The Voices of Thieves and Robbers

by salacious_crumpet

Summary

This “thing” between Republic SIS Agent Theron Shan and the Imperial Agent formerly known as Cipher Nine was supposed to have ended on Yavin 4, but when Theron goes missing and old enemies rear their heads Minister of Sith Intelligence Lana Beniko has no choice but to call her old agent back into the field. (Spoilers for Imperial Agent storyline and Shadows of Revan; storyline diverges from canon post-SoR.)

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter One

Sleeping with the enemy was not supposed to be so … restful, Theron Shan reflected, opening his eyes to find his vision partially obscured by the fall of dark blonde curls that were tickling his face. His right arm was curled comfortably – almost protectively – over a soft, pale hip, his fingers resting lightly on her belly, moving with the rise and fall of her breath. She was warm and soft beside him, her body lax in sleep, and he hated to disturb her. She had needed the rest as much as he had. They’d worn themselves out fighting Revan … and then further exhausted themselves afterwards, celebrating.

Waking brought with it a myriad of aches and pains, stark reminders of the battle they’d fought the previous day. Theron’s back and chest were a mess of lurid bruises, compliments of Revan throwing him repeatedly into the massive stone pillars of the temple, and the kolto-infused bandage she had wound around his battered ribs the night before was stiff and tight against his skin. His head ached, the skin around his implants feeling hot and tight, sure indication of inflammation. His left arm had gone numb, but that was because it was tucked under her torso, the circulation cut off ages ago; he didn’t want to wake her to pull his limb free.

Theron couldn’t believe the two of them had fallen asleep together, even as exhausted as they had been. Even with the truce on between the Republic and the Empire, the two of them were Intelligence operatives; suspicion was an innate part of their being, as much a part of them as his brown hair or her blue eyes. Stars, he hadn’t even known her name until six hours ago, and even then he wasn’t sure what she had told him was the truth. Still, it had felt better crying out “Miranza!” rather than “Cipher Nine!” or “Agent!” when he came, so whether Miranza Gerrick was her name or not wasn’t of too much importance to him, not when all of this would be ending in – Theron checked his wrist-chrono, sighing inwardly at the time. 0700 hours. The truce would be ending at noon, and the two of them would go back to being enemies.

Even when she’d just been a flirtatious voice over the comms back on Manaan he’d had to tell himself this wasn’t going to last. She was Imperial Intelligence – or had been; Lana had been very vague on that subject – and he … he was practically the poster boy for the Republic. They weren’t just divided by political barriers and governmental red tape, they were professional rivals as well, working on the exact opposite sides of the fence. This thing between them couldn’t possibly go anywhere.

Until it had. Until, post-battle, Theron had gone to her to patch him up, trusting in her field medicine skills to handle the worst of his injuries. He could have – should have – gone to one of the Republic medics, but they had had their hands full with wounded troopers and Jedi, and Force knew he had more than enough awkward moments with his mother that he didn’t need to get healing from Grand Master Satele Shan, preeminent healer of the Jedi Order or not. His mother hadn’t wanted him involved in that fight with Revan; showing up at her tent with a mass of cuts and bruises would only have reinforced her opinion that she was right. Miranza had made it through the battle largely unscathed; she was a trained combat medic; it had just made sense, in the twisted mess that was Theron’s mind, to go to her for help.

Days – months, if you counted all the times they had flirted on Manaan and Rakata Prime and Rishi – of suggestive banter and lingering looks had combined with the post-battle adrenaline high and the rush of just being alive to turn what should have been a simple medical exam into something so much more. They’d had to be quiet, muffling moans and cries into each other’s mouths in hard kisses
or against each other’s skin; her tent was hardly private, set as it was on the edges of the Imperial encampment. And they’d had to be gentle: his cracked ribs and battered skull and her wrenched knee hadn’t permitted them to demonstrate their acrobatic skills, no matter how much passion was between them.

And now, with his enemy cuddled up against him in the protective circle of his arms, Theron knew he was in trouble. Not the kind of trouble he usually found himself in, to be fair, but something much more insidious and – if he was being honest with himself – probably much more dangerous.

_Professional objectivity compromised, Shan_, he thought, unable to suppress the groan that escaped his lips. He felt her stiffen slightly against him and found himself bracing for her to come awake suddenly and violently, but all she did was stretch slowly and wriggled around until they were facing each other. Her wriggling – soft skin sliding over his own, warmth pressing against warmth – compromised his objectivity all over again as he found his body responding to hers. They had fallen asleep naked and he was pressed right up against her; there was no way she could fail to notice his interest. Theron couldn’t even muster up the smallest amount of guilt or shame over this, however; he had thrown those emotions out along with his objectivity.

“Mm, morning,” she murmured sleepily, blinking dark blue eyes at him. He had expected things between them to turn awkward – Force knew he’d had enough awkward morning-afters in his time – but she smiled, sliding her hand down his hip. “Sleep well?”

“Actually … yeah,” Theron replied, not bothering to hide the surprise in his voice.

“Surprised you slept well, or surprised I didn’t shiv you in your sleep?” Miranza’s voice was filled with quiet amusement, her breath warm on his face.

He chuckled wryly. “Ah, both. I don’t usually do …” he gestured with his free hand, indicating the two of them together “… this.”

“Me either,” she agreed, sighing. “Vector’s the only other person I trust enough to …” She let the sentence trail off, making no effort to hide the concern in her voice. Vector Hyllus was – much to Theron’s surprise – Miranza’s husband, a former diplomat from Alderaan who had become a Joiner, one of the hybrid emissaries of the alien Killiks. Under normal circumstances the existence of a spouse would have been a deal-breaker for Theron (outside of work-related seductions, which never counted, in his mind), save that Vector and Miranza had both made it very, very clear to Theron that their marriage was not an exclusive one. It was a difficult concept for Theron to grasp, but the way Vector had explained it to him had left little room for doubt or disbelief.

Vector had been very … direct … in his explanations, to the point where Theron was fairly confident that had the Joiner not been seriously injured in the fight with Revan, it would likely have been the three of them cuddled up in bed together, and not just Theron and Miranza. Theron was no stranger to threesomes, but being the Republic filling in an Imperial sandwich would have been a new experience for him.

One that, if he was being honest with himself, he had been looking forward to having.

But Vector had been injured, and Theron knew it was concern for her husband that coloured Miranza’s voice now. She had stabilized him in the field, acting quickly and competently to staunch the blood flow, and while kolto tanks were limited even with the joint resources of the Republic and the Empire she had managed to secure one nonetheless. Few people were willing to get in the agent’s way, not when she only seemed to answer to Darth Marr and Satele Shan. Theron had been surprised that she hadn’t insisted on staying by her husband’s side, but Miranza had said there was simply too much to do, and in any case, the medics on staff were under orders to contact her the
instant Vector’s condition changed. Her wrist-communicator, the means by which they were to contact her, was the only thing she was wearing now.

As if on cue Miranza’s comm chirped, the flashing blue light indicating an incoming call. She sat up, quickly smoothing her riotous blonde curls into a semblance of order, and drew Theron’s shirt across her chest to cover her nudity. She made no indication that he was to hide or cover himself, however, but simply turned the communicator away so that when she answered it he wasn’t obviously in the picture.

“Ah … Agent?” The medic on the other end was obviously flustered, whether by Miranza’s state of undress or something else was hard to say. The medic’s accent was pure Coruscanti, marking him as a member of the Republic, and no doubt somewhat unaccustomed to calling Imperial citizens on private holo. “Your … ah … Mister Hy—that is … the patient is awake, now, ma’am.”

“Excellent, thank you.” Completely unfazed, Miranza began searching around the floor of the tent for her own clothing, flashing Theron a grateful smile when he handed her her own shirt, which she pulled on over her head before tossing him back his. “I’ll be there straight away.”

Theron could see the holographic image of the medic twisting his head from side to side, looking suspiciously as though he was trying to either catch a glimpse of an undressed woman or perhaps see who had kept her company during the night, given that Miranza had clearly not spent the night beside her husband’s tank. Theron had grown up with the same stories of Imperial hedonism and indulgence that the medic had likely heard, and it wouldn’t have surprised him if the medic suspected Miranza was in bed with half the garrison. Never mind that she was Imperial – Theron had a very good idea of the kind of rumours that abounded regarding Intelligence types. Imperial and an Intelligence agent? The level of debauchery inherent in her must boggle the medic’s mind.

Miranza cut off the communication without another word, tossing Theron an apologetic glance as she stood and began tugging on her pants. She bent down to give him a quick kiss on the lips.

“It’s been nice not killing each other, Agent Shan,” she said, a playful note in her voice. “How much longer will you be here on Yavin 4?”

Theron glanced at his wrist-chrono, grimacing.

“Truce ends in about four hours,” he said. “I’ll be helping my people pack up and clear out, and then I’m on the next shuttle off-world. If all goes well I should be headed back to Coruscant by 1100 hours, maybe 1130.”

Miranza made a face, then smiled at him. “Well, if you find yourself at loose ends before then I wouldn’t mind revisiting” – she motioned at the bed and his reclining form – “this. At the very least you’ll have to come and give me a goodbye kiss.”

He laughed and shook his head.

“It’s been fun, Agent Gerrick,” he replied, giving her a rueful smile to take the sting out of his words, “but I’m already going to get an earful from Saresh and Trant for my involvement here. I’ve got enough black spots on my record without adding ‘making out with an Imperial agent in full view of Republic personnel’ to my list of crimes.” Never mind what could happen if they find out what else I’ve been up to with said Imperial agent.

“I’m sure we can find someplace private to say goodbye. Just send me a holo before you leave, all right?”
Theron had agreed, but in the end it wasn’t to be: his own duties came first and once he left Miranza’s tent he found himself caught up in the tasks of packing up the Republic side of the camp. Four hours had seemed like plenty of time to get things cleared up, but one thing led to another and before he knew it he was on board the shuttle to Coruscant. As the shuttle took off his holocomm chimed, indicating a text-only message.

The channel was heavily encrypted, of course, with no signatures or identifiers. Still, Theron knew who the message was from the instant he read it.

“We’re sorry we missed you, Agent. Perhaps next time we and our wife can give you a proper send-off.”

Theron typed out a hasty response before deleting the message and erasing all evidence of communications.

“Next time.”

O o O o O

She shifted in bed, feeling the luxurious sheets sliding over her bare skin. Beside her she could feel her husband’s weight, his body shifting slightly in response to hers. The room was warm, the bed comfortable and familiar, and she could smell their mingling fragrances in the air: his spicy-sweet scent that came not from cologne or perfumed bath products but rather from his Killik nature, her own scent a mixture of fruity shampoos and the sweat of hard labour.

His hand rested lightly on her hip and she turned, smiling, expecting to see Vector’s endless black eyes gazing back into her own. Instead she saw Hunter -- not as she had been at the end, but as she had been, smug smile firmly in place, green eyes full of mockery and something faintly obscene. His fingers dug into her hip, pinning her in place.

She screamed, recoiling, her own fingers curling around the hilt of her knife. Her hand flashed, fast as lightning, in a swift arc towards Hunter’s unprotected throat. He made no effort to block her and her blade slashed him, hot blood immediately welling up, a sudden rush of arterial spray, blood filling her mouth, and he was laughing, laughing –

“Beloved, wake up!”

Miranza came to herself with a jolt, struggling instinctively against the firm hands that pinned her wrists to the mattress, but when she looked up the face that hovered over her own was Vector’s, his worried gaze that meeting hers – and his bloodied nose that was dripping onto her cheek, into her mouth. She went still, trying to show him with her eyes that she was herself again, that she was no longer trapped in her old nightmares. Vector blinked down at her, waiting to be certain, then released her and rolled over, reaching for some tissues to blot at the blood.

“I’m sorry,” she said, the words coming out in a gasp as she forced her breathing and heart rate to slow. “Vector, I’m so, so sorry …”

“There is no need to apologize to us, love,” he replied, one hand pressing the tissue to his nose, the other hand coming down to stroke soothingly against her arm. “We would not have woken you save that you appeared to be in some distress.” Vector glanced down at her, amusement warring with concern on his face. “We ought to know better than to disturb an agent of your calibre.”

She sat up and drew her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around her legs. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I was –“
“Having a nightmare, yes, we know.” He rubbed her back, his strong fingers coming to rest at the base of her neck, tucked under her unruly curls. “Do you wish to speak of it?”

“Hunter,” she spat, and that single word, spoken as a curse, was more than enough answer for her husband. Vector had been there when she was at her worst: he had seen her when Ardun Kothe had invoked her brainwashing, although Vector hadn’t realized what had happened at the time, only that she had come out of their private meeting with her aura dulled and something tremendously off about her body language; he had been there on Quesh when she had mixed the chemicals that would break her conditioning; he had been there on Quesh the second time when she had at last broken free.

He had been there on Corellia when she had handed herself over to be tortured by mercenaries, acting under Hunter’s orders. To all extents and purposes Corellia had been their honeymoon.

Vector knew precisely who Hunter was – or who she had been – and why his wife would be having nightmares about the long-dead agent of the Star Cabal.

“It has been some time since you last dreamt of Hunter,” he said, speaking quietly, using his hand on her neck to draw her in close against his body. “Your aura has not sung of her in more than a year, if we recall correctly. What is it now that speaks to you of her?”

Miranza rubbed one hand over her face, ignoring the way her fingers shook. She didn’t want to discuss Hunter or her nightmare with Vector; it was, as he had pointed out, an old story, and one that had seemed long over. It was over, she told herself – it was only that another had come along and begun poking at the threads she had long considered tied up.

“Shara contacted me,” she admitted, referring to Shara Jenn, the Intelligence operative who had once worked with her as Watcher Two, and then as Keeper. Miranza had gone freelance after the Star Cabal had been dismantled, taking the opportunity to seize control of her own life, free from the whims of the Sith and the Empire. She had kept in touch with Shara and with Lana Beniko, the current Minister of Sith Intelligence, because at heart she was still a patriot who wanted what was best for her fellow Imperials – but she no longer considered herself to be at their beck and call. The contact from Shara had not been unexpected, following so soon on the heels of Yavin 4, but her old Watcher had not called to discuss Revan or Imperial-Republic alliances.

“We’ve received word of someone poking about in old files, Cipher,” Shara had said, referring to Miranza by her old codename: Cipher Nine. “Nothing about you, specifically” Of course not, Miranza had erased all record of her existence with the use of the Black Codex “but they’ve been nosing about in some of your old case files. Red Blade, Hutta, the Eagle – and the Star Cabal.”

The name had been enough to make Miranza’s blood run cold, although she had been careful to give no indication of that to Shara. The woman had been put through enough herself at the hands of Hunter and the Star Cabal, without needing to worry that she was causing her old agent additional concern. Miranza often wondered which of the two of them had had it worst: she had been brainwashed and tortured, yes, but Shara had nearly had her mind stripped from her, caught in a trap specifically designed to take out the genetically-modified analysts in Intelligence. Years later Shara still hadn’t fully recovered; Miranza knew the former Keeper still had to keep a medical droid on hand to maintain her neurochemical levels and that she suffered from frequent debilitating headaches. Most of Miranza’s trauma was healed, at least.

More or less.

“You should know, Cipher,” Shara had continued, heedless of Miranza’s fear, “we have reason to suspect our snoop may be operating out of Republic space. More specifically, we believe it may be someone from the Strategic Information Services.”
Theron fucking Shan. She had been a fool to give him her real name, but she had thought that with all trace of her identity destroyed it would be safe. She and Lana had grown careless around the Republic agent, the forced closeness of their alliance causing them to place too much trust in him. She should have known he would start digging around the moment they were separated – no doubt wondering how badly he had compromised himself by their relationship and looking for a way to level the playing field between them. It was what she would have done, had Theron not been such a ridiculously open book to her. Her identity had been a secret, but after their meeting on Manaan she had made sure to read up on Republic Intelligence’s poster boy.

No doubt she and Lana had let something slip, and Theron, being every bit the cunning and competent spy that she was, had used it to follow up on her. He had known about Ardun Kothe’s supposed recruitment of an Imperial double agent; likewise, he had known that said double agent had been suspected of being involved in Kothe’s death. There weren’t many breadcrumbs left behind in that story, but whatever she and Lana had dropped, Theron had picked up on. And now he was digging into her identity and her background, like the spy he was.

“It is unlikely he will find you,” Shara had said, tone reassuring. “But we thought it worth mentioning to you, so you can keep your guard up.”

Keep her guard up – what she should have been doing on Yavin 4. (And Rakata Prime, and Rishi, and Manaan …)

She explained all of this to Vector, who listened in silence, holding her close against him, his fingers stroking through her hair. When she finished he sat for a moment, considering, then bent slightly to kiss the top of her head.

“We think Shara is likely correct, and you need not fear being detected by Republic Intelligence. But,” he added thoughtfully, “We also do not think it is Republic Intelligence that concerns you now. Shara’s mention of what this Republic spy has uncovered about you has reminded you of things you would rather forget, and it is fear of Hunter and the Star Cabal that causes your aura to flare and spike as it does.”

Miranza nodded, relieved that he understood her so well. As much as it had angered her to have the SIS pulling her strings, abusing the brainwashing codes Imperial Intelligence had put in place, still it had not bothered her all that much to be working with the SIS again – at least not in the form of Theron Shan. She didn’t begrudge the entire organization for the actions of one or two, no matter how heinous and violating those actions had been. And nosy as Theron was, she wasn’t the least bit concerned that he would do any of the things Kothe had done – or worse, the things Hunter had done. From what little she had seen of him, Theron Shan was to Ardun Kothe and Hunter as night was to day.

“Beloved, Hunter is dead,” Vector said gently, lips pressed to her hair. “As is Ardun Kothe. The Star Cabal has been dismantled. You are free. They cannot hurt you anymore. You have seen to that yourself.”

“I did have some help,” she replied, trying for a light tone. She felt rather than heard his small hum of appreciation.

“As you will always have,” he assured her. “Our help – and our protection, should you have need of it.”

“Thank you.”

“Always, beloved.” He kissed the top of her head again, smiling into her hair, then leaned forward to
plant another kiss on her lips. “Always.”
Chapter Two

Theron had never been much for the bar scene – it felt too much like work to him, given that a considerable amount of his time seemed to be spent wheeling and dealing in the back rooms of cantinas. Club Ufora, in particular, was not his favourite place. It had an unsavoury reputation (and for a cantina on Nar Shaddaa, that was really saying something) and had been investigated more than once by the SIS. The discovery of a slavery operation involving kidnapped Republic officers had not done much to improve the club’s name, at least not in Republic circles. Theron couldn’t have said what the Imperials thought of it.

He sat at a small table near the back of the cantina, his eyes surreptitiously roaming the crowd in search of his contact. His contact was the sole reason he was in Club Ufora – a neutral bar in a neutral part of Nar Shaddaa where the security was less than stringent and there were a dozen different ways to disappear just outside the doors. The man had served under Ardun Kothe, a deceased member of the SIS who had possibly had some connection to Miranza Gerrick; Theron was hoping to be able to use him to make contact with Miranza, maybe even –

_She’s not leaving the Empire for you, Shan_, Theron told himself, not for the first time. He took a sip of his drink – the same drink he had been nursing for close to an hour – and scanned the crowd again.

It wasn’t that Theron was hoping Miranza would defect. (Scratch that – he _was_ hoping she’d defect, but he didn’t honestly think it would be likely.) But back on Yavin 4 she and Lana had both said things that indicated she didn’t directly serve the Empire anymore and that she didn’t consider herself to be a member of Imperial Intelligence (although Lana still called her ‘Agent’ and ‘Cipher’), and to Theron’s mind that offered up some possibilities. He couldn’t hope for anything long-term with a diehard Imperial, but a freelancer? A freelancer who was obviously willing to work with the Republic? That he could work with. That had potential.

And, honestly, the more he had nosed about in her history – what there was of it; the woman was practically a ghost – the more he thought that maybe someone should extend an apology to her on behalf of the SIS. Ardun Kothe was long dead, and Director Trant refused to acknowledge that there had ever been an Imperial double agent working under Kothe’s command, but Theron was SIS. He could act as an emissary, extend the olive branch.

At the very least he could see her again. Her and her husband.

Yavin 4 had been months ago; she should’ve been out of his system long before now. Theron had never been good at relationships, but flings? He’d had plenty of those, and when they ended, they ended. He wasn’t one for pining or moping … or whatever the hell it was he was doing now. Maybe it was the lack of closure between them (he refused to consider the end of the truce as the end of things between them), the notion that the door had been left wide open for things to continue, but he felt convinced that there could still be more. And Vector’s message to him had certainly suggested that the Joiner, at least, was open to the idea.

“Killiks have no concept of jealousy, Agent Shan,” Vector had told him, when Theron had spoke to him in private one night on Yavin 4. He had been expecting an awkward conversation – “Hey, your wife seems to want to sleep with me and I don’t normally hook up with married women but I think I kind of want to” – and possibly even a fight, some sort of violent altercation between himself and the Joiner, but Vector had been remarkably sanguine. “Miranza is our wife and we are committed to her,
as she is to us, but that commitment does not come with an agreement of exclusivity. She is free to enjoy the company of others – her profession may require her to do so, as we are certain you can appreciate, given your shared professional – as we are likewise free, should we wish it.” And the look in Vector's strange eyes had said that in this instance, yes, he did wish it.

“You won’t find many who agree with you,” Theron had cautioned, and Vector had just smiled serenely at him, his black eyes fathomless and warm.

“We do not require the agreement of others; only that Miranza be in agreement with us.” Vector had held his hands out, palms up and cupped together. “We do not believe that the heart is a cup that, once filled, will cause the spillage to go to waste. Love is a thing that creates more of itself, when it is given freely. We love our wife and she, in turn, loves us. If she wishes to love others, why should that diminish the love she shares with us?”

Of course, Theron and Miranza had never spoken of love. They hadn’t spoken of feelings at all, and even now, alone at a table in Club Ufora, Theron was certain that what he felt for her wasn’t love. Infatuation, maybe – he was willing to acknowledge that. Fascination, respect, lust – yes, all of those things. And he could admit that he wanted more of that – more of her. More of her strange husband, with whom Theron had only begun to flirt and dance around his attraction to. Maybe if he could just see them both again – if they could dance this dance to its natural completion – then the itch would be scratched. Miranza and Vector would be out of his system.

Theron sighed, getting up from behind his table and stretching. A waitress had come by and taken his empty glass from him, but she wouldn’t bring him another; he preferred to get his own drinks directly from the bar, where he could watch the bartender in action. Old habits: he wanted to be absolutely certain he observed every step of his food and drink being prepared, just to be sure no one was messing with him. He drifted over to the bar and ordered another before taking the drink – some kind of cheap ale that made him wish the fighting on Corellia didn’t make it so difficult to get decent brandy – back to his table before someone else claimed the spot. He checked his chrono for what seemed like the hundredth time. No messages, and he’d been sitting at Club Ufora for close to two hours. At what point did he admit his contact wasn’t coming?

He took a sip of his drink, managing through long practice to make it seem like he was consuming more than he did. A good spy couldn’t afford to get drunk while on duty (half the time it wasn’t safe to get drunk off-duty, either), but just the same it was frequently a job requirement that he at least appear to be drinking heavily. In a place like Ufora it was expected; no one came to the cantina for the music, and they had a nasty reputation for dancers rolling drunken customers, so few came for the dancers, either.

He was about to say kriff it, toss back the last of his drink and head out the door when he was joined at his table by three well-dressed individuals: a female Nautolan, a male human, and an exceptionally large male Houk. Despite being as elegantly attired as his companions, the obvious blasters and techblade marked the Houk as being the muscle. The Nautolan and the human slid into the chairs on either side of Theron, effectively boxing him in, while the Houk loomed over them.

“We heard you were trying to reach us,” said the woman without preamble. She had an unusual accent, one Theron couldn’t place save that she definitely wasn’t born in either Imperial or Republic space. She was quite lovely, with pale green head-tresses and wide-set black eyes. The dress she wore was low-cut but tasteful, made of a fine material that shimmered in shades of green and blue when she moved.

“I’m pretty sure you have me mistaken for someone else,” Theron replied, sliding one hand under the table to rest lightly on the grip of his blaster. His fingers trembled just a little, his adrenaline
beginning to pump.

“No, we know exactly who you are, Agent Shan,” said the human man with a smile that did not meet his dark brown eyes. He wore a suit that would not have looked out of place at the Senate Tower on Coruscant. He jerked a nod towards Theron’s half-empty glass, adding, “Which is why the chemicals in your drinks have been calculated to render you unconscious, rather than to kill you outright.”

Theron glanced down at his glass, only now beginning to notice the blurriness in his eyes, the way the club around him began to feel a little more indistinct. He opened his mouth to protest but found that his tongue wouldn’t cooperate; his fingers slipped off the grip of his blaster to fall uselessly at his side.

“Urjax will escort you out shortly,” continued the Nautolan, nodding at the large Houk, “just another reveler, passed out after too much excess. No one will pay you much heed, Agent.”

“Don’t make a fuss,” added the human man. His hand came down to prevent Theron from trying to grab hold of his blaster again, his long fingers wrapping around Theron’s wrist. “We don’t wish to harm you –“

“Speak for yourself,” interrupted the Houk, Urjax.

“—Fine, only Urjax wishes to harm you,” the man corrected, still holding Theron’s wrist, “but while the rest of us intend you no immediate harm we won’t hesitate for an instant to kill you should you become problematic.” He squeezed, pinching the nerves in Theron’s wrist, then released him and reached up to pat Theron on the cheek. It was a strangely affectionate gesture made all the more odd by the fact that Theron was starting to lose feeling in his face.

Theron opened his mouth again, struggling to speak even as his vision started to narrow to tiny pinpricks. The Nautolan reached out one dainty hand and snagged his glass out of the way just in time for Theron’s head to hit the table.

O o O o O

Lana Beniko spotted her contact the moment she entered the Slippery Slopes cantina on Nar Shaddaa, but she affected not to notice him and instead went to the bar, ordering a glass of white wine before turning and letting her amber gaze take in the room. As cantinas went the Slopes was above average in her estimation – for Nar Shaddaa, at least. It wasn’t the Nexus Room, but one couldn’t expect the luxuries of Dromund Kaas outside of Imperial space.

Not until everything was Imperial space, of course.

Once she was certain no one was paying too much interest in her, she picked up her glass and made her way toward Jonas Balkar’s table, smiling down at him before taking a seat beside him. She made sure to sit with her back to the wall; it required her to sit close to him and gave the impression that the two of them were rather more intimate than was the case, but provided her with the ability to keep her eyes on the rest of the bar. Jonas didn’t seem to mind, but he was every bit the professional that she was and knew exactly what she was doing.

“You’re looking lovely and dangerous as always, Miss Beniko,” he said, smirking. Under normal circumstances she would have been annoyed at being addressed so informally, but this wasn’t a formal visit and she was perfectly happy not to be announced as a Sith Lord – or as the Minister of Sith Intelligence.
Like Balkar, Lana was dressed inconspicuously as a spacer, swapping her preferred attire for a simple pair of breeches and a dark green leatheris jacket. Her lightsaber was in a sheath at her back – damned awkward to get to in an emergency, but less likely to draw attention that way, and at least the pair of blasters at her hips wouldn’t attract undo notice.

“Cut the flattery, Balkar,” she replied, taking a delicate sip of her wine. An inferior vintage, but that was hardly a surprise. At least it didn’t taste terribly watered down – that was a surprise. “You didn’t call me all the way out to Hutt space just to flirt with me.”

“Unfortunately correct, as always.” Balkar drank his ale, and even to Lana’s practiced gaze it looked like he was helping himself to a hearty swig. She doubted that was the case, however. “Look, Theron Shan’s gone missing, and I know he’s worked with you in the past so –“

“Theron’s missing?” Lana sat up, frowning. She made no effort to hide the concern in her voice.

“Yeah.” Balkar frowned, dark brows creasing. “I’m guessing it wasn’t your people, then.”

Lana shook her head, not the least bit offended by the query. If a Republic spy went missing then it only stood to reason it was the work of an Imperial one – but in this case, if an Imperial agent had taken Theron out then it hadn’t been at her behest. Theron was one of the few Republic citizens she could tolerate working with: he was reasonable and pragmatic, in spite of his absurd parentage and upbringing, and perfectly capable of seeing the big picture. Their arguments had been few and far between in the months they had worked together between Manaan and Yavin 4, and even when they had disagreed they could usually understand where the other person was coming from – even after she had arranged for him to be tortured by the Revanites in order to get intel. He had been angry with her, of course, but it hadn’t interfered with their overall work. Theron was reckless and far more spontaneous than she would ever be comfortable with, but he was also professional and almost frighteningly competent. She considered him, if not a friend, exactly, then at least a close ally.

“No, it wasn’t us.” Lana hesitated, buying herself time by taking another sip of her drink as she debated whether or not to share the information she had received a few weeks earlier from one of her agents. In all likelihood Balkar was already aware of the intel, but if he wasn’t it could help him discover what had happened to Theron. On the other hand, it took a significant amount of trust for her to reveal what she knew. She and Theron might have gotten along more or less swimmingly, but she and Jonas Balkar were civil acquaintances at best – civil acquaintances and professional rivals who were very much on opposite sides of an escalating cold war. And the fact that it was him contacting her, rather than her Republic equivalent, Director Trant, added another level of complexity to the matter.

“Jonas.” She put her hand on his arm, startling him. “There was a breech in our security a few weeks ago. Someone – we don’t know who, exactly, but I suspect it may have been Theron – was looking for information connected to a former agent.”

“What kind of information?” Balkar didn’t pull his arm away, and after a moment she drew back.

“Old case files, background history, anything he could get his hands on, really. Most of that intelligence has been … redacted … so his breach was flagged but ultimately considered harmless. There’s nothing he could learn about her from our files, but in accessing our systems and investigating her, he may have tripped some other alarms – security I don’t have control over, organizations that, frankly, are beyond my grasp.”

“’Her’?” Balkar repeated, and Lana could have sworn his expression became more exasperated as he rolled his blue eyes at her. “Is this about that cipher agent he met? The one on Yavin 4?”
“He spoke to you about her?” Lana didn’t bother to correct him on the ‘cipher agent’ thing – she had already said Miranza had been a former agent, but if Balkar knew her as Cipher Nine there was no point in changing his perception. And it was better to have him believe that Miranza Gerrick was still on Intelligence’s payroll, rather than for him to know she was an unaligned freelancer who had effectively gone rogue once the Star Cabal was dismantled. Lana was still amazed that the old Minister of Intelligence hadn’t simply had Miranza executed.

On the other hand, she hadn’t executed Miranza either. She tried to tell herself that it was because killing Miranza would have been a waste of a highly skilled operative, but deep down inside she knew better – she had come to think of the agent as a friend.

“All the damned time,” Balkar replied, answering her earlier question. “Your girl’s got Shan wrapped around her little finger.”

Lana couldn’t help herself – her mind immediately began assessing the different ways she could utilize that bit of intel, starting with having Miranza turn Theron into a double agent. (Although honestly, who would ever have believed that the son of the Grand Master of the Jedi Order had been turned? He’d be marked as a plant from day one and likely wouldn’t live to see day two.) She strongly suspected the former Cipher Nine wouldn’t go for it, though; her own experiences as a double agent had been thoroughly unpleasant. Besides that, Lana had spent enough time in conversation with Miranza to suspect that her feelings for the Republic agent were every bit as compromised and complicated as his for her.

Still, she couldn’t help but consider the possibilities. Theron Shan, Republic golden boy and the son of one of the most powerful Jedi in the galaxy would make a real feather in her cap.

“As I said, his searches didn’t necessitate a severe response from us,” Lana said, choosing to focus on the immediate problem, rather than how she could possibly benefit from its future resolution. (Even as a part of her mind continued to scheme and plot.) “But our agent managed to anger a number of exceedingly dangerous people during her time with us, and one group in particular – if they’re still around – may have the means and the desire to enact revenge against her. It may very well have been their alarms he tripped, in addition to ours.”

Balkar frowned again, his drink forgotten on the table in front of him. Lana could see the worry on his face and suspected that he and Theron were friends – close associates, at least. The Republic operated differently from the Empire; operatives could become friendly, without fear of that friendliness being perceived as a weakness. She wondered if she or Miranza might have fared better in the Republic, where having consideration for the lives of others and taking pleasure in positive relationships weren’t dismissed as foolish concepts. She then dismissed her musings as irrelevant: she and Miranza were Imperial citizens, born and raised, and it was pointless to dwell on might-have-beens.

“Who are these guys?” Balkar asked, the lines between his brows growing deep.

Lana steepled her fingers on the table and met his gaze.

“Tell me, Agent Balkar, have you ever heard of the Star Cabal?”
Theron awakened to the terrible conviction that he had been left to die on the snowfields of Hoth.

Realizing that he was instead lying naked on a cold durasteel floor was, technically, an improvement.

He opened his eyes and had about five seconds to roll over onto his side before his stomach rebelled and violently expelled everything he’d had to eat within the past … however long it had been since he’d last had something to eat; he really had no idea. Vomiting made his head spin, which in turn made the nausea worse, and he was left retching and gasping, eyes squeezed shut to try and block out the world around him.

When the worst of the nausea had passed – or maybe he just had nothing left to throw up – Theron managed to push himself away from the puddle of puke, trying hard to ignore the bright specks of blood intermixed with the rest of the mess. He dragged himself a few feet away until he had his back to the wall, then slowly and cautiously maneuvered into a sitting position, somewhat hunched over in order to protect his midsection, peering around with eyes that were still disturbingly blurry.

Theron was huddled on the floor of a small room that bore a strong resemblance to a solitary confinement cell in a maximum security prison. (He’d seen more than his fair share. Mostly as the result of his work. Mostly.) Three of the walls were durasteel, as were the floor and ceiling; the fourth wall was a row of metal bars, opening up onto a dark, narrow hallway. He wanted to try and peer through the bars to get a better idea of where he was situated, but between the nausea and the general feeling of having been trampled by a herd of nerfs he didn’t really have it in him to crawl that far across his cell just yet.

His captors had done an excellent job of taking the fight out of him while he was unconscious. Between stripping off all his clothing and beating the shit out of him, Theron was a veritable ball of misery. As imprisonment tactics went, these guys were off to a pretty good start; he didn’t think he could fight a baby grophet, much less put up any resistance to trained combatants. He was freezing, he was aching and he had no clue where he was or even how he’d come to be there.

He remembered the cantina, waiting for a contact who never showed, and then that trio coming in and sitting down at his table: the Nautolan, the human and the Houk who had towered over them. He knew that he had been drugged, although he didn’t know how – he’d watched all his drinks being prepared and hadn’t seen anyone slip him anything, and even so, his implants should have handled any toxins that had been introduced into his system. Everything was a blur after he’d hit the table. In fact, the blurriness had started a bit before that point.

Theron rubbed shaking hands over his face, noticing the rough feel of more than his usual amount of five o’clock shadow. How long had he been out? He looked down at his hands, frowning at how badly they shook, then at the gooseflesh raised over his bare arms. His arms were covered in dark bruises, as was his chest, stomach and legs – in fact, it felt as though there wasn’t a square inch of him that wasn’t bruised and battered in some way. He couldn’t see any cuts, however; no broken skin, and no broken bones either, so far as he could tell. He’d been beaten, but he didn’t think his assailants had done more than soften him up a little. He’d had worse, that was certain.

A sound from outside his cell caught his attention and he shifted a little so that he was facing the hallway, listening intently. It sounded like someone was out there, out in the hall beyond his cell, and so Theron pushed himself to his feet, deciding he would rather face his captors standing than be
huddled on the ground.

Behind him there was a loud click, followed by the sound of metal scraping on metal. He turned, frowning, to see a circular hole opened in the durasteel wall a little below chest-level.

The blast of cold water caught him right in the gut, hitting him with enough force to send Theron staggering backwards against the bars of his cell. He didn’t even have time to turn away.

O o O o O

“We must confess to finding this view somewhat distracting, beloved.”

Miranza paused to toss her husband a wicked smile over her shoulder, then resumed crawling through the ventilation shaft, adding an extra shake to her hips as she moved. She heard Vector sigh and had to resist the urge to giggle at him, pleased to have evidence of the effect she still had on him. Not that she had any doubts as to where she stood with Vector – he was far better than she was at expressing himself and his feelings for her. She had struggled with emotional intimacy from day one of their relationship – physical intimacy was something she had always been much more comfortable with – but Vector had only ever struggled with reconnecting with his human half. Once they had established that she had no issue with his Killik half he had become considerably more confident around her.

Her real struggle was in her need to have the upper hand with him. A lifetime in Imperial Intelligence had trained Miranza to believe it wasn’t possible for people to be equals in relationships, and so she found herself constantly trying to either gain the upper hand or cost him his, simply because he was her equal in so many things – and her better in others, just as she was his better in other areas.

Some days she wondered how he put up with her. The man was more patient than a Jedi.

Still, fun as it was to discomfit Vector, now was perhaps not the time.

The two of them were on their hands and knees in the ventilation system of a factory on Hutta – not far from Fa’athra’s junkyards, or what was left of the Hutt’s territory after she had knocked him down a few pegs in order to sway Nem’ro the Hutt into allying with the Empire. They had broken in through the maintenance tunnels, using a keycard Vector swiped while Miranza was distracting the target; Miranza was hopeful it would be several hours before the theft was noticed – she had chosen her target because he had just finished his shift at the factory and wouldn’t be expected back at work until the next day. Vector’s pickpocketing skills were coming along nicely.

This was the kind of work Miranza enjoyed the most, truth be told. She was good at all areas of spycraft – it was a trade she had devoted her entire life to, after all – but there was something particularly fun about breaking and entering, especially when her targets were low-life slavers and thugs. Breaking off from Imperial Intelligence had granted her the luxury of being able to choose her own assignments, and when Kaliyo had told her about the slavery ring operating out of a factory on Hutta Miranza had been eager to get to work. She also had the luxury of choosing how she completed her assignments, which meant breaking into the factory rather than passing herself off as a slave in order to infiltrate the ring.

Miranza had never been comfortable with the concept of slavery, but after months trapped under a command word, dancing to the tune of Ardun Kothe and Hunter, slavery had become even more intolerable to her.

The temptation to simply fight her way in and kill everyone involved in the slave ring was very strong, but Miranza had worked out a deal with her old Keeper – Shara Jenn, formerly known to
Miranza as Watcher Two – to provide intel on the slavery ring that could then be handed over as blackmail information for a larger project. The intel would be given to Imperial operatives on Hutta who could then use it to both strengthen their position and shut the ring down for good. Slaughtering slavers down to the last man drew attention to oneself, and now that Miranza operated under the radar she couldn’t afford to do that sort of thing anymore.

She paused at a T-junction, mentally reviewing the map of the ventilation system she had memorized. Vector hunched behind her, rubbing a grubby hand over his nose to cut off a sneeze before it escaped, and she found herself briefly distracted by the sight of her husband disheveled and covered in dust and grime. It was rare to see Vector looking anything less than his usual elegant self and she tabled the image for future enjoyment.

Just as she started to head down the left-hand shaft Miranza’s wrist-chrono started flashing, signalling an incoming transmission. She held up one hand to Vector, who nodded, then tapped the chrono once to accept the call.

“I trust I’m not interrupting anything, Agent.” Lana Beniko’s voice crackled over the comm; Vector winced at how loud it sounded, but Miranza had already determined the volume to be safe enough where they were. It was unlikely any of the factory employees would be near this section.

Miranza was, strictly speaking, no longer an agent for Imperial Intelligence. Following the destruction of the Star Cabal she had chosen to go freelance. It wasn’t that she was no longer loyal to the Empire – she was, almost fervently so – but rather that too much Sith interference and Imperial backstabbing had left her weary (and wary) of offering herself up in mindless servitude any longer. She wanted – she needed – to be able to pick and choose her own assignments, her own goals, and her own methods of operation. She was no longer willing to submit herself to another’s control, even if that control was supposedly in the best interests of the Empire.

Still, Lana referred to her as ‘Agent.’ Old habits and all that.

“Oh, no, Minister, Vector and I are just mucking about,” she replied in a saucy tone. Her husband swatted at her foot, smiling and shaking his head at her.

“Good.” Lana had always been one for getting straight to business. “I understand you’re in the middle of an op on Hutta, but I need you to pack up and head for Nar Shaddaa straight away.”

Miranza bristled at Lana’s implicit assurance that she would simply do as she was told – as if Lana considered her to still be her agent in fact, rather than a private contractor free to operate as she pleased. She held her argument, however; there was an urgent note in Lana’s voice that made her curious, and really, if the Minister of Sith Intelligence wanted her to take on an assignment then chances were it was rather important.

“What’s the assignment, Minister?”

Whatever Miranza was expecting Lana to say next, it wasn’t this. “Theron Shan has gone missing.”

Violent tremors wracked Theron’s body as he lay curled up in a ball on the floor, water sloshing against his face, his teeth chattering so hard he was afraid they would crack apart in his mouth. His muscles ached with the severity of his shivering and his head pounded in time to the loud music that played continuously from speakers overhead. Huttese pop now; it had been some kind of Imperial marching tune earlier, and before that something angry and intense with a rapid, heavy beat.
He had lost all track of time. There was no natural lighting in his cell or the hallway beyond, no chrono to tell him the date or hour. No guards came to bring him food or water – the only water he’d had in the past few days had been what he managed to catch off the floor after it had been sprayed at him. No one came to speak to him. He had been left alone and ignored for what felt like an eternity.

Theron had been an agent of the SIS for most of his adult life, and this was hardly his first time in captivity. He was painfully familiar with the various methods of torture and interrogation, had training and experience in defeating those methods – stars, half his implants were in place to help him resist that sort of thing – but the cold, the hunger and thirst, the neglect … it was wearing on him. He was exhausted, prevented from sleeping both by continuous discomfort and by the crashing music overhead; he couldn’t remember a time when he had been this bone-weary.

Above all else, Theron was afraid.

He didn’t know why he had been taken or what his captors wanted. There was no way for him to vouchsafe the secrets in his head because he had no clue which secrets his captors were after. Aside from what little he had seen of them at Club Ufora he didn’t know who his captors were or what their motives were. He could think of hundreds of reasons why he had been taken, and almost all of those reasons came back to using him to hurt the people he cared for and the Republic he had worked so hard to protect. That thought terrified him.

The music stopped with a suddenness that left him briefly frightened that he had gone deaf until he heard the ringing in his ears and the hoarse, raspy quality of his own breathing. Then, for the first time since his ordeal began, he heard a door open at the end of the hallway and the sound of two pairs of footsteps approaching his cell.

Theron struggled to lift his head, wishing he had the energy to stand and face his captors, but even raising his head out of the puddle was too much effort for him. Instead he focused on glaring outside his cell, listening as two people walked towards him.

He was unsurprised to see the Nautolan woman and the human man. Her heels rang off the floor; he was wearing dress shoes, shiny and spotless. They came and stood beside the bars of his cell, looking down at him. There was a mechanical clunk and the cell bars receded into the wall, opening for the first time since Theron had woken up on the floor. The man and woman stepped into the cell, the woman making a small sound of disgust as she stepped daintily around a puddle of effluence. Theron thought of a number of smartass remarks he could make to that – it wasn’t as though they had provided him with a ‘fresher or even a bucket to use, so what had she expected? – but he couldn’t form the words. His mouth was dry, his tongue thick and clumsy, and his jaws ached from his chattering teeth. He couldn’t have spoken if his life depended on it – which, perhaps, it would.

The woman came and stood over him, planting one heeled foot on Theron’s hip and nudging him over onto his back. He groaned, his gaze fixed on her leg. He could think of about seven different ways to take her down, to disable her or to kill her outright, but all of those methods required him to be able to move and he couldn’t even raise his head. He was made to flop over onto his back, feeling ridiculously exposed. The man made an appreciative sound and when Theron shifted his attention to the human’s face he saw that the man was regarding him intently with salacious interest. Under normal circumstances Theron could have worked with that interest, but as he was now it just made him feel unsettled and uncomfortable.

“I think it’s time we moved on to the next phase,” the Nautolan commented, resting her foot low on Theron’s stomach. He was uncomfortably aware of how close her spiked heel was to certain tender parts of his anatomy. “Doctor Arjin is already concerned he might become ill. Leave it too long and he’ll be of no use to anyone.”
“I can still think of a few uses for him,” the human replied, his tone of voice leaving no doubt in Theron’s mind as to what those uses might be.

“You would.” The woman sounded both annoyed and faintly amused, as if her colleague’s proclivities were old news to her.

“Mm, yes.” The man was unoffended – pleased, even. “He’ll be more fun post-programming, though, I think.”

“We didn’t take him just to turn him into your own personal toy,” the Nautolan snapped. She took her heel off Theron’s stomach, turning to her compatriot. “There will be hell to pay if you damage him.”

The man just chuckled and moved outside of the cell, the woman following close behind him. Theron heard the cell bars swing closed again and then the sound of heeled feet walking away. After a few minutes the music started up again, the beat immediately syncing up with the throbbing in his head. He closed his eyes and tried to think warm thoughts.

O o O o O

Some time later – although how much later, he couldn’t have said – Theron stood in front of a low metal sink, staring at his own reflection in the mirror. Aside from the scruffy beginnings of a beard the face in the mirror seemed unchanged to him, and that lack of change bothered him. He felt like he should look different. There should be something on his face, in his eyes, that would attest to the changes he knew were in his head, but there was nothing. Nothing outward, at least. Inwards, however … everything felt different, almost painfully so.

He turned on the water, letting it warm up as he picked up the razor and held it in his hand, staring down at it. His hand was surprisingly steady, none of the trembling and shaking he had experienced before. He put the razor down, then cupped water in both hands and splashed his face before slowly lathering shaving cream onto his skin. After a moment he picked the razor up again and made to dash it against the sink, intending to crack the casing to free the blade so that he could bring it up to his own throat.

Instead he began to slowly and calmly shave his face, the blades rasping against his skin.

Theron could see fourteen different items in the refresher that he could use as a weapon or against himself. The razor in his hand, the floss beside the sink, the aerosol spray on the counter, even the mirror could be smashed and the shards used as a blade. In his mind he was reaching out, grabbing the closest available thing and slashing his own throat, the hot blood welling out over his fingers, the light going dim in his eyes. In the mirror his reflection calmly continued to shave, clearing away several days’ worth of growth.

He moved like an automaton, because that was what he was. That was what they had made him.

He knew this moment of privacy and self-care was a test. He had been left alone in the refresher to shower and shave, but there was no doubt in Theron’s mind that someone was watching, waiting to see if he acted out, if he threw off their programming. He had already been through several such tests: being ordered to stand, sit, and jump; being forced to drink a cup of poison (it had turned out to be a particularly nasty form of cheap ale that tasted like engine degreaser and ‘fresher sanitizer combined); being made to stand stoically while Urjax – the massive Houk from the cantina – punched him in the guts. The programming held through all of it, preventing him from clamping his mouth shut against the ‘poison’ or even raising his hands to protect his midsection.
The shower had been a spot of luxury in spite of the fact that he was being forced to take it. It had been so long since he had felt warmth and cleanliness; under different circumstances he would have been willing to stand under the spray of hot water for hours. Instead he had been in and out in less than five minutes, every spot of filth scrubbed away. The water that had circled around the drain had been dark and grimy.

He completed his shave, rinsing the razor off and setting it on the edge of the sink before splashing water onto his face. The next task was to dress himself in the clothes provided – loose-fitting pants and a sleeveless shirt – and in spite of the simplicity of the assignment Theron did his best to take his time. He couldn’t refuse the commands imprinted on his brain, but he could linger over them. He hadn’t yet been forced to hurry up, but he knew he would be made to do so the moment they realized he was dawdling as a means of resistance.

The clothes were soft and warm, the first things he had worn since his captivity began. They didn’t quite fit him properly – the pants were too big, requiring him to tighten the drawstring to keep them from sliding down his hips, and the shirt was tight across his shoulders – but the act of dressing himself was oddly reassuring, even if he wanted to rebel against it. Theron had never been particularly troubled by nudity and his training ensured that he was still tremendously dangerous even when naked and unarmed, but he was grateful for this small amount of armour between himself and the outside world. He dressed, then stood, hesitating, his hand on the door handle. He didn’t want to leave the ‘fresher.

A knock at the door made him freeze, then he heard Samar – the human man with the fancy suit and the spotless dress shoes – call out to him. “All finished in there?”

Theron debated the merits of ignoring him, but decided against it. He didn’t want Samar to come into the refresher after him, didn’t want to be trapped in close quarters with the man. He certainly didn’t want Samar to order him out, because then the choice would no longer be his to make, the programming forcing him to act in spite of what he wanted or did not want. He opened the door, holding his head high and trying not to take note of the eager way Samar’s eyes followed him.

“Come,” Samar said, gesturing for Theron to follow him out into the main room, where a table had been set with dishes and a staggering array of food. Theron’s stomach rumbled, reminding him how long it had been since he had last had anything to eat, and he moved towards the table with heavy feet. The plush carpet felt soft and luxurious under his bare toes, another improvement over his durasteel cell. Or just a reminder that he had traded one cage for another, this one considerably more well-appointed. Samar held back a chair and motioned for Theron to sit, then hovered over him as if intending to serve him himself.

“We weren’t certain what kinds of foods you preferred,” the man said, and sure enough he began to scoop Tionese noodles onto Theron’s plate. The scent made his mouth water.

Within seconds his plate was laden with food, a wide selection of choices that ranged across the galaxy in flavours and textures. Theron hesitated, hands hovering over the cutlery, surprised to discover that he had been provided with both a butter knife and a steak knife.

Theron’s fingers curled around the hilt of the steak knife. Samar stood beside him, but just out of arm’s reach. Not close enough. He lifted the knife, intent upon bringing the blade up to his own throat, but instead it slipped harmlessly from his grasp, bouncing off the table and onto the floor. Samar made a tsk-ing sound as he bent to retrieve it, shaking his head. Rather than place it back onto the table or handing it to Theron, however, Samar held the edge of the blade to Theron’s throat, just under the pulse point. Theron’s heart pounded; if he could just bend his head with enough force …

“Is this what you want, Theron?” Samar asked him, voice quiet and faintly mocking. “For me to cut
“Yes,” Theron ground out, his voice hoarse. He met the man’s gaze and recoiled at what he saw there.

Samar chuckled before placing the knife onto the table beside Theron’s plate, then reached out and ruffled Theron’s damp brown hair as if he were some kind of pet.

“Keyword: Atychiphobia,” Samar said, and Theron felt the switch in his brain responding, prepping him to act on the man’s next words. A stab of fear went through him at what Samar would make him do next, but all the man said was “Feed yourself to satiation.” Then, with a small smile, he picked up the cutlery and added, “But you’ll have to use your hands. We can’t be too careful.”

Immediately Theron scooped up some of the Tionese noodles and brought them to his mouth, ignoring the way they slipped and slid through his fingers. He wanted to resist but hunger and the keyword had him shoveling food in at an undignified pace. The noodles were surprisingly good, the spice burning his tongue in a pleasant way, and within a short amount of time he had cleared his plate before moving on to something else. Samar did not return the cutlery to him, but did help him scoop more food onto his plate, watching in amused silence as the SIS agent ate.

Eventually Samar went and sat down in the chair across from Theron, observing him from over the table. Theron did his best to ignore the man and instead focused on his food, trying not to notice the way the human stared at him, brown eyes seemingly fixated on Theron’s mouth. He considered and then discarded a number of different strategies, most of them too dependent on him having complete control over himself to be effective. After a moment, however, he lifted his gaze and regarded Samar thoughtfully. Seduction had never been his favourite means to an end, but there was no mistaking Samar’s interest in him for anything other than desire, and while Theron had absolutely no doubt the other man could make him do whatever he wanted it might be beneficial to him to acquiesce right away. Indeed, if he could make Samar believe that the interest was mutual, it might be possible to gain an advantage against him that way.

Path determined, Theron chewed and swallowed his food, then gave Samar a slow and somewhat hesitant smile. Better to play it shy and cautious; wouldn’t want the appearance of over-eagerness to tip the other man off. Just let him think Theron was starting to warm up to him, that he was falling for Samar’s friendly, helpful routine. It happened all the time, captives turning to their captors for sympathy and companionship. Nothing suspicious about it, if Theron played it right – and he was a spy, Force damn it, he was good at this.

Theron opened his mouth to say something vaguely suggestive. Instead, to his abject horror he heard himself say “I’m going to attempt to seduce you and then use your trust against you.” He tried clamping his mouth shut before the words could tumble out, but the programming in his mind forced him to betray himself. He waited, heart pounding, for anger to flash across Samar’s face, for the other man to call out to the guards that were no doubt in the hallway and send Theron back to his hateful cell.

Samar burst out laughing, a delighted expression on his face. He stood, crossing the floor to Theron in two quick steps, then grabbed the agent by his hair and savagely yanked his head back, forcing Theron to look up at him.

“Oh, Theron,” he said, laughter still in his voice and something much darker in his eyes. His fingers twisted in Theron’s hair. He wasn’t a large man – Theron was broader in the shoulders and more muscularly built – but he was remarkably strong. Theron’s conditioning prevented him from pulling away or attempting to struggle, no matter how much his instincts screamed at him to resist. “You’re going to be so much fun.”
Then, still chuckling, he bent and kissed Theron hard on the lips, so quickly Theron didn’t even have time to react before the man was releasing him and pushing him away again. Samar’s right hand flew out, his fist connecting with Theron’s jaw with enough force to knock him out of his chair and onto the floor. Theron saw stars and tasted blood, and Samar was upon him before he could even move.

“So much fun,” Samar hissed before closing in on Theron.
Miranza sat in a private side room of the Slippery Slopes cantina on Nar Shaddaa, reviewing the holo-recordings that had been handed over to the Republic SIS earlier that evening. She was on her fourth cup of caf but was exhausted enough that she had begun to seriously consider Lana’s earlier offer of stims. Vector sat on the floor a few feet away, his legs crossed and his hands resting lightly on his knees as he meditated in lieu of actual sleep. The Republic agents – Jonas Balkar, who she had heard of through Lana and Theron, and two young agents too new to have attracted Imperial Intelligence’s notice before now – had stopped casting wary glances at her husband, which in turn had meant that she no longer felt compelled to keep a watchful eye on them, but she still felt the urge to guard him when he was like this.

After Yavin 4 it shouldn’t feel so strange to her to be working with Republic agents. She had spent weeks running around that ghost-riddled planet, sharing campfires with troopers in white and patching up blue-uniformed operatives. She was perfectly aware that it was possible to ignore decades – centuries, arguably – of animosity in favour of achieving a shared goal, and she knew that members of the Republic could be reasonable, pragmatic and competent. Still, it seemed very odd to her to be sitting alongside three Republic SIS agents, acting as if they were all one big team and that was just perfectly normal.

 Stranger still to have those agents sharing intel.

She was fairly confident that had their positions been reversed, she would not be sitting in a room with Director Trant and a couple of Sith Intelligence operatives. Had Lana Beniko gone missing – had Miranza herself gone missing – there would be no joint operation. They wouldn’t have wanted the Republic to know that they had misplaced one of their own agents. They couldn’t have afforded that perception of weakness.

And in truth, Miranza knew that if it had been any other Republic agent but Theron Shan, she would not be here now. As far as she was concerned the SIS and the entire Republic could go hang. It had taken her weeks of working together before she could trust that Theron didn’t intend to screw her over. Stars, the only reason she had flirted with him in the first place was because she had wanted to put him off-balance. (It hadn’t worked: Theron gave as good as he got.) She had never been one to fall for a pretty face (and damn it, yes, Theron Shan was a ridiculously attractive man), but instead Theron had won her over with a mixture of affability, competence and self-deprecation. That, and he never once tried to compel her to do anything, which put him head and shoulders over Ardun Kothe and the other Republic agents she had known. Even Chance, who had seemed so damned likable, had tried to force her to do what he wanted in the end.

Not that Theron had known about the Castellan restraints, of course. Miranza doubted that information had gone any further than Kothe and his crew. Still, the first few times she had met up with Theron she had expected her keyword to fall from his lips.

Lana kept casting concerned glances in Miranza’s direction. The Minister of Sith Intelligence was aware that Miranza had had bad experiences working with the SIS, but she didn’t know the full details. The old Minister, who had served as Miranza’s handler Keeper before being promoted, had kept his promise not to reveal the fact that Miranza had broken free of the Castellan restraints and the brainwashing; instead, the files that Lana had had access to (heavily redacted as they’d been,
especially after Miranza herself had used the Black Codex to erase references to her identity) had suggested only that she had broken free of Republic control, which was quite a different thing altogether. Lana knew Miranza’s grudge was legitimate, but she trusted in her operative to get the job done.

It was also possible that Lana suspected she and Theron had slept together. They certainly hadn’t been subtle about their flirtations, and Lana was an exceedingly observant woman.

Miranza fast-forwarded through several more minutes of security footage, searching for whatever it was that had caused SIS to pass the holo-recordings on to Balkar and his people. She had already skimmed through hours of blurry, grainy feed, to the point where she could have described the hallway outside the bank vault with perfect accuracy and suspected she would be seeing it in her dreams. She never would have guessed that bank vaults beneath casinos would be so busy in the wee hours of night. Then again, outside of using casinos as a safe way to pass on credits – all you needed to do was lose the correct amount at a pazaak game – or a place to meet a contact, Miranza hadn’t really spent all that much time in one.

“There!” exclaimed one of the younger agents, a Zabrak man with dark skin and darker facial tattoos. She had almost forgotten he was there, he’d been so quiet and still, and his excited shout caused her to jump. He was standing right over her shoulder, and leaned over her to point at the screen – as if she hadn’t already been looking there in the first place.

Before she could grumble at him, however, she saw what had attracted his attention: three men in dark combat gear making their way through the vault hallway, looking as out of place as a gundark in an Alderaanian ballroom. Two of the men were human; the third was Twi’lek.

One of the two human men was unmistakably Theron Shan.

The six of them clustered around the viewscreen, Vector’s meditations abandoned in favour of seeing what was on the footage. They watched as the three men stood outside the vault, the Twi’lek taking up an obvious guard position while Theron and the other human examined the vault control panel. There seemed to be a brief discussion between Theron and the man, but the holo-camera was too far away and the recording too blurry for Miranza to get the opportunity to read their lips; she could see Theron’s face was carefully blank, but couldn’t tell if he was hiding something or if he just had his game-face on – she knew she had a tendency to go perfectly expressionless when she was working on something particularly tricky, and she had seen him in action often enough to know that it was much the same with him. The other human shifted slightly so that his body was obscuring Theron from view – was he aware of the holo-camera recording them? – and then Theron did something and the vault door slid open.

The man moved again, once more exposing Theron to view, and clapped his hand on the back of Theron’s neck. It was a strangely possessive gesture, and Miranza desperately wished she could get a better look at Theron’s face to see his reaction. His body language confused her: she thought she saw him stiffen, but at the same time he seemed to lean in towards the other man. The interaction between the unknown man and Theron seemed, to Miranza’s trained eye, to be rather intimate. In fact, it was the same kind of intimate gesture that her husband had used on her, mere nights ago. She certainly didn’t let random strangers and casual acquaintances touch her on the neck; she couldn’t imagine that Theron Shan, with the same skills and similar training (not to mention the same deeply ingrained suspicion) would be any different.

“Huh,” said the other Republic agent, a redheaded human woman. “I thought Theron was straight.” She, too, had seen what Miranza had seen – the way the unknown man touched Theron suggested a decidedly less than platonic relationship.
Standing behind Miranza Vector let out a snort. “Agent Shan is no more straight than we are.”

The woman – her name was Shaelyss – blinked a few times. It had taken her and the other Republic agents some time to grow accustomed to Vector’s Killik speech patterns, and Miranza saw the moment Shaelyss realized exactly what Vector was saying, her freckled cheeks taking on bright spots of colour. Beside her the Zabrak drew his own conclusions and a speculative look came into his green eyes as he glanced between Vector and Miranza. Miranza smiled serenely, letting him think what he pleased about her, her husband and the exact nature of their relationship. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Lana was also giving her a speculative look, and she raised an eyebrow at the blonde Sith. Miranza couldn’t help the cheeky smile she tossed in Lana’s direction, an expression that asked “Can you blame me?” Lana’s own expression clearly suggested that yes, she could blame Miranza, and in fact fully intended to do so since it was obvious her agent couldn’t be trusted to keep it in her pants.

Miranza just smiled.

The Zabrak – Tavrao was his name; Miranza had heard Shaelyss and Balkar call him by the nickname Tav – cleared his throat loudly before asking, “Is it possible Agent Shan was turned?”

A chorus of negative answers came forth from Balkar, Lana and Miranza; in Miranza’s mind there was zero chance that Theron Shan could possibly have chosen to betray the Republic. More’s the pity. The two of them had repeatedly suggested during the course of their flirtations – jokingly and then sometimes not so jokingly – that the other should defect. It had become something of a recurring jest between them, but ultimately Theron was no more likely to abandon the Republic than Miranza was to leave the Empire. Loyalty and patriotism were among the qualities they shared, it seemed.

“Oh, well … it just looks like he and that other guy are … uh … close,” Tav muttered. “It wouldn’t be the first time someone jumped ship for …” He made a lewd gesture that made it perfectly clear what Theron might have been jumping ship for.

“Not Theron,” Balkar said with considerable confidence. “He eats, breathes and sleeps the Republic.”

The six of them fell into silence as they observed Theron and the two unknown men enter the vault, disappearing from view. There were no holo-recordings from inside the vault – or if there were, they hadn’t been handed over to SIS with the rest of the footage – so there was no way to see what they were up to. Miranza resisted the urge to fast-forward until they appeared again; she was afraid of missing anything. It seemed like an eternity before the Twi’lek walked back out in the hallway but it was likely only a couple of minutes. When Theron and the other human reappeared the man was gripping the back of Theron’s neck again, looking incredibly pleased; Theron, for his part, still had a blank expression on his face. Something about the possessive – affectionate, even – way the man touched Theron caused Miranza to flash back to the other night when she had woken up from her nightmare about Hunter, when Vector had comforted her. Vector had held her in much the same way; it had definitely been a gesture of affection from him. She couldn’t read Theron well enough to know whether or not the feelings were reciprocated.

“We perceive a wrongness in this,” Vector mused, his voice soft. “It is unfortunate we cannot read Agent Shan’s aura through the recording.” Three pairs of eyes snapped towards him as the Republic agents processed what he said, but Lana and Miranza ignored their consternation and Vector, his gaze fixed on the viewscreen, did not appear to notice it in the first place. (Granted, her husband had more experience than she at ignoring how others responded to the perception of his Killik strangeness.) Vector simply continued, “Agent Shan is unlikely to have made the conscious choice to betray the Republic, but it would appear that he is operating under his own power. We do not see
any weaponry trained on him, and his associates do not seem to be coercing him to act.”

“Could he have been brainwashed?” Lana’s voice was cool, professional, but the words – so casually thrown out – had an immediate effect on Miranza, and she found herself reeling backwards, heart leaping into her throat as her pulse pounded loudly in her ears. Her vision blurred and she knew she was breathing too hard, too fast, but she couldn’t make herself calm down.

*Panic attack,* a calm voice assessed in her mind. It almost – almost – sounded like Watcher X, but of course he was long gone, killed by her own hand years ago, and even the vestiges of him that had lingered in her brain (somehow – she had never known how he had come to be there) had long since faded. The voice wasn’t wrong, however: she was indeed having a panic attack, but knowing it was happening was not enough to bring her out of it. She lost all sense of herself and her surroundings, locked away in her mind as the memories of her own brainwashing threatened to overwhelm her.

Long, elegant fingers slid around her arm, familiar hands drawing her away from the monitors, directing her towards a chair. Vector was careful to limit his contact to touching her arms only, years of experience having taught him not to try to hug her or otherwise encroach on her personal space when she was like this. She didn’t have the will to resist him, trapped as she was in her terror, and he gently helped her to sit, guiding her to lower her head between her knees. His voice, soft in her ears, murmured, “Breathe, beloved. You are safe. We are here.”

As Miranza struggled to control her breathing her husband spoke to her in quiet, calm tones, the other people in their company forgotten. He focused her attention on tangible things: the feel of the upholstery on the chair under her fingertips, the pattern in the carpet on the floor, the spicy-sweet scent that wasn’t so much Vector’s cologne as his natural body odour, the taste of the stale caf on her tongue. As she slowly returned to herself Vector began to stroke her back, lightly and soothingly, his voice a low murmur in her ear.

She blinked, shuddering, then raised her head again and gave her husband a small smile of thanks. He nodded and caught one of her hands in his own, bending to kiss her fingers. She knew he could read the gratitude and love in her aura; this was not the first time he had coaxed her out of a panic attack, and nor did she suspect it would be the last.

Choosing not to fixate on the small drama that had just unfolded in front of him (a kindness for which Miranza would be eternally grateful, embarrassed and ashamed as she was), Jonas Balkar instead turned to Lana and frowned, his dark brows drawing together.

“Theron’s implants are supposed to help him resist brainwashing and torture,” he commented, rubbing a hand over his jaw. “Not to mention his training.” Balkar knew, as did Lana, Miranza and Vector, that Theron’s training had started earlier than most in a childhood spent among Jedi, training as a Padawan before his lack of Force sensitivity had seen him drummed out of the Order. Miranza suspected that Shaelyss and Tav were not privy to this information, so it was left unsaid, the two Republic agents instead given to believe that the ‘training’ to which Balkar referred had come from the SIS.

“Still, even the strongest will can be broken, given the correct amount of pressure,” Lana replied, and Miranza suspected this was directed at her as much as intended to be about Theron. It was Lana’s way of apologizing to her for bringing up the painful subject of brainwashing.

Miranza, instead, found herself flashing back to Rishi, when Lana had contrived to have Theron captured by the Revanites so that he could learn their plans. He had been tortured then, too, and Lana had been confident that he would not break – and he hadn’t, though Miranza had seen what had been done to him. Indeed, she had patched up the worst of his injuries, since he had been far too stubborn to seek treatment elsewhere. His captivity on Rishi had lasted three days; this time, he had
been missing for several weeks. Miranza knew, from personal experience and from her training in Intelligence, that Lana was right, and that even the strongest person could be made to break. Three days hadn’t been nearly enough to defeat Theron’s implants, training and sheer stubbornness; three weeks, on the other hand …

“We need to speak to casino security,” Miranza said, forcing herself not to think about what had been done to him. She turned to Balkar and picked up her datapad, preparing to makes notes. “Do we know what was taken from the vault?”

O o O o O

Samar had not been gentle with him the night before. Theron awakened to a host of new aches and pains that had not been present before Samar’s ‘celebrations,’ dark bruises around his wrists and thighs, his entire body stiff and sore. He was exhausted, worn out from Samar’s attentions combined with the frantic pace of the past week and a general lack of proper rest. He couldn’t remember what it felt like to get a full night’s sleep.

It was impossible to sleep comfortably or deeply with Samar there. The tension Theron felt whenever the other man was present made him start and jump at every move he made, no matter how seemingly innocuous. When Samar had taken Theron to see Arjin – the Neimoidian doctor who had been responsible for Theron’s brainwashing and who also served as the headquarters physician – the doctor had blandly suggested that perhaps the Republic agent would sleep better if Samar would only leave him be for a time. Samar had been angry but restrained in Arjin’s presence, but once he and Theron were alone he had punished Theron for the doctor’s comments – as if it were Theron’s fault that Samar couldn’t keep his hands to himself. Theron hadn’t complained about his exhaustion after that visit; a full night’s rest wasn’t worth the bruises, not when Samar had plenty of imaginary reasons to cause Theron pain. He enjoyed hurting Theron as much as he enjoyed everything else he did to him.

Theron had always been somewhat indiscriminate when it came to sexual partners. Not that he didn’t have standards – he most certainly did – but rather he had always felt that sex was meant to be enjoyed and he didn’t automatically equate sex with love. He’d had his share of flings and one-night-stands, and he was a hell of a lot better at that sort of casual intimacy than he was at actual relationships, where he was by his own frequent admission a complete space-wreck. He hadn’t experienced much in the way of role models when it came to learning how to manage healthy relationships; his parents had been forced to keep their own relationship a secret and it had ended when Satele had fallen pregnant with him. He knew he wasn’t the sole cause for their separation, but he had no illusions that his existence hadn’t played a part. And while Master Zho had served as a father figure for much of Theron’s formative years, he had been an exemplary Jedi and had been celibate the entire time Theron had known him. Jedi were not ideal mentors when it came to love, sex and relationships.

There had been a number of exes over the years who had tried to analyze Theron’s promiscuity and general ineptitude at relationships. Most of them seemed to be under the impression that he slept around as a means of rebelling against the strictures of his early childhood – his years at the academy on Tython, being raised and trained as a Jedi. (Some of his exes had gone a little further and suggested that he was using licentiousness as a way of hitting back against his mother, but since Theron wasn’t particularly keen on throwing his love-life in Satele’s face and in fact took great pains to keep her out of his romantic affairs, he thought this assessment was unlikely.) Some exes felt that he used sex as a means of establishing a connection – trying to forge the love he had missed out on as a child – but Theron didn’t feel that he’d been neglected in that respect; while there was certainly no denying that Theron had some serious abandonment issues, Master Zho had been a loving and affectionate surrogate father, and Theron had grown up feeling loved.
He liked sex and he sucked at relationships. There was no need to go deeper than that.

Liking sex and being somewhat indiscriminate about his bed-mates was one thing, and stars knew it made his work for the SIS easier at times – seduction was an effective means of gathering intel and establishing contacts, and hell, under the right circumstances it was fun, too. But Theron had always had some say in whether or not he slept with someone; he had never felt compelled to take a seduction to the next level, had never been forced into bed with an asset just because his superiors at the SIS felt it was necessary. It had always been his choice.

Samar had no interest in Theron’s consent, nor any need for it. The same conditioning that forced Theron to jump, eat and shave himself without slitting his own throat compelled him to do whatever Samar told him to do, no matter how much his mind rebelled against it. In fact, if anything Theron suspected that Samar drew a significant amount of pleasure from Theron’s lack of consent. The worst part about it, however, came from the way Samar behaved as though he and Theron had some kind of connection – when he wasn’t hurting him or forcing his body to respond to him, Samar treated Theron with casual affection, much the way Theron had seen other people in relationships behave. He was constantly touching Theron – a brush of the hand here, a kiss on the lips there, always stroking and petting him as if Theron were some kind of pet – and when they were alone together Samar took as much delight in getting Theron off as he did in hurting him.

Theron would rather have been beaten.

It was unlike any kind of brainwashing Theron had ever heard of. No one had convinced him to join their side. He didn’t consider himself to be allied with Samar or his associates. He didn’t believe he was working with them for any greater purpose or towards any meaningful end. He hated Samar – and Urjax, and the Nautolan woman Amrielle, and that fucking doctor Arjin. He fucking despised them, all of them, and if he could have Theron would have bashed Samar’s head in with the glass vase he kept on the bedside table. Instead, Samar said the keyword – ‘atychiphobia,’ whatever the hell that meant – and Theron found himself fulfilling whatever sick and twisted commands the other man issued him. His body’s ready compliance left Theron feeling like a willing accomplice in his own abuse and humiliation, even though he knew intellectually there was nothing he could do to stop it from happening.

Sudden silence startled him from his ruminations, and Theron realized that he had been listening to the shower running in the ‘fresher. With the shower stopped, Theron’s entire body tensed; there was only one other person who could have been showering, and now that he was finished, he would be returning to the bedroom – to Theron.

Sure enough, Samar exited the refresher, a towel draped low around his hips; he dried his damp hair with another towel and smiled down at Theron as if Theron wasn’t trying to make the bastard's head to explode through the force of his will alone.

“Morning, handsome,” Samar greeted him cheerfully, tossing the towel onto a nearby chair. He bent and smacked his palm against Theron’s bare buttocks, chuckling evilly at the way Theron flinched in response. “Looks like you’re going to have some nice bruises there, sweetheart. Sorry if I got a little rough with you last night. I just can’t help myself sometimes – you know how it is.”

Go fuck yourself, Theron thought, his entire body tensing with the desire to leap up and start pummeling his fists into Samar’s smug face. The words stayed trapped in his mouth, however, just as his body remained still on the bed, the brainwashing preventing him from doing anything that might be construed as causing harm to the other man – or himself. Force knew, Theron had tried to hurt himself. He wasn’t suicidal – not usually, at least – but death was certainly preferable to being made to act against himself, his allies and the Republic.
“Amrielle was very pleased with the data we retrieved yesterday, by the way,” Samar continued, as if Theron gave the smallest shit about what would make that Nautolan harpy happy. He tugged the towel free of his hips and proceeded to strut around the small bedroom, rummaging through the drawers in search of something to wear. “You’re turning out to be a very good investment.” Casting a long, lingering glance at the naked agent in his bed Samar added, “Of course, I knew I wanted you the moment I saw you. I’m just glad the Castellan restraints worked – saved me the whole bother of winning and dining you, you know. Such a nuisance.” He spoke as if Theron would have been a sure thing, as if the Castellan restraints – apparently the name for the brainwashing technique he had been subjected to – had merely been a convenient shortcut in lieu of engaging in a protracted flirtation and seduction. As if Theron would have been interested in Samar from the start. Samar was an attractive man on the surface, but underneath his handsome face there was something dark and twisted about him that no amount of charm or fancy suits could disguise.

The brainwashing or restraints or whatever it was could not prevent the bile that rose in the back of Theron’s throat, and he lurched out of bed, racing into the refresher before he could lose the contents of his stomach all over the bedroom floor. The temptation to just give in and puke all over Samar was intense, but Theron knew the other man would simply force him to clean it all up – and he didn’t want to appear that weak in front of him, in any event. Theron hunched over the toilet, shoulders heaving, the act of vomiting making the pain in his back worse.

Outside in the bedroom Samar just chuckled again, amused as always by Theron’s discomfort. When he called out to Theron his voice was filled with malicious glee: “Make sure you brush your teeth before you come back out here. I’ve got plans for that mouth of yours.”

Before Theron could decide to refuse Samar threw in the keyword, reinforcing the command. As Theron began to brush his teeth – unable to meet his own gaze in the mirror – the knuckles of the hand that grasped his toothbrush were white and he held the brush so tightly it nearly snapped in his grip.
Chapter Five

The bank vault underneath the Club Vertica casino was as bland and uninteresting as every other bank vault Miranza had ever been inside, and for someone with little interest in finances and banking, Miranza had been inside a lot of them. The durasteel walls were lined with row upon row of metal boxes about six inches across and more than a foot deep. The boxes were numbered, and there were slightly larger boxes embedded in rows along the floor. All of the boxes had locking mechanisms just below the embossed numbers; the manager had informed Miranza that the locks required two separate keys, which was supposed to ensure the security of the contents.

One of the boxes was missing entirely, just a gaping black hole in the wall. The boxes around it had all been blasted to bits with detonite, their contents scattered around the bank vault floor. Miranza and the others had had to step over broken bits of jewelry, datapads and credit chips when they had entered the vault. Apparently the two-key system was flawed if one didn’t care about covering one’s tracks.

“I’ve told you, none of us are privy to the contents of the safety deposit boxes!” the manager was saying for what was likely the tenth time. Miranza ignored him, leaving him to Lana’s less-than-tender mercies. The Sith Lord had grown tired of the manager more than an hour ago when the man had refused to permit her and her party to enter the vault in the first place. Jonas Balkar had tried for diplomacy – Club Vertica was, after all, located within nominally Republic territory on Nar Shaddaa – but Lana had let her yellow eyes glow a little and that, combined with the obvious flicker of electricity about her hands, had convinced the manager that perhaps it would be in his best interests to let the assembled Intelligence agents into the vault.

Diplomacy came in many forms. Miranza suspected that Vector – himself an actual trained diplomat – was just grateful that his wife hadn’t resorted to simply shooting the manager in the head and stepping over his body on her way into the vault.

Not that Miranza hadn’t considered that.

“Surely you can at least tell us who the missing box belonged to?” Lana suggested. The blonde Sith spoke through gritted teeth but her tone was almost gratingly polite and syrupy-sweet. Miranza had heard Lana use that exact same tone seconds before killing the person it was directed at.

The manager apparently recognized this, as he immediately went almost bone-white and began sputtering. “Well, uh, no ma’am … um .. my lady – I mean, my lord … I mean …”

Miranza ignored their interplay and instead moved cautiously around the vault, Vector trailing in her wake. She brought up her memories of the blurry security recordings, mentally tracing Theron’s progress through the hallways and into this vault. She wished she could have seen what had happened when he and his two – allies? captors? she had no idea who those other men were to him – had entered the vault itself. The end result was obvious – obliterated security boxes forming a perfect square around the one that had been stolen – but she would have liked to have seen it as it happened.

Tavrao inspected the damaged boxes, taking samples of the residue and matching it against known substances in the system. He was apparently something of a demolitions expert in addition to being a
spy, and Balkar had tasked him with investigating the exact cause of the explosion. Casino security had already performed an investigation of their own in conjunction with Republic and cartel investigators, but the Intelligence agents wanted to come to their own conclusions. Thus far the vault theft was the only real lead they had in Theron’s disappearance.

The three Republic agents discussed the results of Tav’s inspection, but Miranza returned her focus to the panicking bank manager and Lana, who was growing increasingly annoyed. Lana hid her anger well – until the moment when she didn’t, and then she was every inch the proper Sith Lord – but they were all aware of how little information they had to go on, and it was frustrating to have this latest lead seem to go nowhere.

The bank manager was sputtering about client confidentiality and nondisclosure agreements, insisting that Club Vertica’s clients paid for privacy as much as for security. Bank policy was not to disclose the identity of any of the deposit box owners, no matter the need.

Miranza listened to the argument with half an ear, thinking. She caught Vector observing her and gave him a long, level glance; he nodded his head in understanding and moved to stand between her and the bank manager, effectively blocking the other man’s line of sight. Sometimes it was incredibly handy to be so damned short – it was easier to overlook her, especially with her tall husband providing interference. After a moment Miranza slipped out into the hallway, mindful of the locations of the security recorders, then activated her stealth generator.

The underground bank was quiet as a tomb with relatively few employees moving around. While not particularly familiar with her surroundings Miranza had been in enough similar locations that she was able to make an educated guess as to where she needed to go, and she moved through the carpeted hallways on silent feet.

The manager’s office was helpfully identified by a placard on the wall just outside the door. Less helpful was the locked door itself, but Miranza hadn’t been stymied by civilian locks since before her tenth birthday, and for all the supposed excellence of the casino’s security the lock on the manager’s door was just that: civilian. She searched the door for alarms or traps (none – so much for security) before picking the look, then eased the door open and slipped inside the office. Three quick steps and she was behind the desk, slicing his computer terminal.

She didn’t have time to go rifling through his files. Fortunately she had a number of data spikes tucked in her utility belt, and after bypassing the manager’s encryption program she put one of the spikes to work, downloading the contents of the computer to look over later. The spike gave a little chirp to let her know it was finished, just as Vector sent a quick message to her wrist-comm to alert her to the manager’s return.

Stealth generator re-engaged, Miranza slipped back down the hallway towards the vault, passing by the manager and Lana as they argued on their way to the manager’s office. Miranza rejoined the rest of the agents, now mingling outside the vault as they waited for Lana’s return, and sent Lana a quick message of her own.

“We’re done. Let’s go.”

After the nightmare that had begun in Club Ufora, the last thing Theron wanted was to sit in another cantina and wait for a contact, but Samar and his associates weren’t particularly interested in what Theron Shan wanted. His first thought, when Samar had returned from a meeting with a fancy suit draped over one arm, was that Samar intended to play dress-up and parade Theron around like a tame dinko – it wouldn’t have surprised Theron in the least. Instead, Samar had ordered Theron to
get cleaned up and changed into the suit without making a single lascivious comment, and then bustled him out of the apartment and into a waiting taxi.

And now Theron sat between Amrielle and Samar, with Urjax and Adan – a large male Twi’lek who served as both an enforcer and a slicer – towering over them. He didn’t know the name of the cantina they were in; in fact, he wasn’t even sure which part of Nar Shaddaa he was on, and no one seemed to be in a hurry to tell him. Amrielle had ordered drinks for them all – Theron included – and sat, one leg crossed over the other at the knees, tapping her lacquered fingernails against the base of her wine glass with some impatience. Neither Urjax nor Adan appeared terribly interested in their drinks, and instead they loomed over the other three, their arms folded across their large chests as they made it blatantly obvious that they were here as hired muscle. Even Samar seemed a bit nervous, right leg bouncing at a rapid pace, his eyes constantly scanning the crowd. Theron likewise felt nervous, but mostly because he was picking up on the others’ emotions, and because he didn’t know what was supposed to happen or why he was there.

At last they were joined by two others, both men: one a blue-skinned Nautolan, the other a cyborg with an astonishing array of implants and cybernetics. They stood for a moment before being acknowledged by Amrielle, who greeted them with a polite incline of her head and motioned for them to be seated.

The Nautolan lifted a heavy metal case onto the table, placing it down amongst their drinks, then sat in the offered seat across from Amrielle. The cyborg chose to remain standing, gaze roaming the cantina around them.

“The sequence profiler is here,” said the Nautolan, jerking his chin at the case. His head-tresses swung forward, decorative beads clacking together with his movements. “You have our credits?”

“Oh, of course, of course.” Samar spoke in a friendly, effusive tone, beaming at the two men as if they were old friends. He slowly put a hand to one of the pockets of his suit, telegraphing his moves before he made them, then reached inside the pocket and withdrew a packet of credit sticks. Setting them on top of the case, he slid them towards the Nautolan before drawing his hand away.

It was the cyborg who bent and picked up the sticks, scanning them with a cybernetic eye and then nodding at his companion. The Nautolan returned the nod and held the pad of his right thumb up to a small scanner on the case; a red light flashed just above the scanner and there was a soft clicking sound. The case lid sprang open, revealing what looked like electronic medical equipment to Theron.

“Just touch here—“ the Nautolan motioned at the small device “—and run your sample. Takes about seven minutes to process. If it’s a match you’ll get a green light, and then the inner compartment should open up with the secondary keys.”

“‘Should?’” repeated Amrielle, sounding cross.

The cyborg shrugged, staring down at her impassively. “That’s how the sequence profiler works. We’ve tried it, but there’s no way to know for certain whether or not the compartment will open – or if the keys are inside – until you’ve got a match.”

Amrielle seemed unhappy with his response, but Samar simply shrugged and waved her off. He closed the lid on the case and the Nautolan reset the lock, adjusting it so that Samar could open it himself. The transaction apparently complete, Samar and Amrielle stood – Samar motioning for Theron to follow suit – and Urjax gestured for them to head into one of the back rooms of the cantina. Before they could leave, however, the cyborg drew Samar aside to speak to him privately. Amrielle frowned at them but said nothing, although Theron was certain he saw the cyborg glance in his direction a few times. Eventually the Nautolan and the cyborg left, and the large Houk led the rest
of their party towards the back room.

Theron had barely taken foot inside the back room when Samar suddenly stepped towards him, right fist launching forward to catch the agent in the jaw. Theron went sprawling, his entire body screaming at him to get back up and fight the man, but his conditioning immediately kicked in and instead he found himself huddled on the ground as Samar closed in on him. He held a large envelope in his hand which he waved in Theron’s face.

“According to Barquet, you’ve got some people searching after you,” Samar snarled, as Adan moved behind Theron and grabbed him by the arms, hauling him back to his feet. Samar stood in front of him, tearing open the envelope to draw out a handful of flimsiplast sheets. He held the sheets up, revealing that each piece of flimsi bore the face of a different person. People Theron recognized all too well.

Hope welled up in him at the realization that he hadn’t been forgotten, that there were people searching for him even now. Samar flicked the pictures at him – Jonas, Lana, Miranza, Vector, and two others Theron didn’t immediately recognize – demanding that Theron identify them. He didn’t invoke the keyword, however, instead opting to have Adan continue pinning Theron’s arms back so that Urjax could hammer Theron in the gut each time he refused to respond. It was further proof that Samar – and Urjax – simply enjoyed causing Theron pain; the keyword would have forced his compliance, but then it would be over. Instead, Samar could demand answers from Theron, Theron could resist for as long as possible, and then Samar would have his excuse to have Urjax hit him.

Urjax was massive, even for a Houk, and impressively strong. His fists felt like they were made of durasteel and it was all Theron could do to keep from crying out when he struck him repeatedly in the same place, but he felt a perverse sense of pride at being able to resist. Samar could demand all the answers he wanted, but until he forced Theron’s compliance through the use of the keyword Theron wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of a response. He didn’t care if it hurt more to disobey – it felt pretty fucking good to refuse.

That refusal, combined with the knowledge that his allies were trying to find him, helped to spark something in Theron that he hadn’t even realized had gone out. The deprivation and torture he had experienced shortly after his capture had ground him down, wearing him out and crushing his spirit, but the brainwashing that had followed had left him feeling emotionally and spiritually crippled. Weeks of being forced to obey Samar’s every command – and endure Samar’s abuse – had only added to those feelings, until Theron scarcely even knew who he was anymore. But now that he was able to laugh in Samar’s face – even if that laughter was speckled with flecks of blood – and he knew, he knew that his friends hadn’t given up on him, Theron felt his resolve return.

Then, quick as a flash, Samar’s expression grew hard and he uttered the hated words: “Keyword: atychiphobia. You will identify these people. Don’t even try to bluff me, handsome, or you’ll regret it.”

The laughter died in Theron’s throat and he stiffened, glaring up at the man. Samar smirked, then lifted the first of the flimsis, holding it out for Theron to see.

“Jonas Balkar, Republic Strategic Information Services,” Theron said, his voice flat and without affect. He felt as if he were a great ways off, observing himself from a distance, as if in a holo-recording. Samar’s smirk widened and he held up the next picture. “Lana Beniko, Minister of Sith Intelligence.” That brought a small gasp to Amrielle’s lips, but Theron ignored her, forced to focus on the pictures in front of him. The next two were the people he didn’t recognize – a handsome Zabrak man with impressive facial tattoos and a mousy redheaded human woman who looked barely old enough to be out of the academy. When he admitted that he didn’t know them Samar became
angry, thinking Theron had found some way to defeat his programming, but repeated uses of the
keyword produced the same results and he moved onto the next pictures: “Miranza Gerrick …
Imperial … Ah, I’m actually not sure what she is. She’s not with Sith Intelligence. Private contractor,
I guess?” Then, finally, he identified Vector Hyllus, listing him simply as a member of the Imperial
Diplomatic Service. Samar hadn’t asked him to reveal everything he knew about his allies, just to
identify them. No point in drawing connections between any of them, such as by revealing that
Miranza and Vector were married – or that Theron had slept with Miranza (and would have slept
with Vector, too, given the opportunity).

Jonas and Lana weren’t a surprise – even though Lana was Sith and the Minister of Intelligence, she
and Theron had worked well together and Theron considered her to be an ally. And Jonas and he
went way back – stars, the last time Theron had found himself in trouble in a cantina, it had been
Jonas’s fault. Theron assumed the two unknowns worked for Jonas or Lana; new Intelligence agents,
recruited to provide additional support in tracking him down. Theron was surprised to see Miranza
and Vector, however. Sure, she had been a fun fling, and Theron had certainly been looking forward
to seeing her and her charming husband again, but it wasn’t like Theron was expecting an Imp to
come to his rescue. (The fact that Theron himself would have gone to Miranza’s aid had their
positions been reversed was completely lost on him.)

