

“Into – into a vat, sir.”

“A what?”

“A vat. Like a bathtub, sir,” the orderly extracted one hand from where it twisted with the other and pointed. “In there, sir.”

Quinn kicked the swinging double doors open. There it sat, a broad, low-walled tub, covered in a tarpaulin of boiled white, sterile and hopeful. At his gesture, the orderly jumped to pull the tarpaulin back, and Quinn, without a damn for form or propriety, simply stepped over the side and knelt, letting Astridel sink into the liquid’s gel-like matrix. He reached up to unfasten the mask that covered her nose and mouth in battle, and, for the first time since the fight, he looked at her, truly and fully.

Covered as she was, head to toe, with her armor, her veil, her battle mask, and her gloves, little of her skin saw the sun, and thus she was always pale, but now she looked positively cadaverous, so bloodless was her face. Even in her unconscious state, though, there was a determination ingrained in her features, something so indelibly stamped that he doubted even the peace of death would succeed in wiping it away.

There was some hubbub nearby; medics and doctors and distressed droids, all fussing and noisy at his intrusion, at his lack of protocol, at his disregard for their procedures, scolding him for fouling the bacta reserve with the mud of his boots and how his selfishness might cost more Imperial lives while the bacta was filtered and sterilized for use, but his attention remained fixed on Astridel. His hands, beneath the fluid salve, were busily unfastening her armor, fishing out fragments of broken reinforced chanlon and duraplas. When he retrieved her light sabers and set them, goo-filled, side-by-side on the edge of the tub, he had a moment of vindictive satisfaction at hearing the voices go abruptly silent. At last, he raised his eyes to the assembly.

“You will take superb care of this Sith lord,” he ordered quietly. “If she dies, your executions will not be pleasant.”

There was a general murmur of respectful assent and obedience, and as trained hands reached
forward to take over the responsibility, Quinn yielded to their expertise, moving back and swinging his legs over the side of the tub. His boots were full of bacta, squishing over the rims as he walked, leaving a trail of healing ooze behind him as he stepped away, through the door, down the hall, to somewhere, anywhere, where he could have a moment to collect all the shreds of himself that he had been barely holding together. He sat down on the floor and buried his eyes in his hand.

Chapter End Notes

Expanded this episode largely on a whim, mostly 'cause I get a sort of sadistic enjoyment out of torturing characters. Especially Quinn. :)

The miraculous bacta did its work admirably, and within a matter of hours Astridel was suitably improved to be transferred, under the watchful guardianship of Jaesa, from the field hospital to the orbital station to finish her convalescence.

“You look terrible,” Jaesa had said when she arrived at the field hospital, looking down as Quinn hastily scrambled to his feet.

“Yes, well,” he stalled testily, brushing the back of his fingers over what had been, not so very long earlier, a brand-new and extremely nice uniform jacket. “I imagine so.”

“How is she?”

“Better. She is sleeping now,” he replied.

“I've got it from here.” Jaesa paused, one hand on the door, and with something almost like kindness in her voice, she added, “Go clean up and get some sleep.” Then, with a follow-up smirk that was rather unnervingly like those he had seen Astridel flash, she added, “You wouldn't want to embarrass her, after all.”

No, he most certainly would not. He found, pleasantly, that Pierce was anywhere but in the quarter-room they shared, and, leaving his filthy uniform outside the door for Toovee to take care of, Quinn, showered and shaved, dropped onto his bunk and fell asleep instantly.

He was awakened sometime later by the buzzing of his holo. Uncharacteristically for one of his methodical habits, he had dropped it thoughtlessly on the bed; sometime in the night it had fallen to the floor, where it lay against the metal supports of the built-in bed, and the clattering it made startled him out of his deep slumber. Quinn fumbled for a moment in the dark, disoriented and alarmed. The sharp rattle of the vibrating holo seemed a harbinger of something terrible, and he tried to convince himself that the sense of foreboding that struck him was simply the result of being so abruptly jolted from a heavy sleep. With Pierce still absent, Quinn checked the message.

Text only, once again. Once again, no sender identified. And once again, no need. Quinn's heart stumbled, icing over so severely that he thought he would pass out.
You will contact me at once, whether it is convenient or not.

Quinn scrubbed a violently trembling hand over his face, and his fingers came back slick with cold sweat. At some point, without disrupting his sleep, Toovee had brought him a fresh uniform, hung neatly on the hook on the wall beside his bed. He dropped the holo on the bed again and reached for his clothes, dressing himself hastily with rapid, jerky movements, nervous and wasteful motions so unlike his usual efficient and smooth actions.

He couldn't make this call from the *Fury*. Too risky, far too risky – anyone could walk in, anyone could overhear him. He wasn't even sure his little holo had the power to reach to Korriban at this distance without patching it through the ship's communications array, and that would leave a trail a child could follow, even if he wiped the log. It was imperative to get off the ship. He opened the door of the bunk-room bulkhead.

“Hey, Cap,” Vette said genially, looking up from reading her data pad as she sprawled leisurely across the lounge couch. Seeing him heading directly for the door with an anxious face, she called after him, “Jaesa says she's doing well, but we're good here if you want to go check on Lord Astridel.”

“Yes,” he said quickly, trying to look relieved. “Yes, of course, thank you, Vette. I'm sure the ship is in good hands.”

“Sure,” she said laconically, her eyes already back on her one-credit novel. It never even dawned on her to consider that for the early months of their acquaintance, Quinn had been distinctly uncomfortable at the idea of her having that level of responsibility. Pinching his lips together, he hurried away down the gantry ramp before she had a chance to notice and comment on it.

Cargo holds were plentiful on the station, and it was easy to find one that was empty, even with the added need of patch access to the station's communication system. His hands were shaking too hard to grip the holo; he placed it on a crate and did his level best to compose himself as the holo connected. A miniature image of Darth Baras' form, no less threatening for its minuscule size, appeared above the emitter immediately.

“My Lord Baras,” Quinn whispered, his voice rasping over his dry lips as he inclined his head respectfully.

“My sister Ekkage is dead,” Baras observed, his voice flat and inscrutable.
“I – I'm afraid so, my lord.”

“I felt her die,” Baras observed. “I felt her joy when she was freed, I felt her triumph over those who had failed her, and then I felt her die. I felt who killed her.”

Quinn, trying to swallow around the boulder of fear lodged in his throat, could not answer, but his face spoke for him. His lie had been discovered, he knew, and his life was over.

“Yes... yes, my old apprentice,” Baras continued his monologue. “The apprentice who seeks to usurp me. The apprentice who would thwart my goals. The apprentice killed by Lord Draahg – the apprentice that you, Quinn – yes, you – personally assured me was dead.”

“My lord –” Quinn began, hardly knowing what he could say. Astridel had seen Baras Force-choke a man over holo at sixty thousand parsecs. Was this to be his grave? Here, to die ignobly among crates of Imperial rations and military-grade soap, hiding like a damned Rodian rat? He gritted his teeth, squaring his shoulders under his new uniform. “I am aware of my failure, my lord.”

“Failure?” Baras said, his tone deceptively and mockingly thoughtful. “Failure is a word for unseen accidents. Were your eyes closed when you chose to lie to me, Quinn?”

Quinn licked his lips. “No, my lord. I must confess I... I deliberately misled you, my lord.”

“Don't tell me things I already know,” Baras snapped. “What I don't know is... why?”

“I feared detection, my lord.”

“Hm. Yes, I do sense the fear in you,” Baras mused. “You hide it better than most, but you are afraid... but there is something else.”

*Oh, no,* Quinn begged internally. The very act of pushing away the thoughts only served to strengthen them. *Oh no, no no –*
“Ah, yes... there it is...” Baras sounded greatly entertained. “You... are in love with her. With my old apprentice!” The Darth's cold laughter burst out, echoing sharply behind the full-faced metal plate of his mask, even over the tinny speakers of the holo.

“And, even better, you imagine she actually loves you, too? Ohhh, Quinn, this is really too much; this is beyond my greatest expectations!” Baras hooted, making an instant farce of what Quinn had held most secret and most dear in his heart. “Really, I could not have asked for better!”

“My lord...” Quinn said, hearing the pleading tone of his voice in his own ears and hating himself for it. Being Force-choked to death here and now was suddenly a much more appealing prospect.

“Oh, I'm not going to kill you, Quinn,” Baras replied pithily, sobering from his bout of mirth. “You deserve it, and more, but you are closest to my apprentice. Lord Draahg would have served, had he not blown his cover by prematurely gloating over his victory on Qesh, and it will not be possible for me to get another into so perfect a position quickly. Like it or not, I must rely on you.”

His tone strongly suggested he did not, in fact, particularly like it.

"Thank you, my lord," Quinn answered softly.

“Who told your darling lady the location of my sister, and that I had sent for her to be freed?” Baras rapped out. “And think carefully before you answer, Quinn; there are limits to the number of lies I will listen to. Despite what I have just now said, you are not indispensable.”

“Two Sith, my lord,” Quinn murmured. “Purebloods.”

“What, they simply showed up and my apprentice started doing their bidding?” Baras rarely, if ever, spoke of Astridel by name.

“More or less... yes, my lord.”

“Lies of omission are still lies, Quinn.”

“They... they claimed to be the Emperor's Hand, my lord.”
“The Hand!” Baras echoed, somewhat surprised. “How interesting. And what did they have to say?”

“They claim that Lord Astridel has been called to serve the Emperor, my lord,” Quinn confessed. “As... as the Wrath. And that you and Ekkage are enemies of the Emperor.”

“An unexpected development, to be sure,” Baras muttered, more to himself than aloud. The Emperor was perhaps not as impotent as he had imagined, and if the Emperor had set a new Wrath against him, then he had better accelerate his time table for securing his position as the Voice. Returning his attention to the captain, Baras asked, “What is my apprentice’s next assignment? What is her target?”

“I don't know, my lord. We have not received instructions.”

“Alert me when you do, and be ready for my commands.”

“That may be difficult – ”

“I don't care about difficult, Quinn. I care about being obeyed. I trust you understand the difference?”

“Yes, my lord,” Quinn answered hoarsely.

“There is still a place for you here, under my command, in the New Order of Things,” Baras proclaimed pompously, adopting a slight cajoling tone to his voice. “Under a unified, triumphant New Empire I will have need of many to oversee what the Emperor has permitted to go to seed. You are not without talents; it is why you above all others on that forsaken rock of a planet were selected. But reward is based on results. See to your results, Quinn, and I will see to your reward.”

“You are generous, my lord,” Quinn mumbled.

“Otherwise,” Baras fired a parting salvo, “I would hate to have to tell your mother that her second son was a disappointment, too.”

All color left Quinn's face as the holo went dark. His knees, locked ramrod straight for the interview,
buckled beneath him, and he caught himself with his hands before he hit the floor, slumping over to suck the station’s filtered air into his lungs. He tugged at the stiff collar of his sweat-drenched jacket, feeling like it was suffocating him despite its meticulous, tailored fit.

They could run, he thought wildly. He could go to Astridel now, convince her to give up the post of Wrath, and they could run, change their names, book passage on a Chiss ship for the Unknown Regions of space, and flee forever from Baras and the Empire and the Republic and the Jedi and the Sith and their damnable wars and their orders and commands and schemes and lies and betrayals. He would turn his back on his career, on the military that had been his life and pride, and she would turn her back on her oaths to the Emperor, and they could be forever free, lost out there in the stars, with just each other, and no one would ever find them, and no one would ever make demands of them and –

And it would never work. Not when Baras could sense his sister dead and his apprentice alive the full diameter of the galaxy away. Forever paranoid, forever fearful of usurpation, he would never rest in his hunt for them, his wayward apprentice and his traitorous military lackey, the pair who had defied him and escaped. One day, he would find them, sooner or later. And Astridel would never consent. Quinn would never be able to explain the need for flight without revealing the whole of it, and doing that meant forfeiting all claim he had to her trust and affection. She would despise him, and be all the more determined to destroy Baras. He would never be able to convince her to turn her back on either her responsibilities or her vengeance. He would never be able to convince her not to be Sith. And he would never be able to look at himself as anything other than a coward and a deserter. They would never be free.

“Can I help you, sir?” came a voice in a broad, low-Empire accent. A young enlisted crewman in a baggy coverall uniform stood a few meters behind him, looking over with uncertain concern. How long Quinn had crouched there he had no idea, and he rapidly stood now, which did nothing to improve the ghastly, ashen pallor of his face.

“I'm fine, thank you,” he said crisply. “Excuse me.”

With a measured tread he hoped disguised the extreme trembling in his legs, he strode across the cargo hold and out the door. Somehow, he contrived to patiently walk the interminably long meters between him and the nearest lavatory before slamming open a refuse hatch to vomit.

Chapter End Notes

Bleah, I have been down sick all weekend with a cold. The good part is that since I couldn't do much of what I had planned (cleaning and such), I spent all day Saturday
playing and got Astridel up to level 70, and Paha up to 68. I meant to play more today, but I spent almost all day buried in blankets and napping. I managed to pull myself together this evening, though, and was able to devote some time to writing, though :) 

I've been *itching* to write this chapter for a long time - to address some of the behind-the-scenes stuff that *had* to have been going on prior to the sudden switch-flip as it is presented in-game. Many players have complained that it comes out of left-field, and to a degree, it does - but it wouldn't be much of a betrayal if you knew it was coming ahead of time, right? Anyway, at some point, Baras HAS to confront the issue that the SW is still alive - if I recall correctly, I believe the game dialogue explicitly states that he only learns it because he senses it when Ekkage dies, and that is how he knows to start tracking the SW (and thus knows to send Lord Draahg to confront SW next on Hoth).

So, if Quinn hasn't told him that SW is still alive, Baras would be understandably pissed that Quinn hasn't been up front with him. Baras is not of a temperament I would describe as "naturally forgiving" so he would need a darn good reason not to instantly kill Quinn for his failure to keep him informed - and the game has already established that Baras was able to Force-choke an incompetent subordinate on Hoth from his chambers on Dromund Kaas. Baras has motive and ability to kill Quinn - the only reason he doesn't MUST be that Quinn can still be useful, which, as the mole in SW's camp, is true.
“You needn't look so terrified, Quinn, I'm not dead yet,” Astridel greeted him blithely as he entered her room. She was sitting up against a pile of pillows she didn't need but which she nonetheless took a rather hedonistic pleasure in lounging on, and she paused in the act of scrubbing caked-on bacta out her off-hand lightsaber, its component parts strewn across the coverlet of her bed. Jaesa stood nearby, looking amused, and Quinn had a sneaking suspicion that he might have been the topic of conversation prior to his entrance.

“No, I quite see that, my lord.” What would Baras do to him if he knew that Astridel had every chance of being thoroughly dead now had it not been for Quinn's intervention? He rapidly buried the thought and his fear, schooled his face into an expression of relief which was not, in fact, a lie of any kind, and stepped forward. Astridel had her veil on, clean and whole, delivered along with a change of clothing by Vette.

“Jaesa,” Astridel instructed, “Please let the doctors know that Lord Viliyan wishes to check out, if it is permitted.”

Quinn said nothing; of course she would have given a fictitious name here. No need to make it too easy for Darth Baras.

“Of course, Master,” Jaesa answered in a tone that signified exactly how ludicrous the thought of a Sith lord needing permission from any ordinary professional struck her. It was also quite possible that some of the titter in her voice was tied to the way her bright-eyed glance slid between her master and the captain as she sauntered out of the private room. Quinn waited for the door to shut behind him.

“I'm really not, you know,” Astridel said. When Quinn looked at her blankly, she clarified, “Dead, that is. Thanks to you.”

Hardly knowing what to say, he took a few steps forward, and she, interpreting the turmoil she sensed in him as a natural result of their joint ordeal, gave him an arch smile, thinking to tease him in her usual way, to show him that she as perfectly fine, and all would be back to normal in no time at all.

“Not quite like your fantasies, was it?” she asked lightly. “It always sounds very pleasant in the abstract – riding in on a white varactyl to save the fair lady. Was I a proper damsel in my distress?
You will have to tell me, for I admit, some of my memories are a little hazy.”

“You – ” Quinn paused, his mind suddenly full of the sight of his hands, coated in her blood. A memory, or a premonition? He gave her a smile, albeit one a trifle feeble at the edges. “My lord, in all the time I have known you, you have never once been a proper damsel.”

She threw back her head and laughed at that, the rare, open laugh of authentic humor, her white teeth showing behind her lips, pale pink, soft, and kissable. Too overwrought to do anything but give in to the impulse, Quinn took another step to sit on the edge of the bed, catching her face between his hands and kissing her softly. *Damn you, Baras,* he thought vengefully. One way or another, he would find a way to save this woman, even if it cost him his life. He had done it once. He could do it again.

“Thank you, my lord,” he murmured as he released her.

“For what?”

“Oh,” he affected nonchalance. “For giving me the opportunity to rescue you. What else?”

She laughed again, and swiftly took up the pieces of her lightsaber, assembling them rapidly with the Force. She would give it another cleaning and proper tuning later, but that could wait until she was back on board the *Fury.*

“Are you sure you are quite recovered, my lord?” Quinn asked, rising from the bed. While their liaison was an open secret by now, it still wouldn't do to have Jaesa walk in on them in such an intimate position. Perhaps... perhaps he could simply delay her, stall her until Baras was enough ahead that she could pose no threat; perhaps Baras would agree that Astridel need not be destroyed...

“Quite sure,” Astridel replied, once more all business. “But even if I were not, I must get in touch with our new friends and update them on this success, and find out what is next. It won't be long before Baras knows that Ekkage is dead.”

“If he doesn't know it already,” Quinn observed softly.

“Just so,” Astridel agreed, and Quinn was uncertain if it were the movement of her head or his own anxiety that made him imagine that she had just shot him a look beneath her veil. She gripped the
covers with one hand, prepared to toss the blankets back. “Keep watch at the door, Quinn.”

“My lord?”

“I need to get dressed.”

“Oh!” A bolt of red flared across his cheeks. “Yes, of course, my lord.”

- - - -

While the Hand was pleased that, with Ekkage's death, a potentially powerful prop for Darth Baras had been eliminated, it was only insurance against a future source of support. The current state of affairs, particularly politically, had not changed. Darth Vowrawn was still the leading voice of dissent against Darth Baras, and some members of the Dark Council, swayed by Vowrawn's highlighting of the lack of proof for Baras claim, now exhibited some wary reluctance to throw in their lot with the would-be Voice.

Vowrawn's position of supervision over the battle for Corellia, a focal point of the war, was how Baras intended to shift the balance. Corellia, by all accounts, should have been ripe for the taking – a long campaign of bribery and infiltration through all levels of the Corellian government had produced a secret but distinctly pro-Empire stance. When the Treaty of Coruscant was broken, the Corellian leadership played its part well, handing the planet, with its excellent shipyards and commercial centers, over to the Empire, and that should have been the end of it.

But the people – the ever-unpredictable mob – was having none of it, and declared that whatever the official stance, the unofficial one was Republic, Republic, Forever Republic. Now the planet was among the hottest of the hot front lines, as much a planetary civil war as it was a key battleground between the Empire and the Republic. It should never have been so, Baras declaimed to the Dark Council, and would not have been, had it not been for Vowrawn's mishandling of the situation and the troops deployed there.

“The Empire's Armageddon Battalion,” explained Servant One, “were to to be assigned to Corellia, but Baras redirected it to Hoth, where its strength is being wasted. General Griest commands. He must be convinced to abandon Baras' orders and take Armageddon Battalion to Corellia.”

“I served with General Griest for a time, my lord.” Pierce put in. “As tough as they come. And stubborn.”
“Sounds charming,” Astridel replied, rather humorlessly.

“Resistance cannot be accepted,” ordered the Hand. “Armageddon Battalion must be reassigned. Do whatever it takes to make it happen.”

The holo blinked off.

“Great, back to the deep freeze,” Vette said with a grimace.

“Hoth is a big place, my lord,” Quinn observed. “It could take a long time to find Greist.” Please, please, he prayed inwardly, let it take a long time...

His hopes cracked and crumbled at Astridel's next words.

“Fortunately, I've got a contact.”

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Her contact was Commander Slinte, the unlucky fellow advanced to fill the shoes of the unluckier Commander Lanklyn, as if the entire galaxy were conspiring to remind Quinn of Baras' ability to dispense death to the farthest reaches of known space from the comfort of his own chambers. When Astridel and Jaesa returned from their interview, it then seemed as if the galaxy were mocking him for what he could not, or would not, do. He heard the women's laughter in advance of their appearance.

“...a nicer ring to it than “dead!”” Oh, Master, it's a shame he's gone,” Jaesa was laughing almost uncontrollably, “I quite liked him!”

“Commander Slinte?” Quinn guessed.

“Gave us the information, and promptly took himself off to parts unknown,” Astridel reported.
“The cutest and most practical little coward I ever saw,” Jaesa grinned. “He never even let me get to the point of having to read him. I hope he outruns Baras, I really do.”

“He... deserted?” Quinn blinked, torn between disgust at Slinte’s dereliction of duty, admiration for the man’s sense of self-preservation, and jealousy that Slinte had a chance, slim though it was, of a life as a free man, if he could escape whatever conscience pursued him.

Astridel shrugged. “He’s free to choose his own fate, rather than one foisted on him by Darth Baras,” she said, and Quinn felt a pang. “He may find a way to smooth out his transgression with his superiors – particularly once Baras is disgraced. Now, where’s Pierce?”

“In his quarters, my lord. Shall I summon him?”

“Yes, captain,” Astridel seated herself in the command chair. “He served under Griest; he can tell me about the man. If they got on well, then Pierce may help me persuade him to move his troops. Or, if Pierce can tell me that the general has a soft spot for an exotic twi'lek, then Vette may be the one to swing the balance in our favor. Unless you can tell me?”

“I'm afraid my knowledge of the general doesn't extend to that level of detail, my lord.”

She sensed some hint of discomfort beneath his unruffled demeanor and gave him a smirk. “Don't worry, Quinn. You're still my favorite. Come by my quarters later, and I'll prove it to you.”

Chapter End Notes

Still sick. This is the cold from helllllllllllllllllllllllllllll....
Quinn had been more contemplative than usual during the flight from Belsavis to Hoth. He pushed away his concerns and terrors regarding Darth Baras – Astridel would sense it, he was sure, if he spent too long dwelling on that topic – but again and again, his thoughts returned to his feelings for her, and the question of what she felt for him. She hadn’t said, in so many words, that she loved him. To be sure, there was affection, but affection wasn’t love.

He had thought that perhaps her near-death experience might highlight certain truths to her, or might make her wish to speak out on those truths as she discovered them; that seeing so acutely the fragility of life, she might be inclined to confess the depth of her feeling for him – but this was not the case. Astridel seemed wholly unaffected by her trial, and appeared perfectly content to settle back into their same routine of flirtation and physical pleasure. Quinn, fearing to annoy her with additional declarations, stayed silent, pursuing the topic only in the depths of his thoughts. When he was not able to keep the memory of Baras’ insinuating voice out of his ears, the phrase he heard most often was that horrible dry cackle, the laughter of a man who mocks all things for which he has no use, and the vicious, acerbic rhetoric: “You imagine she actually loves you, too?”

Sprawled morosely and uncharacteristically lax in the command chair, Quinn gnawed at his knuckle, indistinctly hoping that the self-inflicted pain would give his mind a focus unconnected to the repetition of this awful, doubting refrain. Damn you, Baras, he mentally excoriated the Darth again, while at the same time fearing the truth of the man's words.

Just prior to departing Belsavis, during some routine pre-flight check, Quinn had found four seconds in which to send the demanded information to Darth Baras – one word, just Hoth. Baras would simply have to be content with that, and work out for himself which of his many schemes would be impacted by Astridel’s visit to the frozen planet. Quinn felt satisfied that he had been sufficiently obedient. Even still, it was more than a small shock when the Fury rocked violently in docking clamps on the Hoth orbital station, triggering wailing klaxons throughout the ship. Quinn jerked his hand from his mouth and scrambled to check the sensors he had been ignoring in favor of pursuing his own obsessive ideas.

“Quinn!” Vette yelled, stumbling onto the bridge from the lounge. “What the hell – ”

“An incendiary device, outside the ship,” he reported shortly, scanning the ship console readouts. He slammed his hand on the ship’s intercom button. “Pierce, Broonmark – prepare to defend the ship; it appears we’ve got company.”
That company took the form of Lord Draahg, awaiting them on the airlock access bridge with a cruel smile. The long hallway of the airlock was choked with smoke from the explosion; below the access bridge, debris still smoldered and burned. Draahg had to have cut the fire suppression systems, Quinn reasoned, his eyes streaming from the acrid smoke and the scorching air. Pierce was blasting away, but Vette, coughing convulsively, was already on her knees. With a grunt of pain, Quinn felt his own blaster bolt, deflected off Draahg's blade, slam back into his own chest, and the impact knocked him off his feet. This couldn't even be considered a proper fight – they had been flushed out like mynocks, straight into the most obvious of traps. Dimly, through the thick black smoke, Quinn caught sight of the light of a door opening at the end of the access bridge – a hazy figure, one he would know anywhere, stepping through, with another at her side, and then he saw nothing more.

Astridel took in the scene in a glance – her crew, sprawled across the deck grates, and over them, Lord Draahg, clearly proud of his handiwork. For the faintest flicker of time, she felt a icy rush sweep through her, a sensation she had no time to recognize let alone analyze, and in the cold, empty space it left behind, she felt a boiling hot fury, bitter with acrimony, welling up within her - but she would not let it be her master. She would bend her rage and the Force together to her will. She pinched her lips together and put her anger on a low simmer, using its scalding tendrils to reach deep into the Force.

Draahg dusted his hands. “You're looking well for someone I blew up.”

Astridel tossed her head. “You're looking well for someone who failed to blow up anybody. I would have executed you for incompetence, but I suppose Baras has to make do with the dregs.” She made a gesture to her crew. “I believe I have you to thank for this.”

“You should thank me; I spared them. Your slaves look like they could be useful in a fight,” Draahg answered. “Darth Baras and I will put them to good use. Baras is the true Voice of the Emperor, you know. Soon he'll claim his rightful title.”

“We both know that's a lie,” Astridel said flatly, drawing her saber. Behind her, she could hear the dark hum of Jaesa's dual-bladed saber springing to life. “Draahg, I don't really care about you, or hearing your delusions of Baras' grandeur, so let's get this over with. Unless you really are nothing but talk.”

“Baras held back when training you,” Draahg gloated, drawing his blade. “But he has taught me everything. And Darth Vengean showed me Dark Side secrets even Baras doesn't know.”

“Well, one of them sure taught him how to run his mouth,” Jaesa muttered. “On your call, Master.”
“Now is perfectly acceptable,” Astridel replied, and an instant later, she leaped into battle.

Draahg was skilled, certainly, but Astridel was better – and with Jaesa at her side, she was unstoppable, a paragon of power and lethal artistry. The finesse with which she wielded her two sabers, whirling adroitly in flaring arcs of blinding purple, was breathtaking. She tapped into the Dark Side with all the control and deliberate care she had developed through her meditations, rationing out both her fury and her power in an even, unbreakable cord which Draahg’s unsteady rage could not snap. At length, Draahg fell to his knee, and, to Astridel’s surprise, laughed.

“It's cute; you think you're doing well,” Draahg panted. “But I have a secret: I can't be killed.”

“Not much of a secret if you tell it to everyone,” Astridel scoffed. “You put me in mind to test your statement.”

“You're lucky, I'll grant you that – the luckiest being in the galaxy! But Darth Baras will see that luck run out.”

“Luck is for those who lack ability,” Astridel retorted as Draahg staggered to his feet for a final charge. “You may need it, Draahg, but I don't.”

With an incensed snarl, Draahg lunged at her. With unflappable poise she leaped, catlike, flipping over his head as he swung wildly where she had just stood, and as soon as her feet touched down, she flung up her hand. The blast of Force power that billowed from her palm caught Draahg square in the chest, flinging him over the access bridge railing. With a terrible cry, he fell to the bottom of the access shaft and landed among the burning chemical refuse of the bomb he had set off, where the unnatural fires began instantly to eat into his flesh. The first sounds Quinn heard as consciousness came back to him were Draahg’s death screams.

“Get them up,” Astridel instructed Jaesa, who went to Vette as her master knelt beside Quinn, coughing the smoke from his lungs.

“I'm sorry, my lord,” he said feebly, struggling to sit up. “Draahg caught us all by surprise. I take full responsibility for the defeat.”

Astridel waved a dismissive hand. “It's more important that everyone is alive. Get everyone on board,” she ordered, rising as Quinn staggered to his feet. Her senses swept over her battered crew, and she commanded, “Medical review for all – no exceptions or arguments. I want a full ship
diagnostic and damage report; I want the *Fury* put at the top of the list for repairs. And alert the station command that someone has tampered with their fire suppression systems.”

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The damage to the *Fury* was minimal – Draahg had been focused more on chaos and smoke than actual damage – but they would still be held up a day or two at Hoth Orbital Station while minor repairs were completed. From one of the massive bay windows of the orbital station, Astridel watched the departure of the massive troop ships that were conveying Armageddon Battalion to Corellia. Quinn quietly mounted the stairs of the observation deck and came to stand beside her as the fleet ships abruptly stretched and vanished, jumping to hyperspace and out of sight in the blink of an eye.

After a moment of silence, she observed, “It's incredible, really.”

“What is, my lord?”

“The lengths Baras will go to. There is nothing he won't sacrifice.” She shook her head a little, the metal weights of her veil brushing her cheeks. “The man who would be Emperor, destroying Imperial lives on the altar to himself, and who will have no Empire to rule when he's done. All hail the King of the Refuse Heap.”

“Strategically important as it is, Corellia is only one planet, my lord. Corellia is not the Empire.”

There was a pause, and Astridel finally admitted, “True. But you know this is about more than that.”

“It is not like you to be pessimistic, my lord.”

Astridel gave a snort. “Oh, I am not pessimistic, Quinn. Pissed off, yes, but not pessimistic.”

Quinn flushed slightly, biting the inside of his lips out of his sensation of shame. “Ah. Yes. Again, my lord, I deeply regret my failure to handle Lord Draahg more adeptly.”

She made another laughing huff, shaking her head again. “No, not about that; that wasn't your fault.”
She couldn't know, of course, that he had been sulking when Draahg had made his attack.

Astridel braced her forearms on the observation deck railing, staring out into the far off lights that marked the systems of the galaxy above the hazy blue atmosphere of Hoth. From here, in space, without the distortion of air, the stars did not twinkle, just shone with unerring, steady glows, each the size of a pinpoint. Out here, everything was clear. Cold, sterile, and empty, perhaps, but still clear.

Astridel had spent a long time in her meditations before she had retired the night before, examining her feelings from all sides, most particularly the anxiety and fear she had felt at seeing her crew – at seeing Quinn – laid out, unconscious or dead, on the hot deck grates. It was that which angered her, both then and now – the feeling of fear that was altogether different than the fear she acknowledged she felt towards Darth Baras. That fear made her more determined, stronger, more driven to face Baras.

In contrast, in the brief, cold instant of terror that had washed through her at the sight of Quinn, there had also been an instant of enervation, as if all her ties to the Force had been severed from her. It had vanished so quickly, replaced by a fierce core of seething hatred, that she hadn't even been certain it existed until she went over the events of the day again, slowly, later. She loathed it, she found in the depths of her introspection. She despised that sensation of helpless loss; it felt so much like when Selestine had died, her sister whom she had loved with all the innocent fervor of her childish heart. But immediately in its wake had surged the triumphant, vindictive feeling of her vengeance unleashed. She had felt it when she had made her sister's torturers pay – such pain warped into such power! She had felt it again today, and now, Quinn was tangled up in those same emotions of loss and revenge, victory and... Oh yes, everything was quite clear. “Quinn, when I –”

“Master!” Toovee's mechanical voice interrupted from the nearby stair. “The maintenance crews have completed their work on the ship. We may depart as you wish.”

At that moment, Quinn could have gleefully kicked the droid servant out the nearest airlock to join Broysec in Hoth's orbit. There had been something of import in her manner, in the set of her jaw and the tension of her shoulders; some intangible aspect of her being had signified that whatever had caused her frustration and ire, it was serious. What had she been about to say? He almost asked, but the moment was gone. Astridel stood up erect, her head up and her bearing authoritative, and whatever it was she buried once more under her proud mien.

Chapter End Notes

Another day out of work from this cold. I want to boil my head, yuck.
But hey, writing time! :D
“So... here's a question, my lord.”

“Go ahead, Vette.”

The twi'lek pulled her jacket more tightly around her, fastening an additional clasp against the chill of a Voss autumn afternoon.

“Why is it these kinds of things are always called stuff like 'the Dark Heart' and 'the Nightmare Lands'? Why can't we ever get to go on a quest through, say, the Vale of Fluffy Bunnies or something?”

Astridel's mouth curled into an amused grin. “Vette, have you ever seen a paa'chaan rabbit?”

“Nope.”

“Better hope you don't,” Astridel chuckled as she slid a leg over the seat of the speeder. “Their front teeth can grow to fifteen centimeters long. Sharp, too.”

“Ok, point taken.”

“Besides, this way, there's no false advertising. You can prepare for the worst and might even be pleasantly surprised.”

“I doubt it, my lord,” Vette said skeptically, hopping onto the speeder behind Astridel. “But this part shouldn't be too bad: the Shrine of Healing – it's like a hospital, right? No problem.”

“I'll reserve my judgment until we see it in person.”
Astridel revved the engine, and the speeder shot off across the meadows of golden grass and worn dirt paths of the Voss countryside. Voss was an unusual planet: unnoticed for generations, then ignored for years, until the realization that a handful of members in its small populace possessed a most unique way of interacting with the Force. Neither Light nor Dark-aligned, Voss mystics used the Force almost exclusively to divine the future, with the added curiosity – and their central guiding principle – that a Voss mystic was never wrong.

It was the one single aspect of Voss life that seemed without balance – for everything else, there was a cost, and not always a monetary one. Information was bought with confessions or secrets, death paid for life, and each action had its counterpoint and foil. Except for a Mystic's vision: always right, and never wrong.

That was not to say, naturally, that Mystics did not pay for their skills; they did so, by undergoing a series of trials at the Shrine of Healing, but, Astridel reflected as the white-barked trees with their ocher leaves flashed by, those would have to be some extraordinary trials to pay for a lifetime of perfectly true future-telling. What did a Mystic give up to get such a gift? Astridel, advised by a Voss hermit, Madaga-Ru, was heading for the Shrine, and she was perfectly content with keeping hers what had always been hers, regardless of the temptation the future held. What was the point in being able to see the future if doing so risked giving up all ability and power to shape the present?