“Wait a moment,” Amrielle said, before picking up the flimsi of Miranza and frowning down at it. “I
know this woman. I’ve seen her before.” She stared intently at the picture before bursting into
laughter. “Ah, yes, I remember her now. Legate. Hunter’s little bitch.”

“That cipher agent?” Samar asked, cocking his head to one side and taking the picture from her. He
let out a laugh of his own, sounding delighted, and smiled evilly at Theron. “Oh, I hope she does
find you, handsome. She set us back years when she pissed all over Hunter’s parade. It’d be nice to
get a little payback for that, you know?”

Theron tried not to let the anger flash on his face, but he knew Samar and Amrielle saw it, and Samar
laughed again.

“Ah, like that, is it?” he said, motioning for Adan to maneuver Theron into a chair. “Yeah, we’ll
have a great time when she shows up. We’ll even let you help.”

Made to sit, Theron grit his teeth and tried desperately not to think of all the horrific things Samar
could force him to do to Miranza through the keyword but it was all too easy – most of it were things
Samar had already done to him. Theron had grown somewhat inured to violence over the years – it
was an unfortunate aspect of his occupation – but the thought of being directly responsible for
causing someone else to suffer was anathema to him. He was not the sort of agent who relied upon
pain and intimidation to make someone else do what he wanted; far better to make use of charm,
coercion and, when necessary, blackmail. But if the idea of hurting someone was upsetting to him,
the idea of hurting Miranza – who he had known intimately, who had trusted him with her body and
her safety and had invited him to share in private aspects of her life and in her husband’s life – made
him feel physically ill.

While Theron was reeling from the implications of Samar’s words, Urjax was bringing the case over
and setting it down on the table beside his chair, then coming to stand over Theron. While Samar
opened the case, Urjax grabbed Theron by the arm – fingers tightening threateningly when Theron
tried to pull away – and forced him to hold his hand out, palm down. Samar took out the medical
device from within the case and turned it on, following the steps the Nautolan had shown him earlier.
After a minute the sequence profiler was activated; Samar brought it closer to Theron, then waited
until Urjax made the agent place his hand onto the pad the Nautolan had indicated. There was a
sudden sharp jab as something pressed into Theron’s palm and he yelped, startled, trying to pull his
hand free. Then, after the machine gave a little hiss, Urjax allowed him to free himself. Theron scowled down at his hand, which now had small, angry red pinpricks in a circle over his palm.

Theron rubbed at the painful marks, seeing small dots of blood welling up from the spots. After a few minutes – seven minutes, to be precise – there was a cheerful chiming noise, and a light on the sequence profiler turned green. Samar let out a quiet cheer just as a compartment in the device popped open.

“Excellent,” Samar said, beaming at Theron before looking into the compartment. “It looks like we’re headed to Belsavis.”

O o O o O

Miranza and Vector were eating a late dinner in their hotel room attached to Club Vertica, the room compliments of the manager whose office Miranza had broken into earlier. The free rooms – offered up to all the members of Balkar and Lana’s joint operations – were supposed to be consolation for the information the manager had been unable to provide them. That same information which Miranza had stolen from his computer, and which Tav and Shaelyss were poring over in their own complimentary rooms.

The food was good – certainly better than field rations, no matter how highly Vector might think of ration bars – but Miranza picked at her plate listlessly, too keyed up to focus on the task of feeding herself. She was frustrated by the lack of results. Theron was out there somewhere, with people who may or may not have brainwashed him – that notion still made her skin crawl and had woken her with more than her fair share of nightmares the past few nights – and they were no closer to finding him than they had been before Lana had brought her in to help investigate his disappearance.

The bank manager’s files had all been encrypted, of course. While Miranza was certainly capable of decrypting them herself, she had been more than willing to let Balkar’s agents handle it, knowing her own level of anger and frustration might result in her making careless mistakes. She was confident Tavrao and Shaelyss could take care of it, but she hated waiting.

Vector, sensing his wife’s frustration – a frustration which he shared, but was better at managing – set aside his own plate of food and went to sit behind her on the bed, encouraging her to settle in against him. After a moment he reached up and undid the tie that held her hair back, releasing her dark blonde curls. He ran his fingers through Miranza’s hair, smiling faintly when she let out a low groan of pleasure, then picked up her brush from the bedside table and began to work it through her hair.

Normally Miranza only ever brushed her hair before bedtime or showering, working to get out all the knots before sleeping on it or washing it. Brushing her hair when it was dry resulted in it turning into a giant mess of fluff, curls poofing out around her head in a staticky riot. When her hair was wet she favoured a comb, and could be quite ruthless at yanking out the knots and tangles. But Vector found that he quite enjoyed the act of brushing his wife’s hair, and she in turn enjoyed having him brush it; it was comforting, offering up the kind of casual intimacy she had never expected to experience in her life – until he had come along. Vector – by no means an uncomplicated individual himself – was nonetheless the first person who had been willing and able to work with her complications, and it was no coincidence that he had been the one she had chosen to have at her side through some of the most challenging and traumatic moments of her life.

He had also been present for all of the best moments, as well – again, by no coincidence.

Miranza sighed, closing her eyes and enjoying the sensation of having her hair brushed, Vector’s long legs stretching out on either side of her as he nestled her in against his body. He hummed as his
worked, low voice scarcely audible as he went through the stanzas of a folk song he had learned from Daizanna of the Iesei nest, a fellow Killik Joiner who had died several years ago. After a few minutes he bent his head and placed a gentle kiss on Miranza’s bare skin, where her shoulder and neck met.

“We know you are worried, beloved,” he said quietly, running the brush through her hair again. “We believe Agent Shan will be located. The final stanzas of his song are not yet sung.”

“I wish I had your faith,” Miranza replied, her own voice equally soft. She stroked her hands over his legs, delighting in the feel of him – another moment of casual intimacy she hadn’t enjoyed before him, this simple pleasure of being able to caress another person without it having to mean anything more than that she enjoyed their presence. Before Vector all physical contact had been a precursor to sex. Now, while sex was certainly a delightfully frequent part of their lives, physical contact meant more than just a lead-in to seduction. It was comfort and intimacy and tactile pleasure all on its own. “And even if we find him … what if he’s not really … him any more?”

“You mean to say, what if he has been conditioned into someone you no longer recognize?” Vector gave her shoulder a light squeeze, the touch reassuring, and she nodded reluctantly. “If that is the case, we know you have the means to bring him back to himself.”

Miranza was about to reply – although in all honesty, she wasn’t sure what she meant to say – but her holocommunicator let out a loud chime, startling them both. Her first inclination was to ignore the incoming call – Lana or Balkar would contact her on a different channel, the two junior agents didn’t have her contact information, and she wasn’t expecting any other calls – but curiosity got the better of her. With a regretful pat on Vector’s leg she pushed herself up off the bed and went to her holo, hitting the button to accept the call.

A man’s face appeared before her, the hologram casting him in blue light, and although the image itself was rather small she had the impression that the man was actually quite large, certainly much taller than herself, with broad shoulders and a wide, muscular build. His face was heavily scarred, particularly on the right side, but she thought he might have been a handsome man at one point – was perhaps handsome still, if one was willing to look beneath those scars. He had dark hair cut short in a typical military haircut and, now that she was noticing it, he held himself with a military bearing, rather as though he was standing at parade rest. There was something strangely familiar about him, and it took her a moment to realize that she had seen pictures of him in Intelligence’s files: Jace Malcom, Supreme Commander of the Republic Military.

Well. That was interesting.

“Can I help you?” Miranza asked, striving for politeness even though the idea of the former leader of Havoc Squad and the current head of the Republic Military having her private holo was disconcerting, to say the least. “How did you get this channel?”

“I’ve been given to understand that you’re investigating the disappearance of Agent Theron Shan,” the man said, ignoring her questions. He had a deep voice that was nonetheless surprisingly pleasant. “Is this true?”

“I’m not sure that it’s any business of yours –“ Miranza began, but he cut her off.

“I know who you are,” he snapped, looking angry. “I know what you are. I want to know why the woman responsible for murdering Ardun Kothe – and countless others – is investigating the disappearance of a Republic agent.”

Her own anger beginning to boil over, Miranza fisted her hands on her hips, glaring at the holo-
image of one of the most dangerous men in the galaxy.

“I know who you are, Supreme Commander Jace Malcom,” she retorted, drawing out his title and name with slow deliberation, purposefully flavouring the words with her distinctly Imperial accent, “and so I will ask you again, less politely this time: what the fuck do you want, and how the fuck did you get this channel?”

Behind her, Vector eased up off the bed and came to join her, standing at her side. She could feel the consternation radiating off of him and knew, without looking at him, that her husband’s face would have shifted into his most politely professional diplomat’s mask – the one he wore when his wife was in the middle of antagonizing people who were way more powerful and well-connected than she was. (She didn't need to look at him to know that expression well. She had made a habit of antagonizing powerful, important people.) Vector made no effort to silence her, however, nor did he attempt to speak on her behalf – they knew each other better than that. He stood beside her to offer her support and perhaps to remind her (silently) to curb her more reckless impulses, but he wouldn’t try to tell her how to behave. She resisted the urge to reach out to him, not wanting to give this Republic hothead the impression that she needed to rely upon a man to grant her support or agency, but also not wanting Malcom to have too close a look at her husband. He claimed to know who she was, but Vector was still, hopefully, an unknown entity.

Malcom seemed to deflate a little, his broad shoulders slumping. He raised both hands in an unmistakable gesture of surrender.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t call to start a fight,” he said, and to her surprise Miranza believed him. “I have information that may be of use to you, that’s all.”

“Go on.”

“Without going into too many details, there are a number of files and keywords –“ Miranza flinched at his use of the word, but he didn’t appear to notice and he most certainly didn't follow it up with her keyword “—that are set to be brought to my attention if flagged. Recently – less than an hour ago, in fact – one of those files was accessed and I was notified. You or one of your associates tried to access an encrypted document pertaining to a certain safety deposit box that was supposed to be secured on Nar Shaddaa.”

She wondered if she should caution Balkar that his agents had triggered Malcom’s alarms, then decided against it. Balkar and his agents served the Republic and were investigating the disappearance of a Republic agent; no doubt they would all get a medal or a commendation or … or a trophy or something once Theron was found. (Perhaps some kind of merit badge?) And if she warned them that they had been caught they would know not to make the same mistake a second time, which, frankly, wouldn’t serve her in the slightest once all of this was over and they want back to being on opposite sides of the fence. No point in helping Republic Intelligence step up their game, after all.

Realizing that Malcom appeared to be waiting for a response from her, Miranza nodded slowly, unwilling to give him any more information to go on. This appeared to frustrate him, but – as was almost always the case when you refused to talk – he continued without her.

“That safety deposit box contained schematics and maps for a secret cell located on Belsavis,” Malcom said.

“Oh, the ‘secret’ Republic prison planet, you mean? That Belsavis?” Miranza couldn’t help her cheeky response, and Malcom scowled. “What’s in that so-called ‘secret cell,’ then?” Vector let out a small sigh, no doubt adding this holo-call to the list of times his partner had deliberately provoked
“Yes, *that* Belsavis,” Malcom ground out, glaring at her over the holo. “And I can’t tell you what’s in that cell. It’s classified. What I can tell you is that Theron Shan cannot be allowed to get anywhere near Belsavis or that ward. The consequences could be … It would … Well, it would be bad.”

“Why would Th- Agent Shan be brought to that cell?” Exhaustion and frustration had her nearly slipping over Theron’s name; no sense in letting the Supreme Commander of the Republic Military know she was on a first-name basis with one of their agents. (So very, *very* first-name basis …) Miranza shrugged before adding, “He’s a decent slicer and a reasonably competent spy, but I’m not sure what harm there could be in –“

“No!” Malcom interrupted her again, looking panicked. “Theron can’t go anywhere near there. He’s – it’s –“ He heaved a rather large sigh before saying, grudgingly, “There is a hidden arsenal on Belsavis, tucked away in a secret cell known only to a few. The maps that were stolen reveal the location, and the schematics detail the traps and layout of the cell. The arsenal is protected by a special lock keyed to the genetic identities of the team who designed it. They’re all dead except –“

“Oh, you’ve *got* to be fucking kidding me.” Now she knew why Malcom looked so familiar, and it wasn’t just because she had seen holos of him and read his rather extensive file. Beside her Vector hissed in surprise, no doubt reaching the exact same conclusion she had at the exact same time. “They’re all dead except for you. Theron Shan is your fucking son.”

“I –“ Malcom’s shoulders slumped even further, and now that she was looking for it Miranza could see the fear and worry on his face – fear and worry that had less to do with the possible exposure of a deadly weapon long thought vouchsafed against the galaxy, and more to do with the fact that his *child* was missing. (And wasn’t *that* an interesting, juicy detail? The head of the Jedi Order and the head of the Republic Military, and handsome poster-boy Theron was their bouncing baby boy? How had no one in Imperial Intelligence ever uncovered *that* tidbit before?) “Yes. Theron’s my son. These people who took him – whoever they are – will be able to use him to unlock the arsenal.”

Miranza glanced at Vector, seeing her own fears echoed on his face. She turned back to Malcom and let out a massive sigh.

“Bloody fucking hell.”

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: So, obviously, this was the scene inspired by Miri1984’s “Bite the Hand” interaction between Sith Warrior Vopenir and Theron Shan’s father Jace Malcom. I am always a huge fan of “meeting the in-laws” scenes – the more awkward the better, and there is something delightful to me about the idea of two people meeting to discuss someone they both care about, without revealing the nature of their relationship to the other person involved. Hence, this. I don’t think Jace would be likely to get along with my OC, unfortunately. Vopenir is way more charming than Miranza.
Chapter Six

In spite of all of his escapades and service to the Republic, Theron had never once been to Belsavis. He knew of the prison planet’s existence – an existence kept secret even from the majority of the loyal citizens of the Republic – but in all of his time working for the SIS he had never had cause to travel there. It was, he reflected, a surprisingly beautiful planet with a remarkably diverse ecosystem, and the fact that it had been turned into a prison rather than, say, some kind of resort planet like Makeb was a damned shame. Tourists could have spent their time alternating between skiing the snow-capped mountains and luxuriating in one of the many heated mineral pools. Some Hutt had really dropped the ball on that one.

The journey to Belsavis from Nar Shaddaa had turned out to be surprisingly peaceful for Theron. Given its status as a hidden, top-secret prison facility, Belsavis was a difficult planet to access, and as a result Samar had commissioned a smuggler’s ship and crew for the trip. Amrielle was not to be present for this operation; so far as Theron had been able to tell the Nautolan woman didn’t work in the field, preferring to leave the dirty work up to Samar, Urjax and the others. Samar arranged for himself and his remaining ‘team’ to be taken on as part of the smuggler’s crew – Theron included – and had upped Theron’s conditioning to ensure there was no way the Republic agent could make any escape attempts or in any way interfere with the operation. Otherwise, the nature of their guises as crew meant that Samar was just another flunky working under the captain and his men, and thus didn’t warrant his own private quarters. Therefore, Samar was forced to bunk in the crew berths just like everyone else – which meant Theron, too, had his own berth, and Samar had to keep his hands to himself for the most part. Of course the man found excuses to get Theron alone, but Theron was quite adept at avoiding notice and keeping out of Samar’s way, and for the first time in weeks he slept alone.

He wouldn’t have said that he slept well, but it was the best sleep he’d had in weeks.

Samar’s team parted ways with the smugglers once they reached Belsavis, their little ship landing precariously in a tiny field out in the middle of the recreation yard. Thanks to the chaos on the planet – apparently there was some kind of prisoner riot – they were able to land without attracting undo attention, and Urjax and Adan unloaded their gear and then they were off.

If he squinted Theron could pretend this was just another field assignment. Freed from the confines of Samar’s apartment on Nar Shaddaa, dressed in combat gear and carrying the tools necessary for breaking into high-security prison wards, it was possible to imagine Samar and the others weren’t present – or were someone else, such as other SIS agents – and that this was just a high-stakes op for the Republic. He was mostly left to his own devices, the conditioning ensuring he wouldn’t wander off on his own or take advantage of his limited freedom, and the fresh air and activity were invigorating. Even when they camped at night Theron was left unmolested, able to sleep alone on his own pallet, protected from Samar’s attentions by the presence of Urjax and Adan as well as by the fact that Samar was simply too busy to bother with him.

Freed from near-constant fear and misery, Theron could feel his old self returning. He couldn’t help but be aware of the conditioning that bound him, preventing him from taking action, but he was able to begin to work around it, and whatever else he was, Theron Shan was an intelligence operative. If he couldn’t break the conditioning and free himself, he could at least gather as much intel as possible...
in the hopes that when he was free he would be able to use that intel to destroy his captors. In a way it was not unlike his time on Rishi, when Lana Beniko had arranged for him to be captured and tortured by the Revanites so that he could learn their plans: an unpleasant experience he had little choice in, but one where his training and skill could hopefully be of use.

As it turned out, Samar was like most of the megalomaniacs Theron had dealt with in his time: he was dying to talk about himself and his fiendish plans. Theron just had to show a little interest.

“Your girlfriend Legate really set us back,” Samar complained one night as they sat around the campfire, eating field rations. Theron had quickly discovered that Samar assumed every one of the agents involved in searching for Theron was also, in some way, sleeping with him or otherwise romantically connected to him, and insisted upon referring to them all as ‘your girlfriend Beniko’ or ‘your boyfriend Balkar’ – including the two whose names Theron didn’t even know. He had also discovered that Samar harboured an intense grudge against Miranza, who he seemed to blame for every one of his past failings; he never referred to her by her given name (if, indeed, ‘Miranza Gerrick’ was her real name – all Theron knew was that it was the name she had given him), but instead called her Legate or ‘your girlfriend, that bitch cipher agent.’ He was nothing if not consistent.

“Taking out Hunter and most of our leadership – that was a real pain in the ass, handsome,” the man continued, stabbing at the air with his fork. “She destroyed our base of operations, stole all our top-secret research – it took us forever to recover from all of that. But we did recover, of course, and now we’re better than ever.”

Theron considered that somewhat debatable, but prudence kept him from commenting. He was of two minds on the subject of Miranza, at least as it related to Samar and the rest of his cronies. On the one hand Theron was deeply troubled by the realization that her involvement in the search for him had put her back on their radar, and the idea that he was endangering her – worse, that he might be used to hurt her directly – was intensely upsetting. On the other hand, Samar’s obvious hatred of her meant that he might become clumsy in dealing with her; he would almost certainly let his vendetta against her get in the way of doing the smart, calculated thing, and Samar getting sloppy would be an advantage Theron might be able to use. While he wasn’t entirely certain how he felt about the former cipher agent, Theron didn’t want to see her come to harm – but there was no denying that Miranza was competent, talented and exceedingly dangerous in her own right. She was hardly the helpless damsel in need of his rescue – if anything she would be the one rescuing him. It went a bit against the grain for Theron to accept that, however, but in this case he was willing to branch out and try something new.

“The Republic and the Empire have grown soft and weak,” Samar ranted, switching to his other favourite topic. “They rely too much on powerful Force users, and let the damned Jedi and Sith walk all over them, when us regular people – the ones not entrenched in the Force – should be the ones running the show. Wipe them both out, and then we can rise up to take our rightful place.”

How Samar and his cronies intended to wipe out the Republic and Empire was a subject Samar remained infuriatingly tight-lipped on, in spite of Theron’s questioning, but it clearly involved whatever was locked up on Belsavis – Theron knew that much. He knew, too, that Samar needed him to be able to access it; Adan, the large Twi’lek enforcer, had let slip that Samar needed Theron alive, which was also useful information to have. It gave Theron a little room to push – as much as the brainwashing would permit – knowing that Samar couldn’t afford to have him killed just yet. Granted he didn’t know what they needed him for, so he didn’t want to make himself too much of a nuisance – there was a world of difference between “alive and fully functional” and “dead as a doornail,” and he was keen to stay on the living and relatively undamaged end of that spectrum.
Samar’s rant began to wind down; Theron only half-listened, having heard his complaints about the Republic, the Empire, Force-users and Miranza in detail already and knowing Samar had neither interest in nor need for his input. He finished his field rations, then went and set down his sleeping pad between the campfire and the motion sensors that would alert the camp if anyone or anything got too close. He didn’t bother to undress or even remove his boots – he wanted to be prepared in the event of a late-night attack – but instead simply lay down on the pad and closed his eyes. Samar had implied that they would be breaching the high-security ward that was their destination sometime tomorrow, which meant Theron wanted to get as close to a full night’s rest as he could. He didn’t know what was going to be expected of him, but given everything else he had already been through he didn’t imagine it would be particularly pleasant.

Somewhere in the distance a mookla screamed as it closed in on its prey. Theron was asleep before the creature’s hunt concluded.

O o O o O

It was amazing how much easier it was to get anywhere on Belsavis if you had Republic backing. The last time she had been on the prison planet, Miranza had been forced to shuttle down from the orbital station and then essentially fight her way through the various wards until finally reaching her target. That had been where she had learned about the shadowy organization responsible for manipulating things behind the scenes: the Star Cabal. After finally breaking free of her conditioning on Quesh, Belsavis ranked second in the list of places that were both traumatic and transformative for her. She would have been lying if she had said she liked the planet, but her memories of the place were not entirely bad. At least it was kind of pretty.

Jonas Balkar pulled some strings, and if Miranza was any judge she suspected that Supreme Commander Jace Malcom had something to do with it as well, his connections enabling their team to land on Belsavis without interference. Shaelyss and Tavrao were to remain with the Republic forces, providing operational support, while Miranza, Vector, Balkar and Lana headed into the maximum security wing. If anyone was surprised or concerned by the presence of three Imperials in their midst, no one said anything.

Miranza remembered the area from her last visit to Belsavis, and was unsurprised to see that the Republic had not yet managed to regain control over the rioting prisons. Between the efforts of the Imperial Prison Break Initiative and the Esh-kha prisoners in the deeper tombs, it would take more than a few years to get the prisoners and wards back under control – especially given that Belsavis was still little more than a dirty secret that the Republic couldn’t afford to shine a spotlight on by bringing in more support. Say what you will about Imperial justice, at least executing criminals ensured they wouldn’t continue to be a problem.

Then, remembering Watcher X and Shadow Town – imprisonment being her own likely fate if the Empire ever decided they were done using her and realized that the Castellan restraints were no longer effective on her – Miranza gave a small shudder.

Thinking about the Castellan restraints – the brainwashing program she had been subjected to by Imperial Intelligence, only for those codes that controlled her ending up in the hands of Hunter and Ardun Kothe – made Miranza think about Theron Shan and what she had seen of him on the holo footage. *Had* he been brainwashed? Was that what she had witnessed? He hadn’t appeared to be under any duress when he and his associates broke into the vault under Club Vertica, but then *she* hadn’t seemed any different under the conditioning, either. Vector had commented that he could see a strangeness in her aura during the time she was conditioned, but even that hadn’t been enough for him to realize just exactly how wrong she was. She wondered what Vector would see in Theron’s aura, when and if they caught up to the SIS agent.
Of course, if Theron was brainwashed there was absolutely no reason to assume it was under the same circumstances as her. The Castellan restraints might have been an invention of Imperial Intelligence, but there were other methods to accomplish the same thing – or as near to it as was to make no difference. Miranza could think of a variety of drugs and serums that would provide a similar effect, and even just good old-fashioned torture could accomplish the task, given sufficient time and pressure. Or it was possible that Theron’s captors – if that’s what they were – had some other way of coercing his compliance. Perhaps they were holding a loved one captive, or blackmailing him? Miranza knew that she was automatically assuming brainwashing and Castellan restraints because that was what she had been subjected to, but her own experiences were certainly not a barometric of the norm.

Or maybe Theron wasn’t brainwashed or blackmailed or coerced. Maybe he had turned his back on the Republic and made a break for it. Maybe he was acting entirely under his own volition.

Maybe. But from what little Miranza knew of him – and she could admit that, outside of what he had told her of himself and what she had gleaned from the files Intelligence had on him, she didn’t necessarily know him all that well – it seemed unlikely that he would choose to abandon the Republic and go rogue. He was a patriot in much the same way that she was, albeit patriotic towards decidedly different governments, and in spite of the things his own government had done to him over the years – most recently, disavowing him after Manaan – he remained as loyal to the Republic as ever. And she could relate: the Empire had done equally shifty things to her, and yet she still served faithfully. Perhaps Jedi training had the same indoctrination effects as Imperial Intelligence training; Miranza suspected they had both started at roughly the same age. (Which was to say, too damned young.)

Vector’s fingers brushed over the back of her hand, drawing her back to herself. They had slipped in past the security system outside the max-sec wing – a far easier task now that SCORPIO was no longer tied into Belsavis security – and were making their way through the tomb Jace Malcom had identified as the hiding place for the arsenal. She cast a tight smile in her husband’s direction, seeing the concerned look on his face, and pushed her hand back against his fingers in what she hoped was a reassuring manner.

“You do worry us sometimes, beloved,” he commented quietly. They had all taken to speaking in near-whispers inside the tombs – not out of fear of being detected (of the four of them, only Miranza was particularly adept at sneaking around, and consequently stealth was not a part of their mission parameters), but in much the same way that people spoke softly in temples and mausoleums, almost a reverential silence.

The tombs on Belsavis were ancient, dating back to the Rakata Empire, and that immense sense of age and history had overwhelmed Miranza the last time she had been on the planet. It was no less impressive now, for all that she would have considered herself desensitized to the experience. Black stone walls rose up around her, their surface etched with carvings depicting scenes from legends and mythology she had never learned, and there was a quality to the stone that seemed to absorb the light, making the area dimmer than it should have been and rendering their torches less effective. Vector, ever the anthropologist, had been fascinated by the carvings; were it not for the urgency of their task Miranza had no doubt her husband would be puttering about with a holo-recorder and datapad, making note of everything he saw.

“You only sometimes?” she teased, forcing levity into her voice. She walked with her blaster rifle at the ready, just as he carried his electrostaff in both hands; Balkar and Lana were likewise armed, the four of them expecting to meet resistance.

“Hmm, no, we suppose it would be best to say you worry us most of the time. But sometimes you
are asleep,” Vector replied, an answering smile tugging at his lips.

She opened her mouth but her sarcastic reply was cut off short by a burst of blaster-fire from down the hallway. Balkar and Lana dove for cover on opposite sides of the hall, both of them crouching behind large stone plinths that had at one time held some sort of statuary. Vector stood his ground, activating the shield generator at his belt, while Miranza fired up her own stealth generator and faded from view.

As Balkar used his blasters to provide cover fire and Lana let forth some bolts of lightning, Vector took off down the hall at a brisk pace, staff raised as he charged their enemies. Miranza, hidden from view, followed close behind her husband and was there when he barreled into a stocky Zabrak – clad in the standard-issue jumpsuit of a prisoner – and began swinging. She used Vector’s charge as a distraction to cover her own movements, and easily slipped in behind the cluster of prisoners.

Miranza slashed out with her vibroknife, her stealth field disappearing as she connected with her enemy. Her blade caught the prisoner under the ribs, slipping in through a gap in his paltry armour, and he went down with a startled cry. Beside her Vector was a blur of motion, his staff flipping through the air as he moved from one opponent to the next, doing his best to draw their fire. He managed to block most of their attacks, but at least one prisoner landed a hit on him and he barely had time to let out a grunt of pain before Miranza sent her kolto probe towards him, gentle sprays of kolto splashing over the minor blaster wound.

As fights went it was a relatively minor skirmish; Miranza and her allies were better trained and better geared than the Belsavis prisoners. Once it was over she counted seven assailants, all male, of varying species. A motley crew if there ever was one.

“At least they weren’t Esh-kha,” Miranza said in an undertone to Vector. He nodded, grimacing.

“What’s an Esh-kha?” Balkar asked, tucking his blasters back in their holsters at his hips.

“Agents?” Lana’s voice echoed from further down the hallway, past the dead prisoners. She was bent over another body, using her lightsaber as a torch to illuminate it. Miranza and Vector hurried to join her, Balkar not far behind. “Did any of you kill this man?”

Miranza looked down at the dead Twi’lek, frowning. The man lay face-down on the ground, charred marks on his back evidence of blaster-burns. He wasn’t dressed in the plain jumpsuit that the other prisoners wore; instead, he wore black combat gear that was strangely familiar to her. Vector hesitated a moment, then knelt and carefully turned the body over.

She recognized him. It was the Twi’lek who had accompanied Theron Shan into the vault under Club Vertica.

O o O o O

Theron stumbled, prevented from falling only by Samar’s arm around his waist, holding him upright. As much as he loathed the contact it was necessary; the last fight had cost them Adan and had resulted in Theron getting hit by blaster-fire. He hadn’t had the opportunity to inspect the wound but it felt like his ankle was charred down to the bone. The loss of Adan came as something of a pleasant surprise to Theron – one less person who could activate his keyword and force him to obey – but Urjax and Samar were unfortunately uninjured.

More’s the pity.

They were deep in the high security ward, in what looked to Theron like some kind of underground
temple complex the likes of which he had never seen before. The walls were carved into the mountain itself, black stone rising up on all sides, etched with strange images and creatures pulled from legends Theron had never heard of. They had seen some of the creatures, however: oddly bovine monstrosities that walked on their hind legs and were heavily armed – and incredibly hostile. They had managed to avoid the creatures, though, but there were plenty of other dangers for them to run afoul of, including some convicts who had chosen to make the caverns into their hideout. It was the criminals who had taken out Adan and shot Theron.

It felt like they had been running – or limping, in Theron’s case – for hours, but they finally came to the end of the tunnel. Instead of carved black rock, the three of them came to a stop in front of a wall made of durasteel plating, with a set of heavy double doors and a security terminal built into the side. The doors and terminal were liberally coated in dust, but Theron could see lights flickering, revealing that whatever this place was, it still had power.

Samar pulled away from Theron, guiding him to lean up against the wall while he consulted the datapad he kept in his belt pouch. He had been glued to the datapad their entire way in, and Theron recognized it as one of the many things that had been taken from the safety deposit box they had stolen from the bank vaults at Club Vertica. He suspected it contained the schematics and layout of the ward they were now in, but Samar wouldn’t let Theron look at it, telling him it was none of his business, that he was operating on a “need to know” basis. (Theron discovered it was so much more annoying when those words came from someone else’s lips, rather than his own, and offered up a mental apology to everyone he had ever uttered the phrase to.)

Theron felt the cool stone against his back and tried to ignore his ankle’s intense throbbing. A brief glance down – all he was willing to spare himself, since he didn’t have the means to treat the wound no matter how bad it was – revealed heavy singe marks across his black boot, but the skin wasn’t exposed and he couldn’t see blood, so he had to hope it wasn’t as bad as it felt.

“All right, handsome, you’re on deck,” Samar called, motioning for Theron to join him beside the security terminal. Not wanting it to be turned into an order, Theron limped over to him, waiting to be told what was expected of him. Samar gestured at the terminal, ordering him to slice the security to get them past the doors.

He had to clear the dust away first before he could even see the interface, but once Theron had cleaned the panels up enough to make the keys visible he realized he was looking at an older model Republic security system, something that was maybe about twenty or thirty years old – certainly not what he had expected, given the ancientness of the cavern around them. The encryption was outdated but still fairly complicated, and it put him in mind of military installations he had sliced into in the past. He wondered if they were breaking into another prison ward, perhaps one that was better hidden than the rest. After a few minutes of hurried typing he successfully sliced the interface; a string of lights shifted colour from red to yellow to green, and then there was a resonant hum from deep within the mechanism of the door. An audible click and the double doors began to slowly recede into the wall, letting out a loud grating sound as neglected metal plates ground against each other.

As the doors opened there were a series of loud clicks and lights began to flicker on in the space beyond, illuminating a massive room bigger than any enclosed space Theron had ever seen before in his life, the sort of open area that spaceships and space stations were built in. The doors opened onto a wide platform that led to a surprisingly slender bridge arching across a deep natural chasm. On the other side of the bridge – several hundred feet away – Theron could see another platform, with another set of doors barricaded by another security terminal.

Samar urged him forward with a rough shove, heedless of Theron’s injured ankle. Now that they
were apparently getting close to their prize – whatever that would turn out to be – Samar’s patience was wearing thin. Theron moved before he could be shoved again, ignoring the pain in his ankle and the sudden drop in his stomach as he approached the bridge. He didn’t consider himself to be afraid of heights, but the chasm underneath the bridge was so deep it was impossible to see the bottom and so wide it couldn’t be crossed without the bridge. The room was hewn out of the mountain, only the entrances made of durasteel, and the air was cold and damp. Given what little Theron knew of Belsavis he expected to see lava when he peered over the edge and looked down, but all he saw was darkness, and the wind that rustled through his hair was almost bitterly cold.

He clutched onto the railing, using it as much to help take his weight off his bad leg as it was a means of steadying himself against the almost overwhelming vertigo that threatened him as he began to cross the bridge. Samar and Urjax followed close behind in single file, the big Houk issuing a steady stream of curses the entire way. The walk seemed to take forever – much to Urjax’s obvious displeasure – and every now and again they had to pause as the slender bridge began to shake, whether from a sudden gust of wind or from their own movements. They froze, waiting for the shaking to die down, then continued, slowly, all three men desperately gripping hold of the railing.

Once on the other side Samar marched Theron over to the security panel, all but shoving the agent’s face against the console. Theron again had to wipe away decades’ worth of dust and grime before he could see the panel well enough to try to slice it, but once he did he saw the same outdated Republic tech and he set to work slicing it. While he worked Samar leaned up against the wall, taking out his datapad again, and Urjax went to peer down over the edge. Theron glanced over at the Houk in time to see him lean over and spit into the chasm.

The blaster bolt hit Urjax square in the head. The Houk didn’t even have time to cry out before he was dead, his body toppling forward into the abyss. Another bolt hit the terminal in front of Theron, sending up sparks that blinded him and had him throwing his hands up to protect his face; he heard, but couldn’t see, Samar returning fire.

As his vision cleared he had time to see Jonas Balkar standing on the opposite side of the bridge, blasters in hand, with Lana Beniko standing beside him getting ready to toss lightning in their direction. Then Samar was racing forward to slam his hand against a panel on the side of the bridge, causing the bridge to collapse just as Jonas was about to step foot on it. The SIS agent stumbled, losing his balance as momentum propelled him forward, but then Vector Hyllus was there beside him, grabbing Jonas by the coat and hauling him backwards before he could fall into the pit.

Theron looked around, frantic. *If Vector was here, then where was –*

The edge of a vibroknife dug into Theron’s throat and he heard the fizzle of a stealth generator switching off as Miranza pressed in close behind him. *Ah, there she is.*

“Drop the gun, asshole!” she bellowed, as Samar brought his blasters to bear on her. He didn’t fire, not with Theron acting as a shield between them, but Theron could see the fury in his gaze and knew the man was sorely tempted.

“Come on, now, sweetheart,” Samar said, his tone cajoling even as the words were ground out through gritted teeth. He didn’t lower his blaster, and Theron could see that his hand shook just a little. Rage or fear? Theron couldn’t tell, although fury was the only expression on Samar’s face. “You didn’t come all this way just to kill your boyfriend, did you?”

“Sorry, Theron,” Miranza murmured, her breath warm on his ear. “We can’t let you get into that vault.”

He felt the knife dig in a bit more deeply, enough to break the skin, but rather than fear Theron felt a
sharp pang of relief – not a rescue, perhaps, but at least an end to all of this. Across the chasm he could see Balkar still trying to find some way to get a shot in on Samar, who was using the edge of the door frame as cover, while both Lana and Vector were obviously searching for a way to get across.

Then Samar spoke again.

“Keyword: atychiphobia,” he said, and Theron immediately tensed up even as he felt his mind going blank, shifting into that hated fallow state where he was forced to accept commands. “Kill her.”

Theron was unarmed, injured, with a knife to his throat. Miranza was armed, armoured and the one holding the knife. Even so, she froze the instant Samar began speaking, going so tense against Theron that it felt like she had turned to stone. And Theron wasn’t frozen. He was compelled to act.

He grabbed Miranza’s wrist, yanking it savagely, his thumb digging into the pressure point to force her to drop the blade. As he disarmed her, he shifted, turning so that he was facing her, slamming her back against the security panel. Her blue eyes went wide with shock and pain, but instincts and training had her in motion right away, lashing out at him with a vicious kick to his wounded leg. He cried out, almost going down, but managed to stay upright – much to his own dismay. Size and strength were on his side: he slammed into her again, driving his elbow into her midsection just as the back of her head connected with the wall behind her. Stunned, Miranza put up no resistance as Theron’s hands wrapped around her throat. He squeezed, his thumbs pressing down on her carotid arteries, her pulse fluttering wildly under his fingertips, bile rising up in his throat as he felt her start to go limp.

Vector’s voice rose up in an anguished cry that echoed across the chasm. Theron was screaming too – but only inside his own mind.

His conditioning wouldn’t let him scream out loud.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: This chapter kicked my ass. I struggled with it for a while -- set it aside, worked on something else, poked at it, set it aside, came back -- and while I'm not happy with it, I need to move past it to get to the stuff I am happy with.
Chapter Seven

Onomatophobia. So like Imperial Intelligence to make her keyword be a word that means “fear of a word.” So like them to make her fear that word.

A significant part of spycraft involved filling time: time spent waiting in caf shops and cantinas for assets or targets to make an appearance, time spent hidden waiting for an opening to strike in, time spent waiting for an assignment or another piece of intel or just plain waiting. Good Intelligence operatives learned to fill the time, picking up hobbies that gave you reasons to be where you were while at the same time giving you something to occupy your idle hands. Miranza knew operatives who knit, some who doodled, others who took up bird watching or astronomy. For her it was crossword puzzles, a natural extension of the love of reading she had demonstrated as a young child in the training centre. An interest in academia and trivia was useful for a spy – being able to pull a random fact out of the air could help her make a connection others might have missed – and her love of books had been encouraged, as had her love of crossword puzzles. She spoke over a dozen languages, and crosswords helped her broaden her linguistic skills. Besides that, no one looked twice at a woman sitting alone in a café, staring off into space (surreptitiously scanning for her target) while she worked on a puzzle.

As a result, Miranza had understood the meaning of her keyword the moment Ardun Kothe first uttered it so many years ago. And it was for the same reason – her love of crosswords and languages – that she knew exactly what Theron Shan’s keyword was. Atychiphobia: the fear of failure. Another cruel word to pin onto an Intelligence agent, when failure resulted not just in embarrassment or a loss of face, but the loss of life and the destruction of everything they were working to protect. Her failure had resulted in Eradication Day and a litany of screams that would haunt her nightmares until her death. She didn’t know what Theron’s failure would mean, but she was afraid she was going to find out.

Miranza felt a mixture of pleasant and unpleasant surprise at waking up. Pleasant, because she did wake up: when Theron had brought his hands to her throat and begun squeezing the life out of her she had been certain that this was the end, and honestly it was just such an Intelligence way for her to go, to die at the hands of a former lover, an expression of shock on her face. Unpleasant, because she was cold and alone and in pain.

She awakened lying face-down on a cold durasteel floor. She awakened gasping for air, heedless of how much pain that caused her poor damaged throat, too grateful to be able to breathe again to care that it hurt her to do so. But her throat did hurt: it seemed as though she could feel every single bruise left behind by Theron’s strong fingers, especially the twin spots where his thumbs had tried to crush down on her carotid arteries. Her throat hurt, as did the back of her head – she remembered hitting the wall once (or was it twice?) – and her left wrist, which bore the marks of Theron’s hand. She was also stiff and sore from lying on the ground, which frankly had more to do with the fact that she was no longer in her twenties than it had to do with any other injuries she might have taken. Her younger self could have slept on a frozen slab of rock with few ill effects, but you couldn’t propel yourself from one catastrophe to the next without your body taking a beating over the years.
Slowly and cautiously she pushed herself into a sitting position, forced to put most of her weight onto her right hand so that she could cradle her left to her chest. She didn’t think any bones were broken but her injured hand wouldn’t support her; how fortunate that Intelligence had trained her to be more or less ambidextrous, just in case of such an emergency.

She sat up, head resting gingerly against the durasteel wall, and surveyed her surroundings with an air of detachment. She had been imprisoned before. This cell – small, cramped, with durasteel walls and floor and metal bars for a door – was no different from the many other cells she had been in. She took in the fact that she was naked with mild amusement; as psychological tactics went it was a sound one – most people equated nudity with vulnerability, and the added sense of prurient shame and embarrassment were no doubt meant to be demoralizing. Most people weren’t Imperial agents, however, groomed from early childhood to be a weapon, her body just another tool in her arsenal. Miranza knew what she looked like – her fitness and attractiveness were just as much a part of her cache as her skills as a medic or her seemingly endless knowledge of trivia – and if anyone thought she couldn’t use her nakedness to her own advantage … well, they didn’t know her very well, did they?

Somewhere down the hall outside her cell she heard a door open, and then footsteps – two sets, one tread heavy enough that she suspected it belonged to a man, the other almost silent, as if the owner was adept at going unnoticed. She was unsurprised by the two men who came to stand outside her cell: the auburn-haired man she had seen in the holo-recordings of the vault theft, the one who had used Theron’s keyword and ordered him to kill her, and Theron Shan himself. She wondered if Theron even knew how quiet he was, or if, like her, moving silently was just such a natural part of who he was that it was something he did without thinking.

Theron looked like hell. In fact, he looked worse than she felt, and she felt pretty damned awful. The other man was gloating, dark eyes lit with cruel delight as he smirked down at her. He wore a business suit, exquisitely tailored to fit his lean frame, his shoes polished to a high shine. He looked every inch the businessman but he moved like a trained killer and held himself like a king waiting for his tribute. Theron, on the other hand, was clad in loose-fitting black pants and a fitted button-up shirt, the sleeves rolled up almost to his elbows, and his face was so perfectly blank and expressionless that he could have been a statue or a corpse. There was redness around his implants and tight lines of pain and anger around his eyes and mouth.

This was the part where she was supposed to cower and cringingly ask what they intended to do with her, where she was supposed to try to cover her nakedness and hang her head in shame and plead for them not to hurt her. Miranza did none of those things. Instead, she rested her arms lightly on her raised knees, leaning back against the wall with an insouciance she did not feel, and looked up at the two men with a disinterested air.

“You’re awake!” the brown-eyed man said with forced cheerfulness, beaming down at her. “We were afraid Theron had gone too far and killed you, after I’d had a change of heart and called him off you.” He crouched down in front of the bars, putting himself almost at eye-level with her, and the gaze that roamed her body was distinctly possessive. “I admit, Legate, I was pretty angry over you threatening to kill Theron. I let my feelings get in the way, but then I thought to myself, gosh, there’s so many other things I could do to punish you instead of just making Theron here kill you. And besides, what’s better than one spy brainwashed into doing whatever I want him to do? Two brainwashed spies!”

Miranza felt a shiver of fear course through her body but managed to keep her terror off her face. He couldn’t do it. He didn’t know that when she had broken the Castellan restraints she had reprogrammed herself to be immune to all further brainwashing attempts. He couldn’t do to her what
he had done to Theron. The fear she felt was instinctive, residual, a fear of being trapped in that old nightmare of being made to jump to Hunter’s commands, of having her body at the beck and call of someone else while her mind fought to rebel. It couldn’t happen again.

Still, no reason for him to know that.

She let a flicker of fear show on her face before steeling her expression. She saw the way his eyes lit up and knew that he had seen it. Let him think she was afraid of being brainwashed again. Let him try it. She could work with this.

“I’m going to have Theron escort you to the operating theatre,” the man said, standing up again and backing away from the cell doors. He gave a slight wave to someone she couldn’t see, and then she heard the mechanical clunk of the door lock being disengaged, saw the metal bars begin to recede into the walls beside them. The man looked down at her, his expression hard. “You’re not going to fight. If you give us any trouble, Theron here will be the one to punish you while I watch.”

Miranza glanced at Theron. His face was empty, set in stone, but she thought she could feel the anguish radiating off of him. He stepped into the cell and bent down to grab her arm. The urge to resist – to fight back – was strong, but she let him pull her to her feet. She wasn’t going to put him in a position where he would have to hurt her, and she could see from the triumphant look on the other man’s face that he knew this would be her response and it amused the hell out of him. There was no win in this for her: either she resisted and the man made Theron punish her – and oh, stars, there were a lot of horrific things that bastard could make Theron do by way of punishment – or she went along with it and let him know he had an advantage over her, that threatening Theron would gain her compliance.

She would comply – for now – and once that smug bastard’s guard was down, she was going to slit his fucking throat.

O o O o O

Miranza had no memories of the first time she was subjected to Castellan restraints.

She knew it had happened sometime in the wake of Eradication Day, when she had gone to Imperial Intelligence for her post-mission debriefing and medical exam, taking her superiors up on the offer of counselling like the good little agent she had been. (Now the only person she trusted to counsel her was her husband. Vector would never in a million years take advantage of the faith she placed in him.) Either her memories of the programming had been wiped while the restraints were set in place or she had been sedated for the actual procedure. She had always assumed, however, that the process was essentially the same as what she had experienced on Quesh: the serum would be injected into her veins, she would spend a few days or weeks waiting for it to reprogram her neural pathways, and then once the serum took effect the conditioning would be set. She had assumed it was relatively painless.

She had assumed incorrectly.

Theron had led her into the operating theatre, his hand locked onto her uninjured right arm in a vise-like grip. She was made to lie down on a surgical table, sterile durasteel cool under her bare back, and then Theron was ordered to lock the restraints into place: one set of thin metal bands across her chest, another over her thighs, and then her wrists and ankles bound as well. A final strap was pulled over her forehead, holding her head in place, and when Theron looked down at her the hopeless expression on his face felt like a knife stabbing in her heart.

After that, there was no sedation, no anaesthetic. The doctor – a Neimoidian who reminded her of
Doctor Proh’ven on Nar Shaddaa – stood over her, vibroscalpel in hand, and when he began to cut into her skull she felt it every step of the way.

She could add “brain surgery while conscious” to her ever-expanding list of nightmares.

When it was over, after Doctor Arjin closed her up and treated her injuries and then did something to remove the incision marks, Theron was the one who helped her up again, and this time his hands felt like ice when he touched her. He led her out of the operating suite and she did her very best to ignore the splatters of blood and other organic matter on the floor and then she was standing, naked and shivering, in front of the auburn-haired man and a Nautolan woman she did not recognize. Theron released her and went to stand at parade rest beside the man, his eyes fixed on the floor as if he could will it to open up underneath him and swallow him whole.

The litany of tests the man and woman put her through were familiar: sit, jump, touch your nose, aim this rifle. This time around, however, Miranza did these things of her own volition, and it was a struggle for her to keep her triumph off her face as she realized that this time the restraints had not taken hold – that this time she was free, her immunity to brainwashing intact, and the only thing stopping her from pulling the trigger and shooting the man in his smug face was the knowledge that doing so would destroy any advantage she might have.

They had given her the same fucking keyword Intelligence had given her. Of course they had.

She allowed herself to smile in the shower, warm water coursing down over her face as she scrubbed the worst of the blood and muck off her skin.

Afterwards she dressed herself in the clothing provided – loose pants that hung low on her hips and a V-necked short-sleeved shirt – and combed the tangles out of her hair. The face in the mirror was reassuringly familiar and she used that time to school her features into a resolute mask, drawing on old memories of her time under the Castellan restraints to create the illusion that she was conditioned once again.

Theron was the one who escorted her out of the ‘fresher, his eyes zeroing in on the parts of her body that he had injured, and there was no mistaking the relief on his face when he saw that the bruises were gone from her neck and wrist. She tried to let her acceptance and understanding show on her own face but he avoided meeting her gaze, guilt and misery radiating off of him.

The refresher was located in a private suite; she had been rushed through the room following her surgery and hadn’t had time to take in her surroundings. She did so now, noting the lack of exits – one door led out of the suite but there were no other doors or window that she could see. The suite was large and luxuriously appointed, with plush carpeting and fixtures that would not have looked out of place on Alderaan. There was a table set with four chairs, a desk and a private holo-terminal, and off on the other side of the room she could see a king-sized bed covered in throw pillows.

The auburn-haired man stood next to the bed, his suit jacket draped over a nearby chair, his hands in the process of unbuttoning his shirt. He watched Miranza and Theron with hungry, avid eyes, and she found herself reconsidering her decision to go along with all of this until she found an avenue of escape. Once he finished unbuttoning his shirt he went and repositioned the chair so that it was facing the bed, then sat down on it, lounging back as if settling in to watch his favourite holo-dramas.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” he said, turning to speak to them over his shoulder, gesturing with one hand towards the bed. “I like to watch almost as much as I like to do. The two of you are going to perform for me. Make it good, and maybe all I’ll do tonight will be watch.”

Miranza glanced uncertainly at Theron. The grim set of his jaw and hopeless look in his eyes were
all the confirmation she needed of what the other man was suggesting, but she had no intentions of making this easy on the bastard. She folded her arms across her chest, glaring at the man.

“What, you want us to dance for you?” she scoffed, tone filled with contempt. “Sing a little song?”

He was on his feet in a flash, darting towards her, his hands closing on the front of her shirt. Theron let out a startled, angry shout but made no effort to interfere, while Miranza, hampered by the need to pretend that she was also conditioned, had to war with her own instincts to fight back. The man was strong – or anger lent him strength – but she suspected that if she were to push back, she would win. He shoved her backwards into the bed, the back of her legs bumping up against the mattress and momentum causing her to lose her balance. She could have stopped her fall but she chose not to, letting the man think he had won their confrontation.

“You know exactly what I mean,” he snarled at her, leaning down so that his face was inches from her own. He straightened, brushing his hands down the front of his opened shirt as if smoothing imaginary wrinkles out of the fabric, then turned to Theron. “Go on, now, lover-boy. Give me a show.”

Theron moved forward uncertainly, frowning down at Miranza. The other man hadn’t used their keywords; he seemed to expect that he would simply be obeyed, unconditionally. The rebellious part of Miranza – admittedly a fairly large part of her, a part that had grown exponentially since discovering that Imperial Intelligence had had her brainwashed and then lost the kriffing keywords to Republic agents – wanted to fight back until he forced her to act (or at least pretend that she was forced). But the part of her that remembered, quite vividly, what it felt like to be trapped under the hold of the Castellan restraints didn’t want to put Theron through that. She could choose to act or to disobey, but he would be compelled the moment the keyword left that man’s lips, and that stripped all agency from him. Better to submit now, when it was their choice, than have that choice taken from him.

Seeing that the man’s eyes were on Theron, Miranza returned the Republic agent’s gaze, trying to express all the compassion and sympathy she felt for him – her understanding of the predicament he was in, her knowledge that none of this was his choice or his fault. He grimaced, closing his eyes, and gave a small half-nod, seeming to come to a decision. Drawing in close to her he bent down over the bed and brought his hands up to her face.

It took everything in Miranza not to flinch away when his hands came up -- the mental image of him strangling her earlier was too vivid in her memory. She held still as he cupped her face, then grabbed hold of his shirt and used it to draw him down to her. Pressed close she could feel him trembling; his hands on her face were ice-cold.

She flicked a glance at the other man and said, forcing herself to sound shy, “Could we get some mood music here? I mean, if you want us to perform for you?”

For a brief moment she thought he would refuse – that he’d get angry and come after her or Theron, or worse, invoke their keywords. But instead the man smirked a little and climbed out of his chair, moving towards the entertainment console.

Miranza pulled Theron to her in what she hoped appeared to be an amorous embrace, her mouth pressed close to his ear.

“What do you need to make this easier on yourself?” she asked him, her voice barely a whisper in his ear.

She felt him stiffen and he pulled away slightly, an expression of pain on his face. She pulled him
back, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Theron, trust me when I say I can handle this. Just tell me what you need.”

He was silent for a moment. Across the room the man was searching through the available music selection, trying to find something that suited his fancy. Miranza had to trust that she was speaking too quietly for him to hear, but she suspected that if he did hear anything suspicious he wouldn’t have the discipline to keep it to himself for long – he’d want to gloat and show off what he knew. Finally Theron nodded, his fingers tightening in her grip.

“I need for us to not be … us,” he said softly, sounding almost embarrassed by his request. “I don’t want this to be who we are.”

“It won’t be,” she assured him. She gave him a saucy smile, then suggested, “Sleazy cantina pickup?”

“I can do that.”

The two of them assumed their roles just as music started playing over the speakers, some kind of Huttese pop she had heard in a dance club on Dromund Kaas. It certainly wasn’t what she would have chosen to set the mood, but the man sauntered back to his chair and sat down again, looking pleased with himself. Miranza let the music wash over her and settled into the role of Sleazy Cantina Dancer #213, a persona she had used on numerous occasions and one that bore very little resemblance to her own normal state. It wasn’t a perfectly seamless shift – normally her partner was a target, a potential mark or asset, not a man she had feelings for and had already slept with – but she doubted their observer could tell the difference. Theron, for his part, had chosen to take on the position of the cantina-hopping flyboy, and the shift from the familiar – if slightly nervous and more-than-slightly guilty – Theron into a complete stranger was somewhat unsettling, but it helped her get into her own role better.

It didn’t surprise her that Theron would want to pretend to be someone else – that that was what would make this entire awful experience easier on him. He was a spy, after all; acting and roleplaying were just parts of the trade, and if you could pretend to be someone else then you could pretend that these terrible things were happening to that other person instead of yourself. Force knew, it was a tact Miranza had tried on more than one occasion herself. What did surprise her was how touched she felt by the realization that his main reasoning for this pretense was that he wanted to avoid soiling whatever it was they had between them – that he didn’t want to taint their previous experience with this terrible new one. She shouldn’t have cared this much about what some Republic spy thought about her – or about their time together.

And yet … she did. The time she had spent with Theron on Rishi and Yavin 4 hadn’t been entirely pleasant – not with fighting Revanites and him getting tortured and the Sith Emperor being completely insane – but her memories of her time with him were. Not just the sex, either (that had been good, but they’d both been tired and sore and off their game), but the time she’d spent just interacting with Theron: talking to him, joking, flirting, even patching him up (and she had been pleasantly surprised by how much it affected her to know that he trusted her enough to let her be the one to bandage him up post-torture, and then again following the grueling fight with Revan). And if Jonas Balkar and Lana Beniko had contacted her about any other missing agent – Republic or Imperial – she likely wouldn’t have even bothered to get involved. She would have said she was completely done with the SIS and that Sith Intelligence could go hang – she was a free agent now, she didn’t dance to anyone else’s tune. But Lana had said those magic words – “Theron Shan is missing” – and, like an idiot, she had raced off to the rescue.

She was getting soft in her old age.
A voice from nearby distracted her from her inner musings, calling her back to herself. The man was making no effort to hide his enjoyment of what she and Theron were doing: pants unbuttoned, hand rubbing over his crotch, hungry eyes on the two of them. Miranza swallowed her revulsion even as she felt Theron tense over her; she realized she hadn’t heard what the man had said, but that Theron had and, by his response, it wasn’t good.

“Don’t,” Theron growled, hazel eyes flashing, and it took Miranza a second to realize the snarl wasn’t directed at her.

The man chuckled, hand still moving at a leisurely pace, then said, “Keyword: atychiphobia – get rough with her.”

Miranza started to tell Theron that it would be okay, that she could take it, but the words died in her throat as he suddenly shifted his weight on top of her, using his thighs to pin her down. Gone was the seductive mask he had been wearing, replaced by something cold and empty as the keyword compelled him to obey. Theron’s hand flew up, connecting solidly with her cheek, the slap dazing her enough to make her own efforts to fight him off momentarily ineffectual. Then, to her abject horror, Theron brought both his hands up to her neck, wrapping his fingers around her throat just as he had back on Belsavis.

This time, however, as he leaned over her it wasn’t Theron’s face she saw.

It was Hunter’s – the masculine guise she had worn before that last interaction on the Star Chamber, that face she had used to taunt Miranza with.

Panic welled up within her, the terror of the moment being subsumed by the memory of her own nightmares.

That panic roared up, crashing around her, until it swallowed her whole.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Originally I had planned for the character of Samar to be gay, and for him to largely ignore Miranza (aside from the very obvious usefulness of having his own trained assassin/spy). My reasoning was that we had more than enough of women being raped in fiction (not to mention real life) and I didn’t particularly want to contribute to that trope – bad enough I was having Samar rape Theron, I didn’t need to add Miranza to the mix, too. (The idea of the horror of using the Castellan restraints to sexually abuse someone was born out of my own very visceral reaction to the character of Hunter. Even the big reveal at the end didn’t change how intensely that character upset me, how much of a ‘sexual predator’ vibe I got from her. I’m a woman and I’ve only ever played the IA storyline as a female character, so I don’t know whether that vibe is better or worse if you play as a man, but boy did Hunter ever creep me the fuck out.) My big concern with making Samar gay was that I didn’t want to feed into the “gay = sexual predator” stereotype, this belief that a lot of homophobic jerks seem to have that gay people exist solely to turn other people gay and/or prey on them. I decided that since my OT3 are all happily – and healthily – bisexual, it wouldn’t feed into the negative stereotype to have Samar also be bisexual. We have Theron Shan, Vector Hyllus and Miranza Gerrick to look to for models of healthy, consensual bisexuality, and Samar can be the bad guy that he’s supposed to be. Samar’s deal is that he’s too
small-minded to see beyond his own selfish pleasures: he’s got two top-tier agents working under his control (well, he doesn’t know Miranza isn’t conditioned), and all he can think to do with them is to fuck them.
Chapter Eight

The cockpit of the small shuttlecraft was quiet, with only the occasional beep or hum from one of the many instrument panels interrupting the silence. Jonas Balkar sat alone, slumped in the captain’s chair, an untouched cup of caf balanced precariously on the armrest. He was half dozing, half staring at the stars as the ship made its autopiloted journey back to Nar Shaddaa. If it weren’t for the presence of the two Imperials on board, Jonas would have been en route to Coruscant – empty-handed and dejected – but with Lana and the Joiner there it wouldn’t be safe to bring them along, much as Jonas was ready to head back home.

Lana had gone to lie down in the tiny, cramped crew quarters, no doubt to toss and turn rather than to actually sleep. Vector was … Actually, Jonas had no idea where Vector was, save that he had insisted the man leave the cockpit before his incessant pacing drove him insane. Not that he could blame Vector for being restless and anxious – it was his kriffing wife who had gone missing now, of course he was upset! – but sympathy didn’t alleviate Jonas’s irritation.

This whole kriffing operation was turning out to be a wash. Theron was still missing, the Star Cabal – if that’s who they were; Jonas had no way of knowing if this was just some made-up Imperial conspiracy, meant to throw him off the real threat – was still out there, and now Miranza had disappeared as well. And Jonas was pretty confident that their enemies had made off with the damned arsenal that they had been racing to protect, just to cap off the whole kriffing experience!

Jonas ran his hands through his short black hair, mussing it up even worse than it already was. He had filed his report with the SIS, knowing Director Trant had been expecting an update days ago, and he was afraid the next holo he received would include the directive to throw in the towel. Trant wasn’t Theron’s biggest fan to begin with, and Jonas had been operating on borrowed time the moment he brought Beniko and Gerrick into play. Nothing said “complex trust issues” like inviting Imperials along for the ride. But it would have been foolish to ignore the priceless resource the two women represented – to say nothing of Vector Hyllus, whose own efforts had been tireless and invaluable. On the surface of it the four of them were enemies, but Intelligence operatives had a tendency towards the pragmatic, and more often than not they were willing to work together when a greater threat presented itself. Lana and Theron had demonstrated that themselves back on Yavin 4 – and Miranza and her husband had been there to assist. As far as Jonas was concerned they were a team.

He had been running through the scene on Belsavis, going over it in his mind, tearing it apart. From the way Theron had talked about Miranza, Jonas would have sworn the other man had feelings for her. Complicated feelings, to be sure – but when the hell had Theron ever done anything that wasn’t complicated? (Admittedly, however, sleeping with a married Imperial agent ranked pretty highly on the list of incredibly stupid and dangerous things Theron Shan had done. And Jonas knew for a fact that it was an extensive list.) But back on Belsavis Theron had attacked Miranza – had thrown himself at her with all his might. Even from that great distance Jonas had been able to see that his friend had been actively trying to throttle the woman. Had been trying to murder her. What had she done? Why had Theron done it? What the ever-loving hell was going on?
He reached for his caf, wrinkling his nose as he realized it had grown cold hours ago, and was about to head for the tiny galley to fetch himself some more when a light on the console started flashing to indicate an incoming call. Jonas tensed, fully expecting the call to be from his boss, but it flashed as an unknown channel. Hesitating only briefly — there were only a few people who had access to the secured channels the SIS used on their shuttles, but it the call was from Director Trant then ignoring it meant he might not receive the order to abandon the search — he hit the button to accept the call.

Miranza Gerrick appeared on the screen in front of him, looking harried and tiny and decidedly the worse for wear — but, mercifully and perhaps most importantly, alive.

“Kriff, sweetheart, you look terrible,” he said, blinking in surprise at the image.

Miranza blinked back at him, but not in surprise — more like annoyance. She did look terrible, however: while the holo-terminal didn’t have the best imaging system, he could still see the dark bruises and swelling around one eye, her lip was split and puffy, and if he wasn’t mistaken there were more bruises around her neck. Imperials were so damned pale — the bruises stood out like a kath-hound’s balls.

Did Theron do that to her? he wondered, frowning, but kept the question to himself. He didn’t need to know right now. He didn’t want to know, ever.

“I don’t have time, Jonas,” she snapped. Her voice sounded very hoarse and surprisingly fragile — a word Jonas would never have attributed to the cipher agent who had taken down Ardun Kothe (and, if the rumours were true, was also responsible for the death of Darth Jadus). “Did you secure the arsenal?”

“No.” He scowled. “By the time Lana and I made it across that damned chasm, it and our targets were long gone. Malcom’s schematics didn’t indicate there was a back entry into that base.”

She waved his commentary away; he noticed — but did not remark upon — the fact that her hand was shaking. The tremors were subtle, but he was a spy: he was trained to notice subtle things like that.

“Okay, then it’s here.” Her own comment seemed more directed at herself than at him, and she frowned, looking away.

“Is Theron there? Where are you? Are you all right?” Jonas couldn’t hold back the questions that kept tumbling past his lips — he had dozens more, many of which he suspected wouldn’t be answered until they had Theron back, if at all.

Miranza’s frown deepened. “He’s here. He’s … It’s bad, Jonas. He’s … pretty fucked up, but I think … If I can get him out of here, I think I can fix him.”

“What do you mean, fix him?”

“Not now.” The words came out hissed, and this time when she raised her hand he was certain he saw it shaking. “I don’t know where we are but if I can contact you again, do you think you could triangulate our location?”

“Maybe? Shae or Tav could help me. How are you even managing to contact us now?”

“It’s … it’s complicated. They think I’m — look, I can’t get into this now, but they think they’ve got me under control.” She let out a harsh laugh, looking away from the screen for a moment. “Fuck, right now they think I’m catatonic. I’ve got a bit of time, not much. I have a small advantage, they don’t know … They don’t know I’m not trapped the way Theron is. I can use that, I can get us free, but I need to find out where they’ve stored the arsenal first, see if I can get to it.”
“No. No, Miranza, you need to get yourself and Theron out of there. We can come back for the arsenal –“

“Don’t tell me how to do my fucking job, Balkar!” Miranza glared at him briefly, then suddenly turned, an expression of alarm on her face. “Shit, I need to go.”

“Wait! What should I tell Vector?” Jonas pounded his fist on the console in frustration, wishing they had the tracking equipment on the shuttle to trace the call and pin down her location now. “He’s freaking out about you – we thought you were dead!”

She bit her lip, wincing at the pain the action caused, and shook her head. “Tell him … Tell him that it’s like our honeymoon all over again.”

“That some kinda code?”

“Yes. He’ll know what it means. I don’t –“

The call ended abruptly, the shuttle falling silent. Jonas leapt up from his seat, nearly knocking over his caf at the same time, and pressed the button to bring all hands on deck. After a brief pause he next hit the button for the loudspeaker, then cleared his throat.

“Look lively, folks. We’ve got contact.”

O o O o O

The rooftop garden was a surprisingly peaceful place to exercise or meditate, in spite of the ongoing war taking place in the background. Even if Theron hadn’t recognized the ruined skyscrapers and elaborate tram system, the continuous battle between local forces, Imperial invaders and Republic military practically screamed ‘Corellia.’ He hadn’t spent a lot of time in Coronet City but he recognized the skyline even half-demolished as it was.

When Miranza had joined him in the garden and had the chance to see the outside world for the first time since her captivity began, her entire body had gone still and her expression grew hard. The bruises on her face from previous encounters were almost entirely healed, but the cut on her lip was taking longer to go away – it had a tendency to reopen whenever she ate or spoke. The cuts and bruises left Theron with intense feelings of shame and self-loathing, even though he knew that he wasn’t entirely to blame. He knew he wasn’t in control of his own actions, but it was a hard thing to accept.

Miranza’s dislike of Corellia was a palpable thing, but she refused to explain it, and instead simply shrugged and said it was classified. A line from Theron’s own book, and he couldn’t tell if she wasn’t interested in sharing because Samar or the others might overhear, or because she didn’t want a Republic spy to know the details of her past.

The two of them were given the run of the penthouse suite, including access to the rooftop garden, but there were guards posted at the lifts and stairwells to prevent them from going anywhere else – not that Theron’s conditioning would have permitted him to escape in the first place. He wasn’t so sure that Miranza suffered the same constraints.

The other night, the first time that … Theron’s mind skittered uncomfortably around what had happened that night, the things Samar had forced them to do (it was rape, Theron, you can call it rape, an angry voice growled in the back of his mind) and how Miranza had tried to handle it. He had been touched when she had asked him what he needed to make the situation more bearable for himself, and up until the moment that Samar invoked his keyword he had thought he could make it
through unscathed. After all, he liked Miranza and it wasn’t as though that was the first time the two of them had had sex. But it was obviously different, having Samar there (the man who’s raping you, Theron), and he couldn’t pretend that consent was in any way involved. And then Samar had used the keyword, and things got … considerably worse.

Theron hadn’t wanted to hurt her. He never wanted to hurt anyone, but he sure as hell wasn’t the sort of bastard who beat up his lovers, and there was rough sex and then there was what Samar was into, and before Theron had known it his hands were around her throat and she was suddenly panicking and –

He had seen panic attacks before. He’d never fallen victim to them, himself, but he had certainly seen them. He even had a good idea how to coax someone out of one, had done it in the past, and had been there to comfort the person afterwards. But Samar had enjoyed her panic, had thrilled at the notion that he had found something that might break the woman he knew as Legate, and so there had been no comfort for Miranza and Theron had been the one abusing her just as much as Samar. Knowing that Theron wasn’t in control of himself did little to assuage his guilt over the matter, especially since Samar had realized that using Theron to abuse Miranza hurt both of them at the same time. Once Samar discovered a new avenue of torture, he was like a child with a new toy.

And afterwards, after the whole horrible nightmare was over, when Samar had treated their cuts and bruises – because whatever else he was, Samar thought himself to be a considerate lover who took care of his “partners” – when Miranza had finally, finally come back to herself, Samar had asked her what the panic attack had been about. She had refused to answer: shaken, battered, but still unbroken, she had refused. And Samar had used her keyword on her, and so Miranza had given him a story about an abusive ex-boyfriend, and Samar had nodded and accepted it because he had activated her conditioning – she had to answer him truthfully.

Except that Theron was pretty confident that Miranza had been lying.

He didn’t know for certain – he had no more clue what had triggered her than Samar had – but Theron was a trained spy. More than that, he had spent the early years of his life in training to be a Jedi, and with that came a considerable amount of time spent learning to read people, to see the things they were trying to hide and hear the things they were trying not to say. And while Samar had missed it, Theron had seen and heard plenty of cues to indicate that Miranza had not been telling the truth.

If Miranza had lied to Samar after he had used her keyword, then that might mean that she wasn’t actually conditioned, or that at least her conditioning wasn’t as intense as Theron’s.

That was … interesting.

Also of interest to Theron was the realization that he felt no compulsion to immediately inform Samar that she had lied, or that her conditioning might not be as perfect as the other man thought it was. Apparently Theron couldn’t betray Samar and his associates himself, but there was nothing in his programming that forced him to reveal what he knew about Miranza’s potential to betray them. And that she was planning to betray them was a certainty in Theron’s mind, because there was no way in hell he could see her putting up with any of this if she didn’t have a bigger game in play. She was up to something, and he wished on the Force that he could help her.

A sudden rush of motion pulled Theron out of his distracted thoughts, and he leapt backwards just in time to avoid being kicked in the head by Miranza. The two of them were sparring in the rooftop garden, taking advantage of the open space and relative freedom to keep themselves honed. They were evenly matched: Theron had the advantage of superior size and strength, but Miranza was fast and agile, and they had both spent the majority of their lives either training or using that training in
serious combat.

Miranza let her dodged kick flow through into a spin, bringing up her other foot to try and sweep Theron’s legs out from under him. He narrowly dodged that move as well, choosing to close the distance between them and try for a grapple, where his greater strength provided him the advantage. She ducked out of his reach just at the last second, diving to one side before turning the dive into a roll and coming up behind him. One small fist hammered into Theron’s unprotected midsection, and he let out a grunt of pain and jerked his elbow back to catch her in the side. Neither of them held back, both trusting in the other to be skilled enough to avoid serious injury, and by the time the bout was over they were both sporting a number of small bruises and breathing heavily.

Up on the rooftop, away from prying eyes – although neither of them was so foolish as to think there weren’t holo-recorders on them – it was possible to pretend this was just another day. That there was nothing out of the ordinary going on. That they weren’t both prisoners, not just physically, but mentally as well.

Sparring over, Theron stretched, then began a series of combat forms he had learned in his early days on Tython, letting the familiar stances of Shii-Cho calm his mind. While he would never be a Jedi – and, given some aspects of his personality, that was probably for the best – there was a certain comfort in revisiting the training of his childhood. He would take all the comfort he could get, right now.

Miranza came and stood beside him, far enough away that there was no risk of him striking her during his exercises, but close enough that he was aware of her presence. She watched him for a moment, her expression unreadable, then began to go through her own series of exercises.

“You would’ve made a terrible Jedi,” she commented, scarcely out of breath as she stretched backwards until her hands touched the ground, then flipped upwards into a handstand and held the position, making the muscles in her bare arms stand out.

“Thanks,” Theron replied, making no effort to hide the faint note of bitterness in his voice.

“Don’t be insulted; I meant it as a compliment.”

He paused, glancing at her out of the corners of his eyes. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail but individual strands had come loose during their fight, wispy curls sticking to her sweat-dampened skin. She held her position, palms flat on the ground, feet pointed at the sky; he wondered idly how long she could hold herself up in a handstand.

“I’m sure you did, given that you’re … you know …” He made a one-handed gesture that was meant to encompass all of her, letting the sentence trail off.

“What? Imperial? Force-blind?” She chuckled, but the sound held little humour. “The woman you’ve been fucking?”

Theron sucked in a breath, startled at how bluntly she had stated it. It wasn’t untrue, of course, but the current nature of their relationship – whatever the kriff their relationship was – was certainly complicated. (If by complicated you meant “not exactly consensual,” that was.) And that was the thing, really – left to their own devices, Theron had no doubts that he and Miranza would’ve ended up in bed together again, with or without her incredibly charming husband. He liked her, and he knew she liked him. (He was less certain about his feelings regarding Vector, but then, he and Vector hadn’t spent nearly as much time together. If anything, the man was almost as mysterious as his wife.) Differing ideologies and loyalties aside, they got along well and they shared similar mindsets, not to mention a certain fluid and flexible concept of sexuality. But they hadn’t been left to
their own devices, at all, and Theron wasn’t sure whether or not their fledgling whatever-it-was-if-it-
we’re-not-calling-it-a-relationship would be able to survive what had happened.

“I just meant,” she continued, oblivious to his train of thought, “that you’re far too passionate to be a
Jedi. You’ve got discipline – most of the time – and self-control, but you’re too pragmatic and …
hmm, intense to be a Jedi. You would’ve made a better Sith.”

“Okay, where I’m from, that is not a compliment, Miranza,” he told her, although a small corner of
his mouth quirked up at the mental image of himself in black robes and Sith facial tattoos. Wouldn’t
that have given his mother a heart attack?

“Where I’m from it’s the highest form of compliment you can receive,” she retorted, before pushing
herself up and springing to her feet. She straightened and stood, stretching, and he allowed himself to
appreciate the slow, sinuous way she moved. However complicated his feelings were towards her,
he could at least acknowledge that she was a remarkably attractive woman. “Although I daresay your
mother would be less than impressed.”

Hearing her talk so casually about his mother – following so closely on his own thought about Satele
– was a bit jarring for Theron. He was well aware that Miranza knew who his mother was, of course;
the two of them had discussed the subject, back when they had first met. She knew significantly
more about him than he did about her, and he found that he was incredibly curious about her. Partly
because he wanted to even the balance between them – the spy in him disliked how much he felt like
an open book with her, whereas she was almost a complete mystery to him – but mostly because he
was genuinely, honestly curious.

“You know all about me,” he said, after a moment of consideration. He shifted into Soresu stance
before continuing, “And I know practically nothing about you.”

“What’s there to know?” Miranza countered, shrugging slightly. “I am who I need to be, when I
need to be. It doesn’t matter who I was or where I came from.”

“I’m still curious. You know I was raised as a Jedi. What about you?”

Something flickered across her face and was gone, replaced with a small smirk. “You know I wasn’t
raised as a Jedi.”

He groaned. “You know what I mean, Miranza. How were you raised? What was your childhood
like? Did you always want to be in Intelligence? What did you want to be when you grew up?”

She paused in her stretching, frowning at him. He found it difficult to read her and was afraid he had
crossed a line and that she wouldn’t answer him, but instead she gave a little nod, seeming to come to a
decision.

“Fine,” she said curtly, folding her arms across her chest. “I’m an orphan. I don’t know who my
parents were or what happened to them – if they were killed, if they chose to give me up, if I was
taken from them. I have no memories of them. I don’t know which planet I was born on, although it
was probably somewhere in Imperial space. There was a … a program … created by Imperial
Intelligence with the intention of developing better, more loyal spies – using children, training them
from a young age, when they would be more … more malleable. There are similar programs all over
the Empire: eugenics, cybernetics, conditioning … We’re always looking to build the better soldier,
the better spy. So that’s who I am. I’ve only ever been a part of Imperial Intelligence. I’ve only ever
wanted to be an agent. It’s all I know.”

Now it was Theron’s turn to frown and he realized he had frozen mid-stance, hands held awkwardly
at waist-height, fingers curled as if around the hilt of an imaginary weapon as he listened to her speak. A part of him wanted to apologize – it was clear he had touched on something sensitive – but at the same time it occurred to him that Miranza’s childhood wasn’t all that different from his own, nor was it any different from what he knew of typical Jedi or Sith childhoods. He had been abandoned by his mother; she had been abandoned by – or taken from or had lost – her parents. He had been raised to be a Jedi; she had been raised to be an agent. That he had been drummed out of the Order before achieving his dream was where their stories diverged, but still, had he been Force sensitive he would have gone on to become a Jedi. Neither of them had had any say in the matter, any choice in who or what they would become.

“Are you happy with your life?” he asked, instead of apologizing.

She shrugged, not looking at him. “Happy enough. Most of the time. Not so much at present, mind you … but at least the company’s good.”

Theron smiled ruefully and closed the distance between them, taking her hand. She gave his fingers a small squeeze and looked up at him, her blue eyes filled with empathy. He was pleased that in spite of everything he had been made to do to her, she didn't flinch at the contact. She wasn't afraid of him, she wasn't angry with him. She understood.

“Thank you for coming to find me,” he said, voice soft. He meant it both as an expression of gratitude and as an apology: if she hadn’t gone looking for him, she wouldn’t be in this mess now. He hated the things he was being made to do to her, but he couldn’t deny that her presence made him feel a bit less alone and lost. *Misery loves company and all that …*

“I’ll get you out of this,” Miranza replied. Not “I’ll get us out of this” or “We’ll get out of this,” but “I’ll get you out of this.”

Theron knew he was right: she definitely had a bigger game in play.

Vector knelt on the floor of the shuttle, his hands resting lightly on his thighs. He had been in this position for quite some time now and had lost sensation in his feet, but he had yet to achieve the calm and serenity he usually found in meditation. It didn’t help that the Hive was clamouring at him, an endless series of questions and concerns about his troubled mental state and the sense of alarm that the Killiks could feel radiating off of him. The Killiks understood – in their limited capacity – his relationship with Miranza, although it was difficult for them to fully comprehend the concept of a tie that did not go both ways, a joining that was not as complete as Joining. They knew that he loved her, that she was an integral part of his life and his being, and in that sense they had accepted her as a part of the Hive. His worries and grief became their own, then; his fears for her, their fears. They offered up what sympathy and comfort they could, but that support came with the need for him to explain, endlessly, why he was as worried as he was.

The Hive had known Miranza, of course. She had come to the Oroboro nest on Alderaan and had met them, long before Vector had left – indeed, she had been the reason for his leaving, and he was grateful that the Killiks didn’t resent her for that. They considered her to be resourceful, clever and strong: highly desirable traits in a mate, even if Vector didn’t intend for her to ever Join the Hive (she had offered, though, and he had been touched by her offer even though he had refused it; he did not wish for her to change, and the Joining represented a decidedly fundamental change). They couldn’t understand why Vector should be concerned; not that they didn’t understand why he cared for her, but rather, given her skills and strengths, why he should be fearful. They didn’t fear the loss of the individual, because there was no concept of individuality. They couldn’t see that for Vector there was none other who could rise up and replace Miranza should this latest venture prove fatal. For the
Hive, either her strengths and skills would be sufficient to see her through, or she would fail and the Hive would continue on without her. It wasn’t callous, not exactly, but it was a difficult concept for Vector to get across.

“She said to tell you ‘It’s like our honeymoon all over again.’” Miranza’s words, from Balkar’s lips. The Republic agent hadn’t known the story behind it – nor had Vector felt inclined to share, much as the other man clearly wished him to – but the words did indeed give him some insight into what his wife was planning.

Those words also filled him with abject terror.

They hadn’t had a honeymoon – not really. Married in private on board their ship, the Mercurial, they had been en route to Corellia, on their way to face an uncertain future: the Star Cabal breathing down their necks, Imperial Intelligence in shambles, with no real allies or game plan in place. Then, while on Corellia, they had met up with Shara Jenn, whom Miranza had known as Watcher Two and later Keeper, and who had presented Miranza with a horrible plan that had led to the first argument she and Vector had had as a married couple. In the end it had been her choice – as it should be – to agree to Shara’s plan. Miranza had given herself over to agents of the Star Cabal to be interrogated, so that she could pretend to break under torture and let slip information to lead them astray. The plan had worked, but the cost of it had been almost more than Vector could bear. The mercenaries had made him watch while they had tortured his wife, only his own promise to her preventing him from trying to intervene. He would have been killed, of course, but that wouldn’t have stopped him from trying.

And so that was how Vector and Miranza had spent their honeymoon: on Corellia, being tortured.

They both still had nightmares from that experience. Vector tried to hide his from his wife, guilty that he should be so troubled when she had been the one to suffer more, but he knew she couldn’t help but be aware of the nights when he tossed and turned and eventually left their bed to find someplace peaceful to meditate. Most often, though, she was the one waking up, a scream lodged in her throat, her entire body tensed as if to fight. He always woke up with her and sat with her, stroking her back, brushing her hair, anything to help her calm down again. The nightmares had become fewer and farther between, but there was no way to pretend that the events of Corellia were not indelibly etched upon their souls.

That Miranza would choose to remind Vector of the experience now, with her carefully-worded message to Balkar, meant that she knew he would understand what she meant. She may not have chosen to hand herself over to Theron’s captors as she had given herself to Hunter and the Star Cabal, but she intended to treat the situation as the same. That Theron’s captors most likely were agents of the Star Cabal – or what was left of it – made the current situation an eerie parallel of the past. Vector did understand what his wife was doing. It was an opportunity to gain information or to spread misinformation. She would do her job. He understood, but – same as the last time – he did not have to like it.

Vector remembered how angry Miranza had been on Rishi when she had discovered that Lana Beniko had arranged for Theron to be captured by the Revanites. Not because Theron was tortured by them – although Vector knew that did in fact anger her – but because Lana had taken the choice out of Theron’s hands. Vector suspected that the SIS agent and his wife were cut from the same cloth; given the choice, Theron would have gone along with Lana’s plan and would have handed himself over to the Revanites, much as Miranza had done with the Star Cabal on Corellia. It was a good plan and it had worked. But Lana hadn’t given him that choice – hadn’t trusted him to be good enough at his job to do it, hadn’t trusted that he would be willing to do it – and that was what had angered Miranza. Given all the things Vector knew about his wife – her childhood, her struggles to
keep ahead of Sith interference, the brainwashing and the manipulation from the Star Cabal – it
didn’t surprise him in the least that she would be bothered by Theron’s loss of agency. It was the
same anger that he had seen her direct at Project Protean over what they had done to him when they
had arranged for him to be Joined.

He slowly eased out of his kneeling position, feeling the beginnings of pins and needles in his feet as
he stood and stretched. He was not going to find serenity in meditation, not tonight. He was too
worried, too fearful. He trusted Miranza and in her ability to get herself out of a bad situation, but
whenever he closed his eyes the memory of her battered face filled his mind. He didn’t need to
imagine how badly this could go: he had already seen it once before.

A sudden knock startled him out of his reverie, and Vector turned to the door in time to see Balkar
push his way into the room. Vector would have complained about the abrupt interruption, save that
the expression on Balkar’s face stopped him in his tracks. Mixed emotions – fear, hope, worry –
warred within him as the sight of the Republic agent.

“You’ve heard from her again,” Vector said, and at Balkar’s nod he had to push down the rising tide
of anger that his wife had contacted this SIS agent – again – instead of him.

She wishes to spare us. She knows we worry. It wasn’t jealousy – not quite – but he would have
dearly loved to have seen her face, to have confirmation from his own eyes that Miranza was still
alive and reasonably hale.

“Yes,” Balkar replied unnecessarily. He looked down at his datapad, frowning, then said, “She had a
message for you. She said she needs you to go to Quesh. She said, and I quote ‘Lana was right;
Vector will know what I need.’ I don’t … Do you know what she means? Would it kill her not to
talk in code all the kriffing time?”

Vector pressed a fist to his mouth as if preparing to suppress a cough, nodding his head. Miranza’s
message was ambiguous, but he thought he knew what she was trying to convey. ‘Lana was right,’
combined with instructions for Vector to go to Quesh suggested that Theron had been brainwashed;
more so, that the Star Cabal had somehow discovered the means to do to Theron what had been
done to Miranza. If that was the case, however, then Miranza knew how to undo it, and Vector had
been with her on Quesh when she had hunted down the chemicals she needed to create her own
version of Serum IX. He hadn’t know what she was doing at the time, of course – her conditioning
had prevented her from providing him with any explanations – but he had observed her. He
remembered the chemicals she had acquired. He didn’t know how much she would need or how to
correctly combine them, but he could get those chemicals and once she and Theron were safe, she
could handle the formulations herself. That had to be what she meant.

“We believe we understand our wife’s message,” Vector said, adding in a respectful but firm tone,
“But we cannot elaborate, Agent Balkar.” Before the SIS agent could protest the matter he raised his
hand to cut him off and asked, “Were you able to track her location this time?”

“We didn’t need to,” Balkar said. It was clear from his expression that he wanted to push the subject
of Quesh and Miranza’s message further, but he was letting Vector distract him with a more pressing
topic. “She was able to tell us where she is – where they are. Theron’s with her. They’re on
Corellia.”

Vector felt a small pang of fear at the mention of that thrice-be-damned planet, with all the dreadful
memories it conjured.

He had to have faith that his wife knew what she was doing, and that her considerable skills would
be sufficient to get her and Theron out of the danger they were in. Vector believed in Miranza –
indeed, had always believed in her, even in their early days on Alderaan – but he couldn’t escape the
worry and anguish that the mention of Corellia aroused in him.

*Like our honeymoon all over again, indeed.*

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Chapter Nine is in progress, and it is also kicking my ass. I'm kind of hoping that by posting the first few chapters I'd have a reason to continue the story. I know what I want for chapters beyond Nine, but the next couple of chapters are integral to the plot, so I can't just skip over them because they're being a bother.
The hallways of the Corellian University of Aeronautical Engineering and Development were relatively untouched by the war taking place right outside her doors. The building was empty; the school had been closed for months, the students either shipped off-world to their home planets or enlisted (or conscripted, depending on their skillset) in the local military. The university hadn’t been abandoned – the generators still functioned, and cleaning and maintenance droids continued to patrol the halls, keeping everything running – but the security systems were sufficient to deter all but the most foolhardy of looters.

Not that advanced security could prevent two of the best agents in the galaxy from breaking in.

Completely alone with Miranza for the first time in weeks – months, if you counted all that time after Yavin 4 – Theron could almost believe this was just another field assignment, and that the two of them were working an Intelligence job together. Samar and his crew did not possess the skills to get into the university or to move through the building undetected, and so it was up to Miranza and Theron to break in and acquire the data they needed. They were being monitored, of course, both of them outfitted with holo-recorders on their jackets and transmitters in their ears, but they were still essentially alone. It was a freedom and solitude Theron relished.

It was almost possible to believe that everything was normal again. Almost.

For the first time in days neither Theron nor Miranza was battered or bruised. Not because of any show of restraint on Samar’s part, but because Amrielle had insisted Samar leave the two of them alone, that they needed to be in top shape in order to complete their assignment, and they couldn’t waste time waiting on them to heal in a kolto tank just because Samar couldn’t keep it in his pants. (Amrielle hadn’t phrased the command quite so crassly – the Nautolan woman was never that crude – but her meaning had been very, very clear. Also clear was the fact that she did not approve of what Samar was doing with Theron and Miranza, but so long as his proclivities didn’t interfere with their work she didn’t disapprove enough to prevent him from doing what he liked. Amrielle might not approve of Samar’s continuous abuse of Theron and Miranza, but she certainly couldn’t be considered an ally against the man.) Theron couldn’t quite figure out where Samar and Amrielle stood in relation to each other. At times he got the impression that they were equals, but there were other times – Amrielle’s reluctance to intervene on their behalf, Samar’s acquiescence to her demand that he leave the two agents alone for a change – when they seemed to have authority over one another. What was obvious to Theron was that Samar and Amrielle answered to some higher power – and that he and Miranza had yet to meet that authority.

The whirring of servos from somewhere further down the hall announced the incoming presence of a droid. In addition to the building maintenance droids the university had security droids patrolling the otherwise empty halls, and the two spies had already come across a handful of them. Theron froze, hands on the grips of his blasters, and Miranza slipped around him, moving on silent feet towards the sounds. The two of them were armed – he with blasters, she with a blaster rifle, and both of them with vibro-knives – and both carried stealth generators clipped to their belts. The weapons had been granted to them with far more ease than the generators; it seemed their captors were comfortable with them going armed, as they needed to be able to protect themselves, but were less thrilled at the idea of them being able to disappear and reappear at will. Miranza took a few steps away from Theron, then activated her stealth generator and vanished from sight. Theron pressed back against the wall, one hand on his own stealth generator while he waited for her to return. He heard a loud fizzle,
followed by a metallic clank as the droid hit the ground, and then Miranza was beside him again, flashing a hand sign for “all clear.” Theron hadn’t been surprised to discover that Miranza knew military hand-signals, but he had been surprised that the Imperial signs were remarkably similar to the Republic ones, and he had made a mental note to include that information in his debriefing. Since Miranza’s capture and the obvious evidence that the woman had something in the works, Theron had begun to think of his own captivity as being short-term. With that resumption of normalcy – even if only a small part – he had returned to planning and operating as a SIS agent, which included planning for the future – a future which inevitably included paperwork.

The two spies headed down the hall, stepping around the disabled droid, and turned left. Both of them had memorized the floor plan of the university, but Theron had a copy on a datapad tucked in his belt-pouch, just in case. Not that the floor plan would be necessary: the university had thoughtfully provided a “you are here” map on every floor, as well as signs at every intersection indicating what facilities were in which direction. The empty building had been a place of higher learning, not a top-secret military facility – even if the materials they were there to collect fell into the “restricted” category. Students, faculty and guests would need directions; therefore, the university designers had made certain to plaster those directions at regular intervals. People didn’t pay thousands upon thousands of credits in tuition just to end up missing lectures because they couldn’t find their classroom.

As they walked, Theron observed his de facto partner out of the corner of his eye. In spite of their continuous contact and forced intimacy he still knew surprisingly little about the woman. If anything, the nature of their shared captivity meant that Miranza was less like the Imperial Intelligence agent Theron had met on Manaan, and even the tiny snippets she chose to share about herself did little to alter the impression that she was a complete stranger to him. Perhaps it was an aspect of her early childhood training, but it seemed to Theron that Miranza had a persona or mask for every situation the two agents found themselves in, and he wondered how many “Miranza’s” he would get to meet. The Miranza who suffered Samar’s abuse was a completely different woman from the Miranza who sparred with him or the Miranza who sat quietly through Amrielle’s briefings. Each one was still recognizably her, but – to Theron’s trained eye – noticeably different.

Seeing how easily and completely Miranza fell into each role made Theron wonder if he had ever seen the real her. Had she considered herself to be on the clock when the two of them were sleeping together on Yavin 4? Had that version of Miranza been an act, just like every other version he had interacted with since then? Theron found it all too easy to twist their previous interactions into something sinister and impersonal. He was the son of the Grand Master of the Jedi Order (and never mind the fact that he was also the son of the head of the Republic military – not that that was common information), not to mention a highly-placed Republic agent with access to all sorts of state secrets. Seducing him – which, admittedly, had been laughably easy – would have been an obvious lead into gaining access to those secrets. Had Miranza fabricated her attraction to him as part of her job on Yavin 4, or had her superiors instructed her to nurture their existing flirtation into something more in order to achieve the same purpose? Theron wanted to think that their relationship – whatever it was – had been founded on mutual attraction and flirtation, but given his position, his training and his upbringing it was ridiculously easy for him to cast doubt on every interaction he shared with her.

Of course if she had meant to use him for his government access, the two of them would never have parted ways after Yavin 4. Had their positions been reversed and had he actually been trying to use her for intel, Theron would have maintained contact with Miranza, would have continued to press that contact in order to ensure he didn’t lose that connection. There would have been a point when he would have started asking her to share intel – nothing serious, nothing top secret, but little tidbits of information that would have paved the way for her eventually revealing higher-clearance details. And Miranza hadn’t done that with him. If anything, the two of them had lost contact entirely, and it had been Theron who had been trying to follow up on her, rather than the other way around.
Still, the seeds of doubt were sown. Theron couldn’t imagine any reason she would be interested in him for himself. There had to be more to it.

Except … Except if all their flirtation had been a ruse to gain access to Theron’s intel, there would have been no reason for Miranza to come searching for him. Lana, Theron could understand; the two of them had been allies for a long time and to a certain extent he trusted the Minister of Sith Intelligence. But Miranza? She didn’t answer to Lana, so she wasn’t here at Lana’s insistence. If Theron was just another asset to her, then there was no reason whatsoever for her to be putting herself in danger like this.

The vicious cycle of Theron’s thoughts was interrupted by the appearance of another security droid. He handled it this time, slipping into stealth and sneaking behind the droid to jam his vibro-knife into the small space between armoured plating. Circuitry fizzled and died as the droid collapsed in a hulk, and then he and Miranza were heading down the next hallway.

It was his job to slice the security consoles. Miranza was an adequate slicer, but Theron was far more skilled and his implants enabled him to work faster than would have been humanly possible. She stood guard over him while he sliced the console, his fingers flying over the panel as algorithms and codes raced through his mind. The console beeped once, then flashed green and the door hissed as it opened. The room beyond was their destination, and Theron could see rows of databanks stretching out in front of them. As soon as he stepped foot in the room he staggered a little as a nullifying pulse hit him, dimming but not entirely shutting down his implants. The room was heavily shielded from outside interference and his implants counted as such.

Miranza’s hands moved in the sign for “All clear?” and he nodded, tapping the implant at his forehead by way of explanation. He had been prepared for this shutdown, had known that there would be some kind of signal or jamming device in place to prevent anyone from transmitting data into or out of the room. The transmitter in his ear crackled with static and he knew that it, too, would be temporarily disabled, along with the holo-recorder on his jacket.

Theron had had his implants shorted out before and was perfectly capable of working without them, but it was always disconcerting to realize how much he depended on them. The world around him felt strangely muted: colours less bright, textures slightly fuzzy, sounds less precise. He supposed this was the world as normal people saw it, and he wondered how anyone could stand to live without the kind of clarity and precision his implants granted him. He wondered, too, if it was like the difference between having and not having the Force – did his implants permit him to experience the world the way his mother saw it, for example? Or would she have laughed at him for making the comparison?

Theron had a hard time imagining his mother laughing.

Miranza handed him a data spike and he set to work on the first databank, slicing in with relative ease and activating the download sequence. The two of them weren’t entirely certain what they were looking for – Amrielle refused to read them in on the full details of their assignment – but the spikes had been programmed to search out the intel for them. If Theron had the time he could have gone through the spikes to see what the search parameters were, but he knew that if he and Miranza spent too long in the building their captors would get suspicious, and they couldn’t stay in the shielded room forever. The longer they lingered, the more likely it was that Samar would trigger their conditioning the moment their comms were reactivated, and Theron wanted to hold onto the illusion that he was free to act under his own initiative for as long as possible.

The work was slower going than usual because of the lack of his implants, but Theron was an expert slicer even without them and it was only a matter of minutes before he was more than halfway through copying the files. Miranza continued to stand watch over him, her blaster rifle at the ready,
her gaze fixed on the door. Just as he was finishing up with the second-last databank she turned to him, grabbing Theron by the arm and backing him up against the wall.

For a moment he was surprised by the sudden change in her demeanour and he wondered if Miranza had received different orders from his – had she been ordered to kill him and leave his body here? But then he saw the intensity in her eyes and he realized this was something else entirely.

She moved in close, invading his personal space, her hand solid around his bicep. She was close enough to kiss him – or to kill him. Instead, she leaned in, her lips brushing his ear as she spoke.

“I can get us out of this, now,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper even though the comms were down and she was speaking into the ear that didn’t have the transmitter in it. “I can break your programming.”

Theron felt his knees buckle, and it was only Miranza’s grip on his arm that kept him upright. I can break your programming. His mind swam, his heart thumping in his chest as he realized what she was telling him. She could free him. She could get him out of there, away from Amrielle and Samar and this entire horrible nightmare he had been trapped in for Force knew how long.

“How?” he whispered through a mouth gone dry.

“It won’t be easy,” she acknowledged, not letting him go. “I’ll have to disable you, so they can’t use you against me, but I can do it. Once we’re out of here I can get us someplace safe and deprogram you.”

“What about the arsenal?” His thoughts were racing, but the professional in him forced him to try and consider all the avenues. Samar and his cronies had already used Theron to put part of their plan in motion, and now they were using him and Miranza to get more of it together. He didn’t know where the arsenal was or what their plan was. If he and Miranza left now …

“If we go now, we have to forget it,” she said. “We’d have to come back later, after you’re deprogrammed, or I’d come on my own and try to hunt it down.”

“They’d set up shop somewhere else. We’d never find them again.”

“They wouldn’t have whatever it is we’re getting for them here. We would have the data, we could take it back to Lana and Balkar and maybe they’d be able to figure out what the Star Cabal are up to. They might not be able to do … whatever they’re doing … without this data. It might set them back.”

“Or it might not.” A sick feeling was building in Theron’s gut, the feeling of hopes being dashed, squashed under the weight of his own sense of duty. “They could just go somewhere else, take the arsenal with them, and we won’t know what they’re up to until they attack again.”

Miranza’s eyes met his, and he could see the sympathy and resolve on her face. She squeezed his bicep.

“This has to be your choice, Theron,” she told him earnestly. “I can get you out now, but you’re right: we’ll lose the arsenal and we won’t know what they’re planning until it’s too late. I’ve dealt with them before and they always seemed to be one step ahead of me. If we leave we’ll lose what small advantage we have – but you’ll be safe. Samar won’t be able to hurt you anymore.”

“He won’t be able to hurt you anymore, either.” The sick feeling worsened, the certainty that if Theron chose to stay, Miranza would stay right alongside him – with everything that entailed.
She gave him a grim smile. “I chose to come looking for you, Theron. Maybe I didn’t know what I would be getting into, but it was still my choice to be here. I’ve been in your shoes. I know what you’re going through. I can break this, Theron. I can fix you.”

“Stars,” he groaned, closing his eyes, his throat constricting. He wanted this nightmare to be over. Stars, he wanted to take her up on her offer, to let her knock him out or whatever she had to do to disable him so that she could get them both out of there. He needed to get the kriff away from Samar and his cronies. But if he left – if they left – then there would be no way to know what their captors were up to, no way to figure out what their plans were or how to stop them.

“Stars,” Theron groaned again, with less emphasis this time, “Miranza, I want to. Force knows, I want out of this and I’m terrified of what Samar is going to make me do next and –“

“It’s your choice, Theron. Whatever you decide, I’ve got your back.”

Theron thumped his head back against the wall, the dull pain cutting into the confusion and misery welling up in his mind, along with Miranza’s words. I’ve got your back. He wasn’t alone in this. Maybe she wasn’t trapped the way he was trapped, but she was there, with him. She was letting him decide for himself whether or not he could take any more of this. If he wanted out, she would get him out, now, damn the consequences.

Knowing it was his choice to make made all the difference in the world. Theron opened his eyes again, bringing one hand up to cup her face. He could see the understanding on her face and knew that she already knew what his answer would be – indeed, that she had known his answer before she had even asked the question.

“Fuck it,” he said, “Let’s see this through.”
He wasn’t sure if it was nostalgia or the stress getting to him, but Vector would have sworn that the first time he went to Quesh with Miranza things went much more smoothly for them. He didn’t know if the impediment this time around was her absence – or the inclusion of Kaliyo Djannis. He was willing to bet it was the latter.

The first time on Quesh he and Miranza had assumed the role of a surprise inspection team, come to investigate the Imperial supplies and manufacturing chain. Vector had limited experience at roleplaying, but Miranza was an expert at it and kept the focus on herself. Things hadn’t gone perfectly – Intelligence work was seldom one hundred percent hitch-free – but he seemed to recall a distinct lack of people shooting at him, last time around. Also rather less running and screaming, all things considered.

The explosions could be blamed squarely on Kaliyo, but the decision to bring Kaliyo along rested solely on Vector’s shoulders. He would have preferred to call on Doctor Lokin or Ensign Temple, but the good doctor was involved in something hush-hush with the Protean Project and couldn’t be reached, and Ensign Temple had been called to Dromund Kaas for a training exercise as part of her continued involvement in Sith Intelligence. Vector did not trust SCORPIO in the slightest, in spite of how intriguing he found the AI, and while he trusted Kaliyo only a tiny bit more he needed someone for backup. The Rattataki anarchist was his only option.

Kaliyo was not hard-wired for discreet work. Vector should have remembered that.

It would have been easier bringing Lana Beniko or Jonas Balkar along. This was Intelligence work, after all, and they were the Intelligence operatives, as Vector was not (although he had learned, over the years with his wife). But Lana did not know that Miranza had freed herself from Imperial brainwashing and therefore Vector could not explain to the Minister how it was that he came to know which chemicals were required to free Theron. He did not think that Lana would have Miranza executed for her freedom not, but that was a risk he was not willing to take. As for Agent Balkar, while Vector thought the man was perfectly amicable and fundamentally decent, the fact of the matter was that he worked for Republic Intelligence, and although Miranza was disinclined to blame the entirety of the organization for the actions of a few, Vector did not share her charitable instincts in this regard. Not when it came to his wife. Not when it came to the things Ardun Kothe and Hunter had forced her to do.

So: Kaliyo. So, also: explosions.

The Republic mine that had produced the dimalium-6 that Miranza and Vector had secured on their last venture to Quesh could no longer be considered operational. He was not entirely convinced that Kaliyo hadn’t intended to blow the factory sky-high the moment she stepped foot inside it (why else would she have brought so much detonite?), but upon closer reflection he wasn’t certain that he cared. He didn’t know what the Republic wanted the chemical for, but he was painfully familiar with its usages in Imperial space, and quite frankly he was just as pleased as Kaliyo to see the facility burn. (Just as pleased, but somewhat more restrained in expressing himself. She cheered enough for the both of them.)

He could have done without the Republic soldiers shooting at the two of them, but he supposed that was to be expected. They had just ransacked an allegedly secure facility, stolen a crate full of highly valuable and difficult to replace chemicals, and then set off a number of explosives within said
facility. Those sorts of actions called for a response.

There were a number of reasons Vector preferred working with his wife, not the least of which was the fact that when they ended up running for their lives, they weren’t doing it solely because Miranza had done something stupid for the hell of it.

Still, Vector mused, crouching behind a pile of crates as blaster bolts flew overhead, assuming he and Kaliyo made it back to the Mercurial with their precious cargo intact, he could write this off as “mission: accomplished.” It ought to make for an interesting chapter in his memoirs.

“You and me, bugboy?” Kaliyo chortled, going up on one knee and firing back at their pursuers. She was grinning ear to ear. “We’re gettin’ good!”

Vector sighed. He could roll his eyes at Kaliyo, but because he no longer possessed distinctive pupils, irises or sclera the gesture would be lost on her. When this was over and his wife – and her missing Republic agent – was back in his arms, he intended to exact a very lengthy and heartfelt payment from her. Perhaps Agent Shan would be inclined to assist.

O o O o O

Miranza had always hated wearing black. The colour didn’t flatter her in the slightest; it made her look washed out and sickly. Her training in Intelligence had included learning the various ways to accent and accentuate her natural beauty (and had she not been so genetically blessed, she suspected Intelligence would have provided surgical augmentation to remedy the matter), and she knew which colours and palettes best suited her. She knew how to choose the best outfit for every occasion and how to apply makeup and style her hair to suit. When she had still worked for Imperial Intelligence her clothing and equipment had all been provided for her, but she had typically been the one to select the things she wore, within mission parameters. Once she had gone rogue – or rather, had chosen to become a freelancer – she had budgeted for a suitably diverse wardrobe and selection of makeup and accessories. (She had also kept a number of pieces from her Imperial Intelligence days. She considered it a commission.) Her appearance was as much a part of her job as her slicing skills or her linguistics or her talents as a sniper. She never wore black if she could help it.

She hated having other people pick out her clothing for her.

Amrielle had chosen a slinky black dress that likely would have looked devastating on the elegant Nautolan woman, but on Miranza it just looked cheap. Perhaps that had been Amrielle’s intention all along, or perhaps it was simply that she had no clue how to dress up a human woman and didn’t know how to complement dark blonde hair, blue eyes and pale skin. The cut and fit of the dress were perfect (if a little on the tight and skimpy side); only the colour made it an unfortunate choice for her. No amount of makeup or fancy hair-styling could fix it. To her own practiced eye Miranza’s reflection looked half-dead.

Perhaps the dress wasn’t entirely too blame.

There were dark circles under her eyes, hidden beneath a layer of foundation. More makeup hid her most recent bruises, although Miranza strongly suspected that whoever her audience was to be, they would have appreciated seeing her looking battered and haggard. She was too pale, her natural pallor turned wan, and when she practiced a smile in the mirror it didn’t reach her eyes. It looked more like a snarl to her – an uplifting of the lips, a baring of teeth. Certainly nothing friendly.

She knew she was procrastinating. She didn’t want to leave the ‘fresher, didn’t want to go to this latest meeting and be introduced to yet more horrible people who were only going to use her and abuse her. With every fibre of her being she wished that Theron had lacked the courage to stay, even
though she had known the moment she offered him the choice that there was no way the Republic agent was going to decide to leave before they knew what the Star Cabal was up to and how to stop them. He was a good man and a good agent; he wasn’t going to turn his back on the job, no matter how much it was destroying both of them.

There was a gentle knock at the door and she knew before she heard him speak that it was Theron – Samar didn’t knock, ever, and Amrielle never came into their suite.

“He’ll be here soon,” Theron warned, his voice pitched low even though they both knew the suite had bugs all over the place. There was nowhere they could go to speak in private; even the rooftop garden wasn’t completely secure.

Miranza sighed, then slowly straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. She was as prepared as she could make herself, and if she didn’t look absolutely perfect – if her appearance did not meet her own exacting standards – she had done her best with the materials at hand. She slipped her feet into her heels, wincing a little at the imperfect fit, and opened the ‘fresher door.

Theron stood a few feet away, dressed in a tailored black suit that flattered him far better than her dress did her, but with his darker colouring he could pull black off better than she could. (Granted, the man was so ridiculously handsome she suspected he could have made a burlap sack look good.) He looked her up and down, taking in the short hemline and the low cleavage with a grim set to his jaw, but wisely elected not to say anything. He knew as well as she did that the outfit wasn’t her idea. After a moment he let out a sigh of his own and offered her his arm; hesitating only briefly, she accepted, linking her arm through his. To the casual observer they were an attractive couple getting ready for a night on the town; only the two of them knew that they were bolstering each other’s strength.

As threatened Samar soon came in the door, stopping dead in his tracks when he saw the pair of them. His eyes lingered on Miranza’s décolletage, a cruel smirk playing about his lips, but then he just jerked his head towards the door, uttering a curt “Come on.”

Samar left the room first, the two spies following close behind him. Miranza kept her grip on Theron’s arm but she would have been hard-pressed to say who was supporting whom. She could feel the tension radiating off the Republic agent’s body and knew she matched him. Samar led them out of the suite and down the hall, towards the lift where two armed men stood, staring impassively ahead. One of them flicked a brief glance at Miranza’s legs, shifting slightly, but quickly resumed his position. She noticed his interest and, judging by the increased stiffness beside her, sensed that Theron had noticed as well, but there was no point in letting herself be troubled by it. In the unlikely event that the guard decided to make a move on her she could use that to her advantage. She didn’t know how, yet, but she would figure it out.

The lift took them down several storeys before letting them off on an unfamiliar floor. Samar continued to lead them and Miranza detected a distinct lightness in his step: he was excited about something. In fact, his body fair radiated eagerness, putting her in mind of a kath-hound on the scent. His obvious anticipation filled her with worry. He was up to something. Something was going to happen. It was probably going to be awful.

They stopped in front of a set of large double doors, another pair of armed guards standing at attention on either side. These guards paid no attention to Miranza or to Theron; one of them simply leaned in and pushed the door open, holding it for them. Samar led them into the room. Miranza had intended to take in her surroundings – the memory of Watcher X’s voice in her mind saying “Scan … for the important things: overt threats, escape routes, access terminals …” – but the moment she entered the room her thoughts scattered.
There was a Sith in the centre of the room.

There was no mistaking the exceptionally large man for anything else: he was very tall, very broad-shouldered, and wearing sleek matte black armour with spikes all over it. A rich crimson cape was draped over his shoulders and the helmet that was slung under one arm had matching crimson accents – and yet more spikes. The man himself appeared to be human, but so heavily steeped in the Dark Side that he was almost as grey-skinned as Kaliyo. His eyes were yellow, putting Miranza in mind of Lana Beniko – although Miranza had never once seen Lana look so cold or cruel – and he had salt-and-pepper hair cut close to his head, with a neat little pointed beard on his chin.

The Sith watched them enter the room, an expression of interest on his face as he took in first Theron and then Miranza. Like Samar his gaze rested on Miranza’s cleavage and she had to fight the urge to shudder when he quite deliberately licked his lips at the sight of her. She could practically feel the malevolence rolling off of him.

Her fingers tightened around Theron’s arm. She wished he could embrace her, while at the same time hating herself for feeling so weak and needy. The Sith reminded her of Darth Jadus, the way the man’s presence had made her feel sick and as though she was on death’s door. This unknown Sith had an aura about him that seemed to fill the room, and she wondered, if she was this affected by his presence, how much worse would it be for someone Force sensitive? Or would the Force have protected a Jedi or another Sith?

Samar stopped in front of the Sith and gave a deep bow. “My lord, we are honoured by your presence.”

“Of course you are,” the Sith replied. His deep voice had a raspy quality to it, as though he needed to clear his throat. “I take it these are the test subjects you mentioned?” He looked at Theron, frowning slightly. “The man looks familiar.”

Theron had grown even more tense at the word “formerly,” but when Samar mentioned his mother he pulled his arm away from Miranza and straightened up, setting his shoulders back.

“If you think she’s going to ransom me back, you’ve got another think coming,” he said, voice filled with anger. “Satele and I—“

Miranza watched in horror as Theron suddenly began clawing at his throat, his words abruptly cut off. His feet lifted several inches off the floor as in front of them the Sith raised his hand in a fist, glaring pointedly at Theron.

“Silence!” the Sith snarled, opening his fist and releasing Theron with such suddenness that the agent dropped to his knees, gasping for breath. The Sith turned his glare on Samar. “Your test subjects don’t appear to be particularly well-trained, Archon.”

Archon? Miranza wondered, even as she knelt beside Theron, throwing one arm over his shoulders.
as she kept her eyes on the Sith. Theron panted beside her, a hand rubbing his throat.

“All due apologies, my lord,” Samar replied smoothly, still smirking. “That’s one of the reasons we asked you to come here – to help us properly instruct our subjects.”

The Sith looked down at Theron and Miranza huddled together on the floor. She could practically feel the weight of his gaze upon her, and it made her skin crawl. He met her eyes, and she felt something pressing against her mind as the Sith made contact through the Force.

Her knees went weak. If she hadn’t already been kneeling to help Theron, she would have fallen; as it was, the supportive arm she had put over his shoulders ended up supporting her as she sagged against him. He slipped an arm around her waist, drawing her close to him, but there was nothing he could do to keep the Sith out of her mind.

The Sith flipped through her mind as though turning pages in a picture book, and each point of contact – flip flip flip – left her feeling dizzy and weak, as though she was in the grip of a fever. She could feel his mind pressing against hers as he poked and prodded his way through her memories, rifling through the most painful and terrifying experiences of the last few days before pushing deeper. Miranza felt his enjoyment of her misery, the way he reveled in the abuse she had suffered. He shared that enjoyment with her, letting her know exactly how much it pleased him. His mind pushed and pushed and –

Miranza came back to herself with Theron’s arms in a protective circle around her. She was shaking, shivering, scarcely conscious of Theron’s warmth beside her. The Sith was no longer looking at her but was instead staring intently at Theron, his eyes narrowed as he glared at the agent.

“You have an intriguing mind,” the Sith rasped, his comment directed at Theron. “Very orderly. Very well guarded.”

“I trained as a Jedi,” Theron snarled. His own voice came out rather hoarse, no doubt as a result of him being Force-choked. Miranza glanced at him, surprised he would reveal anything of his past to this Sith, but then realized that if Imperial Intelligence had this information in his file the Sith likely knew it already. She had known, long before she had actually met Theron face to face; certainly long before Theron had told her himself.

“Yet you’re not Force sensitive.” The Sith sounded intrigued. He hunched down in front of them, staring at Theron.

“Nope,” Theron replied, popping the “P” sound.

The Sith chuckled, seeming rather amused by the notion – possibly by the realization that one of the most powerful Jedi in the galaxy had produced a Force-blind son – before returning his attention to Miranza. She felt his mind pressing against hers again, then felt a brief flicker of surprise from him.

“And you’re resistant to mind control,” he said, sounding more amused than angered.

Miranza tensed, waiting for a sudden outburst from Samar, but when none was forthcoming she looked around and realized that he had left. He must have stepped out of the room the first time the Sith was rummaging around inside her brain. She was relieved that he hadn’t been privy to the Sith’s comment – assuming the room wasn’t bugged, of course – but at the same time terrified that he had left her and Theron alone with the Sith.

“No matter,” the Sith said, and he suddenly lunged out with one hand, grabbing Theron by the neck and squeezing. At the same time as he did that, his mind pushed against Miranza’s again and he
brought one of her most recent memories to the forefront: that of Samar using the keyword to force Theron to assault her. Only this time Theron was a willing participant, he and Samar laughing as he struck her, and when she turned to see Samar reaching for her he wore Vector’s face …

Miranza collapsed to the floor, screaming, scrabbling desperately to get away. The altered memory replayed itself in her mind, again and again, and with each new viewing it changed slightly to include more participants – Hunter, Kaliyo, Doctor Lokin in his altered rakghoul form, even gentle Ensign Temple, her face twisted with scorn and hatred – and she could feel their hands on her body, fingernails and claws and teeth digging into her skin. She could hear her friends laughing at her, their voices twisted in a malevolence she had never heard in real life, and through it all her own screams rose in pitch and volume until her throat was raw.

The Sith grabbed her then, releasing Theron in order to pull her tight against him. She couldn’t focus on his face – his features kept shifting, blending with the other faces from her twisted memories – but she could feel him touching her, and even his touch felt twisted and mutable, as though his gloved hands were also Theron’s, and Samar’s, and Vector’s. She screamed and struggled against him but her efforts to free herself only made him laugh, and his harsh laughter echoed with the voices of everyone she knew and loved – or loathed – until she couldn’t tell friend from foe in the jumbled recesses of her mind.

Then, suddenly, a blinding spike of pain tore through her head and she heard the Sith let out a terrible cry, his voice filled with rage and pain. He released her and she hit the ground, landing hard on her side. The pressure in her head was gone, along with the feeling of hands on her body, and instead of familiar voices she only heard the Sith’s screams – and they were terrible, terrible and –

Something solid connected with her cheek and then Miranza felt herself being pinned. She flailed, trying to scream, and her wrist was released as a hand slapped her across the face again.

She blinked, opening her eyes – when had she closed them? – and saw Samar staring down at her, an odd expression on his face. He still held one of her wrists, his other hand poised to strike her again, and he was speaking. At first she couldn’t understand him – he was speaking in Basic but her brain couldn’t make sense of the words, as if she’d lost the power of speech. Gradually, though, she realized he was telling her to calm down, that if she couldn’t get herself under control he would make her. She winced, bracing for him to hit her, but when he saw that she was paying attention to him he released her and she fell back to the floor.

Beside her the Sith lay dead, a trickle of blood oozing from his left nostril. More blood leaked from his ears and mouth, dark and glistening against his greyish skin. Samar started to laugh.

“It worked!” he shouted triumphantly, grabbing Miranza by both shoulders and hauling her upright in an elated hug. She was too weak and startled to resist even though the unwanted contact made her flinch. He kissed her hard on the mouth before abruptly shoving her away; she landed beside Theron, who was lying a few feet from the dead Sith, his eyelids fluttering as he slowly regained consciousness.

Oblivious to the two staggered agents Samar leapt to his feet and danced around the Sith’s body, practically capering with glee. His delight contrasted with the dead Sith and the state of his two captives seemed downright obscene, but he paid them all no mind, too caught up in his celebrating to care that Theron was hurt or that Miranza was …

What was she? The Sith was dead; he obviously wasn’t still toying with her mind, and yet Miranza could have sworn she still felt the pressure of his contact, the sheer weight of his mind battering against her own. His screams – his dying screams? – still echoed in her ears, and there, just in the background, just at that not-quite point of hearing, she could hear the cruel, taunting laughter of her
friends. If she focused on the sound or tried to pinpoint where the laughter was coming from it went away; she was aware of Samar laughing, and while it was cruel and inappropriate it wasn’t directed at her the way the voices in her head were directed. His laughter was real; whatever was in her head was … not.

Like the strange laughter the feeling of hands on her body was equally ephemeral – there, but not there, real and yet not. Miranza could feel the ground underneath her body – cold, hard, unyielding – and the unfamiliar dress that clung to her in ways her own clothing never did. She felt, too, a stinging in her cheek where Samar had slapped her, and the dull ache of older cuts and bruises – those were all real. But underneath it all – or perhaps over it all; it was hard to tell – she could feel the hands, featherlight against her skin. It made her flesh crawl, made her feel as though she had insects swarming beneath her skin, but she could see that no one was touching her and that almost made it worse.

“Miranza?” Theron’s voice, tight and weak, her name forced out through a battered throat. She turned to look at him and saw that he had managed to haul himself into a sitting position though his body was shaking with the effort. Dark bands of bruising encircled his neck.

Then she looked at his face, and Theron’s features shifted, twisting until it was Hunter staring back at her, a malicious smile on his – her? – lips. Another shift and it was Vector, face alit with a cruelty Miranza had never seen before on his gentle features. She blinked, trying to make the changes stop, but when she looked at Theron again she saw Ohta, the ex-Mandalorian convict from Belsavis. His lips were moving but she couldn’t hear anything over the sudden rushing sound inside her head. He reached for her, Theron’s concerned expression overlaid by the harsh mask that was Ohta, and then –

Miranza fainted.
Chapter 11

Author's Note: This chapter is long and dark, and includes some very heavily implied (but again, not graphic) rape.

Chapter Eleven

Over the course of his relatively short life Theron Shan had done a lot of things that might be called stupid or foolhardy. Compared to running around half-naked on an Imperial battle cruiser or facing off against his insanely powerful great-great-great-whatever-grandfather, sneaking through the Star Cabal’s Corellian skyscraper alone barely even ranked in the top ten.

At least he was fully clothed. Unarmed and unarmoured, but still: clothed. That made this slightly less risky than his escapades on the Ascendant Spear.

It had been easy enough to slip out of the penthouse suite that served as his prison cell. The hard part had been leaving Miranza behind, but she had fallen into a drugged sleep and in any case she was in no condition to help him.

The Sith’s attack and death had happened days ago, and whatever he had done had left its mark on Miranza. Thanks to his unique upbringing Theron had an above-average understanding of Force powers and he thought the Sith’s tampering of Miranza’s mind had been some sort of fear-based power, but he didn’t know enough to be able to gauge whether the madness would be temporary or if the Sith had permanently damaged something inside Miranza’s brain. She wasn’t even trying to hide how badly the attack had affected her: she would seem fine for hours on end, and then suddenly Theron would find her staring at him, an expression of sheer terror on her face as she saw something he couldn’t. She was hearing things, too, and while she wouldn’t tell him what she heard he knew by her reaction that it was something awful. She was restless and irritable and kept flinching any time anyone touched her. Theron was very, very afraid that the Sith had broken her.

It was his fault. If he had agreed to leave with her, back at the Corellian University of Aeronautical Engineering and Development, she wouldn’t have been there for the Sith to hurt. She and Theron would have been safe, and she would have been on her way towards making good on her promise to free Theron from his brainwashing. Instead he had played the good agent card and refused to leave until they had workable intel on Samar and his cronies’ plans, and now Miranza was hurt and if Theron couldn’t figure out a way to fix her and get her out of there he had no chance of her being able to free him. And he would never forgive himself if his hesitation resulted in her being permanently damaged.

It was that chain of thought that had led to Theron slipping out of the suite at 0300 hours. Samar had been gone ever since the Sith’s death – a mercy for which Theron would be eternally grateful – and Doctor Arjin had injected Miranza with some combination of sedatives to force her to sleep, leaving Theron completely alone. Their doors were locked, but that wasn’t a challenge for a slicer of Theron’s talent, nor was it any difficulty for him to avoid the holo-recorders in the hallway outside. He had memorized the position of the cameras and the patrol route of the security guards days ago. Captivity and brainwashing had not dulled Theron’s skills.

Over the course of their stay on Corellia Theron had seen most of the skyscraper that was their prison and had a good idea of where he was going. He avoided the lifts, which had recorders inside and outside the doors, and took the stairs instead, needing only to slice the doors to gain access to the floor he wanted. The building security was good, but it was designed to keep people out, not to protect against someone who was already inside; for that, Samar and the others relied upon Theron’s
and Miranza’s conditioning to keep them in line. As long as he was only gathering intel Theron’s brainwashing didn’t kick in – he wasn’t actively trying to attack Samar or any of his people, nor was he attempting to sabotage the skyscraper or the Star Cabal’s plans. He just wanted information. It was a very fine line to walk but so far he was able to manage it.

Soft-footed and silent Theron made his way down to the next floor, the floor with the conference room where he and Miranza had met the now-dead Sith. Whatever Samar had done to the Sith that had resulted in the man’s death, it stood to reason that it had something to do with the arsenal Theron had helped to steal. It also made sense that that arsenal would be relatively close by; it was clear to Theron that the Sith’s death had been a test-run, and Samar and his cronies wouldn’t have wanted to risk any other Force-users potentially getting caught in the blast – if the attack had failed, it would have tipped Samar’s hand. No, the arsenal had to be in the building with them, and it had to be close to where the Sith had died. Theron was positive that the arsenal was what had killed the Sith.

In hindsight it made a twisted sort of sense. Theron had been surprised to see the Sith there, and even more surprised by Samar’s obsequious behaviour towards him. Samar had made no effort to disguise his intense loathing of anything Force-related, and his subservience towards the Sith had seemed out of character – but made sense if Samar was setting the man up to be killed. Theron and Miranza had just been the bait to lure the Sith in, and Theron wondered how far Samar would have been willing to let the Sith go with them before he intervened. If the attack had failed, would the Sith have stripped Miranza’s mind completely? Would he have crushed Theron’s throat? Would Samar have tried to stop him, or would Theron and Miranza now be dead? Theron suspected the latter; as much as Samar clearly enjoyed having the two spies to play with, he was pragmatic enough to sacrifice them both in the name of expediency.

He wondered what the range on the arsenal would be. From what little he had come to know about the Star Cabal he didn’t think something so short-range would serve their purposes. They wanted to strip the galaxy of all Force users, to level the playing field between the remaining Force-blind citizens of the Republic and the Empire. They certainly couldn’t do that if the arsenal could only be deployed on a one-for-one basis, but Theron suspected they had found a way to compensate for that. Likely whatever data he and Miranza had stolen from the university had something to do with this. He wished he’d had a better chance to look at the files he was downloading.

The hallway was deserted, although Theron was under no illusions that it would remain that way for long. He moved forward towards the conference room, careful to avoid the arc of the security recorders that swept the hall. The two guards who had been posted outside the room were long gone and the heavy double doors were closed. Taking a chance Theron pulled on the handle closest to him and was surprised when the door opened easily.

Like the hallway the conference room was empty. It was also dark, although there was enough light from the hall for Theron to be able to move around. Aside from the removal of the Sith’s corpse the room appeared to be unchanged from the previous day, and he imagined that he could see dark spots in the carpeting from where the Sith had fallen. There was no sign of any super-weapon, just an empty conference room with uncomfortable-looking chairs and a long boardroom table. He stepped out of the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

Further down the hall was another set of double doors, this time with transparisteel windows fixed in place so that one could see inside the room from the hallway. There were security panels on either side of the doors and Theron spent a few seconds studying the panel to see if he could slice in. From the looks of things the entry system required two keys to unlock, one in each panel; he suspected the unlock had to happen simultaneously, which meant that while he was certain he could slice the panels he would need Miranza’s help to do so. The room beyond was dimly lit by an array of flashing lights set into computer stations. At the far back Theron could see a large case marked with
the emblem of the Republic. He recognized the case from Belsavis; it was what he and Samar had stolen from the vault.

He was right: the arsenal was here.

Theron pulled back from the door and quickly but cautiously made a beeline back to the stairs. It was frustrating to be so close to his target and yet be unable to act, but he needed Miranza’s assistance to get into the room and drugged as she was she was in no condition to help him now. Still, he had a goal, an end destination.

The end was in sight. This nightmare could all be over soon.

O o O o O

Vector sat alone in the cockpit of the *Mercurial*, turning the datapad over in his hands. The encrypted message from Doctor Lokin was still displayed on the viewscreen, but Vector had read the message so many times the doctor’s words were emblazoned in his memory.

“Message rec’d from LB. Marr wants Shan. Cipher to bring to the Dark Council. Alive. Cipher also to report to DC.

“Rumour has it your girl’s in for a promotion. Under no circumstances should she return Agent Shan to Republic space. No rest for the wicked, my boy.”

The first half of the message was clear enough: Lokin and the rest of Miranza’s crew had been contacted by Lana Beniko, with orders to hand Agent Shan over to Darth Marr and the Dark Council, and to present herself to the Council for debriefing as well. No doubt Lana had reported back to Marr that they had a rough idea of Theron’s whereabouts and that Miranza was in the process of retrieving him. Lana had likely left out the part where Miranza had been captured herself, but Vector knew his wife well enough to know she must have a plan to get herself – and Agent Shan – away safely. Lana would know this as well, and had probably passed that information on to her superiors. It was unfortunate, but Vector knew where Lana’s loyalties lay and she couldn’t afford to defy the Dark Council. Vector didn’t know what Marr or the Council wanted with Agent Shan but he had his suspicions. The agent represented an incredible wealth of information on Republic activities and processes – not to mention the valuable bargaining chip he posed, with his mother the head of the Jedi Order. Vector was skeptical that Theron would reveal any of the things he knew, but the Sith had more than conventional torture and interrogation tactics at their disposal. Vector was also skeptical that Satele Shan would do so much as lift a finger to save her son – her presence had been noticeably absent throughout the course of their rescue operation – and doubted the Jedi Order as a whole would come to the man’s aid. He didn’t know which aspect of this scenario troubled him more: the prospect of handing Theron over for torture, or the idea that his own mother didn’t appear to give a damn about him. For as well-connected and likeable as Theron was, Vector had never met a man more isolated than him.

The second half of the message was more convoluted. It read nothing at all like Lokin’s usual style – indeed, the message as a whole was completely different from anything Vector had ever received from the man – but more than that, to anyone who knew the specifics of their situation, it made no sense. Lokin never referred to Miranza as “your girl” – Vector cringed at the idea of such a title being applied to his wife. Furthermore, he certainly didn’t call Vector “my boy,” nor was it customary for Lokin to waste time and effort inserting useless platitudes into his writing. More than that, though: Miranza was a free agent. Lokin knew as well as anyone else on their crew that there were no promotions in her future, no matter how successful her current assignment proved to be. Eckard Lokin had worked for Imperial Intelligence, however, and there was more than one way to send a message, although he had no way of knowing how skilled Vector was at deciphering them.
The code was sloppy and simplistic – Vector would have to explain to the doctor that he did, indeed, know how to read a cipher – but the message was clear enough: RUN.

Miranza had long been in the habit of periodically sweeping her ship for tracking devices and bugs, but once he read Doctor Lokin’s message Vector had Kaliyo do a thorough sweep. The Mercurial was easily identifiable but she was a fast and highly maneuverable ship; if Vector needed to evade capture, he would need every edge he could find. Kaliyo knew how to switch the ship’s transponders with that of another ship, which would buy them some time, and so long as she kept switching them whenever they landed they should be able to keep hidden a little while longer. Vector may not have trusted Kaliyo entirely but there was no denying that her skills came in useful.

Vector had given Lokin a simple reply – “Message received and understood” – and knew the doctor would know what he meant. He trusted Doctor Lokin to do what he could to buy them more time. He didn’t know what to do about Lana or Jonas Balkar – Lana would know what Miranza’s orders were and Balkar had to be continuing his own search for Agent Shan – but he hoped that so long as he stayed off the radar they wouldn’t be able to locate him. They weren’t focusing on him, after all, and had barely even noticed when he had raced off to Quesh without them. They were fixed on getting Theron and Miranza back. He wasn’t their priority, even if Balkar knew about the message Miranza had sent him.

Unfortunately Balkar – and logically therefore Lana as well – knew that Miranza and Theron were on Corellia. They had to be headed there, and it was Vector’s destination also. Kaliyo claimed to have some allies on the planet, but Vector wasn’t certain it would be safe to trust in resistance fighters and anarchists. He figured he would have to play it by ear. He didn’t like playing it by ear.

He turned the datapad over in his hands again and staring blankly at Lokin’s message. Worrying about the future did little to prevent him from worrying about the present.

Samar was absent for five days, gone somewhere off-planet with Amrielle. During that time the only people Theron and Miranza saw were guards and Doctor Arjin. It would have been peaceful were it not for the constant nightmares that plagued Miranza.

Nightmares. More like hallucinations, they tormented her whether she was asleep or awake. She would look at Theron and see Hunter, or Ardun Kothe, or Samar. She could hear people whispering, voices just quiet enough that she couldn’t make out what they were saying, but there was no mistaking the malicious tones they used. She knew she was losing it, that she was in fact lost entirely, and she didn’t know if the Sith had broken something inside of her or if his Force trick had simply tangled itself around the existing damage in her mind that had resulted from repeated uses of Serum IX.

Under normal circumstances she would have worked better to hide how messed up she was. But in this instance she played it up, letting the guards and Arjin think she was worse off than she was, letting them think she was barely functional – practically catatonic at times, except for when the nightmares were at their worst and then she was screaming fit to wake the dead. It kept the guards away from her. Arjin looked her over but there was no external sign of injury or disease, and in any case his interest in fixing her was extremely limited.

Unfortunately the same misdirection that worked on Arjin and the guards also worked on Theron, and there was no way for her to tell him she wasn’t as badly off as she seemed. He watched her and worried, and he knew he blamed himself for not agreeing to leave with her when they had the chance.
Arjin injected her with something the first few nights to help her sleep. If she hadn’t needed the rest so badly she would have found a way to resist, but on the fourth night he gave her pills instead and she felt rested enough that when he was gone she made herself throw them up into the ‘fresher.

Samar returned on the fifth day in the mood to celebrate.

His idea of celebration did not mesh with Miranza’s.

When he finished with her she took the coward’s path and fled to the refresher, fighting down a wave of guilt at leaving Theron to face Samar alone. But Samar’s face kept being overlain with Hunter’s and the dead Sith’s and Theron’s voice kept morphing into a cruel, unsavory version of Vector’s and it was all she could do to keep herself from screaming. She took a minute to scrub some of the blood off her skin and avoided looking at her own reflection in the mirror over the sink. Running water drowned out the sounds of whatever Samar was doing to Theron, but did nothing to silence the harsh laughter and taunts that Miranza heard inside her own mind.

She staggered out of the ‘fresher with no real sense of where she was or what she was doing. The scene played out in front of her just as it had on the numerous other occasions Samar had decided to ‘celebrate’: Theron shoved facedown on the bed, his wrists bound, with Samar moving above him. Theron made a noise – a whimper, some kind of protest or cry of pain – and then Miranza’s world kind of faded away, or she checked out or went offline.

Everything went dark and hazy.

Miranza had no memory of moving, or of even having the inclination to move. She just did, racing across the suite on legs that should have been too shaky to support her. The vase – large, glass, horrifically gaudy – was heavy in her hands and it shattered the instant she brought it down on Samar’s head. She heard a startled cry but didn’t know if it came from Samar or Theron, and she felt a stabbing pain in her hand as she wrapped her fingers around one of the large shards of broken glass.

In the right hands anything could be a weapon.

Muscle memory kicked in. She was armed. She grabbed Samar by the hair with her free hand and wrenched his head back. She dragged the jagged shard across Samar’s throat, feeling him buck against her even as warm blood spurted out over her hands. She wasn’t strong enough to sever vocal chords: he screamed, or tried to, choking on his own blood, struggling to pull away from Theron and fight her off.

Everything after that was a blur until she heard Theron calling to her in the kind of voice one usually reserved for skittish animals and terrorized children. He had to repeat himself a few times before she realized he was asking for her to cut the ropes that bound him.

She did as he asked, her hands shaking so badly that she nicked him a couple of times, but he didn’t protest. As soon as his wrists were freed Theron shoved Samar’s body away and took the glass shard – slick with blood but still lethally sharp – out of Miranza’s hands before pulling her into the protective circle of his arms. Then Theron was leading her into the ‘fresher and into the shower, turning the water on to make sure it was warm enough before guiding her inside and stepping in beside her. He was incredibly gentle as he washed the blood off her skin before doing the same for himself. She was too entranced by how red the water was that circled the drain to pay him any heed and it wasn’t until the water stopped that she realized they were finished. He pulled her out of the shower and helped her dry herself off. His hands were shaking as he used strips of towel to bind the open wounds on her palms.
Theron planted a gentle kiss on her forehead, and it was as if she woke up from a dream. The chaos of the last few minutes came crashing down and Miranza’s legs gave way, her knees buckling as she sagged against the counter.

“Stars, what have I done?” she moaned, a sudden panic threatening to overtake her. “They’ll kill us for this …” She kept repeating herself, the words tumbling from her lips, and then Theron was pulling her to him.

“I know where the arsenal is,” he said softly, whispering the words directly into her ear. “I can get to it, but I need your help. Together we can do this.”

Miranza blinked as the meaning of his words sank in. He knew where the arsenal was. They could get to it. This was it, this was what they had been waiting for.

*We can do this.*

Theron felt uncomfortably exposed as he stood in front of the security panel and waited for Miranza to take up position beside him. He did his best not to stare at her, but he found his gaze constantly being dragged back towards her, the compulsion to check and make sure she hadn’t completely cracked almost overwhelming him.

He knew she wasn’t okay – stars, *he* was so far from okay that the concept seemed a distant memory – but she was functional. After what had happened back at the suite …

*Fuck.*

Miranza was *not* okay. *Theron* was not okay. Samar was dead, though, so that … that was something, although Theron felt an uncontrollable surge of anger that *he* hadn’t been the one to slash the bastard’s throat. He wasn’t normally the sort to obsess over murdering someone else – he wasn’t normally the sort to go around murdering people, period, although he was comfortable enough with violence that he could do what needed to be done – but after everything Samar had put him through he felt like the death had been owed to him.

By now Theron would have thought he would be accustomed to not getting what he wanted.

“Talk me through this,” Miranza said, her voice soft and surprisingly calm for someone who had been in the midst of a nervous breakdown not half an hour earlier. She stood in front of the security panel, hands hovering over the keys, no evidence of the trembling he had noticed before. She knew how to slice a security panel, but this one needed to be sliced at the same time as Theron’s and was slightly more advanced than what she was accustomed to working with.

Theron talked, walking her through the steps needed to slice into the terminal. It was easier for him, but the act of explaining it to Miranza served as a grounding exercise for him. Her fingers flew over the panel and his matched hers, and in a matter of seconds both panels lit up green and the doors opened.

They entered the room side by side, stolen blaster pistols in hand. Theron’s pistol had belonged to Samar and had been buried under a pile of discarded clothing. Miranza had taken her pistol off one of the few security guards they had come across; he wouldn’t need it ever again. She had been the one to do the dirty work: Theron’s conditioning wouldn’t let him fight the guards. Fortunately, even battered as she was Miranza was more than a match for a bunch of mercenaries.

The Republic case was still at the back of the room, where it had been the last time Theron had been
on this floor. They approached it slowly, cautiously. The case was propped open, the device – the arsenal – sitting in the centre, protected on all sides by heavy padding. It looked somewhat like the sequence profiler Samar and the others had retrieved from Barquet and his Nautolan friend, back on Nar Shaddaa. It looked surprisingly harmless, considering what it had done to the Sith, but Theron supposed he and Miranza were safe from it by virtue of being Force-blind.

Miranza stared at the arsenal, her lips pinched. She cast a glance in Theron’s direction.

“If I were a good little agent I would be trying to think of a way to get this back to Sith Intelligence,” she said, still speaking quietly.

“We’re destroying it,” Theron replied, his voice firm. He found it difficult to get the words out, almost as though they toed that line of his conditioning, but he was able to speak through gritted teeth. She nodded, unperturbed. Her expression was unreadable.

They studied the arsenal in silence for a moment before Miranza said, “It’d be easier to destroy this if we had Kaliyo with us. She’d be able to recommend about seven different ways to blow everything sky-high.”

“You didn’t seem to have any problem causing mayhem on Rishi,” Theron reminded her, thinking of how she had destroyed the Nova Blades’ caches with nothing more than some improved explosives.

“Eh, pirates.” Miranza shrugged, but he saw the faintest trace of a smile on her lips. Even this small amount of banter was reassuring to him; it was nothing like how they had flirted and teased each other back on Yavin 4, but it was something.

The room was remarkably devoid of explosives, flammables or anything even remotely useful in destroying a multimillion-credit Republic weapon. Neither of them was strong enough to damage the device with their bare hands, nor could they lift it enough to drop it or fling it against the wall or the floor. In the end the two of them decided to obliterate the arsenal using their blasters – or rather, Miranza blasted the hell out of the device while Theron stood guard, knowing full well the noise would result in security coming to investigate.

“Your father’s going to be so pissed,” Miranza commented, but before Theron could investigate that remark security was upon them and it was time to haul jets.

O o O o O

Kaliyo had finally convinced Bugboy to get some shut-eye before his incessant pacing forced her to take drastic action against him. The damn man had been on edge long before they got to Corellia, but the moment they were planet-side his nerves had ratcheted up. She knew perfectly well that neither he nor Agent had much use for the planet – hell, outside of the warring Sith and Republic, who fucking cared about Corellia? – but damn, he didn’t have to go and get her all freaked out, too. Agent didn’t like Kaliyo using chems to calm herself down, and even though Mom wasn’t there to harass her the only good stuff on board the shuttle was medical-grade shit that would knock her out way too hard and way too fast. She wanted to take the edge off, not sleep for a month. Although she was sorely tempted to jab Vector with some of that shit, just to calm him down.

It wasn’t that Kaliyo wasn’t sympathetic. She liked Miranza, most of the time, even if she was way the hell too bleeding-heart to ever really get a girl like Kaliyo. Agent was like the conscience Kaliyo had never wanted, and her husband was just as bad. It remained to be seen whether or not that little hottie Shan would be just as bad – Kaliyo hadn’t had many opportunities to interact with him on Rishi or Yavin 4. For some reason Miranza had kept her away from him.
Anyway … Kaliyo was sympathetic, was the point. She worried about Agent, getting her dumb ass captured again and no doubt getting tortured again and – huh, wasn’t that something else Miranza had in common with her little Republic spy-boy? A propensity for getting captured and beat up? Maybe that’s what they bonded over: the best ways to avoid breaking under torture. Probably swapped war stories.

Fucking spies.

Kaliyo sat in the cockpit of the shuttle Vector had procured, her booted feet propped up on the console as she listened to the comm chatter. Bugboy had only agreed to taking a break if she had promised to keep an ear out for anything that might let them know where Miranza and Tightpants were. Or any reports that indicated that Spooky-Eyes or Spy-boy were on their way. Shit, 'Spy-boy' was what she called Theron; she needed to come up with new nicknames for that Balkar guy. This whole situation had her off her game.

It was only a matter of time before Lana and Balkar showed up on Corellia – if they weren’t already there. That Balkar guy had been the one to get Miranza’s message that she and Tightpants were on Corellia in the first place, so they were way ahead of the game on this one. And Spooky-Eyes knew that the Dark Council wanted the two spies, although whether or not Lana would have told Balkar that was pretty damn doubtful. Of course the Republic probably wanted to get their hands on Miranza, too, since she’d gone and killed some damned Jedi or some shit like that, so it was best to keep a low profile and stay off of everyone’s radars.

Shit like this was why Kaliyo preferred to work solo. Safer just to assume everyone was going to turn on you and just get out while the getting was good. Spending so much time with do-gooders like Miranza and Bugboy and you started getting ideas about inter-faction cooperation and patriotism and the greater good. All that bullshit.

Vector’s holocomm, which he’d left on the pilot’s seat at Kaliyo’s insistence – poor bastard kept replaying messages his wife had sent him, wasn’t going to get any sleep obsessing over that shit – started to flash and beep. Kaliyo’s feet hit the floor with a dull thud and she leaned over, snatching the comm up and hitting the activation button.

“Kaliyo?” Miranza’s voice sounded frantic, and Kaliyo realized the other woman must have assumed the worst, seeing the Rattataki answering Vector’s comm.

“Relax, Agent, Bugboy’s taking a breather. Hey, look at you, you’re alive.”

The holographic image was pulled in close to Miranza’s face, making it all too easy for Kaliyo to notice the lines of pain and worry etched around the agent’s eyes and mouth. She thought she saw spots of blood on her face, too, but she couldn’t be sure – could just be grime. Stars only knew what kinds of muck Miranza was rolling around in planet-side.

“We need an evac,” Miranza replied, ignoring Kaliyo’s flippant comment. She started to say something, then gasped, and it was hard to tell but Kaliyo thought the agent went a little bit pale.

“Evac and … Is Lokin with you?”

“Off leading a wild flutterplume chase in Hutt space,” Kaliyo replied. “You and Tightpants are — “

“Shit.” The voice that cut in belonged to Theron, and the projection was jerked to one side, revealing the Republic agent in all his delicious glory – although, to be fair, he looked about as shitty as Agent did. This time Kaliyo was almost positive the dark spots were blood. “We need a medic. Look, just … just get to these coordinates, all right? We’ll figure it out from there.”
Theron punched in a string of coordinates, then cut the channel. Kaliyo recognized the location as being somewhere north of Axial Park. She keyed the coordinates into the shuttle’s navicomputer before leaning out of her seat and turning toward the back of the shuttle.

“Bug— fuck it, Vector! We got contact!”

It was raining in Coronet City.

Miranza had always hated the rain. It gave her flashbacks to her childhood on Dromund Kaas and the Intelligence training centres where she had been raised. It was always raining on Dromund Kaas.

Now, though, she was freezing her ass off in the mud, the protective shelter of Theron’s arms doing nothing to alleviate the cold, and there was a red-hot poker jabbing her in the side and everything hurt and she was having a very difficult time holding on to consciousness. The sensible part of her mind told her to stay awake – that sensible part was being echoed by Theron, pleading with her to just stay with me, dammit! – while the other part, the vast majority, of her mind was pretty sure she was due for some rest.

Theron’s hands were resting on her midsection, pressed hard against the pain in her side. She knew he was keeping pressure on her wound, knew that if she looked down at herself she would be able to see the jagged hunk of metal that had impaled her – shrapnel from an explosion, although she couldn’t remember the details. Everything was so blurry. She tried not to look down. It was very disconcerting to see something sticking out of her that wasn’t supposed to be there, and it bothered her even more to see how Theron’s hands were slick with blood. At least nothing was sticking out of her that was supposed to be inside; she didn’t consider herself to be squeamish – you couldn’t afford to be, in her line of work – but the idea of looking down and seeing a length of trailing intestine probably would have been more than even her iron stomach could take. There had to be a limit to what she could deal with.

“C’mon, now, Miranza, you gotta stay awake,” Theron murmured, his face pressed close enough to hers that she could feel his warm breath on her cheek. She looked up and saw the fear and worry in his hazel eyes. A girl could get lost in eyes like that. She blinked, and his face shifted, and it was Samar looking down at her, throat slashed and gaping. She flinched, trying to pull away, but he held onto her and suddenly it was just Theron again.

“All this time together, and I still don’t know anything about you.” He gave her a wan smile. “Stay with me, stay awake. Tell me something I don’t know about you.”

“Hardly seems fair,” Miranza replied, thinking back to a conversation she had had with Shara, way back when she had first met the woman as Watcher Two. “Nothing in this exchange for me – I already know all about you.”

He chuckled softly, careful not to jostle her, then changed tactics. “You ever play ‘Two Truths and a Lie’? We could play that.”

Miranza thought about it. Under normal circumstances she wasn’t one for party games and sharing secrets with a Republic spy seemed like a terrible idea, but it couldn’t be any more intimate than what she and Theron had already been through together. And hell, the man was practically holding her insides together at this point. If that didn’t say trust she didn’t know what did.

“You go first,” she whispered, closing her eyes so his face would stop changing in front of her.
“Eyes on me, Miranza,” Theron cautioned her, and she opened her eyes again, focusing on his lips. He had nice lips. Kissable lips. “All right, let me think … I love Tionese noodles, I hate caf and my favourite colour is blue.”


“Nope, I hate it.” He gave her a faint grin. “Just kind of got hooked on it in the academy and don’t know how to function without it now. And my favourite colour is green. Your turn.”

“I love Sith opera, I kind of threatened your mom, and I offered to be a Joiner.”

Theron grimaced. “Ugh, I want all of those to be lies, but … I don’t even know. The Joiner thing is probably true, ‘cause of Vector, but I don’t know about the other two. I don’t remember you threatening Satele on Yavin 4. You were really polite towards her.”

“I met her before that,” Miranza admitted. “Ask her about the Brentaal Star sometime. Fun story.”

“You could just tell me about it now.”

“Nuh-uh, that’s not the game. Your turn.” She smiled as he shook his head at her.

“You’re impossible.” Theron shifted slightly, trying to find a position that kept her midsection out of the mud but didn’t cause his legs to cramp. “Fine. I’m married to my job, I suck at relationships and I don’t find you even remotely attractive.”

Miranza let out a short laugh that twisted into a gasp of pain and squeezed her eyes shut again. Before he could start cajoling her to stay with him she opened her eyes and patted one of his hands lightly in what she hoped was a reassuring manner.

“I’m fucking gorgeous and you know it,” she retorted, the words coming out clipped.

“Yeah.” He gave her a lopsided grin, pretending not to notice how much pain she was in. “You are. So … uh … your turn?”

“How much longer ‘til they get here?” she asked him instead. It was getting harder and harder to think, and she was pretty sure she couldn’t feel her feet anymore. Theron’s body was warm against hers, but she was cold and wet and so damned tired.

“Soon,” he promised. “Just stay with me. It’s your turn.”

She sighed, struggling to think of something to say. She had never been very good at this game; it was always hard to come up with truths that were safe to intersperse in with the lies.

“I hate Corellia, I once dressed as a Hutt’s dancer to sneak into a cantina, and I mouthed off to your dad.”

Theron’s jaw dropped and he likely would have flinched away from her if she hadn’t needed him to keep her supported. He was silent for a moment, mulling over her words, before finally asking, “You know who my father is?”

“Yeah. Commander Malcom is the one who told us to look for you on Belsavis.”

“And he admitted he was my father? I mean, he told you that?”

“Yeah.” She smiled again faintly. “That might have been where the mouthing-off part came into play.”
“Wow, it’s a good thing I’m not close to my parents, or our relationship’s about to get real awkward.”

Miranza was about to say something – to poke at his comment about “their relationship” – but the sound of an approaching speeder cut her off. She felt Theron tense under her and one of his hands slid away from her stomach, reaching for the blaster pistol at his hip. She wanted to reach for her own weapon but her hands wouldn’t cooperate, and in any event she knew she wouldn’t be much good in a fight.

The rain made it difficult to see more than a few feet ahead of them, but it meant that whoever was coming closer would have a hard time seeing them, too. The speeder came closer until it was obvious that the driver was headed in their direction.

Then Kaliyo’s voice called out to them: “Fuck, Agent, you look like shit.”

“Thank you, Kaliyo,” Miranza said dryly, feeling Theron begin to relax as Kaliyo and Vector approached them. “I love you, too.”

Vector sank to his knees beside them, heedless of the mud and muck that immediately soaked his pants legs. She could see the need to hold her written clearly across her husband’s face but he held back, taking in her obvious wounds – the blood, the bruises, the metal clutched between Theron’s fingers. Finally he reached out and cupped her chin, his long, elegant hand warm against her chilled skin.

“You do look a fright,” Vector admitted, stroking her cheek. His gaze encompassed Theron as well. “You too, Agent Shan, although we are pleased to see you again in spite of the unpleasant circumstances.”

“Glad for the rescue, Vector,” Theron replied, letting go of his blaster and returning his hand to Miranza’s stomach. She let out a gasp at the increase in pressure and Vector’s hand stilled on her cheek. “We need to get her to a med centre or a doctor.”

“We cannot risk going anywhere either of you might be recognized.” Vector looked grim. “The Dark Council is looking for both of you, and Miranza is wanted for crimes against the Republic.”

Theron tensed again, no doubt preparing to do battle on Miranza’s behalf, but Kaliyo let out a laconic chuckle.

“Relax, kids. I know a guy.”
Chapter Twelve

In a time of war any relatively large and clear space could suffice as a med centre, and over his years of service in the SIS Theron Shan had seen more than his fair share of them. This was the first time he’d ever been treated in an elementary school, however.

Much like the university, the school was empty, the students and their families long since fled. Unlike the university, no one was paying to maintain the school’s upkeep: the power and water had been shut off, there weren’t any cleaning droids sweeping the halls, and there was no proper security to speak of. Instead, the building was maintained by members of the Corellian resistance. Generators were packed in side by side out in the hallway, long cables connecting them to all the equipment the makeshift medical centre could need, and there were a handful of water filtration and sanitation stations set up in what used to be the kindergarten room, there to ensure there was clean running water. Armed soldiers patrolled the halls with whatever weapons and armour they could cobble together, and refugees and other civilians rubbed elbows with injured resistance fighters, all of them waiting for medical treatment. The various classrooms were set up as examination rooms and makeshift surgical theatres, with the gymnasium serving as the triage centre. It was all a strange combination of chaos and order, clutter and organization.

Theron sat alone in one of the smaller classrooms, feeling lost and out of place. One of the nurses – or what passed for a nurse, in the makeshift med centre – had assessed his condition already and put kolto and bandages where they would do the most good before hooking him up to an IV drip that was supposed to feed him saline and nutrients. The Twi’lek woman had a maternal air about her and when she looked at Theron her lavender eyes had been filled with sympathy, although she had been very firm about him staying put and letting the IV do its job. Not that he could have gone anywhere even if he had wanted to: the nurse had stripped him of his wet, muddy clothes before examining him, and Theron didn’t have it in him to go parading around the med centre in his underthings. He wasn’t used to feeling this exposed or vulnerable. It was just nudity. But he knew, without dwelling on it too much, why it was that he felt so uncomfortable, why the nurse’s thorough examination had made him tense even though her professional gaze held none of the cruelty or lasciviousness that he had seen on Samar’s face, and he didn’t feel like thinking about it too much right now. Instead he told himself that he just wanted to stay close to the small space heater that was plugged in a few feet away from the large teacher’s desk that served as his exam table – he was just cold, not weak or scared.

The heater did feel nice, though. Theron and Miranza had been huddled in the rain and mud for a long time waiting for her crew to show up, and the cold had seeped into his bones, leaving him aching and tired. Now that the adrenaline of their escape had left him he was well on his way to crashing and was just waiting for the doctor’s all-clear – and the promise of a clean set of clothing – before finding a place to collapse for the next four or seven or twenty hours.

A hesitant knock sounded at the door and Theron started, his hands instinctively moving to cover himself up before he realized what he was doing. He frowned, forcing himself to be still (get a grip on yourself, Shan) and called out a greeting.

He was surprised to see Vector walk into the room; he had thought the man would be with his wife. Instead, he was here, looking around the classroom with feigned interest while Theron fought to get his fears under control. The Joiner had a small bundle of cloth tucked under one arm, and as he approached and held the bundle out Theron was relieved to see that it contained a selection of
clothing: a faded T-shirt with the logo of a local sports team on the front, a pair of soft-looking trousers, and even some underwear and mismatched socks. Vector handed the clothing to Theron before pointedly turning his back and heading towards a bookshelf filled with datapads geared towards younger readers.

“We were not certain of the fit, Agent Shan,” Vector said, “but this was the best that the lost and found had to offer.”

“Thanks.” Theron ignored the underwear – even with Vector’s back to him he didn’t feel comfortable enough to strip off what little he had on, and once again he was definitely not thinking about why he felt so uncomfortable – and pulled on the trousers, feeling an immense surge of relief at being even partially clothed. The T-shirt was trickier to manage; he had to unclip the IV in order to get his arm through the sleeve. The clothes were slightly too big but they were warm and dry and more importantly they meant he was no longer naked. Once clothed, he found the voice to ask the question that was immediately on his mind the moment Vector walked in the door: “How’s Miranza doing?”

Vector didn’t turn away from the bookshelf, but instead ran one of his long fingers over the spines of the datapads, his dark head lowered as he looked through the titles.

“She remains in surgery. We were advised to leave; our presence was, apparently, a distraction.” The Joiner’s voice was tight but composed. “It was felt that we might be of more use elsewhere, and your nurse offered the opinion that you might be more comfortable with dry clothing.”

“She was right. Thank you.”

Vector made a noncommittal sound and pulled one of the datapads off the shelf, turning to face Theron with a faint smile on his lips.

“We recall reading this one as a child,” he commented, showing the datapad to Theron. *The Brave Little Bantha*, the title read. The picture was of a cartoonishly cheerful bantha improbably standing on its hind legs, a bindle stick slung at a jaunty angle over its shoulder. “Did you read this in school?”

“I didn’t exactly have a traditional education,” Theron replied, his voice filled with dry amusement. He hadn’t gone to a formal school, but had instead been trained on Tython, with the other younglings. It had been less a classroom setting and more a small group of antsy, excited children trying very hard to behave with the gravitas expected of future Jedi.

“Oh, yes.” Vector put the datapad back before looking at Theron. “We doubt Miranza would have read this, either. A shame: it’s a rather charming tale, if one doesn’t expect too much grounding in reality.”

Theron was silent, uncertain what response was expected of him. He suspected Vector was simply speaking for the sake of it – filling the silence just to be polite. Normally Theron was better at filling those silences himself, but at the moment he just felt too weighted down by everything to be comfortable at small-talk.

After a moment he sighed and shook his head before saying quietly, “I’m sorry.”

“Whatever for, Agent Shan?” Vector gave him a curious look, his expression mild.

“For Miranza.” Theron scrubbed his hands through his hair, messing it up even more than it had already been. Vector continued to stare at him, looking perplexed, and Theron felt compelled to
elaborate. “She wouldn’t be in this mess if it wasn’t for me. If she hadn’t come looking for me –“

“Agent Shan.” Vector’s voice was very firm as he interrupted him. “It was our wife’s decision to involve herself in the search for you. Had she wanted to remain safe, she could have simply chosen to stay away. She did not. There is nothing to apologize for.”

“But I hurt her!” Theron blurted out, the words suddenly pouring out of him. “Again and again and again. I nearly killed her, back on Belsavis – I would have killed her, if Samar hadn’t ordered me to stop. And then when we were alone, the things Samar made me do to her … He gave the orders, but it was my hands that carried them out, and Force help me, if Amrielle shows up and tells me to kill Miranza – or you – I’ll do it, I won’t have a choice, and –“

“Agent Shan. Theron.” Vector had moved away from the bookshelf and stood in front of Theron, not quite close enough to touch. Once again his voice was firm, his expression sympathetic although there was a hard set to his jaw. “We cannot even begin to presume to know what you have gone through these past few weeks, but we do know from Miranza’s previous experiences with Castellan restraints that you are just as much a victim in this as she is. You were brainwashed. We repeat: there is nothing to apologize for.”

Theron ran his hands over his face, trying to ignore the way his fingers shook. Vector’s words jumbled around in his mind, but what stood out to him was that Miranza had been through this before. He didn’t know what Castellan restraints were – given the context, he could hazard a guess – but he knew what he had gone through. Had Miranza already done this before she had come to rescue him?

“I made her use the keyword on me,” he said softly, staring down at the floor.

Vector went very still. When he spoke, his voice was quiet, no more than a polite query. “Oh?”

“When we got to the exit,” Theron explained, closing his eyes, picturing the scene in his head. “I couldn’t fight, I couldn’t do anything that would betray Samar, I couldn’t even destroy the arsenal. She had to do everything. And then, before we left, there was … I don’t know, some kind of explosion. A grenade, maybe? And she was hit. She kept going … We kept going, but when we got to the door I just … I stopped. I froze. I couldn’t make myself step out the door, I couldn’t leave the skyscraper, no matter how much I wanted to move. When she first offered to get me out she said she could disable me so that I wouldn’t be forced to interfere, but then when we were leaving … I couldn’t go, and she could have disabled me but then she would’ve had to carry me and … and she was hurt. She couldn’t have carried me, not then, so I … I told her to make me follow her. It was the only way. She didn’t want to.”

“No,” Vector said thoughtfully, “she wouldn’t have.”

“She had to. It was the only way.” Theron found his hands were shaking rather badly, and he clenched them into fists and set them on his lap. “She used my keyword so I had to follow her out of there.” He remembered how she had said it, though, how flat and lifeless her voice had been when she had uttered his keyword. He had sensed, then, that it had hurt her to use his command word on him, and he was afraid that it was one more weight piled on a mental structure that was no longer sound. She had already snapped once, back in the skyscraper, and that had led to her killing Samar. Theron forcing her to use his keyword was just one more weight. He was afraid of what he had done to her, and ashamed that it had even been necessary in the first place.

“Well.” Vector’s face had taken on a sickly hue, but his tone was still polite, if somewhat forced. “It sounds like we will have much to talk about when she wakes up.”
The sound of a throat clearing pulled them away from this uncomfortable topic, and Theron turned to see the doctor – Doc, Kaliyo had called him, refusing to elaborate further on his name or his identity other than to say that he was reasonably trustworthy – standing in the doorway. Vector’s courteous demeanour immediately evaporated, revealing the anxious husband that had been lurking underneath.

“Is she …?” Vector couldn’t bring himself to finish the sentence.

“She’s fine,” Doc replied. He had a habit of smoothing down the edges of his moustache whenever he was feeling particularly pleased with himself, and he did so now. “She lost a lot of blood and she’s gonna be in some pain, but ol’ Doc’s got her all fixed up. She’s gonna be out for a while, but you can go and sit with her if you want.” His brown eyes flicked to Theron. “I need to talk to my other patient in privacy anyway, so you might as well go see her.”

Vector offered up some hasty thanks and apologies to Theron before hurrying out of the room, and Doc came to stand in front of Theron, stopping in pretty much the exact spot where Vector had stood moments before. Before Theron could say anything Doc picked up the datapad that the nurse had been filling out and glanced over it, his face perfectly expressionless. The Twi’lek had assured Theron that the various tests and readings they had done would all be deleted from the system when he and the others left the med centre – not only was everything confidential, but the moment the patients vacated the premises the records were destroyed. There would be nothing linking Theron, Miranza or the others to the resistance’s med centre; it would be as if they had never been there in the first place.

Doc set the datapad back on the table and fixed Theron with a serious look.

“Okay, handsome –” Theron winced at the nickname; Samar had called him the same thing, and it made him intensely uncomfortable to hear the doctor using it. Doc paused, shifting awkwardly, and changed tack. “Look, the medical exam gives me a pretty good idea of … Look, you’ve been through some shit. You and the girl. Doc’s not an idiot. Somebody’s been beating the shit out of you, out of both of you, and … There’s no easy way to ask this, but – that guy, the girl’s husband, is he hurting you two? Is Kaliyo? I mean, she and I go back a ways but I know she’s dangerous. Are you in some kind of trouble?”

Theron couldn’t help himself: he laughed. And once he started laughing he found he couldn’t stop, near-hysterical giggles boiling up out of him and causing him to double over on the table. Doc took a step back, no doubt thinking he had just sparked some kind of nervous breakdown, but Theron was completely helpless in the throes of his laughter until his sides were aching and he had to take in great gasps of air to calm himself down.

“Yes, I’m in trouble,” he managed finally, once he’d finally gotten himself under control, “but Kaliyo and Vector aren’t the cause. They’re my rescuers.”

“Huh. Okay, then.” Doc nodded, although he still looked completely confused. After a moment he picked up a small light and flicked it on, instructing Theron to try and follow it as he shone it in his eyes. Theron did as he was told, easily following the light as Doc moved it back and forth in front of him. Doc then leaned in to get a closer look at Theron’s eyes, and as he did so he casually rested his hand on Theron’s knee.

Theron couldn’t help himself – he flinched, violently. Doc removed his hand and took a step back, frowning hard.

“Is there anything you want to tell me?” the doctor asked, his voice pitched low and confidential.
“I don’t want to talk about it,” Theron replied, trying desperately to ignore the way his stomach clenched and roiled, and pretending that he didn’t sound like a petulant 12-year-old refusing to respond to his parents’ questions (not that Theron would know much about that).

“All right.” Doc put the light down and picked up his datapad, turning away to give Theron time to compose himself again. He tapped the mostly empty saline and nutrients bolus with one finger and said, “I’m gonna have Teela set you up with another one of these, along with a course of antibiotics – purely for prophylactic purposes, of course.”

“Of course,” Theron said numbly. It saved him from having to get himself tested after Samar … He grimaced, closing his eyes. He didn’t want to think about this. He was tired of thinking about this. Stars, just let me stop thinking about this!

“Look.” Doc’s voice was hard, and when Theron opened his eyes again he could see that the other man’s expression was filled with concern. “You don’t wanna talk about it with me, that’s your call. Got a pretty clear idea without you filling in the blanks for me. But sooner or later you’re gonna need to speak to someone, or it’s just gonna eat at you. You got someone you can talk to?”

Theron didn’t answer him. He didn’t have it in him to pull off a convincing lie, but he didn’t feel like admitting to the man that he couldn’t think of anyone he could feel comfortable sharing all of this with. Master Zho was long dead, his parents certainly weren’t available, and he wasn’t the sort of person who had a lot of close friends. Jonas? Teff’ith? He couldn’t see himself opening up to either of them about what had happened to him. The SIS had therapists and counsellors on call for agents who were traumatized in the field, but the thought of discussing any of this with a complete stranger – no matter how professional and sympathetic – made him feel sick to his stomach. Trant would pull him off of active field work. He’d be stuck behind a desk, on Coruscant, at best – maybe even put on permanent disability. He couldn’t do that.

“All right,” Doc said again, when Theron remained silent. “Just let the IV do its magic and … you know, try to rest. I gotta go check on my other patients.”

“Thanks,” Theron said.

Doc shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “Eh, don’t thank me. I owed Kaliyo.”

Theron suspected there was more to the story than just that – he had only met the Rattataki briefly, but she didn’t seem like the sort of person who just ran around performing acts of charity. In spite of his curiosity, however, he didn’t feel up to attempting to wheedle more information out of the doctor, so he let the subject drop. After a few more seconds of uncomfortable silence Doc suggested Theron pay Miranza a visit, and told him he could wheel his IV stand over to the room where she was recovering. The doctor made Theron promise not to push himself or Miranza too hard – an easy enough promise to make, given how phenomenally shitty Theron was feeling at present – and let him go, handing him the datapad with his own medical information on it before he left. Just as the Twi’lek had, Doc promised that the information contained on the datapad would be destroyed once Theron and the others left the med centre; the only copies would be what they chose to take with them for their own personal records.

Teela tracked Theron down just as he was pushing his IV stand down the hallway. She made him stop for a brief moment while she replaced his IV bolus with another filled with fresh saline and nutrients, which she explained was to help counteract the effects of stress and poor nutrition from the past few weeks. She also gave him the promised antibiotics – administered by two quick and painless injections – before sending him on his way.

Miranza’s room was another small classroom; judging from the scattered toys and building blocks
laying about Theron suspected it was for a younger grade than the room he had been in. Childish paintings and brightly-coloured examples of Aurebesh lettering decorated the walls, and there was a small weekly chart affixed with gold stars at the front of the class. Miranza was curled up on her side on a gurney – the first actual bed Theron had seen since his arrival – with her own IV stand positioned beside her, as well as various pieces of medical equipment that Theron had seen elsewhere but didn’t know the exact purpose of. Vector sat cross-legged on top of a child-sized desk next to her, holding one of her hands in both of his own. He offered Theron a tired smile.

“We see Doc has freed you,” Vector said, pitching his voice low so as not to wake the sleeping woman beside him.

“Released under my own recognizance,” Theron replied, affecting a wry tone. He came and stood beside the bed, feeling slightly ill at ease, as if he had interrupted an intimate moment between the couple.

If he noticed Theron’s unease Vector didn’t comment on it. Instead, he motioned for Theron to take his seat, angling up off the desk with lanky grace and going to retrieve something from under the bed. When he straightened again he was holding a syringe cupped carefully in his hands, and he had a sober expression on his face.

“Before she went into surgery she asked us to prepare this for you,” the Joiner said quietly, looking away as pain flickered across his features and was gone again. “She was concerned that she might not … that she would not awaken, and thus would be unable to fulfill the promise she made to you.”

He glanced down at Theron, frowning slightly, his all-black eyes fathomless and unreadable. “Were you aware that she was able to contact us during her captivity?”

“No.” Theron felt a small hitch in his chest at the thought that Miranza had feared she was dying and had still been worried about him. “No, I didn’t … I wasn’t aware.”

Vector nodded as if Theron had simply confirmed something he had already suspected. “Twice, in fact. She spoke to Agent Balkar both times.”

The way he said it made Theron certain the other man felt some resentment towards Jonas, but Theron was just grateful to know his friend in the SIS had been involved in looking for him. Not that that was a huge surprise, of course. “The first time we think she was simply establishing contact. She did not have much information to pass on, save that she was concerned for you and that she knew we would be worried about her. The message she had Agent Balkar pass on to us was … not reassuring.”

“Oh?” There was a lot in that statement that Theron wanted to unpack, but he chose to focus on the part that Vector seemed to need to talk about.

“She told Agent Balkar to let us know that it was like our honeymoon all over again.”

At the look of confusion on Theron’s face Vector gave him a thin smile and elaborated, “This is not the first time our beloved has been on Corellia. The last time was shortly after we were married – thus, our honeymoon, although we cannot think of a less pleasant way to mark the occasion. She was … She allowed herself to be captured and tortured, in order to ensure the spread of false information.”

Theron couldn’t help the small gasp that escaped his lips, and Vector nodded again, looking down at his unconscious wife with an expression of fondness – and mild exasperation.

“We do not tell you this so that you will feel guilty,” Vector continued. “Rather, we think you should know that our beloved has made this choice before and has survived it. Whatever the two of you suffered, we have faith that you will both be strong enough to get through it.”

His eyes fixed on Miranza’s pale face – paler than usual, with deep circles under her eyes and a
sunken look to her cheeks – Theron let out a small snort and rubbed one hand over the injection site. The skin felt hot and tight to the touch.

“Doc said I should find someone to talk to about it,” he said after a moment.

He felt rather than saw Vector’s gaze on him as the other man murmured, “And do you wish to talk about it with us?”

“No.” Theron jerked his chin in the direction of the syringe, still cupped in Vector’s hands. “I want to know what that is that you’re holding.”

Vector glanced down at the syringe as if he had forgotten it was there.

“Ah, yes. This was the subject of Miranza’s second message. We were sent to retrieve an assortment of chemicals so that she could prepare this for you.” Vector held the syringe up, the green liquid inside sloshing against the clear glass. “We believe her intention was to prepare it herself, given her greater expertise on the subject, but before her surgery she shared the composition with us so that we could mix it. We are not so experienced with chemistry that we could have conjured it on our own, but her instructions were very clear.”

“What is it?”

“This is the serum that will enable you to defeat your brainwashing, Agent Shan.” Vector smiled. “This is what will free you.”
Chapter Thirteen

Miranza awakened from a nightmare – or strings of nightmares – about grasping, clawing hands, taunting voices and familiar faces twisted into masks of cruelty, and the moment she opened her eyes to discover she was lying on her own bed inside her own ship she was so relieved she nearly burst into tears – she, who hadn’t cried genuine tears since she was a child. (Fake tears, a ploy to gain sympathy from a mark, oh yes she had cried plenty of those, but real tears of pain or fear or even happiness? That sort of visible demonstration had been beaten out of her in the training centres on Dromund Kaas.)

But it was close. She could feel the burning in her eyes, the slight itching in her throat.

She blinked up at the ceiling, finding a delight in recognizing the familiar panels – there, that one spot where the pattern was uneven, it had always annoyed her that on such a fancy ship as the X-70B Phantom the builders had done a shoddy job of putting the ceiling panels together. Now, however, that uneven spot was dear to her; it told her she was home.

She had no memory of boarding the Mercurial. The last thing she remembered was that doctor friend of Kaliyo’s – Doc, he insisted upon calling himself, frequently speaking in the third person in a way that made her wonder if perhaps he was a little bit crazy – fitting the gas mask over her face and telling her to count backwards from a hundred. Miranza hadn’t gone further than 97 before the sedatives had pulled her under, and the sweet relief of the absence of pain had been unimaginable.

The pain was there now, though: a dull, burning ache in her gut that intensified as she struggled into a sitting position. It wasn’t as bad as before – less fiery, with none of the nausea that accompanied a bad stomach wound. She could feel the bandages tight against her skin and had to force herself not to go poking and prodding at the injury.

The captain’s quarters were dark, lit only by the various consoles along the walls. The other half of the bed was empty and cold, and even as she wondered where her husband was there was a small part of her that was grateful for his absence – in part because her nightmares had a tendency to cause her to lash out unseeing, but mostly because the idea of sleeping next to someone, even someone she loved as dearly as she loved Vector, made her feel anxious. Before Vector she had never permitted herself the luxury of falling asleep with her partners. Most of the time they were just marks or flings – one-night-stands who didn’t warrant the kind of trust required to truly sleep with someone. Even on the rare occasion when she had felt actual, genuine affection for the other person she still couldn’t bring herself to trust them enough to share a bed with them. She had always found excuses to leave – she had never invited anyone back to her own bed, never trusted anyone enough to let them into that intimate, personal space. Vector, though … Vector had been different. She had flirted with him right from the start, but it wasn’t until after she had rid herself of her conditioning and he had helped to negotiate an alliance between the Empire and the Killiks that their relationship had really begun to bloom. And by then he had fought beside her, had witnessed her at her very lowest and very worst, and she trusted him not just with her life but also with her heart. Trusting him enough to share her bed – her bed, in her own quarters – had just come naturally to her, and before long her quarters became their quarters.

But now Vector was elsewhere and Miranza felt awkwardly relieved by that.
After a few minutes of sitting and thinking she found the darkness uncomfortable. Reaching the lamp on the bedside table proved to be a painful process – you never know how much you use all those muscles in your stomach and back until it hurts to use them, and then you can feel every little pull – but she did it, and soft warm light flooded the room. Once she could see she lifted the hem of the too-large T-shirt she was dressed in – one of Vector’s, an old one she had appropriated as sleepwear – to examine the bandages wrapping her stomach. To her relief they were crisp and white and clean; she had imagined that her exertions had reopened her stitches and had expected to see blood staining the kolto-infused fabric, but everything appeared to be fine. Less fine were the bruises that marred her pale skin, and she quickly lowered the shirt again so that she wouldn’t have to see them.

She was so fucking glad she had killed Samar. She only wished she had made his death slower and more painful.

Just as she was beginning to obsess over Samar and the nightmare of the past few weeks the door to her quarters opened with a gentle whoosh, and Vector paused in mid-step, clearly surprised to see her awake and sitting up.

Seeing him standing there, hesitant and anxious, Miranza felt a surge of love for him that nearly took her breath away. She gasped, holding in a sound that was perilously close to a sob, and pressed one hand against her mouth to keep herself from bursting into tears. Vector saw the conflicting emotions on her face – and could no doubt read them in her aura – and quickly close the distance between them, easing onto the bed beside her and pulling her gently into the circle of his arms. For one brief terrible moment she struggled against the urge to withdraw, panic welling up in her at being touched, but then his arms settled around her and she could smell that spicy-sweet fragrance that was him and he was warm and strong and most importantly he was home to her.

Miranza did cry then, great gasping sobs that made her abdomen scream in agony but she couldn’t stop herself, burying her face against her husband’s chest, her hands twisting in the folds of his shirt as if to pull him closer. Vector made gentle shushing sounds, rubbing one hand over her back, the other stroking her sweat-dampened hair, and she could hear the slight hitch in his breathing that told her he was crying, too, even as he pressed his lips to her forehead and murmured assurances against her skin.

They stayed like that for a long time, Miranza sobbing into Vector’s chest while he held her and did his best to soothe her. When they finally drew apart she could see tearstains on his face, but his beautiful black eyes were clear and he was smiling down at her.

“That was too close, beloved,” he murmured, using one long, elegant finger to brush away the tears on her cheeks. “We were afraid we had lost you.”

Miranza didn’t have a response for that – in truth, she wasn’t entirely certain that she wasn’t lost – so she kissed him, lightly, on the lips. His other hand came up and cupped the back of her head, holding her face close to his. It was a chaste kiss, more reminiscent of their earliest forays into intimacy, but neither of them pressed for more, and the sweetness of it was a balm to her.

She was the one to pull away first, and the movement drew a pained hiss from her lips. Vector frowned at her, then stood and went into the ‘fresher, coming out carrying the small medkit they kept stashed under the sink in case of emergencies. He swiftly produced a kolto injector and some painkillers, and she sat back to let her husband tend to her, his gentle ministrations soon easing her discomfort.

“Where are we?” she asked, as he gently peeled back the bandages on her stomach to check on her wound. “I mean, I know we’re on the ship, but … where?”
“En route to Alderaan,” he replied absently. He smoothed some kolto over her stitches, murmuring a quiet apology when she made a small sound of discomfort. His gaze remained fixed on her stomach as he spoke. “You’ve received priority alerts from Darth Marr, Minister Beniko and … ah … Grand Master Shan.” She supposed it shouldn’t surprise her that the head of the Jedi Order should have somehow acquired her comm channel – after all, the blasted leader of the Republic military had been able to track her down, too. “You’re under orders to hand Agent Shan over to the Dark Council and to present yourself for debriefing.”

She stiffened, and Vector glanced up at her, his eyes glittering. “We felt it prudent to ignore the messages for the time being. Although we have not had time to discuss the matter, we suspect you’ve no intentions of relinquishing custody of Agent Shan.”

Miranza knew she should. She was a loyal servant of the Empire, and ignoring a direct order from the Dark Council was not something a loyal servant did. But even if she didn’t know exactly what the Dark Council intended to do with Theron, she could guess – a highly-placed Republic spy with connections to the Jedi Order and the top echelons of the military, there was no mistaking the agent’s value to the Empire. Throw in the fact that the man had just endured weeks of torture and brainwashing, and Theron would seem to be one step away from being conveniently broken, all the hard work already done for them. He could be turned, perhaps, or merely tortured for more information, or used as a bargaining chip against the Republic. How many Imperial assets could he be traded for? How many concessions could the Empire wrangle out of Saresh and her minions in exchange for him?

“No,” she said finally, the decision made long before the question was even asked of her. “I promised Theron I would free him, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

“As we suspected,” Vector replied, his attention returned to reapplying the bandages around her waist. “Thus, Alderaan. We have made arrangements for a safe house and security detail there.”

She didn’t need to ask her husband what sort of arrangements he had made. If they were going to Alderaan it was because he was calling on his Killik connections, and why not? She was the wife of the Dawn Herald of the Oroboro nest, and they would protect her – and, by extension, Theron Shan – as though they were their own. And while to her Alderaan seemed like a terribly obvious place for her to hide out, in all likelihood the people pursuing her would have dismissed her ties to Vector and the Killiks. They would be expecting her to call on her own connections, to seek shelter on Nar Shaddaa or Rishi or any of the other seedier places she had visited. They wouldn’t expect to find her on a Core World. Furthermore, if the Killiks were protecting her the Empire might hesitate to push too hard for her return, not wanting to disturb the newly-fledged peace treaty between them.