The trip to the Shrine was but the latest link in a long chain that had started when the Hand had contacted Astridel on the Fury with information on the next strike against Darth Baras. The most recent true Voice of the Emperor, the vessel that housed this essence of the Emperor, had been selected from among the Voss, but had vanished, or been trapped somehow. Death, Servant Two was certain, had not touched the Voice, for otherwise, the Emperor's power would have been released from the Voice, and a new Voice chosen. It was clever, Astridel thought – Baras-level clever, to know to trap a being as powerful as the Voice while refraining from killing the body it inhabited. There was no doubt in her mind that wherever the Voice was now, it was Baras' doing.

Where the Voice was now was, of course, the linchpin of the puzzle, and tracing that thread had brought Astridel to the hermit Madaga-Ru, the last person the Voice had been known to visit before vanishing. According to Madaga-Ru, the Voice had gone next to the forbidden Dark Heart of the Nightmare Lands, a place of secrets and strong with the Dark Side of the Force. A naturally insular people, the Voss had limits on contact with off-worlders, as well as limits on where off-worlders could travel; for one not Voss, the Nightmare Lands were forbidden territory. For Astridel to gain access, it was necessary for a Mystic at the Shrine of Healing to bestow a Voss blessing upon her.

“Say, my lord,” Vette inquired, leaning forward to shout over the whine of the speeder's engine, “what do you think you'll have to do?”

“What do you mean?”
“To get the blessing. These Voss are all about payment, right? So they're probably not gonna give it to you for free,” Vette reasoned. “What will they make you do?”

“I have no idea,” Astridel answered. “But this had better not turn into my running errands for everybody else. I'm not a courier!”

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Voss was a world untouched by the galactic war, but it was not untouched by the Republic and the Empire. The two sides were present on the planet in more or less equal measure, each leveraging significant diplomatic weight in hopes of swaying the Voss to one side or the other. The Voss, while polite and distantly welcoming, held themselves firmly aloof, with just enough hint of a concession to either faction to keep both the Empire and the Republic interested. It was probably the most unique and least bloody battlefront in the entire war.

Considering its relatively peaceful circumstances, and its clearly delineated sectors confining Republic and Imperial visitation zones of the main city of Voss-Ka, Astridel had seen no harm in granting the remainder of her crew leave to disembark the **Fury** and explore at their leisure. It would be a well-deserved chance to recharge, which might go far in helping them forget the ignominy of falling to Baras's lackey Draahg.

“Provided,” she cautioned seriously, “that you keep out of trouble. Just because Baras now knows I'm still alive and we're still a force to be reckoned with doesn't mean we have to send him flowery holo-invitations regarding our whereabouts. Understood?”

Thus Quinn found himself with too much time and opportunity to do what he had been successfully avoiding: updating Darth Baras. He had stalled for as long as he feasibly could, strolling down the white-paved streets of the Imperial sector of Voss-Ka with no fixed purpose until forced to admit the facts: Any longer, and matters could grow dangerous, and not only just for himself. With a sigh, he steeled himself and dialed his holo.

“Captain Quinn,” Darth Baras intoned. “Isn't this a pleasant surprise.”

“Perhaps, my lord,” Quinn hedged.

“Then you suspect I will not like what you have to tell me?” Baras asked rhetorically. “As much as I
suspect you will not like telling it. But I am all ears, Quinn. Where is my apprentice now?”

“Voss, my lord.”

“I see,” Darth Baras replied in an inscrutable tone. He said nothing for a moment, and Quinn began to feel hopeful that this tidbit had sufficed to feed the beast, and that no more would be required of him. But then Baras spoke again, in a tone contemplative and smooth. “Quinn, you can be, I think, forgiven for not understanding certain nuances of Sith ways.”

“My lord?” Gaping, entirely out of his depth at this unexpected speech, Quinn's brows knit together, and he feared the look on his face was more of abject helplessness than confusion.

“For allowing yourself to become so ensnared,” Baras continued, faintly coaxing. “It's only natural that she should have sought to use you in such a way; I should have anticipated it.”

“I – I understand, my lord,” Quinn stammered, rather feeling that he didn't. Where was this going? And what was that – she was using him, Baras said?

“Your feelings are only natural; it is just as natural to follow your passions,” Baras continued, far more mildly than Quinn would ever have anticipated. There was something in Baras' manner that hinted at some vague paternalistic attitude, a softening of his harshest edges. In their recent communications, Baras had seen how close Quinn was coming to rebellion, and had shifted his tactics. Quinn needed a reminder of who was dominant here, and a lesson in the nature of victory; he was perilously close to happily embracing the opposing side so long as he could embrace Astridel at the same time, and follow her blissfully even into death. There was fear in Quinn – many fears, and several of those fears were heavy ones, ones that could be counted on to be suitable prey for a rapacious Sith lord.

“But these things you do not understand – they will be your undoing, Quinn, and I would not have that. I have no wish to watch you pursuing a misguided course that will lead inevitably to your own destruction. And so I will explain to you two things, and you must heed them if you hope for a life or future.” The tiny image of the Sith lord on the holo paused to clasp his hands behind his back, in the attitude of a professor in the midst of a practiced lecture and he drew out his words slowly, even kindly, with patient emphasis, letting them sink in and begin their devastating work. “There are two things a Sith will not say and mean: The first is, I'm sorry. The second is I love you. If you wait for her to say these to you, Quinn, you wait in vain. It will not happen. It isn't in her nature, nor is it in her capacity. You stand a greater chance of seeing a Kaasian abyssal shark driving a speeder taxi than you do of hearing her speak these words. I know it is disappointing to you, but you deserve to know. Like so many things in this life, it is simply beyond her.”
Precisely as planned, the poisonous seeds of Baras words fell on fields of Quinn's mind made already fertile with apprehension and doubt. Quinn's heart sank within him; he could do nothing to refute a truth he felt in the marrow of his own bones. Astridel had had opportunity aplenty, and he had made no secret of how he felt about her. The ball was in her court, and she obstinately had refused to take it up, despite all the power being in her hands. She would never love him, or would never tell him if she did. The only time – the one, single, solitary time – that she had ever even approached the topic, dragged to it on reluctant tiptoe, it was because she had been unable to escape the pinion of his direct question. Her answer then could as easily have been structured as the lie most convenient to be rid of the subject as quickly as possible. She had been using him; his feelings were nothing in her eyes when she sought only her own amusement and pleasure. Baras felt the misgiving and anxiety spreading through Quinn's soul, and quietly smiled to himself beneath the shield of his mask as Quinn strained to stand upright beneath the storm of his emotions.

“The Voss are an interesting people, are they not?” he inquired conversationally when at last he spoke again.

“I suppose so, my lord,” Quinn murmured, somewhat flummoxed by the abrupt change in the direction of the conversation.

“Some would call it balanced in all things; I would call it the perfect example of a transactional society. A proportional cost for every thing desired or exchanged.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“And in the spirit of that, Quinn: I have given you information. Valuable information. It needs payment – oh, nothing untoward. Like for like only.”

“What information, my lord?” Quinn, still struggling with the weight of the awful actuality of his situation, hesitated to ask.

“My former apprentice. Tell me about her.”

“What do you wish to know, my lord?”

“Whatever you wish to tell me. Speak of her, and use your words to divest yourself of the pain she causes you. Paint her in terms as real as you can, unflinchingly, and see her behavior as it is, not as you would wish it to be.” Baras' voice dropped; in low, hypnotic tones it threaded itself into Quinn's
susceptible ears and wound in serpentine coils around his mind, slowly loosening his restrictions and his tongue. “Tell me about her cruelty to you, and to those she has fought. How she has crushed others alongside you. Tell me: what has she done to them? What has she done to you?”

And so, despite himself and his previous passionate vows of all he wished and would do for Astridel, Quinn, without being entirely cognizant of how it had happened, stood in a cold and wind-swept alley between the houses of the Voss and mumbled out his observations, spilling out what he knew.

“And don’t you feel better for it?” Baras inquired, keeping his satisfaction from sounding too evident.

“I don’t know, my lord,” Quinn confessed. He felt dazed, much as he had felt when he awoke in the medical bay with his head injury on Quesh, and in the midst of his befuddlement, he had a notion that he was not altogether certain of everything he had said.

“You will,” predicted Baras, who, with practiced aplomb, perfectly masked that he didn’t particularly care how, what, or when Quinn felt anything at all. He had what he wanted. “Have you any message you would like me to convey to your mother? I could, you know. I am not ungrateful.”

“I – that is...” Quinn replied uncertainly, a fresh feeling of terror stabbing at his heart “No, my lord.”

“That's too bad. You should be a more dutiful son, Quinn,” Baras admonished.

In an almost indistinct whisper, Quinn answered, “Yes. Thank you, my lord. I will endeavor to remember.”

“I will be in touch presently,” Baras concluded brusquely. “Remember, you have done a great thing today for the future of the Empire; you are a true patriot.”

As the holo went dark, Quinn turned away, slumping against the wall of the building at his back, and sliding down it to sit in the dust and grasses, waving their stalks of gold in the chill of the autumn wind. He sat there for a long time, staring up at the indifferent blue sky above.

Chapter End Notes
The paa'chaan rabbit is my own invention (but "it has teeth that go like THIS!" - Monty Python & the Holy Grail). Astridel's voiced dislike for being sent on a bunch of courier missions is a little bit of tongue-in-cheekiness: most of the RPGs I have ever played (granted, not extensive) involve fetch-quests. "Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening" on Game Boy back in the 90s involved a length string of deliveries back and forth across the map - each person had something they couldn't use, but wouldn't give up until you brought them what they actually wanted. Final Fantasy 7 had a part where you had to assemble a full woman's costume for Cloud. I'm casually playing Dragon Age: Inquisition right now and that has its own share of fetch-quests. They're just a staple of the RPG genre to break up the usual fight-&-kill quests.

And then there's the bulk of the chapter - Baras really gets to work on breaking Quinn through a combination of fear, manipulation, and Force-hypnotism. I wanted Baras to operate with more subtlety than just threats and fear alone; I also wanted Quinn to bear some of the responsibility for his decisions and not have the whole thing fall into "I was Force-tricked into it," so it's a blend of a multitude of pressures. Baras attacks him from a number of angles - each one, in itself, Quinn could have resisted, but put together, they sum up to push/entice him into the course of action Baras most wants. Baras is adept at perverting anything and everything to his own advantage: The very thing that Quinn thought would keep him true to Astridel - his love for her - is exactly what Baras uses to shatter him.
It was late, well after dark, by the time Quinn caught the last surface shuttle of the day to return to the Voss Orbital Station and the ship. He had spent the remainder of the dwindling afternoon dawdling in a manner most uncharacteristic for him, meandering desultorily along the streets of Voss-Ka, reluctant to return and his mind running over the guilty memories of all he had said to Baras.

Now, away from the contaminating influence of Baras, his behavior struck him as reprehensible: how could he look her in the face, knowing what he had done? She would know – she would take one look at him and know, written as it was on his own visage. He ran his fingers over his features, wondering if he could himself feel the culpability that was indelibly stamped there.

Bathed in the light of a beautiful sunset he could not see, he stopped one one of the flagstone terraces that overlooked the deep ravines separating the districts of Voss-Ka, a city built on the flanks and summits of a lofty, rocky mountain, and bit his cheeks in anger; mulishly, his heart rebelled, with a seething anger that welled up in his breast. He ground his teeth, choking on the scream of rage that burned in his throat. Why couldn't she have only loved him? This wouldn't have happened – this couldn't have happened – if only she did, if only she had given him some reason to be stronger, if only she had given herself to him as selflessly as he imagined he gave himself to her – if only, if only, forever that litany, if only! In this perverse way, it was her own fault, all of this was – and he caught himself at that thought, instantly ashamed, so disgusted with himself that he had a fleeting impulse to fling himself over the edge, off the precipice and down into the yawning chasm and the waiting arms of death.

Stupid – so stupid! he scolded himself, when death was the one thing for which there was no remedy. There could still be a way – an escape, he thought with desperate hope. Baras had asked him for nothing but information, after all. Baras had never asked him to do anything. He had never been commanded to raise his hand against her, to subvert her or undermine her. Information had been all – Baras must know, as clearly as Astridel did, that a confrontation was inevitable; he would naturally want to know all he could of her skills and defenses in preparation for that moment. And that moment, approaching though it was, was still not imminently on hand; Astridel could grow more powerful in that time, and Baras' intelligence would be out of date and irrelevant. Yes, yes – that was it, his consolation and salvation, the rationale that assuaged his sense of guilt. There could still be a way – there would still be a way – and, consumed with these obsessions, Quinn began again his aimless and haphazard meanderings through the streets of the city, until he hoped the exhaustion he felt would mask all else, and he could safely return to the ship.

Quinn was surprised to find Vette there.
“I had not realized you and Lord Astridel intended to return tonight,” he said, burying deep his sick feeling of dread.

“We hadn't,” Vetted replied, looking up from her spot on the lounge couch. She looked troubled, and Quinn's disquietude deepened, instantly stoking the fires of his anxiety. “But she was adamant she wouldn't stay at the Shrine of Healing. She's in her room, but you should probably let her sleep.”

“What happened?” he inquired apprehensively.

“At the Shrine of Healing – she needed to go through a Voss ritual, a blessing, in order to have permission to go into the Nightmare Lands, to go after the Voice,” Vette explained, pulling up her legs and crossing them beneath her. She wrapped her hands around a steaming mug of something aromatic and soothing. “There were people there who were injured, and the Mystic told her that if she wanted the blessing, then she needed to pay for it.”

“What do the injured have to do with it?”

“I'm getting to that,” Vette answered, slightly nettled. She didn't always relate events in their most logical progression, but Quinn kept quiet, calling on patience from the reserves of his frayed nerves. “The Mystic told her that she could pay for it by helping her heal the injured. By offering up some of her own life energy to heal them, and so earn the blessing she wanted.”

Blinking several times, Quinn asked, “And she did it?”

“Yeah,” Vette frowned, her eyes taking on a distant look as she went over the memory. “It wasn't really pleasant to watch. But it probably was a lot worse to go through. I could see it, you know? Her strength, or her life, or something, getting sucked out of her – it was really creepy. Nasty. And how she looked after...”

Vette, wrapped up in the memory of the ghastly, weakened look on Astridel's face, seemed to barely realize that Quinn still stood nearby, listening, horror-stricken, to this recitation. Part of him was tempted to run to her quarters, to force open the door and see for himself that she was there, safe and all right. But by what right, with his own hands so freshly stained with whatever he had done against her, could he take such an action? He had forfeited his privilege to cherish and protect her well-being. He swallowed hard, and with a tolerably stable voice, he softly asked, “And... did it work?”

Vette blinked and refocused on him. “Yes,” she replied. “The injured were healed, and the Mystic
said Astridel had earned the blessing. I don't know how it worked, or what it did. It looked kinda painful for a blessing, honestly. But... it's done. She wanted to come back here for the night, though. I don't think she trusts the Voss. Not enough to stay there.”

“No... I imagine not,” Quinn said absently. She would rather be here, among her retainers. Among those she trusted. He squeezed his teeth together. “And no, I won't disturb her,” he added hastily. “Good work, Vette. Good night.”

“Yeah. Night.”

Pierce was already snoring – loudly – in his bunk when Quin entered; he noiselessly stripped down and hurried into bed, hoping that the oblivion of sleep would come for him quickly.

It didn't, which was likely why he vastly overslept the following morning. All his routine, his self-regulation, his rules, his precision, his diligence – all of it seemed to have fallen apart of late, and he felt embarrassed and ashamed over it, among the many things for which he already felt humiliating chagrin. He emerged from his quarters to find Astridel, refreshed from a solid night's sleep, suited and booted, ready to go and calling for Jaesa.

“I'm here, master,” the younger woman emerged from the room she shared with Vette, hanging her polesaber hilt from her belt.

“What would you say to a visit to lands touched by the Dark Side itself? Fancy a bit of a trek?”

“It sounds... edifying, master. I'm all for it,” Jaesa replied eagerly, her tawny eyes glittering with avaricious desire.

“Then you're in luck. We leave at once,” Astridel ordered, and then, turning, gave one of her usual satirical smiles to Quinn. “Good morning, captain. Did you enjoy your sojourn in Voss-Ka yesterday?”

“Yes, my lord,” Quinn inclined his head, letting the motion break the chance of eye contact – or whatever was like it, with her veil shrouding her face – with her.

“Good!” she said with clear satisfaction. “You'll have to tell me of it when I return. Jaesa, are you ready?”
“And willing, master.”

With no more ceremony or leave-taking, Astridel strode away through the airlock to the gantry ramp, out into the orbital station, headed for the Nightmare Lands and the trail of the missing Voice. Quinn stared after her. That was it? Yes, to be sure, damn it all, time was of the essence, and there were pressures on her, missions of the most perilous kind that she must accomplish, but did he truly warrant no more than three bald, bare sentences, impersonal and empty? Was everything else a higher priority than he was? She'd shown more consideration for some nameless hurt Voss than she did for him. They had hardly seen each other in days. She had been heavily drained yesterday, and said nothing about it to him, either of the ordeal or how she felt now, hiding any hint of residual weakness. All she had done was make an impersonal inquiry as to whether or not he had enjoyed his visit to the city. Nothing else. No hint of anything more, good or bad. He either had successfully kept his troubles hidden, or she didn't care to stop and ask him about his unsettled feelings now.

But if she felt anything for him, wouldn't she have noticed? Wouldn't she have asked? Did she even care? Was this his proof that she didn't?

Dwelling on his hurt and anger over this apparent neglect gave him no insight or answers, but it did do one thing: it allowed him to feel justified when he left the ship an hour later to offer up a new report to Darth Baras.

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The Dark Heart of the Nightmare Lands was not easily accessed; although the Voss blessing permitted Astridel to approach the gateway to the Dark Heart, she required a talisman to open it. It was nothing more than a simple bone amulet which lay in the hands of a Voss soldier leading his people against the Gormak, the sworn tribal enemies of the Voss. It was a simple exchange, one that lay with Astridel's strengths: the pendant in return for her swift and fierce destruction of the Gormak chieftains. Deep in the Nightmare Lands, the pendant, dismissed as a worthless bauble, unlocked the Dark Heart gate. Instantly, a venomous, unearthly voice filled the air.


“Oh, promises, promises,” Jaesa cooed, raising her ear to the hissing, sibilant sound.

“I'm ready to face death,” Astridel answered the disembodied voice scornfully. “But is death ready to face me? I wonder.”
As Astridel stalked through the open maw of the massive stone gateway into the abandoned stone castle that comprised the Dark Heart, Jaesa, falling in step beside her inquired, “Who is this Sel-Makor, master, do you think?”

“I expect someone a little drunk on power, and as manipulated by Baras as everyone else has been,” Astridel answered. “Tricked into trapping the Voice here as much as the Voice was tricked into being trapped. I'll be glad to remove another stooge from Baras' employ.”

Astridel's stride did not falter as she led the way through crumbling chambers and vast ruins overgrown with the twisted, demented forms of the thorny vegetation that grew in the Nightmare Lands. The walls oozed slime and evil, and the creatures that lurked snarling in the passages were even more deranged and misshapen than those that crept through the bleak forests surrounding this lair. Far within the depths of the structure, in the middle of a large room, a single Voss man stood calmly in clean robes, untouched by the contamination that infected the ruin. He turned at the sound of their approaching steps, and Astridel knew, instantly and instinctively, that this being with patterned blue skin and honeycombed eyes was the Voice.

“Wrath,” he greeted in deep-pitched tones. “Come to me. I am your Emperor.”

“And I bow to you for it,” Astridel replied, sinking to one knee, with Jaesa following suit.

“You have done well,” the Voice praised as Astridel stood and approached. “My choice has not been misguided. How fitting, that you should be the one to rise against this threat. Darth Baras plays the old games. He maneuvered me here, knowing this Voss body could be bound to this place.”

“How did he do it?” Astridel could not resist asking. The Emperor, made a dupe by Baras? Incredible.

“The lure of Sel-Makor's great knowledge, locked here, in the Dark Heart,” the Voice confessed. “Sel-Makor is a force without a body, and he seeks this one. I am able to keep him from seizing this vessel, but he is able to keep me from leaving. Sel-Makor's dark secrets here are of import, but they will wait; my exit is paramount. I must be released. Another time, I will return for what I require.”

“From what you say, I surmise that release from this vessel is not something you can do voluntarily?”

“I am released only when this body dies. An oversight I will not repeat. But for now, the entity Sel-
Makor makes suicide impossible.” The Voice folded his hands before him. “I will lower my defenses, and use my Wrath to kill this body.”

“As you decree, master,” Astridel drew her primary hilt, its purple-black blade leaping to vicious life. Jaesa watched with excited interest. After all, she said later, it wasn’t every day that a person got to kill the Emperor.

“I am ready. Strike me down.”

The Voice was ready, but so was Sel-Makor. The dark force of the entity howled in objection, and the chamber shuddered and trembled at the strength of the spirit’s fury. With the Voice’s defenses dropped, he was subject to Sel-Makor just as much as Astridel’s blade.

“Sel-Makor takes this body!” shrieked the Voice as a black mist enveloped him. “Ah! Such power!”

Astridel’s secondary lightsaber flared into being in her left hand, the twin blades glittering darkly. “So be it. I can kill two as well as one,” she averred. She sprang into the air, her blades coming down on the rebuilt defenses of Sel-Makor’s new host, with Jaesa following close behind, her face alight with the red glow of her saber and the prospect of battle. The lightsabers buzzed and hummed, echoing through the cavernous chambers, and the Voice, exerting the last of his strength to expel the remnant of Sel-Makor from his body, sank to his knees.

“The entity is vanquished, and the life in this body is ebbing,” he panted. “You have done well, my Wrath. Once I am released, the Hand will know all that has transpired. I cannot be trapped twice. Trust the Hand; they will continue to guide you in the effort to ruin Darth Baras’ bid.”

“I look forward to that day with such eagerness.”

“As do I. Now strike!”

Chapter End Notes

I am mostly over my cold, although I can tell I’m going to be troubled by a residual cough for a while. I am getting an incredibly jacked ab (yes, ab, in the singular; it’s a hell
of a one-pack) from all the coughing.

Meanwhile - my thoughts and goodwill are with many of my friends who are attending the women's marches in Washington DC and locally!
“She may not find it as easy as she anticipates to free the Voice,” observed Darth Baras, his voice muted and tinny over the holo.

“She is singularly determined, my lord,” Quinn answered.

Baras made no response for a moment, thinking hard and reviewing the depth and breadth of all his meticulously-laid plans. If his one-time apprentice succeeded in freeing the Voice, that would be an extraordinary blow to his ambitions—a new Voice would step forward, free and clear to condemn him and his stratagems. Speed was more imperative than ever. Vowrawn’s credibility had taken a hit, no mistake: if that silly chit of a girl had imagined that convincing Armageddon Battalion to head to Corellia would be enough to save Vowrawn’s face, she was dead wrong. Where Vowrawn had the blame for Baras’ redirection of the Battalion to Hoth, Baras now took the credit for pulling it out of the icy wastes and moving the troops to the Corellian front. Astridel's little victory had only served him, and wounded Vowrawn further. But it was not enough.

Vowrawn needed to be destroyed, thoroughly and completely, and clearly, the problem of Astridel fell under the same heading. Lord Draahg had tried twice, and failed twice, and was in no position to make a third attempt—and not because he was dead. Far from it. The body of Baras' true apprentice, barely living, had been retrieved by his own loyal medical staff, who were even now hard at work fitting him with cybernetic enhancements and implants. When finished, Draahg would be a killing machine like no other. When finished. He was far from that now.

Which left him with Quinn. Baras had no other with the caliber of skill to take Astridel head-on in a fight, as Draahg would, and no other who had such unfettered access to her as Quinn. It was a hazardous gambit, as he still held deep-seated reservations on the nature of Quinn's loyalties, but the captain's contact with him today, and free offer of information, bolstered him immensely.

“It may be necessary,” Baras began cautiously, “for you to take a slightly more active role, Quinn.”

“I am not sure what you mean, my lord.”

“I merely mean I may ask of you to somewhat hinder my old apprentice's progress,” Baras explained. “To delay her, while I advance my own work. It would pose no danger to you. Nor would there be any risk to those you care about.”
“Care about?” Quinn repeated.

“For example, your mother. Your... brother.”

Quinn blanched.

“Unless,” continued Baras, his voice slik as vine-silk, “of course, you refuse.”

“I... I am sure I could manage something, my lord.”

“Naturally. I have some ideas – your dossier on my apprentice's skills from our last conversation is quite complete; I commend your eye for detail. Think it over,” Baras commanded. “And alert me when you have more to report.”

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The next day, high over Quinn's head and the city of Voss-Ka, Astridel stepped from the planetary shuttle into the orbital station with a satisfied, jaunty step, and headed for the access hall to her own ship. She was done with Voss and their riddles, she had stood in the presence of the Emperor, she had knelt to him and he had praised her. Auspices were good; surely it was now only a matter of time before it would be Baras on his knees. She was proud of herself, and proud of Jaesa, and felt she had every right to be.

As she crossed over the threshold from the elevator to the access bridge to her ship, a now-familiar glow shimmered yellow before her. Astridel stopped as the apparition of her guide, the hermit Madaga-Ru, manifested before her.

“I come to pay you,” Madaga-Ru stated.

“Ah, yes; the fair exchange,” Astridel said, folding her arms. “But I would know: what's the charge, and what's the payment? For how else would I know if the exchange is fair?”
“For the payment, knowledge and a warning,” Madaga-Ru said cryptically. He held still as Astridel made a brief gesture of silence and turned to her apprentice, removing her battle mask as she did so.

“Jaesa, go ahead of me. I will follow you shortly.”

“Of course, master,” Jaesa inclined her head, taking the proffered battle mask from her master's outstretched hand, and Astridel waited until the airlock had sealed behind her before nodding to the mystic’s spirit form to continue.

“The knowledge and the charge is this,” he said. “The Dark Heart is Sel-Makor's prison. I exist to prevent his escape. If I fail to contain Sel-Makor, all existence is at risk.”

“That's a weighty responsibility for one man alone, even a Voss mystic,” returned Astridel.

“It is,” concurred the Voss. “You helped. Through you, I know how to banish Sel-Makor forever.”

“I do what I can,” Astridel replied neutrally. “That is a vast piece of information for you. In my time on Voss, I have learned that everything costs. What is the warning you would give in payment for what I have shown you?”

“I grant you this secret – be warned,” Madaga-Ru raised his hand in a gesture of caution, or perhaps warding, “one of your own plots to betray you.”

“Indeed,” Astridel answered, guarded and noncommittal. “As you are a mystic, this is foretold?”

“A Voss mystic sees. It is always true,” Madaga-Ru replied. “But the identity was unseen.”

Astridel rubbed a gloved hand across her chin with a crafty look. “Fortunately, I always have my eyes open. I may see what you were unable to.”


“Farewell,” replied Astridel. “And thank you.”
She stood for a moment in contemplation, then continued on to her ship. As the door hissed shut behind her and she mounted the stairs to the empty lounge, she raised her voice.

“Jaesa!”

Her apprentice appeared immediately in the doorway of her quarters. “Yes, master?”

“Where is the crew?”

“Vette’s here,” Jaesa jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “Pierce is on the bridge. Quinn and Broonmark are planetside. What’s going on?”

“Come with me,” Astridel ordered. “Conference room.”

Jaesa felt briefly apprehensive. Something had wound up her master – what had that Voss had to say for himself? Had he done something? Had she? Was this about Darth Baras? Astridel sat down across the table from her and fixed her apprentice with a serious look that only partially mollified her uncertainty.

“I need you to do some readings for me...”

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When Quinn returned to the *Fury*, he found preparations being already made for departure.

“I am sorry,” he apologized to Jaesa, “had I realized, I would have returned much sooner. I can take over from here.”

“I’m nearly done,” Jaesa shrugged, waving to the crewman of the orbital station who was monitoring the refueling gauge. She seemed wholly focused on her tasks, and thrust her head at the airlock access ramp. “You can go on; everyone else is back.”
Vette was on the ship's bridge, to his surprise, and even more astonishing, Astridel was not. Vette was busily skimming through maps in the navicomputer console.

“Corellia,” the twi'lek said by way of explanation, “or so the Hand tells us. Astridel's in the conference room with Pierce for a briefing – oh, you know.” Vette tossed a hand in the air in response to Quinn's questioning look, “his Black Ops pals and him. They've pulled missions on Corellia, pretty recently, from the sound of it. If anybody knows what the status is on the ground over there, it would be Pierce. Better than a written report, anyway.”

It was true. Through the heavy door of the conference room, Quinn could hear voices, two of them – Pierce's rough, low tones that skipped letters willy-nilly as his accent tripped along, and Astridel's cutting high Imperial, astute and keen. She burst out laughing at some coarse witticism of the lieutenant's, and her laughter soared over his more menial guffaws.

“Briefing on Corellia, my foot,” Quinn raged below his breath, his jealous fury surging up to engulf him without warning. All his uncertainty and the fragility of his standing rushed through him, all the disconnects and worries and misunderstandings that had been working insidiously through his heart, inflamed by the slanders of Darth Baras.

Since before arriving on Voss, since Hoth, the distance between them had seemed to grow – Jaesa had been at her side, Vette had been, Pierce had been, even Broonmark, under the guise that he was uniquely suited to work on Hoth – every other soul of this crew had accompanied her on her latest missions, except for him. Blinded with hurt and anger, Quinn could not tell, and was past wondering, whether or not the reason for this was that she was selecting the best person for the task at hand. His own guilt screamed at him that there was another reason; that it was because she was avoiding him, she was disdainful of him, she was discarding him without even the courtesy of telling him so. Well, then! If she didn't love him, then so be it, but he was not about to stand by and be forced to witness her new flirtation with a man so much his inferior. He spun on his heel and stomped out the door and down the gantry ramp.

“There's an error in the docking exchange codes,” he snapped aside to Jaesa as he passed by, offering his excuse for abruptly heading to the central interior of the orbital station. As soon as he was out of sight, he whipped his holo from his pocket.

“Corellia,” he reported instantly as the holo displayed Darth Baras, muted in color and tone but not in ambition and danger. “She's going to Corellia.”

To protect Vowrawn from the contingent of assassins Baras had set on his tail, no doubt. Baras pursed his lips, unseen beneath his mask.
“Quinn,” he said at length, “the time has come for that increased involvement I warned you of. Can I rely on you?”

Astridel's face flashed through his mind, followed by that of his mother, and then his brother. Quinn ground his teeth. “You can, my lord.”

“Excellent. Listen closely, Quinn, this is what you must do...”

Chapter End Notes

I was supposed to do laundry and re-organize my closets today. I was going to write "just one chapter" and then get to work. That was 3 chapters ago.

What's the point of being an adult if you can't make a schedule and then gleefully ignore it in favor of writing? At least I got the dishes washed. :)

And now, Quinn makes his fateful decision! That's a more satisfying accomplishment than re-organizing a closet, right? Right?
“My lord,” Quinn reported as Astridel emerged from the conference room, “I'm afraid we cannot go to Corellia at this time. The Empire has enacted a martial law blockade of the entire system.”

“Good afternoon to you, too,” the Sith lord replied, granting him a mirthless smirk. “I assume you can tell me the details so we can figure out a way around this impediment?”

“Ah. Yes, good afternoon,” Quinn replied uncomfortably before squaring his shoulders and summoning up his old businesslike demeanor. “The Imperial fleet has been equipped with special transponder signal emitters. Any ship without this emitter sticks out like a sore thumb.”

“Hm,” Pierce grunted. “I've never heard of such an initiative. It certainly wasn't there when we had our assault on the Bastion.”

“I've been monitoring Baras' communications, Lieutenant.” Quinn raised his chin. Well, that much was true, from a certain point of view. “He only implemented the order recently. Probably to keep us away from Corellia. Without a signal emitter with Corellian space clearance, we will be noticed the minute we enter the system. But I believe I have a solution.”

“A stealth engine,” Astridel guessed, “or an emitter itself. And you know which is easier to get?”

“Precisely, my lord,” Quinn offered. “I intercepted a transmission granting Corellian clearance to a class-A starship not far from our present location.”

“Lucky us,” Pierce quipped.

“Quite,” Quinn replied drily. “We can board the vessel and take their signal emitter.”

“They won't part with it easily,” Pierce objected. “We'll have to go in there guns blazing. A lot of fellow Imperials are going to die.”
“To do it your way, that would certainly be the case,” Quinn said with some trenchancy. To his mind, Pierce had become bolder; he frequently sauntered close to the line of being insubordinate, and Quinn imagined Pierce was daring him to give him a reason to step over it. Pierce's experience on Corellia and his earlier one-on-one meeting with Astridel was going to his head, Quinn thought maliciously, and giving him a complex that he was more important than he should be. It was infuriating, and his ears rang with the memory of the sound of their joint laughter. He made an effort and controlled himself, infusing his voice with practiced and practical calm. “However, I know the schematics of class A starships by heart. I could accompany you on board and lead you directly to the transponder station, my lord. The potential for loss of life would be significantly reduced. It's only a suggestion, of course, but it would help expedite things.”

“Regrettable, but the loss could be managed. Very well,” Astridel mused, resting her knuckles thoughtfully below her chin. She raised her head, and with her veil in place over her sightless eyes, none could see the question on her features. Only Jaesa could read it, and she made no reply but a faint tilt of her head, casual and of no notice to anyone who wasn't looking for it. “Vette, lay in the course. Quinn, you and I will take on the starship.”

“Understood, my lord.”

As he stood in the airlock, awaiting Astridel, Quinn was seized with a sickly wave of dread, remorse dragging heavily at him. What was he about to do? How could he have put himself on this course? How could he really not have figured out a way to extricate himself before it had gone so far? How had he let Darth Baras put him in this position?

But no – it wasn't Darth Baras, not entirely. He himself had done this. He had succumbed to Baras' lure. He had let himself be manipulated. He had been the frail one, the one who had been incapable of being smart enough or good enough. He had foolishly believed Baras when the Darth had said it would be a diversion, just a delay, and thus had committed himself blindly to something so much, much worse. And now it was too late. He had made his choice, and he could see no way out – not, as Baras had made painfully clear, without sacrificing what remained of his family, his mother and his brother.