“I missed you,” she murmured, by way of thanks. Vector smiled and planted a gentle kiss over her bandages, then sat up again and began putting the remaining medical supplies back into the kit.

As he returned the medkit to its customary place in the ‘fresher Miranza eased herself slowly out of bed, feeling her muscles protest the movement. The painkillers had gone a long way towards dulling the ache in her gut but she felt sore all over – stiff and sore and tired, as if she had been abed with a fever for months. She wouldn’t mind sleeping some more but now that she was awake her mind was awake with her, and she knew she wouldn’t be able to drift back to sleep any time soon.

Vector came back out of the refresher and made a soft noise of disapproval at seeing his wife up and about, but he knew her too well to insist on her returning to bed. Instead he retrieved an old pair of pants for her to wear, the waistband low enough that it wouldn’t rub up against her stomach wound, and helped her step into them.

“How’s Theron responding to the serum?” she asked, only just now remembering that she had
advised Vector on how to prepare the IX-Serum in order to defeat Theron’s brainwashing. She had wanted to mix it herself, but had been afraid she wouldn’t survive the surgery and had wanted to ensure that no matter what happened to her, Theron would have the chance to be free again.

Her husband made a wry face, commenting dryly, “Agent Shan has chosen to defer treatment until he can speak with you on the matter. It is not unreasonable that he would like assurances we are not simply handing him a vial of poison.”

Annoyed but not terribly surprised, Miranza rolled her eyes. “Really, of the two of us, which one is more likely to be using poison?”

“In Agent Shan’s defense he doesn’t know you as well as we do, beloved,” Vector replied with a soft laugh.

Miranza chuckled, a small warmth growing inside her at how natural and *normal* it felt to be talking like this with her husband – the quiet banter, the comfortable ease with which they spoke to each other. She could feel a tickle in the back of her throat and forced it down, not wanting to cry again, not when she wasn’t feeling *sad*, per se, simply overwrought and emotional.

“Well, where is he, then?” she asked. “I might as well have that talk with him now. The sooner he gets that serum into him, the sooner it can start working.”

“On the bridge,” Vector answered, then he frowned, resting one hand lightly on her shoulder. “We can bring him here. You’re supposed to be resting, not traipsing around all over the ship.”

“Oh, please,” Miranza scoffed. “How much trouble can I get into on the bridge of my own ship?”

The raised arch of one elegant, dark eyebrow was all the answer Vector needed to give.

O o O o O

Although she wouldn’t admit it, Kaliyo felt grateful that she was to be sent away. The current plan was for her to drop the trio off on Alderaan and take the *Mercurial* into Hutt space, where in theory both the Republic and the Empire would tread more lightly in their search for Agent and Tightpants. She knew dozens of little hidey-holes on Nar Shaddaa and Hutta and in between where she could pretend to set up safe houses and bolt holes, and if she played her cards right she could make it look like they were all on the run together and no one would ever find them.

As far as she was concerned, the best part of the plan was the part that involved her not being with the rest of them.

It wasn’t that she wasn’t sympathetic – well, not entirely – but more that Kaliyo had seen this shit before. She had seen the faces of refugees who had lost everything, had seen their devastation and hopelessness, and she knew what was hidden behind those shuttered eyes and pinched mouths. It was bad enough seeing those looks on the faces of complete strangers. It creeped her out to see that bleak devastation in the eyes of people she actually *knew*.

Not that she actually knew Agent’s little Republic hotness all that well, of course, but Kaliyo had come to know him through Miranza’s eyes, and what she saw now bore little resemblance to the man her friend had become attracted to. Kaliyo couldn’t see Agent having the hots for someone who looked so beaten and scared. And Bugboy? He was the most aggravatingly patient and calm person Kaliyo had ever met, but since Corellia there had been an underlying *rage* inside of him that was intimidating as hell. Not that she would ever admit to being intimidated by Vector fucking *Hyllus*, of all people. But the worst – the absolute fucking worst – was seeing Agent herself looking all small
and pale and sickly, and she wasn’t even conscious and Kaliyo could feel the anxiety rolling off of
her. Kaliyo had seen that woman take on a Dark Lord of the Sith – a man who had choked her into
unconsciousness, to the point where Kaliyo had thought the agent was dead – without batting a
freaking eye.

She didn’t want to stick around and see these people looking so weak and helpless and lost – so not
themselves.

No, better by far that she take the ship and book it. Let them sort themselves out. Nobody expected
her to be the nurturing type.

Kaliyo sat on the bridge of the *Mercurial*, checking the course corrections for the trip to Alderaan.
She had filed six different flight plans with the authorities on Corellia and none of those flight plans
were even remotely close to the actual path she had programmed the ship to take. She’d opted for a
circuitous route, hoping that between the falsified flight plans and the meandering course to Alderaan
no one would be able to discern exactly where they were going. It’d take them longer to get to their
destination, of course, but all they were doing was going into hiding, so what did it matter if it took
them forever to get there?

Agent Tightpants was seated at the navigator’s station not far from her, idly flipping through the
contents of a datapad, his attention clearly elsewhere. Kaliyo allowed herself the occasional brief
glance in his direction – telling herself it was just because the man was stupidly easy on the eyes, and
not because she was in any way concerned about him or the restless energy that practically rolled off
him. Nope, she just kept looking at Theron Shan ‘cause he was pretty, that’s all. Even if he looked
like he’d been shit out by a wampa and then trampled under a herd of ronto.

The galaxy had done everyone a favour when it had decided to make that man Force-blind. No Jedi
had any right being that damned hot.

Frankly, Kaliyo was more than a little jealous that Miranza had had the chance to screw him, but as
far as she was concerned no lay was worth the amount of trouble Agent had gone through these past
few weeks, trying to get that man back. No force in the galaxy could’ve convinced Kaliyo to put
herself on the line like that.

Theron shifted, and out of the corner of her eye she could see him gnawing worriedly at his lower
lip. She had to rather forcefully quell the urge to nibble on that lip for him.

First order of business once she was in Hutt space: get herself laid. She clearly wasn’t thinking
straight.

Kaliyo was saved from her own awkward inner monologue by the appearance of Vector and
Miranza in the doorway of the bridge. Agent looked like shit – hard to miss the fact that she was
practically being carried by Bugboy – but it was a pleasant surprise to see her awake and mostly
upright, and Kaliyo said as much, earning herself an amused “gee, thanks” from Miranza. After a
few minutes of small-talk Vector cleared his throat in what was plainly meant to be encouragement,
because then Miranza gave Kaliyo an apologetic smile before asking if they could speak to Theron in
private. He seemed surprised, but eased his way out of the navigator’s chair and moved to join them
in the doorway, leaving the bridge to Kaliyo.

She absolutely did not turn her chair ever so slightly so that she could watch him walk away. That
man had the finest ass in Republic space, and she –

That settled it: she needed to get laid in the *worst kriffing way.*
The Mercurial was easily one of the nicest spaceships Theron had ever been on in his life. Sleek, stream-lined and elegant, it looked more like a luxury yacht than the kind of ship a government agent would be helming. At least, no Republic agent could ever claim to own something so beautiful (not on his pay-cheque, that was for damned sure), but then Theron didn’t really know how the other side ran such things.

The conference room to which Miranza and Vector led him was no less opulent, with wood paneling on the walls, thick plush carpet underfoot, and a table large enough to host sparring matches on top of (if one were so inclined). He sank down in one of the large leatheris chairs, watching closely as Miranza chose the seat next to him, her husband hovering at her shoulder. The manner in which Vector stood over his wife was protective rather than possessive; it seemed that whatever had happened between them these past few weeks, the Joiner still trusted Theron with Miranza, and was merely concerned about her well-being. That was how Theron had always seen the two together: mutually supportive, not jealous or controlling. Theron’s own experience with relationships was remarkably lacking – and it certainly wasn’t as though he could look to his parents for guidance – but it seemed to him that what was between Miranza and Vector was something worth fighting for.

He waited for Miranza to speak, taking the opportunity to just look at her, relieved to see that she was up and about. She looked unwell, her skin too pale, her blue eyes heavily shadowed, and he could see that it hurt her to move – could see that Vector noticed this as well, and that the other man kept close to her in the event she toppled over. It didn’t escape Theron’s notice that Miranza was perfectly aware of her husband’s concern. She folded her hands neatly in her lap – he saw, but chose to pretend to ignore, the way her fingers shook ever so slightly – and met his gaze, licking her lips before opening her mouth to speak.

“I’m under orders to bring you before the Dark Council.”

Whatever Theron had been expecting Miranza to say, it wasn’t that, and her words knocked the wind out of him. A sudden spike of fear drove into him and his heart leapt up into his throat as the full meaning of what she had said drove home: the Dark Council, the most powerful Sith in the entire Empire, and they wanted him. Not just that, but they were ordering her, the woman who knew his keyword, who had used that keyword on him (because you forced her to, Shan, not because she wanted to), who could control him, and –

Hands, strong but gentle, helped Theron back into an upright position. He hadn’t even noticed that he had doubled over, nor had he seen Vector move, closing the distance between them to support Theron before he fell to the floor. Behind Vector Miranza’s face was frozen on an expression of dismay, her hand clenched to her side as she tried to get out of her chair to come to him.

Think, Shan, he told himself, remembering how he had watched Kaliyo enter their destination into the navicomputer – he knew she hadn’t inputted coordinates for Dromund Kaas, he would have noticed that. And if she had changed destinations after he had followed Miranza and Vector off the bridge he would have felt the ship’s course correction. Wherever they were headed, it was most certainly not the seat of the Sith Empire.

He sucked in lungfuls of oxygen, willing his heart to calm in his chest, forcing the panic down. Vector knelt beside him, one hand resting lightly on Theron’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry, I’m not thinking straight,” Miranza apologized, sounding flustered. “We’re not going to Dromund Kaas. I’m not – I’m not handing you over.”

“Where …” He paused, licking suddenly dry lips, then tried again: “Where are we going?”
“Alderaan,” replied Vector, patting Theron once and then standing up, moving back to his wife’s side.

“But we can take you anywhere you want,” Miranza added quickly. It seemed, having gotten their discussion off to such a terrible start, that she was in a hurry to make amends. “It doesn’t have to be Alderaan. We could take you somewhere neutral – Nar Shaddaa, maybe? Or … we could find a way into Republic space, take you to … to Coruscant, or Tython …”

Theron ran shaking hands over his face, noticing how badly in need of a shave he was. After a moment he gave himself a little shake. “This … thing that was done to me – you can fix it, right?”

“Yes.” Miranza nodded, eyeing Vector. “It takes time, but – yes. I can fix it. I wasn’t lying about that.”

“Can anyone else fix me?”

This time Miranza and Vector exchanged glances, and they both shook their heads in unison.

“Of the people who know how to do this – what this is – no, I’m the only one who would be inclined to help you out.” Miranza looked uncomfortable. “But like I said, it takes time, and it would be easier on you if you were someplace safe. It’s not a pleasant procedure.”

*Of course it’s not,* Theron thought, somewhat bitterly. What he said, though, was “Then I guess it looks like I’m going to Alderaan.” He looked up at her. “Can you at least tell me how you know how to do this? I kind of got the impression you’ve seen this before.”

Miranza shuddered, and Vector moved closer to her, a supportive presence at her side. The two of them looked at each other and Theron got the distinct impression that there was a significant amount of unspoken communication going on between them, but then Miranza gave another little nod and seemed to reach some conclusion.

“I didn’t just see it, Theron – I lived it.” She straightened in her chair, shoulders shifting back as she raised her chin. “Cards on the table: what I’m about to tell you is highly classified, and it could – no, it will mean my death if any word of this gets out.”

Theron nodded, finding himself unable to respond. She didn’t seem to require a response from him, however, and simply continued.

“A few years ago I was involved in investigating a terrorist cell that was believed to be responsible for an attack on an Imperial vessel that resulted in the death of a Dark Lord – Darth Jadus. I can’t really go into the details of that investigation, save that … well, it turned out that Jadus was the one responsible for the attack and had faked his own death. And that was really the least of the horrible things he did, so … I killed him.” Theron sensed that there was much more to the story than what Miranza was telling him – he could see from the haunted look on her face that whatever it was, it was more than simply ‘horrible,’ it had caused her a significant amount of grief and pain. She continued, voice soft, “Afterwards my … boss … was given the order to execute me. I stopped a Dark Lord of the Sith from committing unspeakable atrocities, and my reward for that was to be a bolt to the head and an unmarked grave in the jungles of Dromund Kaas.”

Theron made a sound, some twisted combination of outrage and sympathy, and she shot him a grateful smile.

“My boss –“ the way she continued to hesitate over the word suggested to him that it was an unfamiliar title, but that she was holding back on the truth somewhat “—offered another solution:
Castellan restraints.” He saw her hands squeeze over the armrests of her chair, her knuckles going white. “It’s a conditioning program that alters the brain chemistry and enables a controller to input a command word. Mine was Onomatophobia.”

Theron remembered hearing Samar use that word on Miranza, and how she had tensed every time she heard it. She was tensing now, even with Vector rubbing soothing circles on her back.

“Atychiphobia,” he whispered, the word almost tripping on his tongue.

“Fear of failure,” she said, with a nod. “Mine means ‘the fear of a word,’ because never let it be said that Imperial Intelligence lacked a sense of irony.” She gave herself a small shake, then impatiently brushed a strand of blonde hair out of her eyes. “I think the hope was that my keyword would never be used – the idea being that the restraints were intended simply as safeguards in the event that I tried to defy a Sith Lord again. Up until my conditioning – until Jadus’s death – I was seen as an exemplary agent, so it wasn’t expected that I would ever become a problem again. But then I was sent on an undercover assignment – with the SIS.”

“Atychiphobia,” Theron said, feeling sick. He had known the man; Kothe had been one of his mentors, early in his training with the Intelligence service. He had looked up to him.

“Yes.” Her voice was calm – almost flat. “I was sent to him as a supposed defector, but he didn’t trust me, of course. He had an ally, a … person … named Hunter, who had gained access to my keyword, and gave it to him. Kothe used the keyword on me and forced me to betray … everything.”

Theron wanted to be angry at her – she was an admitted spy, sent by the Empire into his organization to try to uncover top secret information that would likely have led to the deaths of countless Republic citizens. And he knew, at least in part, how her story played out: somehow she had broken her conditioning – and she had killed Ardun Kothe. His friend. His mentor.

He wanted to be angry – but he couldn’t. Kothe had taken her conditioning and used it against her, forcing her to act against her own people, against her own interests. Even if that had been the only thing Samar had done to him, Theron would have still wanted the man dead for it. Miranza had every right to her anger.

“You killed him.”

“I did.” She nodded, unapologetic. “I had … help … in freeing myself. Another operative showed me how to mix the chemicals to create the serum that was used on me, and then talked me through deconditioning myself. Once I was free, yes, I killed Ardun Kothe, and then I hunted down the people responsible for passing my keyword on to him – an organization called the Star Cabal.”

“That’s what you called Samar’s group. I guess you didn’t get all of them, huh?” Theron meant to sound sympathetic, but the words came out slightly bitter – if she had killed all of them, they never would have gone after him. He didn’t blame her for it, but …

“The Star Cabal was around for centuries, working behind the scenes. They had their grubby little paws in every organization across the galaxy. I don’t think I’ll ever be done routing them all out. But the one who had my keyword, Hunter, the one who betrayed me to Kothe – she’s dead.” Miranza looked down at her hands, forcing them to unclench from around the armrests. “I don’t know if she and Samar ever met each other, but if they had, they would’ve gotten along swimmingly. My only saving grace was that I was never left alone with her long enough for her to …” She trailed off, unable to finish the thought.

Theron didn’t need her to, not after the time he had spent with Samar. He could not begin to imagine
what it must have been like for her to wind up in the hands of Samar and his cronies, after everything
the Star Cabal had already put her through. She had suffered through it once, and then had made the
choice to stay with him and go through it all again.

“I’m sorry,” he said, pushing himself out of his chair to go and kneel at her feet. Every bruise and cut
in his body protested the movement, and a small thrill of nervousness shot through him at being so
close to her again, but he needed her to know how much he meant it. He took her hands in his,
feeling her tense at the contact, but she didn’t pull away. “Miranza, I am so, so sorry to put you
through all this again.”

“No, I’m sorry,” she replied, squeezing his hands. Her fingers were ice-cold. “They came after you
because of me – because you were looking for me.”

Behind her, Vector made a small sound, some kind of mixture of impatience and an anger that
seemed completely out of character for him, and Theron looked up at him. The Joiner’s expression
was impassive, but there was a hard set to his jaw. For a brief, terrifying moment Theron was afraid
Vector’s anger was directed at him: that for once, Miranza’s husband was expressing the kind of
possessiveness and jealousy that Theron would have expected to see on the face of a man whose
wife he had been sleeping with, in spite of all of the assurances that both Vector and Miranza had
given Theron regarding the open nature of their relationship. And Theron would have accepted that
anger, would have acknowledged it as natural and reasonable, given everything that had happened
between them, given what Theron had always seen as normal in committed relationship (and just
what would you know about that, Shan?).

“Stop blaming yourselves, both of you,” Vector said, his voice harder than Theron had ever heard it.
“It does you no good to assume blame for the actions and misdeeds of others, and beloved, you are
not responsible for every evil the Star Cabal perpetrates simply because you are one of the few aware
of their existence. Be angry – if it helps you to heal, we will sing the Song of the Avenger together.
But we cannot bear to see this guilt and shame in your auras. You are not responsible for the actions
of others.”

Sinking back on his heels (and trying to ignore the burning ache in his thighs from kneeling so long,
every muscle in his body protesting his decision to get out of his comfortable seat) Theron looked up
at Miranza, then shifted his gaze to Vector. Now that Vector had spoken, Theron could hear the pain
and anguish in the other man’s voice, and could see that what he had mistaken for anger directed at
Theron himself was in fact rage at the situation. And to Theron, unfamiliar with relationships as he
was, but still exceptionally skilled at reading others, there was the sense that this was an argument
Vector and Miranza had had before.

“Apologies, Agent Shan,” Vector said, his fathomless black eyes suddenly lit with good humour.
“We already must care for one agent who bears the burden of the galaxy upon her shoulders. We are
uncertain we have the strength to deal with two of you. This need to take the blame for all the
galaxy’s ills must be a part of Intelligence training.”

“I can’t speak for Miranza,” Theron replied, letting a wry note enter into his voice as he settled back
down into his chair, “but I’m pretty sure I come by it genetically. I mean … you’ve met my mother.”
And my father, too, apparently, he thought, although he kept that part to himself. The fact that one of
the most highly skilled spies in Imperial Intelligence had interacted with not just his mother, but also
his father made Theron feel more than a little anxious.

Theron’s lighthearted comment, following so closely on Vector’s own efforts to lighten the mood,
served its purpose, and the tension between the three of them quickly eased. In spite of Vector’s
admonishments Theron couldn’t help but feel a considerable amount of responsibility for what had
befallen Miranza, but he remembered what Vector had said to him before, when they were sitting together in the classroom on Corellia. Miranza had made the choice to come looking for Theron, even suspecting as she had that his kidnapping involved her old enemies and knowing what sorts of things those people were capable of. She had had more control over the situation than he had, and the two of them had made choices – as much as they were able to, under the circumstances – to stick it out with Samar and the Star Cabal in spite of what was happening to them. They both worked in Intelligence; they knew, better than most, what it meant to make the hard calls.

“So,” Theron said finally, forcing himself to smile, “Alderaan, huh?”

Chapter End Notes

Between Christmas, family drama, illness (both my husband and I are currently sick right now and have been since Boxing Day), and me giving myself a (mild) concussion, I honestly wasn't sure I would ever get this chapter up. It's not quite where I want it, but if I keep poking at it I'll never post it, so ... ta-da!
Chapter Fourteen

It felt strange to be wearing her Imperial Intelligence uniform again. Technically speaking Miranza operated as a private contractor, no longer an official member of Intelligence, and she had never served as part of Sith Intelligence. Her work with Lana Beniko had been entirely through the private sector; Lana had not been her boss, simply the one who occasionally signed her pay-cheques. She wasn’t officially a member of Intelligence and therefore she didn’t really have the right (or the requirement) to wear her old uniform, but when dealing with two of the most powerful Force-users in the galaxy – the heads of their respective orders, at that – she had deemed it prudent to dress herself up for the occasion.

Her uniform had been tailored to fit her perfectly, back when she had first started wearing it. Back then she had been proud to be a member of Imperial Intelligence, and donning it for the first time – feeling the crisp fabric snug against her skin, seeing the way the stark grey contrasted against her blonde hair and blue eyes – had given her such a tremendous sense of satisfaction. She had trained every day of her life, for as far back as she could remember, to serve in Intelligence. Putting that uniform on and finally taking the title of ‘Agent’ had been the culmination of years of hard work.

That had been before Darth Jadus and Eradication Day, before the implementation of the Castellan restraints, her time serving as a double agent within the SIS, and everything she had done to dismantle the Star Cabal and take down Hunter. Keeper – back when he had just been Keeper, not the Minister of Intelligence, not the prisoner he was now – had warned her that patriotism and idealism could only carry her so far. He had been so very, very right.

Now, her uniform felt … odd. It no longer fit her perfectly, of course; she had lost weight, in the time spent with Samar and Theron, and the jacket was loose across the chest where before it had been somewhat snug. More than that, though, the fabric felt scratchy and tight, and her fingers fumbled over the buttons and clasps. She suspected it wasn’t the uniform that had changed, but rather the woman wearing it.

Still, no help for it. A proper uniform served as armour against the world, and even if she wasn’t going to be meeting with Darth Marr or Grand Master Shan face-to-face, Miranza found herself in desperate need of armouring.

She finished dressing herself, picking imaginary pieces of lint off the starched fabric before giving herself a quick once-over in the mirror to make certain she hadn’t missed anything. Her hair was pulled back in a severe bun, the curls temporarily tamed into some semblance of order and smoothed down with water. She had put on a small amount of makeup – mostly to cover up the dark circles under her eyes and the bruises on her face – but had elected not to wear any jewelry. She looked grim and a little bit haunted, but hopefully that wouldn’t show over the holocomm.

As prepared as she was likely to be, Miranza left the captain’s quarters she shared with Vector and made her way to the conference room where she shut the door behind her and keyed in a code that would prevent anyone other than her from opening it again. Not that she expected anyone to disturb her – last she had checked, Theron was sleeping in the crew quarters, Vector was meditating in the cargo hold, and Kaliyo was manning (womanning? Rattataki-ing?) the bridge – but she didn’t want to chance any interruptions. She was not looking forward to making either of these calls, and there
was nothing any of her companions could do to make things go more smoothly.

Steeling herself, Miranza keyed in the sequence for Grand Master Shan’s personal holocomm channel, wanting to get the conversation with Theron’s mother out of the way first. In spite of everything Theron had said about his relationship with his mother and her adherence to the Jedi Code of forbidding attachments, Miranza found it rather telling that the woman answered her call on the first chime. *Somebody's been waiting for this call ...*

“Agent Gerrick.” Satele Shan’s voice was soft and cool as she responded to the holocall. She was an older woman – although Miranza would have been hard-pressed to guess her exact age; there was a certain timelessness about her – with dark hair going to grey and features that bore more than a passing resemblance to her son.

“Grand Master Shan,” Miranza replied, nodding politely at the holographic image in front of her. She held her hands in her lap, tucked under the edge of the table where they would be out of view, and she tried very hard to ignore the trembling in them. “Agent Theron Shan has been exfiltrated and is being taken to a private facility for treatment.” She very deliberately chose not to refer to Theron as Satele’s son, although she knew the other woman had to be aware that she knew of their relationship. She didn’t see any need to make this call any more personal than it had to be, and bringing up the connection between Theron and Satele was a sure-fire way to make it extremely personal.

The relief on Satele’s face was unmistakeable, but it was quickly replaced by suspicion when Miranza did not elaborate.


Miranza sighed. She didn’t want to go into details about what Theron had been through – certainly not with his mother, no matter how distant their relationship supposedly was – and more than that she didn’t want to discuss the topic of Castellan restraints with a high-ranking member of the Republic hierarchy. It was bad enough that Ardun Kothe had known about them and that Theron had been exposed to them, but the restraints were an Imperial Intelligence creation and tool. She wasn’t about to share state secrets with the enemy.

“I’m afraid that’s classified, Grand Master,” Miranza said, her tone as polite as she could muster. Even so she saw the way anger flickered across Satele’s face – *there is no emotion, hmm, Jedi?* – and was gone. “Agent Shan will be taken to a private facility and then released to … well, wherever he wants to go, frankly.”

“This ‘private facility’ wouldn’t happen to be under Imperial control, would it?” Satele asked, frowning at the holo.

“It would not,” Miranza replied, once again choosing not to elaborate – although in this case, that was because she didn’t rightly know where they were headed, save that it was on Alderaan and likely within Killik territory. Vector had made all of the arrangements, and she trusted her husband’s judgment. In all likelihood their safe house would end up being somewhere within Imperial-held Alderaan, if only because it was the Empire who had the peace treaty with the Killik and not the Republic, but the territory would still be essentially neutral, and the ‘facility’ – their safe house – would be privately held. The only Imperials likely to be there were Miranza and Vector themselves, as even if there were other Joiners present among the Killiks the Joiners would consider themselves Killik first and Imperial a very, very far second.

“Agent Shan is a Republic citizen,” Satele said, “and you have no right to keep him in your custody. *Holding him prisoner –*”
“He’s not a prisoner, Grand Master, he’s a patient in need of treatment.” Miranza squeezed her hands together to prevent herself from slamming her palms onto the table in frustration, forcibly reminding herself that Satele was still Theron’s mother and was likely far more concerned than she was letting on. “He’s being taken somewhere where he can receive that treatment. He’s not being held against his will, and I … he … He’s safe with me.”

Satele gave her a look that put her in mind of some of her sternest instructors on Dromund Kaas.

“Theron can receive treatment in Republic space,” she said, and Miranza bit her tongue at the sudden shift to using his first name. “You can make arrangements through Agent Jonas Balkar to transfer custody. The Jedi Order has some of the finest healers in the galaxy; once Balkar brings him to Tython, we can take care of him.”

“With all due respect, Grand Master Shan, no. That won’t be happening.”

Satele’s eyes narrowed and she raised a hand, making a small gesture. Her voice took on a soothing, hypnotic quality as she said, “You want to bring Theron to us so we can save him.”

Miranza felt it – whatever it was – as Satele spoke, a gentle pressure on her mind that made her want to acquiesce. Not just because giving in would be the easier course of action, but because of how the command was phrased: she did want to save Theron, and Satele’s offer made it seem to simple and straightforward. But then she shook her head, scowling at the other woman.

“No.” Her own voice was hard. “Stop the Jedi mind-fuckery – it doesn’t work on me. You can’t help Theron – I can. I am quite possibly the only person in the galaxy who can help him, and if you try to stop me … Well.” Miranza met Satele’s gaze, feeling her features settle into the mask she typically wore when on task, the face of a killer. “I wasn’t planning on murdering any Jedi, Grand Master Shan, but I am willing to reconsider my stance on the matter. Do we understand each other?”

The Jedi blinked, looking momentarily stunned, but whether it was from Miranza’s apparent immunity to mind control or her blunt speech, Miranza couldn’t tell. After a few seconds of silence Satele nodded slowly.

“You care for him, don’t you?” Satele asked, and Miranza thought she detected a note of wistfulness in the other woman’s voice.

On the list of awkward conversations Miranza did not want to have, talking to Theron Shan’s mom about her own conflicting emotions regarding her son had to rank pretty highly. She wouldn’t have wanted to talk to Satele about Theron after Yavin 4, and she sure as hell didn’t want to talk about him now. That her emotions were conflicted was obvious enough, but did she care for Theron? Well, yes, certainly; no one could have gone through the experiences she and Theron had shared without developing some kind of feelings or rapport for him. And she could claim she was helping him for professional or honourable reasons, but at the end of the day few people were willing to go through what she had just been through for someone they cared nothing at all about. Beyond that, though, she wasn’t prepared to evaluate just yet, and she certainly wasn’t prepared to discuss the subject with his mother, regardless of what kind of relationship Theron shared with Satele.

“Agent Shan’s treatment will take an estimated 30 days,” Miranza said, pointedly ignoring Satele’s question. “Once it’s concluded, he will be free to go.”

“Can you at least tell me if he’s all right?” Satele asked, her voice taking on a desperate note. There: that was the voice of a mother worried about the welfare of her son. The Grand Master could make whatever claims she liked about the Jedi and their lack of emotional attachment, but Miranza didn’t need to be an expert at reading others to see how very emotionally invested the woman was.
Miranza closed her eyes and counted to ten before opening them again. Satele was regarding her earnestly through the holo, an obvious expression of concern on her face. It occurred to her that no matter what Theron seemed to think, his mother clearly did care for him; there was no mistaking Satele’s worry for anything else. At some point it might be beneficial for him to talk to his mother about all of this - about her attachment to him, about the fact that she really did care for her son. Miranza suspected it was a conversation Theron needed to have.

“He’s not,” Miranza said, after a moment. She wasn’t going to go into details with Satele about what Theron had been through, but there was no way to sugar-coat what had happened to him or to pretend he was perfectly fine when he clearly was not. “But he will be.”

Before Satele could ask any more questions or make any more demands Miranza cut the holo-channel and sat back in her chair, wiping sweaty palms off on her uniform pants. A smart-assed voice in the back of her head pointed out that the next time she and Theron played “Two Truths and a Lie” she could tell him she had now threatened his mother not once, but twice. He was sure to be thrilled.

Sobering, Miranza drew in a few deep breaths, then keyed in the code for Darth Marr.

O o O o O

Like the rest of the X-70B Phantom, the galley was nicer than anything Theron had seen on any Republic ship; nicer, in fact, than the kitchen in his apartment on Coruscant (bigger, too, and that was kind of depressing, really). The appliances were all top of the line and perfectly maintained, and although the galley was on the small side there was plenty of room for multiple people to work together without getting in one another’s way. Everything was clean and orderly, likely thanks to the protocol droid – Toovee, apparently – that hovered anxiously in the doorway, ready to leap into action the moment one of the biologicals under its aegis might require anything.

At the moment Theron wasn’t certain what he required, and he stood indecisively in front of the refrigeration unit, ignoring the overly obsequious droid and trying to tamp down his own growing anxiety.

“Master Shan, if you would simply inform me of your wishes I would be more than happy to prepare something suitable to your dietary requirements,” Toovee insisted, not for the first time, and not for the first time Theron had to repress the urge to wince at the droid’s choice of address. ‘Master Shan’ would always be his mother, so far as Theron was concerned, but no matter how many times he asked Toovee to call him something else the droid always reverted to that title.

The problem was – aside from Toovee’s insistence on calling him Master Shan – Theron didn’t know what his wishes were. He was hungry, yes, but he had no idea what he wanted, and the droid’s repeated assurances that it could prepare anything did nothing to alleviate his anxiety. He wasn’t accustomed to this level of indecision; if anything, Theron was used to making quick decisions, trusting in his instincts and his years of experience to lead him in the right direction. The fact that he couldn’t even make up his mind now about what he wanted to eat left him feeling incredibly frustrated with himself. He would have expected that after weeks of being unable to make any choices whatsoever he would leap at the chance to exert his own independence now, but faced with having to make even the simplest of decisions Theron felt a near-crippling level of anxiety and for the briefest of moments he wished someone else would come along and tell him what to eat.

“You gonna stand there all day, or can the rest of us have a turn?” Kaliyo’s voice, faintly mocking as always, came from directly behind Theron, and the fact that he hadn’t heard her entering the galley – much less coming to stand so close to him – made him jump.
“Sorry,” he mumbled, backing away from the refrigeration unit and rubbing a hand over the back of his neck, feeling himself reddening. “Not sure what I want yet.”

Kaliyo just snorted and rolled her eyes, pushing past him to rummage around in the unit herself while Toovee came forward to offer its services in preparing something for her to eat. She didn’t appear to be any more decided than Theron had been, however, but was content to sort through the various selections, leaning against the open door and searching idly through an assortment of fresh produce and refrigerated offerings. The door began to chime after a few minutes, an alert intended to inform the ship’s inhabitants that the refrigeration unit was being left open too long, but Kaliyo ignored it even though Toovee’s anxiety and obsequiousness ratcheted up several notches at the sound.

“Nerfburger and fries,” she said finally, shoving the door closed.

Toovee acknowledged her request and immediately set to work acquiring the necessary ingredients from their various resting places around the galley. Kaliyo went and sat down at the table, hooking one arm over the back of her chair as she fixed Theron with a level gaze. Theron took the chair opposite hers, not so much because he wanted the company, but simply to get out of the droid’s way.

The Rattataki woman had an uncomfortable habit of staring at Theron, looking at him as if she was on the verge of making some kind of statement or announcement, but never actually saying anything. He had noticed this before, back on Rishi and Yavin 4, but then he and Kaliyo hadn’t spent much time in close quarters – he was always working on something, and she was coming and going as she pleased. These past few days on the Mercurial, however, he had frequently found himself alone with her, and every time it felt like she was biting back some harsh comment or a joke at his expense. She never said or did anything inappropriate, but he always had the sense that she was about to, any second now. He had that sense now, and as Kaliyo opened her mouth to speak he braced himself for whatever she was about to say.

When she spoke, however, her words and gaze were both directed at the person behind him: “You look like something a Hutt shit out, Agent.”

At Miranza’s disgruntled response Theron turned, prepared to offer up his own commentary on the agent’s appearance, but the words died in his throat the moment he saw her.

She was wearing the uniform of an Intelligence officer. An Imperial Intelligence officer. Which she was, and Theron knew that, but there was a difference between knowing something and seeing it standing before you. Normally Theron would have said he had a weakness for an attractive woman – or man – in uniform, but there was something about the crisp grey lines and stark severity of Miranza’s Imperial uniform that sent a harsh thrill of fear rippling through him. A voice in the back of his mind screamed at him that this was his enemy and it took all of Theron’s self-control not to come scrambling out of his chair to get away from her.

Then Miranza smiled at him and limped over to the chair beside him, and just like that the fear was gone, replaced with something closer to worry because Kaliyo hadn’t been entirely wrong in her assessment of the agent: Miranza did not look well. Granted, she looked better than she had in days, but she was still too pale and when she moved, she seemed to sort of hunch in on herself, her arms coming up to wrap protectively around her stomach. She sat down with considerable caution, careful to move slowly and not jostle the still-healing wound in her gut, but Theron could see the tight lines of pain around her mouth.

Kaliyo had shifted her unnerving gaze onto the agent, and she leaned across the table, one hand going up to the collar of Miranza’s uniform jacket. Miranza froze as Kaliyo idly flipped the collar open, revealing a fresh band of bruising across the agent’s throat – bruising that had not been there
when Miranza had spoken to Theron not that long ago.

“It’s nothing,” Miranza said quickly, her raspy voice giving tell to the lie. “I’ll be all right.”

“Like fuck, Agent,” Kaliyo snapped, releasing the collar and leaning back in her chair, her arms folded across her chest. “You haven’t been off the ship in days. Who the fuck did this to you?”

“Marr.” Miranza unbuttoned her jacket, her eyes fixed on the fastenings so that she wouldn’t have to look at Kaliyo or Theron. “He wanted to impress upon me the … seriousness … of his request.”

Theron felt a chill go through him at the mention of the de facto head of the Dark Council. He had met Darth Marr, had in fact interacted with the man briefly on Rishi and then more extensively on Yavin 4, and only a complete idiot would fail to be utterly terrified of the Sith Lord. The uncomfortable realization that Darth Marr was effectively Miranza’s boss – and that whatever conversation she had had with the man, it had most likely had something to do with Theron himself – made Theron clench his hands into fists.

“It’s fine, Theron,” Miranza said, apparently sensing his growing fear and anger. She finished unbuttoning her jacket and slid it off, hissing slightly when the movement pulled at her stitches. “He reiterated his command for me to bring you to Dromund Kaas, but when I told him we still had work to do he was … agreeable … to a delay.”

“And when you go back to Dromund Kaas without Agent Hotpants here, what then?” Kaliyo demanded, and Theron frowned, both at the nickname she gave him and at the question itself.

“There is many a slip between a cup and a lip,” Vector’s voice, low and calm, sounded from the doorway and Theron watched as the Joiner made his way to his wife’s side, coming to stand beside her. His face was expressionless as he took in the fresh bruising on Miranza’s throat, but Theron thought he could detect a sudden tightening of his jaw, as if he was grounding his teeth together. Before Kaliyo could tell him to stop speaking in riddles he clarified, “Many things can happen between now and Dromund Kaas, and we will have plenty of time to plan. We needn’t worry ourselves with what-ifs and maybes now.”

The Joiner’s calm assumption that everything would be sorted out eased Theron, and he could see Miranza relaxing in turn, her hand going out to seek Vector’s hand. Theron felt a pang of – jealousy? neediness? – at the obvious support and comfort the couple provided each other, a sense of reliance and relief that Theron had never experienced in a relationship. He couldn’t help but wonder what it felt like, to have a partner who he could implicitly trust to guard his back and be there for him the way that Vector and Miranza were there for each other. He wondered, too, if his parents had ever felt this way towards each other, if Satele and Jace had ever shared that kind of relationship. He knew his parents had loved each other, once upon a time – and perhaps they still did love each other, at least a little bit – but he had no real idea what their relationship had been like. He wanted to think that it had been good, in its own way, before Satele fell pregnant with him and before her fears that Jace was succumbing to the Dark Side began to tear them apart.

Pushing away the sudden surge of longing that welled up inside of him, Theron let out a harsh chuckle and said flippantly, “Say what you will about the Republic, at least my boss has never tried to Force-choke me through a holocall.” Although he could certainly imagine that Director Trant would have tried, if he could.

Miranza stiffened, pulling away from Vector. The look she gave Theron was pointed.

“I rather prefer being Force-choked over having someone try to use Jedi mind-tricks to force me into doing their bidding,” she said tartly, and Theron’s stomach did a slow, uncomfortable roll.
“Satele tried to do that?” he asked, horrified on Miranza’s behalf. “She tried to use the Force on you?”

“She tried,” Miranza acknowledged with a curt nod, “She failed.” Her expression softened a little and she added quietly, “She’s worried about you.”

Theron bit down a number of replies, awkwardly aware that most of them would only come out sounding childish and petulant. He had long ago come to terms with his mother’s abandonment of him; stars, he had even gone so far as to tell Satele that he understood and respected her choice! Still, an acceptance of the decisions his biological mother had made regarding him did not quite ease the pain of the all-too-natural desire to have someone there to comfort him after everything he had been through. A normal son, with a normal mother, would have been able to go to his mother for comfort and reassurance. Theron and Satele had never been normal, and there was a part of him that could never be happy with that fact - no matter how much he might claim otherwise.

“She still shouldn’t have done that,” he muttered at last, still sounding uncomfortably sullen and juvenile.

“Kriff, listen to you people!” Kaliyo snapped, throwing her hands up in the air in disgust. She jabbed a finger in Theron’s direction. “People with power will always abuse that power. That’s just … true. By now you of all people should know that. All of you should know that. Fuck. You’re making me glad I’m not staying on Alderaan with you, if I have to listen to this mopey nerfshit all the kriffing time.”

With that she lurched out of her seat and stomped out of the galley, heading off in the direction of the bridge. Toovee, a plate of food in its metallic hands, turned to watch her go, making noises of dismay and disapproval. After a moment the droid looked around at the remaining people gathered in the galley.

“What ever should I do with this, Masters?” the droid inquired plaintively.

Theron snatched the plate out of Toovee’s hands, setting it down in front of him with a solid thunk onto the table. Steam curled off the fries and the scent of fresh nerfburger made his mouth water.

“Thanks, Toovee,” Theron said around a mouthful of fries. “I’ll take care of it.”

O o O o O

Disembarking on Alderaan proved to be a bit more challenging when arriving in the custody of Imperial citizens. Kaliyo docked the _Mercurial_ in one of the hangars at the Rhu Caenus spaceport, having donned one of Miranza’s uniforms to make herself look more like an Imperial pilot than the Rattataki anarchist she actually was. She spoke with traffic control using an accent that sounded suspiciously like Miranza’s – crisply Imperial and surprisingly spot-on – and identified their vessel as a chartered private luxury craft, which the Phantom could most assuredly pass as. Kaliyo would be staying with the ship, taking off after Miranza, Theron and Vector were off-board and heading out into Hutt space to lay a false trail for them. Theron could not say he wasn’t grateful to see her go. Kaliyo’s terse attitude and barbed comments made him tense, and frankly, he had enough tension in his life at the moment.

The remaining three were going to travel from the spaceport to their final destination in disguise, with Vector calling on his experiences as a diplomat to play the part of a minor lordling with connections to Houses Thul and Cortess. The Joiner had disappeared into the quarters he shared with Miranza, reappearing some minutes later dressed in the loosely flowing robes more common to Alderaanian aristocracy; Theron was given to understand that the robes were a relic of Vector's days serving as a
diplomat on Alderaan, prior to his Joining. Most surprisingly, however, Vector had done something and when he looked at Theron, his strange all-black eyes had changed back into human eyes. Theron couldn’t tell if he was wearing special contacts or some kind of holo-disguise, but the unfamiliarity of Vector’s bright hazel eyes was strangely disconcerting. He hadn’t realized just how normal Vector’s fathomless black eyes had become to him.

Miranza, too, had donned a disguise of her own, wearing elegant robes similar in cut and design to Vector’s. Her blonde curls had been twisted up and hidden under a bright silk wrap, topped off with a bizarre headdress that Theron suspected was supposed to be the height of fashion among Alderaan nobility. Makeup – or at least he sincerely hoped it was makeup – had been applied to make her skin more sallow and sickly, giving her cheeks a hollowed-out look that was every bit as unsettling as Vector’s “normal” eyes. She was playing the role of Vector’s invalid wife – a role that would enable her to limit the strain put on her healing stomach – and Toovee was set up as her droid nurse.

After some debate Theron was giving an assortment of armour to play the part of the couple’s bodyguard. None of the pieces fit him perfectly – almost everything seemed to have been designed with a larger, taller, more muscular man in mind – but provided he wasn’t required to actually fight in the armour he should be all right. The most important part was the helm, a full helmet that hid his features and his tell-tale implants, equipped with a voice modulator that made his voice deeper than it normally was although both Miranza and Vector had cautioned him not to speak too much, lest his Republic accent give him away. (It had been a source of private amusement to see the expressions on their faces when he adopted a faint Mandalorian drawl, just to prove that he could in fact hide his accent.)

After all that time and preparation it was almost anticlimactic how easily they were processed through the spaceport, but Theron’s nerves were so on edge the whole time that every little delay had him certain they had been made. He didn’t know if anyone was actively searching for him, but between Satele and Darth Marr he didn’t want to take the chance. Admittedly one had far worse repercussions for him than the other, but regardless of whether he ended up in his mother’s custody or imprisoned by the Dark Council, the end result would be that Miranza wouldn’t be able to break his brainwashing. Even if the Jedi would never use it – and Theron was certain that they wouldn’t – he would still have that keyword hanging over his head. And he had no doubts whatsoever that the Dark Council would use his keyword. If he didn’t spend the rest of his life - short and miserable though it was likely to be - locked up in an Imperial prison, he'd be spending it trapped inside his mind while his body was used to betray the Republic.

Ultimately Vector was the crux of the masquerade, and he performed admirably, taking on the airs of a haughty aristocrat as if he had been born to the role. Theron surmised Vector had seen enough of the type during his time as a diplomat to be able to pass himself off convincingly, but a part of him wondered if perhaps the Joiner had missed his calling as an actor. He had the spaceport officials bowing and scraping (and making angry faces behind his back) within a matter of minutes, and if they were rushed through customs it was likely because the officials wanted to see the back of him before they lost their patience.

Vector commandeered a speeder as soon as they were through customs, having Toovee load up what few bags they had – Vector giving lofty assurances to anyone who would listen that the rest of their luggage would be delivered in a few days, and it had best be in one piece or House Thul would hear about it! – while the Joiner made a show of helping his convalescing wife into her seat. Theron was grateful for the helm that covered his face, because the entire spectacle of Vector being a pompous ass and Miranza being a demure, ill noblewoman was almost too much for his self-control. His helmet helped to hide his ear-to-ear grin, and the fact that his role as bodyguard was mostly mute meant that no one could hear the laughter in his voice.
And then they were off, free of Rhu Caenus, free of the customs officials and the Imperial troopers patrolling everywhere and the flutter of nosy, bored aristocrats. Vector piloted their speeder, being the only one who knew their eventual destination, while Theron stretched out in the backseat beside Toovee. He kept the helmet on for the time being – it was awkward and uncomfortable and fit him too loosely, so it kept sliding forward, but there was no point in risking being recognized now. Up front Miranza continued her performance of the drooping noblewoman, curling up against her seat and looking for all intents and purposes as though she was falling asleep.

Theron had been on Alderaan before, but hadn’t had much cause to spend any time in Imperial territory, and as they drove he found himself looking around with mild interest. Alderaan was a beautiful planet in spite of the civil war that continued in the wake of Crown Prince Gaul Panteer’s withdrawal from the Republic and eventual assassination. Theron had only been a teenager when that happened – it had occurred shortly after the Treaty of Coruscant, which had been what had precipitated Panteer’s decision to withdraw – but he could still remember the shock and outrage his elders had expressed over the planet that had, up until then, been felt to be the soul of the Republic.

Vector took a rambling, meandering path away from the spaceport, heading out towards Cortess-held territory. Theron observed the large Killik nests that rose mountainous over the Castle Lands, with the actual mountains of Alderaan rising in the distance, snow-capped and resolute. Trees rose up on either side of the path, green branches stretching out overhead, and the air was crisp and clean. Theron breathed it in deeply, the fresh scent of pine and snow a pleasant change from the recycled air aboard the spaceship. It was a lengthy drive undertaken in silence, and as Theron lounged idly in the back of the speeder he could feel himself slowly unwinding, the tension of the past few weeks finally beginning to ease. He wasn’t safe – not yet – but once they were settled at their safe house Miranza would give him the serum that would enable her to help him break his programming, and then he would finally be free.

Chapter End Notes

Eh, it's a slow one, but it was starting to get long so I figured I'd end it here. Now that I've got my OT3 alone together things'll hopefully start picking up. I'm still undecided whether or not I want to try my hand at some smutty writing, so we'll see.
In retrospect the armed Killiks patrolling the woods surrounding the cabin – if a deluxe two-storey wood and stone cottage set on a sprawling mountain estate could be called a ‘cabin’ – should not have come as a surprise to Miranza. Vector had made the arrangements; of course her husband would have included security measures, and who better to guard them than a small army of Oroboro Killiks armed to the mandibles? Humans, Chiss or other humanoid species could not be entirely trusted, but the insectoid Killiks and their humanoid Joiners only had allegiance to the nest; as the Dawn Herald of the Oroboro Nest, Vector had their complete loyalty.

The way Theron had goggled at the sight of the Killiks marching around had been enough to make her chuckle a little. He’d finally removed that awful, ill-fitting helm, and the cool winds coming down off the mountains had brought a rosy glow to his cheeks. He almost – almost – looked like his old self again.

Their safe house was somewhat more luxurious than Miranza had been expecting. The hunting lodge was set a ways back on Cortess property, a large wood and stone and transparisteel affair that had served as a retreat for the lords and ladies of House Cortess and their guests. It had a sort of rustic look to it that gave the building the impression of a rather elaborate wood cabin, granting the illusion of roughing it while still providing every luxury an aristocrat could expect. Inside were wood floors polished to a high finish, rough-looking stone walls that were assembled with expert masonry, and large transparisteel windows that let in as much of the fading afternoon sunlight as possible. The cabin had clearly been aired out and cleaned prior to their visit; Miranza knew for a fact that the members of House Cortess no longer had any real use for it, having been giving over to the Oroboro nest shortly after she had met them. At the time it had felt like justice – the Baroness had betrayed the Empire and was working with terrorists, and handing the remaining Cortess over to the Killiks as Joiners had seemed like a suitable punishment. But now, after her own experiences with brainwashing and the loss of autonomy, Miranza was not so certain her decision had been the right one. Vector had few regrets about his own Joining, for all that he had had no more say in it than the Cortess did, but his was an unusual case in that his being the Dawn Herald gave him significantly more autonomy than other Joiners had. What Miranza had done to the nobles of House Cortess – rather, what she had permitted to be done to them – was much more akin to what Imperial Intelligence had done to her, and what Samar and the Star Cabal had done to Theron.

Still, for all that she questioned her actions, her decision to let the Oroboro take over House Cortess was certainly beneficial to her now.

It took no time at all to carry their minimal luggage inside the cabin. There were three bedrooms – a master bedroom and two smaller guest bedrooms – and two and a half refreshers, with the half ‘fresher being attached to the master bedroom as an en suite. The bedrooms were all on the second floor, which gave Miranza some pause as the stairs proved to be a bit of a challenge in her current condition, and on the main floor there was a large kitchen that opened out onto a combined dining room/living room area, as well as a small library and study. No doubt the cabin was considered cozy by Alderaanian standards, but anywhere else it would have been a rather large house; by Kaas City standards it was downright sprawling.

After helping her out of her outer robes Vector set Miranza up on the couch in the living room, bringing her an assortment of datapads to entertain her while he went off to meet with some of the Killiks regarding their stay. Theron had retreated into one of the smaller bedrooms – no doubt
leaving the master bedroom for her and Vector to use – to change out of his armour and into something more comfortable. Miranza did her best to make herself comfortable, acutely aware that she was coming due for her next painkiller dosage and wondering if it would be too much bother to ask Toovee to carry her up to the bedroom for a nap.

After all the racing around and tension of the past few days it felt very strange to simply be sitting and resting, and Miranza found herself in an odd, unsettled mood. Her stomach hurt, but more than the dull, burning ache that had become all-too-familiar since Corellia there was another point of anxiety that held her attention. Just beneath the gentle hiss and crackle of the fireplace was another sound, so faint as to be barely noticeable, but still nonetheless unmistakeable in her ears: the sound of harsh, cruel laughter and taunting whispers.

*It's not real,* she told herself, fingers tightening around the edges of the datapad she was idly flipping through. If the laughter had been real, Vector would have heard it – his hearing was far better than hers, enhanced by the metaphysical changes that had been wrought on him by his Joining. If he had heard it, he would have commented on it; he would have gone out to investigate it. Vector hadn’t said anything, nor had Theron or Toovee made note of it. The only person who could hear the voices was Miranza, and she wasn’t about to mention it to anyone. Vector and Theron were already cossetting her too much without having them worrying she was about to snap.

Of course, if either of them realized she was hearing voices …

The gentle padding of bare feet on the wooden steps proved a welcome distraction to her messy, uncomfortable thoughts, and Miranza looked up in time to see Theron finish the descent from the second floor. In addition to getting out of the armour it looked like he had taken advantage of the upstairs ‘fresher: he had showered and changed into a pair of low-slung pants and a loose-fitted T, and was scrubbing a fluffy white towel over his dark, spiky hair with one hand. His other hand was curled loosely around a familiar-looking syringe, and she realized as he came towards her with a lopsided grin on his face that he was bringing her the serum for the Castellan restraints.

“Hey,” he said, after clearing his throat a few times. He came and stood over her, still running the towel over his hair. After a short pause he held the syringe out to her. “So … uh … I figure, now’s as good a time as any, right?”

Miranza took the syringe out of his hand, turning it over carefully in hers, watching the viscous green liquid sliding around the clear cartridge. They had discussed it back on the ship: the serum, the potential side effects, and the fact that the last time Miranza had done this there had been so many other insane things going on in her life that it was impossible for her to nail down just what, exactly, the serum did to her outside of setting her up to be reprogrammed. Watcher X – or the hallucination that had taken the form of the long-dead agent – had warned her it would be unpleasant, but she would never be certain if the illness and malaise she had experienced in the days leading up to her reprogramming were a result of the serum or of the circumstances surrounding her taking the dose. Now, years removed from the experience and having had time to process what had happened to her, Miranza could admit that she had operated in a sort of fuzzy daze after taking the serum, but she had been racing around at a breakneck pace trying to meet the demands of Ardun Kothe and Imperial Intelligence without anyone knowing what she was up to, and she hadn’t taken good care of herself – she had barely had time to eat or sleep, she had used too many stims and drank too much caf to keep herself functioning; she had been exhausted, injured and mentally and emotionally drained.

Given that perspective, it was impossible for her to warn Theron about the potential side effects of taking the serum, and so he had made the decision to wait until they were safely ensconced on Alderaan before taking it himself.

Had waited, apparently, until now.
Seeing the unease on her face, Theron sank down next to her on the couch, moving carefully so as to avoid jostling her. She braced herself to feel uncomfortable or anxious having him so close to her – after everything Samar had put them through, she would have expected herself to want to keep Theron at an arm’s length, but … she didn’t, no more than she did Vector. She felt safe with him, even if the current situation – the serum, the brainwashing – brought up unpleasant memories.

“I don’t know what you can expect from this, Theron,” she told him quietly. “You might be sick, or tired, or … I just don’t know. My own circumstances were less than ideal, and it’s not like I’ve had anyone else to compare notes with.”

“It’s fine.” He bumped her knee with his own. “You survived it out in the field. I think I can handle it here in some Alderaanian hunters’ lodge.” Theron’s lips quirked in a wry grin. “Even if it kills me – not that I think it’s gonna kill me, mind you – but even if it does, it’s still better than … you know. The alternative.”

Miranza nodded in complete understanding. Even when it had just been Watcher X’s disembodied voice telling her what to do, she had been willing to take the chance. It was, as Theron had said, better than the alternative – to spend the rest of her life a slave to any person who got their hands on her keyword. Injecting herself with some strange substance was the very least of the questionable things she would have been willing to do to free herself from her conditioning. Oh, she understood Theron very, very well.

She held the syringe out to him. “Do you want to have the honours?”

“Ah, no. You … uh … you go ahead.” Theron held his hands up, and she could see that he was shaking – not badly, but enough that it would have gotten in the way of him injecting himself safely. “Please.”

“Okay.” Vector had left a medkit on the table beside the couch – not because Miranza was especially accident prone, but because he thought she might have need of the bandages and painkillers inside, in case her stomach wound opened up again. It only hurt a little bit to lean over and collect it, and she set it on her lap and flipped the lid open, rummaging around inside for some antiseptic wipes.

Theron was incredibly tense as she rubbed one of the wipes over his bare arm, the muscles shifting and bunching under her touch. She gave his hand a gentle squeeze and set the used wipe down before picking up the syringe.

“You’re not afraid of needles, are you?” she asked him, tone faintly teasing.

“What? No!” Theron glanced at her, a light flush on his cheeks. “Not … not really. I’m a little uncomfortable with being jabbed with some unknown substance, though.”

“Fair enough.” Miranza decided not to comment on the fact that she had done this herself, huddled in a ditch on Quesh, with no more idea than he had as to what would happen to her. Vector had been there – Vector had been there for all of it, her rock, her strange protector. But she hadn’t asked him to give her the injection, had wanted it to come from her own hands. He would have done it, if she had asked.

In all fairness she hadn’t been through half of what Theron had suffered in the past few weeks. Her time being forced to dance to Kothe’s and Hunter’s tunes had been longer, certainly, but neither of them had ever done the things Samar had done, even if Hunter had come uncomfortably close. She had been made to race around the galaxy betraying her own people, but at least Kothe hadn’t tortured her throughout all of it. At least Hunter hadn’t held a metaphysical gun to her head and used it to make her rape her friend. Theron had survived his experience with his sanity intact, and she
certainly wasn’t going to belittle him for feeling a bit anxious about a needle, not when she had witnessed the extent of his strength and fortitude.

“Deep breath,” she said, prepping the syringe while he followed her instruction. Theron drew in a shaky breath and held it, eyes on hers as she pressed the sharp needle into his skin. She depressed the plunger slowly and he hissed as the liquid went in; she remembered that it had felt cold going in. Miranza kept pressing until the plunger was down all the way and all of the serum was gone; when she drew the syringe back she quickly swiped at a dab of blood, then took Theron’s hand and had him put pressure on the tiny wound while she fetched an adhesive bandage.

“Don’t feel any different,” Theron commented, drawing his hand away so that she could cover the injection site with a bandage.

“You won’t feel anything yet,” she replied, smoothing down the edges of the bandage. “Just try and take it easy for the next little while. We don’t have to go anywhere, we don’t have to do anything – just rest and recover. We’re safe here.”

“Those aliens guarding the lodge – those are Killiks, right?”

Miranza nodded absently, putting the used wipes, empty syringe and bandage packaging in a plastic sack for disposal. Vector would know where to find an incinerator. “You haven’t seen them before?”

“Strangely enough, I haven’t spent a lot of time in Imperial territory – on Alderaan, at least.” The humour was back in his voice, and when she looked up at him she saw that Theron was grinning.

“I don’t like seafood, my favourite drinks are the ones with little paper umbrellas in them, and I’m double-jointed.”

Theron blinked at her, startled, before picking up on the old game. He considered her statements for a moment, then smiled.

“The drinks,” he said, with confidence, his grin turning into a wicked smirk. “I already know how flexible you are.”

She nodded, his smirk and his words causing something to ignite deep in her gut. “You’ve got me; I’m a whiskey girl.”

Theron thought for a minute before saying, “I once ran around mostly naked on an Imperial warship, my implants pick up strange radio frequencies sometimes, and I have lunch with my mom once a month.”

“For your sake I hope the lie is the warship one,” Miranza said, laughing, one hand pressed to her side. “Knowing you, though … The radio frequencies?”

“No,” Theron shook his head, still grinning. “I have lunches with my dad. Ever since he found out about me, he’s been trying to … I don’t know, connect, I guess? He was pretty pissed off when he realized Satele had hidden me from him all these years.”

“I can’t even imagine.” As much as she wanted to hear the warship story, Miranza suspected it would fall under the heading of ‘classified,’ and instead she found herself musing about Theron’s lunches with the Supreme Commander. She really couldn’t imagine what it would be like, although as a child in the training facilities she had dreamed of the day when her parents would show up at the gates and announce that they wanted her back – or that they weren’t really dead, or that it had all been a huge mistake. Theron’s words suggested that he and Commander Malcom had only found out about each other rather recently, and the idea of meeting up with her own parents as an adult made
her feel a little bit wistful. She wondered when Theron and Satele had first met, and what the circumstances of that meeting had been.

Before she could let herself grow maudlin, Miranza picked up the threads of their game. “I once impersonated a pirate, I had the highest sniper scores in my facility, and I speak thirteen languages.”

Theron groaned. “Please tell me it’s the languages; I’m feeling woefully inadequate right now.”

This time it was her turn to shake her head. “I had the second-highest scores.”

“Quite the cunning linguist, then,” he replied with another smirk, and they both laughed. After another minute he said, “I never wanted to be a Jedi, I used to race swoop bikes competitively, and … I kind of really want to kiss you right now.”

Miranza felt her heart do a little flip-flop inside her chest, all thoughts of trying to sort out the truths from the lie gone as she looked up to see the earnest, almost bashful expression on Theron’s face.

“Why don’t you, then?” she asked, her voice tight.

Theron made a noise low in his throat, hanging his head so she couldn’t see his eyes. One of his hands came up and caught her hand, and she noticed that once again he was shaking ever so slightly.

“I wasn’t sure if … after everything … you would want me to,” he said quietly. “I was afraid it would upset you, or that … that I’d freak out. After everything we did – everything he made me do –“

“Theron.” She stroked her thumb over his knuckles, brushing over the light dusting of hair there; she could feel his pulse beating rapidly under her touch, and it broke her heart a little to know that it was fear and anxiety as much as arousal that made his heartbeat quicken. “We made it out. I don’t blame you for anything that happened, and in a month – maybe less time – you’ll be completely free. We’re okay. We’ll be okay. We’re not broken.”

Was it even fair to say that – “we’re not broken” – when she wasn’t sure there was even a we to break? They’d had a fling on Yavin 4, sure enough, but that was supposed to have been the end of it. What had happened between them on Corellia bore no resemblance whatsoever to what they had chosen to do in the Alliance camps, before the truce had ended. He was, by his own admission, a complete disaster at relationships, and she hadn’t ever expected this to turn into anything more than a fun romp between the sheets. She certainly hadn’t imagined herself traipsing across the galaxy in order to rescue him - much less any of the other things that had happened since she had been captured on Belsavis.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do,” she reassured him, still stroking his hand. “But if you want to kiss me, you have my permission.”

Miranza had always felt that frank and open discussions about consent rather took away from the spontaneity of the moment – spending time discussing whether or not you wanted someone else to kiss you meant that by the time the kiss actually happened, it had already been built up and torn apart, and all the romance and impulsiveness of the desire was gone. She appreciated consent, of course – Imperial Intelligence training included courses on the subject, along with disclaimers that as operatives they would frequently be called upon to grant consent even when they didn’t want to. She just typically felt that consent was something better appreciated through action, rather than dissecting it through words. But talking about it? Laying it all out for the other person, piece by piece, as if you were giving them a presentation on how to fuck you? That just felt weird, as far as Miranza was concerned.
In this instance, however, she suspected it was just as important for Theron to hear the words as it was for her to say them. They had gone so long without consent – without choices or agency – that the very idea of it was practically foreign to them.

Theron made another guttural noise before bringing his free hand up to cup the line of her jaw, leaning towards her to close the small distance between them. His lips touched hers and it was a soft, chaste, closed-mouth kiss that nonetheless made the fire in her belly flare up even more brightly, and when he pulled away again she would have chased after him if it wasn’t for the pain it would have caused her. After a moment, when it was clear neither of them was going to panic or lash out, Theron leaned forward again and crushed his mouth against hers.

He was careful to avoid putting any pressure on her wound or making her move too much, but his lips on hers were insistent, and this time his hand went up to tangle in the hair at the base of her skull, pulling her face in close to his. His other hand released hers to come up and cradle her jaw, and he moved so that he was leaning over her, covering her without resting his weight on her at all. His lips were soft and warm and when he pressed, ever so slightly, she found herself opening her own lips to allow him to slide his tongue inside her mouth.

She wanted – stars, she wanted a lot of things in that moment, but none more than she wanted for her injuries to be gone so that she could fling him down onto the couch and have her way with him. As it was she found herself pulling him down to her, ignoring the sudden flare of pain in her gut in favour of focusing on the far more pleasant sensation of Theron’s body held tight against her own. A tiny part of her marveled at the realization that she couldn’t hear the whispering, laughing, taunting voices any more, and that when she looked at Theron, it was his face she saw, not Samar or the twisted mask of someone she knew and cared for. Just Theron, his brown eyes closed, the lines of pain and grief erased from his features for the first time in days, his body warm and welcome against hers.

Theron pulled away at last, releasing her face and settling back against the couch cushions, his expression a little dazed.

“Thank you,” he said after a moment, sounding out of breath.

“You’re thanking me?” Miranza retorted, although it pleased her to hear it. “I should be thanking you after that kiss.”

He chuckled, a low-voiced, deeply masculine – and deeply satisfied – sound that made her stomach do another little flip.

“Not just for the kiss,” he said, “but for all of it – you came looking for me, and I didn’t think anyone would. You got me out of there. I just … I can’t thank you enough.”

Ignoring the pain in her stomach, Miranza shifted until she was leaning against him, her hand resting lightly on his thigh. He brought his arm up to drape across her shoulders, drawing her in close, and his fingers began tracing a pattern on her bare arm. Somewhere in the distance she could hear the faintest hint of mocking laughter, but Theron's embrace was warm and comforting, and his body was a solid presence beside her own.

“Looking for you was a joint effort, Theron,” she assured him, her words slightly muffled by his chest. “And you and I escaped together. You can thank me by getting better.”

Theron sighed, dropping a gentle kiss on the top of her head, his breath in her hair.

“Thanks, Miranza.”
“You’re welcome, Theron.”

After being awoken by his wife trying – unsuccessfully, thank goodness – to throttle him in her sleep, Vector decided the wisest course of action was for him to sleep in the unoccupied guest bedroom. Familiar as he was with the course of Miranza’s nightmares, he had chosen this particular lodge in part because of the three separate bedrooms, knowing perfectly well that there would be nights when it wouldn’t be safe for any of them to share a bed.

She was apologetic, of course – mortified, horrified – but it wasn’t the first time she had tried to kill him in her sleep, nor was it likely to be the last, unfortunately. Vector didn’t blame Miranza; he blamed the people who had done this to her: Keeper, Imperial Intelligence, Ardun Kothe, Hunter. Now he could add new names to his list, although like Kothe and Hunter at least Samar was dead and could do no further damage. Vector had long suspected that his wife could benefit from professional counselling and therapy sessions, but while he knew that Imperial Intelligence had had people for that sort of thing – no doubt highly trained and exceptionally skilled people, given the Empire’s standards – it was Intelligence that had done this to her initially, by putting the Castellan restraints in in the first place. It would be impossible for her to establish the kind of trust necessary for successful therapy when she knew for an absolute fact she couldn’t trust these people. And given the kind of secrets Miranza had access to, she couldn’t very well go to a private therapist, regardless of any promises of client confidentiality. She made do with her husband, who was sympathetic and intelligent and certainly supportive, but who was by no mean qualified to treat his wife’s condition.

Vector wondered if Theron had access to counsellors in the SIS, and if he would be willing to confide in them, or would the agent have his own reasons for refusing assistance just as Miranza continued to do.

It was an exhausting thought train to be stuck upon, and the spare bedroom, although comfortable, did not provide the respite Vector required. He tossed and turned for a while, grateful at least that his restlessness wouldn’t be keeping Miranza awake – she had fallen back to sleep after tearful apologies and gentle reassurances; he had not left her until he was confident she would sleep again – before eventually concluding that he wouldn’t be getting any further sleep that night. With a small sigh he tossed back the covers and climbed out of bed.

The master bedroom was at the far end of the hall, with the guest bedroom Vector had used right next door. That bedroom and the other guest bedroom – the one Theron had chosen – shared a refresher which could be accessed from either bedroom or the hallway itself. On one side of the hall were the doors, while the other side was simply a wooden railing overlooking the downstairs of the cabin. From the landing Vector could see a light on in the living room; Theron was huddled under a blanket, reading something on a datapad.

Vector made his way down the stairs, making an effort to be quiet without being stealthy: he didn’t want to disturb Miranza, who was a light sleeper at the best of times, but he also didn’t want to startle Theron by appearing unannounced. His bare feet made soft padding noises on the wooden steps and Theron glanced up at his approach, lowering the datapad to offer up a rueful smile.

“Hope I didn’t wake you,” the SIS agent said. The blanket lowered a little, and Vector could see that he and Theron were similarly attired in old T-shirts and loose-fitting sleep pants. Normally Vector preferred to sleep in the nude, but the likelihood of being startled out of bed had necessitated a change; he wasn’t quite certain how receptive the other man would be to finding him wandering the cabin in his altogether. Thus, the choice of sleepwear, which at least had the virtue of providing some additional protection against the chilly nights.
“No, it wasn’t you,” Vector replied mildly, drifting into the kitchen to set the kettle on. The owners of the cottage had decided to eschew the “rustic” element when appointing the kitchen, and as such it had all of the most top-of-the-line gadgets and appliances, something for which Vector was immensely grateful. He didn’t fancy preparing their meals over a wooden stove or cleaning the dishes in a stone sink, even with Toovee there to provide assistance. All things told, the cottage was just about Vector’s idea of roughing it – which was to say, not roughing it at all, but retreating to a cozy facsimile of rustic living. “We simply couldn’t sleep. Tea?”

For a brief moment Theron looked confused, his gaze darting around the joint kitchen/living room in search of Miranza. Then he appeared to remember Vector’s unusual pronoun usage and the confusion lifted as he realized Vector was referring only to himself.

“Please. Need any help?”

Vector demurred, moving about the unfamiliar kitchen with deliberate care as he searched for the necessary items. The kitchen was an orderly place and so he found what he was looking for with minimal effort: mugs in a cabinet over the sink, honey and sugar in the cupboard by the refrigeration unit, and a selection of teas in a canister beside the kettle. There was something oddly soothing about the familiar routine of preparing tea, and by the time he brought Theron his mug the frustration and anxiety from his abrupt awakening had faded. Theron accepted the tea with a warm smile, sniffing at the coiling steam with a nod of appreciation.

“Does she get a lot of nightmares?” Theron asked, meeting Vector’s gaze over the top of his mug. Vector realized Theron must have been up for some time, and that he had no doubt heard the scuffle that had resulted when Miranza had tried to strangle him in bed. He hadn’t been trying to keep quiet when he had been disentangling himself from his wife’s strong, if uncoordinated, hands; he had been trying to stop her from killing him before she could hurt herself. It was always a delicate balance: he was stronger and more resilient than she, as a result of his Killik physiology, but she had the benefits of better training - and, half-asleep as she had been, *she* had been actively trying to kill him, while he had been trying to keep both of them from getting hurt.

“As you would expect,” Vector answered, tone deliberately bland. There was no point in denying that Miranza had nightmares, what with the evidence at hand, but he didn’t see it as his place to enlighten Theron as to the cause and nature of them. She would share – or not – with the agent as she saw fit. “What keeps you up? You must be exhausted.”

“I am,” Theron agreed, with another rueful grin. Mug in one hand, he made a circular motion beside his head with his other hand, and shrugged. “Stupid brain won’t let me sleep. Too many thoughts. Most of them … ah … not pleasant.”

Vector nodded, taking a sip of his tea. It was still a bit hot but not enough to dissuade him from drinking some more. “Would it help you to speak of it?”

“I … don’t know. Probably?” Theron grimaced and looked away, obviously uncomfortable. “I mean, yeah, I should probably talk to someone, but I don’t have a fucking clue what to say. And until the conditioning breaks, I’m not even sure that I can talk about it. Once it does, though … I don’t know how to process this. Any of this.”

Vector considered his words, nodding again. Miranza had given him some idea as to what she and Theron had been through during the time they were in the Star Cabal’s custody, and he knew that it had been bad. Horrific. She had said that it had been worse than what she had experienced at the hands of Eidolon Security, the mercenaries Hunter had used to capture and interrogate her. She had not gone into detail, but Vector was adept at reading his wife’s body language and aura, and what she chose not to say spoke volumes. When he thought about it, the Killik part of him made him want
to sing the Song of the Avenger and hunt down every person responsible for hurting Miranza and Theron, and he was angry that he was unable to punish Samar with his own two hands. (Or was it simply the Killik part of him that wanted that? He didn't think it unreasonable that the human part of him - the man who loved his wife with every fibre of his being and hated the idea of her being hurt - would want Samar dead, too. Painfully, horribly, finally dead.) He didn’t know if he was more furious that Samar would dare to lay hand on the two agents, or that the man had had two of the most exceptionally skilled operatives in his control and all he had thought to do with them was to make them into his own personal sex toys.

He wasn’t about to say such things, however, not when Theron and Miranza were both so raw and hurting from the experience. Instead he latched onto the part that confused him.

“We find it intriguing that your conditioning does not seem to prevent you from speaking about your conditioning,” he commented, doing his best to sound merely curious. “When Miranza operated under the Castellan restraints she found it impossible to speak of it – she could not warn us that she was being controlled, nor could she give any indication that things were not well. We could see in her aura that something was amiss, but at the time we thought it was due to the stress of acting as a double-agent. We did not know what was happening until afterwards, once she had broken the restraints on her own.”

“That must've been horrible,” Theron said. He rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand, ducking his head as if to stare into his tea. “I could talk about it, I just couldn’t do anything overtly to try and stop it. If I didn’t think about what I was doing I could do little things to rebel – take my time getting ready, or slice into the security systems – but I couldn’t fight back or refuse a direct order.” He scowled down into his mug, his expression dark.

“It was bad enough when it was just me, but after Belsavis …” Theron paused, hesitating, and Vector simply waited for him to continue. He knew what had happened on Belsavis; that was where the Star Cabal had taken Miranza. “Samar got off on forcing me to hurt her. I couldn’t stop him, couldn’t refuse to follow an order. It was fun for him to watch me … for him to make me … and she just … she wasn’t conditioned … and …”

Vector had already heard the story from Miranza’s lips and knew she bore the agent no ill will. She would have known better than anyone else what it felt like to be in Theron’s place, even if the things Kothe and Hunter had made her do had paled in comparison to what Samar had commanded of Theron. From the sound of things Samar hadn’t tried to invoke Miranza’s conditioning nearly as often as he had Theron’s, but rather had chosen to force Theron to victimize her, getting off on the fact that he had the other man so completely under his control that he could make him do such horrible things to her. He wondered what Miranza would have done if Samar had tried to use her as he had Theron; would she have snapped sooner, or would she have gone along with it, not wanting to tip her hand so early? His wife was a consummate professional, but everyone had their limits.

“How did you know she wasn’t conditioned?” Vector asked, deliberately closing the door on that other unpleasant line of thought.

Theron shifted uncomfortably, unable to meet the other man’s eyes. “The first time I … when we … she had a panic attack.” Vector nodded in understanding, familiar with his wife’s attacks.

“Afterwards, Samar asked her what had triggered it – as if he didn’t fucking know – and she lied and told him a story about an abusive ex. He believed her, but … I could tell she was lying. She hadn’t wanted to tell him, so he used her keyword, and it didn’t work on her.”

He looked at Vector then, and his expression was wild-eyed, almost feral.

“The things I did to her … How do we come back from that?” he asked, sounding so desperate and
terrified that it made Vector’s heart ache just to hear it. “I thought, earlier today, that maybe it’d be okay, if I could just get over my nerves and … if she said yes, then it wouldn’t be so bad, but …”

Vector knew what Theron was hedging around; Miranza had mentioned their kiss, and her own surprise and gratitude that it hadn’t triggered a panic attack in either of them. He mused that most husbands likely did not share his comfort with the idea that another man had kissed his wife, but he had known early into his relationship with Miranza that neither of them were the monogamous sort. Killiks didn’t experience jealousy; everything they had, they shared with the rest of the hive. As the Dawn Herald he had more freedom and autonomy than most other Joiners, but he was still as much a part of the hive as the others, and his transformation had altered the way he perceived the world in so many ways. He couldn’t remember if he would have been the jealous sort before his Joining, but that didn’t matter; the man he was now was not jealous, and he did not need to have exclusive access to his wife’s body to know that she loved him. She was not some thing for him to own, no more than he was her possession. Still, that comfort and lack of jealousy came after a large number of lengthy, heartfelt conversations; it wasn't something they had come upon idly, or as a lark.

“But removed from the situation, abed with nothing else to think about, you begin to doubt your earlier reassurances,” Vector said quietly, and Theron nodded again. He sighed, searching about for the best way to provide support. “We cannot begin to pretend we understand everything you have been through, Agent Shan. We have … memories … through our connection to the Killiks … memories of other Joiners who have been through similar experiences, although nothing quite like what you and Miranza went through. We can access those memories and know to a certain extent what it was like to suffer such abuse, but it is not the same thing as experiencing it ourselves, nor would we wish to insult you by saying we know what you have suffered.”

He cleared his throat, making a mental note to commune with the hive later and see if he might be able to gain some deeper perspective on Miranza’s and Theron’s experiences. He had access to the entire accumulated memories of every Joiner who had ever been on Alderaan, and some of those memories were certainly unpleasant and uncomfortable; although he had not gone looking for past experiences of rape and abuse, statistically speaking Vector knew such memories would exist in the hive collective. Another man might have found the idea intrusive, to go through a stranger’s memories in hopes of better understanding the trauma his wife and friend had gone through, but the Killik in Vector didn’t see it that way. Memories – experiences, thoughts and feelings – were just another thing to be shared, no better or worse or more private than any other resource the Killiks might have access to or need of.

“We do know that our wife is strong,” he said finally, meeting the agent’s gaze and offering up a reassuring smile. “We do not know you as well, of course, but what we have seen of you on Rishi and Yavin 4 – and since then, here and now – leads us to conclude that you are likewise strong. You must be, for Miranza would never choose to share her affections with one who was not. Therefore, we can only conclude that you have the strength to recover from this. More importantly than that, perhaps, you must realize that you are not recovering on your own. We will see to it that you have whatever support you need, even if that means we need to sneak into Coruscant to deliver you ourselves.”

Theron chuckled; it was a weak sound, containing very little mirth, but it was a step up in Vector’s estimation.

“Yeah, let’s maybe avoid Coruscant, all right?” the agent joked, finishing off his tea in one great gulp. “I’m not sure I want to explain why a couple of Imperials are invading Republic space.”

Vector gave him an arch look. “Agent Shan, we can assure you, it would not be the first time we have invaded Republic space – although, as Miranza would say, the details are classified.”
Theron just blinked at him, shaking his head in amused consternation.

“I should ask,” he admitted, after a moment’s consideration. “But you know what? I don’t wanna know. Ignorance is bliss.”

“Indeed it is, Agent Shan. Indeed it is.”

This time, Theron’s grin was significantly less reserved. “Call me Theron.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Oookkaaay, so it's a little bit smutty in here, but only a little. I'm still testing the waters on how much smut I can write. Hopefully it's not awful.

Chapter Sixteen

Eventually Vector had gone back to bed, returning to the guest room he had briefly co-opted, but Theron continued to find himself unable to sleep. Quiet conversation with Vector had gone a long way towards soothing Theron’s restless mind, but once he was alone again all the fears and anxieties returned, and so he sat out on the couch, attempting to read one of the holonovels they had brought with them. He had lost track of the plot ages ago — if there even was a plot; it was some ridiculous bit of fluff about star-crossed lovers on Nar Shaddaa — and as the rosy fingers of dawn began to brighten the eastward windows he realized he was reading the same paragraph over and over again without processing any of the words. Letting out a disgusted sigh Theron kicked back the blanket and stood up, stretching to ease out the kinks in his back; the couch was incredibly comfortable, but he had been sitting in the same position for hours.

He was tired but restless. Most mornings Theron tried to spend a few minutes meditating, practicing the forms Master Zho had taught him as a child; he found meditation to be an effective grounding exercise that helped him prepare for the day and was generally just as useful in getting him to wind down for the night. This morning, however, he didn’t have the patience for it, and knew that he would just frustrate himself if he tried to sit and clear his mind. If clearing his mind was even a remote possibility he would have been able to fall asleep hours ago. Instead he headed upstairs to his own room and quickly threw on a change of clothes before going back downstairs for his boots and coat. Theron disarmed the security system on the front door, slipped outside, and then rearmed it again, turning his back on the cottage and heading off into the woods.

Theron was conscious of the Killik guards observing him, but none of them approached him to find out what he was doing, nor did any of them attempt to deter him as his quick pace turned into a jog. He was not a prisoner in the lodge; Miranza and Vector had both been explicitly clear on that subject, and the Killiks were there to protect him, not to keep him confined to the cottage. He suspected they would try to prevent him from leaving the property — or whatever the predetermined borders were — but Vector had given him a briefing on the layout of the land around the cottage, and Theron knew there would be plenty of room for him to get a decent run in.

Some of Theron’s earliest memories were of running through woods or across rocky terrain, climbing mountains and trees, and otherwise using the world around him as a makeshift obstacle course. Master Zho had been a stickler for physical exercise; two decades removed from the experience, Theron wondered if the reliance on activity had been an old man’s best efforts at keeping an overly-exuberant boy from taxing his reserves. Ngani Zho had not been a young man when his former apprentice brought her infant son for him to raise, and in hindsight Theron suspected he might have been a bit much for the old man to handle. Not that Theron had any complaints about his upbringing — well, not many — but ever since he was a child, Theron found that physical exertion did more to clear his mind than any form of meditation or introspection. In the past there had been few things that a lengthy jog or a dash around the training grounds couldn’t fix.
He desperately wished jogging could fix him now.

The early morning air was crisp and cold, smelling of pine and earth and the promise of snow to come. There were paths all through the woods around the cottage – game trails, most likely, although Theron couldn’t have said what sorts of animals might reside there. It was still somewhat dark out, as the sun was only just beginning to climb on the horizon, but Theron’s implants improved his night-vision somewhat and he found himself able to move with relative ease. He took a path that ran parallel to a small stream, the gurgling of the water a pleasant background note to the steady slapping of his booted feet on the dirt.

Stars, but it felt good to be outside, moving around. Theron had been able to exercise during his captivity – had, in fact, been encouraged to keep himself in shape – but sparring and training routines on a garden rooftop did not compare to the freedom of being able to just take off and let his own two feet take him wherever they chose. He was tired and achy, but it felt incredible to stretch his legs again. He started off at a jog, but as the sheer exhilaration of moving kicked in he allowed himself to pick up speed until he was full-out running, racing over the dirt path as his arms pumped at his sides, propelling him forwards. His heart pounded and his lungs burned and the air was cold and clean and he was free.

The sudden surge of vertigo came from out of nowhere, staggering Theron in his tracks. His head swimming, he paused, stumbling forward to lean up against a tree, his hand flat on the trunk. The forest seemed to spin around him, the world tilting in a nauseating fashion, and before he knew it he was scrabbling onto his hands and knees, retching into the dirt.

He’d barely eaten the night before and had yet to have breakfast; all that came up was tea and bile. Theron remained hunched over, his stomach still heaving, his eyes closed to try to lessen his dizziness. Once the worst of it had passed he pushed up into a sitting position and wiped his mouth off on the back of his hand, spitting off to the side a few times in a futile effort to rid his mouth of the taste of bile. Looking around, Theron saw that he was on the loop back towards the cottage, and that two of the Killik guards were observing him, although neither of them came forward.

Theron heard booted feet on the path behind him, and turned in time to see Vector hurrying towards him, a look of concern on his face. The Joiner had clearly dressed in a rush: he still wore his sleeping pants, his boots were untied and his heavy coat hung open. Theron thought he could see a faint pattern on Vector’s face that looked like the indentations left behind by having slept with his face pressed against the pillow, and he realized the other man must have come directly from bed.

“Are you hurt?” Vector called as he rushed forward, coming to a stop beside Theron. He stood over him, a look of hesitation on his face; he made a move to reach out to help Theron up, then paused, uncertain if his touch would be wanted.

“How did you know I was out here?” Theron asked, his voice sounding rough to his own ears. He gave his mouth another hurried scrub with his hand, uncomfortably aware of the fact that he was huddled over a pile of puke and that his hands were starting to shake.

Vector motioned towards the two Killiks, who had resumed patrolling. “They noted that you appeared to be in some distress.”

Theron looked at the Killiks, his eyes narrowing. He had been aware that he was being observed, of course, but he hadn’t realized that Vector would be in such close contact with them.

“This close to the nest, we cannot help but sense what the Killiks are feeling,” Vector explained, having noted Theron’s concern. “We sensed their concern, that is all. It is not our intention to spy upon you, or to violate your privacy.” He held out one hand to Theron, and when Theron made no
move to accept, he wiggled his fingers enticingly.

Feeling awkward and embarrassed but having no desire to remain sitting on the cold hard ground, Theron finally accepted the hand, letting Vector haul him back to his feet. The Joiner was surprisingly strong, his grip warm and dry, and Theron was upright in a matter of seconds. The world spun again, alarmingly, and Theron had to close his eyes to keep from toppling over again. Seeing this, Vector caught him by the arm, careful to limit his contact strictly to that which would keep Theron from falling.

“Theron?” Vector sounded uncertain. There was a hesitancy in his voice when he used his name; Theron had discovered that in spite of the somewhat forced intimacy between them, Vector was not the sort of person who was comfortable casually bandying about someone’s given name. “Are you unwell?”

Theron kept his eyes closed, forcing himself to breathe in through his nose, inhaling slowly. “I’m fine. Just dizzy.”

Vector seemed prepared to accept that at face value. “Did you sleep at all last night?”

“A little,” Theron lied. When he opened his eyes he found the other man staring at him, an expression of disapproval on his face. Vector drew his hand away cautiously, prepared to catch Theron again if he showed any indication of wavering.

“Theron,” he said firmly, “In the interest of full disclosure, we may not be as skilled as our wife at reading expressions and body language, but we are capable of reading your aura. You have the right not to answer us and we will not pry if you do not wish us to, but please do us the courtesy of telling the truth when you do answer.”

Theron exhaled in a huff of breath: a sound of frustration and exhaustion.

“No,” he said finally, “I didn’t sleep. I tried, but …” He waved one hand beside his head, waggling his fingers in a circle. “My brain wouldn’t shut off.”

“Ah.” Vector looked like he understood exactly what Theron meant, and Theron wondered how much sleep the other man had had. His expression softened. “Have you had anything to eat?”

Theron glanced at the puddle on the ground, one corner of his mouth hooking upwards in a faint semblance of a smile. It was fairly obvious from the contents of the puddle that he hadn’t eaten, at least not recently, but after a moment of silence he shook his head. “Don’t have much of an appetite lately.”

Vector looked down at the vomit, cocking his head to one side and lifting a shoulder in a small half-shrug.

“Let us get you back inside,” he said simply, gesturing towards the cottage as if Theron had somehow managed to forget the way in the short time he had been outside. “Miranza is the better cook, but we can perhaps find something to entice you to eat. At the very least we can promise you caf or tea.”

The two men made their way back to the cottage, Vector keeping close to Theron without quite giving the impression of hovering. Theron noticed that the other man had made no effort to button up his jacket or otherwise hide the fact that he had apparently come straight from bed, and he was amazed that even slightly rumpled and unkempt he still managed to appear dignified and calm. Theron didn’t think he could pull off the “awoken from a sound sleep by an emergency” look quite
so well.

Once inside Toovee helped them both out of their jackets and boots, and Vector suggested they both get cleaned up. Although the Joiner made no mention of it, Theron was unpleasantly conscious of the fact that he was a sweaty mess: partly from his jog, but mostly the result of throwing up. Rather, Vector behaved as though they were both simply overdue for a shower, instead of treating Theron the way he felt – which was to say, completely and thoroughly disgusting.

The cottage boasted three refreshers, although the one that adjoined Miranza and Vector’s bedroom lacked shower facilities. Given that Theron still felt slightly shaky and wasn’t certain he could manage the walk, Vector offered to use the upstairs ‘fresher, leaving the more opulent downstairs one for Theron’s use. Vector made his way upstairs accompanied by Toovee, who was under instructions to retrieve a clean set of clothes from Theron’s room.

The downstairs ‘fresher was exceedingly well-appointed. Vector had mused that the original owners of the cottage must have tended towards being incorrigible libertines, as there were a number of luxurious indulgences located throughout. Outside there was a rather large hot-tub set into a sheltered grotto in the rear of the cottage, and inside there was a smaller, more intimate hot-tub and sauna setup just inside the back porch. The downstairs refresher had a deep claw-footed bathtub that could easily hold several people at once and a shower stall that was definitely large enough to accommodate a group of people. The two guest bedrooms had king-sized beds, but the master bedroom had a bed that Miranza jokingly described as being “orgy-sized.” In addition to two well-stocked bars and an expensive stereo system, there were also a number of nooks and crannies that had been set up to be cozy little nests. All in all, it was clear that the cottage was intended as more than just a hunting lodge and retreat.

Theron gave his teeth a good brushing, grateful to rid his mouth of the taste of vomit. He stripped out of his sweaty clothes, leaving them in a pile by the door, and headed over to the shower, which he was almost positive was larger than his bedroom back in Coruscant. Turning the water on and setting it to a comfortable temperature, he was surprised to set showerheads set at various heights; when he stepped inside the shower, the jets of water hit him from all angles, hitting him with just the right amount of pressure to soothe his aching muscles.

Theron had been raised by a Jedi and had spent his younger years more or less on the run. Master Zho had never been content to settle down any one place – whether out of natural caution or simply due to restlessness, Theron didn’t know – and as a result Theron’s childhood had been one of austerity. They had slept rough, lived off the land and made do with what they could get. Later on, once he had been rejected by the Jedi Order and sent off to fend for himself Theron had continued to live rough, running with wild kids on Manaan and elsewhere. Finally as an adult he had joined the SIS, and pragmatism had forced him to rent an apartment on Coruscant to be close to work, but it wasn’t as though he made a lot of money as an agent, and years of basic living had taught him to eschew luxuries and indulgences. He wasn’t used to sleeping on top-end mattresses under high thread-count sheets or taking hot, massaging showers in a ‘fresher large enough to host a party in. He didn’t know if Vector had taken all this luxury into consideration when he had chosen their safe house – in all likelihood the Joiner had simply opted for the most secure location he could find – but Theron thought he could grow accustomed to it, if given the chance.

A brief dip in water pressure signalled that the upstairs ‘fresher was in use, and Theron realized Vector had most likely started his shower. The knowledge that they were both – separately – naked and showering caused something hot and needy to curl in Theron’s gut as arousal rippled through him. He could all too easily picture Vector, naked, hot water spraying over his lean, angular body, and once the mental image was in place it was difficult to shake.
The desire that coursed through Theron at that mental image was almost enough to take his breath away, and he was surprised at himself – not that he was desiring another man, as that was a self-discovery he had had quite some time ago, but that he was even capable of feeling desire again. Granted, aside from the fact that they were both men, Samar and Vector had absolutely nothing in common, but Theron had expected that the thought of being intimate with another man again would make him feel anxious or fearful. Instead, picturing Vector – all lean muscle, his expression serene and confident, those fathomless eyes of his flashing with desire – made the blood rush to Theron’s groin with such alacrity he was left lightheaded. Theron knew he still desired Miranza – and that, too, had come as a pleasant surprise, given everything they had done to each other. He suspected it was simply different with her because she had been as much a victim as he was. And maybe it had helped that they had been lovers, however briefly, before Samar had forced them upon each other. Theron and Vector hadn’t had that opportunity (yet, a delightful part of his mind whispered to him), but at least Vector hadn’t been a part of the abuse Theron had suffered. The only connection Theron saw between Vector and what Samar had done to him was their shared maleness. Theron didn’t know if he was prepared to engage in actual intercourse with another man just yet (he wasn’t entirely certain he was ready for sex at all, period), but he found that the idea of it wasn’t distasteful to him; more so, the idea of sex with Vector was rather intensely appealing.

With a small groan Theron let his hand wander downwards, fingers gliding over his stomach before coming to rest firmly around his cock. That part of him had clearly made up its mind on the subject, and was almost painfully hard. Bracing one hand against the shower wall, he let his fingers curl around himself and settled into a familiar rhythm. Eyes closed, he tried to imagine what Vector would look like, head tilted up towards the spray of the water, the look on his face as Theron knelt and took him in his mouth, the sounds he would make, the way he would taste … Theron came, hard and shuddering, spurting out into his hand only for it to be washed away down the drain. He rested his forehead against the wall, trying to catch his breath, waiting for that painful moment when guilt or embarrassment overwhelmed him in place of the pleasure he had just experienced. But neither emotion was forthcoming; in fact, aside from continuing lightheadedness, he felt pretty damned good.

By the time Theron emerged from the ‘fresher Vector was already back in the kitchen, the aroma of fresh caf strong in the air. Seeing the other man made Theron’s cheeks heat just a little at the thought of what he had just done, but he could at least write off his blushing as a result of having just come out of the hot shower. Vector, for his part, didn’t appear to notice Theron’s discomfiture, and instead set about taking measure of their breakfast options.

“Feeling better?” Vector asked, and for a brief moment Theron’s heart leapt up in his throat at the thought that Vector knew what he had done – then he shrugged, shoving down his own embarrassment at the realization that of all people, Vector seemed more likely to be flattered rather than flustered at the idea that Theron had just finished pleasuring himself while thinking about him. Neither Vector nor his wife seemed overly hung up on sex or sexuality, and Theron couldn’t help but wonder whether that nonchalance was an Imperial trait or a them trait. He suspected it was the latter. And in point of fact, Theron wasn’t normally that hung up on sex either, and besides that Vector already knew Theron found him attractive and honestly – oh, get a grip on yourself, Shan, he told himself forcefully, before remembering that he had had quite a grip on himself already.

“Much,” he replied finally, smothering the urge to giggle. Vector didn’t appear to notice his amusement, or if he did notice, he made no comment. Instead, he rattled off the list of breakfast possibilities, and then waited for Theron’s response.
Some of his earlier uneasiness returned, and as Theron sat down on one of the barstools that faced
the kitchen workspace he found himself grappling with the same indecision and hesitation he had felt
before. All of Vector’s suggestions were perfectly acceptable – Theron had never been a particularly
picky person when it came to food, and had a tendency to simply eat off the plates of his friends or
help himself to whatever wasn’t nailed down, so long as it was even remotely edible – but nothing
struck his fancy. His appetite still hadn’t made an appearance, although fortunately the nausea and
vertigo from earlier seemed to have disappeared for the time being, and he honestly didn’t know
what he wanted.

Seeing Theron’s uncertainty, Vector frowned and leaned his hips against the counter, folding his
arms across his chest.

“Are you still feeling unwell?” he asked quietly, making no effort to hide his concern. “If so, we can
get you an antiemetic, or some painkillers –“

“No,” Theron interrupted him quickly, propping his head up on his hands while he rested his elbows
on the island countertop. “That’s not … That’s not it, exactly. I’m just … I’m not hungry.”

Vector continued to frown, studying him in a way that told Theron his aura was being assessed.
Before Vector could ask more questions, Theron let his head drop onto the counter, not quite
smacking his forehead against the smooth surface.

“I don’t know how to decide,” he muttered, voice muffled by the countertop. “It’s like … It’s like
I’ve forgotten how to make a decision. Like I don’t know how. Does that make any sense?”

“It seems to us that you’ve made numerous decisions since escaping the Star Cabal,” Vector said. He
didn’t sound the least bit judgmental; rather, his voice had taken on a thoughtful note, as if he was
seriously considering Theron’s problem. “But yes, it makes sense. You’ve spent a significant amount
of time being denied your own agency. Now that you’re free, perhaps it is simply too overwhelming
for you to be faced with an overabundance of options. So, let us simplify matters for you. What did
you have for breakfast the day you were taken? Or,” Vector added quickly, “if that is too difficult to
think upon, what was your favourite breakfast as a child?”

Theron racked his mind trying to remember that far back. Master Zho had preferred to fast, but had
not encouraged that habit in a growing boy although it had been one that Theron had practiced later
on in life (practiced, and then given up on, for the most part – fasting was a dangerous habit for a
man whose job frequently had him taking off at a moment’s notice; far better to eat when he had the
chance). His mentor had frequently struggled to put food on the table, and there had been days when
their only options were ration bars and paste. At no point would Theron ever add “ration paste” to
his list of favourite foods.

“I remember Master Zho used to make this kind of … porridge, I guess, with nuts and berries mixed
in,” he said after a few minutes. It had been almost disgustingly healthy, but when supplies were
plenty Master Zho had also let Theron add honey and cream to the mix, and that combined with the
berries had been a rare treat for the boy. “It was good.”

“Porridge, then?” Vector repeated, turning to rummage through the shelves again before nodding at
Theron. “We can do that, if you would like?”

“Yeah.” Theron returned the nod, a sudden tightness in his throat at the intense relief he felt – not just
at having the matter settled, but at the simple, compassionate way that Vector had managed it. The
Joiner didn’t seem the least bit troubled by Theron’s indecisiveness, any more than he’d been
bothered by any of the ways in which Theron’s trauma seemed to be choosing to manifest itself. It
made Theron wonder how much of it had to do with Vector’s training as a diplomat, and how much
was simply experience: by his own admission, Vector had gone through this before, with Miranza.

“Was Miranza like this, the first time?” Theron asked suddenly, driven to know more about that previous situation. He felt that perhaps there would be strength in solidarity, in knowing that she had gone through this and had come out the other side – that there was hope that he could do the same. “After everything she went through with Kothe and Hunter and the restraints?”

Vector froze slightly, taking down a box of oats and placing it lightly on the counter before turning to face Theron. He bit his lip, his expression one of consideration, and Theron wondered if he had crossed a line again by asking about Miranza.

“Her experiences were different from yours,” the Joiner said after a moment, tone somber. “She was very angry, as we expect you can imagine, but in addition to that, she felt betrayed. Her own people had done this to her, after all, after she had been nothing but loyal to the Empire. To top it all off, she was fearful – fearful that the conditioning would be restored, fearful that Imperial Intelligence would discover she was no longer conditioned and have her executed, fearful that Hunter would continue to be a threat. So, no, she did not struggle with indecision, as you are currently struggling, but we can assure you, she had her own demons to fight.”

“And now she’s … okay? Or, I mean, she was okay, before … now?”

Vector gave Theron a sad, weary smile, his head tilting slightly upwards in a way that made Theron think he was glancing in Miranza’s direction – towards the master bedroom, where she still slept. It was difficult to judge what he was looking at, given the opaque nature of his black eyes, but from the fondness on his face Theron knew he was at least thinking of his wife.

“She remains unbroken,” Vector said, still smiling. “We would not go so far as to say she is okay, but you have met her, Theron. There is nothing Hunter could do – nothing the Star Cabal, or Samar, could do – that would silence her song. We see that same strength in you.”
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Not gonna lie, this chapter is almost entirely fluff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Seventeen

The mingled scents of fresh caf, bacon and porridge pulled Miranza from her sleep, and she came awake to find herself the sole occupant of the master bedroom’s enormous bed, snuggled in the middle of the mattress with pillows buffering her on every side. She sat up slowly, one hand pressed to her side, but she was pleasantly surprised to discover only a slight ache in her gut and a general all-over stiffness that likely had as much to do with how she had slept as with any injuries she had suffered. Cautiously she lifted the hem of her T-shirt – another one of Vector’s that she had stolen for her own use – and did her best to examine the injury as much as her limited mobility would allow. The stitches appeared to be holding up and for the first time in days she didn’t see spots of blood on the bandages, so it looked like she was on the mend at last.

Easing herself out of bed, Miranza slid her bare feet into a pair of warm, fuzzy slippers (she didn’t remember leaving them on the floor by the bed and suspected her husband had had a hand in making sure they were easily accessible to her) and headed for the door. Her sleep wear consisted of Vector’s T-shirt and a well-worn pair of soft, loose-fitting pants that had a hole in the knee, but she wasn’t overly concerned about appearances, given that both Vector and Theron had seen her at her literal worst. Besides, she didn’t need to glance at herself in the mirror to know she’d have shadows under her eyes or that her hair had turned into a fluffy, ratty bird’s nest while she’d slept.

Warm, masculine laughter echoed up from the kitchen when she stepped out into the hallway, and the sound did something to ease her heart as she recognized both Vector’s and Theron’s voices. The two of them clearly enjoying one another’s company also did something to other – rather lower – parts of her anatomy as well, even if she didn’t feel up to anything more energetic than a chaste kiss on the lips. (Although she wouldn’t have had any objections to observing, should anything come up. Watching someone she cared for being happy and experiencing pleasure was just about as wonderful as experiencing it herself, and Force knew, both Theron and Vector were due for a little of both.)

Both men looked up at the sound of her footsteps on the stairs and she could see Vector’s readiness to leap into action should she give even the slightest hint that she was struggling. She smiled at him and waved him off, feeling confident in her ability to make it down the steps unaided and wanting the excuse to stretch her legs.

“Mornin’, sunshine,” Theron greeted her, as Vector murmured a quiet, “Good morning, beloved.” Miranza smiled at them both and made her way down the rest of the stairs, one hand clutching the handrail and the other trailing lightly along the wall – just in case she needed extra support. She joined Theron at the island counter, his gentle hands helping her up onto the barstool. It was almost – almost – too much for her to manage, but with his assistance she was able to sit down and prop herself up on the counter. Vector immediately placed a mug of caf in front of her, and she knew before she even took a single sip that it would be prepared exactly the way she liked it: two sweetener and a sinful amount of cream.
“You’re just in time for breakfast, beloved,” Vector informed her, moving back to the stove where a pan of bacon was sizzling cheerfully away. “Theron has requested porridge, and there are also bacon, eggs and toast.”

“Did you make all this?” Miranza couldn’t stop smiling, and the thought of her husband putting around the kitchen preparing breakfast just made her grin all the more. Normally she was the one who cooked for them – when they had occasion to cook, which was unfortunately not all that often – not because of any predetermined gender roles, but because she was simply better at it. Vector was exceptionally talented at a great many things, but cooking was Miranza’s wheelhouse, not his. One of her earliest assignments for Imperial Intelligence had required her to take culinary lessons, and she had found it to be an incredibly enjoyable hobby. Since both she and Vector enjoyed trying different kinds of cuisine they had taken to sampling new foods whenever they travelled, and then she would try to replicate the things they had liked when they were at home together.

“Indeed we did,” Vector replied with a smile of his own. He carried the frying pan over to the counter and deposited a healthy serving of bacon onto both his and Theron’s plates, with a smaller portion for hers given that she wasn’t sure she should be eating bacon in the first place. (She knew she was supposed to take it easy until her stomach was fully healed, but surely a couple of bites wouldn’t kill her?)

Theron helped himself to a slice, not bothering to use a fork. Miranza took a tentative bite, savouring the taste before following it up with a couple sips of water. Vector finished setting out the rest of the food – the promised porridge, eggs and toast, along with an assortment of fruit and some sort of fried tuber – before coming to sit at the bar with them. The next few minutes were filled with the sounds of happy chewing as the three of them ate in companionable silence.

“How are you feeling so far, Theron?” Miranza asked, once she had eaten as much as she could (or rather, as much as she felt safe consuming at the moment).

Theron and Vector exchanged glances, and Theron gave a little half-shrug, scratching at the scruff along his jaw.

“More or less okay, I think,” he said tentatively, taking a sip of caf before continuing, “There was some … ah … dizziness, earlier. Some nausea. Wasn’t sure I’d feel like eating, but your husband won me over.”

“We could not recall you having similar side effects,” Vector said after swallowing his own caf. “Although in all fairness, you were rather adept at keeping things hidden from us back then.”

“An ability I seem to have lost since then,” Miranza said in an aside to Theron, who laughed.

“Nonsense, beloved,” Vector replied with a fond smile, “We’re simply better at reading you now.” He glanced at Theron again, tilting his head to one side. “Theron also appears to be suffering from some insomnia, but it would be difficult to discern whether that’s another side effect of the serum or simply due to … circumstances.”

“Did you sleep at all?” Miranza asked Theron, frowning as he shook his head. She considered offering him sedatives, but knew he would have taken them himself if he had wanted to. She didn’t much appreciate the muzzy-headed way she always felt after using them, so she wouldn’t blame him for refusing.

“It is early days yet,” Vector said. He got up and began clearing the table with Toovee’s assistance, and within minutes the droid was taking care of the dirty dishes while the three of them retreated to the living room with their tea and caf.
“You know,” Theron said, moving aside the blanket and datapads strewn about the couch so that he could sit down, “I meant to ask, Vector. Yesterday, at the spaceport – you did that thing with your eyes? How’d you do that? What was it?”

Miranza eyed the couch for a moment, debating whether or not it was worth it to try and sit down beside Theron; the low rise of the couch had been fine earlier, but after perching on the barstool for so long she wasn’t sure her abdominal muscles were up to the process of getting her up again. She was confident she could manage getting onto the couch, but she didn’t think she could get back up and sooner or later she would need to use the ‘fresher. After a moment’s consideration she edged cautiously onto one of the firmer high-backed chairs that overlooked the fireplace, turning so that she could face the conversation. Vector took note of her hesitation and arched one elegant eyebrow at her, tilting his head in inquiry. She smiled, giving her own head a minute shake, then motioned for him to sit.

“It is a skill we learned from one of the other Killik nests,” Vector explained, shooting one last glance at his wife before settling onto the couch beside Theron. “We are able to suppress the pheromonic bond connecting us to the Oroboro nest in order to appear … normal.”

Theron leaned forward, resting his arm on the back of the couch. “I’m guessing you can only do it for a little while?”

“Yes.” Vector nodded. “It is difficult to maintain, and our physiology has altered such that prolonged suppression could eventually prove fatal. It doesn’t hurt, exactly, but it is not entirely pleasant, and it takes us a moment or two to relearn how to perceive the world with our senses so dulled.” He glanced briefly in Miranza’s direction, smiling fondly. “Originally we wished to know how to suppress the bond because we were … uncertain … whether Miranza would prefer us that way.”

Miranza returned the smile, but inwardly she was thinking of how unsettling she found it now, to see Vector suppressing the bond and the changes that wrought on him. Once upon a time she had found his Killik-blackened eyes and unusual speech patterns to be eerie and disquieting, but that was before she had come to know him. Now she couldn’t imagine Vector any other way. Back at the spaceport, when Vector had been doing his haughty lordling routine, she had found the experience to be so disconcerting as to be borderline upsetting – watching him behaving in a manner so unlike himself, with his strange hazel eyes and the altered way he spoke. Before her time with Samar she might have found Vector’s act to be amusing – he was a surprisingly talented actor when he put his mind to it – but now it just reminded her of what that Sith Lord had done to her mind. Seeing Vector looking like himself and yet not himself conjured up memories of familiar faces twisted into cruel masks, and she had to repress the urge to shudder at the thought.

She was so caught up in her thoughts that she missed Theron’s comment, but Vector’s follow-up response made it clear enough what Theron had asked.

“You are correct,” Vector said, turning his smile on the Republic agent. “She told us we had lovely eyes and that we were very sweet, but the man she loved wasn’t human. It was a pleasant surprise, one we hadn’t dared hope for.”

“Yeah,” Theron said softly, “you do have nice eyes.”

Miranza had to repress the urge to giggle at Theron’s awkward attempt at flirting, and she tried to remember – had he been that bad with her? She seemed to recall a few suave efforts on Rishi and Yavin 4, but overall, yes, he’d been almost hilariously inept. Charming, to be sure, but with all the subtlety and grace of a teenaged boy trying to impress the girl. Hard to believe the man was one of the best spies in the Republic.
Still, she mused, it might be easier for him to pull off if he only needed to try and work his magic on one of them at a time. With that thought in mind she pushed herself up off the chair – grateful that she had chosen the chair rather than the couch, given the unpleasant tug on her stomach muscles – and announced her intention to shower.

“Down here, please,” Vector said, jerking his chin in the direction of the downstairs ‘fresher. “We would like to be close at hand, in case you require assistance. Unless you would prefer us to accompany you upstairs?”

Miranza waved him off, still suppressing the stupid grin that threatened its way onto her lips.

“No, no, downstairs ‘fresher is fine,” she said airily, making her way in that direction. She tossed a meaningful glance over her shoulder at Theron, whose cheeks flushed just a little. “You boys entertain yourselves without me.”

She made it all the way inside the ‘fresher and had the water on in the shower before the giggles burst out of her.

O o O o O

Theron could’ve kicked himself at how horribly awkward he sounded, and he could tell from the mirth on Miranza’s face that she had picked up on his inept attempt at flirting with her husband. He’d never been good at paying compliments. Or receiving them. Or, well, compliments in general. Stars, at the moment he wasn’t even sure he was capable of speech.

For his part, though, Vector didn’t seem to be laughing at Theron. Instead, once Miranza had closed the door on the ‘fresher the other man had simply turned to Theron, a warm smile on his lips as he nodded a gracious acceptance of the compliment.

“Thank you,” Vector said, as the sounds of running water began to come from the other room. “We are accustomed to people finding our appearance unsettling. Although we have no desire to change ourselves, it is nonetheless pleasant to hear that there remain others who find us acceptable.”

“More than acceptable,” Theron replied, trying to infuse his words with some heat.

Before his traitorous brain could come up with anything else stupid to say, Theron leaned forward and kissed Vector. The other man was startled – clearly Theron’s attempts at flirting had missed their mark – but only briefly, his hands coming up to pull Theron closer.

Vector’s lips were surprisingly soft and warm – warmer than Theron was used to, but not unpleasantly so. Theron found himself halfway out of his seat, leaning up and over Vector, the other man’s strong hands gripped tightly in his T-shirt to draw him in. He brought his own hands up, tracing the line of Vector’s jaw before sliding his fingers around to bury them in the thick strands of dark brown hair that brushed Vector’s collar. Vector made a sound, somewhere between a hum of appreciation and a moan, and his lips parted, his mouth moving hungrily on Theron’s, his hands tugging Theron’s shirt upwards to expose tanned skin and lines of hard muscle.

Theron moved in closer, closing what little space remained between them, his body pressed up against Vector’s. He could taste the caf Vector had had with breakfast, but underneath that was another flavour, some strange mixture of spice and honey that seemed to be unique to the Joiner. Theron groaned against Vector’s mouth, sliding his tongue between the other man’s lips to better taste him. He felt Vector’s hands sliding around to his back and groaned again when strong fingers gripped his backside, tugging him in closer until Theron found himself grinding up against the other man. As if the eager mouth and hands weren’t enough, Theron could feel the stiffness in Vector’s
pants as they writhed against each other, and his own body was responding in kind.

His fingers tightened in Vector’s hair, tugging just enough to let him pull the Joiner’s head back a little to expose the line of his neck. Theron’s mouth moved away from Vector’s lips as he kissed his way along Vector’s jaw, brushing over the faint trace of stubble over his chin and then back towards his ear. His teeth closed briefly over the soft skin of Vector’s earlobe and he heard the slight hitch in the other man’s breath as he nipped him before continuing his progress, kissing his way along Vector’s neck.

One hand squeezed Theron’s ass as the other came up to twist in his hair, pulling Theron’s mouth back to Vector’s. Vector’s teeth tugged lightly on Theron’s lower lip before he kissed him again, hard and open-mouthed, their tongues tangling. Theron let out some kind of whimper, bringing his hand down to tug desperately at the fastenings of Vector’s pants, and then –

Vector broke the kiss off, both hands coming up to push Theron back just a little. His eyes were heavy-lidded and his lips swollen, but he pulled away with obvious reluctance.

“Damn,” Vector said with sincere regret. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, and when he opened them again he gave Theron a long look. “As much as it kills us to say it, we cannot in good conscience continue this, Theron.”

“What? Why?” Theron pulled back, heat flooding his cheeks. His gaze darted towards the closed ‘fresher door, the shower sounds still very much in evidence. “Because of Miranza?”

“No, no, not that.” Vector sat up, tugging his clothes back into place, his features unreadable. “Because of the conditioning. We cannot be certain how much of this –” he motioned between them “—is you, and how much is a result of the programming and what you’ve been through.”

“Believe me,” Theron said, reaching for the other man, “this is all me.”

Vector waved him off, although his obvious desire for Theron softened the rejection somewhat.

“We don’t want to take advantage of you, Theron,” he said. “We’ve no way of knowing how deep the control goes, nor do we want you to … to do this because you feel grateful towards us.”

“What? That’s not … That’s not what this is.” Theron folded his arms across his chest, suddenly feeling defensive – and uncertain. “Believe me, Samar didn’t have me programmed for … for this. He liked it better when I resisted.”

Looking pained, Vector sighed and closed his eyes, thudding his head back against the backrest of the couch. When he opened his eyes again his expression had cleared somewhat, and the compassionate look he gave Theron twisted something in the agent’s gut. He wasn’t used to people being this considerate of him or his needs, and there was a small part of Theron that wondered if perhaps it was easier that way, when people didn’t give a shit about him aside from what he could do for them.

“Make no mistake, Theron, we do want you,” Vector said finally, shaking his head ruefully. “But until the conditioning is broken we cannot know for certain that this is something you want, too. If you desire us now, we have to hope that in time, once the serum has done its job and you are free of the restraints, you will desire us then. Do you understand?”

Theron opened his mouth to argue but the words died in his throat. He thought he was certain about what he wanted – stars, he had wanted Vector back on Yavin 4, he was pretty sure he still wanted him now – but Vector’s words made sense, as much as he hated it. None of them had any way of
knowing what sorts of nasty traps lurked in Theron’s brain, waiting for the right circumstances to trigger them. He sure as hell didn’t want to find out the hard way that he had been programmed for this. But it was immensely frustrating to think that he did know what he wanted and yet no one could trust him because no one knew the full extent of his programming.

“Yeah,” he muttered, giving in with ill grace. “I can see where you’re coming from. I feel like I am making a choice – that I do want this – but you’re right. Even if I do know what I want, you don’t know that I know. Although I think you’re overthinking this.”

Vector gave him a wry smile. “We would rather overthink matters than not think on things enough.”

“Damn you for being honorable,” Theron said with a harsh laugh.

“Indeed.” Vector stood, then leaned down and kissed Theron lightly on the lips. “We’re not going anywhere, Theron. You’ll see.”

Chapter End Notes

One of the things I really appreciated about the IA romantic storyline (at least in my play-through) with Vector was that things didn't really begin to heat up between them until they had both resolved their own shit: she breaks her conditioning, he "repairs" himself and rediscovers some of his lost humanity. While Vector didn't know about the Castellan restraints until after Cipher had freed herself, the characterization of him makes me think he wouldn't have been comfortable moving forward with her conditioning in place, even if he didn't personally have any control over her. That's something I'm trying to bring to his relationship with Theron: regardless of whether or not Vector has any actual power over Theron, he's going to be worried that he does, or that Theron isn't able to act under his own agency. Consequently, he's not going to be comfortable pursuing a sexual relationship (or any kind of relationship) until he's certain it's 100% consensual.
Chapter 18

Chapter Eighteen

Theron took off sometime after breakfast, heading out into the woods that surrounded the hunting lodge with nothing more than the cold weather jacket on his back and a pair of blasters on his hip. Miranza was concerned, but she knew the Killiks would be keeping an eye on him, and he might be angry and hurting but he didn’t seem the least bit suicidal. He simply needed some time alone to vent and work things out on his own, and Miranza and Vector were willing to give him that.

Vector had told her what had happened, of course. Communication was one of the cornerstones of their relationship, and that included communication regarding potential dalliances. She understood Vector’s concerns regarding Theron’s brainwashing and ability to give consent; she didn’t necessarily share those concerns, but she had been under the influence of Castellan restraints before and had a better idea than her husband of what Theron was going through. She was willing to concede that they didn’t know the full extent of Theron’s programming, but she believed Theron was capable of deciding for himself what he did and did not want. Still, she certainly wasn’t going to force the matter, not if Vector was uncomfortable with it. Her husband’s self-restraint was admirable but, in her mind, unnecessary in this case.

Miranza spent the better part of the afternoon napping, a treat she seldom had the luxury to indulge in. It felt strange to not be constantly on the go; while Intelligence training had had a large element of “hurry up and wait” about it – patience was one of the earliest virtues taught to young operatives – even in her earliest academy days she had been over-scheduled and under-rested. Even after she had finished in the academy and begun working as an operative, she had had a steady stream of assignments pouring in, especially once she began work on Hutta. It wasn’t until she had effectively gone rogue that she had been able to set her own schedule, and the breakneck pace she had grown up with was what she was most comfortable adhering to. But here on Alderaan she had no assignments to worry about, no masters or employers to answer to, and no schedule save for the whims of her heart. Besides that, she was recovering from a serious injury, and she’d had several people impress upon her the importance of taking it easy.

The massive bed in the master bedroom was arguably the most comfortable she had ever slept on. Sure, she’d experienced softer, more luxurious beds in her time, but those had belonged to her marks, and she didn’t sleep in her mark’s bed. Even the bed in the penthouse on Corellia hadn’t been this nice – and this one had the added benefit of the fact that Samar had not once slept in it or fucked her on it. Since Vector had gone off to meet with the Killiks she had the bed all to herself, and so she cuddled up in the middle of the mattress and tried to sleep.

It bothered her more than a little that both Theron and Vector were absent. She was concerned about them both, for different reasons: Theron was off on his own doing Force knew what, and Vector’s meeting invariably involved him being required to do something in exchange for the three of them staying at the hunting lodge. Given that Vector was the Dawn Herald of the Oroboro Nest and that
position involved a fair amount of combat, she thought her concerns were justified. She was less comfortable with the realization that she was just a little bit afraid of being left on her own.

Not that she couldn’t take care of herself. It would take more than a hole in her gut to keep her down.

Miranza had never – ever – in a million years seen herself in the role of the victim or damsel in distress, and it bothered her that being left alone made her uneasy. Her entire life had been devoted to training and fighting, and she had a considerable amount of faith in her skills as a fighter and as an operative. None of that did anything to stop her from feeling like Samar was about to come crashing in the front door any minute now, however.

Intellectually she knew she was safe. Samar was dead – stars, she had killed the bastard herself – and none of the remainder of the Star Cabal had any way of knowing where she was. The hunting lodge was being guarded by a small army of Killiks, any one of them willing to die to protect her, and Toovee was puttering about the cottage on its rounds and was outfitted to be (somewhat) combat-capable. Theron was somewhere nearby and Vector would be returning any time now. And she was armed: there were blaster pistols strapped to the underside of the bed, and she had ensured that Vector had hidden weapons elsewhere throughout the cottage. She was fine. She was safe.

Even knowing all of that she still felt a flood of terror when she heard the front door open downstairs, and it wasn’t until she heard the low rumble of Vector’s voice as he greeted their protocol droid that her fears subsided.

He came up to check on her as soon as his boots and coat were off, opening the door carefully in case she was still asleep. When he saw her sitting up in bed, a white-knuckled grip on the blankets, Vector crossed the bedroom in three quick steps to sit at her side and draw her gently but firmly into the protective circle of his arms.

She loved that she didn’t need to explain herself to him. Vector knew her so well, she didn’t need to outline all her irrational fears or worry that he would think her foolish for being so upset. He knew her and he knew what she had been through, and he was there to support her, no matter what.

“Did you nap at all?” he asked her, speaking into the fall of her hair as he brushed his lips over the top of her head. He released her somewhat, but kept his hands on her, rubbing her back with firm, soothing strokes.

“A little,” she admitted. “Before my brain started worrying about everything.”

Vector made a tsk-ing sound, pulling back so that he could study her face. His cheeks were wind-reddened and his dark hair was mussed and staticky from being tucked under a wool cap. “We need to find some way to turn your brain off – you and Theron both.” A wicked smile quirked at the corners of his mouth and he ran nimble fingers over her as he added, “Surely there must be some sort of switch on you somewhere …”

“You’re welcome to try to find it,” she replied with a wicked smile of her own.

Typical human eyes responded to arousal with widened pupils, resulting in a large black pupil surrounded by a thin band of colour. Vector’s eyes, lacking the traditional pupil/iris/sclera appearance, instead grew slightly glassy, giving him an almost feverish look that Miranza had grown very, very familiar with. His smile grew lazy, and he leaned in, closing his eyes to brush his lips lightly over hers.

Miranza braced herself for her husband’s face to turn terrifying or for the sound of laughter to start echoing in her ears, but that didn’t happen. Instead, Vector cradled her in his arms and kissed her
gently, his lips warm and wet and so wonderfully familiar that it almost broke her heart to feel him again.

He eased her back down onto the bed, helping her settle against the pillows as if she was made of glass. He kissed her again, reverently, careful to telegraph his movements as though he was afraid of spooking her – and maybe he was. They hadn’t been intimate since before she had been taken, and in all honesty she had no idea what would trigger her anymore. He leaned over her but took pains to avoid looming, giving her as much room as she needed. His lips were soft and hungry but not insistent, and when he licked her lower lip she was the one who opened her mouth to let him slip his tongue inside.

Vector’s hands were gentle as they skimmed up her sides, tugging her shirt – *his* shirt, that she had borrowed – up until her breasts were bared. She shivered a little, uncertain whether it was from cold or nerves, but when he bowed his head again and his lips brushed over the curve of one breast she felt a sudden surge of warmth that settled, liquid and heady, deep below her belly.

“May we?” he asked, breath warm against her skin. Miranza gave a jerky nod, barely able to gasp out the word “yes” around a throat gone suddenly hoarse. Vector smirked, just a little, before running the tip of his tongue over her breast, moving in ever-decreasing circles until he reached her peak. She gasped as his mouth closed around her nipple, closing her eyes as he sucked.

She felt his warm hand caress her other breast, his thumb rubbing idly over her nipple as he continued to lick and suck its mate. Miranza let out a low moan, bringing her hand up to twist in Vector’s hair. He lifted his head, his gaze heavy-lidded, and murmured, “Too much? Tell us if you need us to stop.”

“*Stars,* don’t stop!” she hissed, and he chuckled, low-voiced and husky, before returning his mouth to her breasts, guiding his lips and tongue from one achingly sensitive tip to the other and back again.

His mouth blazed a trail of fire from her breasts down over her belly as he licked and kissed his way downwards. He paused momentarily over the bandages taped to her side, pressing a quick kiss that was so light she only knew he had done it because she watched him. Then he continued down, hands gliding over her skin until his fingers hooked in the waistband of her pants. He looked at her again, waiting until she nodded for him to continue, then he began to carefully ease her pants under her hips, taking pains to avoid jostling her. She wanted to buck her hips upwards so that he could just shuck her pants off but that would pull too much against her stomach, so she had to bite her lip to keep from screaming in frustration as he slowly, carefully, tenderly drew her pants down.

When he pushed her legs open she stiffened slightly, gritting her teeth against a sudden rush of anxiety at being so exposed. He waited, eyes on her face, until she was certain she was comfortable with this; when she nodded again he planted a kiss on the inside of her thigh and she could feel his lips twisting in a smile against her skin.

Then his mouth was pressed against her overheated core and his hands came down on her thighs, holding her when the urge to buck became overwhelming. His tongue probed her gently, parting her lips, and she sighed, trying desperately to hold herself still. One hand released her and then she felt him ease one long finger inside, twisting his hand until he could curl that finger upwards and hit that one spot that made her whimper with need. He worked the finger in and out before adding a second, and then a third. With his lips and tongue working her clit and his fingers pressing and gliding she could feel her orgasm building, and when she came it felt more like shattering, like every single piece of her fell apart and came back together and he didn’t stop touching her until he had wrung every last spasm out of her.

He kissed her inner thigh again and smiled up at her. “Did we find that switch, beloved?”
“Eh?” She blinked, words beyond her at this point.

“The switch to shut your traitorous brain off,” he clarified, looking pleased with himself.

“Vector,” Miranza gasped, pulling at him, “shut up and fuck me.”

Now it was his turn to blink at her, and he shook his head, pushing himself up off the bed. His smug expression had turned to one of concern.

“We don’t want to hurt you,” he said, gesturing towards her stomach.

“You won’t,” she assured him, and in truth she had kind of forgotten the wound was even there, given how amazing everything else felt at the moment. She bit her lip before adding, “Please? I need you.”

“You will tell us,” Vector said, fingers fumbling at the fastenings of his pants, “the instant you feel even the slightest amount of discomfort.” He lowered himself over her, careful to avoid putting any weight on her, and gave her a serious look. “We are serious, beloved. We don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t,” she said again, reaching up to pull his head down towards hers so that she could kiss him again and cut off any further protests. She tasted herself on his lips and tongue and he kissed her with an urgency he hadn’t shown before, pressing his lips against hers and pushing her back into the pillows.

Vector guided himself inside her, moving with such deliberate caution she thought the anticipation alone would kill her. It did hurt, just a little – there was no way for him to avoid putting pressure on her abdomen, but more than that she felt uncomfortably tight and raw, even after all the effort he had put into warming her up. But the only way to avoid this pain would be by avoiding this altogether, and she absolutely did not want that. She bit her lip again, hiding her discomfort by burying her face in his neck, breathing in the familiar scent of him, that spicy-sweet aroma that was so uniquely him, and when she kissed his neck she could taste him and he tasted like home.

When he finally began to move within her it was with slow, careful thrusts as Vector set a languid, steady pace. His patience and self-control were maddening as that one point of contact between them seemed to set fire to every part of her body – but it was a slow burn that rippled outward, spreading the warmth and intensity of her earlier pleasure to every single nerve. He held himself cautiously above her, supporting his weight on his hands and arms, careful to avoid putting any of that weight on her; the strain of doing so showed in the way his arms trembled, but he didn’t seem troubled by this.

The buildup this time was slower, more deliberate. She sensed his need in the way he kissed her, open-mouthed and ravenous, but there was no sense of urgency in his thrusts and he seemed to be holding himself back until they were both perfectly in rhythm. His sudden hungry gasp in her ear was all she needed to tip her over the edge one more time, and when she came it was with a shuddering cry that brought him over with her, crying out as he spilled inside her.

“We love you,” he whispered in her ear, kissing her deeply. His black eyes were still glassy, his lips red and swollen. He was gentle with her, helping her up out of bed and into the ‘fresher to clean up, then guiding her back to bed and settling in beside her. It wasn’t until she felt his familiar weight beside her that Miranza’s eyes began to sting and she gulped, trying desperately to hold in the tears that were suddenly threatening to fall.

She didn’t cry, dammit. This wasn’t like her. Miranza scrubbed angrily at her eyes, but she couldn’t stop the tears from coming, and when Vector – composed as always – wrapped his arms around her
she pressed her face to his chest and sobbed in earnest.

“We didn’t hurt you, did we?” he asked, and the anxiety in his voice just made her cry harder, even as she tried to tell him that no, he hadn’t hurt her, it had been wonderful and she loved him and she didn’t even know why she was crying – but the words wouldn’t come. He simply held her, murmuring soothing nonsense words at her and stroking her back.

When the tears finally – finally – subsided and she was a snuffling, hiccupping mess she pulled away, giving her anxious husband a weak, watery grin.

“I’m sorry,” she rasped out, voice hoarse from sobbing. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“You aren’t hurt? We didn’t hurt you?”

“No. No!” Miranza struggled to sit up, Vector quick to assist her. She kissed him, hating the worried look on his face, and tried to find the words to explain what she was feeling without sounding like an overly emotional idiot. “You were wonderful. You are wonderful. I’m just … overwrought.”

“Perhaps this was too soon? We did not wish to pressure you, but –“

“Vector, if anything I pressured you.”

Vector snorted in amusement, splaying his hand protectively over the bandage on her abdomen. His elegant, long-fingered hand was almost large enough to cover the whole bandage, and his skin – darker than hers, lighter than Theron’s – was a stark contrast to the crisp white fabric. Miranza ran her fingers over the back of his hand, enjoying the warmth and strength of him. There was a part of her that wanted to discuss the matter more, that knew at some point she needed to unpack everything she was feeling and thinking, but she didn’t feel like enduring another crying bout and knew that in her current state tears would be the end result. Instead she searched for a safer topic to bring up, settling at last on the reason for his recent absence.

“You didn’t mention what the Killiks wanted,” she said, continuing to stroke his hand.

He stiffened slightly against her before relaxing again with a small sigh.

“Ah,” he said, and paused to collect his thoughts. Vector never said anything that wasn’t carefully considered; she always wondered if that sense of contemplation was a result of his training as a diplomat, where the wrong words could spark civil war and the right ones could forge alliances, or whether he had simply always been a pensive person. She liked to think it was the latter, because it was all too easy to picture the serious little boy he must have been. “We trust you have already discerned that our tenure here comes with strings attached?”

“I didn’t think the Killiks were playing bodyguard simply out of the kindness of their hearts, no,” she replied, keeping her tone light rather than sarcastic.

He chuckled, breath warm on her hair. “Not entirely, no. They would protect us – all of us – as part of the nest, but the level of security and protection we requested goes a bit above and beyond the bonds of the hive. This cottage could be had without issue, as there is no pressing need for it, but the soldiers outside and the constant vigilance require payment. We have simply been asked to continue our duties as Dawn Herald while we are here on Alderaan; this is not a hardship for us, as we have missed the nest in our absence.”

“And the meeting?” She sensed he wasn’t being entirely forthcoming with her, although she knew he wouldn’t lie to her. That was one promise they had always made to each other: while they both understood that there would be times they might need to keep things from one another, whatever
they did choose to share with each other would be the truth. In her line of work that was the best she could do, and the fact that he agreed to it, when others would not have been willing to put their trust in someone who could never be completely open and honest with them, was one of the many reasons she loved him as much as she did.

“A briefing, of sorts, to bring us up to speed on the current situation here on Alderaan.” Vector sighed again, his hand twitching over her stomach. “One of the other nests – the Mirodari – has gone silent. They have always been somewhat more reclusive than the rest of the Kind, but this recent lack of contact has been worrisome. And there have been … attacks.”

“Attacks?” Miranza frowned, looking at her husband. “What kind of attacks?”

“It is difficult to say. Other nests whose territories border on that of the Mirodari have seen their patrols harried, and smaller hives in the area have gone dark. We do not know if they have come under fire from the Mirodari or whether some enemy has taken out the Mirodari and now moves on to surrounding territories. Thus far the Oroboro have been untouched – the Mirodari are further north and east of here, and there are other Killiks between them and us. But still, it is worrisome.” Vector fell silent for a moment, considering. His hand continued to play over Miranza’s bandage, a light brush of fingers she scarcely felt.

Finally he spoke again, and there was a faint hint of irritation in his voice. “Had we known of these present difficulties we might not have chosen Alderaan as our safe house. We do not wish to put you or Theron in danger.”

“Still, if the Killiks need you, perhaps it’s best that we are here,” Miranza replied pragmatically, giving his hand a squeeze.

“You need us,” Vector corrected her, in a tone of voice that brooked no argument. “We will assist the hive, but not at the risk of you or Theron.” Then, in a softer tone, he added, “We will keep you safe, beloved.”

Once upon a time Miranza would have laughed herself silly at the thought of a man – of anyone – promising her their protection. She would have found the very notion ludicrous: she, who had been trained since childhood to be a weapon in the service of the Empire, had no need of anyone’s help or care. But now, after all the things she had been through, she could only laugh at the strange twists her life had taken, and appreciate the fact that Vector had been there to support her through all of it.

"I know you will," she said simply, drawing him back down into the pillows with her.

O o O o O

This time around Theron had decided against pushing himself too hard, and when he left the cottage for a jog he kept to an easier pace that served more to burn off his anxious energy and stretch his legs than to try and outrun the vicious thoughts inside his head. The vertigo and nausea that had troubled him earlier did not make a repeat appearance, and he was able to do a couple of loops around the cottage before finding a rocky promontory where he could overlook the Imperial territories of Alderaan while stretching.

The view was spectacular, but there was a small part of him that wished he had his macrobinoculars on him, or that he was able to record what he was observing. That small part of him felt he should be working, that he was missing a perfect opportunity to collect intelligence for the Republic. From where he stood he could see speeders coming and going from the spaceport, could count troops coming out of House Thul territory, could assess the size and strength of the Empire’s armies on Alderaan.
That part of him was feeling very, very confused about the fact that he was currently playing the role of house-guest to two Imperials, one of whom was effectively his counterpart in Intelligence.

Theron didn’t feel conflicted about his relationship with Miranza or Vector, even though he knew there would be people back home who would tell him he should. Even before this whole mess with the Star Cabal and Castellan restraints he had known the two of them were good people. Miranza had every reason to be mistrustful of him when they had first started working together on Manaan, and yet she had given him the chance to prove his trustworthiness and they had turned into a good team. In spite of everything Theron had grown up believing about the Empire and her citizens, he knew Miranza and Vector were people he could trust. They represented what the Empire should be, rather than what he had been told it was. And then after Yavin 4 … well, Theron’s professional objectivity had been shattered, to say the least.

Still, he was a loyal citizen of the Galactic Republic, and it was hard to overlook decades of education and propaganda. Theron knew, better than most, the kinds of things the Empire was capable of – but most of that seemed to be the result of the Sith, rather than people like Miranza or her husband. Darth Mekhis and Darth Karrid had been nightmares with the power to destroy planets, and Revan – Theron’s own ancestor, because nothing was ever simple in his life – had caused unspeakable damage in his quest to destroy the Emperor. It was the Sith who were the problem, really, not the rank and file citizens of the Empire.

Not that that made him feel any better about this missed opportunity on Alderaan.

Theron sighed, stretching his left arm over his head one last time before shaking himself out and sitting down on the rocky outcropping that overlooked the sprawling estates of House Cortess. He shifted into a cross-legged position, trying to ignore how cold the ground was underneath his ass, and rested his hands on his knees, palms upturned. It was a familiar, comfortable position, one that had been drilled into him from an early age. Body settled, he closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath, letting it out slowly, envisioning the stress and anxiety leaving his body along with his exhalation.

Meditation had never come naturally to Theron. In part he suspected this was because he had spent his early years struggling to connect with the Force, Master Zho assuring him over and over again that he would feel it, he just couldn’t rush it. As a child he had wanted to please his mentor, and his inability to feel the Force had been a constant disappointment that had eaten away at him. He had been fidgety and anxious and when he closed his eyes and tried to reach out there was nothing reaching back to him, and that crushing frustration had made it next to impossible for him to calm his mind enough to enter the meditative state Master Zho required of him. Mix that in with the natural exuberance of a growing boy and he had been a non-stop source of restless activity. But he had learned. He had never been able to feel the Force, but he had learned to find that still, quiet part of himself that Master Zho had been looking for.

Once upon a time Theron had begun his days with meditation and fasting, although the latter had come much later, after he had given up on his hopes of becoming a Jedi and had simply tried to emulate the lifestyle. He’d abandoned the habit of fasting, but meditation was still helpful, even if he knew he would never be able to experience it in its fullest form.

Now his mind was a tangled nest, and even the pleasant burn of exercise and the calming ritual of meditation didn’t seem to be enough to settle it down. He knew, from talking with Miranza, that part of it was the result of the serum; that it was literally rewriting neural pathways and making changes to his brain, and a certain measure of mental confusion was to be expected. But that was only a part of it, and the other parts were things Theron wasn’t sure he was ready to process.

He was still a little stung by Vector’s rejection – not an outright rejection, to be fair, but still, the man
had turned him down for now and he felt more than a bit embarrassed and let down by it. Not that Theron hadn’t had his share of rejection in the past – everybody has their hits and misses, after all – but it had taken a lot of nerve for him to be able to make a pass at Vector, and he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to drum up the courage again in the future. To a certain extent he had hoped that if he could just throw himself at the other man, Vector would be able to do something to eradicate the ghost of Samar that Theron could still feel haunting him. And maybe that wasn’t the best reason to want to hook up with someone, but at least it wasn’t the only reason Theron wanted Vector; it was just one of them.

What if Samar had broken something in Theron? What if weeks of torture and abuse had made him less than who he had been? What if it wasn’t fixable? Theron had gone through most of his life with the sense that he was damaged goods, at least in part – abandoned by his mother, drummed out of the Jedi Order, too much of a pain in the ass for anyone to want to stick with him for more than a few weeks at a time. Stars, he’d never even been able to keep a partner in the SIS for more than a month, and while he liked to claim it was because nobody could keep up with him, Theron knew it had more to do with how difficult he was to work with, that Director Trant just gave up on finding anyone willing to put in the effort. And never mind how kripping inept he was at relationships – Theron was a walking spaceship wreck and he knew it. ‘Damaged goods’ wasn’t even the half of it, and if Samar had made things worse … what the fuck was Theron going to do with himself now?

Gritting his teeth, Theron drew in another deep breath, inhaling slowly, letting the cold air fill his lungs as he tried desperately to empty his mind. He exhaled, counting it out, willing all his negative, self-destructive thoughts to dissipate with his breath. If his breath came out shuddering, if he tasted salt on his lips, if the air felt just a bit cooler on dampened cheeks, he tried his best to pretend he didn’t notice.

Chapter End Notes

Just in case those of you familiar with the Alderaan storyline are wondering, the Mirodari Nest is one I made up for the purposes of this story. I'm not familiar enough with SWTOR/Legends canon to muck about with the already-established Killiks.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Bit of a short chapter this time around, because frankly formatting the first part was a lot less fun than I thought it would be. :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Nineteen

[Encrypted text transmission from User: blondie@traceless.holo.net to User: ninerniner@traceless.holo.net]

[Subject: No subject]

at least let me know you’re alive

[End transmission]

* [Encrypted text transmission from User: ninerniner@traceless.holo.net to User: blondie@traceless.holo.net]

[Subject: Still Alive]

We’re alive. Took a hit on Corellia, but recovering. T was compromised; fixing that now.

Will update you on progress ASAP.

[End transmission]

* [Encrypted text transmission from User: blondie@traceless.holo.net to User: ninerniner@traceless.holo.net]

[Subject: COMPROMISED??]

You can’t just say someone was compromised and then refuse to elaborate, Nine. Is he all right? Do you require any assistance?

Also: what hit?

I expect details in your reports, Agent.

[End transmission]

* [Encrypted text transmission from User: ninerniner@traceless.holo.net to User: blondie@traceless.holo.net]
It’s the mark of a deranged individual to use more than one question mark or exclamation point at a time, Lana. Also, I’m not your agent, remember?

[End transmission]

Miranza:

My apologies. I’m worried about you and Theron, that is all. Anything you can tell me about your current situation would be greatly appreciated at this juncture.

Besides, if I’m deranged, I lay the blame squarely at your feet.

[End transmission]

I can’t go into details about his condition, but he’s getting better. He’s moody. Blames himself for everything. Somewhat par for the course with Theron, though, no?

I was hit with shrapnel on Corellia. Kaliyo (of all people!!!) called in a favour with some doctor to treat me. Sleazy fellow but good at his job. I’m recovering nicely although there will likely be a scar. Not sure how I feel about that.

Vector sends his regards.

[End transmission]

What was that about punctuation and insanity, Nine?

Re: Theron, you should know that I’ve had repeated inquiries from multiple Republic sources on his whereabouts and condition. Jonas Balkar and Grand Master Shan were to be expected, but now I’ve had the Republic military sniffing around, although Force knows what interest Supreme Commander Malcom has in a missing SIS agent. Does Theron subcontract to military now? No word yet from
Director Trant or Supreme Chancellor Saresh, but I expect to hear from them through official channels sooner rather than later.

By the by, Darth Marr sends HIS regards.

Your pet agent is giving me headaches, Nine.

[End transmission]

[Encrypted text transmission from User: ninerniner@traceless.holo.net to User: blondie@traceless.holo.net]

[Subject: Re: No subject]

If we can get to a secure comm I will have Theron contact Jonas and Satele. They can sort out the rest.

He’s fine, really.

Should I be expecting an immediate seizure followed by trial and summary execution upon my return to Imperial space, or have things not gotten that bad yet?

And he’s not MY pet ANYTHING, Lana.

[End transmission]

[Encrypted text transmission from User: blondie@traceless.holo.net to User: ninerniner@traceless.holo.net]

[Subject: Re: Re: No subject]

I take it you’re not IN Imperial space now?

But no, no seizure or trial or execution. You’ve earned enough credit with Marr and Sith Intelligence to be given some leeway in how you conduct your affairs. Don’t push it, though. There’s only so much I can do to keep you covered.

Any updates on your progress? I’m asking as a friend, not as the Minister of Intelligence.

[End transmission]

O o O o O

Miranza paused and set the encrypted datapad down, frowning at its matte surface as she considered Lana’s words and how best to respond. Her relationship with Lana Beniko had always been a confusing one: as a general rule, Miranza was not overly fond of Sith Lords – far, far too many bad experiences, ranging from Darth Jadus to Revan to that Sith Lord on Corellia – but Lana was unusual for a Sith. She didn’t go in for the usual moustache-twirling villainy Miranza had come to expect in Imperial Force-users, but rather harboured a strong sense of honour and compassion that was tempered by pragmatism and duty to the Empire. And stars, the woman was funny, with an unexpectedly dry wit that popped up in the strangest places. Miranza liked Lana, but she needed to be mindful that Lana was Sith, and – perhaps more importantly – she was the head of Sith
Intelligence, which to a certain extent made her Miranza’s boss (insofar as Miranza considered herself to be affiliated, tangentially, with Sith Intelligence). She liked Lana, but she wasn’t so foolish as to completely trust the woman.

Even so, Lana was the only person outside of her crew that Miranza had contacted once she and the men had set up on Alderaan. The secure HoloNet addresses had been established ages ago, their nicknames a joke between the two of them, the encrypted channels created through the Traceless network secure enough to keep out even the most accomplished of slicers. After her less than pleasant conversations with Darth Marr and Grand Master Shan back on the Mercurial, Miranza had thought it prudent to reach out to someone to keep them all appraised of what was going on. Thanks to her position as Minister of Intelligence Lana had the contacts and the authority to carry messages to pretty much anyone, and that, combined with her sense of distraction, made her the ideal point of contact.

Miranza knew she ought to update Lana (although she didn’t entirely trust that the other woman was asking just as her friend; Miranza knew how difficult it was to separate the woman from the job) but she didn’t know quite what to tell her.

Turning slightly so that she faced the mirror over the dresser, Miranza pulled up the hem of her shirt and examined her scar in the reflection. The abdominal wound was mostly healed now; Vector had suggested leaving the bandages off to let it breathe, so she was doing that even though the skin was still somewhat tender. The area where the shrapnel had entered her body was pink and smooth, the scar tissue stretched taut over the external oblique muscles. The edges were ragged and the scar itself was, to her mind, rather large. Strange to think she didn’t have much experience with scars: during her years with Intelligence she had sustained all number of serious injuries, but the evidence had always been removed as it wouldn’t do for an operative to have any identifying marks. (No tattoos or piercings, either, which had always been a source of constant amusement for Kaliyo, who accused Miranza of not having the stomach for pain. Miranza had explained the reasoning behind her lack of body modifications, but Kaliyo found it much more entertaining to see the agent as squeamish rather than following Intelligence’s rules.) The first time she had been injured after leaving Intelligence she had considered getting cosmetic work done to remove the scar, but instead she had decided to keep it: the jagged slash above her elbow was her first real sign of independence, and she wore it like a badge of honour.

Physically she was much improved. The wound still pained her from time to time and the scar tissue pulled if she moved in a certain way, but she had resumed training and exercising and no longer required any painkillers, not even to dull the pain so she could sleep. Kaliyo’s friend Doc had done a good job; the man was an incredibly skilled doctor, regardless of his questionable personality (which, admittedly, Miranza had had limited exposure to, given that she had been mostly unconscious the entire time she had been in his presence). The other injuries she had sustained during her time with the Star Cabal were more or less healed with no ill effects, and she and Theron had done their best to keep themselves in peak condition. She wasn’t back up to one hundred percent yet, but she felt better than she had in a long time.

Mentally, of course, it was another story, but she was used to that. She had never fully recovered from her first experiences with the Castellan restraints and the Star Cabal, so the abuse she had suffered at Samar’s hands was just more fuel for the fire. If she had still been with Intelligence she might have opted for counselling – before the restraints, at least; afterwards was an entirely different story – but as an independent contractor she didn’t have access to the same resources, nor was there any ‘outsider’ qualified whom she could trust. But she was used to taking care of herself, and she at least had Vector and Theron to rely upon.

Theron. There was someone else whose progress she didn’t know how to comment on to Lana.
Physically he was fine: no lasting damage whatsoever. Mentally, though …

On the surface he was fine, but Theron Shan was a spy: he lied for a living. He was very good at feigning normalcy, but Miranza was very good at seeing through that sort of thing, and she could see that underneath the calm demeanour he was struggling. She wanted to help – both she and Vector had done their best to make it clear to the Republic agent that they were there for him – but Theron seemed to want to work through it on his own, and she knew that if she pushed him too hard he would simply shut down or shut her out.

Miranza sighed, deciding her response to Lana could wait until she had something useful to report. She wasn’t about to tell the head of Sith Intelligence that the poster boy for the Republic was grappling with burgeoning post-traumatic stress. Theron would never forgive her for that level of betrayal.

“Is everything all right, beloved?” Vector poked his head in through the open bedroom door, regarding her with a concerned look on his face.

She gave her husband a wan smile. “Just working on a reply to Lana.”

“Ah.” He came into the bedroom and stood beside her, smiling down at her. “Let us guess. ‘Everything is fine. We are fine. Theron is fine. Will report back soon.’ Does that sound about right?”

“Just about,” she conceded with a tired chuckle. She grasped the hem of his shirt, using it to tug him in close, and Vector wrapped his arms around her obligingly and rested his chin on top of her head. When she spoke, her words were muffled by his chest. “At least it doesn’t look like the Dark Council is coming after me just yet.” Lana’s assurances that she wasn’t about to be drawn and quartered the moment she returned to Dromund Kaas had been encouraging.

“That is good to hear,” Vector murmured, his words a pleasant rumble in his chest. “We would hate to have gone to all this trouble just to see you thrown into Imperial prison.”

Miranza snorted but chose not to comment. They both knew that if it came to it, a prison sentence was the very least of her worries. At best she would wind up locked up in Shadow Town for the rest of her life; at worst … The Sith tended to be extremely creative when expressing their displeasure with their subordinates.

“We’ve come to tell you that we are required by the nest for the next few days,” Vector said, after a moment of silence. He pulled back a little so that he could see her face, and she sensed he was reading her aura to gauge her response. “If you think you will be comfortable with it, we would be absent until the end of the week. But only if you are comfortable with it. We do not wish to cause you distress.”

Biting her lip, Miranza considered her reply. She didn’t like the idea of Vector being gone for a few days, but she disliked her immediate needy response even more so. The suggestion of being parted from him made her feel frightened and sad, and that was so unlike her usual self that it sent annoyance rippling through her. She would be perfectly fine on her own. She was mostly healed and the cottage was heavily guarded; it wasn’t as though she needed her husband to keep her safe, she wasn’t some sheltered Alderaanian noblewoman. Besides that, Vector’s absence would be a good test of her recovery: if she didn’t spend the next few days jumping at every sound and cowering under the covers, she could consider herself much improved.

“I’ll be fine,” she said, pleased with how confident she sounded. “Although I wish I was going with you.”
“We wish it as well, beloved,” Vector assured her. His hand came up to rest on her belly, over the scar hidden under her shirt. “Were this a week or so from now we might be willing to risk having you join us, but we do not wish to threaten your recovery. We had considered asking Theron to accompany us, but we would rather he stay here and keep you company.”

“Stars, he does need to get out,” Miranza said with a sigh, even though the idea of both Vector and Theron being gone sent a small frisson of fear shivering through her. *You're fine. It's fine,* she told herself firmly, mustering up a smile for her husband.

“He does,” her husband agreed, smiling, “but we think if we tell him we need him here to protect you, he would be willing to remain behind. Not,” he hastened to add, “that you need protection.”

Miranza made a noncommittal sound, smiling faintly. She suspected Theron would be able to see through that small deception and would know that Vector was just as interested in keeping *him* safe as he was in keeping Miranza safe, but she wasn't about to point it out to her husband. If it made Vector feel better to have Theron play bodyguard to her, then so be it. She could live with that, and so could Theron. They fell into silence for a moment, Vector continuing to stroke his fingers lightly over her healing flesh. Finally he shifted, clearing his throat, then brought his free hand up towards his face as if suppressing a cough or a yawn. Miranza recognized her husband’s habit of doing so whenever he was about to discuss something that had the potential to make one or both of them uncomfortable.

“We thought we might suggest that you invite Theron in here to sleep. Ah, with you,” he clarified hesitantly, as if it needed clearing up. He offered her a sheepish smile. “We had considered making the invitation to him earlier but were afraid of giving him mixed signals. We still think it would be best to wait for his conditioning to be broken before making sexual overtures towards him, but sleeping in here, with us, might be good for him.”

“Or I might throttle him in his sleep,” Miranza commented dryly. She was getting better, but her tendency to wake up suddenly and violently was an ongoing concern.

“We suspect Theron can take care of himself.” Vector’s tone matched hers for dryness. His expression sobered again. “Neither of you sleeps particularly well – in truth, we are not certain whether he sleeps at all – but we worry that you will not sleep if you are alone.”

“And if we sleep together, and one thing leads to another …?” Miranza waggled her eyebrows in her best approximation of a lascivious fashion, earning a soft chuckle from her husband.

“We trust your judgment,” Vector said simply. He knew his wife didn’t share his concerns regarding Theron’s ability to give consent, but he also knew Miranza wouldn’t take advantage of Theron and wouldn’t initiate anything with him unless she was completely certain Theron was on board with it.

As Vector had pointed out before, they didn’t know the full extent of Theron’s programming or what the Star Cabal had intended to do with him. Conditioning him into some kind of honeypot – an operative trained to seduce their targets – seemed to fall in line with Samar’s general designs on Theron, and given that the Republic agent was an attractive, open-minded man it made sense to utilize him in that fashion. If he had been programmed to respond positively to someone making sexual overtures towards him regardless of his feelings on the matter, there would be no way for Miranza or Vector to know it until it was too late and the damage was done. But when it came to relations between herself and Theron, Miranza saw the matter as being somewhat more clear-cut: Samar had always had to force Theron to engage in any sorts of sexual activity with her, which suggested to her that nothing in his programming had set him up for seducing her. If Theron initiated sexual relations with her – and as far as she was concerned, he would have to be the one to initiate anything between them, because she needed to be completely certain he was interested – it would be
because he wanted to, not because he was conditioned to.

And if he didn’t initiate anything … well, that would be okay, too. Theron had admitted to still desiring her, but Miranza wouldn’t have blamed him in the slightest if their recent unpleasant experiences had soured him on the idea.

“Talk to Theron,” Vector said, planting a kiss on the top of her head. “We worry about you both in our absence, but it would be reassuring to know you have each other for support.”

“Hmm.” Miranza stood on her tiptoes to kiss him, smiling against his lips. “I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve you, but –“

Whatever she was about to say was silenced when Vector kissed her again, drawing her in closer. For the next little while she forgot about her report to Lana, her fears over what the Dark Council would do to her if she didn’t get back to them soon, and her worries about Theron Shan. Instead, she let her husband distract her from her concerns, and it wasn’t until much later that she realized he never told her why he was going to be away with the Killiks for several days.

Chapter End Notes

And yes, Miranza's comment to Lana regarding punctuation and deranged minds is a nod to Terry Pratchett, who made more than a few comments on the subject in his books.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Basically just fluff, angst and smut.

Chapter Twenty

Miranza’s internal chronometer woke her up the next morning at her usual time, even though she had nowhere she needed to be and nothing she needed to be doing. The morning was dark and dreary with the kind of heavy drizzle that occurred when the weather couldn’t make up its mind between rain and snow. It was cold and dark and there was no reason whatsoever for her to be getting up this early.

Beside her lay another reason to stay in bed. Theron was sprawled on his back, arms and legs akimbo, mouth wide open in a snore. His T-shirt – she didn’t know who it had belonged to before it had found its way into his closet, but none of Theron’s clothes were actually his and this was something old and faded, with the Rotworms logo branded across the chest – was rucked up, baring that dusting of dark hair just below his bellybutton that people called a ‘treasure trail’ and his legs were tangled in the sheets. She hadn’t seen him in such a relaxed pose since waking up with him on Yavin 4; back on Corellia the two of them had slept back to back, arms and legs drawn up to protect their midsections as if they expected to be attacked in their sleep. (To be fair, sometimes they were.) Now, though, he was right out, and all the harsh lines that pain and worry and fear had etched onto his face were smoothed away.

Much to her surprise Theron had been almost embarrassingly grateful by her request that he sleep with her, and when Vector had asked him to keep an eye on her in his absence he had appeared to take it at face value. It had served to highlight just how lost Theron had been feeling lately, and Miranza resolved to make more of an effort to connect with him. He had warned her that he wasn’t sleeping all that well lately (as if she hadn’t noticed) and said that if his tossing and turning kept her up, she was to send him back to his own room.

He was out cold in minutes. She had been the one tossing and turning all night – mostly worrying about Vector, who was off somewhere doing something dangerous on behalf of the Killiks.

The bed was massive, far larger than king-sized. She and Theron had gone to sleep with plenty of room between them, ostensibly in order to avoid bothering each other with their restlessness. At some point during the night they had gravitated toward each other, and now they were close enough together that Miranza could have rested her head on Theron’s pillow. Instead she propped her chin up on her upraised fist, enjoying the incredibly rare sighting of a slumbering Theron Shan.

In the weak morning light, his face slack and all the worry lines erased for the time being, Theron looked almost impossibly young. Miranza didn’t know how old he was, exactly – Intelligence’s files were disappointingly limited on Theron’s background details, and most of what she knew about him had come from him telling her herself – but she guessed he was pushing thirty, same as her. No grey hairs yet, but she had seen both his parents and knew it was only a matter of time; by that same token, though, she suspected he would be one of those annoying people who only grew more handsome with age. He had some faint scars on his face: one just slightly to the left of the bridge of his nose, and another above his right eyebrow; apparently the SIS did not share Imperial
Intelligence’s standpoint on identifying marks. She was familiar enough with his body to know he had other scars and had gained yet more while in the hands of the Star Cabal. Miranza was Imperial, though: scars meant strength, perseverance, which she knew Theron had in spades. To her his scars were just another facet of his beauty, and Theron was a ridiculously beautiful man.

The urge to trace those scars, to run her fingertips across his face, to explore the trail of coarse hair across his belly, was almost overwhelming. Under different circumstances – such as back on Yavin 4, perhaps – she would have indulged herself. But not now, not when this was the first time in days where she couldn’t see that haunted look on his face, not when he was actually, finally at rest.

But damn if it wasn’t tempting.

One of Miranza’s earliest lessons in the facility where she had been raised was in learning how to make herself presentable. It went beyond simple grooming, of course: Intelligence operatives needed to know which colours and fits were most flattering on them, how best to style their hair and makeup, how to walk, how to move, how to talk. Everything was geared towards making them as desirable and eye-catching as possible, because their bodies were their best and most effective weapons. Later on, of course, they learned how to do the exact opposite – how to disguise themselves, make themselves unrecognizable and unnoticeable. But ultimately, if Miranza was going to rely upon her attractiveness to reel in a mark, she would have spent hours getting ready: hair, makeup, clothing, accessories, all of it. And here Theron was, wearing borrowed clothes, with day-old scruff on his chin and drool at the corners of his mouth, and he was so fucking irresistible she wanted to lap whiskey off his perfect kriffing abs.

Huffing a small sigh, Miranza gave a stretch and then sat up, appreciating the high-quality mattress that ensured her movements didn’t jostle Theron. She probably could’ve done a full gymnastics routine right next to his head without knocking him about (and the bed was so ridiculously large she thought she might have had the room, too). She wasn’t quite ready to get out of bed yet; normally she would have need to make a beeline for the ‘fresher, but frequent ups and downs during the night had made that a necessity about an hour or two earlier. She could be nice and head downstairs to get breakfast started, but instead she was enjoying being lazy.

Beside her Theron made a sound, not quite a whimper but close. She looked down at him and saw that his eyelashes were fluttering (of course he had stupidly long eyelashes; those were always wasted on the folks who didn’t care about that sort of thing). A dream, then.

No, she quickly realized when his head tossed back and forth on the pillow – a nightmare. He whimpered again, then his breath caught in his chest and he began thrashing in earnest, struggling against the sheets that had twisted around him as he slept. Without thinking Miranza reached out and put her hand on his chest, intent on shaking him awake.

Theron let out a strangled cry, his eyes flashing open. At the same time he grabbed Miranza by the wrist, strong fingers grinding her bones together, and he moved, far faster than she would have thought possible.

He punched her in the mouth – probably not what he was aiming for, given that he was still more than half asleep, but even that glancing blow was enough to knock her backwards onto the bed. She was lucky he snapped awake then, as she was too dazed to make any attempt to block any further attacks. She allowed herself to remain sprawled on her side on the bed, tongue delicately probing her teeth to see if he had knocked any of them out. More luck: her lip was split and bloody, but her teeth were all intact. (Thank the Force – she hated having to go to the dentist.)

“Shitshitshitshitshit!” Theron leaned over her, his expression a combination of shame and horror as
he tried to help her back to a sitting position. “Shit, I’m so sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry…”

“It’s fine,” Miranza mumbled, forcing herself not to flinch away from him now that he was definitely awake and aware of his surroundings. “I’m fine.”

“No – shit – you’re not, you’re bleeding –“

“Theron, you’re bleeding, you cut your hand.” Probably on my teeth, she thought, but she didn’t think it would be helpful to say that.

Cupping a hand to her mouth – yes, she was bleeding, but it wasn’t bad – she watched as Theron pulled away to inspect his hand. Sure enough, he had a nasty gash over the knuckle of his middle finger, which must have caught on her teeth when he punched her. It seemed as though the discovery of blood had paralyzed him, and he sat, staring in shock at his shaking hand.

“Hang on.” Miranza clambered out of bed, doing her best to pretend that she wasn’t about two seconds away from freaking out herself. Theron stayed frozen where she left him, so she hurried into the ‘fresher and grabbed the medkit from under the sink, then dampened a couple of facecloths and brought it all back into the bedroom. “Here.”

She handed him one of the facecloths, but when he didn’t move she sighed and climbed back onto the bed with him and pressed it against his injured hand, holding the other facecloth to her bloodied lip. Neither of them was bleeding badly, but she didn’t want to risk getting blood on the sheets and at least tending to their injuries made her feel like she was doing something useful.

“Hey,” she said, moving the cloth away from her mouth so that it wouldn’t muffle the words, “Theron, I’m fine. It’s okay. We’re okay.”

He looked up at her finally, his eyes gone wide, then shook his head. “I hurt you.”

“My fault. I of all people should know better than to wake someone in the middle of a nightmare.” She squeezed his hand lightly, pulling the facecloth away so that she could examine the gash over his knuckle. It had stopped bleeding and, as she expected, it didn’t look terribly bad although she wanted to clean it out before too long – human mouths were full of nasty bacteria and she didn’t want to risk him getting an infection. “I’ve had worse in training. Can I clean this for you?”

“Stars, Miranza, I’m so, so sorry –“

“Yeah, you’ve said that already.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth she regretted snapping at him, but at least Theron didn’t appear to have noticed, as he continued staring at her with his too-wide eyes, his face gone pale. He suddenly bolted up from the bed, nearly tripping over the sheets in his haste to reach the ‘fresher. Miranza grimaced in sympathy as retching noises echoed out from the other room, and while she waited for him to return she opened up the medkit and rummaged around for a small tube of kolto gel.

When Theron emerged a few minutes later – after Miranza had heard the sound of running water and a considerable amount of spitting – she had covered the small wound on her lip with the gel and wrapped her wrist in a kolto-infused bandage. Now that the immediate crisis seemed to have passed her wrist was the worst of the damages: in his panic, Theron’s grip had been like durasteel and with her adrenaline rush gone she was keenly aware of how much it hurt. She didn’t think he’d broken anything – not for want of trying – but she was going to have a nasty ring of bruises around her wrist.

“Come here,” she said quietly, patting the bed beside her with her good hand. “I should clean and
disinfect that cut. You don’t know where my mouth has been.”

He managed a weak smile at her joke. “I’ve got a few ideas.”

Theron shuffled back to the bed, sitting down beside her. He still looked pale – well, pale for him, which was still darker than her – and she thought his skin seemed a little clammy, but he was lucid and if he was capable of responding to her jokes he couldn’t be too badly off. She took his hand in her own and cleaned it with some disinfectant wipes from the medkit, pretending she didn’t notice the way he was shaking or how fast his breathing was. This was one of those moments when she missed her husband the most: Vector would have been so much better at handling this situation than she was. She didn’t have his patience or serenity, and frankly, he had been on the receiving end of so much of her nightmare-induced volatility that he was practically an expert on the subject. Vector always knew the right things to say and do to calm her down, and he did it without making her feel foolish or weak.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Miranza asked finally. There: that was something Vector would have said. He always offered to be her sounding board or her shoulder to cry on.

“No, not really,” Theron answered, giving her another wan smile to soften the harshness of his response. He hissed as she dabbed some of the kolto gel over the cut. “I just – it was a nightmare.”

“Samar?”

“Yup.” The word came out curt and rough, with heavy emphasis on the “P” sound, snapping it off in his mouth with a harsh pop.

“Okay.” Miranza decided not to push him. She wished he would talk, but if he didn’t want to then she didn’t think forcing the matter would help, especially when for all intents and purposes she was still technically The Enemy. (Even if she wasn’t, even if she hadn’t seen him as the enemy since Rishi, and she knew she was in trouble because of that, her objectivity compromised, her loyalties divided.)

She smoothed an adhesive bandage over the cut, making sure the edges of it stuck to his undamaged skin. The injury probably didn’t warrant a bandage but they had plenty of medical supplies and it made her feel better to be doing something. There was also the off chance that having the bandage in place would make Theron more mindful of the injury, and maybe, just maybe, he would take it easy with his hand. But that was a very off chance, knowing him as she did.

On a whim Miranza ducked her head and brushed her lips lightly over the bandage, murmuring “There, all better” as she straightened again. Theron watched her closely, a pained expression on his face. When he opened his mouth to speak, another apology on his lips, Miranza stopped him with a finger to his lips.

“Do you know how many times Vector’s had to do this with me?” she asked him, letting her hand fall into her lap.

“It’s not the same,” Theron muttered.

“How so?”

“Nobody ever used your programming to make you hurt Vector,” he said.

She laughed, but there was little mirth in the sound; instead, it came out harsh and ragged. “No,” she agreed, “but if they had used my command word and told me to hurt him, I would have done it. I would have been screaming on the inside, but Theron, I would have done it. I’ve been where you
are; I know what this feels like.”

He opened his mouth again but closed it before saying anything, clearly struggling with whatever he wanted to say. Miranza chose not to push, and after a moment he abandoned the effort, shrugging and running his good hand through his hair.

“I need to get cleaned up,” was all he said, and he hurried out of the bedroom before Miranza could think up a reply.

O o O o O

The cottage was lovely and luxurious, but one thing it lacked was a proper exercise room. Miranza suspected this had more to do with the fact that the original House Cortess owners were more interested in self-indulgence and hedonism than they were in staying fit, but it was also entirely possible that they had planned on being able to use the expansive grounds surrounding the cottage for their physical activities. Of course, running through the woods depended on the weather being agreeable, and at present it was decidedly not.

Granted, the weather had never been a major consideration when Miranza had been a child at the Intelligence training facility, nor had it been much of a concern at the academy. Rain, snow, hot, cold: none of it was an excuse for putting off exercises, and she could recall numerous occasions where her instructors had sent her and the other recruits out in inclement weather with the expectation that they would either toughen up or drop out. Realistically, it made sense: operatives needed to be prepared to act under any circumstances, and you couldn’t bail out of an assignment just because it was too hot and muggy or you were getting frostbite because you’d forgotten to wear proper cold-weather gear. The Empire was not for the faint of heart, and those who couldn’t hack it were doomed to a life of mediocrity. (Or death. Death was always an option.)

But Miranza was no longer a child or a recruit at the academy, nor was she even a part of Sith Intelligence, and while she was fully committed to doing the job regardless of the circumstances, there was no particular need for her to go jogging in the pouring rain just because she wanted to stay in shape.

Fortunately both Vector and Theron had shared her sentiments, and shortly after their arrival at the cottage the two men had converted the small study into a makeshift training room. This mainly consisted of them shoving all of the furniture back against the walls in order to create an open space in the centre of the room, which was better than nothing. It would have been nice to have some exercise equipment – at the very least, some weights would have been appreciated – or mats on the floor to minimize injuries, but Miranza was accustomed to making do. It was no worse than the rooftop garden on Corellia.

Miranza warmed herself up with some stretches before easing into her familiar calisthenics routine, appreciating the subtle burn and pull of muscles and sinew. Away from the watchful eyes of her husband – who knew better than to say anything about how hard she pushed herself, but who could still make his disapproval felt if he felt she was pushing too hard – she allowed herself to pick up the pace, pushing her body to go harder and faster. Intellectually she knew she hadn’t been laid up for all that long, but she couldn’t afford to be weak or risk letting her body lose its tone and conditioning. She might not be in the academy anymore, but the gruelling pace set by her instructors stayed with her, along with the calm assumption that it was necessary for her own survival.

Thinking back to the rooftop garden, she remembered the routines Theron had performed, no doubt some aspect of his early Jedi training. Picturing the maneuvers, Miranza shifted her stance, concentrating as she tried to emulate what she had seen him doing. Her rhythm was off, she could tell, but she thought she was close.
“Is that Soresu?”

Theron’s voice, coming from the open doorway, startled her enough that she lost her footing and she stumbled forward, hopping on one foot until she regained her standing. She turned to glare at him, face flushing in embarrassment.

“I thought you had gone back to bed,” she said, somewhat accusingly.

“Couldn’t sleep.” He shrugged and took a few steps into the room. “Is that Soresu you’re doing? Your footing is off.”

“I wouldn’t know,” she snapped back, peevish at having been caught off-guard. She felt the urge to cross her arms defensively over her chest and forced herself instead to rest her hands on her hips.

“I would,” he replied, sounding unperturbed at the slightly hostile note in her voice. “If you had your feet right, you wouldn’t have tripped.”

Miranza considered trying to pretend she hadn’t just tripped over her own two feet, but he had clearly seen her so there didn’t seem much point in lying. She didn’t know why she felt so annoyed at having been caught at mimicking his routine – the Soresu stance, apparently – but she knew her cheeks were blazing and she felt foolish and embarrassed.

Theron came the rest of the way into the study, moving to stand beside her. He had showered sometime between breakfast and now, and she could smell the soaps he had used, something masculine and woodsy. Adopting a relaxed stance he balanced on the balls of his feet and motioned for her to follow suit, which she did.

“Here, I’ll show you,” he said simply, and without further notice he began the routine she had observed on Corellia.

Miranza knew next to nothing about lightsaber techniques or Jedi training, but she could appreciate the steady flow and shift of Theron’s movements, and the ease with which he moved through the various stages of the stance. Judging by what she saw, Soresu was a defensive form, and she could see why Theron had been so quick to notice her bad footing – foot placement seemed to be an important facet of the form. He went through the routine a couple of times, pointing out various aspects of positioning and posture, and then had her give it a try. She knew she was sloppy and uncertain, but Theron was patient, his humour much improved from earlier that morning, and he corrected her without making her feel silly, making subtle adjustments until he was confident she had it down.

The two of them then began to move through the forms side by side, flowing from one stance to the next like water over stone. Soresu – indeed, any lightsaber technique – was different enough from anything Miranza had learned, and the effort of putting her body through its paces made for a pleasant distraction. After a few minutes she was breathing heavily, feeling the burn throughout her body.

“I wanted to say I’m sorry,” Theron said, and he didn’t sound anywhere near as winded as she was. “For freaking out earlier, I mean. I know you’ve been through this and you know what I’m going through. I don’t mean to be such a pain in the ass.”

“I think you’ve earned the right,” Miranza replied, between gasps.

“Yeah, but not to take it out on you. Or Vector. I know you both mean well. I’m just … frustrated.”

Finishing the last position of the form, Miranza stopped and stretched, trying to catch her breath.
After a moment she decided she’d had enough working out for the time being, and she sank down onto the ground, flopping down onto her back in a graceless heap. Theron stopped his own exercises and sat down beside her, stretching his legs out before bending at the waist to touch his toes.

“Well,” Miranza said, once she was confident she could breathe normally again, “it is frustrating. You’re stuck waiting for the serum to do its job, but you don’t know what that means or how to tell whether or not it’s working, and in the meantime you’re having to rely on other people to keep you safe. Oh, and those other people are technically your enemies and their superiors want them to make you into an Imperial automaton. Sound about right?”

“Uh … yeah. When you put it like that. Kriff.” Theron cast a long look in her direction, his hands resting on his outstretched leg. “Only I don’t see you as my enemy. Kind of … opposite to that, actually.”

He cleared his throat awkwardly and she glanced over at him, noticing that his cheeks had turned an interesting shade of red. Her heart, which had begun to slow down after her workout, picked up the pace again.

“And that’s … uh … that’s kind of adding to the frustration right now.” It was his turn to sound embarrassed, and he shifted into a cross-legged position, looking down at his hands with intense deliberation. “I mean, it’s been – ah, kriff, I was going to say ‘hard’ but I don’t want to leave myself open like that … It’s been difficult trying to sort out how I feel and … and what I’ve been through – what we’ve been through – and I mean I know why Vector doesn’t want to …” He motioned awkwardly towards himself. “Uh, with me. Right now. And I get it, I don’t like it but I get it, I respect that, but … Ah, fuck, I must sound like a complete idiot.”

Miranza debated letting him ramble on incoherently – his painful awkwardness was actually kind of adorable, in its own way – but decided to take pity on him and cut to the chase.

“You like us,” she said, smiling when the tips of his ears turned red. “And you’re horny.”

“Kriff, when you say it like that …”

“Theron,” she said, pushing herself up and crawling towards him, “Shut up.”

And then Theron shut himself up through the simple expedient of crushing his mouth against hers.

Unlike their last kiss, he didn’t ask permission first, but Theron was a smart man and he assumed (correctly) that the fact that Miranza had essentially crawled into his lap was all the indication of her desire that he needed. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her legs around his waist, and his arms snaked around her until he was gripping her by the ass and pulling her in close against him.

Miranza could taste the hunger and need in him, and it kindled an answering fire in her own belly that had her writhing against him, her fingers carding through his dark brown hair as she pressed her lips to his. The kiss was wet and warm and more than a little sloppy, and as she ground her body against his she could feel his body’s response, immediate and hard where it pressed into her backside.

She broke away, the needy whine that Theron made in response almost causing her to pounce on him all over again, then bent and grabbed one of his hand’s to haul him to his feet.

“C’mon,” she said, pulling him from the study. “Shower.”

The short trip from the study to the downstairs refresher took somewhat longer than expected as Theron and Miranza twined around one another, pushing up against doorways and walls, hands and
mouths roaming as they left a trail of clothing behind. If it wasn’t for the fact that she had just spent the better part of an hour working out and hadn’t showered yet that day Miranza would have dragged Theron over to the couch and had her way with him there. As it was they barely made it into the massive shower stall before she was backing Theron until against the tiled wall, kissing him until he was breathless and her split lip had reopened and then he was turning the water on and she sank to her knees in front of him.

“Fuck,” he growled as she brought her mouth to him.

She repressed the urge to giggle when she heard Theron thunk his head back against the wall, his muffled curse of pain quickly turning to a long, drawn-out moan as she slowly and deliberately ran her tongue along the underside of his cock. She drew him fully into her mouth, relishing the shuddering breath he let out, and brought up one hand to grip him tightly, wet fingers sliding over and around what her mouth couldn’t reach. Theron’s hands tangled in her hair, lifting the wet mass on top of her head to keep it out of her eyes and mouth. He thrust his hips with just a hint of impatience, making her gag a little, but when he tried to offer up an apology she sucked him in as far as she could and squeezed the fingers of her free hand into the hard muscles of his ass, and the resulting trembling she felt in his knees was immensely gratifying.

His fingers twisted in her hair, pulling her back until he could meet her eyes, and although he seemed to be struggling with speech he managed to ground out, “Want you” before tugging her to her feet.

Then Miranza was the one with her back against the wall and Theron’s hands seemed to be everywhere at once, his mouth hot against her throat. She felt his fingers curve around her thigh, pulling her leg up until she hooked her knee around his hip, and she could feel his hardness pushing against her belly. His other hand slid between her legs and she cried out when he touched her, deft fingers parting her lips to feel how hot and wet she was.

“Tell me you want this,” he rasped, gripping himself so that he could tease the tip of his cock against her clit, making her whimper.

“I want this.” Her voice was breathy, but she put as much conviction into her response as she possibly could, knowing he needed to hear her say it as much as she needed to speak the words. “I want you.”

Theron groaned, a low, helpless sound, entering her with one hard thrust. His feet slid a little on the wet tiles and she instinctively reached out, fingers closing around a metal bar that seemed to have been perfectly placed for just such a purpose. Steady again, Theron kissed her hard on the mouth, heedless of the cut on her lip, and she tasted blood. He drew away slightly, planting urgent kisses along her jaw and down the side of her neck.

“Not gonna last,” he ground out, breath hot on her neck. He kept one hand on her thigh, keeping her leg wrapped around his waist, and his fingers dug into her skin with enough force that she knew there would be bruises later. She had one hand on the safety bar – or whatever it was supposed to be – while the other dug into the hard muscles of his back, and she wished she had another hand she could rake through his hair but she was afraid to let go of the bar and the support it provided them.

She felt Theron’s hand snake between their joined bodies, the pad of his thumb rubbing hard and fast over the sensitive nub at the apex of her thighs, and as his hips began to piston against hers she found herself letting out animalistic moans and whimpers that she scarcely recognized as her own voice. He kissed her neck again, murmuring encouragement against her skin, and then his teeth closed down hard at that spot where her shoulder met her neck just as he did something with his thumb and –

Miranza cried out, her voice echoing off the walls of the shower stall, every nerve in her body
dancing with the sweet, fiery pleasure of release. Her fingernails scratched down Theron’s back and that, combined with the delicious spasms clenching his cock, tipped him over the edge and he came with a shout, his hips jerking against her.

Theron released his tight grip on her hip and she lowered her foot as he brought his lips back to hers, kissing her gently.

“That was …” His voice trailed off as he struggled to catch his breath.

“Yeah,” she agreed. Her wrist ached from where he had grabbed her that morning and she knew her lip had come open again and if she was being honest with herself her mostly-healed stomach wound felt just a little bit sore but *none* of that mattered compared to how fantastic everything else felt.

He pulled away, splashing water over himself, then helped her clean herself off. His touch was soft and gentle, with none of the urgency she had felt earlier. She had liked that urgency – Force knew, it felt good to be appreciated – but she was happy that she had been able to help him take some of the edge off. Now that they were done, however, she could sense some of his earlier anxiety settling back over him like a shroud.

“Vector’s not going to have a problem with this, is he?” he asked, giving her some inclination as to what his current concerns were.

Well, she could at least alleviate that concern right away.

“No,” she said, confident in her response. “I’ll tell him about this, of course, but it makes him happy to see us happy.”

“Oh, I’m happy,” Theron assured her, grinning. “I’m gonna be feeling it later, but … it was worth it.”

“Mmm, I’ll say.” Her response came out sounding far more obscene than she had intended it to, and Theron laughed, looking distinctly smug. His expression turned considering and his eyes grew heated again, and once more Miranza found herself pushed up against the tiled wall as Theron went to his knees before her, parting her legs with both hands.

“What’re you doing?” Miranza managed to gasp out, even as the press of his mouth against her heated core made the answer patently obvious.

He drew back a little, smirking, and said, “Making us both happy.”
The weather over the next few days continued to be miserable, fluctuating between cold, hard rain and heavy, wet snow. Alderaan was on the cusp of winter and the forecasts promised blizzards and freezing rain. It was a good time to stay indoors, particularly if one had access to a luxurious hunting lodge up in the mountains.

In Miranza Theron had finally met someone who hated inactivity even more than he did, and their forced seclusion left her restless and irritable. It didn’t help that Vector remained absent; Miranza’s worry for her husband was a palpable thing and it shrouded her every waking minute. Theron couldn’t blame her for being anxious and unhappy, although he did what he could to improve her mood. His own outlook had improved substantially, which he made him feel somewhat guilty when he considered how miserable she was.