He hadn't lied when he said he knew the layout of class A starships by heart. He did. But he had lied, and, as he led Astridel into one of its cargo holds, empty but for two battle droids silent and still at the far end, and the double bay doors whirred closed behind them, he knew she had seen it by now, too. With his back to her, Quinn licked his lips, and began to speak.

“My lord, I regret that our paths must diverge. Out of respect, I wanted to be here to witness your fate,” he said hoarsely. He turned now; if he were to speak of respect and fates witnessed, he owed it to her to suit the action to the word.
Astridel, preternaturally still, made no answer for several tense seconds. "I see," she said at last. "Although I hope for a somewhat better explanation."

Quinn stared at her, trying to gauge her reaction. She seemed strangely calm. Was this simply stunned disbelief? Did she not understand? What would it take to draw a reaction from her? "It pains me, but this entire scenario is a ruse. There's no martial law, and no special signal emitter."

"I see," she said again in the same flat tone.

Perhaps it was neither disbelief nor calm. Perhaps she was furious – so furious she could barely even speak. His insides twisted, but with hope or fear or something else he could not determine, any more than he could read her own reaction.

"It's Darth Baras," he admitted. "He had me lure you here to have you killed."

And a third time, that terrible, unemotional "I see," from her lips. In her shoes, he would have been enraged; she must be the same – enraged beyond all measure or expression. She would destroy him, he had no doubt, and the nauseated feeling that crouched like a heavy leaden stone in his stomach rejoiced at the thought. If she wanted to be rid of him, then she now had the perfect reason and excuse for it.

"I didn't want to choose between the two of you. But he's forced my hand, and I must side with him. I owe him more than you could imagine. Baras is my true master," he confessed, desperate and hardly caring what came out of his mouth in the sickness of his betrayal and despair. That's it, Quinn, that's it – be proud of it; Baras told you to be proud of it. Own your action, revel in your treason – and she will, thank the stars, kill you all the more swiftly for it!

He cut off his own words as she opened her mouth. At last she would speak; if only it would be something other than I see.

"Oh, don't worry, Captain," Astridel said in her keen, sardonic voice, dancing at its most acerbic pitch. "I won't be boring. I won't ask 'how could you,' or such. But I will remind you who I now work for. If you stand with Baras, you stand against the Emperor himself."

"The Empire is in shambles; the Emperor barely has an Empire to return to through his own neglect," Quinn said, burying his misery beneath a second layer of treason. A phrase Baras had used to him sprang into his mind. "Baras is doing what any real patriot would do."
“You're kidding,” Astridel scoffed. “Did you really just use the 'No True Cerean' argument on me? You're usually so much more logical than that.”

Quinn stared at her with wide, red-rimmed eyes. His world, his galaxy, was falling apart through his grasping fingers, and she was laughing at him for it. Laughing! Cut through to the quick, he put a stranglehold on his compunction, and gestured to the battle droids, programmed by Baras using the intelligence he had unwittingly provided in the frailty of a moment. If she would kill him for this, so be it – but she would have to survive long enough to do so. He scowled darkly, and the droids marched forward in response to his outstretched hand.

“After all this time observing you in battle,” he boasted, “I have exhaustively noted your strengths and weaknesses. These war droids have been programmed specifically to combat you. I calculate a near zero percent chance of their failure.”

“I know how thorough you are,” Astridel replied, collectedly drawing her saber, “but you place too much confidence in your odds.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” he spat, wounded. She stood there, facing him, looking so competent, so erect, so assured. So beautiful. His bitterness clogged his lungs, choking him, leaving him burning with anger, shame, and helplessness, sick with the futility of all of his struggles and failures. His failure to outwit Darth Baras. His failure to save her as he once thought he could. His failure to confess all to her before things had gone this far. His failure to claim her love as his own. Why, he thought miserably, why was he always never good enough? Was what he had wanted so terrible, or so wrong, that he should be punished like this? His heart throbbed in his throat, fracturing his voice as he murmured, “I'm sorry it's come to this, my lord.”

Anything else he could have said was lost as the droids began to fire.

It was an amazing thing to witness, her solo battle against the odds. Never before had she been this fast, this agile, this unerring with her strikes. In the past, he had seen her throw a single blade – the memory of the fight in the fog of Kaas City was particularly bright on that point – but never before had he seen her throw both together, simultaneously striking both droids as she dodged aside, elegantly fleet-footed, from their incendiary rounds. In this, she achieved heights of grace and power he had never thought possible. First one droid, then the second, lay in shattered pieces, their servos clicking feebly as they failed. Astridel turned to Quinn, on his knees.

“I should have known,” he murmured brokenly, waiting for welcome death to take him with Astridel's hands. “No matter how precise my calculations – You should be dead – I should have known.”
“Yes, you should have,” Astridel answered relentlessly, still in that same lifeless tone. “If it matters, your droids did push me. It was a valiant attempt.”

“That’s little consolation,” he said bitterly. He laughed humorlessly; it was condescendingly kind of her to give him that, now, as he stood on the threshold of his execution! “I have betrayed you. Conspired with your most hated enemy. I don’t expect your mercy.”

“And so you should not,” Astridel replied. Quinn closed his eyes. Would he feel it, he wondered inanely, when his head was cut from his shoulders? She had not extinguished her sabers; he could hear their buzzing, not far from him now, their noise clanging with the dull harsh ringing in his ears. Would he, for a fraction of a second, be cognizant of their searing heat as they sliced instantaneously through his flesh, severing his life and his neck together? Would her heartless laugh of victory echo in his ears as he died, or would he just be plunged into silence, a great dark silence from which there would be no emerging?

“Get up!” she snapped. Quinn cracked open one eye. She was hanging her saber hilts at her belt again, and he stared uncomprehendingly. What was this? No reprisals, no bitter recriminations? Was this a joke? A ploy to lure him into a false sense of safety, only to cut him down wickedly later?

“Get up!” she repeated. “I will not tell you again.”

“My lord – ” he gasped, fumbling to gather his legs and weak knees beneath himself. “This... is – unexpected!”

“You still have your uses and your duties. I will keep you alive to fulfill them, and we will see if you can earn my trust again,” Astridel declared. “Believe it or not, I do understand how very persuasive Baras can be.”

“My lord, I... I am deeply grateful,” Quinn stammered. His heart within him stuttered, falling to pieces so completely in the light of this unexpected deliverance that he felt faint. The weight of this undeserved clemency made him as nauseated as his dread and anguish had so recently done. Why could she have done this? She had spared lives before, but this - a betrayal so deep? He had never guessed that she had such wells of graciousness within her any more than he had known before that such baseness had dwelt within him. Where was his honor now? How could he repay her for the opportunity to rebuild it? Or had she saved him only to expel him shortly from her service, that he may watch her meteoric climb from afar, blinded by her light but never again permitted to approach its glow?
“Darth Baras would never have afforded me the same forgiveness,” he marveled. “My lord – if you will permit me to stay in your charge, my dedication to you will never come into question again.”

“See that it does not,” Astridel replied. Stars above, it was true; she was not even turning him loose. But as he raised his shame-filled eyes to look into what he could see of her face, he could see no softness there. No tidings of absolution, no hint of grace, no amnesty – perhaps it would be different, he wished once again, if he could have read the emotions of her soul in her eyes, if those portals could have given him some hint of what thoughts and feelings were at work behind her remote façade. But if he had been able to see all that, he might not have found himself in this position now, unraveled and undone.

Dazed, he followed in her wake as she led the way back to the ship, entirely secure and unconcerned at the potential threat of his being at her unprotected back. He still loved her – maybe he loved her more now than he ever had. Could that be the secret? Was her love the reason for her lenience? That this, his terrible act, had highlighted how much she truly did care for him – and had he destroyed it? Abruptly, she paused, perhaps sensing his approach, or the way his hand, almost of its own volition, reached hesitantly and hopefully for hers.

She took a rapid step back, withholding her hand with a decisive motion of her arm.

“Don't touch me,” she spat, and in that, he caught the faintest glimpse of her anger. She mastered it again at once, burying it again beneath the unsettling inertness of her manner. Nonetheless, he flinched at the hint of what churned beneath her exterior. Why would she not show it? It was not a weakness – so why keep it so buried?

“I only wanted – ” he began disconnectedly. “I mean – one thing, my lord – do you plan on telling the others what happened?”

Astridel faced him for a long time without answering. Then, with slow and careful enunciation, she pronounced, “I do not.”

The ensuing shaky relief that flooded through him turned ice-cold as, a moment later, she clarified pitilessly, “You will tell them yourself.”

His mouth moved faintly, with no sound, and he grappled with his voice, forcing it to raise his plea. “My lord –”
“I will not,” she stated firmly, “demand that my crew be subject to orders issued by a man they cannot trust. You will tell them of your actions here, and I will leave it up to each of them to decide for themselves how many of your commands they will elect to follow. With the exception of Pierce, they are not Imperial military. They are under no obligation to obey you. They are only under obligation to obey me. I will not ask them to place their trust where I have found I cannot.”

Of course. There would be no hiding this from the crew; they would see at once that things had changed. She was poised to set out on the greatest challenge of her life, and his egregious errors here had ensured that her team, as a whole, would be fragmented, even if the majority were united in their condemnation of him. Despite this truth, her words gutted him; his life she had spared, but precious little else. She left him subject to the penalty of his decision - the ignominy, the shame, the destruction of his authority, the loss of his self-respect and her faith in him. How far he had fallen! And how horrible that not so very long ago, as he departed on a course of kidnapping and murder, she had told him openly, 'I trust you,' and now, through nothing but his own choices, that trust was shattered. It hadn't taken much to destroy what had been between them – it had only taken him.

“I understand, my lord,” he whispered hoarsely. He would receive no additional mercy.

On board the Fury, with her crew assembled around the conference room table, looking on with puzzlement and vague alarm, Astridel announced, “The captain has something he would like to share with you all.”

With that simple overture, she yielded the floor to him, and Quinn found himself compelled to relate the facts of the event in all their horrible, bald nakedness, each terrible, ugly facet held up to the cold light and the indignant fire of their united censure.

Chapter End Notes

A long chapter this one, and a lot in it! - the chapter, I think, that many have been waiting for. I've drafted and re-drafted this one in my head many times over, changing reactions and responses and timing: I've reordered and/or trimmed a number of the speeches Quinn makes during the confrontation on the starship just to try to improve the flow of the conversation as well have it mesh with the way his tormented feelings flop back and forth, torn as he is in his loyalties.

The "No True Cerean" argument is, to us, the "No True Scotsman" argument, based on a fallacy of logic that a "true" member of a certain group believes certain tenets, and any disagreement with that scripture means that individual is, by default, not a "true" member. It's an ad hoc argument that gets used a lot in Star Wars fandom circles: "No true Star Wars fan likes the prequels." When Quinn spouted the "real patriot" line in my play through, I quite honestly said aloud, "Oh my god, Quinn, did you just No True
Scotsman me?!!" I think I was almost more offended at his poor debate skills than I was at his betrayal - but I suppose the poor man was in such a tough spot that I could let him off the hook for being illogical.
Astridel made it clear to her crew that, regardless of their personal opinion of Quinn and his actions, she nonetheless intended that the ship would continue to run in its smooth and accustomed courses, whether that meant following the patterns of Quinn's duty rosters or not.

“I will tolerate,” she declared firmly, addressing the crew from a standing position at the head of the table, “no disruption to the operation of this ship. There is work to be done, both on this ship and off, and I will not endure distractions that must be resolved by my being either referee or babysitter. You are all adults. I expect you to act like it.”

She turned on her heel and swept out of the room, not even waiting to receive the confirming nods of her retinue. In the silence that claimed the room in the wake of her departure, Jaesa stood, slowly and deliberately, and after bestowing upon Quinn a look of the most complete scorn, she followed her master out the door. One after another, the others followed, wordlessly standing and walking out, first Broonmark, and then Pierce, and last, Vette. At the door, the twi'lek paused, the only one to look back at where he sat broken and miserable at the empty table. It was Vette who said what Astridel would not.

“Oh,” she said, her voice wavering with a clog of unspent tears of sympathy for her friend and master, “how could you?”

Life, to Quinn's painful surprise, resumed. The crew, aware of the responsibilities they shared, was seasoned enough to adapt, and thus the ship more or less ran itself without requiring his direction or oversight. While he could have taken some pleasure in the knowledge that his prior planning had allowed for this smooth continuous operation, it was little comfort to discover that in this, the supervision of day-to-day operations that had been such a part of his pride, he was nearly entirely superfluous. The machine he had set in motion ticked along with easy regularity without any regard for his influence on it, present or absent. He felt keenly the discovery of his own redundancy.

Although, in truth, it was not exactly the same. He was never alone. Without making a pact of it, the rest of the crew, by tacit arrangement, kept him under watch, each of his activities monitored either covertly or overtly, depending on his monitor's identity and mood. The humiliation of it was terrible, but he accepted it silently; it was no more, he reasoned, than he deserved, and had it been any other person in his shoes, he would have heartily approved of the surveillance.

The added corollary to this new arrangement was that he was never alone with Astridel herself. If she came to the bridge while he was there, Jaesa would stay, long after her shift had ended, if
necessary, until Astridel rose to depart. If he entered the cargo hold and she were there, Broonmark lurked in the hatch door of the bulkhead until she had concluded her work. If she were in the galley, Vette stood nearby, fussing with the spice rack and filling the uncomfortable spaces with the forced cheerfulness of her chatter, something Vette considered necessary for a rather different reasons after finding Astridel turning over a lump in her hand, the remains of a cup she had inadvertently flattened as the swell of her submerged fury briefly burst its confining banks. And Pierce – well, Pierce was everywhere, instantly at Astridel's side when she headed out, day after day, to scour the surface of Corellia for Darth Vowrawn and the assassins Darth Baras had set on his tail.

But the very worst of all was how she now treated him, her one-time closest advisor and lover. Far from showering him with the rage he fearfully anticipated and almost hoped for, she treated him with remote, icy politeness. She was firmly distant, granting him slightly less consideration than she bestowed upon the ship's droid. When Astridel polled her team for opinions, his input, once the first and foremost, she now solicited last. She never addressed him or referred to him by name; he was now merely 'the captain.' If he entered a room she already occupied, she gave him no regard or greeting; at the most, if he were lucky, her notice would sweep over him as if he were another part of the ship – a console, an engine component, a bulkhead, furniture there to do a job and unworthy of notice of any other kind. If he were unlucky, he would be transfixed by her attitude of indifferent contempt. More and more, he found himself wishing for her anger, for her to unleash her rage on him as he deserved. The silent, aloof derision of her manner towards him sent him each night deeply upset, queasy with misery.

There were noises from the edge of the ship, the sound of the main hatch door and the gantry ramp, followed by footsteps and voices, victorious over the day's work. Quinn raised his head from where he sat on the bridge, turning toward the hubbub; Jaesa, his chaperon for the afternoon, was already standing in the bridge bulkhead door to greet her returning master, just now entering the lounge.

“*That's two dead,*” Astridel announced, referring to the trio of assassins set on Vowrawn. “*Only one to go.*”

“*Just like old times, m'lord,*” Pierce declared, smiling expansively with satisfaction. “*Like when we took the Bastion. Flexed a lot of forgotten muscles out there.*”

“*Excellent work today, Pierce,*” Astridel praised him, pleased and grateful. “*Vette, tell Toovee for a good dinner tonight – none of those tasteless rations. We've made solid progress, and we deserve a solid meal.*”

“*Right away, my lord!*” Vette answered eagerly, glad to see some marks of cheer in her friend's demeanor. She had noticed Astridel's flat, cold calm, the reticence that was the effect of all her hurt and rage being suppressed under the unresponsive exterior, and she worried over it. Privately, she thought Astridel would do well to sit down and have a good cry. It wasn't good to keep things so bottled up. Especially for a Sith lord.
In the midst of the general approbation of the day's accomplishment, Quinn dutifully murmured, “Welcome back, my lord.”

Whether or not Astridel even heard him, he had no idea. Once again, with a smirk that was slightly more genuine, engendered as it was by her sense of accomplishment, she paid him no heed; laughing and talking with Pierce and Jaesa, she headed for the galley with a bounce in her step. He watched her go with a haunted stare until beside him, Broonmark hooted.

Everyone else was in the galley, and Broonmark was hungry. Quinn would not be left to his solitary thoughts on the bridge. With a sigh, he followed the rest of the crew, slipping through the door and sitting unobtrusively apart, trying to accustom himself to the feeling that for the length of the foreseeable future, this was how it would be: forever the observer of others’ joy, and never a participant himself. His food stuck in his throat as he choked it down. It took him a long time eat, and he was sitting there still, long after the impromptu party had broken up. Astridel had been among the first to leave. So had Pierce.

The pain and anger Astridel felt over the captain's betrayal was an incessant presence in her heart, like a thorn in her flesh slowly pumping poison through her veins. She had not yet discovered a trick that would enable her to ignore it; it pursued her into her battles against Baras' minions, into her bed and her dreams, into her thoughts of her every waking moment, its bitterness turning the flavor of her food to rust and ash in her mouth. There was no escape from it.

She was fiercely determined that her pride would be the stronger force; that he, and the others, would never know how deeply he had wounded her. She would never let them see how vulnerable she had let him make her, or what weakness she had permitted love to inflict on her. When they looked at her, they would see a woman wronged but unscathed, a leader unflinching and yet untouched, a Sith lord as much in control of herself as she was all her surroundings. The captain, above all, would see how little he mattered.

Did he matter so little? Astridel knew that was not true. He had mattered to her – he mattered still – so much, so very, very much. When she gave in to the topic that was her now-constant companion and thought too long or too hard on what he had done, she was left dizzy and nauseated with a breathless, blinding rage that left a blood-red cast over all she viewed through her Force senses.

“You wanted something, m'lord?” Pierce inquired, turning towards where she stood at the door to the men’s shared quarters.

Astridel paused, reviewing the decisions she had made that had brought her to this spot. Did she want something? Yes, she had to admit to herself, she did. She wanted to feel something other than
this all-consuming disgust, the maddening frenzy of her vehement ire, the choler that churned and seethed within her chest with a scalding furor that she could barely contain. She wanted, if only for a few moments, some other idea to suspend her mind and her heart from a storm that was threatening to drown her.

“I did,” she said, stepping into the room and letting the door hiss shut behind her. She tapped the panel to engage the lock. Pierce raised an eyebrow.

“This is about Quinn, isn't it,” Pierce surmised.

“You're bloody damned right it is,” Astridel answered, more matter-of-fact than defiant, as she unbuckled her belt. “And here Quinn doesn't give your astuteness enough credit.”

“When there's writing on a wall, I'm learned enough to read it,” Pierce replied easily. He grinned down at her from his height. “But it puts me in mind to ask, m'lord: my bunk, or his?”

Astridel laughed, and very little of the laugh was pleasant.

Chapter End Notes

Oh yeah, I totally had Astridel engage in a revenge-fuck with Pierce. The funny part is that I had her do that at the same time that the 4.0 update went through which changed the gating for the companion quests. So, I could have SWORN that both Pierce and Quinn wanted to talk to Astridel (because at that point, because of the 4.0 changes, everybody did) but I was pretty much running through nearly the entirety of Pierce's companion quests at once, so I decided to finish with him before going to talk to Quinn. And after Astridel slept with Pierce, Quinn didn't want to talk anymore.

I flailed, thinking that I had FUBAR'd the end-stage romance with Quinn completely, and that there would be no possibility for a happy resolution for them, when in reality all I wanted was Quinn to have to suffer a little bit for being a dumbass. I was like, "Wait, no no no no I take it back, I take it back!” Fortunately, I dumped a few more gifts on him and he wanted to talk again, so I was able to finish out the romance - whew!

The 4.0 companion gating change had other side effects, too - for example, the game now wants me to put Vette through her mother's death all over again. :( Poor Vette.
Quinn came up from the galley under Broonmark's impassive gaze and crossed the lounge under the gauntlet of Jaesa's spiteful glare. He would rather the bridge, he decided; Vette might dislike him, but at least she, perhaps recalling his kindness when her mother died, would not fire such vitriolic looks in his direction. He was at the door to the bridge when the click of a lock caught his attention.

He only intended to glance back, and then continue on his way. Instead, as he saw Astridel emerge from the quarter-room – his quarters, Pierce's quarters – he froze, staring in disbelief with his heart an ice-cold stone weighing down the food that roiled in the upheaval of his stomach. It wasn't possible.

But as Astridel flounced across the lounge to her own room, turning back with a nod in response to Pierce's growled, “G'nite, m'lord.” Quinn knew that not only was it possible, it was. Mechanically, he stumbled to the bridge, staggering to his position with a feeble attempt at uprightness, his hand clenching the back of a console chair as he tried to bring his stunned reason back under his grasp.

He could have wished he hadn't bothered. Reason schooled him terribly: Astridel, with all her sharp senses, had demonstrated more than once that she was aware of who was on board her ship and where. There was only one inevitable conclusion. She had known he was crossing the lounge when she emerged from her tryst with Pierce. She had known he was there, she had known he would see her, she had known he would figure it all out. He breathed hard, trying to control the raking of his air in his throat. She had done it deliberately.

This was unendurable. This was – he flailed mentally, his thoughts scattering in disorder. All that had been heaped on him up to this point he had accepted as his just punishment, but this – to have this thrown in his face, this was – it was insupportable. He choked on his spleen and wounded pride.

“You all right?” Vette looked over at him with narrowed eyes.

“Yes,” he gagged. “I am just – I don't think the meal agreed with me.”

“Maybe you should go to bed,” Vette offered.

To bed! To the room where she – where Pierce – where they – no! His stomach churned more
violently.

“Perhaps,” he agreed outwardly, and he stalked off the bridge. The lounge was empty, so there were no eyes upon him as he rushed to the lavatory. He wished, as he propped himself over the commode, that it were possible to vomit more than just food. He would, if he could, spew out all his guilt, all his wrong-doing, all his misplaced pride and arrogance, all the hurt he had caused and all that had been inflicted upon him. For the first time in nearly a fortnight he had no supervisor, and, free of his surveillance, he spent hours on the cold lavatory floor, wrestling with the revulsion and dismay of the carnage around him.

When Quinn emerged at last, washed and shaved and steeling himself to face another awful day under the yoke of his punishment, he found himself in a unique position. Each member of the crew thought he was somewhere else, under the watch of another. Moreover, Astridel, he discovered, was alone on the bridge, intently focused on a report on Corellia, displayed on the data pad in her hand. As he came to stand in his old spot, on the port side of her command chair, she made no motion of recognition.

The rebellious feeling of being pushed past endurance pressed in upon him. How long could this go on? How much more could he stand? Why did she spare his life and then force him to live this hateful, hideous existence? When, if ever, would she deign to notice him? Abruptly, he felt a wild desire clutch at him; he wanted, more than anything, to break that horrible reserve. He wanted her, good or bad, to simply acknowledge him. But what would that take? He formed a frightful resolution. She would answer him, whatever it took. He would make her answer him.

“My lord,” Quinn broke the terrible silence. He might have been mute. She gave him no encouragement.

“My lord,” he tried again, “if I may ask –”

Astridel continued her perusal of the data pad, offering no indication that she had noticed him, or had any intention to.

“My lord,” Quinn repeated, eagerness to be heard and distress at being ignored strengthening his voice, “my lord, I must speak –” And somehow, without his quite knowing how it happened, he was at her feet, on his knee, in a posture of supplication. “I must beg you to hear me!”

One of the metal pendants that weighted the corner of her veil swayed slightly, and then, with great deliberation of movement, Astridel slowly lowered the pad, setting it with exaggerated care on the console. She returned her hands to her lap, fingers interlaced above legs that were pressed together
primly from knee to ankle, her back rigid with her attitude of aloof disregard.

“You have my attention,” she said at last, her tone flat and shrouded. “Pray, do not waste it.”

“I will do my best, my lord,” Quinn answered, trembling now that he knew he had her attention. What would he do with it? He rose. Part of him was tempted to leave himself on his knees, as many a Sith lord was appeased by a good grovel, but Astridel, he had seen time and time again, was not many a Sith lord. What was fitting in the servile was not fitting for him, and he instinctively knew that she would despise him further if he remained in such a position before her. He would face her on his feet, like a man. “My lord, I cannot express the remorse I feel for my actions – I have not the words. Nor can I express my gratitude for the mercy you have shown.”

“If you cannot express it,” she injected coldly, “then why are you speaking at all? I hope this speech has a point other than to be tedious.”

“It does, my lord, and I will not waste your time in idle comments. I am...” he paused. Which of his many questions could he pursue first? “I am compelled to ask you to share with me your reasons for sparing my life.”

“I'm sure at this point in your existence you have learned to become accustomed to disappointment.”

“I understand, my lord,” Quinn replied, his heart pounding painfully, rushing his blood noisily in his ears. She would not answer, he feared; she would, instead, continue to treat him with that same indifferent contempt that had conspired with his conscience to make his life unbearably miserable since his betrayal. When faced with this awful extremity, the only way forward he could conceive was to meet it with an extreme of his own. He raised his chin levelly. “In that case, my lord, I have but one request, if you will grant it. I ask you to kill me.”

Whatever surprise Astridel might have felt she kept perfectly contained.

“When I want you to be ridiculous,” she said derisively, “I will let you know.”

“I am not being facetious, my lord,” Quinn confessed. “I am in earnest. I am aware of the responsibility I hold for how matters stand between us now. I know my fault; I feel every guilt for my crime, and the consequences are more than I can tolerate. I beg you to end my life.”
“No.” Her answer was delivered with complete calm, that unnerving, preternatural reserve she had maintained since his sin against her.

“My lord,” he insisted, inclining his head towards her, “You must –”

“Do not presume to tell me what I must or must not do,” Astridel interrupted him, her voice as unemotional as his was desperate.

“You must,” he repeated, his hands clenching hard the arm of her chair, “my lord, you must strike down one who has raised his hand against you. One who has broken his vows of fealty. One who has trespassed on your leniency and taken advantage of your goodwill!”

“I will not.”

“I betrayed you, my lord!” he cried, leaning closer in his reckless drive to break her from her heartless composure. “I am a traitor; give me the traitor’s death that I warrant! My life is forfeit. Strike, my lord!”

“No.” There was the slightest edge to her tone. She could sense the turmoil in him, the genuine remorse that squeezed the breath from his chest, and moreover the genuine desire for a violent punishment as he stood so close to her, and it unsettled her more than she wished it could.

“I betrayed you!” Quinn repeated passionately. “I betrayed you as my lord; I betrayed you as the Emperor’s Wrath in favor of a false Voice; I betrayed you as a lover! Make me pay for my treason!”

“No.” The gritty emphasis in her reply gave Quinn the frailest hope that there might be a crack in the wall. If he could break that wall – if he could chisel out its foundation – would it open a doorway? Or would it collapse on him and destroy him under the wreckage? Whichever happened; what did it matter? He would be free of this torment. Anything would be better than this incessant existence that he had made so empty, even if it were for her to blast him into oblivion.

“I should pay for my crimes, my lord! The rage you must feel, the hate, the anger – if it is anything like what I feel for myself, it must be terrible! Do not cut yourself off from such a source of power, my lord! Use your anger – unleash all your hate upon me; your rage will make you unstoppable! You are a Sith, it is your way!”
“No-!”

“Then at least tell me why you will not!” he demanded wildly, clutching her wrist, unable to stop himself.

She flung his hand away with a sharp and disgusted jerk of her arm as she leaped to her feet, almost before he had finished speaking, and exploded furiously, “Because you do not deserve it!”

The anguish and rage in Astridel's voice brooked no possibility that her choice had been made mercifully, and Quinn, too distraught to plumb his own feelings over succeeding at last in driving her to an emotional reaction, gasped faintly at how the features of her face visible below the veil twisted in a dreadful expression of grieved bitterness. Oh, that she had eyes he could see, to read the depths of her savage anger! To know, finally, that he had touched more than just her body, even to provoke her to such hate and hurt!

Her breath rasped swiftly in her throat, but before she spoke again, a clatter of footsteps halted at the open hatch to the bridge.

“My lord!” exclaimed Vette. “We heard shouting –”

Pierce folded his arms. “If you want we should put him out the airlock, m'lord, just give the order.”

Astridel said nothing for a moment, and Quinn cursed the officious but understandable concern of his crewmates. Their arrival had given Astridel the lull she needed to wrest her emotions back beneath her own control.

“Thank you,” she said crisply, without turning towards them. “That isn't necessary. It seems the captain would like a word. I will grant it. Leave us; if I need you, I will summon you.”

“If you say so, my lord.” Vette said uncertainly, her gaze flicking between the two as she took a hesitant step backwards.

“In fact,” Astridel tacked on, “the inventory of the ship's stores needs reconciling. Jaesa will help you. It likely will take some time.”
“Translation: get to the cargo hold and don't come out until it's over,” Vette whispered to Pierce as they made a hasty getaway from the bridge.

“Twenty credits says Toovee is mopping blood off the bridge consoles before the day's end,” Pierce guessed.

“I'd put that money on her letting him live,” Vette countered. “If she were going to kill him, she would have done it already.”

“Hnnh,” Pierce grunted noncommittally. “Must be nice, getting away with anything because you're schtupping the boss.” He conveniently overlooked the fact that he had worn those same shoes himself.

“Don't be gross, Pierce.” Vette wrinkled her nose at him distastefully. “If anything, that would make her more inclined to rip him apart. Lord Astridel has her reasons. She's... very principled that way.”

Pierce hefted his shoulders dubiously. “If you say so.”

Chapter End Notes

The fallout of Quinn's betrayal begins. A warning in advance: There will be angst. So. Much. Angst.

:)
On the bridge, tense silence hung in the air. Quinn was momentarily at a loss as to his next course of action; he had played his gambit, and succeeded, but had not counted on the interference of his fellow crew interrupting his rash plan. And now Astridel was rapidly recovering from the emotional honesty he had goaded her into; his progress was vanishing, and he was unlikely to repeat the maneuver with any success. She would be on her guard now – but at this point, what else could he do but resume the offensive?


“When,” Astridel overran his words sharply, and Quinn could see in the rigid lines of her body and the seething strain in her voice that she was yet still at war with the feelings that threatened to choke her. “When have I ever granted death to someone who has begged me for it?”

Quinn gave a vague and helpless shake of his head. “I cannot recall, my lord.”

“Your memory, at least, is still faithful,” Astridel answered cuttingly. “I won't kill someone just because they ask me to. I won't kill someone who is eager to embrace death. If they are so keen on it, then it is a fitter punishment to leave them alive. Those who wish to live, they are the ones who will fight for it. They are the ones that are worthy of meeting my blade. Not those who wallow in sand dunes, or ice tombs, or despair. If you have made your own existence so intolerable, then take responsibility for it and end your life yourself. Don't beg me to do what you will not.”

Quinn flinched under the viciousness of her words. He had wanted to provoke her into answering him, and he had. Be careful what you wish for, he reminded himself once again. With a steadying breath and fairly stable tones, he answered, “If, my lord, you command me, I will blow out my brains right here.”

Astridel made no reply; she stood so still it seemed as though she were carved from stone. In the deepening silence, Quinn suspected she would not order this, and he had no idea how to feel about it. She would not give him his death, and she would not demand his suicide to expiate his crime – but again, why? He felt his soul consumed with the question. Was living on in this hellish way to be his punishment? Did it really all come down to just her perverse convictions? Was there nothing else at all?
With a motion as slow and deliberate as hers had been when she set down the data pad, he pulled his blaster from its holster, looking down with sorrowful thoughtfulness.

“I have drawn, my lord,” he said quietly. He raised his head. “It remains for you to tell me what to do with it. I will kill myself, if you order it. Otherwise...” His voice faltered and faded, and with a hand that wavered only slightly, he lifted the blaster, leveling the barrel straight at Astridel.

“You must choose, my lord,” he whispered. “I have now raised my hand against you twice. You must act. Take your blade and cut me down, here, now, before I shoot. Or tell me the truth why you will not.”

He could see the rapid movements of her shoulders and chest as her breath, sharp and ragged, sped through her lungs; he could hear it, hoarsely chafing her throat, as she trembled with rage. She could feel her pride rupturing, she felt the façade of her control slipping away from her. He would continue to chip away at it; he had already gouged great holes in it, gaping fissures that let the fire of her wrath blast through, even if the heat of those furnaces would consume him to ash.

He wanted it to, she realized, he wished to receive all her rage and pain, the things he had given her so liberally. He wanted it all back again, the very thing she was bent on fiercely denying him. The very thing that gave her the most power over him. He had left her with nothing but her fury and her sorrow, and he would now take that from her, too? It was unfair; it was unjust – and as her brimming well of bitterness overflowed, her resolution of silence broke.

“You're a bastard, Quinn,” Astridel snarled at last. Despite her fury, despite his misery, he nonetheless felt a painful, joyful pang in his breast at hearing his name in her own voice, the first time she had used it since his betrayal.

“The truth, my lord,” he gasped in fractured tones, uncertain himself if this were an expression of his agreement with her, or if it were a plea for her to throw everything into the open. Perhaps both. Her hands balled into clenched fists at her sides. Was it her power or his distress that made him feel his throat closing in on itself?

“You fucking bastard,” she repeated, as though hardly aware that he had even spoken. She pinched her lips together, holding back the sob of fiery rage that threatened to immolate her.

“The truth,” he demanded again, his heart pumping his overheated blood so fiercely through him that it seemed as though he would shatter. She would tell him, he was sure of it now. She would tell him, and if the ruins of his life then collapsed in on him, and buried him in the rubble, he would be grateful for it. Let the cataclysm fall and be welcome.
“The truth!” she seethed. She would give him his treasured truth, then, if he were so hell-bent on it. With a sudden movement, like those he had seen her use so often in battle, she darted towards him in a leap, slapping the blaster out of his grasp with her left hand while simultaneously the fingers of her right seized him around the neck. She carried the strength of her attack through, thrusting him back on stumbling feet until he slammed against the bulkhead behind him, dazed from the impact and choking as she tightened her hold on his throat and brought her face close to his. “I will tell you the truth,” she spat venomously, her breath hot on his cheek, “if you can tell me why it should be only me.”

“My – lo--” Quinn gagged and sputtered, gasping for air and not understanding.

“Why,” Astridel pressed on, her words and anger frothing from her in a torrent she could not stop now that its chains were loosened, “should it be only me left with this? Why should you be free of your crime while I must continue to live with it? Why should you be rewarded with ignorance and death, while I am not? Why,” she cried, wild with harsh ferocity, “should I be the only one who must continue to suffer?”

She yanked her hand away from his throat and jerked away from him violently, spinning sharply on her booted foot, unable to face him any longer and unwilling to let him see further how severely he had upset her. Why – why? Why could she not have kept herself apart from him, her remote calm untainted by his desperation; why had she let herself be susceptible to his bait? Why did he have such power over her, and what could she do to break his hold on her? Why couldn't she just have killed him and be done with the whole mess?

His legs weakened and staggered beneath him and he braced himself against the wall to keep himself from collapsing in a woozy heap. Distantly, over the thundering sound of his blood throbbing in his temples, he heard her say, in a voice more defeated than he had ever heard from her before – in a voice that stabbed him to the depths of his soul:

“You broke my heart, Quinn.”

- - - -

For a moment, the hum of the engines was broken only by the crackling sound of breaths drawn violently over hurt feelings and bruised tissues.

After a moment, Astridel, more in command of herself, said darkly, “It’s my turn now, Quinn.” She
rotated slowly to face him where he stood, leaning on the wall where she had left him. “My turn to ask why. Were my demands of you unreasonable? Did I ever mistreat you? Was I too harsh, or unfair?”

“No, my lord,” he whispered, his voice rasping.

“You made captain, and captain, second grade, while in my service; you had two promotions in barely more than a year. Was my influence insufficient to advance your career?”

“No, my lord.”

“Then what was it? Where did I go wrong? What flaw was there in my philosophy of my treatment of my crew?”

“There – there was none, my lord.”

“I refuse to accept that. What makes you so eager for death now? Why are you demanding my answers to your questions?” Her voice sharpened as she rapped out, “Tell me!”

“My lord – ” Quinn swallowed hard, his words sticking in his aching throat.

“Answer!”

Quinn jerked himself upright, hating the wall that supported him for making him appear so cowed before her. “My lord,” he growled savagely through gritted teeth and clenched jaw, “did it never occur to you that I needed to know?”

“Know what?”

“If – ” His voice cracked; he inhaled with a noise of frustration and tried again, spitting out, “if all I am to you is just a servant who is occasionally permitted to warm your bed!”

Struck by this unexpected retort, Astridel froze, astonished.
“That I needed to know whether,” he added brokenly, “there is any difference between Pierce and I. To know whether you ever loved me like how I love you. The way I always have.” His voice snagged in something he refused to admit was a sob. “And always will.”

Astridel was still immobile, shock petrifying her entire body.

“You never said it,” he accused harshly. “You never said it.”

“A difference between Pierce and you – !” Astridel echoed, aghast. She shook away her torpor with a brusque movement of her head, then asked pitilessly, “Why do you think I slept with Pierce?”

“If it was for no other reason than to hurt me, my lord, then I am happy. So ought you to be, for it worked,” he confessed.

“Happy?” she repeated in clipped tones.

“That you feel enough for me, even if what you feel is hate, to want to wound me. That you wanted to betray me as thoroughly as I betrayed you. I was never sure, before, what you felt, if anything,” he lamented. “You never assured me of it. Only once, Astridel, just once on Belsavis, when I practically had to force it out of you. And I was sufficiently a fool to tell myself that that would be enough! That I never needed more!”

When Astridel replied at last, her voice surprisingly thoughtful. “And yet you did,” she observed. “But you never told me so.”

“What good would that have done?” Quinn asked fatalistically. “I wanted you to say it because you wanted to. Not because I manipulated you into it.”

Astridel bowed her head a little, slowly running her hand along the smooth surface of the back of the command chair headrest. “It's true, I never made any declaration aloud,” she said at length. “But assurance? That's another matter. Didn't I, though, in a thousand other ways?”

Quinn hesitated, suddenly overcome by memories and shame in successive hot waves, contrasting with the cold of the bulkhead wall hard against his back. He thought of how she so often had chosen
him to accompany her on her missions. Her approving praise that had made him strive so hard to be worthy of it. The smile that she would share with him that he never saw her grant to anyone else. The way she had thrown him out of danger on Quesh, with power she could have used to protect herself. The times she had allowed him to lift the veil that kept her masked to the rest of the galaxy, and the feeling of her fingers caressing idle patterns on his bare skin. The unexpected, trusting serenity of her features as she dozed on his shoulder after sating their hunger. The way she had trembled in his arms the first time he had held her naked against him. How could he have obsessed over a few tiny words when he had had such evidence before him? Why had they blinded him to what he’d had; how could he have let bitter doubt fester in his heart?

“And this,” Astridel marveled softly, “this is why you betrayed me. Because I had not said, ‘Quinn, I love you,’ in so many words.” Astridel shook her head. “Oh, Malavai, you are a bastard. Betrayal for such an insignificant thing.”

“My lord – ” He broke off, uncertain.

“Yes?”

“It was not insignificant to me,” he whispered. Quinn, miserable, could say no more. He waited for her derision, for her dismissal of his adherence to form and propriety, things that would have given their relationship the stability and structure that would have steadied him in the face of greater trials. To his surprise, there was no sign of it.

“No,” she mumured, "I see that now."

Chapter End Notes

Quinn finally gets what he's been after - much good may it do him.

I had much of last chapter, this one, and the next written for months, at least, with minor revisions and edits happening periodically right up to posting. There were certain points I wanted to hit, and in order for them to make sense in the broader scope of the narrative, it meant that when I was filling in the interim chapters, I had to be sure I included certain enough details to set the stage for these things to mesh in later on.
“But this wasn’t the only part of it,” Astridel speculated, breaking the tension of the moment that hung dark and silent in the air between them. “For all the misunderstandings, there still was a catalyst. Darth Baras.”

Quinn pursed his lips, a sensation of violent hatred rising within his chest so abruptly it felt like his tissues had melted into fire. It was a fully automatic and visceral response, one that caused his stomach to churn again with disgust and revulsion, and Astridel sensed it.

“Yes, the third person in our relationship, as much as I tried to shoulder him out.” Astridel sighed with a heavy, melancholy sound, and sank slowly onto the edge of the command chair. “Do you think I didn’t know?”

“My lord?” Quinn stammered. He stared at her, marking the deep lines of exhaustion and sorrow imprinted around her mouth.

“When I arrived on Balmorra, Baras made it clear to me that you were his man. This would not change just because he assigned you to my retinue. For one as paranoid as Baras, it was a perfect opportunity for him to plant a spy in the ranks; he has always played a long game, and would have foreseen a time when he would need a closer watch on me. As matters between Baras and I deteriorated, I hoped to secure your defection from his camp to mine.” Astridel pursed her lips. “I did everything I could think to do. I ensured your promotion, I advanced your career. I gave you my attention, I gave you my respect, I gave you my trust. I even,” she admitted sadly, “gave you my heart, along with my body. And none of it was enough.”

Quinn stared at her uncomprehendingly. Then, with a wince, he staggered to the console nearest him and dropped into the chair, his legs no longer sufficient to support his own weight. “You... you knew, my lord? That I would betray – ”

“I knew you belonged to Baras. I only suspected the consequences. I had hoped to avert it,” she conceded. “And then, even if I doubted my own senses, there was Jaesa.”

Jaesa, of course. The padawan with the fabled power to read the secrets written on the souls of all around her. Quinn dropped his face into his palm, barely smothering a pained groan. But even without Jaesa’s confirmation, Astridel had drawn her own conclusions. She never yet had been a
“Do you recall,” Astridel spoke again, “that night after my existence as Baras’ apprentice was revealed to Darth Vengean?”

“Yes, of course.” Quinn looked up at her quickly. There was no way he could have forgotten – the first night he had been allowed into her chamber, and allowed deeply into her confidence.

“Then you must recall how carefully I explained that Darth Baras would cut down every one of his adherents without rationale or pause.”

“Yes.”

“Quinn, I was already perfectly familiar with every single reason and conclusion I outlined to you that night. I didn't need the explanation. I didn't need convincing. All of that was for your benefit. It wouldn't have mattered if you had succeeded in killing me; it would never matter how true you were to him. Baras would still destroy you, sooner or later. I hoped you would see that your future lay with me, not with him.”

Feeling sick, Quinn scrubbed a hand over his mouth. Even that far back, she had guessed. All this time, she had been hoping, striving, bending all her efforts to sway him, and he had undercut them all while she watched, disappointed in him and his choices. All along, fucking hell, all along, she had known, and all along, this whole thing had been nothing but a stratagem, a ploy to ensure his loyalty. He felt a jet of anger flare within his shame, damning him for a fool. All along, a ruse – except –

Except for that rending confession that he had torn from her, that terrible, fractured admission that proved this had been more than just her scheme: You broke my heart, Quinn. In that was the precious, fragile truth, battered and buried under the wreckage. Whatever she had started this as, and whatever he had done to it now, it was real, or had been, and that was the cruelest stab of all.

“And now, should I destroy you because you proved yourself loyal to your original oath, and so could not uphold your oath to me when they came into conflict?” Astridel wondered aloud. “I wrestle with the question without end or solution. Should I execute you for being too loyal to Baras? Because, in short, you are too honorable?”

“I don't know, my lord,” Quinn shook his head helplessly.
“Baras never deserved a loyalty as strong as yours,” she observed. “My inability to transfer that loyalty to me is something I will count among my greatest failures until my dying day.”

“It's not your fault,” Quinn murmured. “There's more to the story than you know.”

“Then you had better tell me the whole.”

He swallowed, taking a moment to organize his thoughts. “My lord, you know I have a brother?”

“No, I didn't.”

“Now you do: I have a brother. Two years my senior. He was Force-sensitive.”

“Was?” Astridel caught the use of the tense. “He no longer lives?”

“I suppose I should say he is Force-sensitive; he is still alive, but in the state he is in, he might as well not be,” Quinn said bitterly. “He was not exceptionally strong in the Force, but he went to the Academy on Korriban, as required. We were very proud; the first Quinn to become a Sith.”

“I gather it didn't go well.”

“There were rivalries, as there always are. He had attached himself to another acolyte, a powerful one, one who had enemies. Those enemies decided to strike this acolyte's supporters, including Callirum – including my brother. He was no match for them; he couldn't be.” Quinn's brows drew down, creasing his forehead at the memory of when the news had been brought to them, along with the devastated ruin that was only barely recognizable as his brother, and in response to that the terrible cry his mother had made as she collapsed. Consumed with recollection, he stared at a seam in the deck plating without really seeing it.

“They didn't have the mercy to kill him. They left him alive, crippled in body, shattered in mind. The Academy quietly agreed to ship him home,” Quinn reported vacantly. “We once thought he would be a Sith. Now he will never be anything.”

“And Baras found out.”
Quinn started, yanked from his painful memories by her voice. “You understand, my lord, how anxious we were to keep my brother's disaster secret. We gave out that he had been killed, and kept him in a secure location. He has outbursts; he can be violent... but our mother could never bring herself to let him go. She made me swear to protect him. I send money, now and again,” he added softly. His features hardened abruptly. “It seems that failure and disgrace run strong in the sons of the Quinn family.”

Astridel made no answer; she appeared to be absorbed in her own thoughts. Her mind had called up the childish face of Selestine, her long-gone twin who had no Force to protect her, and so had relied on Astridel to guard her. Callrum had had that ability, and yet now was nearly as dead as Selestine, practically a living corpse, and maddened into the most dangerous kind of creature: one with the power of the Force but none of the sense or capacity to control it. And the task of protection, executed more aptly than her ten-year-old self had done, fell to a man with no Force ability whatsoever. Sometimes, it felt as though the galaxy had a sick sense of humor. Hesitantly, Quinn ventured to intrude.

“My lord – ?”

She raised her head. “I was only considering, Quinn, that it seems my philosophy regarding my crew was not, in fact, as wrong as I feared it might have been. I just didn't have all the facts. I thought I had only your fealty to Baras to contend with. I didn't know I was up against a mother and a brother as well. That changes things. Had I known, there were other steps I could have taken.”

“I'm sorry, my lord, that I kept it from you. I'm sorry for everything I have kept from you,” he confessed earnestly. “But my lord – if you suspected that I could betray you, why did you continue to give me so much leeway?”

“For the same reason you balked at forcing me to say I loved you,” Astridel answered reasonably. “If you were going to not betray me, it would have meaning only if it was your choice. My intervention might have kept you from committing your treason, but it would not have changed your intention.”

“Was that the only reason, my lord?” Just another one of her capricious rules of governance?

Astridel regarded him for a long moment, considering how bracing for the blow had not made it hurt any the less. “No,” she confessed at last. “I believe... On some level, I believe I wanted to see if you had the nerve to go through with it.”
“My lord!”

“On the one hand, I'm furious that you did. On the other,” Astridel hesitated. “On the other, you know some part of me has always appreciated your boldness. Or would, if you hadn't made such a hack job of it.”

“You were kind enough to say that you had to work for your victory.”

“I did say it, and I did have some work – to a degree. After all, did I not tell you once that it was your task to keep me on my toes?”

“You used moves I had never seen before.” Quinn paused, rapidly running through his memories of the awful event. “If you suspected me all along, my lord, then am I correct in guessing that you deliberately refrained from using certain tactics in front of me, so that I would not know all of your skill?”

“Yes. It wasn't always easy, concealing some of my strongest moves in other battles so you would not know of them.”

Quinn buried his brow in his palm, so burned with shame that he couldn't look at her. In everything, she'd had the upper hand. “Stars above, I am an ass.”

“Yes, you are,” Astridel confirmed. “The droid plot was overly complicated; I hope I have not also been wrong in my assessment of you as a strategist. Were you trying to fail? If my death were so critical, why did you not simply stab me in my sleep? You had opportunity.”

He blanched, the crimson of his humiliation draining from his face to leave him a ghastly pale hue. “No,” he shook his head feebly, revolted at the idea. “No, my lord, no – no, I could never – ! No.”

She gauged his reaction with interest. His aversion was authentic, down to the core of his being. Every sinew in his body shrank from the idea of cold-blooded murder in a bed jointly warmed by their bodies; there was something about that time that was inherently sacred to him, and he could not bear to contemplate it being stained by the conniving schemes of Darth Baras. As she looked at him, she felt her heart throbbing painfully within her breast, aching with the acknowledgment of all that they had lost, but yet, for the first time, without the tortuous twisted agony that had marked each beat since the disaster.
“I think we understand each other somewhat better now,” Astridel mused quietly. There was a sort of finality to her tone that made Quinn almost wish again for the rage and fury to pour down on his head.

“Yes, my lord,” he answered heavily. His eyes glittered feverishly in the dull, dark hollows of his face. “But what does this mean for us?”

“I don't know, Malavai,” she sighed. “I really don't.”

Chapter End Notes

Annnnnnd the other shoe drops.

Seriously, with such a force as Jaesa on hand, why wouldn't the SW have used her to investigate the crew, especially after the mystic's warning? If Jaesa came up empty, then the SW knows that either the Voss mystics are NOT always right, or that Jaesa was lying, making Jaesa the likely traitor. If Jaesa uncovered the truth by reading the crew, the SW could either believe it at face value, or conclude that Jaesa was still the traitor and was deflecting suspicion on to another. Either way, when coupled with a Sith's ability to sense the emotions and mental states of those around them, it would provide a compelling, if circumstantial, case - at least enough to ensure the SW would be on their guard.

There are some players who do hold that Quinn, consciously or subconsciously, sabotaged his own plan, largely because the fight against the droids is, honestly, not especially difficult. Certainly, his estimate of a 1% survival rate is way way way off. Some interpret this as him working against himself, evidence of the reluctance to betray the SW, despite the bravado of his words before the fight. It also doesn't do much to engender confidence in him as a tactician, which is why I chose a slightly different tack: Quinn is not the originator of the droid plan, Baras is, using information that Quinn supplied.

Quinn could then say that the droids are programmed using his information and calculations, but then only as they have passed through the arrogance of Baras' filters in between, with Quinn only either adding final touches or basing his calculations off what Baras reports back to him of the droid's abilities. This leads to a watering-down of the programming, with multiple layers of misinformation between Baras, Quinn, and the droids, making the droids easier for the SW to destroy but without completely undermining Quinn's reputation (and established history) as a strategist - particularly when he could, as Astridel states, simply have stabbed her in bed, given his unrestricted access to her person.

The plan to have Quinn kill the SW must be a recent scheme for Baras, otherwise, the same effect could have been accomplished simply by forcing Quinn not to function in his role as a healer, or by replacing kolto with poison; this meshes with the feeling that
the droid plot is rather hastily thrown together. The complicated nature of the droid plan
smacks of Sith scheming; it would let Baras claim the crew, including Quinn, as his
property, whereas if Quinn had killed the SW on board, it would be likely that Jaesa or
Vette would have killed Quinn instantly in revenge and fled, depriving Baras of several
slaves with advanced skills. Also, given Quinn's conflicted state of mind, an order from
Baras to murder the SW outright in her own bed would likely have been met with his
instant revulsion and rebellion, and Baras would have lost completely his influence over
Quinn - hence why I think he must have put him up to it under a false flag, after
prepping him that it would be a simple diversion that would delay Astridel, not kill her.

On a different note: Those who have some rudimentary knowledge of Latin (I took a
year of it ages ago in high school) would recognize early on in the game that Malavai is
aptly named - "Mal" for "bad or wicked" and the ending "vai" somewhat akin to forms
of the verb "facio" (to do). I kept the same for his invented brother, Callirum: callidus,
meaning cunning, skillful, clever, or crafty, and rumpo, meaning a break or fracture. So,
while Malavai's name becomes "to do bad," Callirum is "broken skill," with both names
hinting at their fates.
“Ok, seriously, what kind of Darth puts his secret headquarters in the middle of Republic territory?” Vette asked as she peeked around the corner. A solitary Sith guard, a Zabrak an underling downstairs had referred to as Lord Haresh, prowled before the access elevator to Darth Vowrawn’s inner chambers.

“Aside from an exceptionally ballsy one?” Astridel replied rhetorically. “I don't know, but I expect we will shortly find out.”

Lord Haresh was predictably skeptical of Astridel's claim that the schism between herself and Baras was authentic, but was so steadfastly loyal to Vowrawn that Astridel couldn't help but genuinely regret the necessity of his death. While she had always had a solid appreciation for the currency of loyalty, its value had understandably risen as a result of her recent experiences. It appeared it was an appreciation that Darth Vowrawn shared.

“Stand down,” Vowrawn commanded the trio of Sith lords that comprised his personal guards, about to throw the weight of their combined strength against Astridel. Vowrawn paused, noting how Astridel's sabers were hung still on her belt, their blades unlit and their threatening growls silent beneath her folded arms. If death had come for him, it was for him alone.

“Thank you for sparing them,” Vowrawn continued, his tone conversational and light. He might have lost the game, but he had played it well. There would be no grudges or heartburning, and certainly no begging. It would be unbecoming for a pureblood Sith, particularly one of his proud status. “They will not be a problem for you or your master.”

“I'm not here for-” Astridel began.

“I applaud you,” Vowrawn continued as if she had not even spoken. “Convey my congratulations to your master for your superior game play. The kill is yours. I ask only that I not suffer the indignity of decapitation.”

Somewhat exasperated, Astridel tried again. “The kill is not mine. I'm not here for your head, unless it remains firmly attached to the rest of your body. I understand your suspicion, but if you wish to remain among the living, I suggest you stop assuming and start listening.”
Vowrawn raised a fleshy eyebrow above the gold filigree of the jewelry clamped to the bridge of his nose. “Well! I think that's enough to get my attention.”

“Baras is not my master,” Astridel stated flatly. “My goal is to bring him down.”

“No, that is a surprise,” Vowrawn observed with equal parts amusement and skepticism. “Nothing more can be gained by maintaining the deception... then the rift is credible!”

“Assassination attempts tend to have that effect, yes,” Astridel replied drily. “Mine, not yours.”

“Ah, if this is true,” Vowrawn said, almost chortling, “then the game is renewed! And the pieces are arrayed across the board quite differently!”

Astridel was just opening her mouth to respond when a faint noise caught her ear – the tinny and high-pitched whine of a thermal detonator just arming to blow. “My lord!” she shouted, flinging Vowrawn to the floor just as the explosion tore through the room. Baras' third assassin had made his move.

Without pausing to regard Vowrawn's personal guard, Astridel leaped to her feet, her sabers already in her hands and their blades thirsty for blood. Grimly determined, she closed with the bounty hunter, deflecting his blaster bolts, and striking at him viciously. It was only when the assassin fell that Astridel realized she had been fighting alone.

One of Vowrawn's guard was unconscious, another was too badly injured to be of much help, and the third crouched between his lord and the assassin, a final line of defense should Astridel fail to block his lethal shots. Vowrawn was shaken, but not greatly injured, while Vette –

“Vette!” Astridel shouted, hurrying to her oldest friend and dropping to her knees. The young twi'lek was curled on the floor, her arms wrapped protectively across her torso, from which protruded a sharp and deadly piece of shrapnel. At Astridel's touch, Vette made a small whimpering noise.

“It... actually – kind of tickles, my lord,” she mumbled as Astridel hastily jabbed a shot of kolto near the wound. She didn't dare touch it directly; if she moved the shrapnel, Vette would likely bleed out in a matter of minutes.
“That assassin had me dead to rights,” Vowrawn marveled, picking himself up from the floor, “and you did not hesitate to defend me... nor did your friend, to her detriment. Her loss is regrettable.”

“She's not dead yet,” Astridel snapped. “But we all may end up that way if we stay. Your sanctum is compromised, Darth Vowrawn. We cannot stay here.”

“My friend, I am convinced,” Vowrawn conceded. “Both on your claim and your assessment of our situation.”

“It won't take long for Baras to dispatch more assassins,” Astridel claimed, lifting Vette to her unsteady feet with an encouraging noise. “Relocate to my ship. My crew will join your personal guard in protecting you.”

It was not very long after this that Quinn, on board the Fury, docked in an Imperial-controlled hangar in Coronet City, heard the familiar hum of the gantry ramp descending, and the confused sound of voices – several voices. On his feet instantly, he had just descended the steps from the bridge when he met Astridel mounting the stairs from the hatch door, half-carrying Vette who was a ghastly shade of sickly gray. Behind them hustled a refined and imposing-looking pureblood Sith and a number of half-battered lesser lords.

“Quinn,” Astridel ordered at a word, already halfway to the med bay. With his Imperial training, he was, after all, the most experienced medic on the ship; it was only logical that she would call for him – but nonetheless, some part of him took pleasure in it. He was not as useless as he had feared he might be. She still needed him. She still relied on him.

“Jaesa,” he urged swiftly as he passed her emerging from her quarters, “please see to our guests.”

Jaesa looked briefly taken aback, but covered her surprise. Her master had ordered that ship operations not be disrupted, and throwing a petulant temper tantrum in front of what was likely Darth Vowrawn of the Dark Council himself was not wise. She recalled Astridel's assessment of the necessity of the Dark Council's support. And, come to think of it, Quinn had said please. Jaesa stepped forward and bowed to the Darth as Quinn pursued Astridel into the med bay where Vette was already groaning, barely conscious, on the medical bed.

“She'll be fine, my lord,” Quinn assured, rapidly scanning the readouts of the medical monitors as they chirped to life. Even he, he realized, would be deeply saddened if Vette died; for all that he had once found her an annoying and overly-talkative piece of work, he had now a much higher opinion of her: she was highly skilled, infectiously cheerful, and faultlessly loyal. The same could hardly be said of him. Setting his jaw, he cut away the shreds of Vette's coat and grabbed the strongest
medpac in stock. It was not an easy process; even with the advantage of the medical equipment, the metal embedded in her stomach still posed a very real hazard to her, and she required a great deal of treatment to stabilize her before he could even think about removing the shrapnel. Those were the tensest moments; the stretching seconds between when he had removed the ribbons of metal and when the kolto kicked in sufficiently to seal the vessels relentlessly pumping blood into the vacancies of her chest cavity.

“Vowrawn's guard could use the once-over, too,” Astridel said breaking the long silence that had reigned since he began.

“Of course, my lord,” he answered at once. When the last one had been patched up with kolto, he dared to raise his direct gaze to Astridel. “And you, my lord?”

She waved a hand. “Mere scrapes,” she said dismissively. Quinn gave her a boldly wry look, his eyes flicking askance pointedly to the deepest of the fresh, scorched gouges across her armor, clear signs of damage that had penetrated the sturdy protection it offered. Would she, then, place Vette's survival in hands she would refuse to permit to touch her and her lesser injuries?

“Very well,” Astridel sighed with a touch of bad grace, plunking herself down on the vacant medical bench beside the bed where Vette lay senseless but out of danger. She unfastened her armor, rolled back her sleeves, and waited to see what he would do. Firmly determined to be nothing less than professional, Quinn took up the jar of kolto and got to work, his cold fingers applying the colder ointment to the blaster burns on her forearms.

“Any others, my lord?” he inquired, and she she did not immediately answer, he demurely reminded her, “At such a juncture as this, my lord, it is imperative that you approach every confrontation in the height of health. There is –” he hesitated slightly, then pushed on, “– no disadvantage that Darth Baras will not exploit. You must give him none, my lord.”

“How very sensible,” Astridel observed in an impenetrable but keenly-edged tone that he could not read. Nonetheless, she lifted her arm and drew up the side of her shirt, revealing a fresh slice across her ribs, neatly bisecting the long thin line of the scar that was the remnant of her battle with Ekkage. Quinn held his breath to keep from making an audible noise as his memory assailed him – how she had crumbled before him, and her life then was more in his hands than it ever had been before or since, and the defiant measures he had taken to ensure her life was saved. How stupid he had been, how completely, utterly, wastefully stupid, to have allowed foolish temptation and fear to lead him into a plot to sacrifice the life he had once made such an effort to save. He hoped she would not notice the nervous flutter in his chilly hands as he smoothed the kolto gently over her warm skin; it would be a rare occasion, a long time in coming, before he might ever touch it again.

“There, my lord,” Quinn said quietly, stepping back and straightening. “Didn't lose you.”
“It will take more than this, Quinn,” Astridel answered, hopping lightly down from the table and brushing her shirt back into place.

“I'm certain of that, my lord.” He wiped his hands and followed her out into the lounge.

“You have quite a crew here,” Vowrawn proclaimed in his habitually pleasant manner at the sight of Astridel. “I have been quizzing them on their exploits, and yours; the list is impressive – more extensive than what I had heard, and I pride myself on keeping well-informed. Baras is a fool to have wasted you.”

“And yet, I cannot say that I regret that he did,” Astridel replied with a smirk, earning an approving nod from the Darth. “I invite you and your guards to make yourselves at home. The ship's droid is our steward; he will bring you anything you need. You are, of course, entitled to use my quarters while on board.”

“Oh, by no means!” exclaimed Vowrawn, raising both hands. “I would not usurp your very bedchamber!”

“Then allow me to offer the use of the crew bunkrooms,” Astridel offered. “Pierce and Quinn can move temporarily into the hold with Broonmark. Jaesa?”

“It's fine,” said the young apprentice. “I'll be in the med bay with Vette all night, so our room will be open.”

“Such graciousness!” Vowrawn nodded with appreciation. “Very well, we accept your generous hospitality.”

“Quinn,” Astridel turned to the captain. “You and Jaesa work out what adjustments will need to be made to the duty roster while Vette is recovering. One on alert on the bridge monitors at all times; we cannot assume that we will be untouchable here. But ensure enough time for sleep in the rotation that anyone will be available to accompany me tomorrow.”

She had not made up her mind yet who that task would fall to; there was no doubt in her mind that Baras would not give up in his hunt for Vowrawn. Just because Astridel had defeated the three assassins that the Hand had known about did not mean that there weren't more on the Darth's trail; it was as imperative to have strong, trustworthy fighters at Vowrawn's side as it was to have one at her
“At once, my lord,” Quinn assented. As he headed to the bridge behind Jaesa to enact the necessary changes, Vowrawn settled onto the lounge sofa to prepare Astridel for the next steps to topple Baras' tower of ambition. Quinn's innate instinct for strategy itched for him to remain, or at least to eavesdrop, that he might know the details of the plan, or could offer his insights, and it was with difficulty that he fought the temptation. His lord had given him an order, first and foremost, and beyond that, she might rightfully resent his interference. Would not snooping on the contents of their conversation, even if he came to know them through legitimate channels later, be just another example of his untrustworthiness?

There had been progress already, progress he was loath to jeopardize; when he had left the bridge after their torturous confrontation, Jaesa had emerged from the cargo hold and made a motion to follow him, prepared to resume the surveillance she felt Quinn had more than fairly earned. But Astridel, standing palely in the hatch to the bridge, had briefly raised her hand in a tired, arresting gesture.

"It's okay," she had stated calmly. "Let him go. He is entitled to his privacy."

It was a concession that surprised him, almost as much as the unexpected revelations of their conversation. Now that she had fathomed his motivations and taken the measure of his remorse, she found no cause for continued observation she had noted her crew keeping on him. He posed no danger now - but that didn't mean that all had been forgiven and forgotten. That, Quinn knew, might be something that would never come to pass. But he would try for it. For as long as it took, until his death, even, he would try. As he had lain awake that lonely night, his ears ringing with Pierce's snores in the bunk against the other wall, his exhausted brain had found a strange and blackly humorous irony in the whole thing: Astridel had once puzzled over what method she needed to employ to ensure his loyalty. She likely had not expected that it would be his betrayal of her that would ultimately secure it forever. But he would never earn back her respect if he did not respect her wishes first.

He made an effort, blotted the Sith's conversation in lounge from his attention, and got to work.

Chapter End Notes

One problem - a small one, admittedly - with the timing of the Quinncident (love that term) is that it leaves very little time in the main story for Quinn to earn back the trust he broke. I found it a bit jarring, particularly when I had the "let's get married" conversation happen at very close to the same point. It just didn't flow well.
Baras' web of plots on Corellia were as extensive as Astridel had expected they would be. Two of his top-level enforcers were currently on the planet: one a spymaster who collected the secrets Baras used as leverage to ensure the support of members of the Dark Council, and the other, a Sith hidden amongst Jedi, directing Republic forces against lords who failed to fall in step behind Baras. After learning this news from Vowrawn, Astridel sat up late in her quarters, mulling over her personnel problem.

It wasn't that she doubted Vowrawn's guards – far from it; he knew his people, and had explicit trust in them. But they were unknown quantities, operatives whose ways and means she did not know, and who did not know her, her crew, or the Fury. In that unknown quantity lay the danger – Vowrawn's guards could be trusted to protect him, but nothing beyond that. They were not obligated to, simply put, which meant that in the scheme of crew assignments, they were non-entities. With Vette temporarily out of action, that left her with four for her to distribute between herself and Vowrawn's protection detail.

Pierce and Jaesa were the best fighters, eager for battle. Their strength in the protection of Vowrawn would be invaluable; left on the Fury, Jaesa might find a study of Vowrawn's more complex and subtle ways beneficial, while Pierce's knowledge of Corellia would be useful should the Darth need to be moved in an emergency. Broonmark was nearly as strong, and strikingly single-minded when given an order. Side-by-side, Broonmark and Pierce together made a wall of incredible durability.

But if these three were left to guard Vowrawn, that left her with Quinn. And, as disgusted as she was with herself for the cowardice, she wasn't ready for that. There was honesty between them now, but not trust. But even that was not the real reason, she confessed to herself as she sat on her rug, sunk in her introspective meditations. Since the betrayal, she had shrunk from examining her hurt too closely; she prodded it enough to inflame it, to harass and worry it into a heat that seared her flesh, but never peeled back the layers to investigate what gangrenous infection had taken hold. Their confrontation had cut out much of the disease, exposing the wound to light and air and inspection, showing her what she had not wanted to see.

What she saw she did not like. She saw her own role in the catastrophe, she saw the heartlessness of eternally testing him when he had not even known he was under examination, she saw the depravity of having made a sort of game of his loyalty by paying out all the rope he’d needed to hang himself, she saw the unmitigated malice of her liaison with Pierce, and moreover, she saw that at least part of the reason she avoided him was due not to her anger with him, but to her fondness. On some level, she yet fretted that she was forgiving him too easily. In her drive to be as unlike Baras as possible, had she swung too far the other direction? Had her leniency left herself open to more such hazards? Would she have been as sparing if the life and loyalty in the balance had been Broonmark's or Pierce's, or even Jaesa's?
The question made her uncomfortable, as uncomfortable as the prospect of having Quinn at her side on the morrow, they both of them carrying on as if nothing had changed. Was avoiding that distraction actually cowardice, or just a sensible decision? It was easy to rationalize leaving him behind: Quinn's medical experience would be needed on the Fury should Baras' agents mount an attack; Pierce's knowledge of Corellia made him equally useful to her in the field as it did in securing a new hiding place if the Fury were compromised.

Her doorchime chirped, and Astridel tucked her robe securely around her as she rose to answer it, already knowing it was Quinn on the other side. He held out a data pad to her.

“The revised roster, my lord,” he offered respectfully. “Adjusted for our current priorities, and with multiple iterations depending on who will accompany you tomorrow.”

Astridel skimmed through it rapidly. “Very thorough, Quinn,” she replied without looking up.

“Thank you, my lord.”

“Tell me, Quinn, how is the crew handling this?”

Quinn hesitated before answering. What was she really asking? With her senses, she would have a better idea of the crew’s emotional state than anyone. “My lord, I cannot say that I am in a position where they are inclined to confide in me. However,” he added, flushing a little at the allusion to their circumstances, “I can speak to their skills. They are a seasoned crew; they are each in possession of unique talents. They are with you one hundred percent. We,” he emphasized, “are with you. Completely.”

“They might not be inclined to confide in you, but are they inclined to obey you?” Astridel asked unflinchingly.

“I confess, not especially, my lord,” Quinn pinched his lips together. “Pierce has always had trouble showing proper respect to a chain of command. Broonmark is a renegade. Jaesa acknowledges you as her master, and not much else. Vette's talent for operating outside the confines of law and order is something I hardly need to elucidate, my lord. But they have been observant of your order, and kept any dissent private.”

Astridel's quietly turned this over. While she still felt that informing the crew of Quinn's betrayal had
been the correct course of action, she had not anticipated a scenario such as this: a need for two
different undisputed leaders acting in agreement on two different fronts. At one time, Quinn would
have been the ideal choice to spearhead the protection of Vowrawn, but he was now as unsuited to
that role as he was to the role of accompanying her – and the responsibility for both of those
conditions lay largely on her own shoulders, despite Quinn's actions.