At no point would Theron ever try to claim that sex was the answer to life’s problems – if anything, sex was a complication, not a solution – but he had to admit that he was feeling a lot better following their interlude in the shower. (Which had led to another interlude in the shower, followed by one on the stairs leading up to the second floor, and another in the bedroom, and … Well, suffice to say whatever inhibitions the two of them had had, they were well and truly shattered by now.) Part of it was just the physical comfort of it: Theron wasn’t an overly demonstrative person, but there was something inherently reassuring in being able to touch and be touched in return, even if there was nothing sexual about the interaction. But he knew there was more to it than that, and he wasn’t quite prepared to unpack all his thoughts and feelings regarding Miranza or his relationship with her.

That he had feelings for Miranza was a given. Sure, Theron was generally on board with an uncomplicated fling here and there, and one night stands had their own allure under the right circumstances. Sex was meant to be enjoyed, after all. And honestly, this thing with Miranza had only ever been intended to be a fun mindless romp: it was supposed to have ended when the truce did, and the two of them weren’t supposed to ever see each other again. (And if they had seen each other, it had been expected that they would be enemies once more, with all that that would entail.) But then along came the Star Cabal and Samar and Belsavis and Corellia and there was nothing fun or mindless about any of it. The woman had put her fucking life on the line to come and save him – her and her husband both – and now there was no way to pretend Theron didn’t have rather strong feelings on the subject. Gratitude, yes; admiration, certainly. And lust – oh, stars, yes; it didn’t seem to matter what they did or how often, he still wanted more. (And the fact that she wanted him was immensely gratifying. A man has his ego, after all.) But Theron knew his feelings went beyond all of that, and he was so not prepared for this.

Force help him, he was not falling in love with a married Imperial agent. He fucking well was not.

Maybe stupid, star-crossed relationships was a genetic trait. Maybe that was his excuse.

Theron shut down that train of thought before it could leave the station, telling himself it was too late at night for him to sit obsessing over the fact that he seemed genetically predisposed to make a disaster of his personal life. In his defense it wasn’t as though he’d had any good examples of healthy relationships to model himself after. Master Zho had been largely celibate – or at least really, really good at hiding any dalliances from his young ward – and Theron hadn’t met his parents until he was
an adult, but it’s not like any of them were good role models, relationship-wise. Strange to think his first real experience with a healthy couple came in the form of a pair of polyamorous Imperial spies.

Stranger still to think that one of those spies was currently cuddled up against him on the couch while the two of them watched a truly horrendous holo together. Well – “watch” was probably too strong a word. The holo – some sort of romantic comedy that seemed to have cobbled together every trope imaginable – was terrible, and both he and Miranza spent most of their time commenting on the stupidity of the characters, the awful stereotyping, and the laughably low-budget sets and special effects. Miranza in particular had a tendency to argue with the characters on the screen as if they could hear her criticizing their every word or action.

Theron, for his part, was mostly just enjoying the warm weight of the woman snuggled under his arm, her curly blonde head resting on his chest while the two of them shared a blanket. It was probably the most normal interaction Theron had ever engaged in, and it was so abnormal for him that it felt a little surreal. Pleasant, though. Very, very pleasant.

The hero of the holo was in the process of running through what was supposed to have been an Imperial spaceport (presumably on Dromund Kaas), which incited a considerable amount of snark and hilarity from Miranza when there was a loud banging from the front door of the cottage.

It was late – close to midnight – and the night was dark and storming, with periodic bursts of freezing rain interspersed with snow. Miranza and Theron were certainly not expecting anyone, and although they had no idea when Vector was due to return there was no reason for the Joiner to be knocking on the front door when he had keys and access codes. Theron froze in a moment of uncharacteristic panic but Miranza moved swiftly, pushing away from him to hang over the back of the couch and retrieve a blaster pistol he hadn’t known was there. She then snagged a second pistol that had been strapped under the coffee table, handing it to Theron as she headed for the door. His hesitancy disrupted by her suddenly dropping a blaster into his lap, Theron stood and joined her, his heart thudding in his chest as the two of them moved towards the noise.

While the cottage was well-guarded it did not have top of the line security systems – it was, after all, nothing more than a pleasure retreat tucked away in the Alderaanian mountains; it wasn’t meant to be a spy’s safe house – so there were no security recorders over the door. There was, instead, simply a window overlooking the front porch, and that was where Miranza crept, blaster at the ready at her side. Tugging back the curtain, she peered out onto the porch, only to draw away with a startled cry and hurry to unlock the door.

The moment the door was opened Theron saw the cause of her alarm: there, supported between two Killiks – not the Joiners, but two actual insectoid Killiks – was Vector, hanging limp and scarcely conscious.

One of the Killiks made some kind of buzzing, clicking sound that Theron suspected was supposed to be some form of speech, and then Vector was shoved unceremoniously through the door. He would have fallen if both Theron and Miranza hadn’t moved forward to catch him; in the end Theron took the bulk of the other man’s weight, easing his shoulder under Vector’s armpit and hooking his arm around the Joiner’s waist. Vector sagged against him, head lolling, cold water dripping off his dark hair and clothing. The Killik spoke again – if, indeed, that was what it was doing – and rubbed its forelegs together, bobbing its head in Vector’s direction. Then, moving in near-perfect unison, the two Killiks turned away and stomped back down the porch to take up protective stances in front of the cottage.

Miranza went to assist Theron in supporting Vector, only to have her husband let out a pained cry when she tried to ease in on his other side. She drew back, then motioned silently for Theron to help
Theron half-carried, half-dragged Vector towards the couch, the Joiner mumbling incoherently the whole way; Theron couldn’t quite make out what the other man was saying, although at one point he thought he heard Vector apologize for getting water on the floor. Just as Theron was about to lower Vector onto his back on the couch Miranza cursed under her breath and, with some urgency, told him to put Vector onto his stomach. Theron hastened to comply and once he had done so he saw the reason for it: the back of Vector’s long coat hung in shreds, the flesh underneath in frighteningly similar condition.

While Theron did what he could to make Vector comfortable, Miranza hurried to fetch their supply of medkits. She also set Toovee – who had spent the better part of their sojourn there powered down in maintenance mode, so as to not be underfoot – to cleaning up the water and mud that had been tracked across the floor. As soon as she returned with their medical supplies she dropped to her knees beside the couch and began using bandage scissors to cut away the remains of Vector’s coat and shirt. With the ruined fabric out of the way Theron could see jagged tears all across Vector’s right shoulder and back, down almost all the way to the waist of his trousers. The wounds didn’t look to be terribly deep, but they were red and inflamed, with harsh bruising that looked at least several days old. Theron couldn’t quite place the cuts, but if he had to hazard a guess he would have said it looked like Vector had been mauled by a gundark or a manka cat – something with long, incredibly sharp claws or teeth.

“When did this happen?” Miranza breathed, surveying the damage. Her voice sounded surprisingly calm, but Theron could hear the underlying edge of panic and fear in it.

Theron thought the other man had passed out, but Vector stirred slightly, his response muffled by the couch cushion. “Ye – ah – yesterday morning, we think? Or per- perhaps it was the day before? We have … We regret that we have lost all track of time.”

Miranza’s lips pressed firmly together as she fought down whatever sharp response was on the tip of her tongue. She ducked her head and began rummaging through the medkits in search of something; when, after a few seconds, she failed to find whatever she was looking for she upended the kit onto the floor in a fit of pique, cursing under her breath. Theron watched her for a moment before he noticed how badly her hands were shaking and realized she was in no condition to treat her husband’s injuries. Gently he nudged her aside, delving through the supplies until he found a package of disinfectant wipes and several tubes of kolto gel. Instead of handing them to her, however, he sank down on the floor beside the couch and began examining Vector’s wounds.

“I’ve got this,” he said quietly, giving Miranza a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, I know my way around a field dressing.” Then, in a gentle tone he added, “Could you please get some towels and dry clothes for him?” Miranza nodded uncertainly, no doubt recognizing that he was just finding some busy-work to help her feel useful while getting her out of the way so that he could treat Vector’s wounds. He wasn’t used to seeing her so shaken and upset: even back on Yavin 4 when Vector had been injured badly enough to require an extended stay in the kolto tank, Miranza had been calm and collected. Now she was on the verge of losing it entirely, and Theron found it more than a little unsettling. She did as he asked, however, quickly standing and heading upstairs in search of the requested supplies.

With Miranza gone and Vector’s ruined clothing out of the way Theron bent his head to the task at hand. He was by no means a doctor, but he hadn’t been lying when he’d said he knew what he was doing. Field medicine was a staple part of SIS training, and Force knew Theron had been injured often enough on the job to pass muster as a relatively competent medic. The wounds on Vector’s torso certainly looked bad, but the cuts were relatively shallow and were already beginning to scab
over; from the look of things the bigger concern was that they had gone untreated for close to two days, perhaps longer, and were beginning to show signs of being infected.

“Still with me?” Theron asked, ripping open the package of wipes and beginning to clean the worst of the wounds.

Vector hissed at the contact and nodded, keeping his eyes screwed shut. His face was unnaturally pale and there were beads of sweat on his forehead in spite of the fact that he was shivering slightly. The cottage was reasonably warm, but it certainly wasn’t set up for a half-naked man whose only remaining clothing was a pair of trousers that were soaked from the freezing rain outside. Theron debated the merits of removing the rest of Vector’s clothes, but decided it could wait until Miranza was back with dry things for him to change into. He would need her help, anyway; undressing a grown man, especially one on the verge of unconsciousness, was difficult work.

When Miranza returned a few minutes later her calm veneer was back in place. Theron had completed the painstaking process of cleaning and disinfecting the wounds; after setting down the towels and clean clothes, Miranza took over the application of kolto and bandaging while Theron began undressing the other man. Vector’s boots had tracked mud and water into the cottage, which Toovee was mopping up (while also muttering plaintively about the mess and the condition its master was in), and he was still wearing them when Theron had helped him onto the couch. It was a bit of a struggle to get his boots off with him lying facedown on the couch, but Theron was able to manage and soon had both boots and socks removed. Vector’s pants were soaked from the knee down and much of it had seeped into the couch cushions, leaving him lying on a wet surface; Theron wanted to get him into drier clothes, but he wouldn’t be able to get him out of his pants until he was upright again.

Miranza worked with quiet efficiency, her hands moving deftly over the slashes across Vector’s back. She had given her husband some painkillers while Theron had been struggling with his boots, and Theron was relieved to see the lines of tension erased from Vector’s face as the edge was taken off the worst of his pain. The kolto was already beginning to take effect: Theron could see the redness beginning to diminish, and the skin around the claw marks – if that’s what they were – was no longer shiny and taut. Vector was losing the fight against unconsciousness, the combination of kolto and painkillers tipping the balance against him, and he stared unseeing at his wife, his eyes glazed and unblinking.

“The couch is soaked,” Miranza commented as she finished bandaging. She glanced up at Theron, her expression closed and guarded. “Do you think you can get him upstairs? He can’t sleep down here.”

Theron nodded, and the two of them helped Vector up off the couch, with Theron getting his arm around the other man’s waist and Vector’s arm over his shoulder. Once Vector was fully upright Miranza made short work of his pants, stripping him down to his boxer shorts and tossing his ruined trousers in the same pile as his shirt and socks. Theron noted with faint amusement that the process of undressing the other man was decidedly less exciting than he had fantasized – or rather, it was exciting in an entirely different and altogether unpleasant manner, given the circumstances.

Getting Vector upstairs proved to be more difficult than Theron had anticipated. Vector was taller than Theron – although Theron was broader in the shoulders and chest, and had a more compact, muscular build – and ungainly from the combination of drugs and pain. By the time they were all the way upstairs Theron was practically carrying the other man and his arms and legs were shaking with the effort. To his surprise Miranza had instructed him to take Vector into the middle bedroom rather than the master, but the fact that it was marginally closer was something Theron could appreciate. He hauled Vector into the bedroom, awkwardly drawing back the bedsheets one-handed, then eased the
injured man onto the bed. Vector hit the mattress with a slight hiss of pain, burrowing his face into the pillow.

Theron had asked Miranza to fetch her husband some clean clothing, but that had largely been an excuse to get her out of the way. There didn’t seem much point in struggling to get Vector into dry clothes, not when he was just going to be in bed anyway, and so Theron tugged the sheets up over the other man’s legs and waist. The process of getting upstairs had roused Vector somewhat, and he gazed up at Theron with a bemused expression on his face.

“We do not know if it is the drugs or an influx of emotions,” the Joiner commented idly, his voice thick with exhaustion, “but your aura burns brightly, Agent Shan. It is exceptionally fierce, like flames or star rubies. Radiant.”

“Theron.” The correction was automatic, although it had been close to two weeks since Theron had last needed to remind the other man to call him by his first name. His cheeks flushed as he added awkwardly, “Uh, thanks.”

Vector chuckled, a sleepy, low-voiced sound that seemed to rumble up from his chest. His eyes were drifting shut as pain and fatigue pulled him down. “The dimness of your aura has dissipated somewhat, Theron. You must be pleased. It’s quite lovely.”

Not knowing quite how to respond to that – was Vector flirting with him? what dimness was he even talking about? – Theron opted for simply patting Vector on the arm in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. He was saved from having to find a suitable reply by the appearance of Toovee, who informed him that Miranza had sent him upstairs to monitor Vector’s vital signs and attend to the Joiner’s needs while he recuperated. Theron gave Vector another awkward pat on the arm before heading back downstairs.

Toovee had done a commendable job of cleaning up and aside from the couch – which would require more than a bit of dabbing with a dry towel to address the soaked and muddied cushions – the main floor of the cottage looked more or less as it had prior to Vector’s unexpected arrival. The Joiner’s ruined clothing had been taken away, either to be cleaned and mended or to be tossed out, and the medical supplies had been put away and the empty wrappers and discarded containers disposed of. The air smelled strongly of kolto, disinfectant and cleansers, but otherwise it was almost impossible to tell that anything was amiss.

Miranza was seated at the island counter in the kitchen, a bottle of something – most likely whiskey, given her preferences – and a half-filled glass in front of her. She did not acknowledge Theron’s return but rather continued to sit and stare at her drink, her face blank. Theron went to the window by the front door, tugging back the curtain to look outside. Sure enough the two Killiks were still out there, standing in front of the cottage in watchful, wary positions, seemingly oblivious to the icy rain pelting their chitinous hides. Theron didn’t know how he could tell by looking at them, but he was certain the Killiks were on guard. He knew they weren’t the only Killiks out there protecting the cottage, and the sudden realization of how necessary that was sent a small chill through him.

Composing himself, he joined Miranza at the table, climbing up onto the barstool and facing her across the counter. Even with the dim lighting he could see that she had been crying, tear tracks marking her fair cheeks, her blue eyes bloodshot.

“How is he?” she asked, after taking a small sip of her drink. Her voice was hoarse but steady.

“Sleeping,” Theron answered. He smiled suddenly, shaking his head. “I don’t know what you gave him, but he was smiling off into space and mumbling about auras and radiance.”
Miranza snorted. “It’s his Joiner physiology. Meds and stims have weird effects on him. I’m usually more careful with how I dose him, but he doesn’t need to be lucid right now.”

Theron helped himself to the alcohol – which he had correctly surmised was indeed whiskey – taking a swig directly from the bottle. It was top-shelf stuff and it burned a pleasant path towards his gut. Setting the bottle down again, he reached across the counter and took one of Miranza’s hands in his own, giving her fingers a squeeze.

“You okay?” he asked quietly, searching her face.

“You saw those wounds, Theron. Whatever did that to him, it happened days ago.” Miranza’s hand in his was ice-cold and he could feel a slight trembling in her fingers although her face remained composed. “Why was he left untreated so long? Who – what – did that to him?”

“I don’t know,” Theron answered her simply, giving her hand another reassuring squeeze. “He’ll be able to tell us when he wakes up.” He saw her shudder slightly and when she ducked her head he realized she had begun to cry again. “Hey, hey, it’ll be all right, Miranza, he’ll be fine. He’ll be okay.”

Pulling her hand away from his, Miranza scrubbed angrily at her face, brushing the tears away with harsh, jerky motions. She grabbed the bottle and refilled her glass, downing her whiskey in a single gulp before refilling the glass again. This time she just curled her fingers around her drink, staring down at the rich amber liquid as if it held all the answers to her questions.

“I don’t know why I keep crying,” she muttered, scowling. “I never cry. I hadn’t cried since I was a child, and now I’m a kriffing leaky faucet.”

“I think we’re all a little fucked up right now,” Theron said.

“Yeah, well, I fucking hate it. I hate feeling weak.”

Theron reached across the counter and wrapped both his hands around Miranza’s, cupping her hand around the glass. He ducked his head, looking up at her until she met his gaze.

“You’re not weak,” he told her. “Stars, you’re one of the strongest people I know. You saved my kriffing life and were nearly killed in the process, and now your husband is upstairs looking like he was on the losing side of a wampa fight. You’re allowed to be upset, Miranza.”

She just nodded and let out a shaky breath, blowing strands of curly hair away from her face. The two of them lapsed into silence, Theron continuing to hold Miranza’s hand in both of his, his thumbs stroking lightly over her fingertips. She was still crying, but silently, tears tracking down over her cheeks, her shoulders rising and falling with quiet sobs. Theron didn’t comment on it, nor did Miranza make any further complaints, and in the background Toovee continued fussing over the couch cushions while upstairs Vector slept.

O o O o O

Miranza awakened the next morning with a splitting headache that had more to do with her crying jag than with the alcohol she had consumed. She didn’t know how long she and Theron had sat up, but by the time she had gone to bed – alone, in the master bedroom – the bottle was more than half-empty and she was stuffed up and miserable. She had lain awake for a while, tossing and turning and worrying about her husband, and when morning came she was irritable and exhausted. She could have remained in bed for a while longer but a pressing need to use the ‘fresher combined with a natural disdain for laziness had her up and moving before long.
Necessary functions attended to, Miranza made her way out into the hallway, morning sunlight causing her to wince against the pounding in her skull. The other two bedrooms were empty, both doors hanging open; the guest bedroom where Vector had rested was still dark, curtains pulled closed and the bed unmade, but Theron’s room looked like it hadn’t even been touched. A glance over the railing showed that neither men were in the kitchen or the living room, and she realized with a sudden flare of panic that their boots and coats were gone from their usual resting place by the front door. She hurried down the stairs and was well on her way towards a full-blown panic attack when the door opened and Theron, then Vector, came inside the cottage.

“Easy, beloved,” Vector murmured when he saw her face. She resisted the urge to fling herself into his arms at the sight of him, and instead settled for giving her husband a watery smile, shoving aside the flash of annoyance at the knowledge that she was yet again on the verge of tears.

“Where were you?” Miranza asked, watching as Theron helped Vector out of his coat before removing his own. Both men had snowflakes melting in their hair and their cheeks were reddened from wind and cold.

“Talking to the guards outside,” Theron answered her. He knelt to unlace Vector’s boots, waiting patiently while the other man braced himself on Theron’s shoulder before taking off first one, then the other boot and leaving them by the door. Vector was moving stiffly, but he seemed in much better shape than he had the night before. Under other circumstances Miranza might have been amused (and more than a little turned on) by how well the two of them seemed to work together, Theron clearly supporting her husband.

“We wanted to be certain we were not followed here,” Vector added, as Theron straightened and kicked off his own footwear. “Our memories of last night are dim, but we know we returned in rather a hurry.”

“Everything looks fine, though,” said Theron reassuringly. “It doesn’t look like anyone followed Vector and the others here.”

Glancing between her husband and the Republic agent, Miranza rubbed the bridge of her nose and tried to will her pounding heart to settle down in her chest. Her headache had started to pulse in time to her heartbeats.

“Can you at least tell me what happened?” she asked finally, fixing her gaze on Vector.

He nodded, giving her a small, tight smile. “Of course, beloved. But first …” His expression became slightly boyish and abashed, and he hung his head, snow-dampened hair falling in his eyes. “Could we perhaps have breakfast? We cannot recall when last we ate, and we are finding ourselves rather famished.”

In truth the thought of food made Miranza feel a little bit nauseated, but she didn’t need to be hungry in order to be able to fix something for Vector to eat. Within minutes the three of them were in the kitchen, Theron having dragged one of the larger, comfier chairs in from the living room for Vector to sit in, as the injuries on his back made it difficult for him to perch atop the barstools. Miranza steadfastly ignored her pounding head and nausea in order to throw together breakfast for the two men, and while she cooked Theron handled the prep work and set the table. Once he had everything together he disappeared for a few minutes, reappearing at Miranza’s elbow with a glass of water and a couple of myocaine tablets in the palm of his hand. He handed them to her without comment and she tossed the pills in her mouth, downing the water eagerly.

“Did you sleep at all?” she asked him, after he had set the now-empty glass in the sink to be washed.
“Nope,” he confirmed, shrugging. He helped her serve the bacon and eggs. “Strangely enough I was feeling kinda restless after you two were down. Might’ve had something to do with all the adrenaline surging through my body after we got Vector all patched up.”

Theron set Vector’s plate down in front of the Joiner, then grabbed his own plate and sat down opposite him. Miranza, for her part, decided to nibble on a plain piece of toast, sensing her stomach wouldn’t tolerate much beyond that. After the men had eaten a few bites she waved her toast in her husband’s direction, fixing him with a gimlet eye.

“Yes, about that,” she said firmly, “can you please tell us what happened to you? Your wounds are days old, Vector – why haven’t you been treated before now? What’s going on?”

Vector swallowed his mouthful of bacon, resting his fork against the side of his plate, and nodded at his wife. The look on his face suggested that he knew very well how upset Miranza was and why.

“We apologize for worrying you,” he said, taking a quick sip of his caf before continuing. “You will recall that we were accompanying the Killiks to investigate reports of a missing or endangered hive?”

“Yes.” Miranza nodded, racking her brain for the name. “The … Mirodari?”

“Precisely, yes. We went as part of a recon team to investigate the Mirodari nest. We were attacked almost as soon as we entered their territory.”

“Attacked?” Theron repeated, talking around a mouthful of scrambled eggs. He chewed for a few seconds, then swallowed and continued. “By the other Killiks? Why? Aren’t you guys all … like … allies or something?”

Vector nodded slowly, making a so-so gesture with his free hand. He took a bite of his bacon and chewed thoughtfully, considering his response while Miranza finished off her toast instead of grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him until he started spilling the answers she rather desperately needed to hear. She hated the fact that Vector had been injured, and hated even more so the fact that it had happened when she wasn’t there to support him. Making matters worse was the knowledge that his injuries had been sustained while he was honouring an agreement he had entered into in order to keep her and Theron safe. She blamed herself for him being hurt, and having to wait while he picked his way through his responses was killing her.

“As a general rule, yes, the Killiks on Alderaan are essentially in accord,” Vector said after he had finished the last of his bacon. “Which was why when the Mirodari fell silent and we began to receive reports of patrols in their territory coming under fire, we – the other Killiks, we mean – had assumed the threat came from an outside source. We were incorrect.”

His expression was grim, and he covered his mouth with his fist as if suppressing a cough.

“The Mirodari attacked us, but it was … They were changed.”

“Changed?” Theron repeated. “How?”

“We have not seen anything like it, nor is there anything similar in all the hives’ memories. The Mirodari were … the best word we can use to describe it is to say they were rabid. They attacked us without any concern for their own well-being. We had no warning, no threats or efforts of intimidation or orders to turn around and leave. They came out of nowhere and … It was monstrous.”

Vector’s haunted expression tore at Miranza’s heartstrings, and she reached across the table to catch his hand in hers, squeezing his fingers tightly. He gave her a grateful, if somewhat distracted, smile
and ran his thumb over the back of her hand.

“There were fifteen of us on the recon team,” he continued, staring down at their joined hands. “After the attacks … well, the two Killiks outside are all who accompanied us here. We were attacked … two days ago? Three days ago? We cannot remember when, exactly, it all happened, but the Joiner who accompanied us as medic was among the first to fall in battle. We are the only ones trained in medicine, but we could not tend to our own wounds, and after the fighting … well, we had no choice but to flee. We would have gone directly to the Oroboro nest, but the cabin was closer and … we wanted you.”

Miranza exchanged horrified glances with Theron as the implications of Vector’s words sunk in. She doubted Theron understood exactly what Vector was saying, but she had spent enough time around Killiks in general and her husband in particular to know the full meaning of what she was being told. It was bad enough that twelve Killiks were dead, but she suspected that given the nature of the connection between the Oroboro nest, Vector and the two surviving Killiks had sensed the deaths of their mates. The shared connection between the nest was a double-edged sword; it meant that they were better able to communicate and work together, but the loss of one was felt by all. And the loss of twelve all at once … She couldn’t even imagine what that had felt like or how he was managing to keep himself together, especially given his own injuries.

“I’m so sorry, Vector,” she said, bringing his hand up to her mouth and kissing him lightly.

Vector sighed, giving her another distracted smile.

“We will need to return to the nest,” he said quietly, stroking her hand. “Not today, but tomorrow, perhaps, or the next day. We need to report back on what happened and make plans for future efforts to investigate what befell the Mirodari. But,” he added, when both Miranza and Theron tensed up in preparation for arguing with him on the matter, “we intend to bring you both along with us when we leave. There is clearly something going on with the Mirodari that is beyond our ability to investigate, and we would welcome your insight – both of you.”

Theron and Miranza exchanged glances again. She was still more focused on the fact that her husband had been injured, but she could tell that Theron was pleased at the prospect of being able to get out of the cottage and do something for a change, rather than spending all his time hiding and waiting for the serum to take effect. And at least she didn’t need to worry about any of the Killiks knowing his activation keyword; if the Killiks were going to try brainwashing him, it wouldn’t be with his pre-existing conditioning. Vector would notice the Killiks trying to use pheromones on him – or on her, for that matter. He wouldn’t let the Killiks interfere with either of them. But it was clear from Vector’s words and injuries that getting involved in this investigation would be dangerous, and Miranza couldn’t help but feel worried, even if she did her best to hide that from her husband and Theron.

“Works for me,” Theron said, grinning. “I was getting a little stir-crazy sitting around here anyway.”

“Tomorrow or the next day, though,” Miranza said firmly. She couldn’t keep them both safe forever, but she could at least keep them safe with her for a day or two longer. She could have that much. “Not today. Vector needs time to recover, and you –” she wagged a finger in Theron’s direction, which only made him grin harder “—need time to sleep.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Theron snapped off a jaunty salute and began to collect their dirty dishes and cutlery, still grinning ear to ear.

As Theron moved away from the table Miranza gave her husband’s hand another squeeze, taking comfort in knowing he was safe with her. She understood what had motivated him in coming to the
cottage instead of heading directly to the Oroboro nest, and it wasn’t just the knowledge that she was a decent medic. She was home to him, just as he was home to her. Together, they were strong. Together, they were safe.

“Are you all right?” she asked him, knowing it was a foolish question even as the words left her mouth.

He smiled at her and dropped a light kiss on her fingers. “We are now.”

Chapter End Notes

I struggled with this chapter and am still not completely happy with it, but I'm putting it up now because otherwise I'll still be fussing with it a month from now with no end in sight.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Introspective Theron is sad and introspective.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Theron Shan had had what most would consider an unconventional childhood, having been raised by his Jedi mother’s mentor, Master Ngani Zho, and spending most of his early years traveling from planet to planet as Master Zho had sought to keep his ward hidden as well as to ensure Theron had the best possible training for his future as a Jedi. Granted, the future Master Zho had envisioned for Theron had never come to pass – all the powerful bloodlines in the galaxy couldn’t turn the Force-blind into a Jedi – but for all his eccentricities, Theron’s guardian had done his best to safeguard his ward’s education. Zho’s teachings had been as eccentric and variable as every other aspect of his life, but he had still made certain Theron grew up with the same knowledge of the galaxy as any other child of the Galactic Republic. Consequently, Theron knew that Alderaan had belonged to the Killiks long before humans had ever settled there.

It shouldn’t have surprised him that the Killiks had more knowledge of the planet and its vagaries than did its human inhabitants. It shouldn’t have surprised him, but it did. In spite of the time he had spent with Vector Theron was still relatively ignorant of the Joiner’s Killik connections, and although intellectually he realized they had their own society and culture – which, logically, would include extensive histories – it was hard to look past their insectoid exterior and see anything but mindless bugs. Thus it came as quite a surprise that the Killiks had a vast understanding of the planet they inhabited and had mapped out much of the territory – both above ground as well as below. The vast caverns into which their labyrinthine hives were built reached deep beneath Alderaan’s surface, providing secret paths into areas that most humanoids would have considered inaccessible. From these caverns one could reach any part of the planet; you simply had to know where to look.

Vector had given himself all of two days to recover from his injuries before deciding it was time to return to the Oroboro nest and report on what had happened. Theron knew Miranza was upset by her husband’s decision – Vector healed quickly, faster than most other humanoids, but he was still injured and she was understandably worried about him – but it was hard to overlook the Joiner’s sense of urgency. Whatever had happened to change the Mirodari threatened the other Killiks, and while Mirodari territory was far from the lands the Oroboro claimed as their own, it was only a matter of time before the threat spread. Since they didn’t know what, exactly, had happened to the Mirodari it was impossible to determine how much time they had to prepare for the threat.

The three of them arrived at the cavern the Oroboro used as their diplomatic headquarters mid-morning on the third day since Vector’s return. They were accompanied by the two surviving members of Vector’s party, the two Killiks who had brought him back to the cabin. Although Theron found it difficult to get a read on the Killiks (in all honesty he struggled to tell the two of them apart; he knew it was racist – speciesist? – of him, but all Killiks looked alike as far as he could tell) he got the impression the two survivors were eager to return to the nest, and Vector explained that the only reason they had gone to the cabin instead of heading directly to the Oroboro hives was because the cabin had been closer and Vector had needed medical attention. Left to their own devices the Killiks would have gone straight back to the nest.
On the way Vector explained that the cavern headquarters were where the Killiks of the Oroboro Nest chose to interact with most other humanoid species, as it was relatively close to the hives and underground tunnels where they lived. The cavern was generally assumed to be safer for their humanoid guests, as it provided less exposure to the pheromones that resulted in the Joining. Vector did not outright say it, but Theron got the impression that the Joiner was a bit concerned that Theron would be more at risk from the pheromones as a result of the serum currently working through his system. The idea made Theron nervous and he found himself constantly sniffing at the air around him, as if he could somehow pick up on those pheromones before they started working on him.

In the end the plan wasn’t for them to remain in the cavern, but rather once Vector and the two surviving Killiks made their report to the rest of the hive, they were then directed to another series of caverns that led deep underground and would provide an alternate route into the territories held by the Mirodari. While the route wouldn’t prevent them from crossing paths with the potentially-dangerous Mirodari (or any other subterranean threats that might exist), it would keep them from coming across Republic or Imperial patrols, either of which could prove to be a hazard. Theron had some concerns about venturing into Mirodari lands with such a small party, but it was felt that a smaller team would have better luck moving quickly and quietly, and if there was the chance that the Killiks would be going to war with the Mirodari then they couldn’t afford to lose more of their warriors. At least Theron, Miranza and Vector had experience operating discreetly.

It was strange, but in all the adventures and experiences he had had with first Master Zho and later the SIS, Theron had spent relatively little time underground or in caverns. He had undergone rock-climbing and spelunking training as part of his course-work to join the Republic Strategic Information Service, but he didn’t get many opportunities to put that training to use. Most of his field-work ended up being on city-planets like Nar Shaddaa and Coruscant (or occasionally half-naked on Imperial battle cruisers), and dive bars and cantinas didn’t exactly qualify as caves no matter how dank and dark they were.

The tunnels underneath Alderaan were remarkably vast and spacious, and it amazed Theron that so little was known by the planet’s inhabitants about what wonders lurked below the surface. The Killiks knew what was there, of course, and Vector was able to get some idea from the collective hive-memory so that he would be able to provide them with directions to Mirodari territory, but Theron doubted anyone in either Imperial or Republic space had any idea how much activity went on underground. He did his best to commit their route to memory in the hopes that he would be able to pass that information on to his superiors, but there was a part of Theron that worried that doing so might constitute as a betrayal against Miranza and Vector (of course there was nothing to say that Miranza wasn’t also making the same decision about what she was learning).

Objectivity was starting to feel like a bad word.

The more time Theron spent with Miranza and Vector, the easier it became for him to forget about the world outside of them. He scarcely noticed their Imperial accents anymore: Miranza’s accent all posh, upper-class Kaasian and Vector’s more precise and liquid. And it wasn’t as though they lounged around the cottage in their Imperial uniforms, after all, no more than he walked about wearing a Republic military uniform (he had one, somewhere, probably hanging in a closet in his apartment on Coruscant). They were certainly aware of their conflicting alliances, but when it was just the three of them it wasn’t something they needed to dwell upon. Back on Rishi and Yavin 4 it had become something of a running joke (“Are you sure I can’t convince you to defect, Agent Shan?”), but Theron couldn’t remember the last time one of them had even brought it up. Soon, though, the serum will have done its work and Miranza would be able to reprogram him – or remove his programming, or whatever the kriff it was she was going to do to fix him – and then …

And then Theron would go back to Coruscant, and Miranza and Vector would go … wherever it
was they went, but it would almost certainly be in Imperial space and then that would be the end of it. If they saw each other again it wouldn’t be for any good reason, and most likely it would be at opposite ends of blaster rifles and pistols. They would be enemies again.

Theron wondered if they were as conflicted about all of this as he was.

Once upon a time back when Theron was a new SIS agent – back when he had been young and dumb (okay, dumber) – he had had an affair with an older married woman. The fact that Selene was married hadn’t been as much of a deal-breaker for him then as it would have been now; she had told him her husband was never there, that their relationship was on the rocks, that they were steps away from initiating divorce proceedings: all the things a naïve young man needed to hear to be able to tell himself it was okay to fool around with her. What should have been the deal-breaker was the fact that Selene was Theron’s therapist, assigned to the position to monitor his progress as a newly-fledged agent. Not surprisingly the affair had ended when her husband found out and came after Theron in the middle of a crowded cantina, but since her husband had turned out to be some bigwig in the Senate, it all got swept under the rug. It wasn’t until Theron mentioned the affair in passing to another agent – a colleague who had noticed that Theron seemed depressed about something – and that agent took it up the ladder that the issue was ever properly resolved. Selene was hauled before an ethics commission and later fired, and Theron had landed more intensive counselling with someone else. (And it had been the first among many black marks on his record, for all that he had essentially been the victim in the situation.)

Now, close to ten years removed from the situation, Theron could see that his therapist’s behaviour had been hugely unethical and downright immoral. Not just because Selene had been cheating on her husband, but because she had chosen to do so with one of her clients, someone she had a significant amount of authority and control over. A good spy knew his own strengths and weaknesses, and one thing Theron had learned from that situation – aside from not fucking his therapist, no matter how hot she was (arguably a good lesson for anyone to learn) – was that he was extremely susceptible to being manipulated by someone who claimed to give a shit about him. Selene had been well aware of Theron’s abandonment issues and need for belonging, and she had used that knowledge to get what she wanted out of him. If she had been an enemy spy, she could have done a lot more damage than simply breaking his heart (and getting him involved in a bar-fight with a senator). If it had been her intention to teach Theron about how easy he was to manipulate ... well, lesson learned. He was a sucker for anyone who was willing to pretend they cared about him.

It was hard not to look at Miranza and Vector and wonder if they were pulling the same manipulative bullshit on him that Selene had pulled. Miranza knew who his mother was and what his childhood had been like; for all that he should know better than to confide in an enemy spy, she was incredibly easy to talk to and he had been open with her from Rishi on. Never mind all the time they had spent together on Corellia, when it had been just the two of them against Samar, Amrielle and the rest of the Star Cabal; she had been the only person he could talk to, and it had been considerably easier to talk about his past than about their present. And then later, once they were off of Corellia ... He would’ve been grateful towards her and Vector just for rescuing him alone, much less all the other stuff they had done for him between then and now. Miranza was a spy and Vector was a diplomat – outside of a therapist, you couldn’t find other professions that were better at reading and manipulating the feelings of another person. Sure, they hadn’t tried to get him to spill state secrets or defect or anything, but there was a part of Theron that was afraid that’s where all of this was going. Because that's where it always went: he opened up, he got close, and then he got used - and abandoned. It was stupid to think a couple of Imps would be any different given that it was the people on his own side who had started the pattern.

Of course, unlike Selene there was no deception in Miranza as to the nature of her relationship with her husband. Theron knew she and Vector were together – not just together, but fully committed,
happy, supportive and completely in love with one another. Both of them were completely upfront about their relationship and their commitment to each other, and Theron never had the sense that they were sneaking around. They were openly affectionate with each other – and with him. Vector had made it clear that his own reservations stemmed solely from his concern that Theron’s conditioning might impede his ability to give consent; otherwise, Vector was completely on board with engaging in whatever physical relationship Theron felt comfortable with. And Miranza let Theron dictate the terms of their encounters, even though she had been just as badly hurt by Samar as Theron had. He felt as though they used kid gloves when handling him, but it didn’t feel like they were manipulating him. It felt like they actually gave a fuck, and that was the part Theron was starting to struggle with.

If this was all just a con – if they really were just manipulating him in order to lure him over to the Dark Side, or at least to the Imp side – then it was going to hurt when it was over. Even if they weren’t just messing with him, it was still going to end, wasn’t it? They were Imperial agents, he was a Republic spy. There were no happy endings in store for them.

Theron frowned, staring hard at Miranza’s back as she picked her way through the rocks underfoot. He had lost track of where they were, exactly, aside from knowing that they were deep underground somewhere north of the Oroboro cavern. Their progress had been slow – partly to account for Vector’s healing injuries, but also in part because they were proceeding cautiously. They were joined by two Killiks (who may or may not have been the same two Killiks who had brought Vector back to the cabin; Theron knew it was racist – speciesist? – of him, but he honestly could not tell them apart), and it was the Killiks who led the way, having a better idea of where they were going.

As if sensing his gaze on her, Miranza turned and smiled in Theron’s direction, and it was such a completely open and guileless expression that he immediately felt guilty for questioning her. She and Vector had been nothing but kind and patient with him. He was an asshole for even thinking they were trying to manipulate him.

Unless their kindness and patience were a part of the manipulation …

This is why you’re going to die single and alone, Shan, he told himself harshly, before mustering up a weak smile for Miranza.

He sighed, adjusting the straps of the pack he was carrying, and forced himself to focus on where he was going. Ahead the caverns stretched on, dark and ominous, not unlike Theron’s thoughts.

O o O o O

A good night’s sleep did much to improve Theron’s mood, even if he did spend the night sleeping on the cold, hard ground in a damp cavern deep underground. Their sleeping arrangements were improved by the decision to combine bedrolls and blankets so that the three humans could share warmth; the ground was too hard and cold for just one bedroll to provide sufficient comfort, but by piling all the bedrolls on top of each other and huddling together it was marginally more comfortable. Theron felt a little awkward about sharing sleeping space with both Miranza and Vector, but Miranza pointed out that she and Vector normally shared bedrolls, and it didn’t make sense to leave Theron out, especially not when it meant he’d end up cold and miserable.

So instead of sleeping alone on his own bedroll, Theron wound up with Miranza cuddled up on one side and Vector pressed in close on the other, and damned if that wasn’t a nice way to wake up, with Miranza’s curly head nestled in against his shoulder and Vector’s arm slung across his hips.

Okay, this is … this is nice, he thought, his face pressed against Miranza’s blonde curls, Vector’s breath warm against the back of his neck. There was nothing sexual about it – kriff, they were lying on the ground with a couple of Killiks standing guard – but it was comfortable and it was comforting
and if Vector and Miranza were fucking with him they were pushing all the right buttons because Theron couldn’t think of another time in his life when he had ever been this relaxed with someone else.

He was so, so screwed.

Theron felt it the moment that Vector woke up, the Joiner’s body going tense and stiff behind him as he tried and failed to muffle his hiss of pain. Sleeping on the ground – even with the extra padding and warmth provided by their shared blankets and bedrolls – could not have been helpful for his injuries. Vector pulled away, using his hand on Theron’s hip to push himself into a sitting position.

“You okay?” Theron asked, easing his arm out from under Miranza’s head – he could tell she had come awake as well – and sitting up. One of the Killiks turned away from whatever it had been staring at and cast what felt like a curious glance in their direction.

“Some kolto would not go amiss,” Vector admitted, which was about as much acknowledgement of his injuries as Theron had heard him make. “We are mostly just stiff from sleeping on the ground.”

Phrasing, Theron thought, but he kept that to himself. Had the three of them woken up in bed together in privacy, then he might have made the comment out loud and seen where the innuendo would take them. But here, in a dark and damp cavern with a pair of Killiks keeping watch, it wasn’t exactly the most romantic of settings. Never mind that there might also be potentially rabid Killiks lurking further down the tunnel.

Miranza climbed out of their makeshift nest to rummage through their packs in search of kolto and painkillers, a search that didn’t take long given how well-organized their supplies were. She knelt down beside her husband and helped him remove his shirt, handing him a couple of myocaine tablets to take while she applied fresh kolto to his wounds. Vector swallowed the pills dry, then sat patiently to let her work.

Still seated beside Vector, Theron allowed himself a moment to appreciate the view of the shirtless Joiner. Even battered and bruised as he was – and to be fair, he was far less battered and bruised than he had been earlier and his wounds were healing nicely – Vector was a handsome specimen. He was taller and thinner than Theron, with a build that was more lanky than beefy, but the lean lines of muscle were well-defined and spoke of hard work and frequent exercise. He had more scars than Miranza, which Theron found intriguing; he assumed Miranza had had the bulk of hers surgically removed, but he’d never thought to ask. Vector had the kind of lean, masculine beauty that Theron wouldn’t have minded exploring a bit more thoroughly … under different circumstances.

I am so fucking screwed.

Finishing up with the kolto, Miranza tossed Theron an amused glance that suggested she had caught him staring (and she approved). She capped off the tube of kolto gel and wiped her hands off on her pants, then bent and pressed a light kiss to a spot on her husband’s shoulder that wasn’t covered in bruises, cuts or kolto.

“There, that should help,” she said with finality, standing up to go and put the medical supplies away.

“Yes, much better, beloved, thank you,” Vector replied, smiling and tugging his shirt back on. He stood and surveyed their small camp before commenting, “We should eat and pack up. Now that we have rested we need to continue our journey.”

Theron shuffled out of the blankets and off the bedrolls, and began bundling the bedrolls together,
rolling them up in a tight ball for ease of packing. “Where are we, exactly, anyway?”

Vector closed his eyes, accessing the map in his prodigious memory as he turned in order to reorient himself. Theron had been shown the maps of the tunnels under Alderaan – such maps as there were, anyway – and had done his best to commit what he could to memory, but there was a vast amount of territory to cover and little of it bore any resemblance to the world above-ground. He could picture the maps in his mind, but it was all too easy to lose his frame of reference and without any obvious indication as to which way was north or south he quickly found himself losing all sense of direction. Vector, on the other hand, seemed to have some kind of internal compass, and that combined with his memorized maps made him their best choice for navigator.

“Somewhat south of Outpost Talarn,” Vector said at last, opening his eyes again. “On the edge of House Alde lands. Mirodari territory is further north, but our patrols began noticing incursions in this general area – albeit topside, of course. We had not thought to investigate the tunnels before now.”

“Do we have a plan?” Theron asked.

The two Killiks who had accompanied them came over to join their conversation. Although they didn’t speak it, Theron got the impression that they understood Basic, and had been listening to him and Vector speaking. One of them turned to Vector and made some buzzing sounds, gesturing towards the tunnel with one of its forelegs. Vector nodded at the Killik.

“We will continue north,” the Joiner said. “Past Alde territory into Ulgo lands, where the Mirodari have their hives. We should be on our guard: the Mirodari know as much about these tunnels as we do, and there may be patrols down here.”

“Lovely,” Theron muttered, finishing with the bedrolls.

The Killik buzzed at Vector again.

“Ah,” Vector said, with another nod. “The Mirodari are not thought to have nests down here, as the bulk of their hives are above-ground, higher up in the mountains. While there may be patrols in these tunnels, we should not expect to see a significant force. Our best bet will be to utilize Miranza’s stealth generators in order to sneak further into their territory.”

“I guess at this point we’re not expecting a friendly welcome,” said Miranza.

“No,” Vector replied. He rubbed a hand absently over one of the healing cuts on his shoulder, his expression thoughtful. “No, we are not.”
They came upon the dead Killiks sometime around mid-afternoon.

There had been so many twists and turns through the tunnels that Miranza had lost all sense of where they were, and she had to take Vector’s word for it when he said they were somewhere within Ulgo territory. A narrow passage – so narrow, in fact, that Miranza had been concerned that the two Killiks who accompanied them would not fit – opened up onto a broad cavern with vaulted ceilings and pathways branching out in multiple directions. In the centre of the cavern were six dead Killiks and two dead humanoids, most likely Joiners.

Miranza was not a particularly good judge of Killik physiology, but going by the two dead humanoids – one human, the other Chiss – she suspected they had died sometime the night before. Their deaths had been violent.

The bodies were strewn about the cavern floor. At least two of the Killiks had been completely torn apart, limbs and pieces of chitinous hide scattered a few paces away from the rest of their bodies and the thick green ichor that constituted their blood smeared across the ground. One Killik lay crumpled against the far wall, just inside the mouth of a cavern that led north, the entire right side of its head caved in.

The Chiss looked almost peaceful, her face gone slack in death; were it not for the dark blood that stained the top half of her robes – and the open, gaping wound at her throat – she could almost have been mistaken for being asleep. The human, on the other hand, had met a more grisly fate: he lay facedown, his back torn open to the point where it was possible to see the muscle and bone beneath, and seeing him made Miranza think of the horrible wounds on her husband’s back. The Killiks had their chitin to protect them; humanoids, on the other hand, had nothing but clothing and, if they were particularly lucky, armour. This human had not been wearing armour.

From the looks of things the three remaining Killiks had killed each other, and it looked like two of the three were slightly larger than the rest – but that could have been a trick of the eye, given that these two were also the most intact.

Although it was obvious that the human and the Chiss were both dead, Theron immediately went to the woman’s side and felt at her mauled throat for a pulse. Unsurprisingly he found nothing, and he shook his head sadly, wiping her sticky blood off on her robes. A sense of duty or thoroughness propelled him to repeat the process with the dead human, with much the same results. They were dead. They were all dead.

One of the Killiks in their party gestured at the three dead Killiks in the centre of the cave, the ones who had died fighting each other. The Killik chirruped at Vector, its mandibles clicking. Vector nodded in response.
“These two,” he said, pointing at the two Killiks that Miranza had thought were somewhat bigger than the others, “were of the Mirodari nest. The others were of Togot; we are in their lands.”

“Do these two seem bigger than the others?” Theron asked, echoing Miranza’s thoughts. He remained over by the body of the dead human, almost as if he was afraid to approach the Killiks.

Vector turned to their Killik escorts, closing his eyes and bowing slightly towards them. He was silent, but the two Killiks watched him as if they were engaged in conversation, and after a moment one of them replied to him with a series of buzzes and clicks. Vector nodded again and turned back to Theron.

“The Mirodari are not generally this large,” he said, kneeling down beside the bodies. Miranza moved with him, going down on one knee next to one of the dead Killiks. “They are not a particularly small race, but these … these do seem larger than is the norm.”

He leaned down, his face inches away from the Killik’s corpse, and inhaled, his nostrils flaring widely. Reeling backwards, Vector nearly landed back on his rear, a pinched expression on his face as he waved one hand towards his nose.

“Do you smell that?” he exclaimed around an expression of disgust. The two Killiks leaned in and opened their mouths, tasting the air around the dead Killik; they, too, quickly recoiled away.

Somewhat fearful, Miranza leaned closer to the body and sniffed the air delicately. The only thing she could smell was blood, and it was a familiar enough odour that it didn’t bother her all that much.

“I don’t smell anything,” she said slowly, “but my sense of smell is nowhere near as good as yours.”

Vector brought his hand up to his face, covering his mouth and nose. “It smells like … candy? But unpleasantly so, like burnt sugar that has gone rancid and rotten. It is hard to place.”

One of the Killiks buzzed at him, and Vector tilted his head, curious. “She says it makes her head itch,” he said, by way of translation.

She? Miranza thought, giving the Killik a dubious glance. She had assumed – mistakenly, apparently – that the two Killiks were male. She really didn’t know anything about Killik physiology.

“In truth, we feel it as well,” Vector continued, oblivious to his wife’s musings. “A strange sensation – as if we are about to sneeze but it is trapped in our nostrils. But more” – his long fingers rubbed the bridge of his nose – “here, and there is a sort of … pressure, there. Very difficult to describe, but thoroughly unpleasant.”

“Theron, could you hand me my pack, please?” Miranza waited for him to comply, then began searching for one of her kits. Finding what she was looking for, she opened the kit and took out some tweezers and a scalpel, and used the edge of the scalpel to scrape at the dead Killik’s chitinous shell. She pried off a piece of shell with the tweezers and dropped it into an empty jar, then repeated the process with some of the dried ichor.

“What are you thinking?” Theron asked, watching her while she worked.

Miranza sat back on her heels, putting her samples and supplies back into her pack. She straightened and brushed her hands off on her pants.

“I’d like to take a look at those samples under a microscope,” she said, pondering. “I’m almost wondering if maybe one of the human populations put out some kind of insecticide or pesticide” – she steadfastly ignored her husband’s wince – “in the hopes of thinning out the native Killiks, and if
it had some kind of chemical reaction that upped their aggressive responses?"

“Intentionally or unintentionally?” asked Vector, looking pained.

Her first response was to ask if it mattered, but of course it did: if they were indeed in Ulgo or Alde lands then they were within territories that were at war with the Empire, and given that the Killiks had entered into a treaty with the Empire it was possible that this was intended as an attack against both the Imperials and the Killiks. Even if this wasn’t meant as a strike against the Empire, there was no mistaking the Killiks for non-sentient beings, and using some kind of insecticide to wipe them out was essentially a form of biological warfare – which the Republic was, in theory, diametrically opposed to.

Of course, Miranza knew from first-hand experience that what the Republic said and what the Republic did were often two very different things.

“It’s hard to say,” she said finally, aiming to be diplomatic. “Given how little we know about Killik physiology, it might be an unintended side effect.”

“Or it might be something entirely different,” Theron pointed out. “Insecticides, some kind of illness – we won’t know until you can get a closer look.” He turned to the two Killiks, speaking to them directly for the first time. “Did the Mirodari say anything when they attacked you? Has anybody heard anything from them?”

Vector turned to the Killiks for their response, but their negative body language didn’t require any translation: no, the Mirodari hadn’t spoken. Their lands had been silent, and those who had encountered them – of those who survived, of which there were few – had not been able to open up a dialogue before they were attacked. As Vector had said earlier when first describing the Mirodari they had come across, they had seemed rabid and monstrous, and nothing at all like the Killiks they were familiar with.

“We might as well keep going,” Miranza said. In truth she couldn’t stand the thought of spending any more time in this cavern surrounded by the dead. It was bad enough seeing the Killiks, with their bodies torn apart, but the dead human whose injuries reminded her so much of Vector’s made her feel almost physically ill. It was all too easy to picture Vector or Theron lying among the dead.

“What are we going to do with the bodies?” Theron asked.

Vector looked around, his expression grim. “Nothing.” At Theron’s look of disbelief he added, “We do not have the means to carry this many bodies back to the surface with us, nor does it serve our current purpose to do so. We will leave them here and report our findings to those who can follow up on this. It pains us to show such disrespect, but … they are dead. We can do nothing for them now save carry on and hope we can get to the bottom of this.”

Theron clenched his jaw, but to Miranza’s relief he said nothing further, simply nodding at the other man. Vector and the two Killiks spent a few minutes with each body, and while Miranza couldn’t be certain what they were doing, to her it looked like they were praying or communing. After they had finished, they collected their things and resumed their journey, moving past the dead Killik whose body lay crushed against the mouth of the tunnel.

Finding the dead had cast a pallor over their journey, which had not been terribly cheerful to begin with. Theron was quiet and contemplative: he had been unusually silent the previous evening, almost bordering on sullen, but had woken up in a much better mood, which Miranza attributed to his having spent the night sandwiched between her and Vector. As the day had progressed, however, he had begun to distance himself from them, and she didn’t know what the kriff was going on. She did
wonder if perhaps the serum was making him feel unwell. She caught Vector casting curious glances in Theron’s direction and knew her husband sensed the other man’s unease. She wanted to talk to Theron about it – if something was wrong she wanted the opportunity to try and fix it – but their current circumstances didn’t leave them much room for privacy, and if it was simply a case of him feeling sick there wasn’t anything she could do about it until the serum had worked its way through his system.

At least Vector’s disquiet made sense to her. He was upset about the dead Killiks and Joiners, he was worried that he was pulling her and Theron into a dangerous mess, and he was concerned about the threat the Mirodari represented – or if not the Mirodari themselves, then whatever had done … this … to them. If the Mirodari had been attacked with some kind of insecticide – or some other chemical or biological agent – then that had greater ramifications for both the Killiks and the Empire. Was it an attempt to disrupt the treaty between the two? Was it an open attack against the Empire? Or had some xenophobic human simply taken an opportunity to rid themselves of a perceived threat? Until they knew the answers to at least some of these questions, Vector’s unease would remain.

For her part, Miranza knew exactly why she was upset. She was worried about Theron, she was worried about Vector, and she was concerned about the welfare of the Killiks to whom her husband was bonded. A threat against the Killiks was a threat against the Empire in general and Vector in particular. It didn’t help that she kept flashing back to that dead human Joiner, the one whose wounds were so eerily similar to Vector’s: that man had been killed by one or more of the Mirodari, and those same Killiks had tried to murder Vector as well. She knew that when they went to sleep again that night, her dreams would be haunted by that dead Joiner’s face, and thanks to that damned Sith Lord back on Corellia she could fully expect to see the Joiner’s features merge and shift into Vector’s – or Theron’s.

But that was a worry for later. For the time being she had work to do.

They walked in silence, heading in what Vector assured them was a northerly direction. She hadn’t noticed it before, but they had been heading deeper underground prior to reaching the cavern where the dead Killiks had been found. Now, however, they were pushing back towards the surface, the pathways carved at a much steeper incline than the downward passages had been. Her ears kept popping, suggesting that the change in altitude was more pronounced than she had expected, and every now and again she caught a whiff of fresh air as a cool breeze whispered past her face.

At last they came to a cramped space with two passages branching off. Both passages were quite narrow – Miranza wasn’t certain that the two Killiks would fit – and one continued north while the other headed off in a more easterly direction. They paused, huddling together in the crowded space, and considered their options. The Mirodari hives were located in the north, while House Ulgo held territory to the east; both were close enough together that it was possible the Ulgo were in some way responsible for what was happening to the Mirodari – and if the Ulgo were the cause, then it might be possible to uncover evidence of what they were doing somewhere in their vast estates without ever venturing into Mirodari lands. If they could solve the mystery without coming into contact with the dangerous Mirodari, then so much the better.

They took the eastern passage.

It was tight, but the two Killiks were able to squeeze through with little trouble although the three humans had a much easier time of it. At last they came to what at first glance appeared to be a dead end, until Theron, looking upwards, caught sight of a large opening just above eye-level. He gave Miranza a boost, holding her up so that she could peer in through the opening.

The passage appeared to lead into a smaller tunnel, just beyond which looked like there was some
sort of storage area – and not storage as the Killiks would use it, but rather familiar-looking plasteel boxes and wooden bins. It was hard to tell exactly what she was looking at without crawling through all the way, but the space looked dusty and unused.

When Theron let her down again she saw that Vector and both of the Killiks were sniffing at the air, that same pinched expression back on Vector’s face.

“We smell that burnt-candy odour again,” Vector said, wrinkling his nose in distaste. He jerked his head in the direction of the hole Miranza had been peering through. “Whatever the scent is, we think it is coming from somewhere in there. It is not as strong as the odour that was on the dead Mirodari, but it is still enough to make our nose itch.”

“The passage opens up onto some kind of storeroom,” Miranza informed them. She looked up, trying to get her bearings, then looked to her husband for confirmation. “We’re on Ulgo land now, right?”

“Yes.” Vector nodded. “We are not familiar with the territory, but we do not think we are directly underneath the castle itself.” He turned, motioning off to the east. “House Ulgo’s castle is further in that direction, we think. We are most likely underneath one of the lesser estates.”

“And the three of you smell whatever it was that was on the dead Killiks,” Theron said, frowning hard. He jerked his chin towards the opening. “Which means that whatever the source of that smell is, it’s probably somewhere in there. I’d say our best bet is to continue on this way and see what’s in that storeroom.”

Now it was Miranza’s turn to frown, and she shook her head, sizing the two men up.

“It’s a tight squeeze,” she said. “The Killiks definitely won’t fit, and I’m not sure you or Vector will, either. I could barely squeeze myself in there, and I’m a lot smaller than either one of you.”

Vector sighed, looking discouraged. “No hope for it, then. We will have to go back to the juncture and see if the northern route yields any answers.”

Miranza bit her lip, a terrible idea forming in her mind. Theron saw her expression and shook his head, already prepared to stop her before she gave her idea voice, but she cut him off.

“I can fit,” she said, even as Theron groaned in dismay. “I’ll take my stealth generator, squeeze in to the storeroom, and look around. If I can’t find anything useful in twenty minutes, I’ll come back and meet up with you here.”

“No, no way,” Theron protested immediately. “We’re not splitting up. That never goes well.”

Vector looked torn between wanting to agree with Theron and wanting to learn more about the mystery that was threatening his people. He obviously didn’t like the idea of Miranza going off on her own – especially not into enemy territory – but his sense of duty warred with his sense of chivalry. None of the rest of them could possibly fit through this tunnel, and Miranza was a highly-skilled infiltration expert; this was exactly the sort of job she was best at.

“Fifteen minutes,” he countered, brushing his fingers over the comm in her ear. “And you will stay in constant comm contact at all times and report back on what you see immediately, provided it is safe for you to do so.” Theron groaned again. “We will wait for you right here.”

“It’s a deal.” Miranza quickly slid out of the straps of her pack, dumping it onto the floor along with some of the heavier pieces of her armour and her belt. The passageway had been tight and she didn’t want to risk any of her gear getting snagged along the way. She could push a blaster and her stealth
generator ahead of her, but the rest of her equipment could stay out here with the men.

“I don’t like this,” Theron said, even as he was hoisting her back up into the passage.

“Noted,” she replied, kissing him on the cheek before clambering up onto the ledge.

Back in the passage she eased forward onto her hands and knees, her blaster pistol and stealth generator in front of her. She scooted forward, then slid onto her belly, steadfastly ignoring the slight twinge that arose in her gut. She took her time moving, pushing her pistol and generator ahead of her, feeling the rocky walls pressing in close. She imagined that she could smell the odour Vector had described, that rancid burnt-candy scent, but she knew it was just in her mind; instead, what she smelled was a combination of dust and mould from a storeroom that was likely long-neglected.

The passage narrowed further as she approached the end. She hadn’t gone this far before, and hadn’t realized how exceptionally tight it was. At one point she thought she might be stuck, her head jammed at an awkward angle as she struggled to bring her elbow forward, and for a brief moment she panicked at the notion of being trapped in this crowded space forever. She had to force herself to calm down, knowing her panicking struggles only made her situation worse, and as she let out a slow breath she was able to ease her elbow into the open space and then finally, finally push her head through. She had to jam her arm up against the wall in order to squeeze through and the resulting scrape no doubt left pieces of her skin behind on the rock, but then she was falling forward, free of the passage and tumbling headfirst onto the floor of the storeroom.

She landed with a dull thud, managing to catch herself at the last second so that she didn’t fall flat on her face. Dusting herself off, she stood and turned to glance back at the way she had come.

She tapped the comm in her ear. “I’ve got good news and bad news.”

“If you’re stuck I’m going to piss myself laughing.” Theron’s voice, strong and clear in her ear, made her roll her eyes.

“Lovely,” she said tartly, “and no, I’m not stuck. The good news is I made it through; I’m in the storeroom. I was right, though: there’s no way any of you are going to fit.” Vector, with his lean build, might have been able to squeeze his way through if he hadn’t been so tall, but there was no chance Theron’s broad shoulders would get past the part where she had nearly gotten stuck. And the two Killiks were right out, given that their chitinous hides would make it impossible for them to push themselves through.

“Is that the bad news?” Theron asked.

“Not … exactly …” Miranza looked up at the opening … looked up … and up. “The passage opened out about ten feet above the ground. I’m too short to reach it from here. I can’t go back the way I came.”

“Is there nothing for you to climb upon?” Vector asked, sounding worried.

She looked around. There were a large number of boxes and crates in the storeroom, but none of them were of a size she could reasonably lift and carry, and attempting to move them would be certain to make a significant amount of noise. The storeroom looked like it didn’t see a lot of activity, but she had no idea what awaited her outside, and she couldn’t risk drawing attention to herself by making a ruckus.

Miranza picked up her blaster pistol and stealth generator, clipping the generator onto the waist of her pants.
“Don’t worry about me,” she told the men, dropping her voice as she moved towards the door. “I’ll sneak around and see what I can learn while I’m here, then find my way outside. The rest of you go back and take that northern passage. We’re split up now, we might as well make the best of it. We can meet up at Outpost Bolym.”

“Miranza …,” Theron was saying, just as Vector groaned, “Beloved …”

Force save her from overprotective men.

“Just go!” she snapped, the words coming out more as a hiss than an order. “Trust me to do my job.”

“We love you,” Vector said, sounding much more subdued.

“You still need to fix me,” Theron added, his humorous tone slightly forced. “Don’t get dead.”

“Same goes for both of you.”

Blaster pistol in hand, Miranza pulled open the storeroom door and stepped out into the hall beyond, flicking on her stealth generator as she moved. There was a low hum, and then she disappeared.

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“She’ll be all right,” Theron assured Vector for what felt like the thousandth time.

“Yes,” Vector agreed. It was difficult for Theron to tell if the tightness in the other man’s voice came from the pain he was still in, or if it was caused by worry for his wife. It was possible Vector was getting tired of Theron trying to reassure him.

The northern passage was slightly wider than the eastern one had been, and the two Killiks had less difficulty making their way through it. Theron and Vector experienced no trouble whatsoever. The passage opened up considerably along the way, becoming both wider and taller, and the cool scent of fresh air became much more pronounced. Wherever this passage led, it clearly wasn’t heading deeper underground.

“If someone is deliberately poisoning the Mirodari Killiks, what will you do?” Theron asked, attempting to distract himself from worrying about Miranza. She’ll be all right.

“That will depend,” Vector replied thoughtfully. He cast a glance back at Theron, weighing his next words carefully. “If agents of the Republic are seeking to damage the treaty between the Empire and the Killiks, we will have no choice but to report on this and advise both the Empire and the Killiks to take action.”

Theron licked his lips, uncomfortably aware that there was a good chance he was assisting the Empire against the Republic. Still, if Republic agents were poisoning the Killiks, that needed to be dealt with. It wasn’t right. The Killiks were sentient beings – giant, creepy, bug-like sentient beings with the ability to brainwash people … Yeah, maybe let’s not focus on that part, Shan.

Regardless of his personal feelings regarding the Killiks – and those feelings were complicated, he could acknowledge that – it was wrong to poison them. Chemical and biological warfare were wrong. Kriff, how many assignments had he run for the SIS, working to put down this exact sort of thing? Just because it might be his side responsible this time, didn’t make it right. There was little doubt in his mind that the Empire would do something like this (maybe not Miranza and Vector … but then again, maybe …), but he rather desperately wanted to believe the Republic innocent of such crimes.
“If the poisoning is merely an attack against the Killiks,” Vector continued, oblivious to Theron’s thoughts, “made by humans who are unhappy with sharing their land with Alderaan’s native inhabitants, that is something else. It will need to be dealt with, of course, but wishing to rid one’s home of a perceived alien invader is not quite the same as wishing to destroy an alliance between sentient beings. It is entirely possible that if some sort of pesticide is being used, the people using it are ignorant of its more potent side effects. Whatever is happening to the Mirodari may be unintentional.”

“Or it could be something else,” Theron pointed out. “Some kind of disease, maybe?”

“Perhaps.” Vector flicked his gaze towards the two Killiks who accompanied him, who continued to walk along ahead, ignoring their conversation. “If it is a disease, however, we have all been exposed. We would think by now the Killiks, at least, would be symptomatic. We suppose it could have a long incubation period, though.” He returned his glance to Theron, raising one hand to his mouth. “It will depend upon what we can glean from Miranza’s samples, as well as what she discovers – if anything.”

“Hey, maybe we could luck out and trip over the solution ourselves.”

Vector smiled faintly. “Has that happened often in your career, Agent Shan?”

“No, Mister Hyllus, it has not.”

The two men exchanged rueful glances, Vector chuckling dryly. Theron thought of at least one example from his time as an SIS agent where he had stumbled upon the evidence needed to solve a crime and was about to share the story with Vector when a sudden horrible screeching sound brought them both up short.

Something burst out of the tunnel up ahead, colliding with one of the Killiks. At first all Theron could see was a tangle of insectoid limbs; then he realized he was watching his Killik ally scrabbling to ward off a much larger Killik. He drew his blaster pistols but couldn’t get a clean shot.

Another Killik rounded the corner, barreling into the two who were fighting, attacking them both with little concern for the one who should have been – in theory – on its side. With a shout Vector joined the fray, his electrostaff spinning in his hands, and Theron watched as the Joiner waded in with no apparent concern for his own well-being.

Theron had seen Vector in combat before – they had fought together against Revan back on Yavin 4, and although he had not been focusing on the other man’s moves he knew the Joiner was a remarkably ferocious opponent. While Theron had a hard time telling the warring Killiks apart, Vector suffered from no such impairment, and within seconds he had separated one of the attackers from the others. This gave Theron the opening he needed, and so he moved to a better position, slipping in behind the Killik so that he could open fire on the creature’s unguarded back.

He got off a few shots – most seemed to just bounce off the chitinous armour, but he thought one might’ve connected somewhere painful – before the Killik spun around, turning on him with a furious screech. Theron was forced back a few paces as the Killik advanced, Vector following close on its heels, attempting to draw it back to him.

The two Killiks on their side – the Oroboro Killiks, although Theron had a hard time not thinking of them as the good Killiks – faced off against the Mirodari Killik, the one Vector and Theron weren’t fighting. Theron could hear the commotion behind him but had no way to keep an eye on their battle and his own.
The Killik swatted at him, three-fingered claws slashing towards his face. Theron reeled back, bringing his pistol up to take a shot, only to have the Killik swipe at his arm and send the weapon flying out of his hand. Vector shouted again, bringing his electrostaff down in a two-handed strike on the Killik’s skull, and there was a sickening crunch.

Theron dived for his pistol, ducking under flailing limbs, landing on his hands and knees a few feet away from where his weapon had fallen. He reached for it, fingers brushing the barrel just as clawed hands closed around the collar of his jacket. He felt himself being lifted, tried to grab the pistol just as he was yanked away, and then he was flying through the air.

He tried to bring his hands up to protect his head but there was no time. There was another sickening crunch as he collided with the cavern wall and his vision went white and he saw stars.

Theron hit the ground on his side, fiery pain lancing through his flank. He tried to move – tried to push himself back up to his feet – but his body wouldn’t cooperate.

The last thing Theron saw before darkness claimed him was one of the Oroboro Killiks moving to stand guard over his body.
Chapter Twenty-Four

The key thing to remember when using a stealth generator was that the device only prevented you from being observed visually. Depending on the generator, that typically meant that it functioned either by cloaking you from the naked eye – in which case anything that could see in the infrared spectrum would still be able to see you – or putting you just slightly out of faze, which was better because it fooled almost all forms of visual observation. (Granted, humanoid bodies were not designed to spend extended periods of time fazed, which was why most stealth generators had a limit on how long you could be shifted. Faze-sickness was a problem for those who spent too long in stealth.) What the stealth generator did not prevent was you making noise, kicking up dust or manipulating air currents by moving around. A good spy learned to take note of those things and avoided doing anything to draw attention to herself.

Miranza had been in training to be a spy since she was a very young child, and moving silently came as a second nature to her. She had had to learn quickly: the facility where she had been raised hadn’t tolerated incompetence, even in children, and any time she had been caught moving too noisily she had ended up on the receiving end of a beating. (Usually from an instructor who had snuck up on her because she had been too noisy to hear them coming.)

The hallway outside the storeroom was quiet and empty. Miranza, stealth generator activated, moved on silent feet, allowing her gut instincts to lead her. She was a cipher agent – or she had been – and as such her generator did not have a timer set to turn off if she spent too long out of faze; at her level of training and experience, the assumption was that she would know her own body’s limits as well as the necessities of her assignment, and if she needed to be stealthed for an extended period of time then she could be – even if it killed her. She was hopeful that she would be able to find a place where she could take a break from using the generator, but if that didn’t happen she knew she had some stims and meds that would help handle the worst of the faze-sickness. Of course, those meds were in her pack … which was back with Vector and Theron.

She had said she would spend fifteen minutes looking around and would then come back to them, but since it was no longer possible for her to get out the way she had come in she figured she might as well take her time investigating. Even if House Ulgo had nothing to do with the Mirodari and their strange behaviour, she was confident she could find something useful – something incriminating – on their estate that she could hand over to the Empire for leverage against them. Bouris Ulgo’s capture had put an end to his bid for the throne, but that hadn’t stopped the House from causing problems for the Empire, and anything she could do to make their lives difficult would be beneficial to putting the revolt down.

Her investigation would have been easier if she had had Vector – or at least his superior sense of smell – with her. She wasn’t able to pick up that sickly rancid candy smell he had commented on and it was her only connection to the Mirodari. Still, if the Ulgo were fabricating some kind of pesticide and the odour of it was coming from this building, in theory she should be able to find it even without her husband’s keen nose.

There was another storeroom to the left of where she had come out. Unlike the storeroom she had exited, this one didn’t have a door, and she was able to walk inside without disrupting her stealth field. This storeroom clearly saw more frequent use, as it didn’t have any of the dust or mould that
the other room had been covered in. The large, heavy boxes were the same, however, and none of them appeared to have been opened recently. She poked around a bit, her stealth generator deactivating when she opened one of the containers to peer inside; the box contained weapons, older model blaster rifles that had clearly seen better days. Given that most of the boxes were the same general size and shape, it made sense to assume that those boxes were also full of weapons, and she made a note to report that House Ulgo appeared to be stockpiling arms. Even if they weren’t responsible for the Mirodari, it looked like the House continued to pose a threat to the Empire.

The next room was storage for the cleaning droids (or the human servants; Miranza knew House Ulgo had plenty of both). After that, another storeroom, this time with boxes of field rations, bottled water and medical supplies, which suggested the House was preparing for some kind of disaster. Given that Alderaan had been in the midst of civil war for years, that kind of preparation made sense, but it was still worth noting.

Miranza slipped past her first patrol – two armed guards wearing the livery of House Ulgo – before turning down another corridor. This led into a much wider hallway that opened up into a med centre that was currently unoccupied by anything more than medical service droids doing the rounds. She wasn’t surprised to discover that the House had expensive, sophisticated equipment and droids; House Ulgo had deep pockets and far-reaching connections, and top of the line medical treatment for your soldiers ensured loyalty and improved performance. (A lesson the Empire could stand to learn, when the only people guaranteed the best treatment were the Sith and those who served them; everyone else had to make do with whatever scraps were left.) She did a quick tour of the med centre, taking care to stay well clear of the droids – she had no way of knowing whether or not their sensors would pick her up in spite of her stealth field – before moving back out into the hall.

She was expecting the med centre to be the last area she would look at before she made her way up to the next level of the estate, but after rounding another corner she found herself in the open doorway of what looked to be a large laboratory. The sheer size of it forced her to re-evaluate her estimation of the estate; she was fairly confident she was still at least one floor underground, but if that was the case then House Ulgo had a truly massive compound beneath their estates. She couldn’t remember how large the above-ground properties were – whether the compound was built under more than one structure or whether they had ventured deeper into Ulgo territory than they had estimated and this was in fact underneath the castle proper – but from the looks of things the entirety of House Ulgo could move into this space and still have room to spare. It had been some time since she had last been on Alderaan, but Imperial data had nothing to indicate the sheer scope of the Ulgo operation.

The lab was surprisingly devoid of personnel, and it wasn’t until Miranza found a chronometer mounted high up on the wall that she realized how late it was – past midnight, which meant she and the others had been traveling underground for much longer than they had known. She had taken her time moving from one storeroom to the next, but she hadn’t expected that she had taken that long.

Still, the late hour meant that the lab was empty, which was a blessing all on its own. Given how open the lab was – no locked doors, no secured access points, not even any holorecorders that she could see – Miranza thought it was unlikely that there would be anything incriminating lying about, but it was certainly possible that the people in charge felt secure enough within the grounds of their estate that they weren’t concerned about being observed. Overconfidence and arrogance were frequently boons to investigative work: when your enemy thought they were too powerful or too protected to be at risk of infiltration, they often let security lapse.

Miranza moved toward a bank of computers, checking repeatedly to make sure there wasn’t anyone around. After several sweeps for recording devices she settled in front of the terminal. Her stealth field disappeared the instant her hands touched the keyboard, and she typed quickly, using some
standard slicing techniques for getting past encryption. She had a brief thought that she could have used Theron’s help on this – he was a far, far better slicer than she was – but that proved to be unnecessary when after a few quick keystrokes she was in.

She wasn’t expecting to find a master file labelled “Our Evil Plans” right off the bat, so she wasn’t disappointed when her initial forays into the system only revealed some research into the native flora and fauna – none of it related to the Killiks in general or the Mirodari in specific. Digging deeper, she saw there was a line of questioning into a breeding program designed to improve the native thranta – the large avian species used for aerial transport on Alderaan – as well as speculation into whether or not it might be possible to refine one of the local plant types into a topical poison for use by House Rist assassins. If she had been able to bring some data spikes with her she might have recorded the information to include in her report, but her data spikes and other recording devices were in her utility pouches, which had been left with Vector and Theron along with the rest of her gear.

She was about to dig deeper when the sound of voices in the hall outside gave her pause. Quickly logging off, Miranza reactivated her stealth generator and moved away from the terminal just as two guards stepped into the lab to do a cursory sweep.

O o O o O

Theron awakened to a blinding headache and the sight of a woman in an Imperial uniform looming over him. His immediate urge to panic flew away instantly when sudden nausea wracked him and he bolted upright in time to vomit on the woman’s shiny black boots.

Under normal circumstances he would have found both the act of puking all over an Imp and the expression of horrified disgust on her face to be absolutely hilarious, but the movement caused sudden searing pain to stab across his chest and that, combined with the increased pounding in his head, was nearly enough to make Theron pass out again. The nausea wasn’t in any way diminished by him throwing up, and when he started to gag and retch again – which only made the pain that much worse – the woman caught him around one shoulder and helped him lean forward, supporting him while his rebellious stomach threatened to claw its way up his throat.

“For fuck sake, someone get this kid an antiemetic before his kriffing ribs tear through his lungs!” the woman snapped over her shoulder. Then, in a far gentler voice, she said to him, “Hang on, son, you’re only gonna hurt yourself.”

Her accent was strong and between that and her uniform there was no mistaking her for anything other than an Imperial, and the realization that he was literally in enemy hands would have made Theron struggle to free himself if it weren’t for the fact that he was fighting to retain his tenuous hold on consciousness instead. He was in a significant amount of pain, from the agony in his head to the fiery throbbing in his ribs and down to a duller ache almost bordering on numbness in his left shoulder.

Theron felt something press against his right arm and heard a small hiss as an injector was activated. Almost immediately his nausea began to diminish as the antiemetic went to work, and the woman lowered him onto his back with considerable gentleness.

“Try and breathe, son, but keep it shallow,” the woman instructed him. She shone a light in his face, moving it from one pupil to the other, and he hissed as it caused a fresh wave of pain to slam into him, one hand instinctively reaching up to try and prevent her from continuing. She caught his wrist in her free hand, holding it down. “Do you know where you are? Can you remember what happened?”

Theron started to shake his head only to stop and groan as pain and dizziness threatened to
overwhelm him. He had no clue where the hell he was – other than that he was apparently in Imperial custody – and as to what had happened, the last thing he remembered was being flung through the air by an angry Killik. After that, everything was dark.

Before he could try to answer her, however, there was a sudden commotion, and then Vector had pushed his way in front of him, exclaiming loudly about Theron’s condition. There was something off about the other man, and in Theron’s confused state it took him a few seconds to realize Vector’s eyes were hazel – human-seeming – and he was holding himself with the same haughty air he had put on when they had first arrived on Alderaan, when he had been impersonating a nobleman. Aside from that there was a nasty cut on Vector’s forehead just below his hairline, that had been stitched closed, and blood had caked all down the right side of his face, lending him a vaguely sinister look that, coupled with the unnatural state of his eyes, was very unsettling to Theron.

“Cousin, you’re awake!” Vector proclaimed with exaggerated delight, gripping Theron’s good hand in both of his own. The Imperial woman looked annoyed at being shoved out of the way, but Vector’s arrogant lordling act had the desired effect of causing everyone to kowtow to him. “I was terrified those beastly Ulgos had killed you!”

Cousin? Ulgos? Theron blinked in confusion, his scrambled mind struggling to catch up, but the woman spared him the effort, finally nudging Vector out of the way in order to resume tending to her patient. That Theron was her patient was soon abundantly clear, as the Imperial went back to assessing his head injury.

Another Imperial officer had come over to join them, apparently having decided that now was the time to begin getting an account of what had befallen the two men in their care. Vector continued putting on airs, keeping himself close to Theron and interrupting every time someone asked Theron a direct question. He clearly didn’t want Theron to speak, for which Theron was grateful; he didn’t think, in his current state, that he could manage to keep up an Imperial accent for very long. To be perfectly honest, he wasn’t sure he could manage much in the way of intelligible speech at all. Coherent Basic seemed a bit beyond him at the moment.

“My cousin, the nephew of Baron Cortess, was kidnapped by thugs in the employ of House Ulgo less than a week ago,” Vector explained with considerable melodrama, his strange hazel eyes boring into Theron’s. “We – myself and some other lesser members of House Cortess – were negotiating his release when we were beset upon by more thugs. I’m sure they thought they could capture us as well and force the Baron – our uncle – to pay a greater ransom, the brutes.”

“The two of you were dumped off here by a bunch of bugs,” said the other Imperial officer, the one who was tasked with taking down Vector’s statement. There was obvious disgust on his face when he mentioned the Killiks. “They just swept in from the mountains and left you here.”

“I’m sure I don’t remember any of that,” Vector replied, his lip curling in evident disgust. “In fact, I’m certain when I recount this tale to my uncle, the Baron, it will be to regale him with tales of the heroism of the brave, brave Imperial soldiers who came to our rescue.”

The woman tending to Theron’s injuries looked unimpressed, but the other Imperial had a smug look on his face. No doubt having a commendation from one of the noble Houses on Alderaan would do well for his career. Clearly not wanting to interfere with the potential opportunity for praise and possibly more financial considerations from House Cortess, the man didn’t seem terribly inclined to pick apart Vector’s story, and since he appeared to be the ranking officer at this outpost none of the other Imperials were going to step in and raise questions.

Bandaging Theron’s ribs – without proper imaging equipment it was difficult to tell if they were bruised or broken, but judging by how much pain he was in Theron was willing to bet it was the
latter – was an exercise in torture. His left shoulder was dislocated (again – this had to be the third or fourth time it had happened, which meant he was starting to look at more permanent, lasting damage) and he couldn’t raise his arm at all, making it difficult for the woman to wrap his torso without jostling him painfully. The tight bandages made it difficult to breathe, although in fairness the aching ribs were already causing him enough trouble in that respect. The medic wanted to sedate him before resetting his shoulder, but Vector caught Theron’s sudden flare of panic at the idea of being completely helpless in enemy custody and quickly vetoed the suggestion, haughtily stating that his cousin was allergic to most common sedatives.

As it was Theron nearly lost consciousness again when the medic and one of her assistants set his shoulder. It wasn’t so much the pain from his shoulder itself – although that was certainly unpleasant – but that it combined with the agony in his ribs and the persistent ache in his head to leave him feeling dizzy and sick. He remembered the sickening sensation of the joint sliding back into place and he was about to say something when his world went grey and he heard the medic’s assistant shout something that sounded like “He’s going down!”

When he opened his eyes again – completely unaware that he had even closed them in the first place – he and Vector were alone, and the other man was running a soothing hand through Theron’s hair.

Theron mumbled something – it might have been “Gonna puke” – and then Vector was helping him lean forward so that he could empty his stomach onto the ground. Vector held him, supporting the bulk of Theron’s weight so that his injured torso would be spared the effort, one hand rubbing up and down Theron’s back. Once Theron was certain there was nothing left to throw up Vector helped him to lie down again.

“How …?” Theron managed, but between a throat raw from retching and the persistent ache in his head that was all he could get out. Vector seemed to understand his question anyway, for he answered him: “I will explain in more detail once we’re out of here, but for now it’s enough for you to know that we’re safe.” That was hardly sufficient to answer all the questions rattling around in Theron’s brain, but he didn’t have the energy to argue with the other man and in any event, Vector was probably right not to discuss the details while they were in Imperial custody.

After a few minutes the male officer came over to inform them that they had made arrangements for a speeder to take them back to House Cortess. At first Vector had looked startled, opening his mouth to protest, but Theron saw him realize that this was the natural conclusion of the story he had given the officers and after a moment Vector nodded graciously and thanked the man. Once the officer had left the female medic returned, and the look she swept over both Vector and Theron was severe.

“I know you’ve got Kelson wrapped around your pretty little finger, your lordship,” she said to Vector, her voice scathing, “but I don’t believe your bullshit for one second.” She held up her hand before Vector could say anything. “I also don’t care. You’re hurt, that’s the only thing I give a shit about. Once you’re gone from here, you’re not my problem anymore. You can tell House Cortess all this nonsense about kidnappers and ambushes and ransoms, and see where that gets you.”

She inspected the cut on Vector’s forehead, prodding hard enough to make the Joiner give a small
hiss of pain, then handed him some myocaine tablets and a bottle of water.

“Those stitches can come out in about five days, give or take,” she informed him, and he nodded between swallowing the pills and drinking from the bottle. “Less time if you’ve got access to some proper kolto. If your lordship” – and again, she infused the term with such blistering sarcasm that there was no mistaking her disbelief – “is concerned about scars, I’m sure you’ll be able to have someone pretty your face up again for you.”

She turned her glare on Theron, but something about him sitting there, hunched over and miserable, made the expression on her face soften, and she sighed, shaking her head.

“You should be in a kolto tank,” the medic told Theron. “The ride over to House Cortess is gonna hurt like a sonovabitch, and I’m not entirely convinced your ribs aren’t busted. You’ve got one hell of a concussion, so when you go to sleep tonight, you make sure you’ve got someone waking you up every hour or so, checking to make sure you know your name and what day it is – which, by the way, I still don’t even know if you do know that shit, since you let his lordship do all the talking for you.” She scowled at Vector, who had the good grace to hang his head, and her next comments were directed towards the Joiner. “If his headache gets worse, or he starts getting dizzy or the nausea comes back, or if you have any trouble waking him up, you get his ass to a med centre, stat. In fact, when you get back to House Cortess, you get your family doctor to look him over ASAP.”

“We will do that,” Vector said softly, “right away.”

“Fine.” She folded her arms across her chest, scowling mightily. “Now get the fuck out of here before my better judgment returns and I have you both thrown in lock-up until we can get to the bottom of all of this.”

“Yes’m,” Theron murmured, as Vector helped him down off the exam table.

The medic gave him some antibiotics, along with instructions to get his cranial implants looked at – she didn’t have the skills or the equipment to give them a once-over herself, but there was obvious inflammation and she was concerned that the casement might be cracked. Vector hooked an arm around Theron’s waist and helped him over to where the Imperials had a speeder waiting.

True to the medic’s word, the speeder ride from the Imperial outpost to House Cortess was absolutely miserable. The droid operating the speeder wasn’t particularly careless, but Theron still felt every bump and jostle as if someone was taking an electrostaff to his midsection. He wanted desperately to ask Vector about the two Killiks – he had seen no sign of either of them since waking, nor had the Imperials mentioned that any of the Killiks who had dropped them off had been part of their group – and he wanted to know what had happened after he had been smashed into the cavern wall. He could dimly remember one of the Killiks standing over him, but that was where his memory ended. Had the Killiks abandoned them once they had reached medical care? Had they returned to the Oroboro nest? And Miranza – had Vector heard from her? Was she waiting for them at Outpost Bolym, like she had promised? With the droid there, however, Theron didn’t think it was safe to speak freely, and in any event Vector didn’t appear to be handling the ride any better than Theron was. In fact, if anything, the Joiner appeared to be on the verge of falling over, but Theron wasn’t in any position to assist him.

Then the speeder was pulling up to the landing pad outside the walls of House Cortess, and the droid assisted first Vector, then Theron out of the vehicle. There were armed guards standing watch from the entrance, too far away for Theron to make out their features, but he assumed they were dressed in the livery of House Cortess. A woman, tall and slender and wearing long, flowing robes, hurried over to greet the two men. She had a pretty, heart-shaped face, platinum-blonde hair that put Theron in mind of Lana Beniko – and the all-black eyes of a Joiner.
“Welcome back, Dawn Herald,” she said, smiling at Vector. “We have prepared rooms for you and your guest.” She bowed in Theron’s direction, and the smile she bestowed upon him was the very definition of the word ‘beatific.’ “Can we assist you in any way?”

Vector sagged a little, pressing the fingertips of both hands to his temples. When he straightened again Theron saw that his eyes had returned to what passed for normal for Vector, that fathomless black void that Theron had become so familiar with. Now that he was back to himself, Vector seemed to be standing straighter, steadier on his feet. Whatever weariness or injury had plagued him on the journey over seemed to have passed.

Glancing away from Vector, Theron took in the two guards who stood watch at the gates, and saw that they were turned in his direction. Like the woman who greeted them, their eyes were black, their expressions serene. Theron let his gaze drift across the people he saw moving around the courtyard, all of them dressed in the colours of House Cortess. None of them were in a hurry, everyone seemed to be moving with purpose, everyone seemed perfectly content. Sickening realization dawned.

They were Joiners. All of the members of House Cortess were Joiners.

Miranza hit jackpot shortly after the patrol resumed their rounds.

Forced to move deeper into the lab in order to avoid detection, she threaded her way around various computer terminals and workstations, passing by a large amount of lab equipment whose purpose she couldn’t put a finger on. She couldn’t do any hands-on investigation of the equipment without deactivating her stealth generator and she wouldn’t come out of stealth until the patrol was gone, but she could look with her eyes, and what she saw told her that the scientists and technicians using the lab were working on something big.

She made her way to the back of the lab, where a small office was tucked in the corner. Unlike the rest of the underground compound the door to this office was locked, which to her was as good as a neon sign proclaiming “TOP SECRET INTEL HERE!” Once she was sure the patrol had moved on, she examined the security panel in front of the door, wishing once again that she had Theron’s expertise to fall back on.