“Well, then,” she concluded, hefting her shoulders as she came to a decision. “While I am out, Jaesa
will be in charge. Offer her any of the same advice that you would to me; I will speak with her to
ensure she listens to it.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Quinn inclined his head. It made sense; in the past, when he had fought
alongside Astridel on her missions away from the ship, Jaesa took nominal charge of the Fury. But in
Astridel's words, it was clear he would not be with her on her mission. If not him, and not Jaesa, then
who?

“Alert Pierce that he will go with me tomorrow,” Astridel ordered. “That will not be a problem, will
it?”

“No, my lord,” Quinn answered, carefully neutral.

“It is imperative that there be a skilled medic in Vowrawn's protection detail,” Astridel continued.
“There is no doubt in my mind that Baras will continue to hunt him, and his survival is of paramount
importance. I believe I am making a wise decision in entrusting this task to you.”

Quinn looked down at her in surprise, his brain momentarily stumbling to catch up. Far from his
disgrace being emphasized, she was giving him an extraordinary token of faith – and given his
history, nearly blind faith. He had given her precious little reason to have such confidence in him; he
would have nearly uninhibited access to Vowrawn. If Quinn were truly loyal to Baras, if his
contrition were in fact all a ruse, then he would have ample opportunity to handily eliminate Baras'
most indomitable foe – most indomitable, that is, Quinn added mentally, apart from the notable
exception of his particularly recalcitrant apprentice. A small, painful feeling of warmth trembled in
Quinn's chest. Perhaps there was a ghost of a chance that trust could be restored, after all.

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Baras' undercover spymaster, deep in the ranks of the Republic Army, was the first to fall, and Quinn
felt an eager relief when Astridel sent word to Vowrawn that this prop had been knocked out from
beneath Baras. Vowrawn was positively gleeful: through some clever arguments and merely a scant
threat of death, the double-agent Senks had willingly handed over all the secrets he had collected on
the Dark Council members on Baras’ behalf, and, moreover, swapped his allegiances. He was clear-eyed enough to see to jump when a tower was on the verge of tumbling down. There had as yet been no sign of trouble at the *Fury*, and Vowrawn supplied Astridel with the location of his own counteroperative who could get her access to Baras’ second spy, hidden among the Jedi.

Jaesa listened intently – here was proof of exactly what Astridel had taught her: Sith so adept at masking their Dark leanings beneath a veneer of genuine adherence to the Light that even the Jedi they fought side-by-side with daily had no idea that one of their own was not one at all. The potential for devastating the banal Jedi orders from within using such a tactic lent an avid thirst to her eyes; shut up within the ship for days while others had the joy of the kill was frustrating, despite the diversion of the company of four skilled Sith lords. To have the chance to battle an entire group of Jedi – to crush them under her heel, to relish their screams as they died! Jaesa’s mouth almost watered at the thought.

What she hardly knew was that, at that moment, Astridel had just finished tricking Baras’ hidden agent into revealing herself. There was no fight, no great and glorious battle, just a terse and brutal execution. The Jedi stared in shock, first, that one of their number had been a Sith, hidden for years, and second, that they now were in the awkward position of owing their lives to another Sith – one who was entirely uninterested in them, their mission, or their lives. If they raised their blades against her, surely she would fight, but, unhindered, she would walk out of their midst without a second thought. The Jedi hardly knew what to make of it.

“Sith business,” Astridel said with a toss of her hand. No further explanation was needed.

Jaesa, caught between her daydreams of battle and her desultory conversation with Vowrawn and his retinue, jumped in alarm as Quinn burst suddenly into the lounge from the bridge.

“Ready yourselves,” he ordered, hoping that his news and manner would be sufficient to override concerns about his authority. “The proximity alarm has been tripped.”

“Anything on the monitors?” Jaesa inquired.

“No – but I’m not dismissing it as a false alarm without verification,” Quinn answered tensely, drawing his blaster and giving it a glancing inspection.

“What would you have us do, Captain?” Vowrawn inquired with his usual serene good humor as his trio of guards clustered closely about him.
“Please stay here, my lords,” he requested. “I'm going out to investigate.”

Broonmark hooted suspiciously.

“Protect Darth Vowrawn,” Quinn replied. There was a strained moment, and Quinn belatedly took in the appearances – an alarm that only he had seen, followed by his solitary departure from the ship – it could be construed as another trick, a plot to escape the group and rejoin Baras' forces, even a means of letting an assassin on board. “Or come along,” he invited. “A second set of eyes and your sense of smell would be a help.”

Broonmark shadowed him closely as he crept down the ramp, alert to danger. All seemed quiet, but he was still on edge; his senses on overdrive and a feeling of danger in the air that he could not dismiss as merely his imagination. His wariness was validated as Broonmark yowled a buzzing roar, flinging himself flat in response to a barrage of bolts that hissed lethally past. There was a second buzz farther off, more vicious in its growl: the unmistakable sound of a lightsaber blade snarling into existence.

“Back on board!” Quinn gasped, scrambling to gather his hands and feet beneath him in the shelter of one of the *Fury*'s landing gear. A meager glance was enough to tell him they were vastly outmatched to face a frontal assault. “At once!”

He swung out from behind his protective pillar to lay down cover fire as Broonmark charged up the ramp, hollering and howling his warning to those within. Quinn ducked back into safety as blaster fire chipped away at the metal supports of the ship around him, and wondered how he himself would reach the secure shelter of the ship. Broonmark had no blaster; he was partial to the hand-to-hand combat of his race, so could provide no cover. A sudden volley of shots whizzed by him, bright yellow and accompanied by the shout, “Quinn! Move it!”

He rolled aside, scuffing across the dirty floor of the hangar, and scuttled up the ramp as a flurry of bolts from the enemy erupted behind him. As the door slid shut behind him and the hum of the gantry ramp retracting filled his ears, Quinn found himself staring in surprise at Vette, ash-faced and breathing hard, her two blasters clutched in her hands.

“Well, lying around in the med bay isn't going to help, now is it?” she demanded practically in response to his look. She winced, pressing an arm to her side, but gamely declared, “I can still fight.”

He was grateful, and he hoped she knew it, but there was no time to spend on stating it. “A squad of two dozen soldiers, likely more,” Quinn announced, mounting the stairs into the lounge. “And at least one Sith lord.”
Broonmark's fizzing hum indicated he agreed with that assessment.

“But we should be secure in here, right?” Vette asked. “I mean, this ship is designed to withstand deep space!”

“No problem for a lightsaber,” Jaesa answered. “And a few well-placed thermal detonators-”

As if on cue, a violent roar rent through the air, and the ship rocked precariously on its landing struts, cutting off Jaesa's words.

“Oh, for fuck's sake,” she hissed beneath her breath.

As the echoes of the explosion died, it was replaced with a grinding noise – the sound of the gantry ramp being forcibly pulled from its securing clamps. Throughout the ship, klaxons shrieked and monitors flashed red with notifications of damage.

“We are out-manned and out-gunned,” Quinn reported, grim and urgent. “Our combined efforts could repel them but not without great loss of life – not without the possible loss of Darth Vowrawn.”

“Then you suggest we run like cowards?” Jaesa's lip curled derisively. The expression on her face plainly indicated she thought that a fitting reaction from him. She wanted a fight; she thirsted for blood.

“I suggest, Jaesa, that we ensure that Darth Vowrawn has a protected route to a secure location,” Quinn insisted. “If the ship is surrounded, their forces are somewhat dispersed, and we have the chance to break through. If we are cornered in our own ship with no recourse, then our deaths are certain. But if we go, we must go now.”

“There is an Imperial Outpost not far from here,” Vowrawn reasoned. “The commander has no love for Baras, I can assure you.”

Outside the ship, there was the sound of stomping footsteps, and the deafening, angry squeal of metal being ripped and bent.
“They’re cutting through...” Vette panted anxiously, bending to cradle the healing wound in her stomach. “Come on, Jaesa...”

“Okay!” Jaesa snapped. “Okay – the secondary hatch from the cargo bay. We go out that way – Vowrawn’s men to lead; Broonmark, you help Vette, and bring up the rear. Quinn - ”

“I will fight alongside you, of course,” Quinn answered in a tone that expected no argument. Jaesa naturally would not be able to resist the temptation to face the enemy; his own motivation was less self-aggrandizing, but no less selfish, rooted as it was in his fervent wish to be worthy of the task Astridel had commissioned on him. “To cover the Darth’s escape.”

Jaesa gave him a searching look for a moment, reading the depths of his heart and motivations. “Fine,” she agreed after a moment. Quinn promptly crossed to the armory door and began pulling out anything he could lay his hands on – spare blasters, thermal detonators, vibroknives – and handing them randomly to the outstretched hands of all nearby.

“What's that?” Vette asked as he clipped a cylinder a bit larger than his hand to his belt.

“Thermal imploder,” he answered resolutely. They were notoriously lethal, frequently destroying their wielder as well as their target, and so were generally banned across the galaxy for their indiscriminate destruction. Nonetheless, they were a popular item among black marketeers for the high price they would fetch. Her eyes widened, and she said no more, but hurried on limping legs to the cargo hold.

Broonmark blew their own cargo doors, relying on their explosive outward blast to flatten enough of the enemy to give them an avenue for their dash to safety. Simultaneously, the Sith assassin finished cutting through the front hatch, and was promptly greeted by the thermal detonator Quinn flung in the massive man's masked face. The assassin would be fooled only for a short time by the trick they had employed to ensure Vowrawn's escape, and that time must be extended by any delay he could generate to give Vowrawn as long as possible. It was not, Quinn saw, a battle they would win, but he was driven to acquit himself well in it, to prove to Astridel even in death that he would not fail her. Beside him, Jaesa spun her polesaber with lethal precision, as fiercely determined as he while he divided his attention between giving her cover and healing the hits the assassin struck through her armor.

“Pests,” the assassin snarled, as he suddenly sensed his true prey escaping him. He flung out his arm, tossing Quinn and Jaesa aside. Quinn rolled over several times, flailing to retain his senses in his rattled head. The assassin had already turned from them, he was about to escape, hurrying in pursuit of Vowrawn – it must not happen! Quinn thought fiercely. Not on my watch!
Dizzily, Quinn scrabbled to his feet, and without a second thought, yanked the thermal imploder from his belt, and armed and flung it in one smooth motion. In an instant, the air itself exploded, a concussive wave of power contracted and expanded the space above the assassin, but as the wave rolled with callous speed over him, striking him with nearly full force, Quinn was thrown for meters, and all knowledge of what happened next was gone.

Chapter End Notes

You have no idea how many times I've blown myself up with a thermal imploder on Star Wars: Battlefront. No. Idea. Seriously, there should be an achievement for it; it would be the one achievement I would have managed to get in my inglorious reign of the bottom of every scoreboard.

This is why I don't PvP.
“Get up!”

The voice sounded dim and far-off, through a dark haze of confusion and the high-pitched ringing in his ears.

“Come on, get up!”

Curious: given that it felt like he was being bodily shaken, how could there be such a distance between the hand – or foot? – nudging him and the voice's owner? Logically, it seemed to Quinn's befuddled reasoning that such a command was more likely to be ordered from right beside him, which made the discrepancy all the more bewildering. He felt his eyelids fluttering, struggling to open.

“Get up, damn you!”

A pale face floated above his unfocused vision, and it was only the sudden recollection that out here, in the open, Astridel would have been covered with her veil and battle mask that prompted him to bite off her name before it fully sprang from his lips.

“Jaesa?” he mumbled. He raised a bruised hand to his aching head. “How... how long?”

“Not very,” she answered. “I was able to shield you from some of it.”

He blinked in surprise, fumbling to pull himself into a sitting position. Dizzily, he stared at her through bleary eyes; he could feel the swelling setting in beneath the blood oozing down one side of his face. “You... did?”

“You healed me as I fought the assassin; I shielded us when you tried to blow us of the face of the planet,” she answered flatly. “As far as I'm concerned, we're even. Don't expect me to make a habit of it.”

“He took the brunt of it, but I didn’t sense him die. A handful his soldiers survived and were hustling him away. Another small group are pursuing Darth Vowrawn.” Jaesa folded her arms. “I’m going after them. Join me if you must, or sit here and rot; I don’t care. But they have earned their slaughter, and I mean to give it to them.”

Jaesa was already turning away, stalking with rapid steps after the soldiers; Quinn hauled himself to his feet, forcing down his stomach. While it was unlikely that a handful of Baras’ soldiers would pose a legitimate threat to Vowrawn’s guards, Broonmark, and Vette, it nonetheless would take only one survivor to reveal to Baras where Vowrawn had gone to ground. “Yes, I’m coming,” he coughed, tripping after her on unsteady legs. “Hold still a moment.”

“I don’t have a moment,” she snapped without slackening her pace.

Swearing beneath his breath, Quinn fished in one of his belt pouches, and, catching up with a stumbling trot, he swiftly grabbed her arm and jabbed a kolto shot into it. She whirled on him, about to rip into him for his presumption in touching her, then, realizing his purpose, shut her mouth so hard her teeth made a sharp clacking sound as they struck.

“You’re bleeding,” he pointed out. “And you don’t know what you’re walking into. The least you can do is let yourself be patched up, even if you have no plan.”

She pursed her lips in a graceless grimace, then grudgingly answered, “Thank you. And I do have a plan: pursue and destroy.”

“Then lead the way,” Quinn conceded. He wiped the blood from his face with his sleeve, and rapidly smeared a glop of kolto paste across his temple to hold back the worst of the bleeding. “I will back you up.”

Jaesa’s response was a noncommittal grunt of skepticism, but she made no overt objection, and merely restarted her chase at a brisk pace that required Quinn to break into a long loping stride to keep up. It was not difficult to follow the trail – here and there, along the buildings of Coronet City, fresh blaster marks smoked from the alley walls, clearly marking the path of retreat.

“There,” Quinn pointed. No more than half a dozen of Baras’ soldiers, laying down a cover of mortar
fire and high-energy bolts across an open space between two alleys, blocking Vowrawn's group from crossing to finish their rush to safety. Jaesa pulled her dualsaber from her belt, her face alight with the promise of savage battle.

“One moment,” Quinn held out a hand.

“What?” she demanded in a biting tone. “I don't need any more healing.”

“No, but did you notice the sniper?” he asked, pointing. Barely visible, a muzzle protruded obliquely from a tall fifth-floor window that was slid half-open, its lethal eye trained on the rubble behind which the group had dug in. “Even if you obliterate all of Baras' men, if we don't take out the sniper, Vowrawn dies. And with comm signals jammed all over the planet, we can't even raise them on holo to let them know the danger.”

“Then why don't Baras' soldiers stop firing, pretend to give up, and lure Vowrawn out?” Jaesa asked practically.

“They probably don't even know the sniper is there,” Quinn answered, searching through his pouches. “Baras never lets anyone have all the pieces of any of his puzzles; you know that. As soon as he discovered Vowrawn was on the *Fury*, he probably put snipers in place on every likely escape route. Have you a thermal detonator? I'm out.”

“No. A flash-bang, that's all,” Jaesa replied.

“It will have to do,” Quinn sighed, taking the small explosive from her hand. “Attack on my signal. You'll know it when you see it.”

“What are you doing?”

“Going after the sniper, of course,” he stated as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Cato Nemoidia.”

With that cryptic allusion, he ducked his head and scuttled around the corner of the building out of sight. Jaesa watched him go with narrowed eyes. Five minutes, she decided. She would give him five minutes, and then, sniper or not, every one of these lackeys of Baras' would be laid open by her blade.
Slightly more than half that time had passed when Quinn's signal came: the deafening percussion of the flash-bang erupting from the fifth-floor window, seguing to muffled blaster fire. Jaesa leaped instantly from cover, landing among Baras' soldiers like a manka cat among somnolent mynocks, all bloodthirst and claws. Two fell instantly, dead before they hit the ground, and Jaesa drank in the terror of the remainder as they realized their deaths were upon them.

Overhead, in the cramped and disheveled room that once had been some middle manager's office, Quinn was locked in hand-to-hand combat with the sniper, a woman in Mandelorain armor marked with countless indicators of her kills. The lights were out and the floor was covered with rubble, and, still aching from the impact of the thermal imploder, Quinn knew he was at a significant disadvantage. The flash-bang had helped with the element of surprise, but it was a crowd-control measure only: she was uninjured, and the visor of her helmet had protected her vision from the bulk of the stun grenade's blinding effects. In response, her first action had been to kick his blaster from his hand, forcing him to recourse to his vibroknife. His only hope of victory was to take her down quickly, but he feared that moment had already passed, and he was tiring rapidly. The fight couldn't last much longer – but if nothing else, his actions had forced the sniper's existence into the open. Broonmark, Vette, and Vowrawn would know to watch for more now. Astridel would know.

Astridel would know, he thought, as he lunged at the sniper, tackling her with a final desperate effort. Astridel would know, he thought, as the momentum of his attack carried them along, barreling them over the sill of the window, locked in combat. Astridel would know, he thought as he plunged earthward, entangled with the body of the Mandelorain sniper, his knife jammed at an angle beneath her mask and the blood streaming from her throat into his face. Astridel would know. He closed his eyes and waited for the impact. Astridel would know.

It wasn't at all like he thought it would be. At the last second, it felt like time had slowed, as though there were massive unseen fingers stretching out the world around him, prolonging the instant his life would be thrust out of his body. When he hit, it knocked the wind out of him, to be sure, but that was it. He opened his eyes wonderingly, gasping.

“Quite a show!” came a jovial voice. Darth Vowrawn's deep red face appeared above him. “You nearly didn't give me enough time to catch you, Captain. If that window had been any lower, the only thing we could do now would be to peel you off the pavement!”

No, time had not slowed – he had. Dazed at this unexpected outcome, Quinn slowly hauled himself to his feet, unable to speak.

“But I don't think there's a particular need for us to remain here longer,” Vowrawn was saying, his head swiveling to include Jaesa, Broonmark, and Vette. “It appears to me that you are quite out of enemies to dispatch. If there's nothing preventing us from continuing, then by all means: let's go.”
Within half an hour, they were securely holed up in a secret Imperial Outpost, and bumped to the front of the medical staff’s triage list, with Quinn and Jaesa addressed first. Vette had incurred no new injuries; her brief treatment meant she was on hand to answer Astridel’s call when she made contact a short while later.

“Hey there, my lord,” Vette greeted her tiredly. “Some bad news: a hit on the Fury, just as you predicted. Some super-fast, megapotent baddie. We’re with Vowrawn at a safe house in the Imperial Legislature. He wants you to meet us there.”

“Is everyone safe? Vowrawn?” Astridel inquired intently. She almost asked “Quinn?” but she caught herself and asked instead, “The crew?”

“Yeah. A little shaken up, but we're all accounted for. Still got all our parts, anyway,” Vette replied with a weak laugh. “Don't know about the ship, though. It was pretty brutal.”

“Stay there, and stay safe,” Astridel replied. “I'm on my way.”

When Astridel arrived at the safe house, deep in the Government District of Coronet City, she found Darth Vowrawn waiting for her.

“Ah, you made it!” he greeted her pleasantly. He was almost rubbing his hands together gleefully. “This is heating up, isn't it?”

“You could say that,” Astridel replied wryly. “Forgive me if I am less sanguine about it.”

“Oh, but you should be delighted!” Vowrawn exhorted her. “Baras has taken off the sparring gloves. This assassin was the most lethal to date. You've gotten under his skin, my friend. You've thwarted him at every turn, and there's nothing Baras hates more than a good thwarting.”

Astridel chuckled in spite of herself. She found herself truly liking this member of the Dark Council and his droll sense of humor.

“And my crew? Vette said there were no losses?”
“True, although they were not without injury. I congratulate you on selecting some truly talented individuals for your crew.” Vowrawn clasped his hands behind his back. “There was no panic, no confusion. To a man, your people stared into the face of death and did not flinch. They assessed their options, made their decisions logically, and executed their plans with bravery and skill. But I can see you wish to inspect your troops for yourself – come, this way.”

Vowrawn gestured for her to precede him through an adjoining door that led to what had once been a sort of parlor, now fitted up as a medical waiting room. Broonmark, lounging against the wall, straightened with a buzzing greeting as Astridel entered. Vette jumped to her feet, wan but overjoyed to see her friend, and Jaesa, with a wince, stood up somewhat more slowly. Last of all, Quinn, slumped over in exhaustion with his elbows on his knees, raised his head, revealing a face so bruised and a countenance so haggard that Astridel forced herself to hold back the gasp of alarm that nearly erupted from her lips. The medical staff had worked their wonders, but he yet ached all over, and he rose to his feet with an effort to mask the residues of pain that rippled through every muscle of his body.

“Every one of them a hero,” Vowrawn praised “Although I must say, Captain Quinn must be commended. He took on the assailant with no mortal concern.”

Behind her, Pierce shuffled his feet and folded his arms, giving Quinn a look of scorn as Astridel answered with meticulous neutrality, “On more than one occasion in the past, I have been grateful for Quinn's skills.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Quinn answered in a low voice. “I am... trying to make up for a past indiscretion.”

“What is our next move?” Astridel inquired, hurriedly steering the conversation away from dangerous channels. It was nothing Darth Vowrawn need know about, and his knowing it might cause his faith in her team to falter despite the recent proofs of their competence and fidelity.

Sensing it was better not to interfere with whatever lay beneath the surface of this group, in light of such positive results, Vowrawn shrugged off his curiosity. There were greater plots to unravel, after all.

“You've successfully neutralized Baras's top agents,” he nodded. “The end game is upon us. We have been reactionary; now we must go on the offensive.”
“Then Baras is our target?” Astridel assumed, her voracious hunger for revenge pulling her lips back from her teeth. “I’ve been waiting a long time for this.”

“All in good time, my eager friend,” Vowrawn cautioned genially, holding up a hand. “We’ve just reached the best part.”

“Better than standing on Baras’ throat with one foot and kicking off his mask with the other?” Astridel asked pointedly. Jaesa snickered.

Vowrawn himself laughed. “Point taken. But you will have the opportunity to see what very few have. In a secret lair on this planet, Baras has bound and indentured an ancient Sith spirit. She is an embodiment of the Dark Side itself. Baras feeds off this spirit's power, stealing all her visions of the future. Everything he has built comes from her insights. She is as old as the Force, and she must be freed. You have the power to break into his lair and clear the way to her, while only I know the ritual to unlock the spirit's bonds. Deliver me to her, and we will strike the ultimate blow and cripple Baras from within!”

Chapter End Notes

I was honestly surprised at how many readers had been eager to hear the details of how Quinn conducted himself in the attack on Darth Vowrawn! As I was writing the last chapter, I almost stripped out a lot of it, fretting that I was frittering away space on uninteresting events, but I'm so glad now I left it in!
“Six hours,” Astridel announced after Vowrawn had left the room. “You all get six hours to rest. Jaesa, will you be fit to accompany me to see this manifestation of the Dark Side for ourselves?”

“Of course, master,” Jaesa bobbed her head, her eager excitement glinting ghoulishly through the faintly luminescent kolto slathered across the bruises of her face. “I would be a fool to let such minor scratches keep me from such an opportunity.”

“I presume that, when we depart, any surveillance or agents of Baras will follow us,” Astridel reasoned. “In truth, they could hardly fail to. All of you, however, will be likely free.”

“Then you think the assassin will try again, m’lord,” Pierce speculated.

“Vowrawn and I, in the same place? Ignoring such a ripe temptation would be inexcusable,” Astridel scoffed, then her jaw set in a determined tension. “And I look forward to it. There’s a score here that needs settling. But that is my affair.

“It is imperative that the Fury is made fit for space flight as quickly as possible. When we free the Entity, Baras will likely know it, and will know I am coming for him. He will certainly try to forge ahead with whatever plan he has in contingency, so time becomes our enemy, not our ally. Whatever it takes, that ship must be ready to depart the instant I return.”

Astridel surveyed the slight nods she received in response, and her habitual saucy smirk flashed below the weights of her veil. “Or, if Baras’ assassin kills me, you’ll need the ship to make your getaway before you’re all slaughtered, too. But between you and me, that’s damned unlikely. Your six hours start now. Do what you will with them.”

“Forget six, I could sleep for sixty.” Vette mumbled to Broonmark as she followed the Talz out of the room towards the camp beds that had been set up in a makeshift barracks. Astridel watched her subdued crew departing, and she paused for a moment before Quinn, battered and exhausted in his chair.

“Quinn,” she ordered, but without an edge to her voice. He looked up, his dark eyes ringed with livid hues of weariness and pain, and waited for her command – one, when it came, he recalled he
had heard once before. “Get some sleep.”

“I'm not sure I could, my lord,” he answered honestly. During the crisis, his mind had shifted into an intense and fixated overdrive, and in spite of whatever his physical condition was, it remained there still, with all his senses converging on an acute alertness and his attention leaping rapidly between every thought and fragment of information he assimilated. Already, some portion of his brain was reviewing what he recalled of the damage to the *Fury*, estimating repair time and needs, guessing at the number of personnel available at the spacedock versus the number of personnel the job would require. And simultaneously, some part of him felt hurt and irritated at being once again passed over for the mission, while his reason scolded him for being ridiculous – in his current state, he was more of a liability than an asset, even if he had been still comfortably ensconced in the best of Astridel's good graces. Moreover, it was entirely logical for Jaesa to meet this Entity, both from the standpoint of her affinity for the Force and her ability in a fight against the assassin's inevitable next attack. To nurse this as a wound was equally foolish and selfish.

“Try anyway,” Astridel advised, not unkindly, as she walked away. He remained where he was, appreciating the comfort of the solitude, rare enough on a small ship and rarer still during his recently rescinded supervision, and continued to doubt his ability to obey.

The current hypersensitivity of his perception and susceptibility of his imagination had not omitted her in their scope; he fancied he could see her still before him, erect and proud and her peculiar beauty hidden to all but his memory of seeing her unmasked and unveiled. He had never classified her as conventionally pretty – in truth, he had never classified her as anything at all, as she so stalwartly defied any attempt at such – but she was unique and clear-featured, from the precise curve of her lips to the slight upturn of her nose, and the smooth crest of her cheekbones below her unnervingly wasted eyes. These qualities, coupled with her assured bearing and the native energy of her spirit, contrived to give her an allure he continued to find undeniable.

Her voice resounded in his ears, leaving him questioning whether her interest was merely related to her own ends, or if anywhere in it there could be the tiniest signal that her command had been, even in the tiniest part, born of concern for him, or even basic, boring gratitude for his efforts. In the wafting breeze of her passing, his nostrils were full of the faint scent of the leatheris lining of her armor, and beneath that, the odor of her exertions in the battles she had just left behind her, reminding him of the scent of that perspiration drying on her naked, lust-dampened skin. His fatigued legs could yet summon the energy to pursue her if he would only let himself, his enervated arms felt refreshed at the illusory prospect of enfolding her within them.

Quinn recognized all the symptoms of his old obsession, the thing of which he had not been cured, and had no wish to be. When his overzealous awareness finally faded, the exhaustion of his body would be enough to force him into unconsciousness, but until then, a bed held nothing for him but the torment of all his former fantasies, made worse by being now grounded in the reality of having touched her, held her, kissed her, wrapped her in his arms and let himself be rapt in her. That night on the foggy plain of Belsavis, he had been a truly happy man – a man who had, for an instant, had in his grasp all the things he had most wanted. Was there any chance he could have that once again?
As he had predicted, sleep was a tardy visitor, and one that did not care to linger.

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Astridel stared up at the Entity, a darkly glowing figure suspended in the mystical chains Baras had used to enslave her, and tried not to overtly display her awe. Her sense of the Dark Side was nearly overwhelmed here; even a Force-blind would have been able to feel some shadow of its power. Beside her, Jaesa drank it all in voraciously.

“Baras,” rasped the Entity in an unholy, disembodied voice, “desecrated my resting place... where I waited... for my love. Your Emperor.”

Astridel could not keep herself from making a movement of surprise. If the Emperor had such a creature as this waiting for him, why had he not made use of her? Why leave her abandoned in whatever tomb she had called her own, or worse, subject to the profane and rapacious hands of Darth Baras? Clearly, she lacked the ability to free herself; just because she embodied the Dark Side did not necessarily mean she could wield it, only that she could, perhaps, give her power to the one she thought worthy, the Emperor. In the meanwhile, she would languish either in her resting place or in Baras' chains, waiting for her love.

The passivity of the Entity made Astridel uncomfortable as much as it astonished her; she had trouble conceiving any scenario where she could be forced to wait, patiently or otherwise, for some other agency beside herself to act on her own behalf. For an instant, she was even a little annoyed – why hadn't the Emperor sensed this; why hadn't he done something about it? – when it dawned on her that the Emperor had. After all: was she not his Wrath, here to free the Entity, with the assistance of one of the few who knew how to break the enchantment?

When Vowrawn stepped forward to begin the rite, Baras' final assassin struck. As he clenched Vowrawn's throat and flung the Darth aside with an angry gesture of his hand, Astridel had plenty of opportunity to recognize her foe: tall, powerfully built, his hair burned away and replaced by scars, the mangled flesh of his cicatriced face held together by the same cybernetic implants that gave life and unnatural strength to his muscles. Beneath the scars and the machinery, however, there was no mistaking the man. Lord Draahg.

“I told you,” he gloated, “I cannot be killed.” He raised Vowrawn's limp body, enveloped in a poisonous red cloud, a stasis field of Force energy that was slowly killing him.
“Apparently,” Astridel replied sardonically as Jaesa ignited her saber beside her, “neither can I. At least not by one who fails as thoroughly as you do. I can only conclude you must be a glutton for punishment. Or Baras is really scraping the bottom of the barrel now.”

“Pain sustains me. I ate of suffering as you watched me burn,” Draahg said coldly. “I drank of anguish as Baras rebuilt me.”

“Master,” Jaesa inquired, “Is it part of the Sith code to monologue before a fight? Because this is some of the worst poetry I’ve ever heard.”

Laughing at Jaesa's witticism and delighted at the prospect of beating Draahg again, Astridel gleefully taunted him, tossing her head in a motion of pure contempt. “If pain is your meat and drink, Draahg, I am more than happy to serve you a buffet of it. You will be sated a thousand years, and filled with gratitude for me, who gave you such a feast.”

“The sight of you,” Draahg seethed, “sickens me and delights me. In minutes, the great Darth Vowrawn will be dead, and the Entity will forever be in Baras' control.”

“Not if you die first,” Astridel challenged. She leaped into the air, drawing her paired sabers as she did so, bringing both angry blades down on Draahg's swiftly raised block.

“Oh, praise the stars, no more lousy poetry,” Jaesa breathed fervently as she promptly followed Astridel into battle.

“Is it really that bad?” Astridel called in amusement to her apprentice as she nimbly dodged Draahg's outraged slashes.

“I've read better tripe,” Jaesa replied pithily, her words somewhat fragmented as she whirled about, her blades clashing against Draahg’s, “from melodramatic schoolgirls on Alderaan.”

Despite Draahg's cyber-enhancements, Astridel was faster, more agile, more controlled. Astridel heaped mocking consolation on her opponent as she darted and weaved between Draahg’s twin blades. “Such hard luck for you, Draahg. Your literary ambitions shattered along with your delusions of adequacy, all in one day. I have a hankie, if you need it.”

Draahg was frothing at his mouth with rage; while his anger gave him power, it also made him
careless. With spittle flecking the implants embedded in his chin and chest, he charged, snarling, “Vengeance is mine!”

“Not today,” Astridel replied calmly, ducking rapidly beneath his blade as he swung it; she sprang lightly up, driving both of her sabers through the electronics wired across his torso and through the rib cage beneath, burying them to their hilts with their lethal black spires protruding wickedly from his back. There was a shower of sparks from the implants, but no sound erupted from his open mouth as his two sabers tumbled from his unclenching hands. Astridel flicked the switches of her sabers and the blades vanished, and Draahg’s body fell heavily to the floor.

Jaesa straightened from her en garde stance. “We making sure this time, master?”

“Indeed,” Astridel said. A movement of her arm, a swing of the reignited blade, and Draahg, the man who could not be killed, lay dead at her feet. She could see the Force of his life leaking irreparably out of him, and with Draahg dead, the death field in which he had held Vowrawn died with him. Vowrawn picked himself up with his customary amicable aplomb.

“Such a finish! I never felt so much pain – I fully expected to die!” he marveled. “But the pain kept me aware; I am grateful to have witnessed your destruction of that monstrosity. Such coordinated movements between you – and such gibes! It was positively enjoyable!”

“When it comes to Baras' lackeys, we've had practice,” Astridel deadpanned.

“Making me all the more eager to see what you do against Baras himself,” Vowrawn chortled. He turned to the Entity. “But first – Entity, is Baras aware of what transpired here?”

“Through me, the defiler sees,” the Entity answered, her incorporeal eyes glowing fiercely purple-violet, “All of this.”

“Wonderful!” Vowrawn clapped his hands. “He must be twisting with fury. Now... your freedom is at hand, Entity!”

The rituals were not terribly complex, although they were lengthy, and Astridel and Jaesa watched with interest as Vowrawn broke Baras' seals.

“Free!” gasped the Entity. “Now I am forgotten again, and grateful. Remember me to the defiler.”
Astridel bowed as low as Vowrawn. “I will not fail to do so.”

Chapter End Notes

Still love Vowrawn. I kept the majority of these scene rather than just doing a glossing summary just so I could include more of him. Plus, the prospect of letting Astridel and Jaesa completely demoralize and dismantle Draahg was too tempting. That guy's really a total prat.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The *Fury* sped through hyperspace, decreasing the distance between Astridel and Baras and their approaching confrontation. Astridel sat in her quarters, alone, on her rug in her habitual pose of meditation, but her thoughts were scattered and unfocused. She had expected that her distractions would be centered on the future, on facing her former master and would-be murderer at last – what she would say, what she would do, what the last moment of his life would be like – but instead, she found her mind returning again and again to the Entity.

Something about the Entity bothered her, and for a long time, she was puzzled to put her finger on it. The Entity was an inspiring thing, whatever she was at her core, creature or spirit or something else entirely; she was a thing of raw power and passion, and yet, despite all the inherent strength welling within her, she had nonetheless become the tethered plaything of Baras. It must have been humiliating, to witness herself being used to further the Darth's ambitions and crass lust for superiority, and all the while know she had to rely on another to free her. All that power, and yet powerless.