Her stealth field fell away as Miranza keyed in a sequence on the security panel. Lights flashed red and there was a desultory beep from the door, signalling that the incorrect code had been inputted. She recognized this system and knew that too many failed attempts would either lock the system down entirely or sound an alarm – possibly both. Fortunately, she knew a work-around.

Pulling her comm from her ear, she snapped the backing off and used the tip of her fingernail to pry underneath the casing, picking at it until she had worked two wires loose. She gave the wires a twist, snapping them, then peeled away the flexible coating that protected them from exposure. Then she pried open the security panel and hooked the wires from her comm into the wiring that connected the panel to the locking mechanism and pulled out her vibroknife. Activating the knife, she let it spark a couple of times, then jammed it into her comm. Her comm sparked and died just as the lights on the panel flared green. The panel flashed a series of ones and zeroes as the door let out a cheerful little chirp that was immediately echoed by the sound of the lock switching off.

Miranza tucked her ruined comm in a pocket inside her jacket and opened the door.

The office was small and cluttered, with notes written on flimsiplast and datapads scattered everywhere. The back of one wall was stacked with canisters, all of them with the word AUDRAGAS stenciled on the side in large yellow letters. There were two computer terminals
running side by side.

She chose the terminal on the left, waking it from sleep mode and waiting for the security screen to pop up. To her surprise there was no prompt for a password; the screen simply lit up with a listing of files for her to access. That immediately made her suspicious – she could understand a certain amount of arrogance, given that she was in the heart of Ulgo lands in what was supposed to be a secured office – but who didn’t password-protect their workstation?

Not one to look a gift ronto in the mouth, Miranza quickly scrolled through the file selection, one hand resting on the grip of her blaster pistol as she kept her ears open for sounds of jackbooted security guards. Most of the files appeared fairly innocuous – thranta breeding programs, experiments in intensifying the toxicity of certain native plants, potential medicinal uses for the membrosia the Killiks produced. Then she caught sight of a file with the “AUDRAGAS” label and clicked it open.

Inside the file were a number of topics to choose from ranging from the suspected location of every Killik hive and nest on Alderaan to chemicals known to be poisonous to Killiks to dissertations on Killik society and behaviour. She saw the Oroboro nest listed on the map, as well as the Togot and the Mirodari, and a few other Killik hives she was less familiar with. The Mirodari were marked in red.

The office was quiet, isolated as it was from the rest of the compound, and so when the door lock suddenly re-engaged itself the noise seemed almost preternaturally loud. Miranza jumped, startled, and exited out of the system, moving towards the door. It was locked, the panel flashing red every time she attempted to open it. She drew her blaster and took aim at the security panel, intending to shoot her way out of the office now that the time for subtlety appeared to have passed.

A soft hissing sound came from overhead and Miranza looked upwards to see thick green smoke pouring out of vents in the ceiling. She recognized coma gas before the first hints of the sickly-sweet scent hit her nostrils, and was already overcome with dizziness before she could lift a hand to cover her mouth and nose.

Miranza was unconscious before she hit the ground.

Chapter End Notes

I thought I’d try my hand at actual spy stuff, but I freely admit I know nothing about security systems - in the real world or in the Star Wars universe. Hopefully my ignorance isn't *too* glaring.
“Wakey-wakey, princess.”

A harsh slap jarred Miranza back to her senses, the mocking voice echoing in her ears. Her cheek stinging, she grudgingly opened her eyes, only to immediate wish she was still unconscious as a painfully familiar scene played out before her. Flashbacks to the first time she had been captured and tortured on Corellia, when – under orders from her old Keeper – she had handed herself over to thugs working on behalf of Hunter and the Star Cabal in order to feed them false information.

*Good times,* she thought sarcastically, as a thug wearing the colours of House Ulgo slapped her again. She tasted blood and suspected the slap – or multiple slaps, judging from the pain in her face – had reopened the cut on her lip. At this rate it was going to leave a scar.

Much as she had been years ago on Corellia, Miranza was seated on a hard metal chair, her arms bound in what felt like shock-cuffs at the wrists behind her back, her ankles tied to the legs of the chair. She flexed her hands experimentally and was disappointed (but not surprised) to learn that there was little give there; whoever had put the cuffs on her had done a good job making sure they fit her properly. She had small hands and slender wrists, and sometimes her captors didn’t take that into consideration when they tied her up. Unfortunately for her, this was not one of those times.

Aside from the sore cheek and the lingering taste of coma gas (not to mention the dry mouth that always seemed to accompany being dosed by the stuff), she didn’t feel any worse for wear, which meant her captors hadn’t worked her over before tying her up. Either they didn’t feel the need to soften her up beforehand or they were the type who preferred to exert their efforts on conscious enemies. Maybe she’d be lucky, and this would be one of those rare times when her captors didn’t actually plan on torturing her.

A girl could have dreams, right?

“You gonna talk for us?” the thug asked her, standing in front of her and pushing his face in close to hers. He was a large man with broad shoulders and a prominent gut that spoke of muscle turned to fat, and judging from his hooked nose and the scars on his face, he’d seen more than his fair share of fights.

Miranza licked her lips, trying to regain some moisture in her mouth. “You haven’t asked me anything yet.”

Surprised by her response, the thug let out a harsh bark of laughter, blasting her in the face with warm breath that smelled heavily of onions. He straightened and turned to his companions, and the realization that there were other people in the room with them filled Miranza with dismay, if only because she had been too disoriented to notice before.

There were five of them in total, including the one who’d woken her. They all wore the livery of House Ulgo, and although they varied in size, shape and colouration they all had the look of men who had seen a significant amount of combat – most of it dirty and messy. She had had worse odds, but so long as her hands were bound she didn’t consider herself to be in any position to test her luck against them.

The thug leaned in again, grabbing the front of her jacket in one meaty hand and using it to force her
closer to him. He was grinning.

“We caught you snooping around in the labs. What do you got to say about that?”

“I was looking for the little girl’s room?” Miranza suggested, quirking one eyebrow.

The punch was not unexpected, but it did rock her sideways, and if she hadn’t been bound in place she probably would have fallen out of the chair. He hit her with his solid, meaty fist, connecting in roughly the same spot on her face where he had slapped her earlier, and for a moment she saw stars. When her vision cleared he was scowling down at her, but there was a slight twist to his lips – she amused him. That, or hitting her amused him. Possibly both. She had that effect on people.

“You sound like a posh Dromund Kaas bitch,” he said, and waited.

Miranza blinked at him. “Is that a question?”

Another punch, this time to the midsection, knocking the wind out of her. She drew in a shallow breath and licked at the blood on her lips.

“Who are you spying for, Dromund Kaas bitch?” the thug asked.

There were a variety of methods of coping with an interrogation, especially when you actually had something to hide. You could keep your mouth shut, although that ran the risk that when you did finally break, you would begin spilling the truth. You could antagonize your enemies, so that they lost their temper, but that usually resulted in you getting hurt more – which was occasionally a benefit, since it also meant your captors took you out of play faster (by beating you into unconsciousness). Or you could lie. Lie soon and lie often, and when you did finally break – because sooner or later, everyone broke, it was just a question of when – hopefully you will have fed your enemies so much false information that when you start telling the truth they wouldn’t be able to sort it out from the lies. Miranza favoured a combination of all three tactics: she refused to answer, she did her best to be as obnoxious as possible, and she lied like a fine Corellian rug.

“I work for the Queen of Naboo,” she replied, smiling. With the blood on her mouth she knew it had to be a fairly ghastly expression.

He punched her again, of course, aiming again for her midsection. It hurt more than it ought to, and not because her assailant was particularly strong – he was hitting her in the vicinity of her shrapnel scar, and while it was more or less healed the area was still tender. Still, when he growled at her to try again, she told him she was a spy for Nem’ro the Hutt, and then the next time he asked she said she worked for the Czerka Corporation. The fascinating shades of red that swept over his face were her only real source of amusement in all of this, and she found herself hoping she annoyed him enough to give him an aneurysm or a heart attack.

“I don’t think interrogation is your wheelhouse,” she told him smartly, ignoring how thick and swollen her tongue felt, or the fact that she could scarcely see out of one eye. “Have you considered taking up macramé?”

His answering bellow of rage was most edifying, but the fact that she had succeeded in making him lose his temper lost some of its enjoyment value when he chose to take that temper out on her.

O o O o O

House Cortess had a med centre. It was small and some of the equipment was out-dated, but it was there and there was even a doctor as well as a medical droid.
Theron was escorted – and it was just an escort; there was no indication that he was under guard in any way – to the med centre straight away. The Joiner who provided the escort was a young woman barely out of her teens with dark, wiry curls and a sing-song voice, and she treated Theron with deference, referring to him as ‘honoured guest.’ When they passed others along the way they were all Joiners, and they bowed in acknowledgement before returning to their work.

The deeper into the estate Theron went, the more it struck him that he was the only human on the property. Even the doctor – a tall, heavy-boned woman with copper-coloured hair and a wedding band on one finger – was a Joiner, and when she motioned for Theron to sit on the exam table both she and the dark-haired girl moved forward to assist him with such synchronicity that it was as if they had rehearsed their movements, not a word uttered between them. He would have shaken off the assistance save that with his left arm bound by an immobilizer and his ribs bandaged, there was no way he could climb up onto the exam table without help. Even the act of getting up onto the table was enough to leave him feeling woozy, and the girl stayed at his side, one small hand placed firmly on his good arm to help hold him in place.

The doctor introduced herself as Healer, and when she spoke, the gentle, liquid cadences common to Joiner speech were wrapped around an accent that came straight from Coruscant. It was jarring enough that Theron missed what she was saying, and she had to repeat her instructions a second time.

She was incredibly gentle when she removed the immobilizer that prevented Theron from trying to use his injured shoulder, and the hands that unwound the bandages around his chest were warm and sure. She cut his shirt off him – it was torn and bloodied and the effort of removing it without damaging it would have been more than his injuries could take – and took out her med-scanner, running it over him while her serene gaze studied the results. Another doctor (a normal doctor, a voice nagged at Theron) would have made some kind of ts-k-ing sound or expressed concern when reviewing the results of Theron’s med-scan; his most recent injuries were bad enough, but a good scanner would have also picked up all the previous breaks and contusions as well, and Theron had sat through enough medical exams to grow weary of the constant head-shakes and wide eyes that resulted whenever he was given a check-up. Field agents seldom lived quiet lives, and Theron had what most would consider an extensive record of duty. The Joiner doctor appeared completely unfazed by both his current condition and the evidence of his previous injuries, simply looking over the results of the med-scan with a tranquil expression on her face.

“We suspect your shoulder will require surgery to correct,” the doctor informed him, her tone an odd mixture of serenity and regret. “This was not your first dislocation, was it?”

“No.” It bothered Theron that he couldn’t remember exactly how many times he’d dislocated the same damn shoulder. It was starting to become a bad running joke with him. “It’s popped out a few times.”

The doctor simply nodded, unsurprised, and continued her inspection.

“You’re not from Alderaan, are you?” Theron blurted out, her familiar accent troubling him.

“No, we are not,” the doctor replied without looking at his face, still examining his ribs. “We had a clinic in the Senate Tower on Coruscant where we had begun treating a number of alien refugees. We came to Alderaan to attend a xenobiology conference in order to improve our skills and knowledge. The recent acquisition of a significant number of humanoid Joiners into the Oroboro Nest necessitated a doctor trained in handling their medical needs, and so we were Joined. It is an honour to serve.”

“What about your family on Coruscant?” Theron asked, nodding in the direction of her wedding
“Your … husband?”

“Our wife,” she amended gently, with no more emphasis than if she was correcting him for calling her shirt red when it was blue, “and our children remain on Coruscant. We have not seen the need for contact. They are not of the Nest.”

Theron’s heart thudded dully in his chest and the pounding in his head worsened. “Don’t you miss them?”

“We knew them when we were Evika Rhees, physician of Coruscant,” the doctor told him. “Now we are Healer of the Oroboro Nest. We no longer share the same song, and they have not been called to serve.” She was so placid, so assured, that it set Theron’s teeth on edge. This woman had been taken from her wife and children so that she could work for the Killiks as a doctor for their sudden influx of Joiners (and why had there been a sudden influx? Was that the norm for the Killiks?), and it didn’t seem to bother her in the least. Her family was back on Coruscant, no doubt worried sick about what had befallen her, and she didn’t care. It was as though that family had belonged to someone else in another life.

Theron was spared from making a response by the return of the dark-haired girl, and it startled him to realize that he hadn’t even noticed she was missing. She carried with her a tray topped with covered plates and a tall glass filled with some kind of white liquid. Setting the tray down on a table a few feet away, the girl lifted the covers off the plates, revealing an assortment of mouth-watering food. Theron’s stomach gurgled in appreciation, suddenly reminded that it had been rather a long time since he had last had anything to eat – and whatever he had eaten, he had thrown up not that long ago.

“The Dawn Herald thought you would be hungry,” the girl said, bringing Theron one of the plates. “We were sent to procure you some sustenance.”

The girl held the plate for him while Theron, one-handed, helped himself to some of the food. It bothered him that he hadn’t noticed the girl leaving, and it bothered him even more that he hadn’t seen any indication that anyone had spoken to her prior to her departure. He knew ‘Dawn Herald’ was what the Killiks called Vector, but he had no memory of Vector speaking to the girl, not even when she had first come to escort Theron to the med centre. So far as he could recall, the only person who had communicated with the girl at all had been him, and yet not only had she been sent to fetch him a bite to eat, someone had instructed her to get him food he could eat easily with one hand and that wouldn’t put undo strain on his still-queasy stomach.

“What’s your story?” he asked her, around a mouthful of soft, buttery bread. He couldn’t help himself; as horrifying as it had been for him to hear the doctor’s explanation of how she had come to be here and who she had left behind, he felt compelled to know more. “Who were you before you were … ah … a Joiner?”

The girl blinked, startled by his question, then smiled at him.

“We were once Thalia of House Ulgo,” she told him, handing him the glass of white liquid. He sniffed it cautiously before taking a few tentative sips; the taste was strange, but not unpleasant, sort of sweet and spicy at the same time. He took another sip and was pleased to feel some of the aches and pains in his body disappear as a comforting warmth suffused him. “Before our Joining, we had snuck here, to the Cortess estates, to be with our lover. He was a son of House Cortess and our father had forbidden us to see him, but we knew we were destined to be together and so we met in secret. We were here when House Cortess was brought into the Nest.” She beamed at Theron. “Now we serve the Nest alongside Jarrod, and our father cannot tear us apart.”
Theron surmised that Jarrod was the girl’s star-crossed lover, and a prickly part of him wanted to ask the girl where he was now. He kept the question to himself, however; he didn’t want to know if Jarrod was somehow no longer in the picture. It was bad enough knowing that this girl had simply been Joined through dint of having been in the wrong place at the wrong time, her rebellious tryst resulting in the complete obliteration of her previous life.

“Eat,” said the doctor, finishing her examination of him. “Drink. The membrosia will speed up the healing process, but we would like you to spend some time in the kolto tank.” She motioned towards the large tank over in the corner of the room which sat unused and gleaming, the green liquid bubbling cheerfully inside the transparisteel container.

Chewing pensively, Theron looked over at the tank, his thoughts turning over and twisting in his mind. House Cortess had a kolto tank. Vector – who, so far as Theron could tell, had complete run of the place – seemed to know House Cortess and its estates exceptionally well. He had to have known there was a med centre here. Why in the galaxy had Vector and Miranza taken Theron to that cabin in the woods when it was obvious that Miranza should have been here, making use of that kolto tank to treat the wound she had sustained on Corellia? Why had she been left to suffer for days when she could have been in and out of the kolto tank in a day or two?

Theron took another sip of the white liquid – membrosia, apparently – as he came to what seemed to him to be an obvious conclusion: Vector, and by extension Miranza, had not wanted Theron to see House Cortess. Was it because Vector had suspected Theron would be uncomfortable surrounded by Joiners? Was House Cortess supposed to be some kind of secret? Back at the Imperial outpost, when the officer had announced Theron and Vector were being sent on to the Cortess estates, Theron had seen how Vector wanted to object. At the time Theron had assumed it was because they had promised Miranza they would meet her at the Bolym outpost and didn't want to miss their rendezvous, but now Theron was beginning to wonder if there might be a more unsavoury reason for Vector’s reluctance to bring Theron here.

Was this simply some Imperial secret? Theron knew the Empire had entered into some sort of alliance with the Killiks. Was House Cortess the cost – or the culmination – of this alliance? Had Vector been trying to keep Theron from seeing how far the Empire would go to achieve its goals? If so, Vector was a day late and a credit short: Theron had learned a long, long time ago the extreme lengths to which the Sith Empire would go in order to fulfill its mandate. In fact it seemed as though this was to be a lesson Theron would learn over and over again, no matter how deeply ingrained the knowledge had become.

Theron didn’t know what upset him more: the knowledge that Vector hadn’t trusted him to keep his mouth shut, or the realization that the man had willingly put his wife through unnecessary suffering in order to protect a secret. It clashed with everything Theron thought he had known about the Joiner, and made him realize that perhaps he didn’t understand the two Imperials who had rescued him as well as he thought he did. But then again … how far would Theron have gone in order to protect Republic secrets from falling into Imperial hands?

He was just drinking the last of the membrosia when Vector came into the med centre. The Joiner took two steps into the room, his gaze falling on Theron, then suddenly raced forward and dashed the glass out of Theron’s hands. The glass hit the ground, shattering instantly, and the remaining membrosia splashed across the floor tiles. Theron, startled by this thoroughly unexpected outburst and still bothered by the recent revelations, glared at the other man.

“Vector, what the kriffing hell –“

Vector rounded on the dark-haired girl, an expression of fury on his features unlike anything Theron
had ever witnessed before. Theron realized, in that moment, that he had never before seen Vector truly enraged. Few people were ever more terrifying than a sedate man pushed beyond his limits.

“We told you he is ours!” Vector snarled, pointing at Theron. The girl cowered, stammering apologies, and Theron made a sound of protest, shifting as though to move between the two of them even though it made fire lance across his ribs. Vector paid him no heed, instead focusing the full brunt of his fury upon the terrified girl and the doctor. “He is not for the Nest! We told you this the instant we arrived here!”

The doctor was unmoved. “The membrosia is intended to enhance his ability to heal. Your honoured guest is —”

“No membrosia!” Vector bellowed, his face inches away from the doctor’s. “No membrosia, no pheromones, none of it! You were told!”

“Hey,” Theron interjected, feeling strangely defensive of the pair, “they were just trying to help —”

“Get out.”

At first Theron thought the command was snarled at him, but the doctor and the dark-haired girl hastened to comply, the pair of them hurrying out of the med centre as if Vector intended to chase after them with his electrostaff in hand. Perhaps he did. The man was angrier than Theron had ever seen him, and he had been present when Miranza had shared some of what had happened to her and Theron on Corellia.

As soon as the two Joiners were gone Vector seemed to deflate, his shoulders sagging. Turning away from Theron, he knelt and began scooping up the broken bits of glass, collecting the pieces with his bare hands and dumping them into a nearby garbage receptacle. He used some towels to wipe up the spilled membrosia. Theron watched him, unable to get down from the exam table without assistance, and feeling very much like he was intruding on something intensely private. He was unfamiliar with this side of Vector - stars, Theron would have sworn Vector didn't even have this side - and it brought to mind all his earlier realizations about how little he knew of Vector and Miranza.

“This House,” Theron said finally, eager to break the silence between them and latching on to the first subject that came to mind – unfortunate as it was. “These people … They’re all Joiners. You used House Cortess as your cover because you knew there wouldn’t be anyone here to dispute it.”

Facing away from Theron to dispose of the wet towels, Vector’s shoulders stiffened, and he let out a long sigh.

“Must we have this discussion now?” the Joiner asked. He sounded weary, as if all of his fury had suddenly been replaced with sheer exhaustion.

Conversely, all of Theron’s confusion and embarrassment at being the subject of discord between Vector and the other Joiners disappeared, his earlier anger returning. That Vector clearly didn’t want to discuss the subject – that he was still trying to hide all of this, in spite of the fact that Theron was right in the middle of it – made him furious. It felt like confirmation that Vector was deliberately keeping Theron out of the loop, and if there was one thing Theron hated it was being left in the dark.

“Fuck yes, we need to have this discussion now!” Theron snapped, wincing as his outburst put strain on his damaged ribs. The doctor hadn’t had a chance to rebandage him, given that she had intended for him to spend time in the kolto tank first, and he was painfully aware of how much he had needed the bandages to support him. He gave in to his anger some more, using it to push him past the pain.
“You’ve clearly been keeping this place from me. You knew all these people were Joiners –“

“Yes, of course we knew!” Vector suddenly whirled on him, his expression a mixture of anger and some other emotion Theron couldn’t quite place, although he was afraid it might be shame or guilt. Vector’s next words confirmed that for Theron: “We knew, Theron, because we are the ones who were bloody well responsible for it. We did this to these people.”

“You … You what?”

Vector leaned back against the counter where the medical supplies were kept, folding his arms across his chest.

“We are the reason House Cortess was subsumed by the Oroboro Nest, Theron,” he said, in a voice gone flat. “We made the choice to hand an entire family over to the Killiks as punishment for one member betraying the Empire.”

Theron’s stomach did a slow, queasy roll. “You, as in you … or you, as in you and Miranza?”

“Does it matter, Theron?” Vector asked him, sounding defeated. “We made a choice, and in doing so we stripped every member of House Cortess – the nobles, their servants, every last man, woman and child – of their ability to do the same. Would you rather believe that we were in accord with our wife, and that we are monsters together, or would you prefer the illusion that Miranza is still pure in spite of everything the Empire has asked of her?”

The queasiness in Theron’s stomach kicked up a notch, and he closed his eyes as he struggled to bring his body under control. But closing his eyes gave his imagination free rein, and his mind conjured up the Joiners he had seen since arriving at House Cortess: the guards, the people wandering the courtyard, the doctor known as Healer, who once had been a Coruscanti physician with a wife and children, and the dark-haired girl formerly known as Thalia Ulgo, who had simply had the misfortune of sneaking to her lover’s home just when the Killiks had stormed the castle and turned its inhabitants into slaves. Vector had done this - Vector and Miranza. Vector and Miranza, two people Theron cared for, who had rescued him at considerable risk to themselves, who continued to safeguard him even though he knew it put them at odds with the rest of the Empire, who he … what? Had feelings for? Was in lust with, if not maybe more?

*Fucking perfect, Shan.*

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” he mumbled, and even before he was doubling over – his good hand clasped to his aching side – Vector was there, supporting him and holding the garbage bin under his head to keep him from throwing up all over himself. Instinct should have had him recoiling away from Vector, but even with everything he had just been told Theron still trusted the other man. It made no kripping sense to Theron and yet there it was: he trusted Vector.

Theron threw up into the garbage bin, groaning against the flare of pain in his sides. Vector, ever patient, held the bin in one hand, his other hand resting lightly on the back of Theron’s neck, his touch cool and calming. When at last Theron finished being sick Vector took the bin away, setting it outside the door of the med centre for someone else to take care of. He came back to stand a few feet away from Theron, all his earlier anger and guilt replaced by an expression of concern.

“You need to be in the kolto tank, Theron,” the Joiner said quietly, filling a cup with some water before handing it to Theron.

Theron took a sip of the water and swished it around in his mouth before spitting it out onto a towel. The next few sips he swallowed, his mind racing.
“You knew there was a kolto tank here,” he said finally, looking up at the other man. Vector nodded slowly, his expression uncertain. “And yet you took me to the cabin instead, even though Miranza was hurt. Was that so I wouldn’t find out about House Cortess?”

Vector grimaced, letting out a short huff that was part laugh, part growl. The uncertainty had diminished, his earlier anger returning.

“You think we brought you to the cabin to prevent you from uncovering some deep, dark secret about us?” he asked, in a tone of injured disbelief. Then he snorted, looking away. “We suppose we have done worse things in the interests of Imperial security.”

“Like sentence an entire household to brainwashing and a lifetime of slavery?” Theron couldn’t help the note of accusation in his voice, and the responding wince he received from Vector was almost gratifying.

“Yes, like that,” Vector said softly, not meeting his eyes. “The Oroboro Nest had determined House Cortess to be a suitable target for expansion. We acted in the interests of the Nest and in the interests of the Empire, and yes, Miranza supported our decision. At the time we did not see our … Joining … as a negative. We believed it would be of benefit to the House, as well as to the Killiks.”

“But you said you did it to punish them? Because one of them betrayed the Empire?”

Vector nodded. “Baroness Chay Cortess, yes. She had been working with an enemy of the Empire, secretly funding a terrorist faction. She was executed by her husband for her treachery, but Miranza agreed to allow the entire House to be Joined in order to secure their loyalty – and the loyalty of the Killiks. For Miranza it was a punishment. For us … at the time … we saw it as a gift.”

“And now …?” Theron was angry and confused, but the obvious regret and pain in Vector’s voice told him there was much more to the story, and he felt that he needed to know if he was to gain any understanding into the Imperials who had rescued him.

“And now …” Vector sighed heavily, his shoulders sagging once more. “We are uncertain. We have learned a lot since that time – about ourselves, about what … we have lost. About what it means to be Joined – or to be free.” He looked up, and although his lack of pupils made it difficult for Theron to be certain, it seemed like he was meeting Theron’s gaze. “We do not remember our Joining. We remember ourselves as we were before it happened, although our memories are vague and lack depth, rather as though they are stories told from another man’s life. We remember ourselves after our Joining, and what it felt like, to be a part of something greater than ourselves. But we have no memories of the Joining itself, and we have to wonder if perhaps the experience was painful or frightening. After all, nobody chooses to forget the pleasant experiences.”

He shrugged and pushed off from the counter, moving to stand beside Theron, taking the empty cup out of his hands and setting it onto the table beside them.

“As Dawn Herald we have greater autonomy than the other Joiners. Even so, when we first met Miranza we were … no longer human. We had to relearn a great deal: how to interact with people who could not share our thoughts, how to communicate when we had only tone and body language to rely upon, what it meant to think in terms of the individual, rather than the Hive. And as we learned about ourselves, we came to discover that our Joining was no accident, but rather that the Empire had decided to … sacrifice us … to learn how the Joining worked. We were a science experiment – and one that was discarded as a failure, in the end.

“At the same time Miranza was trapped in the bonds of the Castellan restraints, forced to work under a different kind of brainwashing than what we had experienced. We did not understand what had
happened to her – indeed, we did not fully realize that anything was wrong until she had saved herself and broken free of her conditioning – but we knew that she chafed under those restraints. We knew she hated the loss of her own autonomy, and it made us think that perhaps we were not wholly pleased with our own loss.

“So now, Theron, we know that we have made a mistake in our treatment of House Cortess,” Vector concluded, once more unable to meet Theron’s gaze. “We have condemned an entire family, as well as their servants and guests, to slavery. They are happy, every last one of them, but only because the Hive gives them no other choice. They feel a unity of purpose and a sense of belonging that no other could match, but it is not real, and there is nothing we can do to free them from it. We cannot undo their conditioning as Miranza has undone hers – as we work to undo yours. They are trapped here and we are responsible for it.”

Theron put a hand up to his aching head, the dull throbbing having synced up to his heartbeats. His mind was reeling and a queasiness that had nothing to do with his concussion still roiled in his gut.

“So you didn’t want me to see this,” he said finally, voice hoarse. “You kept me away because you were ashamed?”

Startled, Vector glanced up at him, then shook his head slowly.

“No, Theron,” he said, in a tone of voice that suggested Theron was being completely absurd. Theron suspected that if the man could roll his eyes, he would. “We did not willfully endanger our wife’s recovery simply because we were too embarrassed to have you bear witness to our failings and betrayals. We did not bring Miranza here because it would not have been safe for you.”

Theron blinked, his turn to be startled. “I don’t … I don’t understand.”

“We did not wish to endanger you by exposing you to the Hive,” Vector said simply. “We could not be certain that your current state – the effects of your conditioning, the serum working in your body – would not make you more susceptible to the Joining. We knew that the moment the Oroboro met you, they would want you as part of the Nest. You’re a singularly remarkable man.”

“I get that I’m the only non-Joiner here, but what does that —“

“Theron.” Vector’s voice was filled with infinite patience and a hint of something more – amusement, perhaps, or exasperation. “You are intelligent, humorous, brave, and exceptionally loyal. Our clothes are presently covered in your blood and vomit, half your face is bruised and bloodied, your entire torso is practically black and blue – and you are still one of the most breathtakingly beautiful men we have ever known.”

Theron felt his cheeks flush with a mixture of embarrassment and, if he was being honest with himself, pleasure at the realization that Vector still found him attractive. In spite of their argument, in spite of the realization that perhaps he didn’t know the other man as well as he thought he did and there were definitely some unsavoury elements of Vector’s past that bore some rather serious examination, Theron was still pleased to know that the attraction was still there. And it was funny, but Theron couldn’t think of anyone else in the galaxy who could have said those same words without sounding absolutely ridiculous - yet coming from Vector, uttered in that melodious yet precise voice of his, it was simply the truth as Vector saw it.

But Vector hadn’t finished, apparently.

“Of course the Killiks would want you,” he went on, and if he had noticed Theron’s blushes – and how could he not, given that they were standing less than a foot apart? – he made no mention of it.
“Did we not just finish rescuing you from the clutches of enemies who want you working on their side? Is it really so difficult for you to imagine that there might be people who find you worthwhile?”

Mention of Samar and the Star Cabal dashed some of Theron’s inner delight, and he felt himself shutting down again. It wasn’t him that they had wanted – it was his skillset, his connections, his biological relationship to Jace Malcom. That Samar had also desired him physically had more to do with the fact that Theron had been brainwashed and unable to resist him than it did with Theron as a person. It hadn’t been *Theron* Samar had wanted, but a toy that he could play with. If life had taught Theron anything it was that he was expendable and ultimately unworthy of anything more than transitory connections. People didn’t want to stick around him; sooner or later everyone left. His mother had given him up to serve the Jedi Order, his mentor and guardian had abandoned him to follow the Force, the Jedi Order had drummed him out – stars, at this point the longest relationship Theron had been in was with the SIS, and even they had been quick to toss him on his ass after Manaan.

Yeah, it was pretty difficult to picture anyone wanting Theron for himself, but he certainly wasn’t so self-pitying that he was going to admit to that *out loud*.

Of course, Theron had forgotten that Vector could see his aura, and while the SIS agent was adept at keeping his thoughts and emotions off his face it was clear from Vector’s expression that the other man was able to read it all anyway.

“Really, Theron?” Vector said softly, and before Theron could frame an answer the Joiner leaned in and kissed him.

It was a violent kiss, far more passionate than the one they had exchanged days ago when Vector had told him – reluctantly – that he wasn’t willing to take things further between them until Theron’s conditioning was broken. This time it was all lips and tongue and teeth, Vector’s hands coming to rest on Theron’s hips, Theron’s own good hand twining around the back of Vector’s head to draw him in closer. Vector’s mouth was hot and insistent, his teeth tugging at Theron’s lower lip, drawing a hungry moan out of Theron. If he had been feeling lightheaded before it was nothing compared to the rush that filled him now, and if Theron could have latched on to the other man with both hands he would have.

Vector’s hands tightened around Theron’s hips, tugging him closer to the edge of the exam table – and it was at that moment that Theron’s ribs reminded him that there was a reason he was in the med centre. His moan turned into a whimper and Vector released him instantly, pulling away with a murmured apology.

“We should … table this,” the Joiner said reluctantly, before bringing one hand up to cup Theron’s jaw and leaning in for another far gentler kiss.

“Yeah,” Theron agreed, the word coming out a little shaky. He grimaced, suddenly mindful of how filthy he was – Vector had not been lying earlier when he had said there was blood and vomit everywhere, and now that he was thinking of it he realized he desperately needed to brush his teeth. He was amazed Vector hadn’t commented on it. “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is … bruised.

And I’m disgusting.”

“You are not,” Vector told him firmly, releasing him at last. “But we could both benefit from a shower. And perhaps some mouthwash.”

“And about forty-eight hours’ worth of undisturbed sleep,” Theron added, and now that the sudden flare of lust was receding he was aware of how exhausted and sore he was. How long had it been since he’d last had a full night’s rest? Periods of unconsciousness due to head trauma certainly did *not*
“Agreed,” said Vector, but a shadow crossed his expression, and Theron realized that he hadn’t made any mention of Miranza. Was she waiting for them at Outpost Bolym, or had she given up and gone back to the cabin? She must be worried sick about Vector. Vector shook himself, then moved to help Theron down off the exam table, supporting him on the walk towards the kolto tank.

Theron did not particularly wish to go into the tank, even though he knew the kolto was exactly what his injuries needed most right now. The idea of being trapped inside the tank – especially now that he knew the Killiks had taken an interest in him – made him incredibly anxious, but there was no mistaking the fact that he was badly hurt and the kolto was the best thing for him. They had no idea how soon he would need to be back out in the field, and he couldn’t back Vector and Miranza up with broken ribs and scrambled brains.

Vector, of course, sensed Theron’s reluctance, and as he helped the other man strip down to his briefs – there was no way Theron could bend to remove his own boots and socks, and even stepping out of his pants was an agonizing endeavour – the Joiner promised to stand guard over Theron while he was in the tank. Theron knew Vector must have a dozen different things he needed to be doing, not the least of which likely included the aforementioned shower, and yet he was grateful to have him there.

As the tank sealed above him and the soothing green kolto swirled around his body, the last thing Theron saw before the sedated liquid pulled him under was Vector’s hand pressed against the side of the glass.
Vector shifted uncomfortably in the hard metal chair, his long legs splaying out in front of him as he maintained his vigil over Theron’s kolto tank. The agent slept peacefully, aided in his rest by the sedatives added to the kolto, his forehead resting lightly against the transparisteel wall. Vector envied him his slumber, even if it wasn’t completely natural – he was completely exhausted, the adrenaline from the fight with the Mirodari long gone, and with nothing more than fatigue and a host of mostly untreated injuries to show for it. The skirmish with the Killiks had reopened the wounds on Vector’s back while adding a few more cuts and bruises besides, and in addition to the painful gash on his forehead he was fairly certain his ribs were badly bruised, if not cracked or broken. He had permitted the Imperial medic to treat his head injury simply because it was impossible to pretend it wasn’t there, but once that had been taken care of he had insisted the medic focus on Theron, whose own injuries were much more severe.

He would have had Healer patch him up, but he suspected he had worn out his welcome with her when he had lost his temper over Flit bringing Theron’s membrosia. Flit – formerly known as Thalia Ulgo before her Joining – had gone off to hide, and Vector doubted he would see the girl again any time soon.

He shouldn’t have been so hard on the girl, but when he had shouted at her and Healer, his words had been directed at the Hive in general, knowing full well the rest of the Oroboro Killiks would hear everything he said. And he was furious: he had specifically warned them that Theron Shan was under his protection, that the agent was not to be considered for Joining, and that Vector would fight them on the issue. He hadn’t expected the Killiks to make a play for the man so quickly, although he’d known long before now that the SIS agent would be a tempting target.

Vector huffed out an angry sigh, grimacing as the movement put pressure on his aching side. He slid his hand under his shirt, fingers brushing over the tender spots along his flank, feeling his ribs for obvious weaknesses and breaks. He had helped himself to some kolto and painkillers shortly after Theron had drifted off, but he knew he needed proper medical care. Even so, a small part of him wanted to wallow in the pain, feeling himself somewhat deserving of it at the moment. It wasn’t his natural inclination to mope and brood, but Theron’s words to him had rekindled a guilt and sorrow he would have preferred to keep buried.

Theron hadn’t been entirely wrong when he had accused Vector of keeping him away from House Cortess out of guilt or shame. While it was true that Vector was concerned about Theron’s welfare, he couldn’t deny that he had wanted to keep the Republic agent oblivious to what had happened to the Cortess and their retainers. The forced Joining of the household had proven to be of considerable use to Vector personally, providing a suitable cover for his activities on Alderaan and gaining him access to a safe house where Theron could recover from his conditioning and Miranza could recover from her injuries, but those personal benefits certainly did not balance out the human cost. Baroness Chay’s actions had been unconscionable, but the rest of her family had been innocent, and Vector had given them over to the Killiks without a second thought.

At the time Vector hadn’t seen any issue with it. He had benefited from his Joining, and every Joiner he knew was happy, peaceful and had found purpose in life. He had believed the Joining to be a gift, and even knowing that Miranza had intended it to be a punishment against House Cortess had not
been sufficient to deter him from going through with the Oroboro Nest’s plans. The acquisition of the House – its members as well as its vast estates and resources – had been beneficial to the Nest. It was the culmination of years of planning and hard work, and it expanded their resources and territory considerably. That the members of the House would have no say in their Joining had been of little interest to Vector; he was doing his duty as Dawn Herald, supported in his decision by an agent of the Empire.

But now? With everything Vector had learned – not just about the circumstances of his own Joining, the involvement of Project Protean, the fact that he was little more than a science project so far as the Empire was concerned, but also having seen Miranza’s struggles to regain her own autonomy and break free from the Castellan restraints – he had serious doubts about the actions he had taken. And seeing the Joiners of House Cortess, he was forced to acknowledge that prior to the arrival of the Oroboro Killiks, they had been normal people with lives and hopes and dreams, and he was the one responsible for stripping that from them.

He didn’t need Theron to tell him the story of Healer, not when Vector could taste the memories Evika Rhees had brought to the Hive, and could picture the faces of her wife and children, could remember the pride she had taken in working at her clinic on Coruscant, how dedicated she had been to improving the lives of the refugees in her care. He didn’t need Flit to tell him that she had been a rebellious, headstrong girl who had been madly in love with a boy from a rival House, not when he could delve into not only Thalia Ulgo’s memories, but also those of Jarrod Cortess, and knew the two had been overcome with the happiness of their first infatuations and ready to take on the world to be together. Every single person at House Cortess had been an individual whose life he had disrupted, and he had done it not because he had thought it a just punishment for their Baroness’s betrayal, but because it had been expedient at the time. Tit for tat: the Oroboro Nest had assisted Miranza with her work on Alderaan, and House Cortess, in their mind, had been a fitting payment.

Vector could claim that his own connection to the Hive had ensured his compliance in the matter, and to a certain extent that was true: despite the relative autonomy he had as Dawn Herald, so long as he was on Alderaan he felt the presence of the Hive in his mind, and that swayed his thoughts and opinions rather heavily in their favour. But he could not place full blame upon his connection to the Killiks, because he did have more autonomy than the average Joiner and he was free to make his own choices – and he had chosen to permit the Oroboro to take House Cortess for the Nest, and damn the consequences to the humans involved.

He didn’t know what Miranza’s motivation had been in agreeing to the bargain. The two of them did not discuss House Cortess, and that alone felt like an admission of guilt. It was an uncomfortable subject and, frankly, their relationship had more than enough of those to go around. Vector did not feel it necessary to tackle every difficult subject head-on, not when they so often had other issues to worry about, issues that were rather more pressing and with more potentially fatal consequences for the Empire as a whole. It wasn’t that he and Miranza avoided the topic of House Cortess, but rather that they had too many other things to focus on. Their lives often seemed to be based around racing from one catastrophe to the next, and that left them little time to dwell on matters that could not be resolved.

There was, so far as Vector knew, no cure for Joining. What had been done to the members of House Cortess – what had been done to Vector himself – was permanent, and that was simply something that Vector was going to have to live with.

He shifted again, trying unsuccessfully to find a position that didn’t put strain or pressure on the various battered parts of his body. His clothes clung to him, blood making the fabric stick to his back, sweat and grime and other things best not thought on too long leaving him feeling gross and uncomfortable. He was badly in need of a shower – better yet, a lengthy soak in the hot-tub back at
the cabin – and although Flit had brought food for Theron to eat, Vector hadn’t thought to ask for anything for himself, and his stomach grumbled unhappily at the thought. In short, he was tired and miserable, and it was no wonder he had lost his temper with Flit and Healer, even if he did consider his outburst to be inappropriate and unacceptable (regardless of his desire to keep Theron safe).

A glance at the unconscious man in the kolto tank brought a wry smile to Vector’s lips. There was something about Theron Shan that brought out the rather large protective instinct in him, and it amazed Vector how Theron could be so utterly oblivious to his own attractions. He had never met anyone who combined so much charisma and talent with such an absolute lack of confidence in his own self-worth. Theron seemed to be constantly bracing himself for the moment when the people in his life walked out on him, and when it didn’t happen he didn’t appear to know what to do with himself.

If this was the result of that much-vaunted Jedi detachment, Vector couldn’t begin to see the appeal. To be fair, Satele Shan giving up her infant son to be raised by her old mentor likely hadn’t been the sole cause of Theron’s rather blatant abandonment issues, but from what Vector had learned it had been the first in a long line of rejections in Theron’s life.

The sad thing was, as much good as Vector and Miranza could do for him, once his conditioning was removed they would be parting ways, and to Theron it would be yet another rejection. He wasn’t going to defect to the Empire, nor did they have any intentions of joining the Republic – and there was no future for any of them in neutrality or independence, not when both sides would hunt them to the ends of the galaxy for their betrayal. Theron deserved better – he deserved to have at least one person in his life who would put him above the needs of the galaxy – but it was unrealistic to think that it could be the two Imperials who had rescued him.

A sudden clatter jolted Vector back to awareness. He hadn’t realized he had dozed off, and he glanced around the med centre, alert for potential threats. There were none, of course; he didn’t really think the Killiks would go after Theron again so quickly, and in any event he hadn’t been that deeply asleep, no matter how much he needed the rest. Having ascertained that Theron was still safe – floating peacefully in the kolto tank, blissfully oblivious to Vector’s anxious thoughts – he looked around again, searching for the source of the sound that had awakened him.

His personal comm had fallen onto the floor, its clattering across the tiles being the noise Vector had heard. He bent, one hand clasped to his side, and scooped the device up. The blue light that indicated incoming calls or missed messages remained unblinking, and out of habit Vector keyed in the channel for Miranza’s comm. No answer.

Vector wasn’t worrying. He wasn’t. Miranza was an adult; not only that, she was a highly skilled and incredibly resourceful woman, and he knew perfectly well that she was capable of taking care of herself. She was armed, she had her stealth generator on her, she knew what she was doing.

He was worried.

Vector had sent Killiks to Outpost Bolym to see if she had made it to their proposed rendezvous point, but hadn’t heard back yet from them, nor had he heard from the Killiks he had sent to the cabin on the off-chance she had gone there instead. Both locations were a fair stretch from the estate proper, so it was unreasonable for him to expect a response just yet. Even so, it bothered him that Miranza hadn’t tried to make contact over the comms. It was all too easy for him to picture her fallen to the claws and mandibles of the enraged Mirodari Killiks, her face replacing that of the dead Joiners they had discovered back in the caverns. He could just as easily see her falling afoul of a Republic patrol, or being taken by guards within House Ulgo. There were hundreds of hazards between those caverns and House Cortess, and as much faith as Vector had in his wife’s abilities he
was far too cognizant of how treacherous Alderaan could be.

If he didn’t hear word from her soon, he would send more Killiks out in search of her. The two who had accompanied him into the caverns had remained with the Togot who had rescued them; perhaps they would have heard or seen something.

Thirty more minutes: then he would send out the search parties.

Maybe twenty more minutes.

O o O o O

A bucket of icy cold water to the face snapped Miranza out of the daze she had fallen into and she came to with a gasp, spluttering and coughing up water while her captors laughed at her reaction.

She had no idea how long she had been unconscious this time. No more than a handful of minutes, surely. They had no intentions of letting her rest.

The thugs in House Ulgo’s employ were remarkably pedestrian when it came to interrogation techniques. Granted, Miranza suspected none of them had been trained by Imperial Intelligence – or by the Sith, who had their own uniquely terrifying methods for getting inside someone's head – but still, it was clear they didn’t get a lot of experience exercising what limited skills they did possess. Or perhaps she was simply a more difficult nut to crack. For the most part their repertoire was limited to kicks and punches, which, while painful, was not much incentive for Miranza to talk. She wasn’t truly afraid of them or of what they would do, and if all they intended to do to her was to slap her around a bit then she could do this all day. At least they had gone to the courtesy of providing her with a place to sit while they roughed her up – even if her shoulders were beginning to ache from the strain of having her arms forced behind her back. Sore shoulders, one black eye, a split lip (again) and some bruises on her torso: she had had worse, much worse. Stars, she’d suffered worse injuries during training – and she had undergone training as a child. These thugs? They were nothing by comparison.

Still, a punch to the head had rung her bell, and it wasn’t until they were dousing her with water that she even realized she’d lost consciousness. It likely wouldn’t be for the last time.

Miranza had given up on trying to keep track of the various lies she had told them. At this point they would have been fools to believe anything that came out of her mouth, especially since half the things she said were so blatantly false as to be completely absurd. She could easily have started sprinkling in bits of truth and they wouldn’t have the faintest idea. Unfortunately these goons were too low-ranking to provide her with any useful counter-intelligence. By now if they had known anything they would’ve let something slip, if only to see if she would respond to the bait – but all they knew was that she had broken into the laboratory underneath the estates of House Ulgo. They didn’t know the purpose of the research being conducted in the lab, they didn’t know why their employers were keeping it hidden, and they didn’t know who would have hired her to spy on House Ulgo in the first place. (Granted, that list was fairly extensive; it would have been better to ask who wouldn’t have hired her.) She had yet to give them anything truthful and they had yet to give her anything useful.

What she needed was someone like Revan, someone who wanted an audience to gloat about his grand machinations. Lana’s plan to let Theron fall into Revanite custody had only worked because his captors couldn’t resist bragging about what they were doing. Miranza’s captors didn’t seem to know enough to do the same.

In addition to her expanding list of falsehoods, Miranza had lost track of how long she had been in
their custody. It had to have been hours – had to. At some point Vector would realize she wasn’t going to be meeting him and Theron at Outpost Bolym, and he would come searching for her. The idea of waiting for a rescue grated on her, but unless she could find some way to get free of her bonds she wasn’t going to be going anywhere under her own power.

The large man with the hooked nose and scars on his face did the bulk of the talking, asking her the same questions over and over again: “Who do you work for?” “Who are you?” “What were you looking for?” He also did the bulk of the punching and slapping, and Miranza had learned that he was right-handed, typically liked to telegraph his punches, and had fists that felt like slabs of duracrete. He also really, really liked eating onions, and every time he leaned in close she got a noseful of his bad breath.

He was easy to piss off, and most interrogation sessions ended with him sputtering in rage and trying to pummel her into paste.

This time, he came and stood in front of her, his arms folded across his massive chest as he looked down at her. He was tall, taller than Vector, and she had to crane her neck to look up at him, but she would be damned if she wouldn’t meet his eyes as best she could.

“Last chance to open up, princess,” he told her, affecting to sound regretful. “Boss is gonna be here soon, and if we don’t got results for him, he’ll come lookin’ for them himself. Believe you me, you don’t want that.”

Miranza considered and discarded a number of responses to that before cocking her head to one side and letting a small smirk spread across her lips. “Don’t be so certain. You’ve no idea what I want.”

He scowled, opening his mouth to retort only to close it again and glance behind Miranza. One thing her captors had consistently done that was smart – at least in the sense of psychological effectiveness – was keeping her back to the door so that she couldn’t see who was coming and going. She was forced to sit and stare at the plain duracrete wall ahead of her, with no idea of who was coming at her.

It was the door opening behind her that had silenced the thug, and he straightened, taking a few steps away from her. There was an expression of resignation on his face as he crossed his arms over his chest again.

Miranza wanted to turn her head to see who had entered the room, but she knew they were all expecting some sort of reaction out of her. Instead she waited, listening as booted feet stalked across the tiled floor.

The man who stepped in front of her was decidedly less intimidating than she had expected, given the thug’s efforts to make him seem dangerous. He was young – almost surprisingly so, perhaps no more than a year or so younger than Miranza herself, but he carried himself with considerable dignity. He was only an inch or so shorter than the head thug, which meant he would tower over her regardless of whether she were standing or not, and was built similarly to Vector: lean, athletic and fit. He had dark hair and a neatly trimmed goatee, and his eyes were a surprisingly clear shade of blue. He wore the colours of House Ulgo, but instead of the standard livery that the thugs were wearing, he was dressed in a loose-fitting tunic and breeches, with a half-cape attached to decorative epaulets at his shoulders. In short, to Miranza’s practiced eye he looked every bit the noble.

He looked down his nose at her, his eyes narrowing and his nostrils flaring as if he had smelled something bad. His mouth was pinched, which was a shame because Miranza thought he had a rather nice mouth, one better suited to smiling than frowning.
“You. Spy,” he said, spitting the word out as if it tasted bad. “Do you know who I am?”

“Nope,” Miranza said, although she could hazard a guess. “I bet you’re going to tell me, though.”

The head thug moved forward, drawing his hand back to strike her, but the nobleman held up his own hand. He didn’t look away from Miranza, his blue eyes still boring down at her.

“My name,” he said slowly, enunciating carefully, “is Alric Ulgo. My uncle was King Bouris Ulgo.”

Miranza let her eyes widen, then gave as much of a shrug as her bindings would permit and said, in a bored tone, “Am I supposed to recognize that name?”

Alric Ulgo rolled his eyes, looking more annoyed than angry.

“Madam, please do me the courtesy of crediting me with some intelligence,” he said tartly. “No agent worth her salt working on Alderaan could fail to know who Bouris Ulgo was, so either you’re a remarkably inept spy or you think I’m an exceedingly stupid man. I am Bouris Ulgo’s nephew – his heir, in point of fact – and I demand to know what you were doing spying on my family’s estate and who you work for.”

“Let me guess: if I don’t talk, you’ll have Captain Beefcake slap me around some more?” Behind Alric the head thug shifted slightly, mouth pressed into a firm line; the look in his eyes told Miranza that he would be absolutely delighted if this was to be the case.

“Hardly.” Alric Ulgo squared his shoulders, smirking at her a little. His blue eyes went several shades colder. “It might interest you to know that before my family’s change in fortune I was attending the academy for Imperial Intelligence and was on-track for a Minder designation. I can handle my own interrogations.”

Repressing a shudder, Miranza looked Alric over again, trying to see if she recognized him now that she knew he had once been a fledgling member of Imperial Intelligence. He was younger than her, however, and she had graduated from the academy early into her teens, fast-tracked as a result of her childhood education in the Intelligence facility; in all likelihood he had entered the academy long after she had already begun to work as an operative. If they had ever traveled in the same circles she had no memory of him, but that didn’t necessarily give the lie to his story. And if he was indeed a former Intelligence trainee his interrogation tactics were going to be head and shoulders above what the Ulgo thugs had been using on her.

Still, Alric Ulgo had not completed his Intelligence education, nor did he have over a decade of experience as an agent under his belt. Miranza had a lifetime of training and experience, and the past few years alone had involved more torture and interrogation than most agents dealt with in their entire careers. She could hold her own.

“Well, then,” Miranza replied, lifting her shoulders in what would have been a magnanimous, expansive gesture if she had been able to incorporate her hands, “by all means, continue.”

He inclined his head towards her in an imitation of a bow, a faint smile playing about his lips. Behind her Miranza could hear the sound of heels clicking on the floor tiles, and she saw Alric lift his head and turn a full smile on the person approaching them. Once again she resisted the urge to turn towards the unknown person, making herself wait until they were within her line of sight. As the other person approached she – for it was a woman, sharply dressed in an exquisitely tailored business suit the colour of rich red wine – let out a trill of delighted laughter upon seeing Miranza.

“Oh, this is rich,” Amrielle declared, coming to stand beside Alric Ulgo. The Nautolan woman
looked absolutely overjoyed, as if Miranza’s presence was a combination of Life Day and her birthday all wrapped up into one unexpected yet entirely welcome gift. “Alric told me his men had caught a spy in the compound, but I never would have imagined that it would be you.”

“You know this woman?” Alric asked, looking between Amrielle and Miranza.

Miranza’s heart began to pound loudly in her chest and she worked hard at keeping her face perfectly expressionless, even as she could feel sweat beginning to break out all over her body. Inside her mind she was screaming, the events on Belsavis and Corellia replaying themselves in perfect clarity as she struggled to maintain her calm, disinterested veneer.

“Indeed I do.” Amrielle leaned in and gripped Miranza by the face, her sharp, lacquered fingernails – painted to match her suit – digging into the agent’s skin. “This is the cipher agent who sold House Cortess to the Killiks. This is the woman who took your sister Thalia away from you and made her into a slave.”

Amrielle smiled, a viciously triumphant upwards twisting of her lips, as Alric Ulgo’s face underwent a rather interesting shift from mildly curious to seething, blind hatred in a matter of seconds. Leaning in, she dug her fingernails in harder, so hard Miranza wouldn’t have been surprised to see blood. In a voice that was sickly sweet and full of malevolence, Amrielle asked a single question:

“Tell me, Agent, where is Theron Shan?”

Chapter End Notes

Those chickens are coming home to roost.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings for torture, nonconsensual drug use and heavily implied rape

Chapter Twenty-Seven

One of the earliest lessons Miranza had learned was how to keep a secret. Intelligence was primarily about obtaining the secrets of others, but once you had that knowledge you had to learn how to contain it, and spies who couldn’t keep their mouths shut when it mattered (or even when it didn’t) held no place in the Empire. Miranza would never have made it to agent status – much less to the vaunted position of cipher agent – without taking those early lessons to heart. The only time in her entire career when she had revealed ‘secret’ information had been when she had been directed to break under torture in order to spread false intel.

Amrielle and Alric Ulgo were determined to change that winning streak.

Granted, Alric Ulgo didn’t give a flying fig where Theron Shan was, and probably had no clue who he was asking after. For all that Theron’s name came up rather regularly in the Intelligence reports Miranza was privy to, it was highly unlikely that he was a frequent topic of discussion on Alderaan, no matter his importance off-world. Regardless, Alric was motivated to break Miranza not because he cared about the answers she could provide, but simply because the process of breaking her was so desirable to him. As far as he was concerned Miranza could keep her mouth shut forever so long as it meant he could keep hurting her.

First things first, though: the injuries Miranza had received from the House Ulgo thugs needed to be treated, and then she needed to be transported to somewhere more private. Both Amrielle and Alric were concerned that Miranza’s allies would be looking for her, and it stood to reason those allies and co-conspirators would be aware of her last known whereabouts. Miranza’s presence within the Ulgo compound was a strong indication the compound was no longer secure – and besides that, Alric wanted someplace where he could work on her in private. Doctor Arjin, the Neimoidian who had overseen the application of the Castellan restraints and who had treated her injuries back on Corellia, was still working with Amrielle and was brought in to patch Miranza up. He made no attempts at conversing with Miranza while he treated her, simply put kolto on her cuts and bruises and sent her on her way. After that one of the thugs hit her with a carbonite freeze ray, the kind of gauntlet-mounted blaster that bounty hunters favoured, and then she knew no more.

She awakened some time later to find that she had been transported out of the Ulgo compound to what appeared to be some sort of refrigerated storage facility. She was left alone in a freezing cold storage unit, bound hand and foot to a heavy metal chair, surrounded on all sides by slabs of fresh-cut meat hanging from tenterhooks from the ceiling. If she had ever wanted to know what nerf steaks looked like before they were cooked and served - and she had not - that question was answered for her now.

She wasn’t left alone for long. Alric joined her, carrying with him a small leatheris case that he set down on a nearby metal table, and he flipped it open with slow, reverent movements, running one gloved hand along the various implements displayed within. Miranza was familiar enough with Imperial interrogation training to recognize the torturer’s tools of trade, and her stomach did a queasy
roll at the sight. The assorted knives, hooks and pincers contained within the case were all spotless and gleaming metallic in the harsh light of the storage unit and she knew without a doubt that Alric ensured they were all lovingly maintained. Her mind sorted through various sarcastic remarks - "boys and their toys" coming to the forefront - but she kept her mouth shut.

Having no doubt been briefed by Amrielle – who, Miranza couldn’t help but notice, was conspicuously absent – Alric didn’t need to bother with the standard opening questions. He already knew who Miranza was: her name, her designation, her former and current alliances. Amrielle’s intel was quite extensive, and had no doubt been added to during the time Miranza and Theron had been in her custody. Alric didn’t care how Miranza had escaped from Corellia (if, indeed, he even knew that she had), he didn’t want the details of how she had defeated her programming, and he wasn’t concerned with why Amrielle wanted her. He was curious about what she had been doing in the Ulgo compound, but that curiosity paled in comparison to Amrielle’s desire for the answer to her one single question.

Where was Theron Shan?

It was the one question Miranza would not answer. She didn’t know what Amrielle wanted Theron for, but she had absolutely no intention of handing him back into her custody. Alric asked, again and again, and Miranza kept her mouth shut.

Miranza’s silence suited Alric Ulgo just fine.

Alone together in the refrigerated storage unit, Alric’s refined, noble demeanour peeled away, revealing a man twisted and torn by his family’s losses and betrayals. His uncle’s bid for the throne of Alderaan had come with a high cost, and although Bouris Ulgo had been killed the rest of his family continued to pay the price. Alric’s father had briefly stepped into the role of the head of the family, but the unexpected loss of his daughter – Alric’s sister, Thalia – had hit him hard, and he had suffered a stroke shortly after claiming the title of Baron, dying after a few days spent in a drug-induced coma. Thalia’s disappearance had had the biggest impact on Alric, however: the two siblings had been close, and when the girl had run away to House Cortess to be with her lover Alric had tried to keep their father from sending armed forces after her – only to find out that when House Cortess was absorbed into the Oroboro Nest, Thalia Ulgo was absorbed right along with them. Alric blamed himself for preventing their father from going after her, but her blamed Miranza more.

And why not? House Cortess falling to the Killiks was her fault, although she couldn’t for the life of her figure out how Amrielle had found out about that.

Miranza had not been aware of the situation with House Ulgo. Her interest in the family had ended when she last left Alderaan, after the intervention of another prevented Bouris Ulgo from becoming king; Imperial Intelligence had not seen any need to send her for follow-up investigations, and in truth she had mostly forgotten about the power-hungry clan the moment she had stepped onto her own spaceship to leave the planet. Her recent foray into Ulgo territory had little to do with politics and everything to do with helping Vector protect the Oroboro Killiks, and she hadn’t needed to read up on Ulgo modern history to conduct that investigation. Alric Ulgo, however, had been more than eager to brief her on everything she had missed since her last visit to Alderaan.

His ‘briefings’ were conducted as part of his interrogation of her, his rants about the misfortunes that had befallen House Ulgo interspersed with that one damned question, asked of her over and over again:

Where was Theron Shan?

Unlike his hired thugs, Alric was remarkably adept at interrogation. More specifically, he was adept
at torture, and even if he hadn’t already told Miranza that he had trained with Imperial Intelligence she would have been able to guess right away. He didn’t resort to brute force. He didn’t punch or slap her, and in fact he seemed to have no interest in marking her face at all. Instead he spent a few minutes looking over the items in his toolkit, deciding what to use first before selecting one viciously sharp scalpel from the mix.

He started, not with her face or her midsection, but with her hand.

Hands are delicate instruments: so many fine bones, so many nerve endings, so much potential for pain. Her wrists were bound to the arms of the chair, her arms outstretched, and although she tried to pull away all that served to accomplish was to dig the ropes into her skin. Alric asked his question – Amrielle’s question – and then, when Miranza didn’t answer, he began to talk, telling her about his sweet sister Thalia as he used the scalpel to carve patterns across the back of Miranza’s hand. Slow, steady slices, the blade of the scalpel cutting through her flesh like a heated knife through butter.

Miranza bit down on her lip so hard she tasted blood, but she did not talk, and she did not scream. By the time Alric decided to pause for a break, Miranza was drenched in sweat and shivering in the cold air of the refrigeration unit, her right hand skinned to the point where she could see bone and sinew and bloody ruin.

“Thirsty?” he asked her, his tone conversational, all of his earlier rage and hostility gone, the mask of the polite and dignified nobleman back in place. He held a glass of water out to her, and for the briefest of moments she considered refusing, but between sweat and blood-loss she was already becoming dehydrated and she had no intentions of killing herself through sheer stubbornness. She nodded and he held the glass up to her lips, tilting it so that she could drink. Once the glass was empty he set it onto the table, alongside his collection of torture implements, and returned to studying his tools. This time he selected a short-handled ball-peen hammer, and he turned back to her, smiling.

“Now,” he said, raising the hammer, “where is Theron Shan?”

The ‘fresher attached to the House Cortess med centre was small and cramped, but it had a shower and that shower had hot water, so it might as well have been the ‘fresher in a luxury suite in the finest hotel on Coruscant for all Theron cared. Having been released from the kolto tank, the worst of his injuries healed enough that he could move with relatively little pain, his first course of action was to clean himself up. Kolto got everywhere – everywhere – and it was bad enough that it made his blood feel carbonated, he didn’t need it making his hair crunchy and his skin sticky, too.

He stood in the ‘fresher, his face tilted upwards to let the hot water wash the kolto out of his hair, and tried very hard not to think about the three Joiners who were waiting for him outside the door. Of course trying not to think of something made one think about it, so he was trying and failing, miserably. Healer had returned to take him out of the tank, bringing Flit with her as her medical assistant – and Vector, apparently, had never left. There was a terse silence between the three of them that Theron couldn’t help but be uncomfortably aware of (made all the more uncomfortable by the certainty that the tension had to do with him), but they all treated him well enough. Vector looked relieved to see that he was substantially improved, which would have been more touching to Theron if Vector had clearly not done anything to take care of himself the entire time Theron was in the tank. He still wore the same grime clothes he had been in since they left the cabin, there was blood smeared across his face, and it didn’t take a spy with keen observational skills to see that he was completely exhausted.

One thing at a time, though: shower first, then badger Vector into some basic self-care. Theron
would have invited the Joiner to accompany him in the shower if it weren’t for the fact that there wasn’t enough room for the both of them. Besides, Theron didn’t think he was recovered enough for anything more frisky than some light petting, and Vector looked like he might fall over if he didn’t have a chair supporting him.

Ablutions completed, Theron shut the water off and grasped outside the stall for a towel, finding it hanging on a hook within easy reach. He dried himself off, taking care to avoid putting pressure on his still-tender ribs, but pleased to note the returned feeling and range of motion in his left shoulder. Hopefully the application of kolto meant his shoulder wouldn’t require surgery any time soon, because he was fairly content to continue ignoring that particular problem as long as possible.

Peeking outside the stall, he saw that his filthy, tattered clothes had been taken away and replaced with a shirt and trousers whose plain cut and sober colours did little to hide the fact that both articles of clothing were made from fabric much more expensive than anything he could have afforded on an SIS agent’s salary. He dressed himself quickly, the clean clothing soft against his skin, and finger-combed his hair before stepping outside the ‘fresher.

As expected, all three Joiners were still there, the two women engaged in busy-work while Vector made little effort to disguise the fact that he was guarding Theron from them. He looked up at Theron’s approach, the tired smile not quite making its way up to his all-black eyes.

“You look much improved, Theron,” Vector commented, pushing himself to a standing position with less than his usual grace.

“And you look like shit,” Theron replied bluntly, giving the other man a frankly appraising glance. The skin around the cut on Vector’s forehead was beginning to bruise and he still hadn’t washed most of the blood off his face although Theron could see he had made a token effort to do so. There were deep shadows under his eyes and lines of tension around his mouth, and to Theron it looked as though he could probably knock the other man over with little more than a gentle nudge. “Has Healer looked at your injuries? Have you had anything to eat?”

“We have not,” Healer answered, before Vector could open his mouth to speak. The look she gave Vector was difficult to read, but Theron thought it was disapproving. “The Dawn Herald refused to leave his post.”

“We are waiting to hear back from the Killiks we sent to search for Miranza,” Vector said with a hard glare in the medic’s direction that required no interpretation. “And we did not wish to leave you unattended.”

Dismissing the second half of Vector’s statement, Theron felt a small chill ripple through him at the realization that the Imperial agent was still unaccounted for. Between his head injury and his bouts of unconsciousness Theron had lost all track of time, but he was certain that Miranza should have been back by now. While it was possible she had made the decision to go someplace unexpected – perhaps she hadn’t gone to their rendezvous point at Outpost Bolym, perhaps she had gone to some other Imperial-held territory on Alderaan – Theron knew she should have made the effort to contact him and Vector, if only to update them on her status. That she hadn’t meant something had gone wrong.

“Well, let’s get you looked at.” Theron turned to Flit, putting on his brightest, most charming smile even though he knew flirtation was wasted on the Joiners. “Could you please find something for Vec – ah, the Dawn Herald to eat? And maybe a change of clothes for him as well?”

Before Vector could protest, Flit nodded at Theron and returned the smile, and if he wasn’t mistaken the young Joiner seemed grateful for the opportunity to leave the med centre. She hurried away and Theron turned his charm on Healer, hooking a thumb in Vector’s direction.
“I’m pretty sure the Dawn Herald has a bunch of injuries he’s not telling anyone about,” Theron informed the medic, ignoring Vector’s disgruntled expression. “I don’t know why he’s not saying anything, but I’m guessing the wounds on his back have opened up and I think I remember seeing him take a couple good hits to the torso, so you might wanna look at that.”

Healer tilted her head, giving Vector an assessing look. There was a note of censure in her voice when she said, “We can sense your pain and discomfort, Dawn Herald, but we were not going to press the issue. May we tend to your injuries now, or would you prefer to continue suffering in silence?”

Theron blinked, startled that the medic was able to put that much acidic disapproval in her tone and expression. He had seen enough of the House Cortess Joiners to have been given the impression that they were all essentially placid drones, but Healer very obviously had a personality of her own buried underneath the Killik brainwashing. Maybe that was a remnant of her identity as a physician: in Theron’s experience (and he had a lot of experience in this regard), doctors and medics tended to be an acerbic, outspoken lot, quick to get their hackles up when a patient in their charge attempted to do something foolish.

Vector, for his part, seemed to sense that further protest or refusals would be a lost cause, and he acquiesced to medical treatment with ill grace. As expected, when he stripped out of his stained shirt the terrible wounds on his back and shoulder had reopened and the blood made the fabric stick to his skin; Theron would have helped him to ease it off gently, but Healer very obviously had a personality of her own buried underneath the Killik brainwashing. Maybe that was a remnant of her identity as a physician: in Theron’s experience (and he had a lot of experience in this regard), doctors and medics tended to be an acerbic, outspoken lot, quick to get their hackles up when a patient in their charge attempted to do something foolish.

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“How are you still standing?” he asked, shaking his head. He hurt just looking at all the damage.

“We are Dawn Herald,” Vector replied simply, as if that explained everything. Perhaps to him it did.

“Even the Night Herald has limits,” Healer said blandly, picking up the med-scanner. “Do not be so quick to see your Song ended, Dawn Herald.”

Once again Vector opened his mouth to protest only to shut his lips firmly, an unaccustomed scowl on his handsome face. Healer worked in silence, although Theron suspected she was able to communicate with Vector through unspoken means: occasionally he would turn or lift an arm without her giving him instruction to do so, and it was clear he was responding to some silent command. Theron wondered if speech was uncommon among the Killiks, and if the insectoid species and their humanoid Joiners spent their days and nights in silence, the pheromonic bond between them removing all need for verbal communication. He was curious about what it would be like, for all that he had no desire to experience it first-hand himself. Before knowing Vector he would have considered the Killiks and everything about them to be incredibly creepy, but having had a chance to get to know Vector better he was more prepared to accept them as simply different - although the Joiners and the brainwashing involved in their Joining continued to make him intensely uneasy.

Healer had only just begun to apply kolto gel to the reopened wounds on Vector’s back when both she and Vector stiffened, their heads cocking to the side simultaneously as if both were listening to some internal voice Theron couldn’t hear. Healer’s expression shifted from professional detachment
to anger and concern, but Vector’s response was far more pronounced: he gave a small, anguished
cry and sank to the floor as his knees gave way.

Startled, Theron went to a crouch before the other man, certain that Vector was on the verge of
collapse. The Joiner looked up at him, rage and terror fighting for dominance on his handsome
features.

“What is it?” Theron asked, although he suspected he already knew. “What’s happened?”

“The Killiks the Dawn Herald sent to investigate his mate’s absence have reported in,” answered
Healer, leaning down to catch Vector’s arm as if to pull him back to his feet.

Vector shrugged her off, meeting Theron’s gaze.

“Our wife was taken by servants of House Ulgo,” he said, voice thick with fury. “They are torturing
her.” Then, with great conviction: “We will find them and we will destroy them.”

O o O o O

Miranza sat shivering and clinging to the tenuous threads of consciousness, pain and panic
threatening to overwhelm her. Alric had stepped out of the refrigerated storage unit a few minutes
ago in order to attend to affairs of state, giving her a brief reprieve in which to take stock of her
injuries and her surroundings.

She was in rather a significant amount of pain, but with the exception of her right hand the bulk of
her injuries were superficial at most. Alric had used a pair of shears to cut away her clothing in order
to expose more flesh for him to abuse, and so she sat freezing in nothing more than a bra and panties,
her wrists and ankles still bound tightly to the arms and legs of the cold metal chair. He had made
sharp little cuts all over her body – her arms, her legs, even over her stomach and the parts of her
upper back that he could reach – and while the tiny wounds were definitely painful they were
shallow and he had avoided tearing into anything important. Assuming she received medical care in
a reasonable amount of time they likely wouldn’t even scar. Her hand, however …

Her right hand was a ruin, skin flayed and torn, the fine bones snapped and crushed by the repeated
application of Alric’s hammer. Looking at it was enough to leave her queasy and faint, but even
without looking she could feel an agonizing ache that ebbed and flowed to the too-rapid beating of
her heart, and her thumb and index finger twitched and spasmed with every misfire of her damaged
nerves, each movement enough to send fire racing through her body. She was terrified that her hand
was damaged beyond repair and what that meant for her future.

Of course, that was even assuming she had a future. Alric clearly had no intentions of letting her go
any time soon, and that was to say nothing of what Amrielle had planned for her. She couldn’t
imagine that either one of them intended to set her free.

She hadn’t broken, though. She had torn through her lip trying to keep her mouth shut and was
ashamed at how quickly she had given in to screaming, but she hadn’t whispered a word about
Theron or his possible whereabouts, nor had she answered any of the other questions Alric had
finally gotten around to asking her. While his main focus did seem to be on causing her as much pain
as possible, he was apparently concerned about what had led to her being in the underground
compound, and he had begun to ask her about who her employers were and what she was doing
there. The questions were rote, his interest in her responses vague at best – it was simply that her
failure to respond gave him an excuse to hurt her more, and Alric didn’t need much provocation for
that.
When he wasn’t asking questions, he was telling her about his absent sister, and it was clear to her that Alric’s anguish over Thalia Ulgo’s Joining had cast a golden sheen over his memories of her. Alric had elevated Thalia to near-sainthood, deliberately forgetting any negative qualities she might have had in favour of remembering her as perfect: a dutiful daughter to House Ulgo, a beloved sister to him, a friend to everyone and a truly shining example of humanity’s best. While Miranza had no doubt that Thalia had been a perfectly delightful young woman, Alric’s earlier explanation – that Thalia had been taken after having run away from her home in order to be with her star-crossed lover – painted a picture of a willful, stubborn girl who had gone against her parents’ wishes to follow her heart. The real Thalia Ulgo had likely been quite charming, but the Thalia of Alric’s remembering was practically an angel.

If Alric Ulgo hadn’t been so intent upon carving Miranza into bite-sized bits and pieces she might have felt sympathetic towards him. As it was she was mostly just imagining herself seizing the scalpel from his hand and stabbing it through his left eyeball.

The sound of heels clicking on duracrete distracted Miranza from her dire thoughts, and she looked up, surprised to see Amrielle entering the storage unit. The Nautolan hadn’t shown her face since she and Alric had arrived at the tail-end of Miranza’s interrogation in the Ulgo compound, and Miranza had assumed she was working elsewhere, doing whatever it was that she did for the remnants of the Star Cabal. But now she had returned, clad once again in another tasteful, perfectly-fitted business suit – this one a shade of slate-grey that complemented her light green skin beautifully – and making a small moue of distaste upon seeing Miranza. She was alone, and Miranza couldn’t decide if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

“‘I see Alric has been enjoying himself with you,’” Amrielle said, her black eyes raking over Miranza with studied indifference. Her gaze lingered on Miranza’s ruined hand, her lips pressing tightly together. She gave herself a little shake, then raised one of her hands, revealing a small syringe that had been tucked inside the curl of her fingers.

“You have a very unpleasant future ahead of you,” the Nautolan continued, eerily echoing Miranza’s earlier thoughts. “Alric has plans for you, and although I hate to be the one to spoil the surprise, I think you already know those plans won’t be anything you will enjoy.”

She came closer, lightly tapping the syringe against her thigh. Miranza found herself focusing on the syringe, on the golden-brown liquid that slithered along inside the transparisteel cartridge.

“I think we both know you’re not going to break,” said Amrielle. “Imperial Intelligence trains its assets way too well, and you’re a top-tier operative – for all of Alric’s training and pride in his work, he never even graduated from the academy. He’s not in your league, and you and I both know it. Unfortunately for you, I think Alric has figured that out on his own, and he’s decided to move on to the next stage of his revenge against you.”

“Does the next stage involve talking me to death?” Miranza rasped out, horrified at how weak her voice sounded. Her throat and mouth were dry and hoarse from screaming, and she was desperately thirsty. She hadn’t had anything to drink since the first and only glass of water Alric had given her, and that felt like ages ago.

Amrielle let out a delighted little laugh, covering her mouth with her free hand.

“Oh, no, I think you’ll find Alric’s sense of justice is much more poetic than that,” she admitted, lowering her hand again. The syringe tapped against her thigh a few more times, the contents oozing back and forth. “No, you see, you made his sister into a slave, so he’s decided to do you the same courtesy.”
“How so? By selling me to the Hutts?” Miranza didn’t fancy that notion in the slightest, but she thought she could work with that. Slavery was legal in the Empire, so it was entirely possible that if Alric sold her to the Hutts as a slave her new owner would take her to Imperial territory. At the very least chances were good whoever purchased her would have no concept of what she was capable of, and once they let their guard down she would be able to escape. She wasn’t some uneducated Twi’lek stolen directly off of Ryloth, she was a highly skilled Imperial citizen – she wouldn’t be imprisoned for long.

But Amrielle’s next words dashed Miranza’s faint hopes immediately.

“Eventually, perhaps,” she said, tilting her head to one side, the beads on her head-tresses clicking together over one shoulder. “First, though, there’s this.” She held up the syringe. “This is spice. It’s a rather higher concentration than most first-time users get, but I think that’s the point. Once you’re hooked on it – which shouldn’t take long, given the potency – he figures you’ll be much more malleable. He’ll keep you around for a little while so that he can play with you – you’re good practice for his interrogation skills, even if you’re not going to tell him anything – and he’s got all those bored mercenaries to entertain, and you’re so pretty … I’m sure you’ve noticed how he hasn’t marked your face?” Miranza had noticed; although Alric’s thugs had been pretty generous with the slaps and punches to the face, Alric himself had been very careful to restrict himself to damaging the rest of her body instead. “Ugly slaves don’t sell for as much, and I imagine a whore with Intelligence training would fetch a pretty price.”

Miranza’s heart – already too loud and too fast – picked up pace in her chest, the blood rushing in her ears. She wasn’t sure which part of Alric’s plan frightened her more: his intentions to turn her into some kind of spice-junkie, or that he meant to hand her over to his thugs to play with. Both prospects were equally terrifying. She had been exposed to various forms of spice as part of her training – she had needed to learn to recognize the effects of the drug on her body and mind, and how to combat those effects whenever possible – but had wisely steered clear of narcotics whenever possible. And after all the time she had spent with Samar she would have thought herself somewhat inured to the threat of rape, but even just the implications that that was what Alric's thugs would do to her was enough to make her break out in a cold sweat. Amrielle, curse her black heart, saw her reaction right away – and she smiled.

“So, here’s the deal, little spy,” she purred, stroking her fingernails over Miranza’s face. “All I want to know is where I can find Theron Shan. Tell me that, and I can end this for you.”

“You’d let me go?” Miranza asked her, disbelieving.

“Oh, no.” Amrielle laughed again. “No, of course not. Even if it didn’t concern me that you would continue to interfere with our plans once you were freed, I still couldn’t make Alric agree to set you free. He’s pretty committed to his revenge scheme. No, I won’t be letting you go. But I can kill you, quickly and painlessly, and all of this” she motioned to the syringe, to Miranza’s ruined hand, to the storage unit around them “will stop. That’s really the best you can hope for at this point, little spy.”

Miranza couldn’t help herself – she gave the idea some thought. She was so tired and in so much pain, and if Amrielle was telling the truth about Alric’s plans then there was nothing but misery and degradation in her future. She knew that if Theron were there with her, he would have encouraged her to do whatever she could to spare herself from more suffering; if anything, the SIS agent wouldn’t consider himself worth all this pain and misery.

Stars, he was such an idiot sometimes.

Miranza forced herself to meet Amrielle’s gaze, and the spark of triumph that lit the Nautolan’s face was quickly extinguished by the spy’s next words.
“Go fuck yourself.”

Amrielle scowled, then reached out and curled her fingers around Miranza’s damaged hand, squeezing tightly until Miranza screamed. The pain was blinding and Miranza felt herself starting to black out just as Amrielle jabbed the needle into the soft skin inside Miranza’s right elbow, that tiny pierce so minuscule as to be almost completely blotted out by the far greater agony radiating from her mangled hand. Then Amrielle depressed the plunger, injecting the spice into Miranza’s veins, and she was almost immediately suffused with a delicious warmth that seemed to ripple and flow throughout her body, easing every single ache and pain and even making her forget how much her hand hurt. Or that she even had hands in the first place ...

The Nautolan withdrew the needle and straightened, backing away from Miranza. Her expression was hard, her eyes cold as she turned and headed for the exit.

“She’s all yours,” Amrielle said, speaking over her shoulder at the five armour-clad men who filed in through the doors.

Even the warmth of the spice flowing through Miranza’s veins wasn’t enough to shake off the sudden chill that struck her as she found herself at the mercy of Alric’s thugs.
Never had the phrase “the hive was abuzz with activity” felt more apt than when the Oroboro-Cortess Killiks discovered that their Dawn Herald’s mate had been captured. Seconds after Vector provided his rough, anguished explanation of what had happened the Killiks burst into a flurry of motion, and Theron swiftly found himself essentially ignored as Vector rushed to meet with the scouts who had located Miranza and plan their next course of action. Before he left, however, Vector promised Theron – with the grim determination that came from a man filled with a tremendous amount of fury and worry – that he would ensure that the Killiks would no longer try to assimilate the SIS agent into their nest.

Left to his own devices, at Healer’s suggestion Theron spent some more time in the kolto tank. He would have preferred to have gone with Vector and involve himself in the strategizing that was no doubt taking place, but the Killiks and Joiners conversed through a combination of pheromones, body language, sub-vocal communication and some kind of telepathic connection, and there was no one free to translate for him. The worst of his injuries had been healed already, but if there was even the slightest chance that he was going to be seeing battle in the near-future – and if there was to be a rescue operation to free Miranza then Theron was determined to be a part of it – he wanted to be back in fighting form. Healer helped him back into the tank and set it to run automatically before leaving to join the other Killiks and Joiners.

The tank cycled off at the pre-determined time, the kolto draining out into the purification and storage system attached, and Theron was released. He helped himself to another shower before re-dressing in the shirt and trousers he had been wearing before. Someone – most likely Flit – had left a tray of food on one of the counters, and Theron helped himself to nerf-steak, mashed tubers and mixed vegetables cooked in a delicious yet unfamiliar sauce. This time around there was no glass of milky-white membroisia, but rather an insulated canister filled with (perfectly mundane) hot tea and a pitcher of ice water. He didn’t know what Vector had done, but for the moment it seemed like the Dawn Herald had lived up to his promise of keeping the Killiks at bay.

It was strange for Theron to realize that so far as the Killiks were concerned, Miranza’s identity was completely wrapped up in her relationship to Vector. He saw the two of them as connected but separate, two clearly distinct individuals who nonetheless chose to be joined through bonds of love and affection, and who were capable of functioning both independently or as a unit. To the Killiks, however, Miranza’s worth as an individual was defined solely by her status as the Dawn Herald’s mate; she was useful and valued, but had she not been Vector’s wife she would only have been of interest had she been more traditionally Joined to the nest. The Killiks did not care that Miranza Gerrick, former Imperial agent and current freelance operative, had been captured. Miranza Gerrick held no value to them – but the mate of the Dawn Herald was of utmost importance, and the fact that she had been taken while operating in the interests of the nest made her capture all the more distressing. It was an odd way of thinking, to see a person only in the context of the greater whole to which they belonged, and yet he knew the Killiks found him odd because he thought in terms of the individual.

He wondered how Vector saw things.

Several hours had passed between the discovery of Miranza’s capture and Theron’s release from the
kolto tank and subsequent shower and meal, and by the time he was done attending to his own needs
the flurry of activity had settled down considerably. Bored and anxious and wanting to know what
the plans were, Theron set off in search of Vector, and to aid him in his search he stopped the first
Joiner he saw – a large man in the livery of a House Cortess guard – to ask if the man knew where
he was. The guard paused, closing his eyes, and was silent for a few seconds before intoning that the
Dawn Herald was at the nearby cantina.

The cantina was easy enough to find, situated as it was in a fairly central location within the Cortess
estates. It was a finer establishment than most of the watering holes Theron tended to frequent, but it
was clear the place no longer saw much use – the Killiks and Joiners had little need for the typical
drinking and socializing common to other humanoid species – and although effort was made to keep
the cantina clean Theron had the sense that the shelves of liquor behind the bar hadn’t been touched
since House Cortess had been absorbed by the Oroboro nest.

Vector was seated alone in a private booth towards the back of the cantina, as far away from the
entrance as he could possibly be. He didn’t look up as Theron approached him, but Theron had the
sense that the other man was aware of his presence. There was a bottle of top-shelf whiskey in front
of him – apparently Vector shared his wife’s taste in alcohol – and his hands were curled around a
glass tumbler. Theron was rather forcibly reminded of how, only days ago, he had come upon
Miranza in much the same state – and under somewhat similar circumstances: alone, drinking and
worrying about her spouse.

Theron cleared his throat. “Mind if I join you?”

“Apologies, Agent Shan,” Vector said quietly, not looking up from his glass, “but we are not
particularly good company at present.”

Vector hadn’t said no, however, so Theron helped himself to a tumbler of his own before sliding into
the booth across from the Joiner. After a moment’s hesitation Vector pushed the bottle towards him
and Theron poured himself a healthy measure of whiskey, taking a few seconds to appreciate the
way the dark amber liquid swirled around in his glass before taking a sip. Top-shelf indeed: back on
Coruscant he wouldn’t have been able to afford the stuff, not on an agent’s salary. It must be nice,
being rich.

Sitting in silence, Theron allowed himself the opportunity to look the other man over. At some point
between racing out of the med centre and making his way to the cantina Vector had finally had his
injuries attended to, and the cut on his forehead was little more than a soft pink scar that would no
doubt be completely gone in a matter of days. He had showered and changed into a button-down
shirt, and his hair hung damp and slightly mussed from what looked like repeated instances of him
running his fingers through the dark, wet strands. Physically he seemed much improved, but Theron
didn’t need to be Force-sensitive to feel the fear and anger radiating off of him.

“We have sent the fingerlings out in search of her,” Vector said. He sounded remarkably lucid in
spite of the fact that he had obviously been drinking for some time – the bottle was more than half-
empty, and given that the stock in the cantina didn’t appear to see much use Theron didn’t imagine
the Joiner would have helped himself to an already-opened bottle. Theron wondered if the other
man’s enhanced physiology provided him with a bit of additional resistance to intoxication, but he
didn’t think it could be a complete immunity, since it was fairly clear to him that Vector was drinking
for the express purpose of getting drunk. Top-shelf whiskey or no, no one sat drinking alone in a
deserted cantina just because they liked the taste.

Vector had explained – briefly and haltingly – that the scouts had reported that they had not located
Miranza herself, but rather had discovered traces of her in the Ulgo compound and had discerned that
she was no longer in that location. At the time Theron had been afraid to ask what those “traces” were; it was enough to know that Vector could tell Miranza was being tortured, and that gave Theron’s anxious imagination entirely too much to work with, even without being given the details. Now, however, Theron thought he might be ready to hear what the Killiks had uncovered, and he suspected Vector might actually be drunk enough to tell him.

“She wasn’t in the compound anymore,” Theron said, after taking another fortifying sip of whiskey. “How did you know she was being … hurt?” He couldn’t bring himself to say ‘tortured,’ even though that had been precisely the word Vector had used and Vector, diplomat that he was, tended to exceedingly careful in his choice of words. ‘Torture’ conjured up all sorts of unpleasant memories of his time with Samar, and if he let himself think on that too much he was afraid he would lose himself entirely to the fear and panic that were threatening to bubble to the surface.

“The boon of being Joined to the Hive,” Vector said slowly, his tone dull, “is that we do not require words or speech to communicate. We speak through thoughts and emotions, and we share memories. The Killiks who found her …” He hesitated, his grip on the glass tightening until his knuckles were white – and Theron noticed then that the knuckles of Vector’s right hand were bruised and bloodied, as if he’d been in a fight recently. He fought down the urge to ask. Vector tried again: “The Killiks who found traces of her did not see her present, but they could … smell her, there in the compound. She smelled of terror … and pain.”

“She could have just been hurt when she was taken,” Theron suggested, as if that were somehow better. Compared to the deliberate pain and suffering of torture, he supposed it was better, if only marginally so.

Vector shook his head, running one hand through his hair, messing it up further. It was strange to see him so unkempt and haggard; Vector was normally one of the most elegant and dignified people Theron had ever met. Unflappable sprang to mind - but right now, Vector was most definitely ... flapped.

“The Killiks reported finding her scent in a holding facility within the compound. There were others there, and those others smelled of anger and excitement.” Vector looked up then, and the anguish on his face was heartbreaking. “The Killiks shared this with us. We saw what they saw, smelled what they smelled. We did not learn of this second-hand, as one might speak the words to another; we tasted their memories, and know what they know.”

Theron considered Vector’s words and felt a dull sense of horror settle over him. Vector hadn’t just been told that his wife was being tortured: he had had the proof of it dumped, complete and uncensored, directly into his mind. It was bad enough to hear about it; Theron couldn’t even imagine what it would feel like to be able to remember the smell of a loved one’s fear and suffering, and have those memories be his own. Unthinking, he reached across the booth and grabbed Vector’s hand in his own, curling his fingers around the other man’s.

“We are going to find her,” he said, putting as much conviction into his voice as he possibly could. “We are going to get her out of there.”

Giving him a bleak smile, Vector squeezed his hand and tossed off the remainder of his drink before pouring himself another. He and Theron fell into silence again, holding hands across the table. Theron thought it should feel strange and embarrassing to be clutching hands with another man, but instead it felt perfectly natural, Vector’s long-fingered hand grasped in his own, the callouses from his electrostaff rough against Theron’s palm. Vector’s hand was dry and warm, and Theron couldn’t tell if his body temperature was slightly elevated due to his drinking, or if he just naturally ran hot. He remembered noticing it before, however, when Vector and he had kissed, and those memories
made his cheeks flush with something that was definitely not embarrassment.