Astridel found the idea discomforting; it was a fearful prospect to face, in her opinion. If it came to it, she would vastly prefer death, even at Baras' hands, than be forced to serve him again. Baras would likely make no such error – he, too, would opt for the security of ending her life for good, so Astridel considered that she had little enough to dread on that front. It had to be something deeper, she thought, something beyond the choice between death and servitude, and Astridel recalled that her antipathy to the Entity's situation pre-dated her realization that the Entity could not help herself.

It had, she realized at last, stemmed from the Entity's statement that she had simply been waiting for the Emperor. That's all. A being of incredible power, but no agency of her own, content to do nothing more than to wait for her love, and secure in the belief that he would one day come for her. Astridel found the idea so disturbing that she stood from the rug rapidly, pacing in bare feet across its plush surface in some agitation; she remembered the private joke she had shared with Quinn at the museum gala: her inherent inability, one she owned proudly, to helplessly wring her hands while awaiting a rescue. The thought of doing so was abhorrent to her; she was so much her own instrument of authority and activity that to be any other way was inconceivable – to have the faith that another would come for her, or rather, to place that faith in another was so inconceivable – Quinn's face abruptly sprang into her mind along with such an insolvable knot of jumbled feelings that she caught her breath at the pain that welled within her breast and froze in her restless pacing, her toes curling into the warm fibers of the rug.

Well, and what else were her meditations for if not introspection? She stood there for a long time, deep in thought, and might have stood for much longer, had her door chime not broken her concentration. It was Quinn, immaculate and unassuming, datapad in hand.
“The duty roster and daily report, my lord,” he said, quietly respectful, carefully ensuring that he not step so far over the threshold of the room as to cause the door to slide automatically shut behind him.

Still feeling herself rather off-balance, Astridel buried her confusion beneath her cultivated calm and took the pad from his hand. She stepped back to look at it, putting some physical distance between the tumult of her emotions and his presence; Quinn, with a sinking heart at an act he interpreted as a clear mark of disdain, turned to leave without another word.

“A moment,” Astridel called after him abruptly. He drew up instantly, but turned only after mastering his facial expression to convey placid competence and nothing more. Again, he stopped just within the confines of the room, ensuring the sensors that held the doors registered his presence, and he was startled when Astridel tapped the panel on her desk. The sensors overridden, the doors hissed shut behind him so quickly he felt the shift in the air on the hairs of the back of his neck. He didn't step forward. In the days that had passed since the attack on the ship, he had been so absorbed in overseeing repairs that he had hardly seen Astridel, and he certainly hadn't been alone with her since their confrontation over a week prior to that. Being secreted with her here, in this private room that held such memories, was difficult.

“My lord?” he inquired stoically, standing at formal ease.

Astridel hesitated a moment, hardly knowing herself what her purpose was. She had wrapped her robe around herself tightly when she had opened the door, shrouding herself within it monastically, covering herself as fully as her daily wear did; the only indicators Quinn had of her mood were her bootless feet dug into the plush rug, the thin lines of her mouth beneath her veil, and her half bared arms, hugging themselves across her chest. It was an odd pose for her – somewhat defensive, somewhat uncertain, and she seemed to realize it at the same time he did, for she pulled her arms down and squared her sloping shoulders suddenly.

“High praise from the Darth the other day,” Astridel commented in her usual sardonic tones that she used to mask her deeper thoughts. “Having heard Vette and Jaesa’s reports of the incident as well, I am inclined to agree with Vowrawn: you deserve every acclamation for both your valor and your clear-headedness in dealing with Draahg’s attack.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

A ghost of a smile toyed at her lips. “Not foisting your praise off onto Jaesa or Broonmark?”
“You once informed me, my lord, that false modesty was perjurious folly,” Quinn replied, determined not to let her derisiveness disturb him. “I know what I did, and what I am responsible for. I see no reason to lie about it. Not to you, my lord. I mean to accept what I earn. Whether it is good or bad.”

“You are a brave man, Quinn,” Astridel said, and in the softening of her mocking tone, there was genuine respect beneath her words. “There are not many who would face their own behavior so boldly. But there are not many in this galaxy like you, I think.”

“Thank you, my lord. And I meant what I said,” Quinn inclined his head, encouraged into relaxing his stance somewhat. “I am striving to make amends for what I have done. My commitment to you, my lord, is unassailable now. But I understand how empty words can be. I intend to back them up with actions.”

Astridel didn't answer for a moment; when she did, after a larger breath than normal, her sardonic humor was effaced. “Quinn – ” she began soberly, “You know I cannot tell you what to do to earn back my trust.”

“Of course not, my lord,” Quinn said with a small shake of his head. “And I have no wish for you to.”

“You don't?” Astridel asked, somewhat surprised.

“It would make my motivations suspect. Did I act because it was appropriate, or because I was checking off a box on a list of chores you provided? You would forever second-guess my actions – and that is the antithesis of trust, my lord,” Quinn answered, at last making another step into the room. “This isn't a matter of duty, my lord, and I can't treat it as such. This isn't a duty; this is an honor.”

The pain that had been tightening in Astridel's chest seemed to deepen. “It's too bad, really,” she said, with a waver in her voice she passed off as a sort of chagrined laugh.

Not following, Quinn tilted his head slightly, asking, “My lord?”

Astridel bit her lips, turning away a little, then said quietly, “Because it would help if you could give me a list of what I should do, too.”
Astonished, Quinn stared at her, blinking in his confusion. Without raising her face to him, ashamed
that his bravery to own his actions outstripped her own, she traced the edge of the datapad absently
with one nervous finger while Quinn gaped. This, he realized with his stumbling perception, was
authentic. She wasn't laughing at him. She wasn't looking to humiliate or repudiate him; the acerbity
of her earlier speeches had been a shield solely for her own sake, and she had been striving to
dismantle it before him, piece by piece, as they talked. The last time she had been so emotionally
honest with him it was because her fury had overtaken her, she had struck him, choked him, cut him
with words like a lash. This was altogether different, and the tremor of his nerves made his heart
stagger.

“A list for you?” he echoed faintly, breaking the tense quiet.

She made a movement, a hefting of her shoulders in a vague expression of troubled scruples and
uneasy guilt, and had the courage to look him in the face to ask, “Must I not earn your trust again, as
well? Do I not have sins for which I need forgiveness, too?”

“I – I can’t say, my lord,” Quinn answered.

“I can,” Astridel replied, suddenly decisive and a shade bitter. “And I do. Quinn – what you did, you
did because Baras manipulated you. What I did... I did on purpose. I was cruel to you, and I was
deliberate about it.”

“I –” he fumbled hesitantly, trying to sort through the disarray of his thoughts and feelings. “I – I
understand your reasons, my lord, and I... I can’t say I blame you for them.”

“I do,” Astridel repeated. “Blame myself. For that, as well as for the part I played in your actions, as
well.”

He opened his mouth as though to interrupt, but she lifted a hand to forestall him in a motion too
rapid and tremulous. She had found what she wanted to say, and she must say it, before her nerves
and pride silenced her again. Her voice was nearly as unsteady as her gesture.

“I had seen the signs,” she continued in a low voice, “but I never intervened, and... I should have. I
stood back and watched you drowning, and scorned you for being weaker than the whirlpool instead
of extending my hand to you. What I... what I'm trying to say, Quinn –” Astridel bowed her head
slightly, and with both hands lifted the veil back from her face. “What I'm trying to say is that – I'm
sorry.”
Quinn felt his breath flow from his lungs in a rush, an exhalation of stupefaction he could not conceal. In his ears echoed the hated voice of Darth Baras, with its false concern and veneer of avuncular interest: *There are two things a Sith will not say and mean: The first is I'm sorry.* And here a Sith stood before him, doing exactly that. She said it, and moreover, she meant it. It wasn’t his wishful thinking. She had removed the shroud between them of her own volition, letting him see in full the face that had been obscured to him for week after week, the face that he despaired of ever seeing in its entirety ever again, and she had not only owned her transgressions, but apologized for them. He blinked again, clearing a burning feeling behind his eyelids, and swallowed the dryness in his throat.

“My lord,” he rasped out huskily. “I – I accept your apology, and... I forgive you.”

“That easily?” Astridel said incredulously.

“Yes, my lord. That easily.” What else could he do but that? Quinn paused, then hastily rushed on, “And as you spoke against false modesty, I now caution you against false responsibility. My choices were not your fault, they were mine. My decision, my failure. I could have confided in you; I could have sought your help before matters came to a crisis. I could have had more faith in you. I could have had more faith in *us.***

Astridel smiled sadly, a wan look on her pale face. “But I, Quinn,” she said, “I could have given you a better reason for that faith. I knew what you wanted from me. I even gave it to you, but refused to let you know. I was just being obstinate. Arrogant. Proud.”

“And now?” he asked softly, risking a step towards her without even realizing he moved. “Is that all there is? Arrogance and pride?”

“Oh, there is plenty of that; there always will be!” Astridel deflected shakily, and the motion she made with her words shifted her offhandedly closer to him. The painful sensation in her chest had continued to weigh on her, compressing her lungs and forcing her heart to struggle like a snared bird in its beating; it felt lodged in her throat, frantic to break free, and she felt she was losing the grip of her control on it if she did not let some part of it out.

“But there are other things, too,” she murmured. “Things like... forgiveness. For you.”

“Truly?” he asked gently. He wanted desperately to ask why; this was so much more than just his fighting well in defense of Vowrawn, clearly so very much more, but he feared breaking the spell that engulfed them. She was quite close to him now, he could reach out and touch her without stretching if he dared.
“True. And full.” She could sense his question and his nearness, his hope and his anxiety, all snarled up in her own coiling sensations, bloated and muddled and overwhelming her. Why, he wanted to know, and that why was the fuse that led down into that bomb of emotion choking her breath. Let the bloody thing detonate, then.

“Because,” she whispered, and her face contracted suddenly, pained, as if the damp salt that sprang from the narrow corners of her useless, hollow eyes sockets burned on her cheeks like acid. Quinn, shocked, had not even known it was possible for a species without eyes to weep – what need had a Miraluka for tears?

“Because – Ohhh... damn it all!” She turned her head aside to curse herself under her breath in a tremulous voice, and then gasped out, “Because in spite of everything, Malavai – I... I still love you.”

Chapter End Notes

The nearest Astridel will ever get to being willingly helpless: Confessing at last to Quinn. Of course she can't do it without swearing.

Miraluka eye sockets are vestigial, so yes, there would hardly be a need for tear ducts to keep eyes moist - but that doesn't necessarily mean that they're completely gone. We humans still have tail bones, after all, and other stray anatomical bits that don't serve much purpose thanks to our evolutionary history. It's possible that a Miraluka could still cry, if really driven to it.

One interesting aspect in writing this work - in Drones and Clouds & Colors, Paha and Vector spend a lot of time communicating to each other with their eyes - they both have such unusual eyes that I mentioned them often. With Astridel veiled most of the time, it really puts a limit on any kind of facial tic that might clue Quinn (or anyone else) into what she's thinking. With her veil on, I can never say that she cocks an eyebrow skeptically, or scowls in frustration, or her brow creases in concern. And even unveiled, she can never use her eyes to signal to Quinn. No way to shoot a glance aside at something, no rolling her eyes in exasperation, no coy winks or flashes of anger or lust in their depths - it's proven a fascinating challenge, from a writing perspective, especially after coming straight from writing two lengthy works where non-verbal communication plays a big role in Paha and Vector's bond.
Breathless and lightheaded, Quinn said nothing, and swiftly, Astridel, balked.

“If you don’t, I understand,” she blurted abrasively, fearing she had made herself ridiculous. “I don’t need –”

She broke off as he moved – not abruptly, not quickly – but he had been standing so still that any movement interrupted her. He had simply grasped her hand within his own, all his emotion in that tiny act, and then, as he stared down into the disorder of her features, he slowly lifted his other hand to brush those few startling teardrops from her face with a ghostly tender touch of his fingers.

Quinn could scarcely breathe; he wavered where he stood. It was the second thing that Baras had warned him a Sith would never say: I love you. And here they yet were, both together in the span of a few meager minutes, from her lips, to his ears! I love you – she had said, I love you – the words he had given up hope of ever hearing! He clung to her hand, her cold fingers against his palm and prayed this was real, and not one of his tortured dreams or hopeless fantasies.

But her face was warm and corporal beneath his fingertips, the embodiment of his evidence, and after he had smoothed away the last tear with his thumb, he cupped her cheek still, feeling the tremble in the muscles hidden beneath the salt-stained skin, and, then, after this long moment of sweet agony, he bowed his head to hers. So often, in the past, their kisses had been hurried, devouring, fervent things, marked as much by haste as by passion, but this time, it would be different. He brushed her lips softly with his, a slow temptation of taste, and only when she slipped closer, the anguish and tension between them beginning to melt at last, that the kiss deepened, salving the betrayals and injuries that had sundered them. She raised her hand, resting it against his chest and curling her fingers around the narrow belt that crossed it at an angle; he dropped his hand from her face to wreath her in his arm, feeling the weight of her body on his once more as he thought he never would again, wondering still at how swift fortune reversed itself.

The kiss might have been slow, languid, and lingering, but it was no less ardent for that, breathlessly dizzying, leaving them each dazed. They were clinging to each other; he clutched her to him and she had been unaware of how she had been pressing her hips to his, and she flushed. It was rather too early yet for that.

“I should go, my lord,” Quinn murmured, although without making a move to release her now that he had her in his arms again. “It’s only a day to Korriban, and there are still preparations to make.”
“Sensible as ever,” she replied quietly, free of sarcasm.

“I hope so, my lord,” he answered, reluctantly drawing away from her, his hands missing already the feel of her body beneath the sleek material of her robe, which had sagged open at her throat. She felt suddenly chilly with the expanse of air between them. “Good night, my lord.”

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Astridel stood at the head of the conference table, her fingertips resting lightly on its smooth surface and her head up, looking monarchial. She surveyed her team for a moment, and they stared back silently, tense and waiting.

“As you have by now, I am sure, surmised our purpose here, I will not waste your time and mine with pointless rhetoric. Yes: this meeting is to brief you on the mission assignments for the coming confrontation with Darth Baras.” She drew up her chair and sat. “First and foremost, who will be accompanying me to the Council Chambers: that role will fall to Captain Quinn.”

There was a general outburst.

“Master!”

“My lord?”

“The knob? But he’s a traitor!”

“Whhooohbz woo...”

Only Quinn made no noise, sitting motionless and stunned beyond his ability to mask his surprise. Despite the promising indicators in the restoration of their trust, and the even more promising sign that their relationship might be repaired, he had not expected at all that he would be given this honor or responsibility. The crew, for one, still condemned him, and second, it had been weeks – months, even – since he had last fought side-by-side with Astridel. Their ability to work in concert with minimal planning or through just the use of unspoken signals had relied greatly on the trust that had been broken and was only just beginning to knit together. That bond was untested and unpracticed; it
needed time to be reforged, and its fragility now could be disastrous before Darth Baras. Jaesa, as Astridel's apprentice, with her fighting strength and Force abilities, was the logical choice, and Quinn had assumed Astridel would follow logic in a situation as critical as this. Would the Dark Council even permit the admission of a mundane military man to their exclusive chamber? Astridel tolerantly let the protests vent for several seconds, then held up her hand for silence, which fell again almost immediately.

“I assure you, I have not lost my sanity,” she asserted. “I have my reasons for this decision, some of which – not all – I will share with you. First, Quinn's tactical ability remains unmatched. Second –”

“We don’t doubt his skill,” Jaesa interrupted pithily, “just his loyalty.”

“Second,” Astridel repeated, a slight edge to her voice warning against additional disruptions, “Quinn has made the most expensive error of his life. It has taught him many things, the primary of which is that he will not be so careless as to make it again.”

The faces looking back her clearly indicated that they thought carelessness had nothing to do with it.

“Third, for those who continue to waste their energies in doubt, ask yourselves this: what better way to keep an eye on him than by my keeping an eye on him?” Quinn flushed a darker red, but his discomfort did not sway Astridel. She must, he realized, make plain that her decision was more than whimsical caprice if she did not want the mistrust and accusations of favoritism to disrupt her crew more than it already had been disturbed. The crew would follow her lead; for trust to be restored among them, she must overtly exhibit that trust first.

“You are all aware of his skill at arms,” she reasoned baldly. “If Quinn were with any one of you while I face Baras, and he were to take it into his head to change his allegiance again, he would likely kill you. I am the one best suited to cut him down, by right, by rank, and by reason. The rest of you might not be so successful – yes, Pierce, even you. And I very much have need of you all being alive and able-bodied, which I will explain momentarily.

“Finally, every single one of you has earned the right to stand at my side for my triumph over Darth Baras.” Her masked gaze swept around the table. “None of you should doubt that, and never doubt that my selecting another means I value you less. It does not. However, in one respect Quinn does have the advantage: for him, this surpasses duty. For him, this is personal, for many reasons which are his to share, not mine. This, I think, will spur him on, as it did his defense of Vowrawn. In recognition and in recompense for these acts, I allow Quinn to partake of my vengeance. This is my decision. Are there questions or further objections?”
After a moment, Vette ventured, “No, my lord.”

“Good.” Astridel pronounced the word with satisfaction. “Then we may move on to the next matter, which I already alluded to. I am taking no chances with Baras. He is devious, he is cunning, he will exploit any possible loophole, regardless of the rules of the Council Chamber. I haven't the slightest expectation that Draahg was his only other apprentice, and we all know he has plenty of soldiers. Doubtless, he will have them nearby, awaiting his call. Jaesa, your task will be to seek out his hidden apprentices and destroy them. Eliminate his followers. Pierce, you will support. I leave it to you both to plan the details as you will. Use whatever means you consider necessary or expedient, but Baras' remaining apprentices must not live. You are free to be as ruthless and brutal as you please.”

“I understand, master, and am most eager to obey.” Jaesa’s mood brightened considerably at the prospect of the coming carnage.

“You've got it, m'lord,” Pierce nodded casually. He still retained his dislike and distrust of Quinn, but the politics of the Dark Council held little interest for him. Taking down a few of Baras' snotty Sith upstarts, however – that was a cause he could get behind, and one that promised to be a fun challenge. He gave Jaesa an audacious wink, and she preened in response.

“Vette.” Astridel turned to the twi'lek, her longest friend. “You and Broonmark are to focus on Baras' resources and spy network. While I confront Baras, his private chambers are likely to have a diminished guard, as many will be escorting him to and from the Council Chambers. Take out those he has left behind, and infiltrate his offices. I want what he has – dossiers, reports, relics, Holocrons, controllers for slave collars, whatever – anything and everything, as much as you can get. After you have stripped the computer, destroy it; same for anything you cannot take with you. I want his infrastructure utterly dismantled. No one else is to have anything that once was his. Search carefully; he is likely to have countless secret hiding places.”

“Treasure hunt with the murderous oversized teddy bear?” Vette twisted her mouth nervously into a one-sided smirk, but her eyes already glittered avidly at the thought of unfettered access to Baras' plunder. “I can do that.”

Broonmark made a buzzing hoot that might have been agreement, or might equally have been offense at Vette’s description. Regardless, he didn't seem inclined to object to the task, the division of labor, or his assigned partner. The time had come to cleanse the clan for good, and he approved that Astridel sought to make a full sweep of it.

“I have just now received as much updated information as Vowrawn was able to supply regarding how matters stand on Korriban,” Astridel continued, calling up an array of files and maps on the holodisplay built into the conference table. “Schematics, surveys, stolen blueprints, census data on troop assignments, squad movements of private guard companies... much of this information are
secrets the Council Darths would keep under lock and key. The encryptions have been broken, thanks to Quinn, so use them. Scour them for any clue, any weakness, any person Baras could rely on.”

“Got it, my lord,” Vette answered, barely looking up, already eagerly flicking through the files. Free license to the classified treasures of the Dark Council! It was such an exciting prospect that she felt she could even ignore the likelihood that they might all face slaughter in less than a day.

“One last thing,” Astridel added as she stood, and the solemnity of her voice caused even Vette to look up. “My gratitude. You are the finest crew I could hoped to have at my side – all of you. As I go to face Baras now, it is with the greatest pride in our accomplishments. It is not what we have, it is what we are. We are passion, we are strength, we are power, and from power comes our victory!”

And then, to her surprise, her crew as one responded, “Through victory, our chains are broken!”

Chapter End Notes

In both Drones and this piece I invented things for the rest of the crew to do while the main character headed off to their big final fight. Because honestly, it just makes sense. The game mechanic of main character + 1 companion breaks down under the lack of logic that you would leave behind 80% of your team when going up against your most lethal foe. They wouldn't all just sit around waiting to hear if the main character has been killed or not - any copmanion with any loyalty would want to be helping. So: side missions to help the main.
Quinn flicked a non-existent piece of lint from his coat and squared his shoulders before looking over at Astridel. The ship’s droid had polished her armor; it gleamed a murderous color under the cold white and red lights of the Council Chamber anteroom. In truth, she could have used a new set, as there were scratches on this old garb that no amount of buffing would smooth out, but he knew she would rather go as she was, with the comfort of the familiar, rather than weighing herself down with some piece that was new and untried. There were enough unknowns in this situation already.

“I am ready, my lord,” he reported steadily. The group had split up as they left Korriban's spacedock – Vette and Broommark making straight for where Baras' new chambers were marked on their map, while Jaesa and Pierce set off to trace Baras’ adherents to their hiding places. As for Astridel, she marched with unwavering step to the ceremonial chambers of the Dark Council, and Quinn strode proudly at her side. Now that he was over his surprise, he found himself almost as eager as Astridel to come face-to-face with the man who had tried to destroy his life, hers, and theirs.

“As am I,” Astridel replied, giving her glove a tug. Aging armor notwithstanding, she had taken care with her appearance; the weights on her veil were polished, their gleaming silver pendants dangling against her cheeks like the last twinkling stars in a preternaturally pale dawn sky, and she had lined her upper lip in deep red, with single vertical streak across the bottom, giving her the appearance of having delicately sipped blood from a chalice, her tongue smearing its taste across her upper lip and a single, rolling drop caught before landing on her chin. But for its color, it was not unlike how she had appeared on the night of the museum gala, and Quinn stared down at her, momentarily entranced by her striking grace and stalwart determination. He was immersed once more in his old silly wish that he could protect her, even save her, despite knowing that there were few other people in the galaxy he could imagine as less needing such service.

But that had always been the way, hadn't it? She was a Sith on the threshold of the greatest triumph and the height of her powers. Despite the tender revelations of not even a full day before, and despite her decision to have him with her for this critical moment, Quinn could not help but wonder what, if anything, she needed him for. For really, what need had a comet, carving through the heavens, for the common planetary mud? In a contest of Darths, what was one military man? Could she have selected him to witness her destruction of her former master merely to drive home to him the point that in selecting Baras, he had chosen wrongly?

Absolutely not! Quinn instantly condemned himself for the unwitting thought, ashamed it had sprung automatically to mind despite his re-sworn fealty. It was tough to break old habits of suspicion; being made a pawn in a game of Sith had made somewhat of a hash of his strength of will. But suspicion, paranoia, betrayal – these were the ways of Darth Baras. They were not the ways of Astridel, not when the quavering echoes of her I still love you still resounded in his ears.
Quinn watched as she took up her battlemask and tried not to consider the possibility that this moment could very well be one of their last together in this galaxy. Would her one admission, and the one kiss that had followed it, be all they were to have? He could die—or she could die, in which case his own death would rapidly follow—his only chance to have her in his arms again was through total, irrevocable, unquestionable victory. He smothered down his urge to sweep her in his arms for one final embrace. Whether through reading his emotions or her own, Astridel's thoughts had evidently turned the same direction, for she paused in wiping a smudge off the mask she held in her hand.

“Don't worry,” she smirked impishly. “That won't be the last.”

“I know it won't, my lord,” he answered with a sure smile. He had, after all, his faith in her, renewed and resplendent.

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Astridel led the way from the anteroom, and in the hall before the Council Chamber met Darth Vowrawn in the company of his guards, as well as two additional Sith Quinn did not recognize. Astridel, however, did.

“Darth Vowrawn,” she greeted the pureblood Sith, then turned to the man on his left, commenting in her keen, sardonic tones, “And Overseer Tremel! You are looking well.”

“I have you to thank for that, although, I admit I am now a man with no country,” soberly replied the man she addressed as Tremel. He bowed to her, slight but respectful, and as he straightened, he drew his hands from behind his back. Quinn, prepared for hostility from these unknown allies, had a brief flare of suspicion at this action, but it changed in rapid succession to surprise, speculation, and then understanding as he noticed that one of Tremel's arms ended bluntly at the wrist. Here before him stood the living, breathing proof of the early roots of Astridel's defiance of Darth Baras, minus the hand that was her admission to Baras' apprenticeship.

“No, Tremel pull me out of hiding to bear witness, nothing more. In truth, I can't wait to watch Baras pay for what he's done.”

“And Lord Rathari,” Astridel continued, turning to a darkly hooded man with cybernetic implants on Vowrawn's right. While the man's face was an unknown to Quinn, the name was not: when Quinn's exile on Balmorra had ended with Astridel, she had gone to Nar Shaddaa, where Vette's first-hand
knowledge of that glittering moon had made her more useful than his textbook facts. All Quinn had known was that Lord Rathari had been charged with protecting Sith interests on Nar Shaddaa, perhaps posted there by the Dark Council itself. Rathari and Baras' mutual dislike of each other had prompted Baras to demand his death by Astridel's hand, and she had confused Quinn with her laughter as she returned from deliberately failing her mission. Yet another death and life – the first ordered by the master and the second spared by the apprentice!

“Lord Rathari found me,” Vowrawn explained approvingly, “and expressed his wish to be here. A passionate young man.”

Rathari raised his chin within the deep folds of his cowl. “I told you I'd have your back when you faced Baras,” he said. “I want to hear him scream.”

Astridel smiled a wolfish smile. “You are in luck, my friend. Your wish is about to come true.”

“Rathari's presence,” continued Vowrawn, “will show the rest of the Dark Council that you have Sith support. I am equally glad to see that you have brought your Captain Quinn! I had hoped we might meet again; even more so now that I have learned the circumstances behind the removal of that insufferable incompetent, Moff Broysc. You, Captain, are even more of a hero than I had estimated you to be – and your status, and your presence here, is tantamount to having the full weight and allegiance of the Imperial military behind you, Lord Astridel.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Quinn bowed.

“Now, Baras has called a special session of the council to make his claim as the Emperor's Voice official. I,” Vowrawn chuckled, “am fashionably late. Your former master and the most powerful Darths in the galaxy await, my dear. The play is yours.”

“Then let's make a grand entrance,” Astridel replied, fastening her mask over her nose and mouth. “We will only get to do this once.”

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The Dark Council Chamber was a vast room, ringed with a dozen throne-like chairs, some empty, but most occupied, one or two by holo. Astridel barely gave the chamber, with its vaulted ceiling and its heavy sacerdotal draperies, a glance as she flung open the doors and strode boldly in, Vowrawn and Quinn trailing slightly behind, with Rathari and Tremel quietly taking up positions along the
wall. All of Astridel's attention was fixated solely on Darth Baras, pacing impatiently in the center of the circle.

“That had better by Darth Vowrawn coming through those doors,” Baras snipped without turning around.

“Oh, it is,” Astridel announced to his back. “And then some. Today, Baras, your reign ends.”

To his credit, Baras only hesitated slightly in his restless pacing – but it was enough for Astridel to have noticed, as well as some members of the Dark Council. From his throne above the chamber floor, Darth Marr, a man in elaborate armor, leaned forward with attention. “Interesting,” he commented.

Another lord, unmasked but swathed in long robes, raised a dismissive hand. “This isn't the time for one of your games, Vowrawn.”

Vowrawn mounted the stairs to the chair that topped his dais and turned around to answer his colleague. “Oh, charming as that thought is, Ravage, this is no game, I assure you.”

“Miss me, Baras?” Astridel inquired with poisonous saccharine. “No? Not even a little? Nothing? For one who purports to be the Voice of the Emperor, you're uncharacteristically silent. Didn't the Emperor warn you of this?”

“I'm merely amused, young one,” Baras sneered over his shoulder. The Darth lifted his head within its engraved mask and with measured tread strode away, raising his voice to address the council. “My fellows, this is my former apprentice. No doubt you are acquainted with her defiance. She was unworthy of me, so I excised her.”

“Mm, yes, some three or four times, if the stories are true,” Vowrawn replied as he sat. He rested his elbow on the arm of his throne and smiled pleasantly.

Astridel stood respectfully poised and alone in the center of the room, but she could not resist a smug interjection. “Tried to, anyway, my lords. Stunning that you would brag so about your failures, Baras.”

“The Emperor,” Baras continued loudly, “will inform me what is to be done with Vowrawn. For
“Council, if Baras is true, and I false, he should be able to defeat me himself. Make him prove he is what he says.” Astridel asserted. She had hit the most astonishing balance – utmost respect towards the Council and its sacred traditions, but unmistakable disdain for her target. Her implication was clear: Baras, that still sounds like failure to me, and all who hear it. Quinn bit his lips, imprisoning a bubble of incorrigible laughter, with no clear idea as to whether it was the product of her snide humor or Baras' seething rage. She lifted her chin with dignified confidence. Stars above, she was enjoying herself.

Astridel was certain she had nettled Baras; he would flay her alive given half the chance, and the whole chance in its entirety was stomping closer with every passing second. She could hear his sharp inhalation as he stopped, perhaps realizing his pacing was beginning to look more like nervousness than intimidation, before he snapped, “You need only judge by who stands with this cretin: Lord Rathari, who thumbed his nose at our traditions and got it bloodied like a disobedient dog.”

“The challenger,” Ravage pointed out with some exasperation, “is also supported by Darth Vowrawn, one of our own. I have no doubt about you, Baras, but swat this gnat quickly so we can continue our business.”

“One moment, my lords,” Astridel interrupted firmly. “Baras has had his say. I will now have mine.”

“By what right!” demanded Ravage, furious at this impudent demand. “By what authority!”

“By the authority of the Emperor,” Astridel averred, her voice ringing strong with conviction off the lofty struts of the Council Chamber roof. “I am the Emperor's Wrath, charged by the Emperor to remove the false Voice, Darth Baras. My challenge is laid at your feet, Baras. Take it up, or be known for the coward you are.”

There was a faint rustle as some of the assembly shifted, their astonishment unconcealed. This was not some mere apprentice looking to usurp her master; the implications of this struggle's origins and outcomes were vast. Vowrawn, aware of the glances being cast his direction, sat with every appearance of serene but interested calm.

“Then the challenge,” Darth Marr spoke seriously, “is formal according to the rules of this chamber. Single combat. No assistance, no interference.”
"Very well, my lords," Astridel bowed. "I understand the traditions, my lords, and respect them. No assistance, no interference."

Quinn swallowed his surprise. He was not, then, permitted to participate – he could not stand at her side, fight with her one last time, give her his utmost aid as he longed to do. She did not seem to show the same surprise he felt; she might be masking her feelings on it, as she so often did, or she might have known this was a possibility. He had not known, although, given the ceremonial aspects of Sith culture, he could have guessed it. Not that it mattered: all he could do now was only stand and watch, tortured with the anxiety of a deeply interested spectator. His hands clenched into gloved fists at his side.

“Fine,” Baras growled with fury, “The master will grant the slave's last wish. The Emperor calls for your death. Attack me if you dare.”

“I was never,” Astridel declared as she drew her sabers, “nor shall I ever be, your slave.”

The buzzing blades sprang to life in her hands, snarling a song of death in a bloodthirsty duet, and the long-awaited clash began.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote probably 800 words of a pre-fight scene between Astridel and Quinn, decided I hated it, and deleted a good portion of it. Some of it I could save, re-organized and reworked into the opening scene for this chapter as it stands now. I meant to finish it and post Wednesday night, but I got home from work to find my 16-year-old cat - and as an aside, there are many who claim their cats are the best cats in the world, and this is true, but the truest of the true is that my cat is indeed the best cat in the world - mostly unresponsive in a puddle of her own urine and feces on the couch (the brand-new couch that is less than 7 months old - my cat was always exceptional at finding the newest and cleanest thing to barf a hairball on, too). We rushed her to the vet where she stayed overnight, and we picked her up at the start of that big snow storm on Thursday morning. It took a long time to get home; the roads were bad and with near white-out conditions, the visibility was very bad.

She's still not well. Her spirits have recovered and she happily and eagerly eats anything I put in front of her but she will not make any effort to stand on her own or support her own weight. She's not paralyzed - she will move her back legs on her own, but she won't try to stand or walk. The vet has ruled out toxins or something she ate, and her blood work indicates her organs are functioning pretty well for a cat her age. Hypotheses include stroke/seizure/blood clot or brain tumor. I'm going to keep working with her and trying to get her to get up and walk under her own power - and I will
spoonfeed her and clean her for as long as she wants, until she either gets better or informs me that no, she's tired and she's done.

So yeah... I've had some bouts of full-on ugly crying over the past couple days, so writing has been tough. But I'm sitting here with her by the heater, her favorite place, and she's snoozing comfortably now, so it was a good time to finish off the chapter while she gets some sleep. I mean, she normally sleeps like 18 hours a day anyway, so...

Sorry for the downer rambling.
To Quinn's surprise, Astridel didn't start with what he now knew as her regular opener – flinging both sabers together in twin whirling arcs whose trajectory she bent back to her receiving hands, the skill she had once hidden from him so well – followed by a Force-propelled leap, catching the sabers in mid-air as she jumped and bringing them down both together on her target.

This time, she prowled, circling the central stage of the Dark Council Chamber as Baras did the same, sizing her up as he stalked a corresponding arc widdershins across the diameter that stretched between them. What had she learned in all that time she had been traversing the galaxy, far from his oversight, and what secrets of battle had he kept hidden from her? Quinn pursed his lips, willing her to strike; hesitation made her appear uncertain, weak, timid, when he knew full well she was anything but.

When Baras opened the attack, it was with a speed surprising for a man of his age and size. He went instantly for a heavy, lethal blow, his blood-red blade flaring with light as it crashed against Astridel's pair, raised above her head in a block. She did not riposte, and behind Quinn's back, he curled his gloved fingers into a fist, clasped tightly within his other hand, the only outward sign of his tension he was willing to show.

As Astridel stepped back again and again, calmly and smoothly parrying with astute patience, Quinn began to understand: she was testing Baras, investigating whether the moves he had used to train her blade skills were the same as those he would use in a real battle. She was reserving her energy, while gauging the depth of his based on how he expended it now. The hook had been baited well, and the fish had risen to the lure – now there only remained to play out the line, to let it tire, before reeling it in for the finish. For all that, Quinn, following her with avid, narrowed eyes, found himself willing her to press the counterattack.

When she struck back at last, it was with abrupt and blinding speed, adroitly executed with no forewarning, and Baras grunted in surprise and effort as he yanked himself out of the reach of her swing, the humming heat of her blade skimming past him centimeters from his face. He had barely recovered when he found himself forced to retreat again as her second saber followed the first, and this time, the sound Baras made was of disdainful amusement. The whelp was finally going to fight – perhaps it was time for him to do the same. He tightened his grip on his hilt and unleashed the brunt of his rage and arrogant power.

Never before had Quinn witnessed a match so vicious, so ruthless, so intense, with each duelist bent on the total and thorough destruction of the other. For all his skill at subtlety and plots, when it came to the use of the saber, Baras threw the weight of his person into his arm, relying as much on brute
force as on skill. Astridel, lithe and agile, moved faster than Quinn had ever seen her before, whirling
and dodging in her attacks with a grace that was breathtaking in its speed and dexterity. Nearly on
their own volition, the muscles in his arms strained beneath his skin as he imagined his own arm
seconding hers, his legs tensing as she darted sure-footedly over the glossy floor of the Council
Chamber, his strength on loan to her slashes and strikes, sparks flying shimmering from the blades
each time they clashed.

Despite her competence and caution, Astridel, surging forward on the crest of an attack, was too
committed to her movement to convert it to a defensive one as Baras briefly lifted his hand from his
hilt just long enough to blast a concussive wave of Force power at her. It slammed into her,
overcoming all her momentum and flinging her meters away, where she landed on her back and slid
over the polished floor, only just preventing the ignoble end of impaling herself on her own saber as
she fell. Quinn winced as though it had been he who had been struck.

“Get up,” he muttered low through clenched teeth, his lips barely moving and his tone inaudible to
any but himself. “Get up, my lord, get up, get up...”

Astridel bounced upright with a swing of her legs without using her blade-filled hands to assist her,
and as soon as her feet touched down, she let loose with the move Quinn had been waiting for: both
sabers flung in spinning arcs, twin windmills of death aimed straight at her foe, summoned back to
her hand by the Force in an unnatural boomerang's curve, caught as she was already aloft in a
powerful leap to slash both downward in a brutal, battering stroke. She nearly broke his guard, the
tips of her blades carving two parallel lines along the brow of his silver facemask. His helmet badly
scarred, Baras stepped back, panting for breath, and laughing a harsh, hollow sound that echoed
within his mask's metal confines.

It was the opening Astridel had been striving for, but she, with aching arms and tiring legs, could not
take advantage of it; even at his distance, Quinn could see her shoulders heaving with her breathing.
Was it folly, or weakness, to have always had a companion to rely on in battle? When, he wondered,
was the last time she had fought so alone? The answer to that question, embarrassingly, was the
droid ambush he himself had led her into. Maybe, now, there could be seen a value in it; the benefit
of a fight in which she had no one to sustain her but herself. In his memory, he could hear her voice
asking, “Did I not tell you it was your job to keep me on my toes?”

Out on the Chamber floor, Baras, laughing, had drawn his helmet from his head, the first time either
Astridel or Quinn had seen their erstwhile master's face. Fleshy and round, it was the face of a man
bloatet with power and drunk with vice, with puny, sunken, lightless eyes that peered blood-orange
from dark hollows like wicked but pusillanimous creatures lurking in two damp and fetid caves. The
stain of his corrupted soul was smeared across this ghastly pale canvas, blue-black lines of rotting
veins tracing patterns of evil over the pallid, sagging wrinkles that gathered corpseslike in the dull
gray skin drooping around his eyes and mouth and over the cadaverous, hairless dome of his head. It
was the visage of one who had given himself thoroughly and completely to the Dark Side,
welcoming the raw contamination of its power even as it drained him of his conscience, like a
parasite on his soul. For all her power, Quinn had never seen a trace of this contagion on Astridel; it
could be, he considered, an effect of her wisdom in how she chose to draw upon the Force – the measured, steady pull, rather than the vampiric, gluttonous guzzling that many another Sith chose to employ.

Baras dropped his helmet carelessly, still cackling, then abruptly raised both hands, thrusting a fistful of lightning, white and indigo, straight at Astridel. In the nick of time, she braced her feet and flung up both her sabers in a crossed ward before her, catching the lightning on the cross of the blades. She had no Force lightning abilities herself, and had very little experience with fighting against it, but she had seen Baras use it before, torturing information out of a Republic spy. Her defensive action had been both reflexive and based on theory that she had once read but had had no opportunity to employ, and to her relief, was successful. Her blades hummed in her hands, trembling with the power they were holding at bay, and she hoped the kyber crystals within would hold up without shattering.


“You seem to be breathing as hard as I am,” Astridel replied steadily. “But that also could be because you are a pompous windbag.”

“You look the worse for wear to me,” Baras snarled, then, as though to prove her wrong, he shouted out, “Your champion is failing, Vowrawn. And you'll be next!”

“Is that coming from you, or from the Emperor, Baras?” Vowrawn taunted rhetorically. “It's hard to tell the difference.”

The tactic of Dun Möch was a standard part of Sith battle: the psychological attack, exploiting the weaknesses and insecurities of the opponent, using both the Force and taunting mockery to dominate the will of the other. For all Baras’ adeptness at manipulation, Astridel was somewhat surprised to find Baras rather less adroit at it than she expected; perhaps Baras had not expected Dun Möch from an observer rather than Astridel, if that even was what Vowrawn had engaged in. Either way, it had its desired effect: enraging Baras to carelessness.

“Don't mock me, fop!” Baras roared, reinforcing the strength of the lightning that continued to rupture from his fingers into Astridel's quivering blades. “Your patron just ensured your suffering will be epic, youngster. Now die!”

As Baras poured a final surge of power into his attack, Astridel countered, slashing both blades away from her in a motion that flung the concentrated ball of lightning back on the Darth, smashing into
him with a crash of thunder and flinging him back, stretched his length on the floor and flailing to
rise. Astridel, on trembling legs, bent to catch her breath, letting the blood return to her strained arms,
knowing that she would not cross the distance in time to kill Baras before he could defend himself
again. It would only weaken her to try, so she opted instead to rapidly recover, drawing on the Force
to bolster her strength and her vitality, so that when Baras attained his feet again, he would see her
calm and powerful, ready to fight. Baras' breath, rasping in his throat as he glared at her, sounded
like the growling of a beast.

“Put your helmet back on,” Astridel ordered, kicking the object across the floor to him. “I'll not have
it claimed I killed a man improperly dressed for battle.”

Quinn was ready to gnaw his knuckles bloody for this act, this stupid, honorable concession that yet
told him to love her all the more. Baras, laughing at the imbecilic scruples of his contrary apprentice,
obeyed the injunction, his final chuckles echoing in the depths of his battered mask. The battle began
again.

This time, it was shorter. Their moves were not as precise, fatigue brought some sloppiness and some
failing of strength, but Astridel's momentary respite had serve its purpose. Baras fell to his knees, his
lightsaber skittering away across the floor in a spinning clatter. Baras made a gesture, summoning the
lightning to his fingertips once more, but the result was a handful of feeble sparks.

“You are depleted, Baras,” Astridel declared. “You hover a breath away from destruction.”

“No,” he gasped in rage, “my powers abandon me!”

“Admit your deceit,” Astridel demanded. “Confess that you are not the Voice of the Emperor.”

Baras made a noise of derision. “I call upon the Dark Council to kill this fool! Now! The Emperor
commands it!” As the Council stared back impassively, his voice rose in pitch with desperation; now,
with all his ambitions slipping through his hands, he was too far gone to realize the spectacle he
made of himself, on his knees in defeat. “Darth Marr, strike on the Emperor's behalf! Or suffer his
disfavor!”

“I believe I'll take my chances,” Marr replied flatly.

“Ravage, defend me! Defend the Voice!” Baras pleaded, craning his head towards his former ally.
But this prop, too, abandoned him.
"I will not stand in the path of the Emperor's Wrath," Ravage replied, faintly relieved.

"You think you've won?" Baras ranted. "That you can silence the Emperor's true Voice?"

“I think,” Astridel stated with cool derision, hanging her sabers, still hot from battle, on her belt again, “that you yourself have amply demonstrated that you are not the Voice.” She had no intention of letting Baras leave this room alive, but for all that, she felt it would be prudent to allow the Council a say in the manner of his execution - and fitting for Baras to hear their united condemnation.

"My lords," Astridel continued, raising her head to address the Council, “Is my claim proven to your satisfaction? That this pathetic creature, who continues spouting his deranged delusions, is not the Voice?"

“We are satisfied.” Marr nodded. Below, on the floor, Baras had curled into a decrepit wad of misery and defeat. Shattered, the Darth was shuddering, clutching his arms to his chest as if he were yet trying to grasp the lofty prize his ambition had sought so fervently. Marr's baritone voice was level as he added, “Baras' claim is false, and you are acknowledged, Wrath. There remains only to decide the fate of –”

The Council lords and Astridel had been focused on Marr as he spoke, and only Quinn, standing apart with his rapid eyes always seeking out the next threat, realized that Baras' apparent helplessness was a ruse.

“My lord, look out!” he shouted, making one abrupt step forward as Baras raised up, the final dregs of his power in his fingers. Astridel spun around, with time only to draw one of her sabers, and caught the brunt of the arcing electricity with the blade she ignited just in time as dancing fragments of lightning flared from the defeated Darth's outstretched hand.

The brunt she caught, but not the whole.

Whether by accident or intent, a single bolt splintered from Baras' fingers and across the intervening air, flaring and sparking with blinding, lethal purpose to stab directly into Quinn's chest. As the torrents of current poured into him, snapping his jerking body up on his toes with his nerves' natural signals overwhelmed by the foreign voltage, one single thought fixed itself in his mind as rigidly as his muscles were petrified in his frame, soldered in his brain as firmly as his eyes were riveted on Astridel where she stood in what seemed to him a flashing aura of glorious white-hot fury:
Poor Quinn. I really do beat the everloving shit out of him in this story. But here's the thing - when I got to Corellia, I still used Quinn as my go-to companion, because I liked having healer along plus I figured (as Astridel herself states) that the best way to keep an eye on Quinn is by having him with me at all times. That meant that I actually never got the scene myself of Vowrawn praising Quinn's selflessness during the assassination attempt on Vowrawn. In fact, there was no in-story additional scene resolving Quinn's betrayal at all, just the final conversation on the personal character arc (which doesn't really address it, either). I was hoping that there would be some final scene or act that would be "Quinn's Redemption" - something like him being instrumental in saving the SW/destroying Baras. The ending of this chapter is 100% wish fulfillment on that, all the way.

Dun Möch is a real (ok, Star Wars real) technique.

Took me a bit longer than I intended to write this chapter - I find action scenes a bit tough; I feel like I have a million words and methods for describing emotion, and only about 20 for describing combat, so I end up doing a lot of rewrites and revisions and such. But I think I'm getting better at it.

Also, over the past couple weeks, I have actually been *playing* SWTOR instead of just writing about it. Just finished my Bounty Hunter! I enjoyed the story, but I spent too long playing it; it ended up watering down the plot. Better, I am discovering, to play a story straight through before I forget what happens in it. Also, I liked Torian well enough as a romance option, but I felt a bit about him the way I felt about Felix Iresso - nice enough, but lacking a certain... panache? Verve? Uniqueness of personality? Je ne sais quoi? At any rate, it felt like, beyond "my father is a dishonorable to'pah and I need to kill him," and eschewing things like starting sentences with personal pronouns or indefinite articles, Torian seemed to be kind of a blank slate. Again, that could be because I spent too long going through the story, but on the other hand, I didn't feel that was the case with either Mako or Gault - I felt like I knew them both much better than Torian.

Anyway, now that I'm playing more regularly again, I hope to make good on seeing some of you in game :)
positive titer, to my surprise. So she's on medication for that, which she is not thrilled about at all, but she hasn't yet surgically removed my eyelids in my sleep so I guess she is still forgiving me for the 2x-a-day meds.
Baras’ treachery brought immediate outcry from some of the assembled lords, wordless and indistinct exclamations of outrage and condemnation from those who held honor, tradition, and the orthodoxy of the Dark Council Chamber in higher esteem. Vowrawn was on his feet in protest, dismayed at this deceitful attack on a favorite, but even in despite of his disapproval, his ochre eyes flicked between the principle actors of the drama with an interest that was stronger than his concern. What would this flagrantly underhanded maneuver drive the young Wrath to do? Particularly when there was clearly some history between the pair that went beyond mere lord and vassal?

Astridel's reaction was swift. With one instantaneous, curt action, she wrenched her saber up with the deflection of the guttering lighting, then brought the blade down with vicious energy on Baras' wrist, severing his hand as she had severed his sister Ekkage's not so long ago. Immediately, the wild jets of electricity vanished, the evidence of their existence only lurid afterimages, burned purple and red into the eyes of unprotected witnesses. The crackling hiss evaporated with it, ending in a heavy, terrible silence in which the sound of Quinn's body hitting the floor sounded hideously loud. There were rapid footsteps – Tremel's, and then Rathari's, running to the aid of her retainer, followed by muffled, uncertain sounds, whispered consultations and shuffling, swift movements.

As for Astridel, she felt as though when Quinn had fallen, her beating heart had fallen from her chest at the same moment, leaving nothing behind but a cold and empty pit, rattling with the hollow words of her unfulfilled promise that their last kiss would not, in truth, be the last.

That pit – empty? No... not really. It was filling, rapidly, with a churning, visceral, seething rage, a hatred that was simultaneously and contradictorily both blinding and outlining every aspect of the scene with the utmost clarity, impressing every sight and sound, scent and touch, that her Force-senses detected upon her mind forever: The neutral interest of the assembled Dark Council members, the weight of her hot saber hilt in her hand, the pungent odor of sweat and blood and the reek of ionized air, the trickle of sweat down her backbone moving in tandem with the anxiety down her spine, the pounding of her heart and the scuffle somewhere behind her that gave no indication of Quinn's life or death, which her overwhelmed abilities could not at this distance discern.

All of this flooded into her, writhing with the rising tide of pain and fury that was where her heart once had been, pouring into a hole that seemed to have no bottom, a hole more deep than she had ever guessed to fathom. This agony, and the power of the Force that came with it, could, she thought, empty into her forever, and still it would not fill her, and in spite of that feeling, this gushing deluge that streamed into and through her at a fever pitch had taken meager fragments of time, not even seconds. Never before had her tether to the Force been so strong, except, perhaps, when Selestine had died. Then, as a child, Astridel had no control over the torrent; the whirlpool had picked her up, almost smashing her in the same way she had used it to mangle Selestine's murderers to death. She had much more command now, and much more ability now, and she meant to use
every ounce of it.

Astridel flung out her left hand, seizing Baras by the throat with the Force, not hard enough to kill, merely hard enough to hold, and with cold, slow deliberation lifted him upright, and then kept going, up and up, until his booted feet swung helplessly above the floor and his helmeted head waggled as he gagged on the air that died in his throat. She dangled him there, suspended, regarding him with a detachment that utterly belied the furious agony of her grief.

A lightsaber was a curious thing. Its blade blazed with such ferocious heat that the very quality that made it so deadly – its ability to carve its way with nonchalant ease through metal and tissue alike – made it surprisingly bloodless. Wounds were cauterized at the same instant they were made, making a dismemberment by saber a startlingly tidy event; the nerve endings were instantly seared to death, dulling the pain and shock of the loss. But for those who knew intimately the tools of their lethal practice, there were more delicate methods of saber technique; ways of cutting that were nowhere so clean or neatly abrupt. Astridel knew these.

With a deft motion of her right hand, she tossed her hilt briefly in the air, the blade extinguishing as it flipped a tight, tiny somersault for her to snatch it in a reverse grip in her palm, a rare Shien style variant from antiquity. An easy flick of her thumb to ignite it again; its fatal purple blade, hissing with vengeance, springing from the emitter once more.

“I wash the galaxy clean of you,” she hissed, low and raw. And while Baras struggled in the Force grip of her elevated fist, she made three rapid slashes, left, right, and left again, bringing her arm all the way across her body so precisely each time that the marks of her strikes aligned perfectly across Baras' torso, hanging before her just at eye level.

Three cuts: the first to score his armor, the second to sunder it, the third to slice through the bulk of his fleshy stomach, severing the skin and the layers of sinews that intervened between his internal organs and the open air. With the peritoneum severed, the restraining bonds of Baras' vitals slipped, initiating a sluggish avalanche of organs, each one slowly sliding, stretching and tearing the remaining mesothelium, shredding the mesentery as the descent became a cascade, and meters of the Darth's coiling entrails splattered down to steam hotly on the frigid floor below his feet, twitching feebly now that his severed abdominal muscles could no longer pull to move them effectively.

And yet, he lived – handless, gutless, Baras yet clung to life, suspended in the most horrible animation, with cold fingers of air seeping into the once isolated and inviolable cavity of his body. Astridel let him have his time to contemplate his position, and would have held him there indefinitely, dying by fractions, had her thoughts not been straying to the faint sounds of Tremel and Rathari kneeling beside Quinn.

When Astridel let Baras go, she did not do it with the casual indifference of a scornful victor letting
the husk of a vanquished enemy tumble. She was far more active: she jerked her left hand down in a
tere, violent motion, and her Force-hold on Baras' throat followed, smashing his face into the floor
with such vigor that the filigree-carved convex mask of his helmet stoved in on impact, shattering the
facial bones that lay beneath. Astridel turned away before the blood began to trickle from the mask's
cut eye and mouth openings, and there, alone, disdained, and ignored, his pride as shattered as his
body and his ambitions, Darth Baras, at last, died.

- - - -

Quinn awoke so slowly and silently that Astridel, sunk deep in her thoughts, remained wholly
unaware of the change. She sat beside the bed with her palms pressed together, pinned between her
knees, and her head bowed, lost in her meditations and the hypnotic hum of the medical equipment
that sustained his life. He didn't move; he lay still and wondering, his hands, normally so active and
strong, resting limply on the blanket, and simply looked at her, gradually coming to the surprising
conclusion that once more, he had survived. Survived, and seemed intact, more or less, with Astridel
once more by his side.

He must have made some movement, or some shift in his breathing, for she raised her head suddenly,
and turned towards him.

“My lord,” he mumbled over dry lips.

She made no answer for a moment, and, shrouded by her veil, he could read nothing on what he
could see of her solemn face. Her clothes were clean, her armor was unfamiliar and clearly new, so it
had to have been some time since her confrontation with Baras – a day at least, perhaps more. That
they both sat here, together, was a testament to her victory. What had happened after his
electrocution?

“You look very serious, my lord,” he observed, his voice roughened.

“Only thinking,” Astridel replied, forcing a smile. “I am glad to see you still with us.”

“Us?” Quinn's gaze meandered across the empty room.

“With me, then,” she clarified. “How do you feel?”
Quinn considered a moment. “Like I have been fried by a bolt of lightning, frankly. But in truth... not bad.”

His head clearer now, Quinn made a restless movement, pushing himself more upright in the hospital bed. He found himself the occupant of a well-furnished private room, outfitted with an array of sophisticated equipment, and boasting high windows that offered a broad view of the silver gloss of rain falling on the mountains surrounding Kaas City.

“We're back on Dromund Kaas?” he inquired, somewhat incredulous. He had been out much longer than had initially guessed.

“Yes,” Astridel confirmed. “I transferred you as soon as they assured me it was safe to do so.”

It made sense; Korriban was devoted to mysticism and Sith secrets. Medical emergency attention for non-Sith was unlikely to be a major concern. The hospitals on Dromund Kaas would be better, and more comfortable, and he had no doubt that it was thanks to Astridel's largesse that he now occupied the expensive room he did. Nonetheless, she seemed troubled; relieved, yes, but certainly concerned as well. Had she somehow fallen afoul of the Dark Council? “What's on your mind?” he asked directly.

“Nothing that can't wait,” Astridel deflected.

Quinn made a show of looking around the room again. “I see no one else here to listen,” he observed, wanting no secrets or mysteries between them, now that, at last, they seemed to have come through every crisis, both internal and external, that had threatened their future. “Or any reason why anything should wait, my lord.”

Astridel finally made a wry grimace, not quite a smile, but neither yet a frown. “I was only,” she admitted, “considering the reasons why this wasn't going to work.”

Quinn's rising spirits took a considerable step backwards, and Astridel hastened to add, “Before.”

With caution, Quinn slowly requested, “Explain, please, my lord.”

Astridel sat forwards, her elbows propped on her knees and her fingers interlaced before her lips, and, after a small sigh, she asked, “How much do you remember?”
His eyes going vague with recollection, Quinn shook his head slightly. “I remember seeing Baras move – I remember shouting to you – I remember seeing the light, that awful light, just before it struck... that's all.” He looked back up at her. “What happened?”

“There was little I could do,” Astridel confessed, “except destroy Baras. Which I did. Tremel and Rathari saw to you; they grabbed every kolto you had on you and injected you to save your life. By the time I was free to get to you, you were alive, but barely stable. Critical condition, and unconscious. But they told me that before you went fully under, you said one thing.”

“Which was, my lord?” Quinn inquired apprehensively.

“They weren’t positive, but they agreed it sounded like ‘not important’,” Astridel reported. Quinn looked back blankly, plainly with no recollection of these words. “I’ve had a lot of time to think about that, and what it might mean, particularly in the context of what I know of you. I think you were speaking of yourself.”

“That... is likely, my lord.” At a small gesture from her, he added, “I am sworn to serve you, my lord. I have repeated that vow – and I meant it, regardless of cost to myself. My devotion – ”

“...is part of the problem,” Astridel put in, to Quinn's surprise. She pursed her lips a moment, gathering her thoughts. “Quinn – Malavai... I cannot live standing on a pedestal. It is lonely, it is isolating, I cannot move or fight there. I see I must be on your level, or you must be on mine. For me to love you as you wish me to love you, then you, Malavai, you must also love yourself. You must come to see your own value... as I do.”

Still blinking in bewilderment, Quinn stammered, “You... don’t want me to serve you? To protect you?”

“That’s not what I mean,” Astridel corrected gently. “I would only ensure that you know the full worth of your own life. For you to declaim it as not important is a lie. It is, to me, one of the single most important things in the galaxy.”

She leaned forward then, before he could answer, granting him a kiss of the most delectable softness, the breath on her lips like a balm on his, chafed and dry as they were. She tasted of fresh air and triumph, he could feel his mental confusion and physical pain evaporating as her delicate touch buoyed him up, spirit and body alike. He was dizzy when she pulled away, and dazzled by the slow-blossoming smile that bloomed over her lips. Once more, as she had done before, she gave him one
simple, sweet order.

“Get some sleep, Quinn. I'll be back to visit you soon.”

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I've written enough at this point in my life that I can start to see emerging patterns in some of my stories, and I've realized that the same holds true here: apparently, I like to put my female leads in situations where their lovers - Vector and Quinn - have zero choice but to stand back and watch their women kick ass and take names. The Corellian torture for Paha; the confrontation with Baras, for Astridel. From a game standpoint, of course the SW would have a companion with them for the final fight, but in reality, I feel like Baras would exploit that - while he could be cocky enough to think that the companion would make no difference in the final fight, I think that he is paranoid enough and devious enough that he would rather cripple the SW by denying them the assistance of their companion for the battle. So, I took that confrontation a little bit of a different direction.

The other thing I see I'm big on is the notion of equality. Paha is painfully aware that most consider her an inferior due to her race; among her own people, she is an exile. She is perpetually an outsider, and always trying to prove herself and her skill. Having suffered from this kind of inequality, she is able to empathize easily with Vector's position as a pariah, and agrees with him on the dislike of anti-alien sentiment. She is being entirely transparent and truthful when she tells Vector that she doesn't want a subordinate, she wants a partner - and equal. The same is appearing here in Astridel's story - by virtue of her rank as the commander of her crew, her social status as a Sith, her role as Wrath, her power as a Force-wielder, she is Quinn's superior in almost every way. It's taken her a long time, but she's come to see how that can lead to problems in a romantic relationship, and it's forced her to acknowledge that she may need to approach her interactions with Quinn in a different way. Even with these differences, it doesn't mean that they can't be equal in the relationship itself.

I seriously enjoyed writing Baras' death scene. It's good in the game, with igniting the saber through his guts, but with the addition of his sucker punch at Quinn, I wanted a reaction a bit more visceral from Astridel. :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There was first a veritable parade of doctors and nurses and medical droids before Astridel made a reappearance, several hours later.

“I'm willing to bet you didn't actually follow my instructions,” she said with a smile that was almost shy as she sat down beside the bed again.

“Well, my lord,” Quinn shrugged mischievously, “if you want me to try out this new egalitarian philosophy of yours, then it seemed to me a simple piece of disobedience was a good place to start.”

Far from sleeping, he had lain awake mulling over her words, and he realized the accuracy of her observations – that while devotion was one thing, elevating her too high above him in his own estimation brought its own share of problems. Could it not be considered insulting for a lover's self-effacing servility to engender a feeling of injured dignity or lessened status? That had never been his intent; when he had often enough in the past marveled at how Astridel behaved so differently from the usual Sith who thrived on the grovelling attitudes of those beneath them it occurred to him that this was only a logical extension of those peculiar characteristics of hers.

Her earlier words reminded him, in truth, of the night in her penthouse, not so very far from the spot he now lay, when she, vibrant with passion, demanded – no, begged – that he drop all sign and semblance of rank and call her only by her name. He had never really stopped to think about what that request had meant, beyond the obviousness of its surface. Had she, even then, been wishing for this leveled ground between them, untouched by military distinctions and Sith power struggles? If they had each been braver that night, and more honest, so much pain and trouble might have been avoided!

But that pain and trouble had illuminated so many things, casting light into the dark places of their relationship and their natures, that perhaps everything had happened for the best after all. Had things been different, then she might not be here now, smirking over his joke at his bedside.

“Besides,” he added, “you left your tale half-finished. You never told me Baras' end. I regret that I wasn't awake enough to have seen it for myself.”

Astridel's smile broadened proudly. “It's a shame; there are no holocams in the Dark Council Chambers,” she said with false ruefulness. “Officially.”
“Which means that every Darth in there has it bugged in a hundred different ways and places,” Quinn surmised.

Astridel held out a small data pad she had brought with her. “Darth Vowrawn was kind enough to share the footage. He thought it might make a delightful memento. He's right, of course.”

Quinn was already pulling up the file, and watched in silence. Aside from the brutally thorough and gruesome end of Baras – he watched it three times, with increasing satisfaction each time – he noticed that the file was larger than just these few seconds that had been marked off for his review. There was additional footage from before Baras' death, and as he backed the video further with a motion of his hand he made quickly, disguising the quiver in his fingers, Astridel reached out suddenly, placing her fingertips lightly on his wrist.

“You don't have to,” she said, with a depth of compassion in her voice that surprised him.

He hesitated a moment. “I know. But I think I'd like to, my lord.”

It was profoundly uncomfortable to watch himself struck by Baras' lightning, and he raised a hand to his chest as if he could feel it again, slamming into his chest with the force of a sledgehammer. He let the file keep playing, through Tremel and Rathari running to his body, through the objections of the Council lords, through the part he had already seen, Astridel's mute grief and savage destruction of the orchestrator of so much suffering for so many. As the video finished, he could only say in a subdued voice, “It was very well done, my lord.”

“Mm, yes, I thought so,” Astridel agreed serenely, feeling it was wiser to hold off on digging any further into it. One heavy conversation a day was more than enough for a convalescing man. Still, she reached to take his hand in hers, lifting it from where it pressed against the healing wound Baras had made.

“You have mail, as well,” she pointed out to change the subject. “A lot of it. Unsurprisingly, our little adventure didn't stay secret for long. If you thought the Fury's communications array lit up when you took out Broysc, you should see what it has been doing since we left Korriban. Quite a few out there wishing you well, and speeding your recovery.”

Scrolling through the list with eyes widened with faint astonishment, Quinn shook his head at the volume of missives synced onto the datapad. He paused every so often to open one or another, clearly from old military friends, with a slight, pleased smile on his face. It faded into a look of
bewilderment as he reread one of them, then held it out to Astridel.

“Is not sure what to make of this, my lord,” he said.

_My dear Mal,_

_I don't know how you managed it, but I know we have you to thank. So sly, you never even gave us a hint! It must have cost a fortune – I had no idea you had so much saved. I hope you have kept some back for yourself – don't put yourself in beggary for us! The house is snug; the garden is lovely, and I confess, it's nice to be away from the endless rain of Dromund Kaas. The sun here does me good, and I think it does Callirum good, too. He seems calmer here, more manageable – and the nurse you engaged to help has already visited twice. It is so quiet and beautiful here. You must come see us as soon as you can. Do you think your lord will grant you a leave? I miss you so much – but never mind that, I know you are busy – I am simply proud to call you my son._

_Your loving,_

_Mumsy_

“I think you are free to call on your mother whenever you like,” Astridel answered pleasantly, a knowingly smug smile toying at her lips. “Of course I grant you leave. And it's adorable that you call your mother Mumsy.”

Quinn turned a color of red normally reserved for pureblood Sith. “You know that's not what I meant, my lord,” he said with some embarrassed exasperation. “I have no idea what she's talking about, but surely, you must. You moved my mother and brother off Dromund Kaas?”

“I would have done it a long time ago, if I had known,” Astridel answered. “I did say I had other tactics I could have used, you know.”

The reference to their fight was oblique, but although Quinn still felt the stab of chagrined pain at the memory, he was a little surprised to find it didn't hurt as much as he had expected. It was a pain that had made great strides towards healing, replaced with strong, durable scar tissue that bound them to each other. “But...why?”

“Why did I help Vette free her sister and find her mother?” Astridel said reasonably. “Why did I spare Jaesa's parents, and sent them here, to live in the Empire? And when matters between Baras and I began to sour, why did I take care to have them moved again, out of his immediate reach? Why
did I give Pierce free reign to find his old Black Ops crew?”

“Nothing but a ploy to ensure our loyalty, then?” Quinn asked pointedly. “No, I no longer believe that, my lord.”

“Oh?” The questioning tone in Astridel's voice was genuine.

“On some level, yes, but not entirely,” he asserted, sitting forward on the bed. “Not at all entirely. I know now you operate from far more than just self-interest, whatever you might say about it. You did all this, and continue to do it, because I think we are more than just your crew. It's much deeper than that; it's more than you simply accepting the responsibility, or even liking the responsibility. You like protecting us as we protect you. You like being loyal to us as much as you like us to be loyal to you. You like us all. In short, my lord – my Astridel – it's because you care.”

Quinn stretched and reached for her, slipping his arm around her to pull her from where she perched on the edge of the chair to sit on one awkward hip beside him on the bed, his limbs and his blood warming with the weight of her, his lips close to her cheek as he deduced, “I don't think it is coincidence that everything you have done here comes back to family ties – or, in Pierce's case, his brothers-in-arms. We are the family you were robbed of. You love us all. Whether you admit it or not.”

Any reply she was about to make was smothered in the kiss he used to capture her lips, drinking in her scent and her taste, his nerves and muscles vibrantly alive beneath his skin and humming in time with the pulse of her heart, detectable in the warmth of her flesh beneath his hand. He felt like touching her rejuvenated him, and was rather surprised that the passion that throbbed in his veins left him feeling abruptly tired and breathless, and when she lifted her mouth from his, he settled back in some weariness on the plush pile of pillows, drawing her after him to settle on his shoulder, one of the metal pendants of her veil chilly on the skin of his neck. He felt there was nothing more to say on the subject, particularly if she needed some time to consider his conclusion. After all, one heavy conversation a day was more than enough for a convalescing man – and this woman curled beside him.

“How,” he requested, puffing slightly from the exertion and a little frustrated over it, “tell me about what happened after Baras. Tell me about the Dark Council confirming you as Wrath.”

“They haven't,” Astridel answered with a little smirk.

“What! I understand that they don't have to, of course, but...”
“Oh, they tried. And informally, yes, they did. But I,” she added, resting her hand on his chest, rising and falling with the breath he was still recovering, “was rather preoccupied with other concerns, and politely requested a slight delay. They agreed to await my pleasure at the Citadel here in Kaas City, until my crew – my whole crew – can attend.”

“You put it off for me?” Quinn asked, touched.

“Naturally,” Astridel declared. “If anyone decides to paint *The Confirmation of Lord Astridel*, then I want to be sure they do it honestly, as it really happened. With all the most important people present.”

“And I am one of them,” Quinn said quietly, a statement of fact, not a question. It was, to his mild surprise, what he had been striving for during the long and curious course of their acquaintance – to be as dear to her as she was to him. It was a little ironic that he came by this certain knowledge, at long last, when he lay weakened and still, at his most feeble, in a hospital bed. But she wasn’t, he realized, wishing him to be anything other than what he was right now – simply himself, the man she loved. For once, ambition had been satisfied, and lay safely discarded on the floor, ignored and quiet.

“You are,” she confirmed softly, nestling into the hollow of his shoulder as though it were he who were the strong one, and she frail and exhausted in the shelter of his arms. The weight of her there was a pleasant anchor, drawing him slowly down into the soothing waves of the sleep that eluded him earlier, now lulled by the husky warmth of her voice.

“For where would I be without you? Malavai Quinn, the Defender of the Empire,” she murmured fondly, using a title she had invented in the wake of his murder of Moff Broysc, then adding a new one, “and Savior of Sith.”

“How lofty,” he chuckled drowsily into the fabric of her veil on top of her head, “When there is only one Sith I am particularly interested in saving.”

“At least twice now.”

“Twice?”

“Have you forgotten Ekkage already?”
“No,” he smothered a small yawn. “But that was... before.”

“Still counts. We are all the sum of our experiences and our pasts, Quinn.”

“I don't intend to ignore mine, lest I should repeat it,” he answered, hugging her more tightly, his eyes drooping closed. “Thank you, my lord... my Astridel.”

And with her name on his lips, he drifted over the border of consciousness to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Lots of schmoopy in this chapter, d'awwww. But relevant schmoopy; Quinn's got Astridel pegged whether she realizes or not (and she does). I promise, I really will not let this pair go without some additional fluff'n'smut. There's a little bit more denoument to go.
When Quinn awoke, he was alone, the comfortable weight and scent of Astridel on his shoulder a pleasant but missed remembrance. It was a little after dawn; the broad windows of his room, high above the damp, chilly streets, showed the rare glint of the sun in the gap between the horizon and the edge of the ceiling of clouds. The foggy mists that had squatted overnight on the mountains around Kaas City were rousing from their slumber, lifting their shaggy, monstrous heads from their rocky couches, rising up in streams of white and gray and rosy gold as if they were the silver-lined souls of the mountains themselves being pulled relentlessly heavenward. It would be a fine day.

He stretched, feeling how much of his strength and vivacity had returned to his limbs, and enjoyed the luxury of lounging in bed, not bothering to tally the minutes of the morning he watched passing through his window. He turned quickly from admiring the vista when the door abruptly opened. His hope for Astridel was disappointed; a nurse of indeterminate age entered, accompanied by a medical droid.

“Good morning; just here for a final vitals check,” she announced pleasantly.

“Final?” Quinn echoed.

“If all is good, there's no reason for you to stay here longer,” she answered, skimming through the data display mounted at the food of the bed as the droid began to recite a length and mumbling summary of readings, both raw values as well as trends or lack thereof, regarding Quinn's health.

After a moment, she concluded, “Everything is looking good! You should be able to leave today – a few hours to process all the usual paperwork. Bureaucracy, you know,” she tacked on chattily, waggling her eyebrows a little. “Stars above, we're steeped in it! We have forms to fill out to request forms to fill out, you'd hardly believe it. I once suggested a plan to cut back on all the redundant formwork, but I had to fill out so many forms to bring the proposal to the hospital board that I gave up. Eight levels – eight! – of management and administrators to go through to get to talk to anybody who can actually do anything, and each one has their own pile of forms and requests. It's enough to drive you nuttier than a bogwing on bad spice.”

“But,” Quinn interjected, trying to stem the bewildering tide of this garrulousness, “I haven't any clothes.”
His uniform – the new one, the one he had brushed with such care before accompanying Astridel to the Dark Council Chamber – was ruined beyond all hope of repair, a great gaping hole scorched straight through the front of it. There had been no sign of it, and he assumed it had been cut off him by the medics.

“Oh?” the nurse paused to look over at him fully for the first time. She let the silence stand for exactly half a second. “Nonsense – to be sure you do; your servant brought your things in for you in last night!”

She crossed to the slender wardrobe that stood bolted to the wall near the private lavatory, opening the door wide. Within was a uniform, brand-new and gleaming white, spotless and unsullied by dirt or sin, blood or error. As he gaped at it, the nurse kept up her stream of volubility.

“At least, I thought it was your servant, anyway. Some woman brought it – hooded type, she was; you know, one of those alien-kind. Mira-somethings. I can never keep them straight, Miraluka, Mirialan; too many of them, if you ask me. Thank goodness for the droids; otherwise I'd never keep straight who has hearts on one side or the other or a second spleen or liver or some other strangeness...”

The flow of words continued to pour out of her as she fussed about the room, shutting down certain monitors that were no longer necessary for tracking Quinn's condition, but he stopped paying attention to her, his eyes still fixed on the dress uniform, whiter than even the clouds that scudded past his window. The only part he noted in the nurse's prattle was her assertion that the 'hood woman' said she'd be back to meet him just after midday.

“It's nice you have such good help, sir,” she babbled on, “Stars know it's not easy to get good servants these days; she was very polite, very well-trained, quite concerned that you would be prepared for - oh, some meeting or other, I think; she didn't give many details, which was very discrete of her. Likely you've done wonders with her; they can be so unmanageable at times.”

“Thank you,” Quinn replied, since a response seemed to be expected, his voice sounding strangled as he tried not to laugh. Astridel would have a thorough cackle over it when he told her later. “Could I get dressed now, please?”

“What? Oh, of course,” the nurse nodded, turning for the door. “You have a nice day, Captain.”

He waited a few minutes to ensure she was truly gone, then got up on legs that were only slightly unsteady to give himself a thorough inspection in the lavatory mirror. Several days' growth of dark beard covered his face, his cheeks faintly sunken from days in a coma without a solid meal. But the
stubble was easily shaved away, and his weight and his strength would return together in the matter of a few days.

The scar where Baras' lightning had seared him was not so easily removed, and he had no wish for it to be. It was a badge of pride, the permanent reminder of what he had done for Astridel, marking him as hers for life. It prompted him to wonder if there were anything that correspondingly marked her as his, but he mulled the question over without the obsessive zeal of his former self, looking at it now as only a curiosity, not an imperative point to be proven. It was a novelty to feel so unconcerned about any issue in which Astridel factored so largely; but he had resolved to trust more in faith and futures than proof and pasts. She said she would come for him, and he was certain she would. He took his time in showering and shaving, and loitered long over the breakfast that was delivered before finally presuming to don the spotless uniform.

He was still smoothing his hair in the mirror and flicking invisible dust from the gleaming white jacket when he heard footsteps entering the room, and the swish of heavy, draped cloth. The sound puzzled him, and as he turned to emerge from the lavatory, he spied a moderately petite woman in resplendent rich red robes, a long, voluminous cape, and a complex headdress that covered half her face, the very image of weighty ceremony. For an instant, he assumed this woman had wandered into the wrong room, when his eye fell on the familiar curve of her visible lips, the top painted a deep ruddy purple, with a streak down the lower.

“My lord,” he breathed.

“I know, it's not my usual sort of thing,” she said, looking down at her unaccustomed garb with a small, embarrassed laugh. “But I figured I ought to make the effort. It isn't every day... well, you know.” She pulled the folds material away from her feet to take another step into the room. “I don't know why anyone would actually wear this. I feel like I can barely move, let alone fight.”

“Perhaps it's simply to allow a distressing damsel's protectors the illusion of being useful, should a fight become necessary,” Quinn offered with a serious expression it took a minor effort to maintain.

“Illusion?”

“Please. At the first sign of trouble, you'd cut that skirt off at the thigh and go all in, my lord. Don't pretend you wouldn't.” The irrepressible grin he could no longer keep at bay flashed across his face. He bent forward to place a quick kiss on her lips, careful not to disturb the color on them. “And thank you for the uniform.”

“It suits you,” Astridel said demurely, but with color tinting her cheeks as she surveyed him
appreciatively. He had not been so ill as to have gained a wasted appearance, merely a little thin, so
the tailored jacket yet fit him well, cut in precise lines over his chest, the close-trimmed pants just
barely outlining the muscles of his legs. It was amazing, at times, at how fragile life could be and yet
also so resilient – these physical features, and all that went with them, had been nearly completely
destroyed mere days ago, snuffed out of existence, and yet now he stood before her, hale and
handsome, tempting her every sense to touch him, to taste his skin and smell his scent, to fill her ears
with his voice, and take in every part of him with all the perception her Force-fashioned sight could
offer her.

“You'll enjoy the story of how I was informed it had arrived,” he was saying, and when she, still
gazing rather vacantly at him, didn't answer, he prompted, “My lord?”

She gave her head a slight shake, collecting herself. “Yes, of course.”

“Anything on your mind, my lord?”

“No,” she said hastily. Her telltale blush deepened. “I'll tell you later, Quinn.”

No doubt she would! He flushed a little, and as she turned to lead the way out, he quickly caught at
her hand.

“One thing, my lord, before we return to the galaxy at large,” he said quickly. Astridel instantly
turned back to him, and he took a moment to look down into her face. “I have had some time to think
this past day or two. About us, and things we have each said. And you are correct, what you had to
say about being on equal footing for this to work. I admit, I'm not used to such... democratic ideas.
But I am more than willing to try, if you are.”

“It...” Astridel confessed softly, “is a bit foreign to me, too. But that doesn't diminish my willingness,
either.”

“Then,” he continued, a relieved smile flickering over his features, “in light of our new commitment,
perhaps you could go on calling me 'Malavai,'”

“Only if you call me Astridel,” she countered. With an impish smile, she relented slightly. “At least,
in private. In public, we can still go on with the 'Quinns' and 'my lords.'”
“That goes without saying,” he agreed, glad she still held to that comfortable trapping of professionalism in front of others. The distinction made him happy, that their moments away from the notice of others would be truly reserved for themselves. “But in private... Astridel. I think I can manage that.”

“Unless you come up with something else to call me,” Astridel replied, her smile turning even more wickedly coy. She stretched up on her tiptoes, whispering tantalizingly in his ear in a low voice, “In... private... of course.”

With his heart pounding and his cheeks flaring with high spots of color, he echoed faintly, “Of course.”

She beamed archly at him, all feline satisfaction, and asked one last, dangerous – but memorable – question. “Anything else?”

“Just this,” he replied promptly, sweeping her in his arms to kiss her far more thoroughly than his prior peck of greeting, no longer caring about the precision of her makeup, tasting its waxy tang on his tongue and feeling the glossy, sleek smoothness of the warm velvet and cool silk of her robes under his fingers, and the pressure of her form, all curves and muscle, against his body.

A few minutes later, the talkative nurse, on her way to her next patient, stepped quickly aside in the hallway in deference to the rank of the powerful Sith lord who progressed majestically down it arm-in-arm with her military attaché. Quinn paused briefly to smile amiably at the nurse.

“Thank you for your excellent care,” he nodded. With a brief bow of his head to indicate Lord Astridel at his side, he added, “My servant thanks you as well.”

As Astridel and Quinn stepped into the lift at the end of the hall, he caught a glimpse of the nurse staring after them in aghast and wide-eyed horror, more speechless than ever she had been in her entire life.

Chapter End Notes

Gosh hecking darn it, I keep totally over-writing each chapter. I had figured the entirety of this scene would have been maybe half a chapter at the most, with the other half covering the confirmation with the Dark Council, and I let it run away from me. Derp.
Best laid plans on mice and men, and all that.
They met the others before the Citadel, backlit with flashes of lightning that were the forerunners of an approaching storm, and if none of them welcomed Quinn with instantaneous embraces, neither did any of them display any disdain. The fractures of the Fury's crew were healing over. Quinn and Astridel were not the only ones sporting new garb; Vette looked polished in a sleek jacket of glossy leatheris and Jaesa was formally arrayed in finely woven kath woollette and saava silk. Pierce's replacement armor, bereft of the scratches and scuffs of countless battles that had marred his former suit, gleamed brightly below the perpetual light of the Kaas City street lamps, and even Broonmark's fur had been so carefully brushed that it shone. Astridel surveyed her team proudly.

“We have come so far,” she marveled, her veiled face turning first towards Vette, recalling their first adventures on Korriban, when they had been just two young women taking on the galaxy alone, then looked along the arc surrounding her – Jaesa, Pierce, Broonmark – “So very far...” – and last of all, her shrouded gaze fell on Quinn. “Together. Now, I am honored if you will go with me a little farther.”

“Ha! As if we'd back out now,” Vette cracked with a slight roll of her eyes as she propped one hand against her cocked hip.

“Cute, master,” Jaesa uttered, a phantom smile curling the corners of her lips and a spark of amusement glittering in her eye, “to make it sound like we had a choice in the matter.”

“In this to the end, m'lord,” Pierce shrugged, but pride tinted his voice no matter how much he tried to be nonchalant. “And then some.”

“Zwho-o-bwooz,” Broonmark agreed with satisfaction.

“Well, then,” Astridel declared. “The last time I did something like this, I said I'd only get one chance to make a grand entrance. I think we'll make a better one this time.”

The Dark Council chamber in the Citadel in Kaas City was very much a sister to the one on Korriban, with its twin arc array of a dozen thrones lofted on raised daises, occupied by the highest Sith Lords of the Empire, some present physically, others in attendance by holo. This time, every throne was filled, with the exception of the chair that had been vacated by the death of Darth Baras. Astridel had been correct: their entrance was worthy of the space occupied by this august assembly;
she, in her rich finery, led the way with Quinn on her arm, his insignia and rank cylinders sparkling in the dim light; she was followed, as was most fitting, by her apprentice Jaesa together with Vette, the slave that had become her oldest friend. The formidable wall that was Pierce and Broonmark made the rearguard, and the Council, ever appreciative of pageantry, approved of the sight as it came to a halt before them, with Lord Astridel disengaging herself from her military escort and stepping to the fore. The young Wrath had amassed a team to be reckoned with, a team who did her as much credit as she did them. Darth Vowrawn was particularly delighted.

“Welcome, welcome,” he greeted them, rising from his seat and rubbing his hands together. “I am so pleased that the Council has saved the most agreeable topic of our meeting for the last; it's always pleasant to end on a positive note.”

“Indeed,” Darth Marr replied neutrally. He turned his masked face back to those who stood attentively before him. “Lord Astridel, the Council formally receives you.”

“My lords,” Astridel answered respectfully, bowing to the head of the Council.

“According to traditions of some Sith,” Marr intoned with an ironical emphasis, “the title of Darth is conferred upon the apprentice by the master at a time of the master's choosing.”

Ravage shifted in his chair. “That cannot be the case in this situation, for obvious reasons.”

“Rather,” Vowrawn put in with a smile, “Baras chose the most spectacular mode of bestowing your new rank upon you. It was really quite exhilarating.”

“It's hardly necessary,” piped up a rather cadaverous-looking woman, “for it to be the master alone to lay claim to this duty.”

“Any one of us may do it,” Marr agreed in his unnervingly solemn voice. “Now, it shall be me. Kneel, Lord Astridel.”

Astridel obligingly sank to one knee before the Council, her head bowed ever so slightly, respectful but clearly not servile. Darth Marr rose to his feet. He was silent a moment, his mask shielding any outward sign of his thoughts that might have been betrayed on his features as he regarded the woman on the floor before him.
“Lord Astridel, you are strong in the ways of the Force,” he observed, “and you have been thorough in the destruction of your enemies.”

“*Quite* thorough,” Vowrawn murmured gleefully below his breath.

“I,” Marr announced, pointedly ignoring Vowrawn's commentary, “accordingly confer upon you the rank of Darth. But I grant you no new name, as it seems the will of the Emperor has bestowed one already upon you. Council lords,” Marr raised his voice slightly as his masked countenance swept around the ring of seats, “we convene now to acknowledge the status of Darth Astridel as the Emperor's Wrath. State your objections now, or confirm as you will.”

Marr addressed each of the lords in turn, polling their responses. No Council member could hide their vote – or lack thereof – in a chorus of voices. Each must speak, one way or another. Down the line, the responses came, from Decimus, from Mortis, from Aruk, from Rictus, and Vowrawn.

“Confirm.”

“Confirm.”

“Confirm.”

“Confirm.”

“Oh, confirm, of course,” Vowrawn smiled delightedly.

And then from Hadra, from Acharon, from Thanaton, and Arho:

“Confirm.”

“Confirm.”

“I confirm.”
“Confirm.”

From the vacant seat that had belonged so briefly to Baras there came a deafening silence, one that continued as Marr's masked gaze fell on Darth Ravage, once Baras' closest ally on the Council, likely by virtue of whatever damning evidence Baras had held over his head. Ravage, perhaps recalling past allegiances, looked slightly uncomfortable.

“Yes, confirm,” Ravage muttered hastily.

“Darth Astridel,” Darth Marr returned his attention to her, “when you knelt before this Council, you were but a lord. Rise now as the Emperor's Wrath!”

“You have proven that you are truly touched by the Emperor,” Vowrawn declared as Astridel regained her feet “The Dark Council knows that the Emperor's Wrath has free reign. You are answerable only to our ultimate master.”

“Your actions will not be challenged as long as they do not contradict our own.” Darth Marr said, as much a warning as a statement of fact.

Astridel inclined her head. “I look forward to aiding the Dark Council in its most critical matters.”

“Then our power has heightened,” Vowrawn proclaimed, practically glowing with joy. “Let the enemies of the Empire tremble! The Emperor's Wrath shall consume them all!”

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“Do you really, master?” Jaesa asked some time later as the group stood outside the Citadel in the waning light of day. “Look forward to aiding them, I mean?”

Astridel made a short, derisive snort of something that wasn't quite laughter. “Let's just say that I didn't see any benefit in openly setting us at odds with them. We will do as the Emperor directs regarding matters in which he chooses to concern himself. As for everything else? We will do as benefits the Empire, and benefits us. The Council may take it or leave it as they like.”
“So…” Vette mused in a voice that fell somewhere between wonderstruck and mischievous, “what do we do now?”

The curl of Astridel’s answering smile was just as mischievous, but far more satisfied, full of anticipation and smug glee. “Celebrate, of course,” she declared. “Phondcrest awaits.”

“Phondcrest?” Vette echoed, and even Quinn raised his eyebrows. Draped in ostentatious riches and fabulously expensive, the Phondcrest lounge was only open to the most elite of Imperial society; the wait list for a table was notoriously months long. Walking in with a twi’lek as a companion, not a slave, would turn a few snobbish heads; factor in a Talz and an enlisted man and her arrival would damn near cause a riot.

“Mmm, you’re right; too stuffy,” Astridel replied in a playfully light tone that indicated she had been teasing them all along. “Which is why I have engaged a private table at the Thunderview.”

The Thunderview had the distinction of being literally the highest cantina in Kaas City, perched on the top two floors of a skyscraper in Central district, offering an exquisite sight – for which it was named – of the storm-shrouded mountains that ringed the capital. Its casino was run with minimal cheating of the customers, the drinks were liberally poured, and some of the best and wildest acts in the galaxy graced its stage – things that would have irreparably shocked the considerably more highbrow and considerably less fun crowds at Phondcrest. Not a one of them would feel out of place, not Broonmark with his wild white fur floating about him, nor Pierce, already down 20 credits at Corellian Spike sabacc; not Vette, two drinks in and steeling her stomach for a repeat of her Nar Shaddaa hangover, nor Jaesa, eyeing a handsome spacer leering pleasantly at her from the bar. And not Quinn, whom Astridel had unobtrusively and skillfully seated at her left hand on the plush booth seats around their table.

A Sith lord so brilliantly attired with a retinue so diverse and similarly arrayed could not fail to attract attention, and a tiny handful of individuals who were particularly well-connected took more careful note of Astridel’s appearance and set the gears of the rumor mill into active motion. It didn't take long for the entire lounge to know the identity of who sat in their midst. It made Quinn uncomfortable, the glances shot their direction, as many of them focused on him as they were her. They were at this moment perhaps the two most notorious and respected individuals in Kaas City.

“My lord,” he murmured low in her ear.

“Let them stare,” Astridel answered with regal nonchalance. “We are the victors today. No losers, no consolation prizes. Don't shrink from it, Quinn.”
He propped his elbow on the table, his chin resting lightly against his fingers as he regarded her a moment before answering. “I don't, my lord,” he observed at length. “No false modesty, no deflection. We won.”

Not you. We. He felt the truth of her words – none of them, not even her, would have made it this far alone. He had to content himself with drinking her in with his eyes, warm and admiring, as he nonetheless didn't dare take her in his arms and kiss her as he wanted to do, spurred on by the pressure of her leg against his beneath the table, through layers and layers of wool and silk. He was hardly even aware of the waitress bringing the next round of drinks, and it was only when Vette set her glass down with an audible clunk on the glossy wood surface of the table that he came to himself, faintly embarrassed for his senses to have lost themselves so entirely so soon after noting the many eyes that flicked towards their table.

“Too serious!” Vette declared abruptly, noting the expression passing between the two. She reached over and neatly plucked the conical headdress with its elaborate folds from Astridel's head and dropped it backwards on her own lekku, leaving Astridel's face covered only by a simple under-hood she had been wearing beneath. Quinn barely muffled a snicker as he heard a number of gasps erupt across the lounge, with more than one patron edging towards the door, certain that the whole scene would become a bloody massacre in a matter of seconds. The hostess at the door looked ready to burst into tears.

But Astridel only laughed, long and unhindered, the way he had seen her laugh on Nar Shaddaa, the way she laughed sometimes when they were alone, away from the stares and concerns of the galaxy. It was a sound that warmed him through, and, picking up his glass as Astridel retaliated by challenging Vette to pazaak – “Nar Shaddaa rules,” she grinned wickedly, which Vette was just still so sober enough to refuse to – Quinn relaxed, unfettered by worries for his future for the first time in the long duration of his memory.

Chapter End Notes

The trouble with listing the members of the Dark Council at this time is that so many of them die in the course of the various storylines. This thread was a help, but it's mostly existing DC members post-game. It would be handy to break it down by the 12 Pyramids of Influence and who inherits them in succession throughout all the story lines - but that information might not be readily available.

I have put the Council at this time as the following: Marr, Vowrawn, Ravage, Hadra, Acharon, Decimus, Thanaton, Mortis, Rictus, Arho, Aruk, and the spot left empty by Baras' death.

Marr, Vowrawn, and Ravage all have speaking parts during the end of the SW line, so
they of course make the list. Darth Hadra is alive during SW vs Baras (determined by mousing over witnesses to the fight), so I included her, along with the two other Darths she was on Corellia with, Darth Acharon and Decimus. That entry also states that Acharon was present via holo for SW vs Baras. Originally, I was going to include Darth Nox, but that linked entry indicates that Thanaton is alive for SW vs Baras. This information states that Mortis is present for SW vs Baras, and he is also present for Thanaton's end, and this entry declares that as of 3640 BBY, Rictus is the oldest person on the Council, and he is still alive after Darth Hadra's death, so he must be on the Council at this point.

Since I'm considering that Paha has already defeated Jadus and killed Zhorrid, that leaves two unfilled spots, the third spot being Baras'. Darth Arho is stated as being killed during the Battle of Ilum, so it is reasonable to conclude that he as part of the Council (unless he were the one advanced into Baras' seat, meaning his tenure on the Council was very brief indeed). There is Darth Aruk, on whom there is scanty information. My research has led me to dismiss many of the other possibilities for these last two seats. For example, Darth Karrid takes Hadra's seat, and Hadra is still alive now, so Karrid is out. Karrid is replaced by Acina, so Acina can't be on the Council yet, either. Darth Arctis is replaced by Thanaton, so Arctis is not a member at this time. There is Darth Charnus, Decimus' apprentice, but I can't find any information that supports he ever ascended to the Council - and even if he had, it would be unlikely at this time, since Decimus is still alive and on the Council. That more or less exhausts the list that was put together in the forum thread, so I am fairly confident (or at least, content) in my list.

It's been a little while since I put up a chapter - I've been working on making new garb for my husband and I for a living history re-enactment group we belong to, and this week I took a day off from work to relax and do some writing and instead spent the day battling a head cold (ugh, and I still have it, double ugh). Additionally, I decided to start devoting some time to a few of my LS characters, and got the Smuggler story moving along, so, yay, actually getting to play again!

Speaking of Smuggler stories, can we just take a moment to appreciate how adorable is Corso? I think I've found my next fanfic pairing! Of course, I'm not done with Astridel - I definitely intend a sequel, and I've got plotty notions of an Astridel/Paha crossover at some point, but before I can get into any of these, I have a pile of non-SW/non-fanfic writing work I need to tackle to release as ebooks over Amazon.

[And while I am on that topic, if anyone is interested in being on a mailing list either for releases or for receiving advanced reader copies for reviews, please let me know, and I'll put you in touch with my husband who is handling all the marketing end of things. It will still be a little while before I have anything ready for publication (paranormal/historical romance), but when it's ready, you'll be the first to know!]
“I never asked, my lord,” Quinn recalled later as he idly swirled the dregs of his last drink, “about the outcome of the other missions. Clearly, they went well.”

“Oh, very,” Astridel assured, poking at the melting ice in her drink with the long stem of the garnish. “Jaesa and Pierce made short work of Darth Baras' loyalists – here's a toast to poor dead Draahg; he would have been heartbroken if he had known there were three other apprentices waiting in the wings! Any of his lackeys that survived the purge I inherited; enough to keep Jaesa busy reading their secrets and motivations for two months running. Vette and Broonmark were just as successful. It's a good thing you like puzzles; there's a pile of gadgets, encrypted files, and secrets just waiting for your adept skills to unlock.”

“I look forward to it!” Quinn nodded appreciatively. “I'll get to work at once.”

“It's not so immediate as all that. It can, at least, wait until morning.”

There weren't all that many hours left before that time, Astridel noted, and she pushed her empty glass away from her in a clear indication that for her, the party was drawing to a close. “Time for me to bid you all good night,” she announced.

Vette made a noise of protest and a pout, and Astridel laughed, tugging her purloined headdress down over the twi'lek’s eyes briefly. Vette made a motion to return it, but Astridel waved her off.

“Oh, it's yours now, Vette. You might need it if you get sick in the taxi on the way home,” she teased, then raised her attention to Broonmark and Pierce, who had decided to cut his sabacc losses. “Please, stay as long as you like; the tab is open and the bartender knows how to handle the bill.”

“Allow me to escort you, my lord,” Quinn offered, rising with respectful alacrity, and she accepted his arm with a smile that she managed to keep surprisingly demure.

The thunderstorms of the early evening had moved on, and the next mounting clouds had not yet begun their march over the hills. The streets streamed with draining rainwater, offering up cool mists that swirled like phantoms around the legs of those out at this darkly placid hour. The trees, lined in
streaking silver droplets, sparkled under the light of the full moon, its rays enfeebled by the intervening haze of cool humidity. As they emerged onto the sidewalk, Quinn took a breath of the air, feeling that it seemed so much cleaner than the heat of the lounge, full of the close, dense smells of food and drink and active people, perfumed and warm-blooded.

“Shall we walk, my lord?” he suggested.

“It’s a lovely night for it,” she agreed softly. She curled her arm around his, hugging his bicep to her bosom as she fell in step beside him. “Especially if we cut across Seline Park.”

Without further speech, they went on until they shortly passed the low stone wall that surrounded the park, a meandering tract of green where the rainforest had been tamed, the grass trimmed and the trees sculpted by a hand other than that of nature alone, and vines weighted with fragrant white flowers gleamed in the pale moonlight. He had assumed she was bound for her penthouse, but although he also felt his admission to that sanctum of hers remained speculative, he was reluctant to disrupt the spell of the night with talk, even as the coy smile that hovered on her lips brought to mind a former stroll under somewhat similar, foggier circumstances. But assumptions had done them terrible damage, and as their steps slowed in the quiet night, Quinn at last broke the silence.

“My lord...” he began, and broke off as she came to a stop beside him, and their arms disengaging as he turned to face her.

“My lord?” Astridel repeated with an arch smile. She turned her head to take in the hushed solitude of their surroundings. “This seems private enough... Malavai.”

“Then... Astridel,” he murmured, “I am bringing you to your apartment?”

Her smile curled a little more deeply. “Of course.”

She was about to step towards him, ready to forestall the obvious next question, but was abruptly snared by the drape of her cape flowing around her, catching on one of the low thorny shrubs along the narrow path, some woody, dark-blooming bush threaded through with the vines with their long-throated trumpets of effervescent white, glowing an eldritch greenish hue in the night’s blue depths. Before Quinn could stoop to free the material, she gave it an impatient tug, and as the cloak sprang loose, a sudden fountain of vivid orange sparks blossomed up from the ruffled leaves. Astridel, surprised, made a jerky movement of wary alarm, but Quinn instantly seized her hand.
“Wait – don't move,” he urged gently, and on solely his word, she held still, and the frenzy of tiny lights expanded and whirled in an aimless dance around them.

“What are they?” she asked in a low voice, enchanted.

“Emberwisps,” he replied, just as softly. “I used to catch them when I was a boy. I haven't seen one in years; I had no idea there were any left here in the city.”

He lapsed into silence when she didn't answer, her head tipped back slightly to watch the fervent glow of the minute insects in their random, scattered flights, wreathing her and him together in the repeated eruptions of a thousand impossibly dainty suns, flaring over and again like novas in some minuscule galaxy. The comet had come down to the planetary mud, and brought with her a shower of stars. But he – he was mud no longer; tempered by fire and hardened by pressure into rock and durable crystal, he had become a foundation for the firmament, an anchor for the empyrean. Two celestial bodies, orbiting as one, forever linked and entwined.

His gaze followed the sparks of the emberwisps as they rose, their lights as stars on the backdrop of clouds overhead and each one reflected in the depths of his dark eyes. When he looked again at Astridel, she had drawn closer to him, so close that he had to do nothing but raise his arms to embrace her, and no more motion than to bow his head to kiss her.

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She led him through the door of her penthouse, unfastening her cloak to drop it over the outstretched arm of the droid she otherwise ignored as she entered, and turned back to him with a smile that was genuine and mirthful, one that prompted him to sweep her laughing in his arms as she fumbled to unfasten the polished black belts that crossed the spotless chest of his ivory uniform. It was a rather confused progression from there, a desultory and chaotic chase with no clear delineation between the pursuer and the pursued, leaving shoes and gloves and her veil and other articles of clothing scattered so haphazardly across the apartment that Toovee would have, for once, some proper tidying work to do in the morning.

Laughing breathlessly, they fetched up together against the wall beside the door into Astridel's bedroom, Malavai's hands pinning her wrists above her head to prevent her wicked fingers from roaming too directly and too immediately down the unfastened placket of his trousers. His jacket was long since lost somewhere in the penthouse's cavernous rooms, along with her overskirt and ceremonial armor. Her quickened heartbeat flared color in her cheeks, and she smirked dangerously, the slender line of her brow arching.
“As if,” she murmured merrily in his ear, his nerves thrilling to her breath warm on his neck and the startling sensation of a phantom, fingerless touch tracing up the length of his thigh, “I actually needed my hands!”

Malavai gasped, his breath catching in this throat in a wordless exclamation, and he wedged his knee between her legs in response, pushing up the heavy drape of her skirt in folds as he pressed his weight against her.

“You,” he accused as his lips traced the exposed line of her collarbone, “are utterly diabolical.”

“And you wouldn't have me any other way,” she answered smugly, squirming enticingly to press her hips more closely to his.

“Oh, I would have you, Astridel,” Malavai declared, releasing her hands to open her disheveled shirt further, pulling aside the band that bound her breasts to embrace each with his lips, delighting in the little breathless noises this drew from her, “I would have you any way I could, forever.”

“Forever is good,” she twittered, tremulous with need, sliding her hands around his bare waist to pull him towards her, “but now is better!”

He plucked the tangles of her shirt from her arms as she let her half-fastened skirt fall, leaving both alongside his pants in gilded pools of white and crimson on the bedroom floor as he scooped her up in eager arms, swinging them together to the soft plush covers and welcoming pillows of the broad bed. She sprawled luxuriously before him for a moment, all undulating, sleek curves and graceful fervor, her fingers tracing the sinews of his forearms and tugging lightly at his hands, before he sank down between her knees, their sweat-slick skin shivering at each others' touch and their heads dizzy with the dance of desire.

And as their repeated first kiss of their renewed romance had been slow and gentle, free of demands and expectations, so too now, despite their mutual urgency, was this deliberate and unhurried, but no less passionate for that. No haste, no aggression, no dominance, and no insistence but for the emphatic craving of pleasure as given as it was received, cherishing and ardent. When she crested and arched beneath him, her head flung back and blinded to all but bliss, her rapturous cries and the shudders that bucked her body against his shattered him, and he buried his answering shout in the scarred flesh of her wantonly exposed neck, limned in the ruddy gold light of the fire.

After a giddy moment, in which all his muscles felt as weak as they had when he had been struck by Force lightning, Malavai curled his arms around Astridel and rolled over, gathering her to his chest to lay as she had lain on him in the hospital, panting with exertion as much now as he had then. She
snuggled against his ribs, resting her head on his shoulder and her hand on the many-pointed scar that marred his chest like a radiant sun.

“Would you, Malavai?” she asked quite a while later, and something in her voice made him look down at her, reading in her countenance an odd little flicker of an emotion he could only classify as anxiety. “Have me any way you could... forever?”

He pressed a kiss into her hair, squeezing her lightly. “I would, Astridel.”

“Oh,” she said, her fingers tracing the rays of the scar with a minuscule nervous flutter. “Good.”

“Hmm?” he inquired softly, not pushing, but merely closing his eyes with serene patience. He had learned she would speak when she wished; he need not drive her to it. There was a comfortable silence that lasted several minutes, which he employed rather agreeably by idly tracing the curve and tip of her breast with one gentle fingertip. There had been uncomfortable silences in their history, silences that screamed in anger and seethed in rage, silences that blamed and silences that faulted, silences that were pawns of a game and tools of a punishment, and this was none of them. But even a benign silence could be broken, or should be, when the confession was an important one.

“Because,” Astridel murmured, her husky voice cascading over his skin as she pressed her cheek to his shoulder, “I wouldn’t want to be the only one of the two of us who feels this way.”

Malavai’s throat clogged, choking on an emotion that swelled his heart and sent a quiver through his pulse, and as Astridel’s nerves had been soothed by her admission, his own throbbed in response, surging with unbounded joy. He hugged her again, pulling her tightly against him, and he tenderly tipped up her face so that he could once more kiss her trembling lips.

“Oh, my love,” he whispered hoarsely, “you are not.”

Outside, beyond the windows and beyond the city, beyond the mountains and beyond the storms, the faintest streak of dawn tinted the eastern sky, the first light illuminating the way to their tomorrows.

Chapter End Notes
The final chapter of Monster! Roughly 117,000 words! (I am quite sure that short fiction is a medium I will never learn to master.)

There were just a tiny handful of things to resolve, and of course, the absolute necessity of the physical aspect of Astridel and Quinn's rekindled relationship. In short - some last bit of smutiness :) (And I'm sure I can't be the only one who pursued Force abilities to their logical sexual conclusion, seriously!). They might both have some monstrous traits to them, but I still have zero compunction about letting them have a happy-ever-after resolution.

As usual, it is a bittersweet ending for me as an author: to no longer be writing this pair on a more-or-less daily basis. But I am bidding a temporary adieu only to Astidel and Malavai - clearly, there has to be more, because I never had them have the marriage conversation. Based on the progress of this story, they've just managed to patch their relationship up, so it's more than a little early for the "marry me" part. They're each much wiser but also more secure - in themselves, and in each other - this time around. So there will certainly be a few additional tales - at least a short story for Astridel and Malavai alone, and the possible Astridel/Paha crossover that I mentioned last chapter; I'm just not sure when I'll be starting on them.

As always, thank you so very much to all my readers, kudos-givers, and commeters; your feedback and compliments are truly a privilege to read and an honor to receive. I am grateful for all of you!

Love, luck, and lolipops,

Amicia.

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