“You … uh … You never did say how you convinced the Killiks to leave me alone,” he offered, after clearing his throat again awkwardly.

Vector blinked, startled, and glanced away. Theron was surprised to see the Joiner’s face redden slightly.

“We impressed upon them that you are ours,” he said, after a moment’s hesitation. He seemed somewhat embarrassed. “That you … ah … do not need to be Joined to the Hive because you are already … connected … through us. In … much the same way that Miranza is.” For a moment his expression darkened as he considered his wife, then it was Vector’s turn to clear his throat before he clarified, “For all intents and purposes, as far as the Killiks are concerned you are … our mate.”

Theron choked on his whiskey, coughing as his blushing intensified a thousand-fold. To buy himself time to recover he gulped down the rest of his drink and quickly refilled his glass, taking a few more rapid sips.

“We apologize for making you uncomfortable,” Vector said diffidently. “The Killiks do not understand the need for individuality, and it was the only way to ensure your safety. By our statement, we made it clear that you have … reason … to support the Nest, without forcing you to become part of the Nest. You should be afforded the same freedoms and considerations that Miranza is given.”

“Because I’m your … mate.” The word felt strange on his tongue, all the more so because Theron knew Vector didn’t mean it in the sense that the two of them were good friends and buddies. Vector meant mate as in mates – spouses, partners, husbands. Holy kriffering hell.

“We apologize for overstepping our bounds, Agent Shan.”

“Theron.” The correction came automatically, along with the reassurances. “And no, it’s fine. I appreciate what you’re doing. What you’re … trying to do. To protect me.” Stars help him, why couldn’t he get his cheeks to stop burning? Theron wasn’t some awkward teenage boy, caught up in his first clumsy attempts at flirtation – he was a grown man and for kriffer’s sake Vector was hardly the first man he’d ever been attracted to or flirted with. Maybe he wasn’t the most suave person in the galaxy, but he was generally better than this.

“We admit that we are not entirely motivated by altruism, Theron,” Vector replied, a sardonic note in his voice. “We much prefer you as you are – an individual, separate from the Nest – and have little desire in bedding a Joiner version of you.”

“But you do … ah … desire me? Um, bedding me, I mean?”

The look Vector gave him was two-parts Don’t be an imbecile, Theron and one-part heated, and as Theron stared back at him that one-third that was blatant, full-fledged desire shifted rather dramatically to the forefront. Before Theron knew it the Joiner had closed the space between them and was pressing him back into the plush seat of the booth, mouth crushing against his. Vector’s passion was unexpected but decidedly not unwelcome, and Theron found himself pulling the other man in closer, his fingers twisting in the soft fabric of Vector’s shirt.

Theron could taste the whiskey on Vector’s lips, mixed in with an urgency and need he’d never before sensed in the other man. Vector’s hands twined through his hair, pulling Theron’s head in close as he pressed in tight against him, the Joiner’s body warm and lean against Theron’s. Between the alcohol and the fact that it seemed like all of his blood had recirculated to either his cheeks or his
Theron was feeling lightheaded and giddy, and he let his hands do what he’d been aching to do from the moment he first set eyes on Vector, running his fingers up under the Joiner’s shirt, over the smooth planes of muscle he had been dying to touch for months now. Vector groaned into his mouth when Theron brushed his fingertips over the other man’s nipples, feeling them tighten under his touch. The Joiner nibbled at his lips as his fingers twisted in his hair and it was Theron’s turn to groan when Vector yanked Theron’s head to one side so that he could kiss and lick his throat.

Theron fumbled with the buttons of Vector’s shirt, his hands made clumsy by the heady sense of desire that was thrumming through him. Impatient, he gave the fabric a harsh yank and was rewarded by the soft huff of satisfaction that Vector made against his throat as the shirt fell open at last, and then he was free to run his hands over the other man’s muscular torso while Vector continued to run his lips over his neck and jaw. He let out a gasp when Vector’s hand slid between them, slipping under the waist of Theron’s pants to curl warm, solid fingers around Theron’s cock. Torn between desire and responsibility Theron pulled back slightly even as his hips bucked up to meet Vector’s hand.

“You’re drunk,” he managed to gasp out, suppressing another groan as clever fingers stroked along his length. “And so far as I know I’m still conditioned.”

“We are not drunk,” Vector retorted, nipping the underside of Theron’s jaw. But he drew back, hand going still on Theron’s cock, his fathomless eyes searching the other man’s face. “Do you want this?”

“Fuck yes,” Theron hissed, grinding himself against Vector’s hand. “I’ve wanted you since – kriff! – fucking Rishi, you’re the one who keeps stopping us, I –“ he hissed again when Vector’s hand tightened and resumed its movements “I just don’t want to take advantage of – fuck! – you when you’re drunk and hurting and –”

Vector pulled back, and when his hand went still again Theron couldn’t stop the needy whine that escaped his lips. “Theron, we want you very much, but if you want us to stop we will. It has to be your choice.”

Stopping was literally the last thing Theron wanted, so by way of demonstrating his very enthusiastic consent he grabbed Vector’s face in both hands and pushed the other man back, shoving him up against the opposite side of the booth. He kissed Vector hard on the lips before letting his mouth move downwards, smiling at the Joiner’s strangled gasp when he took Vector’s nipple between his teeth and gave it a gentle nip. He caught hold of Vector’s trousers, giving a rough yank just as Vector lifted his hips to help him along, and then Theron was mouthing Vector’s cock through the thin fabric of his briefs. Then Theron had Vector’s cock free of his briefs and he had a brief moment to think maybe he was a little bit drunk himself if he was willing to go down on someone in a kriffing cantina of all places (but surely Vector would know if someone were coming? a helpful little voice voice in the back of Theron’s mind whispered and he found himself agreeing wholeheartedly with that voice) before he was taking the other man in as far as his mouth could allow.

Fuck, it felt like an eternity since the last time Theron had done this completely of his own accord, and the fact that it was his choice and it was with Vector just made it all the better. The sounds escaping Vector’s mouth as Theron bobbed his head up and down over his cock were incredibly rewarding, and Theron slid his hands up to stroke in rhythm to his own mouth’s movements just to hear what other noises the Joiner might make. Vector’s hands tangled in Theron’s hair and his hips bucked upwards – not enough to make Theron gag, but as if it was a completely unconscious action on the Joiner’s part, and Theron fought the urge to grin around the other man’s cock.

“Theron – we – stars!” Vector exclaimed, fingers tightening in the spiky brown strands of Theron’s
hair as his hips gave an erratic jerk. He made a move as if to push Theron away, the instinctive clenching of his buttocks further indication that he was seconds away from coming, and then Theron relaxed his throat as much as he could to take the Joiner in all the way. Vector gasped again and the pull on Theron’s hair was almost too tight and when Theron made a small hum of desire at the borderline painful-pleasurable sensation he heard Vector cry out just as his hips bucked and warmth spilled into his mouth and down his throat. Theron held him in place until the last shudders wracked his body, then pulled away with a smack of his lips as he swallowed and smiled up at the other man.

Vector grabbed Theron by the front of his shirt and hauled him up off his knees, drawing him up into another heated kiss, tongue sliding into Theron’s mouth to taste himself. Theron felt the Joiner’s hand snake inside his pants and it was his turn to gasp when those talented fingers wrapped around his cock once more.

“Stars, Vector,” Theron moaned around Vector’s mouth, grinding his hips against the Joiner’s hand. “Vector, fuck …”

He felt Vector smirk against his lips before the Joiner murmured, “Yes, Theron, that’s what we’re doing …” and Theron couldn’t think of a rejoinder before Vector gave his wrist a proficient twist that forced a lengthy moan from Theron’s mouth.

“Make that sound again,” Vector murmured, his voice a breathy rumble against the skin of Theron’s throat. His hand twisted around Theron’s cock again and Theron found himself only too eager to comply, his moans growing in frequency and pitch as Vector worked him. Vector kissed him again, nimble tongue slipping inside Theron’s mouth just as his free hand grasped the hard curve of Theron’s ass and pulled him in closer. Then the Joiner gave Theron another quick, hard tug and Theron’s knees were buckling, his vision going white as he came, erupting over Vector’s hand while the Joiner’s mouth swallowed his cries of pleasure.

They broke apart gasping, both collapsing on opposite sides of the booth. Theron put his hand on his chest, feeling his heart racing beneath his fingertips, and looked over to see Vector slowly and deliberately licking his hand clean. The sight was nearly enough to make him hard all over again and Theron groaned helplessly.

“Sweet kripping fuck,” Theron managed to huff out, closing his eyes.

“You have a filthy, filthy mouth,” Vector replied, the satisfaction in his voice making the statement sound all the dirtier. Theron heard him moving and opened his eyes again in time to see the other man shifting forward, towards him. Vector kissed him again, smiling against his lips, then settled back against the cushioned backing of the booth. “That was … that was incredible.”

Flushing with embarrassed pride Theron ran one hand through his mussy hair and lifted his shoulders in a half-shrug. “Just trying to find some way to distract you, I guess.”

Still smiling – although Theron could detect traces of fear and worry beginning to return to the other man’s expression – Vector refilled both their glasses, then lifted his own in a mock-toast.

“To distractions,” the Joiner said, voice soft.

“To distractions.” Theron returned the toast, swallowing the shot of whiskey in a single gulp. “May there be many more.”

Vector’s answering delighted chuckle was all the affirmation Theron needed.
I'm not gonna lie, I had originally intended for Theron to stop them before they went this far. He's a little drunk, Vector's a little drunk, Theron is still most definitely brainwashed, and both of them are very cognizant of their missing third. I guess the two of them were tired of waiting, though, 'cause this chapter pretty much wrote itself.

Also - and I don't know why - I absolutely love it every time there's a "fuck!" "that's what we're doing/trying to do!" moment in a sexytimes scene. It seems to be a reoccurring gag (I can think of at least four different fanfics I've read where this happens) and for whatever reason it is never going to get old for me.

And thus ends my first attempt at M/M smut.
Messing around in the cantina seemed to have done little to cool the ardour between Theron and Vector, and before long they were hurrying across the courtyard of the Cortess estates, stumbling over and into each other in their haste to get to the private suite of rooms Vector had been granted as the Dawn Herald. (Theron had no idea if he had rooms of his own, or if he was expected to share with Vector. Given Vector's story that the Killiks now considered him to be his ... mate ... Theron suspected it would be the latter, and he was surprisingly fine with that.)

Night had fallen quite some time ago and the courtyard was lit by ornate streetlamps that cast a soft golden glow over everything. That glow was helped along rather substantially by the combination of desire and alcohol that permeated Theron’s body, and for the time being all of his worries and stresses were put on hold in favour of the willing distraction Vector provided. That they were distracting one another was obvious enough to both of them, but there was no sense in sitting around worrying and until the fingerlings – whatever those were; Theron had forgotten to ask – reported back there was very little either of them could do besides wait.

All of Theron’s lingering shyness and uncertainty seemed to have been stripped away, replaced with the conviction that he knew what he wanted – and what he wanted was Vector. The Joiner had made no more mention of his reservations regarding Theron’s conditioning, choosing instead to take Theron at his word when the SIS agent expressed his consent, and although both of them were rather pleasantly buzzed neither one was drunk enough for intoxication to be a concern. Inhibitions were lowered, yes, but only enough to relax them both.

Alone in a narrow hallway Theron didn’t recognize – although all Alderaanian architecture seemed the same, and one hallway looked much like any other in his estimation – he pushed Vector up against the wall, pressing his lips to the other man’s in a hungry, open-mouthed kiss that left them both breathless and panting. Vector swiftly turned the tables, using his grip on Theron’s hips to spin the agent around so that it was Theron’s back against the wall and Vector’s mouth nuzzling along his jaw and throat. Theron’s hand slipped in between them, slithering under the waist of Vector’s pants to brush his fingers over the Joiner’s hardening cock, eliciting a low growl from Vector’s lip.

“Bedroom,” Vector hissed, between kisses, “Now.”

The bedroom door fell open when they stumbled into it, Vector kicking it closed behind them as they made their way towards the bed. Vector’s shirt – still unbuttoned from their earlier forays in the cantina – fluttered to the floor in a rumpled heap, swiftly followed by Theron’s although he couldn’t for the life of him remember whether it was him or Vector who finally yanked it off his body. Mouths and hands were everywhere as they twined around each other, and it was Vector who tugged impatiently at the buttons on Theron’s pants before finally tearing them open as if ripping into the wrapping on his Life Day present. Theron’s pants were halfway down his hips when Vector sank to his knees in front of him, taking Theron’s cock in his wet, warm mouth. Theron had to drop his hands onto Vector’s head, tangling his fingers in the other man’s still-damp hair, to prevent...
himself from falling over as his knees buckled. He was torn between closing his eyes to savour the sensation or keep them open to enjoy the view. In the end he kept his eyes open, and when Vector looked up at him with his eyes as black as the spaces between the stars Theron’s knees went weak all over again.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” Theron blurted out, unable to help himself. It wasn’t just the sight of his cock disappearing between Vector’s lips – although fuck, yes, that was amazing – but the lean lines of his face, the elegant arch of his dark eyebrows, the high plane of his forehead … gorgeous was the only word for him.

Vector released Theron’s cock from his mouth with an audible pop, his lips curving upwards in a wicked smile that promised all sorts of unfathomable delights. He stood slowly, hands gliding up Theron’s body before twining around the agent’s neck, his fingers sinking into Theron’s hair. Theron gasped when the other man gave his hair a sharp tug, twisting his head to one side to expose his neck.

“You really do have the filthiest mouth,” the Joiner murmured before crushing his lips against Theron’s.

The kiss alone took Theron’s breath away, and then Vector was pressing his body against his, pushing him backwards until his legs bumped up against the bed. He sank down, pulling Vector down with him, mouths locked together as hands continued to roam. Vector rose up to his knees over Theron, one hand unbuttoning his own pants as the other made its way back to Theron’s cock, fingers curling around the hard length. There was a bit of awkward shuffling as Vector shucked his pants off one-handed, and then Vector was naked and straddling Theron, bending forward to run his lips and tongue along the smooth, tanned column of Theron’s throat. Vector shifted, adjusting his weight, and Theron looked up to see the other man leaning over him.

Sudden terror coursed through Theron as he felt Vector’s weight pushing him into the mattress and he cried out – not in ecstasy, but in blind panic, frantically shoving the other man away. He struggled to breathe, feeling as though an immense pressure was on his chest, and dark spots suddenly danced before his eyes.

“Theron?” Vector’s voice, filled with concern, came as if from a great distance away. The Joiner had pulled back the instant he sensed Theron’s fear, shifting to sit beside Theron, carefully not touching him.

“I can’t breathe,” Theron gasped, heart thundering in his ears, the terrible weight pressing harder and harder on his chest, choking off his breath.

Strong hands urged him into a sitting position and then forward, his head between his knees. Dimly he could hear Vector speaking to him, voice calm and soothing; the Joiner pulled his hands away the moment Theron was sat forward.

“You are having a panic attack, Theron,” Vector said, in that incredibly calm, patient voice. “Just try to breathe with us – in, yes, like that, now out, slowly …”

Terror still thrumming through him, Theron let himself take in the sound of Vector’s voice, soft and deep and pleasant. It was a struggle to follow the Joiner’s instructions but he did his best, inhaling a shaky, shuddering breath and holding it, then slowly letting it out. His heart seemed painfully loud – too fast, so fast and hard it felt like it should be bursting out of his chest – and his hands, fallen between his knees, were shaking.

“You are safe, Theron,” Vector continued. “Breathe. It is all right. You are all right.”
Finally, Theron forced his breaths to come in slowly and evenly, his heartbeat slowing. His vision cleared, the spots disappearing, and he felt himself coming back to his surroundings. As he did, the weight of what had just happened came crushing down upon him, and he buried his face in his hands, shame and embarrassment coursing through his body.

Fuck. Theron ran his hands over his face, through his hair, until he was digging the tips of his fingers into the back of his head so hard that it hurt, and that slight amount of pain felt good. Not in the way that pulling his hair or biting his skin felt good during sex, but more like how it felt good to push down on an aching tooth. He wanted to scream. He wanted to punch something – someone. He wanted to cry, to rage, to break down completely. Most of all he wanted the floor to open up and swallow him whole.

“Theron?” A hand, warm and dry, brushed his bare shoulder gently, strong fingers pressing lightly, reassuringly. He resisted the urge to shrug the hand away, embarrassed at how childish and insecure he felt. Belatedly he realized that Vector was gripping the shoulder he had dislocated, and that it didn’t hurt even a little bit.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Theron mumbled, hating how childish it sounded.

“You had a panic attack, Theron. There is nothing to be ashamed about.”

Anger curled up in him, hot and violent, and it felt better than the shame and humiliation so he let it find purchase inside him. “Stop being so fucking nice to me!”

Vector drew in a startled breath, but didn’t withdraw his hand. Instead he gave Theron’s shoulder a squeeze, asking quietly, “Why? Do you feel you don’t deserve it?”

Theron fought back an angry scream, and this time he did shrug the hand away. Vector made no move to touch him again, simply sat beside him calmly, observing him. The other man’s unflagging patience tugged at something inside Theron, reaching past his anger and embarrassment, and he sagged his shoulders, feeling the hot rage ebbing.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last, the words coming out in a hoarse rasp. “I hate how fucked up I am.”

Vector made a sound that fell somewhere between a huff of disapproval and a sigh of comprehension, and once again his hand clasped Theron’s shoulder.

“Theron,” he said, in a tone that brooked no disagreement, “you have been kidnapped, held against your will, brainwashed, tortured, and violently and repeatedly raped by a man who had complete control over your every move. You are allowed to feel that way.”

The stark, no-nonsense way he spoke caught Theron off-guard, as did the expletive – Theron didn’t think he had ever use the man say anything more vulgar than ‘damn’ or ‘bloody hell.’ But more than that, however, was the very precise choice of words: Vector was not saying that Theron was fucked up, but rather, that he was allowed to feel that way. The distinction was not lost on Theron. Furthermore, hearing Vector list it all – the things Theron had been through – so clinically and deliberately, so perfectly matter-of-fact, no judgment, no accusation or pity – it hit a chord deep inside Theron. He remembered the school-turned-hospital back on Corellia and that awkward, painful conversation with Doc: “Sooner or later you’re gonna need to speak to someone, or it’s just gonna eat at you.” Stars, he didn’t want to fucking talk about it, but Doc was right, it was eating at him. And Vector was here, looking at him with such an expression of compassion on his face that it was all Theron could do to keep from flinging himself into the other man’s arms.

Theron looked at Vector, and suddenly the words were tumbling from his lips, the entire awful story
spilling out into the open, starting from his meeting with Samar, Amrielle and Urjax on Nar Shaddaa and ending with the moment Vector and Kaliyo found him and Miranza on Corellia. He left nothing out – none of it, not all the times he had tried to slash open his own throat only to have the conditioning still his hand, not the things Samar had forced him to do, forced him to feel (and the shame he had felt, that his fucking rapist could get him off even when he was hurting him), not the nightmares or the terror or the constant, unending horror of the whole devastating experience, none of it. He spoke until his voice was hoarse from talking, his mouth gone dry, and at some point he started crying and Vector did pull him into his arms and it wasn’t embarrassing or awkward or strange. It was just ... nice. Comforting, in a way that Theron had seldom experienced in his life.

When he finally fell silent save for a few choked sobs Vector kissed him lightly on his forehead and reached behind them to tug at the bedsheets, drawing them down before motioning for Theron to crawl into bed. Theron, drained and wrung out, did as he was bade, wriggling under the covers and shifting until he found a position that felt comfortable. He felt shaky and achy, as though he was recovering from a fever, and now that the worst of his embarrassment had passed and the story was out he realized just how exhausted he was – exhausted and maybe still a little intoxicated. Vector settled into bed behind him, warm body snug against his, and he draped one arm over Theron’s hip, careful not to make the other man feel pinned or trapped.

“Try and sleep, Theron,” the Joiner murmured, breath hot against the back of Theron’s neck.

Against all odds, Theron did.

O o O o O

It was much later when Vector opened his eyes and eased his way out of bed, careful not to disturb the man sleeping next to him. In the darkness he could dimly make out Theron’s face, handsome features peaceful in slumber; easier to see was Theron’s aura, shining bright and hopeful in shades of vibrant red and orange. The memory of that aura muted, stricken through with the muddied browns and blacks of pain and fear and shame, looking almost tattered at the edges, was what had kept Vector awake, and he slipped quietly out of the bedroom, stalking barefoot and naked down the hall.

He didn’t run into anyone, nor did he expect to – but nor did he care. Neither Killiks nor Joiners held any particular taboos surrounding nudity – indeed, Killiks did not wear clothing at all, and most Joiners only chose to dress themselves out of habit or in order to avoid offending any potential non-Joiners they might come across – and Vector, while rather more autonomous than the average Joiner, was not so different that he felt the least amount of embarrassment at being discovered naked. The house was warm enough that clothing was unnecessary and he didn’t feel like risking Theron’s sleep just so that he could rummage around through unfamiliar closets and drawers in search of something to wear.

Vector made his way to an indoor training room, pausing briefly inside the door to grab one of the quarterstaffs from a rack of weapons. He gave the staff a practice twirl, getting a feel for its weight and heft, then took up a position in front of one of the dummies. Balancing lightly on his toes, he sucked in a deep breath – and let loose.

The ends of the quarterstaff came down hard on the dummy as Vector lashed out again and again and again, reveling in the sensation of wood striking heavily padded cloth. He could feel the slight shock that rippled up his arms every time the staff connected, the solid thwacks echoing throughout the training room. Normally when he trained he kept his mind focused and still, the motions familiar and soothing, similar to meditation. But not this time. This time he was filled with rage and fear and revulsion and worry, and he let it all out, screaming his frustration with every powerful strike.

Theron’s words – every horrific memory of his experiences with the Star Cabal – felt carved inside
Vector’s mind, and he could still hear the halting, sobbing quality of the other man’s voice. It was all too easy to picture what had been done to Theron – what had been done to Miranza – and the fury that built up inside Vector as a result made any anger he had ever felt about the torture she had suffered at the hands of Eidolon Security pale by comparison. She had entered into that by choice. What had been done to her and Theron – by Samar, by the other monsters of the Star Cabal – had not, and thinking about it made the Song of the Avenger rise to Vector’s lips.

Bad enough that Theron had been through all of this. Bad enough Miranza had suffered it with him. But now, for her to be lost – again – and it was because of him, because Vector had chosen, selfishly, to bring her and Theron with him to investigate the Mirodari … It was untenable. It was unfathomable. Vector had enemies to face, foes to rip apart, and he had no idea who they were or where they were. He didn’t know where she was, he didn’t know what was happening to her, and he couldn’t protect her and she was alone in enemy hands and –

CRACK!

The wooden quarterstaff came apart in his hands, shattering against the training dummy.

Vector let the broken bits of wood fall from his hands as his knees gave way and he knelt, breath coming in great shuddering gasps, in the centre of the room.

Just as he was about to pull himself to his feet again he felt a murmuring against the back of his mind, and Vector closed his eyes, welcoming the contact with the rest of the Hive. Sympathy and concern washed over him; the other Killiks did not quite understand why he was so upset, but they sensed his anguish and wanted to comfort him. Then, just as he made contact with the others, he sensed a sudden ripple of excitement from somewhere far from the nest.

It was the fingerlings he had sent to search for Miranza.

We have found the First Mate of the Dawn Herald.

Vector opened his mind, inviting them to make their report, only for their memories to overwhelm him. He made a small, choked sound and fainted dead away.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for rape.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty

The med centre on the grounds of the House Cortess estate was quiet, with only the occasional beep and chirp to break the silence. Theron had long since blocked those sounds out; he knew that he only needed to be concerned if those beeps and chirps were to change in pitch or frequency, and for the past three days they remained consistent to the point where they had faded to background chatter. He had spent the better part of those last three days in the med centre, leaving only to attend to personal grooming or get a breath of fresh air. He had a bed of his own to sleep on – not that he was doing a whole lot of that lately – and one of the Joiners, usually Flit, brought him his meals on a tray. He was mightily sick of the sight of the med centre but he had no intentions of leaving until and unless Vector left with him.

The past three days had been frustrating and worrying. Vector had been found, unconscious (and naked, although apparently that was of little concern to the Killiks) in the training room. He had been found quickly – his distress had stirred every Killik and Joiner within the vicinity, and Theron had been awakened by the commotion – but there seemed to be little that anyone could do for him but sit and wait. According to Healer, Vector’s condition was the result of some kind of ‘feedback loop’ with some of the other Killiks, but when Theron pressed for details she became very quiet and firm. Flit had tried to explain that the fingerlings had reported back on Miranza’s whereabouts, and that that was what had led to Vector’s collapse; that insight, combined with Healer’s reluctance to discuss the matter, left Theron in a state of high anxiety and fear, not to mention rage and frustration. The Killiks knew where Miranza was, but they refused to act without Vector’s input – input that Vector could not give, because he was essentially comatose as a result of learning what happened (what was happening?) to his wife. And the Killiks wouldn’t tell Theron where she was or what were happening to her, nor would they let him leave the estate to investigate matters on his own.

The Killiks knew where Miranza was. They could send a rescue party. They could tell Theron, who could go after her himself. But they wouldn’t act, because Vector wasn’t able to instruct them. Theron knew that when Vector woke up (he refused to think in terms of if the other man woke up) he would be furious with the Killiks for not acting sooner – and he would likely blame himself, for his collapse putting the rescue of his wife on hold.

To top it all off, the Killiks and Joiners were treating Theron like a child or an exceedingly valuable pet. As Healer explained it, the feedback loop from Vector came with intensely protective feelings towards the Dawn Herald’s “mate.” In the absence of Miranza, those feelings were directed solely and intensely upon Theron. The Killiks and Joiners could not rescue or “protect” Miranza without Vector to guide them, but they could keep the Dawn Herald’s Second Mate safe, and by the Force they were determined to do so. Theron suspected that if they could wrap him up in cotton batting and stuff him in a secure lockbox somewhere, they would have done it. He was sheltered, he was coddled, and he was looked after with such solicitous concern that he wanted to scream in frustration. Theron couldn’t remember a time in his life when someone – anyone – had ever worried
about him so much. He could barely leave the med centre without having two Killiks as his
bodyguards and two Joiners to attend to his every need. At least in the med centre they more or less
left him alone.

Vector’s story about Theron being his mate had its benefits – the Killiks had at least stopped trying to
forcibly Join Theron to the Hive – but the degree of protectiveness directed towards him was stifling,
not to mention more than a little infantilizing.

Theron shifted uncomfortably in the hard metal chair that every med centre seemed to have, trying to
find a position that didn’t leave his ass or legs feeling numb. At his request he had been given a
datapad and he had spent the better part of the past three days slicing security feeds across Alderaan
in an attempt to locate Miranza on his own. He didn’t have the best tools for the job – his implants
were a boon as always, but the equipment available to him at House Cortess was far from ideal – but
he had managed to break into the feed from the Rhu Caeneus spaceport as well as two Republic
outposts and one Imperial one. So far he hadn’t discovered anything connected to Miranza, but it
made him feel better to be doing something.

Across from him Vector lay unmoving on one of the med centre beds, various leads and wires
connecting him to the medical equipment that monitored his condition. Theron found all the wires to
be more than a little intimidating, but it was somewhat reassuring to know that the equipment wasn’t
necessary for maintaining Vector’s health – simply assessing it. The Joiner was breathing and his
heart was beating on his own, and the only assistance he was receiving came in the form of an IV
drip that kept him fed and hydrated.

Sighing, Theron set the datapad onto the table beside him and stood, the urge to stretch his legs
combining with a need to use the ‘fresher. He hated leaving Vector alone – he felt helpless to assist
the other man, but he was certain Vector would sense his presence and hopefully draw comfort from
it – but he hadn’t yet reached the point where he was ready to start wearing a diaper just to avoid
having to leave the med centre. It was bad enough being babied by an army of well-meaning Killiks
and Joiners; he didn’t need to further contribute to his own regression to childhood by wearing
diapers and swaddling.

He had effectively claimed the nearby ‘fresher as his own (not that there was much argument from
the Killiks). Theron was in and out in a matter of seconds, walking briskly to and from the ‘fresher,
stretching his legs and ignoring the way his knees popped and cracked with his first few steps. A
shrill alarm sounded from the med centre just as he was heading back, and he picked up the pace,
stepping back into the room in time to see Vector standing unsteadily next to the bed, clumsily
yanking the various leads from his body.

It was the heart monitor that was sounding; the clip had been detached from Vector’s finger and the
machine could no longer read his heartbeat, and just as Theron stepped in to shut the device off the
respiration monitor began to shrill as Vector pulled the mask away from his face.

“… have to get to her …,” the Joiner was mumbling, leaning heavily against the bed as he tried to
pull the IV free.

“Stop that,” Theron told him, switching off the monitors – or at least their alarms – before they
brought the entire nest on them. “You’re going to hurt your- “ Before he could finish that statement
Vector had yanked the IV out of his arm, causing tiny droplets of blood and larger drops of saline
solution to splash onto the floor.

Theron grabbed Vector’s arm, putting pressure over the tiny wound in the bend of his elbow where
the IV had been fed. Vector made no effort to pull away, instead staggering a little against Theron,
one hand pressing hard to his temple as if trying to block out pain or stimuli.
“Her aura, Theron,” Vector gasped, sagging heavily until Theron was forced to help him over to the chair where he had been sitting earlier. “Her song is screaming …”

Healer and a pair of Joiners Theron didn’t know hurried into the med centre, the doctor immediately racing to Vector’s side. She tried to urge Vector back towards the bed but the Dawn Herald was having none of it, insisting they needed to get to Miranza now and that they were wasting time. As thrilled as Theron was to see his friend up and moving he was afraid Vector was going to hurt himself in his urgency, and it was unsettling to see the Joiner so haggard and uncoordinated.

When it became obvious that Vector had absolutely no intentions of returning to bed Healer backed off, sending one of the Joiners to fetch the Dawn Herald some food and the other Joiner to get him some clothing.

“What happened, Vector?” Theron asked, as Healer began a barrage of tests. “You’ve been out for days.”

“Days?!” Vector’s face – already drawn and gaunt – went pale, and for a brief moment Theron was afraid he was about to topple over. Healer must have feared the same thing because she forced Vector back into the chair, his head down between his knees until the dizziness passed.

When Vector finally looked up again his colour had improved somewhat, and his jaw was set in a firm line. He turned to Healer, motioning her away, and Theron had the sense that the two were communicating silently, the two Joiners staring at each other intently until finally Healer nodded tightly and left the med centre. Once she was gone Vector stood, looking at Theron.

“You will recall when we told you about our connection to the Hive?” he asked, shucking out of the loose-fitting hospital scrub pants he had been dressed in and reaching for the clothes the Joiner had brought him.

Theron nodded, uncertain. Instinct and years of exposure to Jedi morality told him he ought to be turning away, to give the other man privacy while he changed, but Vector didn't seem the least bit bothered by his presence and Theron had other things to focus on besides how kriffing perfect the Joiner's ass was. “You said you didn’t need thoughts or words to communicate.”

“Correct.” Vector’s voice was soft, distant. “The fingerlings located Miranza and reported back to us. We … It …” He sighed heavily, lowering his head, holding the clean pair of trousers he had been brought. “Fingerlings are prepubescent Killiks. Their understanding of the world is … limited. They’ve had little exposure to the greater memories of the Hive. They see and hear and think, but they do not necessarily comprehend. They saw Miranza, but what they saw did not … It was outside their sphere of understanding.”

“I don’t …,” Theron began, trailing off uncertainly.

The expression on Vector’s face was ghastly. “Killiks,” he said, with great precision, “do not engage in sexual intercourse. Female Killiks lay eggs and male Killiks fertilize them. Killiks, as a species, do not mate, and Joiners are not required or expected to reproduce. Consequently, there is no concept of sex for enjoyment or … or …”

Theron was lost for a moment, confused by Vector’s overly clinical explanation. Then, as the meaning of what he was saying began to click in, a sick feeling began to settle in Theron’s gut. But Vector wasn’t done talking yet.

“Older Killiks have access to the Hive’s collected memories and thus have a greater understanding of the humanoid species that have Joined them,” the Dawn Herald went on relentlessly. “The
fingerlings we sent to locate Miranza, however, did not comprehend what they were seeing when they discovered her. They reported back what they saw, but it confused them and they requested … clarification.”

“And so you …” Theron didn’t want to finish the sentence. He didn’t want to finish the fucking thought.

Vector cocked his head to one side, his jaw working back and forth as he struggled with himself. Although it was difficult to tell for certain, Theron had the impression that while Vector was facing him, it didn’t seem as though the Joiner was actually looking at him – but rather through him, at the horrible memories.

“And so,” Vector continued, in a voice filled with a bitter, angry sarcasm Theron had never heard him use before, “we had the unmitigated pleasure of explaining the concept of rape to a group of confused, frightened children who had the misfortune of witnessing such acts firsthand. Who also, might we add, were burdened with ability to read the auras of everyone involved in such acts, enabling them to see, with perfect clarity if not perfect comprehension, precisely how much the men were enjoying themselves – and precisely how much our wife was not. And who,” he added finally, tone leaden, “fed all of those memories into us, such that they are first and foremost in our mind when we close our eyes.”

Bile rose in the back of Theron’s throat as an unexpected tremor shook his body. He knew, from horrible, painful, humiliating personal experience exactly what rape looked like, and it was all too easy for him to picture everything Vector described. Even so, even at the worst of what Samar had done to him and Miranza, he hadn’t had to bear witness to Samar’s inner thoughts and emotions. It was bad enough to be able to imagine the faces of the men involved, without also having to know exactly how they felt about what they were doing.

‘Feedback loop,’ Healer had called it when she had attempted to explain to Theron what had happened to Vector. Now he understood why she refused to provide him with further details: she had known – she had to have known, given that she was connected to the same Hive and had access to the same memories and information that Vector had – precisely what happened, what Vector had seen and experienced. Vector had been forced to witness the fingerlings’ memories and then had been further forced to explain the context of those memories to the infant Killiks, and no doubt their terror and anger at what they had seen had combined with Vector’s anguish at perceiving his wife’s abuse, resulting in mental and emotional overload. No wonder Vector had collapsed.

Sudden fury contorted Vector’s handsome face, and the Joiner surged to his feet, grabbing the first sturdy thing that came to hand – in this case, the metal stand his IV had been attached to. He held the pole in a two-handed, white-knuckled grip, lifting it high over his head before turning with an angry, helpless scream and throwing the stand at the far wall. Metal crashed against painted duracrete, cracking the plaster as the stand hit the wall and then clattered loudly to the floor.

Hands empty, Vector looked around the med centre, no doubt searching for something else to throw or smash. Theron stood well back, the urge to comfort the other man warring with his own common sense: Vector might be unsteady on his feet, but he was still stronger and tougher than Theron and if it came to blows Theron knew the Joiner could take him apart. Not that Theron expected Vector to attack him - he might be justifiably enraged, but he certainly wasn't lost in a blind fury; he knew who Theron was and that Theron was not his enemy - but rather he didn't want to get hit by any shrapnel that might result from the things Vector did choose to attack.

Vector balled his hands into fists and slammed them down hard onto the bed, causing its metal legs to buckle and collapse under the force. He let out another hoarse shout and kicked at the bed – and
the impact of his bare foot colliding with the metal frame was enough to shock him back to his
senses.

Snarling a litany of curses under his breath – expletives Theron hadn’t even been aware the Joiner
had known – Vector limped back to the chair and threw himself onto the seat before burying his face
in his hands. Sensing that the storm had passed, Theron went and knelt at the Joiner’s feet, resting his
hands on the other man’s knees. Theron spared a brief glance down at Vector’s foot, relieved to see
that he hadn’t injured himself on the bed frame.

“The Killiks know where she is,” Theron said finally, infusing as much strength and hope into the
words as he possibly could.

“Yes,” Vector whispered. He lifted his head, determination warring with anger on his features.

“Then we can get her back,” Theron continued.

“Yes,” Vector agreed. “And we’re going to destroy everyone involved in hurting her.”

O o O o O

When the spice high was at its peak it was easy to pretend all of this was happening to someone else.
Her mind and body seemed to disconnect, her mind floating free – carried on a shimmering bed of
colourful stars – while the broken, bleeding vessel that kept her chained to this corporeal world lay
limp and unresponsive, forced this way and that by cruel, calloused hands. The sounds she made –
whimpers of pain combined with harsh, shattered sobs – weren’t coming from her, but from the
twisted, helpless carcass she had left behind. She was free, floating, untouched.

Without the spice everything hurt and the pain combined with crippling humiliation that this was
happening to her, that she should be brought so low. Without the spice she was trapped, the world
around her brought into violent clarity, every touch and sound and taste the sole focus of her painful
existence.

She lost all sense of time, passing in and out of consciousness and states of coherence with such
rapidity that she began to feel as though her life began and ended in this barren, freezing storage unit.
Their faces and bodies blurred together, harsh laughter and cruel taunts ringing in her ears, echoing
the torments from her fragmented experiences with the madness inspired by the Sith Lord on
Corellia.

She saw no more of Amrielle, the Nautilian woman no doubt preferring to keep her distance from
anything so crass and unseemly as brutal rape, but Alric Ulgo made frequent appearances. He didn’t
touch her – not even to bring his sharp knives and heavy hammers into play – but rather stood back
and asked his questions, over and over again, demanding to know what she had been doing in his
family’s compound, who she was spying for, and where Theron Shan was. He made her promises,
every time, claiming he would end all of this the instant she revealed what she knew, but she could
see the falseness on his face and heard the lies in his voice, and knew he would never stop punishing
her for the loss of his sister. The certainty that Alric wasn’t going to end this combined with her
natural contrariness, the end result being that she kept her mouth shut no matter what they did to her.
She wasn’t going to betray Theron on a fool’s hope that Alric Ulgo would live up to his word.

There was one other who stood out in her mind, for all that there was nothing outstanding about his
appearance. He preferred to visit her alone, watching his compatriots from the sidelines, his face
practically glowing with sadistic delight – and when the others had left, off to attend to whatever
other duties or needs they might have, he came and used her to help him act out every violent fantasy
he’d ever had.
He was here with her now, snarling angry taunts into her ear as he forced her onto her back. Sometimes she tried to goad him on, thinking to push him so far that he snapped and finally killed her, but this time she was hovering on that cusp between perfect clarity and beautiful oblivion, neither so high on spice that she forgot who she was nor so sober that she was trapped in her own misery. He backhanded her before twisting his hand through her hair and as his knees forced hers apart she let her good hand skimp over his side until her fingers brushed the hilt of the knife he always kept at his waist. (Sometimes he liked to use it on her. She knew precisely how sharp it was, how carefully he maintained the blade.) Caught up as he was in his own enjoyment, he didn’t notice her lifting the knife, pulling it free from the sheath. She had to move slowly, fearful he would catch her and make her pay for it, but then the knife was free and heavy in her hand. She had to work blind, his body obscuring her view, and her hand felt weak and clumsy.

She thrust the knife home, stabbing him low in the back before pulling the blade out and sinking it in a second time. He screamed and she, unthinking, jammed her other hand into his mouth, crying out as his teeth came down hard on bloody, ruined flesh. She pulled the knife out and thrust it up under his chin, yanking her other hand free as hot blood spilled down over her face. She held him locked into place with her legs around his waist, bodies pressing together in a gruesome parody of lust, waiting for him to gasp out his last few breaths as his body twitched above her. Then, with the last of her strength, she shoved him off of her, his corpse hitting the floor with a dull thud.

She waited, listening intently for any indication that his dying screams had been heard. After a count of two hundred Miranza forced herself to her feet, ignoring the exhaustion pulling at her, and stumbled towards the exit.

According to the fingerlings, Miranza was being held at a meat processing and storage facility on the border of Republic territory. Theron, wanting desperately to find some way to be useful, used his slicing skills to investigate further, and discovered that Bouris Ulgo – the late, un lamented self-proclaimed King of Alderaan – had had a younger brother who had married outside the nobility. That brother’s wife had been heiress to Behani-Earle Meat Solutions, a meat-packing empire that, while certainly not glamorous, had contributed towards making the Behani family exceptionally wealthy. Bouris, his brother and his sister-in-law were all deceased, but there had been children. The son had inherited both his late uncle’s title as Baron Ulgo as well as his mother’s stake (no pun intended) in the meat-packing company – and the daughter was Thalia Ulgo, who had become known as the Joiner Flit. In addition to the address (or rather, a rough approximation of an address) provided by the fingerlings, Theron was able to pull up schematics and floor plans for the storage facility in order to assist Vector and the Killiks with their rescue strategy.

Before they left, Vector pulled Theron aside, taking him into a quiet study far away from the hustle and bustle of dozens of Killiks preparing to go to war. At first Theron was afraid the Joiner was going to insist he remain behind – with Vector’s return to consciousness the Killiks had ceased their overprotective watchfulness of Theron, but he still had the sense that they were all reluctant to let him charge into battle – but Vector’s first words immediately dispelled that notion.

“ ‘We would like to attempt to remove your conditioning,’ Vector said simply, and those words made Theron’s knees go weak.

He staggered into a handy nearby chair, guided there by Vector’s gentle hands on his arms. The Joiner hunkered down next to him, an expression of determination on his face.

“ ‘It is early days yet,’ the Joiner cautioned him. ‘It was close to a month before Miranza was able to free herself from the Castellan restraints. We do not want to make promises we cannot keep, but in
the event that anything should happen to us …” He brought his fist up to his mouth, ducking his head slightly and clearing his throat. The mix of emotions playing across his face – fear, anger, hope, nervousness – made Theron’s heart clench in his chest. “We want to ensure you have every opportunity to be free.”

Theron considered and discarded a number of responses before replying, “Okay. What do you need me to do?”

Within minutes he and Vector were seated cross-legged on the floor, facing each other. Vector rested a datapad on his knee, glancing down at it occasionally while Theron worked on getting himself to relax. The SIS agent ran through some meditation exercises he had learned as a child at Master Zho’s side, his body unwinding even as his mind continued to race. Free. Free at last from the Star Cabal’s conditioning, free from the constant worry that someone would learn his keyword and use it against him, free from the fear that he would be forced to hurt someone he cared about, free from the threat of once again losing his own autonomy. His heart pounded in his chest, so loudly he was certain the other man could hear it, and then Vector reached out and grabbed his hand.

“Deep breaths, Theron,” the Joiner urged, forcing a smile.

“Easy for you to say,” Theron muttered under his breath.

“It’s really not,” Vector replied, ducking his head again, his face carefully blank - but not before Theron saw him wince and swallow heavily.

Theron was about to apologize, embarrassed at how callous and indifferent he sounded, but Vector waved him off.

“Before we begin, Theron, you need to decide whether or not you trust us,” he said, voice quiet and calm.

“Of course I –“

“No. Theron, listen to us.” Vector was firm, and he tapped the datapad with one long finger. “If the serum has done its job, our next words will give us the ability to reprogram you. This will give us tremendous power over you, not to mention almost complete and unfettered access to your mind. We have no intentions of taking advantage of you, but we would be remiss if we did not make it explicitly clear that that possibility exists. If you have any doubts whatsoever, Theron, please, tell us and we will stop now.”

Theron’s heart flipflopped in his chest and he nodded, doing Vector the courtesy of seriously considering what he was saying. Trust was hard to come by in Theron’s profession – not to mention in Theron’s life. A host of painful past experiences had taught him, again and again and again, that blindly trusting in anyone was foolish and hopeless. Everyone let you down, sooner or later, no matter how much you believed in them or how much you thought they cared. And he would be an idiot if he didn’t at least acknowledge the fact that Vector Hyllus, for all his good intentions and seeming honesty, was a loyal and emphatically patriotic servant of the Empire. Theron wasn’t an idiot. He wasn’t blind to who Vector was. If anything, these past few days had been incredibly eye-opening in that regard.

For all that it was an incredibly complicated and complex decision, it was remarkably easy for Theron to make it. He leaned forward, catching the line of Vector’s jaw in his free hand and drawing the other man closer before kissing him hard on the mouth.

“I trust you,” he said once the kiss had ended.
Vector blinked at him, nodding slowly as he brushed a hand across his face.

“Very well.” The Joiner straightened, giving the datapad another quick glance before looking back up at Theron’s face. “Listen to our voice, Theron.” Theron nodded, focusing with more intensity than ever before in his life, and Vector continued, “Thesh protocol, phase one. New keyword: iconoclasm.”

Theron felt … something. An itching in the back of his skull, some kind of pressure behind his eyes. He waited expectantly for Vector to continue, only to realize that Vector appeared to be waiting for him.

“I don’t know what … Am I … Is something supposed to happen?” Theron asked, hating the hesitance in his own voice.

Vector’s shoulders sagged and the hopeful expression on his face faded immediately, replaced by an almost-crushing look of despair. “It didn’t work. It’s too soon. Or we have done something wrong …” He looked at his datapad again, studying it intensely, brows furrowing. “We used the correct words … She was very clear …”

Suddenly realizing that Vector was somehow even more distressed by this apparent failure than he was, Theron grabbed the other man’s hand and squeezed. It touched him, more than he could say, that Vector cared this much. Under different circumstances Theron would have wanted to sit down and think about how much this affected him, how deeply moved he was by the other man’s concern for him, but there wasn’t time for that now. Deprogramming or no deprogramming, there was an Imperial agent to rescue and an army of angry Killiks waiting to head out.

“It’s okay,” Theron said at last, squeezing Vector’s hand again. “It’s just too soon. We just need to give it more time. Let’s just … Let’s just worry about Miranza right now, all right?”

Vector returned the comforting squeeze, closing his hand around Theron’s and nodding. After a moment resolve replaced the hopelessness and despair on his face, and he leaned forward again, bringing his lips to Theron’s. The kiss was hurried, impatient, and when it ended Vector released Theron and stood.

“Miranza will free you,” he said, with absolute conviction. “We will rescue her, and then she will break your conditioning, as we had originally intended.”

Theron just nodded, hoping it would be as simple as the other man suggested.

**Chapter End Notes**

Okay, that was an incredibly difficult chapter to write. I wanted to make it clear what was happening - both with Vector’s collapse as well as what Miranza was enduring - but I absolutely did not want to be graphic or explicit about it. So all three of my characters get to have an incredibly shitty time and hopefully it all made sense in the end.
Chapter Thirty-One

Morning sunlight filtered across the patio as Elara Dorne sat quietly drinking a cup of herbal tea while her husband, Aethan Tigano, worked at a nearby table. The morning was cold and crisp, their breath misting out into the cool air, but the tea and some blankets kept her warm and it was nice to be outdoors. The rest of the house was asleep, mercifully, which meant the two of them could enjoy some quiet time together without having to worry about somehow offending their hosts. She suspected Countess Amari would be horrified to discover her future son-in-law’s oldest brother dismantling and cleaning an assortment of blaster pistols and rifles on top of her spotless patio table.

The past few days had seen a number of similarly “offensive” moments. Aethan, much as Elara adored him, was a rough and tumble man from remarkably humble origins, and he had joined the Republic military in order to keep his younger brothers fed and clothed and help put them through school. Now he served as a Major, the head of the Special Forces crew known as Havoc Squad – the most highly-decorated military unit in Republic history – and Micah, his youngest brother, had invited him and his wife to attend his wedding on Alderaan. Elara, Imperial-born and raised as she was, was horrifying enough to their upper-class hosts, but at least she had proper manners and education to offset her unfortunate heritage. Aethan, on the other hand, was as blue collar as one could get – and damned proud of it.

Elara suspected her husband was performing arms maintenance on the patio table just to irritate their hosts, but at least he had chosen to do so first thing in the morning when there were fewer people about. House Oretano was one of the lesser noble houses on Alderaan but they had connections to House Organa, and as such there were dozens of guests staying at the estate. (Elara and Aethan had offered to stay at a nearby hotel, but Countess Amari had been horrified, just horrified - emphasis hers - at the prospect of her future son-in-law’s family staying at a hotel as if they were strangers - emphasis, again, hers. Even if Elara and Aethan would have preferred the privacy of their own hotel suite, rather than a bedroom down the hall from all the other guests – most of whom were literal strangers to them. And the hotel would have had a pool.) Aethan seemed to take a significant amount of perverse pleasure in irritating the Oretanos, over-emphasizing his Corellian drawl, delightedly sharing all of his goriest war stories and otherwise doing absolutely nothing to hide the fact that he was a career military man and not, say, a banker or bureaucrat. (Micah, Aeth’s youngest brother, was an accountant. An accountant, of all things! It never ceased to amaze Elara how two men could be so remarkably different.)

The wedding was in two days, and Elara was already looking forward to being back on their spaceship, away from giggling noblewomen and overly-solicitous servants. She’d already had to endure the bridal shower – sitting in a room filled with women she didn’t know, pretending to ooh and ahh over embroidered hand-towels and fancy dishes that Lady Iryss almost certainly wasn’t
going to be using, the whole experience made slightly worse by the fact that Elara was in her second trimester and everyone wanted to pat her belly and give her all kinds of unwelcome and unnecessary advice on child-rearing. (Never mind their horror at the realization that Elara intended to return to active duty after her maternity leave had ended. It boggled their minds that she didn’t plan on giving up her military career simply because she and Aeth were choosing to have children.) Both Countess Amari and Lady Iryss had offered to throw her a baby shower closer to her due-date, and Elara had stumbled to find some polite way to say “thanks but no thanks.” She dimly recalled giving some weak “that’s so sweet of you!” remark that had fallen on deaf ears as the two noblewomen began planning the party.

Still, for all that she found their company stifling (and more than a little silly – Alderaan might have been a warzone, but most of the upper-classes were protected from the horrors of war through virtue of their rank and station ... and wealth, let's not forget that), Elara had to admit she was enjoying the relative peace and quiet of the Oretano estate. The house was beautiful, the grounds were lovingly maintained and it was rare indeed for her and her husband to be able to relax in the lap of luxury. (Or relax, period.)

Rarer still for them to enjoy a quiet morning together. She smiled up at her husband, peering over at him as he worked. He saw her looking and smiled back, an easy grin that he saved just for her and that had her melting in a heartbeat.

“How’re my girls doing?” Aethan asked her, reassembling a sniper rifle with easy efficiency. Although she and Aethan had chosen not to learn the sex of their unborn child, Aethan was confident the baby would be a girl, and insisted upon referring to it as such. She had given up on correcting him – but she was pretty sure she was carrying a boy. Not that either of them cared either way; so long as the baby was healthy, they kept saying.

“Your wife is tired,” she replied, after swallowing another mouthful of tea. Herbal tea, to replace the caf she habitually drank in the mornings – no caffeine for her, not while she was pregnant. (Aethan had offered to abstain with her, bless his heart, but the man was absolutely miserable without his morning caf. He’d lasted all of a week before she’d ordered him to resume his habit.) “Your son kept her up all night with his fidgeting. He’s a restless boy.”

Aethan stood, beaming, and came over to rest his hand on her belly. She absolutely hated it when anyone else did that – Jorgan, Aethan’s Cathar XO, had been the only person to actually ask before touching her and had been gracious at her refusal, but everyone else just seemed to assume she was perfectly fine with having random strangers coming up and putting their hands on her – but with Aeth it was all right. His hand was large and warm, almost broad enough to cover the expanse of what (to her) seemed like a massive baby bulge. He bent, kissing her stomach lightly, before taking on a mock-stern expression.

“What the fuck …?” Aethan growled, just as two more figures burst from the trees.
distance Elara could see that they were larger than the first – much larger, and wearing the colours of House Ulgo.

Then, just as Elara was pushing herself to her feet, she heard a woman’s voice cry out.

“Help me!”

Aethan fired, his lack of hesitation surprising his wife only because he wasn’t generally the sort to fire on enemies without any warning – but the shot rang out, and one of the two larger figures dropped, screaming, hands clutched to a fresh wound on his leg. So, too, did the smaller, paler figure, but Elara quickly realized that it was because they had tripped, not because Aethan had shot them. The third figure continued doggedly pursuing the first, only for Aethan to fire a second time, dropping them in a similar manner.

Then Aethan was jumping over the patio railing, landing in the grass below with surprising grace for such a large man and racing towards the fallen figures. He had swapped out his rifle for one of his blaster pistols and had it out, aimed towards the ground as he moved in. He reached the first figure – the pale, small person Elara was almost certain was a woman and the source of the cry for help – and staggered, dropping to his knees. After a moment he turned to his wife, and even from this distance she could make out the grim expression on his face – that expression he wore when surveying battlefields and assessing casualties, when directing refugees and victims of war towards safety. The face that said this was serious and it was bad, but he was the CO of Havoc Squad and he’d be damned if he was going to back down now.

Sparing the other two figures a cursory glance – just enough to make certain they weren’t getting back up any time soon – he bent and scooped the woman up in his arms, cradling her against his broad chest as if she weighed no more than a child.

“Elara!” he bellowed, as he began hurrying back towards the house, “Get your kit – and tell one of the droids to prep the med bay. This woman needs a medic, stat.”

O o O o O

Aethan would have died before admitting it, but when he first saw the woman through the scope of his rifle, he nearly had to do a double-take to make certain his wife was still standing beside him. Blonde hair, fair skin: from a distance it was an honest mistake. It was that superficial resemblance to Elara that caused him to pull the trigger the first time, shooting down the man in House Ulgo livery before he could catch up to his obviously-fleeing target. The second time, though, it was because the woman was hurt – badly – and the men behind her were chasing her and Aethan Tigano was not the sort of man who let that shit fly.

Lucky House Ulgo was at war with the Republic, and House Oretano was very much a part of the Republic. The thugs in Ulgo colours were trespassing on Oretano territory.

That would be Aethan’s official report, anyway. Besides, it wasn’t like he had killed them. Yet.

Not wanting to waste time navigating the lengthy corridors of the Oretano estate, Aethan jumped over the railing, racing towards where the woman had fallen. By the time he reached her she was on her hands – shit, what the fuck happened to her hand?! The extremity was nothing more than blood and bone and fuck, how is she even putting weight on that?! – and knees, trying desperately to keep crawling away from her enemies.

Up close her resemblance to Elara faded, although Aethan had the nagging sense he had seen the blonde before (hard to tell, under all the blood and bruises, but she sure looked familiar to him). Sure,
the two women were both blonde and pale, but Elara was all curves (fit, yeah, but soft in all the right places with an ass that wouldn’t quit) whereas this blonde was slim and athletic, and Aeth was absolutely not checking her out but it was hard not to notice her figure when she was clad only in a filthy and torn set of bra and panties. And at that Aethan’s jaw clenched and he stumbled forward, landing with a hard thump on his knees beside the woman, his eyes drawn to every fucking cut and bruise on her body.

He wasn’t a doctor – that was Elara’s job, not his – but Aeth didn’t need more than cursory medical training to know that the blonde was in rough shape. Someone – likely the two assholes screaming in pain behind him – had worked her over, and her condition hadn’t been helped along by running barefoot and naked through the woods in near-freezing weather. Aethan glanced back at the two uniformed men, confirming again that they weren’t going to pose an immediate threat, then bent and scooped the woman up into his arms. Maybe he should’ve waited for Ellie to come out with a stretcher or a neck brace or something, but to Aeth’s way of thinking time was of the essence and he’d be damned if he was going to leave this poor woman lying out on the cold, hard ground a moment longer.

“Elara!” He started running back towards the house, the blonde letting out a hoarse whimper before going limp in his arms. She was a tiny thing; he was pretty sure he had assault cannons that weighed more than her. “Get your kit – and tell one of the droids to prep the med bay. This woman needs a medic, stat.”

Aeth didn’t wait to see if his wife obeyed him; Ellie was a professional and a damned good medic, and he knew that she trusted his judgment. If he said the woman in his arms needed a medic, stat, Ellie knew he wasn’t fucking around. Stars, he probably hadn’t even needed to say anything – chances were Elara was already in motion before he even made the call.

The run back to the house seemed to take an eternity although it was likely no more than a minute or two. Aethan was fit – tall, broad-shouldered and exceptionally muscular – and he was used to wearing thirty-two kilos worth of armour and carrying enough weapons to occupy a small town, and this little blonde weighed about as much as his entire kit, tops. Urgency granted him speed, as well, and by the time he was kicking in the back door to the Oretano estate Elara was there to meet them, a med-scanner in one hand as she walked backwards in front of them, perfectly in step with her husband.

It seemed like the entire household had been awakened by Aeth’s shouting (or perhaps by whatever Elara had done to ensure the med bay was prepped) and Aethan had to shoulder his way past more than a few gawkers to get to the med bay. The next thing he knew, Countess Amari was there, her shrill voice urging everyone back, to make room for Major Tigano and Lieutenant Dorne, to get out of the damned way, you idiots! Aethan would’ve grinned at how quickly the assorted guests, family members and servants hastened to comply, but he was far more focused on the two blondes in his immediate vicinity to give a shit if any snot-nosed nobles were stupid enough to remain in his path.

Countess Amari was a noblewoman born and bred, and she had been the head of the Oretano household for decades. When she spoke, people listened. She had clearly missed her calling as a drill sergeant: the moment she ordered people out of the way, everyone hopped to, making room for Aeth to carry his unconscious bundle down the lengthy corridors and straight into the med bay. Elara followed hot on his heels, quick in spite of her pregnant belly (as far as he was concerned she was nowhere near as big as she thought she was, but there was no mistaking she was knocked up and damned if he didn’t feel just a little bit of macho pride at that), reviewing the results from her med-scan with pursed lips.

Then Aethan was lowering the blonde onto the only bed and the Countess was sending her guards
out to detain Ulgo’s men, closing the doors to the med bay behind herself to ensure no one came in to intrude upon Elara’s work. Countess Amari made some passing comment that she was confident her guards could see to their prisoners’ wounds without needing to bring them to the med bay, which earned her a nod of approval from the two Havoc Squad soldiers. If these men were responsible for the blonde’s condition, the last thing the poor girl needed was to be stuck in cramped quarters with them. Finally, Aeth and Ellie were left alone with two med droids and their unconscious patient.

Aethan had been a soldier his entire adult life, and most of his career had seen him in some of the worst warzones in the galaxy. He had served on Ord Mantell and Belsavis and Balmorra, and he would have said nothing much could faze him anymore. But the extent of the blonde’s injuries shook him to the core. Not because she was badly hurt – she was, but he had seen worse, all things considered – but because he had the experience to know what he was looking at when he saw it. She hadn’t been caught in the crossfire between warring Houses, nor had she been hit with shrapnel or ejected from a crashing jet-fighter. Her injuries were deliberate, the result of malice and anger and vicious, evil cruelty.

One eye was swollen shut and the other halfway there; when Ellie lifted the woman’s eyelid – needing to gently pry it up, blood sticky around the lashes – all Aeth could see was a thin band of blue around one large blown pupil, the sclera all red with blood. Her nose was broken and so was the cheekbone under the swollen eye, and her mouth was bloody in a way that suggested she might be missing some teeth. Further down Aethan could see distinct bands of bruising around her neck, marks that looked an awful lot like hand-prints ringing her throat, and there wasn’t an inch of fair skin that wasn’t cut or bruised or both. She was pale, paler than his wife – and Elara, being Imperial and all, was pretty damned pale – and those marks stood out in livid contrast against flesh gone stark-white from shock and blood loss. Someone had taken a knife or blade of some sort to her torso, carving words into her skin that shouldn’t even be spoken aloud to someone, much less written on them. It hurt his heart just to look at it. And when Elara moved the woman slightly, adjusting her legs to make her more comfortable, Aethan caught a glimpse of dark bruising along her inner thighs – bruising, and at least one bite mark.

Elara stiffened and swore. Ellie never swore.

“I need you to leave, Aethan,” she said quietly, and he looked at his wife, startled. Her blue eyes were apologetic, but her mouth was set in a hard line. She motioned towards the two droids. “The droids can assist me. You should … you should go wait outside.”

“You sure, Ellie?” he asked her, just as quiet. She was angry, angrier than he had ever seen her, and there was a part of him that wondered if he should be worried about the baby, that she might overtax herself and something could go wrong … But pregnant isn’t sick, Aeth, her warm voice chided him in his head, and he had to remind himself that Elara knew what she was doing, and if she wanted him to get the fuck out of the med bay, then maybe that’s what he should be doing.

“I love you and you’re a good, kindhearted man,” she said, and then she jerked her chin down at the bruises that marred the woman’s fair skin. “But this is … she deserves her privacy. My treatment of her will be intrusive enough without having an audience. Please, just wait outside, Aeth.”

“Okay,” Aethan said simply. He wanted to lean over and give his wife a kiss, but not here, not under these circumstances. Instead he mouthead I love you and headed for the door, deciding to go find Countess Amari and thank her for her assistance. See? He had manners. Sometimes.

O o O o O

Once Aethan was gone Elara allowed herself a second to catch her breath and force down the angry sob that was threatening to overwhelm her – the combination of hormones and a natural, sympathetic
response to what she had witnessed – before getting to work. Emotional response on the way, way backburner, Elara slipped into the familiar role of Lieutenant Dorne, Havoc Squad medic, and let her professionalism carry her through.

It was quite a while later when Elara finally raised her head, stripping off her gloves and surgical gown before washing her hands with soap and water. She took her time with her hands; now that the crisis had passed this was her decompressing ritual, both literally and figuratively cleaning the blood off her skin before finishing up the non-essential tasks of performing medicine solo. She put one of the two med droids on clean-up duty (grateful, at least, that this wasn’t a job she needed to worry about; one of the perks of not being in the field) and set the other to monitoring the woman’s life signs, drew a blanket up over the still form – and collapsed into one of the chairs that lined the far wall.

She was exhausted, mentally, physically and emotionally, but Elara was confident in her skills. The woman’s injuries were quite extensive, ranging from cuts and bruises to broken bones to a ruptured spleen, as well as indications of repeated exposure to and withdrawal from spice, not to mention frostbite and hypothermia from exposure. Alderaan was beautiful, but the mountains were snow-capped and the weather could turn freezing in an instant, proving deadly to the unwary. And for a woman who had run from Force knows where with nothing but the ragged scraps of clothing on her back … Well, suffice to say Elara didn’t expect her patient had been prepared for snow and ice. Not that Elara could blame her for running; dying from exposure had likely seem a mercy after what she had already endured.

And Elara was under absolutely no illusions as to what her blonde patient had endured. She knew torture when she saw it – that right hand alone was bad enough, never mind the beatings and the rape and the filthy words carved into her skin (Elara had done what she could but those marks would scar; she dearly hoped her patient had access to someone who could surgically remove them). She didn’t know if her patient had simply fallen afoul of the wrong people or whether the assault on her was a part of some kind of interrogation, but regardless Elara was grateful her husband had shot the woman’s pursuers on sight – even if they didn’t know for certain those men were responsible for this. Aeth at least had had the presence of mind to merely wound them, rather than killing them outright – as much as Elara might have wished differently, with a vehemence that surprised her given that she wasn’t normally one for violence. She and Aeth were supposed to be on vacation, resting peacefully while attending Micah's wedding - not racing around shooting people or performing life-saving medicine on a woman who had clearly been through rather extensive torture. (And rape. Had the rape been a part of the torture, or just the cherry on top of a rather messed-up sadist's sundae to the men who had done this? Elara had given the woman every precautionary STD treatment she knew of and had briefly considered administering emergency contraceptive before deciding that was something she ought to discuss with the blonde beforehand. She wasn't looking forward to that conversation.) This was all just ... so very, very awful, and Elara's heart bled for the woman.

Elara ran a hand over her face, unsurprised to see her fingers trembling slightly: aftermath of adrenaline and emotion, not to mention sheer exhaustion. Now that the woman’s injuries had been treated and she had been made somewhat decent – the droids had wrestled her unconscious figure into a medical gown, so even without the blanket she was covered, her modesty and privacy preserved as much as possible – Elara was prepared to face her husband again. She was grateful Aethan hadn’t argued with her over her decision to send him outside; the moment she had seen the bruises on the woman’s inner thighs and realized what she was looking at, she had been confident Aeth’s presence (however welcoming she personally found it to be) would be unwelcome in the event the woman should wake up to find herself alone and naked on an exam table.

Aeth was standing in the hallway outside the med bay along with a middle-aged man Elara recognized as the captain of the Oretano guard. Her husband met her eyes, giving her an
encouraging smile as the captain clicked his heels together and saluted her.

“She’s resting comfortably,” Elara said, keeping her voice down to avoid waking her patient. She hadn’t sedated the woman; she wasn’t certain how the anaesthetics would interact with the multiple varieties of spice she had been on (a life-long habit or just more of the abuse she had suffered?) and didn’t want to risk causing a seizure – or worse. She walked the two men back inside the med bay, leading them to stand over the bed. She could practically feel the anger radiating off of Aeth, and when she looked at her husband’s face she saw him staring down at the unconscious woman with a hard set to his jaw. She suspected that if the two men he had shot had been in the room, her husband would be taking them apart piece by piece with his bare hands. Aeth had a chivalrous streak a mile wide, and nothing set him off like seeing women or children in trouble.

“Any idea who she is?” the guard captain asked. His own face had gone rather pale at the sight of the woman’s injuries, and Elara wondered if he would have fainted had he seen her when she was first brought in. “My guards are still interrogating the … uh … the … captives.”

“She wasn’t exactly carrying identification on her,” Aethan replied, saving Elara the trouble of pointing out that her patient had arrived in a state of undress.

“Oh. Quite.” The man’s cheeks flushed and he nodded, blinking rapidly. Searching desperately for a more safe avenue of discussion, he suddenly perked up. “The two men Major Tigano shot were mercenaries known to be in the employ of House Ulgo. She … uh … she looks like she may have been tortured, yes?”

Biting her tongue before she said anything improper, Elara fought the urge to give the man a slap upside the head. Was he just naturally tactless, or had the circumstances left him so rattled that he was incapable of being delicate? (In either case, he didn’t seem the sort of man who should be put in a position of authority, where tact and delicacy were often necessary.) Fortunately her husband saved her the effort again, leveling an even stare at the hapless captain before stating through gritted teeth, “Obviously.”

“Ah. Yes.” The man cleared his throat nervously, nodding again. “Yes, well, perhaps the woman was a servant in House Ulgo’s employ, one who had displeased them … Or perhaps she is an Organa spy, and they caught her in the act?”

Elara and Aethan exchanged glances before looking down at the woman at the same time. She was stirring, lines furrowing on her brow. Finally she opened her good eye; Elara was relieved to see that the pupil had returned to normal size, although the sclera was still bloodshot. When the woman took in her surroundings she reacted with a noticeable start, flinching away from the sight of the three people standing over her, her good hand flying up to protect her face. Elara cleared her throat, uncertain whether or not the addition of her own obviously Imperial-accented voice would be of any comfort, even if she was a woman. Finally, when it was clear neither Aethan nor the captain would be of any use she opened her mouth.

“It’s all right,” she said in the most soothing tones she could manage. “You’re safe now.”

Rather than the immediate panic Elara had expected at the sound of her voice (or rather, her accent), the woman seemed to relax, sinking back against the pillows. A warning bell went off in Elara’s head at that reaction and she opened her mouth again, this time to cut her off.

But before the woman could speak the med bay doors burst inwards as one of the captain’s guards hurried inside, racing up to the captain and drawing him aside with considerable urgency and a number of timid, fearful glances at the woman on the bed. Elara and Aethan exchanged looks again, both turning to observe the guard captain – whose sympathetic face had shifted and twisted into an
angry mask. He marched back over to the bed, hands fumbling at his waist for a pair of handcuffs. He quickly clapped one cuff around the woman’s uninjured wrist and snapped the other cuff around the solid metal arm of the bed. Both Aethan and Elara opened their mouths to protest even as the woman went completely still, seeming to go even paler, if that was possible.

“Our other captives have identified her,” the guard captain said, and Elara couldn’t fail to notice how he emphasized the word *other*, making it clear where he stood on her patient’s current status. “This woman is an Imperial spy.”

O o O o O

The instant the words left the guard captain’s mouth Aethan looked down at the blonde woman on the bed, that sense of familiarity returning to him as he tried to imagine what she would look like without the bruises. Sudden shock rippled through him as he realized where he knew her from: Yavin 4. She had been the Imperial agent tasked with getting the two warring factions to work together, assisting both the Republic and the Empire in defeating Revan.

“Shit,” he said aloud, fighting down a pang of guilt at the unhappy expression on Elara’s face, “She’s not just an Imperial spy. She’s the Commander of Sith Intelligence from Yavin 4. She’s the kriffling Ghost of the Empire.”
Chapter 32

Chapter Thirty-Two

Vector Hyllus, the diplomatic attaché and scholar, was a handsome, elegant man who carried himself with dignity and grace. A man who spoke eloquently and calmly, who favoured peaceful reconciliation and civility over violence and anger. He was a good man, a fundamentally decent man who believed in doing the right thing and in serving the people.

Vector Hyllus, the Joiner and Dawn Herald of the Oroboro Nest, was a warrior and a diplomat. A man who was comfortable placing himself between danger and those he was sworn to protect. A man who was as calm and courageous in battle as he was in negotiations and the pursuit of academia. He was a fighter, a soldier who put his life on the line in order to protect others.

Vector Hyllus, the husband whose wife had been taken and abused, was downright terrifying.

Theron had seen Vector in battle before, of course: they had fought together on Yavin 4 and more recently in the caverns of the Mirodari. He knew that Vector was highly trained and that he put his Killik-enhanced physique to good effort in taking down their enemies. He was fully aware of how lethal the other man could be, and that was just in his own defense.

With Miranza’s life on the line, Vector was a one-man wrecking crew. Backed by Theron and an army of enraged Killiks, he was unstoppable. The mercenaries guarding the Behani-Earle Meat Solutions storage facility didn’t stand a chance.

Normally Theron was not a “see the hill, take the hill” kind of person. He favoured stealthy infiltration and minimizing casualties – going in alone, sneaking in to where he needed to be and acquiring his targets while involving as few other people as possible. But he was not in charge of this operation, and the decision was made to have the assault on the facility look more like a random Killik attack than an emergency extraction, which essentially meant a wave of Killiks tearing through the storage facility like a tsunami washing over a small island.

They came late at night – practically the wee hours of morning, when the facility was expected to be empty (or at least manned by a skeleton crew, rather than a host of unsuspecting employees who likely had nothing to do with Miranza’s capture). Theron could have sliced the security on the doors, but that would have been too subtle; instead, two larger Killiks – built like tanks, with thick chitinous shells and bodies the size of icetrompers – simply rammed the doors until they burst open, the other, smaller Killiks pushing their way inside with Theron and Vector following close behind.

After that it was all kind of a blur. Theron remembered fighting, blasters out, crouching behind a portable shield Vector had procured from Force knows where, but mostly he remembered the screams as Vector – aided by the Killiks – swept through the building like a force of nature.

The mercenaries who guarded the facility were armed and armoured, but they were ill-equipped to deal with the unstoppable wave that was the Dawn Herald. Vector’s electrostaff whipped through
the air, spinning so fast Theron could barely keep track of it as the Joiner laid waste to every man in his path. He made little effort to spare anyone; far removed from his usual, more temperate nature, Vector let forth all his rage and fear and worry for his wife, harnessing his emotions in a way that put Theron in mind of the Sith and made him wonder if perhaps the Jedi weren’t handicapping themselves by refusing to utilize this obvious source of strength.

Theron himself wasn’t exactly eschewing that source of power, either. The last time he had let anger guide him in a fight had been after he had been captured by the Revanites and forced to free himself. He had been fuming with Lana for facilitating his capture – no matter that he had managed to accomplish exactly what she had been expecting from him, garnering intel they likely wouldn’t have been able to acquire in any other fashion – and he had been well and truly afraid there would be no rescue. He had let loose, blasting his way free, certain he was on his own and furious because of it – until he ran directly into Miranza and Vector, who had, against all odds and expectations, come to save him.

Normally he held back. He’d been raised by a Jedi. Anger made you sloppy, careless. Anger led to the Dark Side.

Fuck that. Anger felt good. And Theron Shan had a lot of anger to go around.

He was aware of the Killiks keeping close to him, stepping in to block an attack, pushing their enemies back before they could enter into melee range with Theron. He knew, dimly, that Vector’s frantic protect our wife was probably spilling over his connection to the Hive, and that the Killiks, unable to fully distinguish one “mate” from another (lacking, as they did, no real concept of individuality), took that directive to include Theron as well. He wasn’t entirely comfortable with the idea of anyone putting their lives on the line to protect him, but he was grateful for it – grateful towards these strange insectoid creatures that had decided, inexplicably, to consider him a part of their Nest.

Screams echoing in their ears, they stormed into the heart of the facility, to a nondescript set of doors that nonetheless brought Vector up short. Theron watched as, with shaking hands (blood splashed over his gloves and up both arms), Vector pushed the doors open.

A large man with broad shoulders and a hooked nose stood in the centre of the room, flanked on both sides by two others, his companions smaller but still heavily muscled. He had a strange expression on his face, a sort of mixture of enraged and defeated, and he slowly raised both his hands into the air. The men on either side of him followed suit.

“She’s not here,” he said, eyes darting from Vector to Theron and back again. He seemed to dismiss the Killiks, focusing instead on the two men in front of him.

Vector looked around, nostrils flaring widely. He and Theron both glanced down at the same time, noticing for the first time the dead man on the floor – a man they hadn’t killed. He lay on his back, a knife protruding from under his chin, his lower half drenched in blood. His pants were down around his ankles, revealing a soft, sad cock and pasty white thighs. Vector made a choked sound at the sight.

“Where is she?” Theron asked, realizing the Joiner was too upset to speak.

The large man shrugged, hands still raised high over his head in a gesture of surrender.

“Beats the fuck outta me,” he said. “Bitch killed three of my boys and ran.”

“She’s a demon!” one of the other men cried out. Theron noticed he looked younger than his
companions, barely out of his teens. His eyes were wide with terror and his hands, raised like his fellows, shook in the air. “Nobody should’ve been able to get out of here, not after what we –“

“Shut the fuck up, Tollers,” the first man snapped, looking disgusted.

“No,” Vector said, in a frighteningly calm voice. He stepped in closer, cocking his head to one side as he locked in on the young man. Theron saw the kid take in the splatters of blood on Vector’s face, doing a double-take when he got to Vector’s patently inhuman eyes. “By all means, continue. Tell us. Tell us what you did.”

It was like watching a jungle cat closing in on its prey. The young man stared at Vector in terrified fascination, opening and closing his mouth with no sounds coming out, his chest heaving as he struggled to breathe. Vector didn’t – to Theron’s eye – appear to do anything overtly menacing, and yet … everything about the Joiner was menacing, from the blood splashed across his face and clothes to the electrostaff carried with casual grace in his hands to the hard, glittering surface of his uncanny eyes.

“It – it wasn’t me – I didn’t want to – the others, they made me,” the boy protested, unable to look away from the predator circling him.

“Tell us,” Vector said, moving in so close his clothing brushed up against the boy’s.

The unmistakable scent of urine filled the air as the boy wet himself. Beside him, the large mercenary edged away slightly, letting out a sound of disgust. The third man seemed to be doing his best to fade into the background, his eyes darting to the open door behind Theron – and the hallway beyond, filled with waiting Killiks.

Vector leaned in and sniffed the boy, his nose inches away from the kid’s face. “We can smell her on you. Tell us what you did. What they made you do.”

“Fucking coward!” snarled the large mercenary, spitting in the boy’s direction. “We didn’t make you do shit, you little fuck. You took one look at that tasty blonde bitch and you were all over her.” His gaze snapped back to Vector, then Theron, his tone turning confidential. “Ain’t never had a woman before, him. Figured, no better place to start than some high-class Imp whore. Betcha she taught him a thing or two, didn’t she?”

*He’s goading you,* Theron thought, wishing Vector could hear him but not wanting to say the words out loud. *He knows he’s going to die and wants you pissed so you get careless and make it quick.*

But Vector remained focused on the boy, tilting his head again in a manner that seemed decidedly inhuman. His voice was still soft, calm: “Is this true? Were you all over her?”

“I …” The boy closed his eyes, swallowing hard. “Yes. I did it. The woman – the blonde – I r-raped her, I beat her. I knew it was wrong and I still … Force save me, I did it.”

“The Force,” Vector said quietly, “has little to do with it.”

Quick as a flash he lashed out with his electrostaff, striking the boy in the head, staggering him backwards. The blow wasn’t enough to kill the young man instantly, and instead he reeled back, dropping to his knees. Vector whirled, spinning on the balls of his feet, and brought the staff down a second time, slamming it down on top of the boy’s head with superhuman strength. A sound like a melon bursting echoed across the room and the third man – the one who was doing his best to make himself invisible – winced. Vector brought the staff down a third time, just to be sure, and this final strike caused bits of skull and brain matter to fly up, some of it splattering the large man’s face. The
third man doubled over and was very noisily sick.

Vector turned to him, casually flicking something red and fleshy off the sleeve of his coat. He knelt, smiling unpleasantly at the man, careful to avoid standing in the pool of vomit.

“Your turn,” the Joiner said, ignoring the large mercenary who stood at his unguarded back.

The man looked up from the floor, then suddenly pushed himself to his feet and bolted towards the door. Theron reacted on instinct, shooting him in the head before he even made it halfway across the room. The man crumpled to the floor, dead.

Vector straightened again, an impassive look on his face as he regarded the body. He glanced briefly at Theron, his expression unreadable, before turning back to the large mercenary. To his credit the man stood straight and tall, unwavering despite the fact that his friend’s blood – and other bits – was splashed across his face.

“We do not suppose you intend to plead your innocence?” Vector asked, crooking one dark eyebrow.

Doubling down on his *goad the bastard until he kills me quick* strategy, the large mercenary just scoffed, folding his arms across his chest.

“Like you’re gonna fucking believe me?” he spat, sneering. “Nah, I’m not fucking innocent, not in this. You wanna know what I did?" He took a step forward, crowding Vector; he was taller than the Joiner by several inches and twice as wide. “I fucked her. Sweet little Imp bitch like that, you’re damned fucking right I had a piece of that. I broke her fucking face and I carved my name into her gut and I rode her like a ronto and I made that little bitch *scream* for me. You ain’t never heard the sounds your little whore made for me, I had her fucking *begging* –“

Vector’s hand lashed out, closing around the man’s throat as he suddenly surged forward. He was shorter, but far stronger, and the mercenary was unable to break free of his grasp, shoved back until he was slammed up against the duracrete wall with such force Theron heard something crunch. He didn’t think it was the wall.

“Our *wife,*” Vector said through clenched teeth, fingers tightening around the man’s throat as he slammed him back a second time, “does not beg.”

“Your wife. *Your. Wife.*” The mercenary started laughing – a hideous, choked-off sound made all the worse by his bulging eyes and reddening face. Vector was holding him up by the throat, just high enough that the man’s feet couldn’t quite touch the ground, and Theron could see where the Joiner’s fingers were digging into the mercenary’s neck, how Vector’s knuckles had gone white with the strain. “Fucking freak bug like you, and that tasty little cunt was your *wife?* No wonder she screamed for me – bitch probably forgot what a *real* man felt like!”

Theron’s finger twitched on the trigger of his blaster and he lowered the pistol before he lost his temper and shot the man full of holes. Behind him he could hear the Killiks in the hallway getting restless and suspected they were feeding off of Vector’s fury; the Joiner was deceptively calm and collected on the surface, but Theron knew he had to be on the verge of snapping.

“I fucking broke that bitch and I *loved* every fucking second of it,” the mercenary bragged, spittle flying from his lips.

“That *bitch* took apart three of your men and escaped your custody,” Vector replied, smiling blandly. “That does not sound terribly broken to us.”
Vector cocked his head to one side and squeezed his hand, and Theron heard a sickening crunch. The mercenary let out a few strangled gasps, his eyes quickly glazing over. Vector released him and his body slumped to the floor, head hanging at an awkward angle, his neck quite obviously broken. The Joiner turned to Theron, his face twisted with fear and worry.

“She isn’t here,” he said, all traces of calm vanished. “We can smell her, but … she’s not here.”

“She escaped,” Theron replied, trying to infuse those two words with hope. He deliberately ignored the three bodies on the ground. It should’ve been slower, for all of them. They should have died screaming.

“She escaped,” Vector repeated. He gave a curt nod and moved towards the door, his face going distant as he communicated with the Killiks. Theron noticed that there were fewer of the creatures milling around; the pathway out of the storage facility was clear – although the halls were littered with bodies, none of them Killik – and he and Vector were essentially alone.

They made better time exiting the building, not needing to stop and fight every step of the way. As they headed out Vector explained that he had sent the Killiks to track Miranza’s scent, their heightened senses better suited to the task than his or Theron’s. Theron didn’t feel the need to point out that, injured as she was, Miranza couldn’t possibly be moving all that quickly and her scent-trail would probably be fairly easy to pick up.

Once outside the storage facility Theron and Vector paused for a moment to regroup. Looking around at the bodies and destruction, Theron was amazed to find how not upset he was by what he was seeing. He would have expected to be horrified, disgusted at what they had done, the amount of damage and loss of life they had caused. He wasn’t. He wouldn’t go so far as to say he was happy, but there was certainly a part of him that was thinking this was perfectly acceptable – just, even. The only thing that could have made it all better would have been if Miranza had been found and rescued.

He was about to comment on this to Vector when a loud crackling noise came from overhead. Theron glanced up, noticing the loudspeakers mounted on posts throughout the yard, no doubt put up for the foreman to make announcements. Someone had activated the speakers. He and Vector exchanged glances.

“My goodness, gentlemen!” The woman’s voice, with its strange accent, was painfully familiar to Theron, and he felt a thrill of terror run through him. Amrielle. What the fuck was she doing here?! He saw Vector turn to one of the Killiks, motioning for it to go and investigate before the Joiner frowned in Theron’s direction, a concerned expression on his face.

“You’ve caused quite a mess, haven’t you?” she continued, oblivious to Theron’s racing thoughts. “Shame Miranza isn’t here to see it. I’m sure she’d be quite touched.”

“Where is our wife?” Vector demanded, shouting the question as if he believed Amrielle was close enough to hear him and would answer. Perhaps she was; Theron had no idea where the control booth was, where the microphone was located.

“Theron Shan, none of this would have been necessary if you had just stayed put like a good little boy. But no, you had to go and run away, and so I had to get creative. Lucky me, the Star Cabal has friends all over the place – even here. But enough is enough, Theron. It’s time to come home.”

Theron’s heart was racing. He was dimly aware of Vector moving in, closing the distance between them, the Joiner putting himself between Theron and danger once more. But this wasn’t danger Vector could protect him from – this was something else entirely, and Theron knew the next words
over the loudspeaker would spell his doom.

“Theron Shan. Keyword: Atychiphobia.” He felt himself lapsing into that passive state, prepared for whatever horrible command Amrielle gave next. He fought to alert Vector but he couldn’t move, frozen in place, unable to even open his mouth to give warning. “Shoot –“

Something hard slammed into the side of Theron’s head. His world went dark.
Chapter Thirty-Three

When Theron opened his eyes again he was back in the med centre at House Cortess.

He was also handcuffed to the bed.

Before he could succumb to panic – granted, not his normal reaction to getting tied up in bed, but given the way his life had been going this past month it was probably a fairly reasonable reaction – he noticed Vector sitting beside his bed, eyes closed, hands resting lightly on his knees in an attitude of meditation. Theron saw blood smeared across the Joiner’s face and over his clothes, although he couldn’t see any obvious signs of injury. He frowned, trying to remember what had happened. Had Vector been hurt? If so, why wasn't Vector the one on the bed, and Theron sitting beside him?

He must have made some noise – or perhaps Vector had simply sensed his awakening – because Vector suddenly opened his eyes and gave Theron a smile that was a strange mixture of guilt and relief.

“Are you … you?” Vector asked.

Theron opened his mouth, blinking in confusion. Was he … what? He groaned, suddenly aware of the dull throbbing in his head, just a little to the left of his implants. Had he done something to fry his implants? Was that what was wrong? He tried to lift his hand to feel his head for injuries, but that’s when he remembered the handcuff chaining his wrist to the bedframe, and confusion warred with pain and rising panic.

“What’s goin’ on?” he mumbled, tongue feeling thick in his mouth. “How’d I … Why’m I …?”

Vector frowned, lines of worry creasing his brow. “Do you know where you are? More important, do you know who you are?”

“Fuck, Vector, yes.” Unable to help himself, Theron gave the handcuffs a harsh tug, even though he already knew they weren’t going to come loose that easily. It was hard to resist the urge to fight, to try to break free and escape. He looked up, noticing that Vector was still frowning at him, and elaborated, “It’s me, it’s Theron. Why’re you bein’ so weird?” In spite of his best efforts his words were still coming out slurred, and he was having a hard time organizing his thoughts. Every time he thought he had something fixed in his mind, it slipped free, leaving him feeling lost and confused.

“Do you remember the storage facility, Theron?” Vector asked him, so patient and gentle it was almost irritating.

“Where Miranza was – yeah.” Theron looked around, realizing Vector’s wife hadn’t joined them. If he was in the med centre and she wasn’t, did that mean she was okay? Or had the rescue gone south? Miranza wasn’t … she hadn’t … “Shit, Vector, tell me she’s okay, tell me we got her out of there …”

Vector’s face fell and for a moment Theron thought the worst, that Miranza had been killed during their rescue attempt and that was why she wasn’t there in the med centre with them. But then he realized that for all his apparent worry, Vector hadn't gone half-mad with grief – in fact, if Theron didn’t know better he would’ve sworn almost all of that worry was directed towards him. But that didn’t make any sense, did it? Why would Vector be concerned about him?
“Look, Vector …” This time Theron remembered the handcuff, and used his other hand to touch the tender spot on the side of his head. There was a small lump there but his fingers came away free of blood, so ... that was good, right? “My head hurts, I’m cuffed to the bed and I’m about five seconds away from losing my shit … What the fuck is going on?”

“Miranza wasn’t at the facility, Theron,” Vector said, speaking quickly to cut off any further questions Theron might have. “She escaped. We don’t know where she is, but we have Killiks searching for her, and she should …” He grimaced, looking away. “She should be easy to find.”

Theron shook his head – and instantly regretted it. He remembered the storage facility, vaguely. He had gone with Vector … right? To rescue Miranza? He remembered fighting alongside Vector and the Killiks, remembered hearing a lot of screams and shouts, smelling blood. His memories were blurry, but there was something … something on the edge of memory, something upsetting …

“Amrielle,” he gasped, as the memory of her voice over the loudspeakers came slamming back to him. “Oh, stars, she – she used my keyword … Oh, fuck, Vector, what did she make me do …?”

“Nothing, Theron,” Vector replied. He stood, moving somewhat stiffly, and leaned against the bed. The guilty expression was back on his face as he brushed gentle fingers over the lump on Theron’s forehead. “We knocked you unconscious before she could give the command. We hit you … rather harder than we intended.”

“That explains the head wound …,” Theron muttered, but at Vector’s wince he mustered up a small smile. “It’s fine, Vector – no, more than fine. I’m glad you did it. I don’t know what she would have made me do, but it wouldn’t have been pretty. But … uh … why am I handcuffed to the bed? I’m pretty sure we weren’t planning on getting up to any kinky shit just yet.”

“We … ah … no.” To Theron’s delight Vector’s cheeks flushed, and the Joiner bowed his head, pressing his fist to his mouth as he attempted to hide his embarrassment.

“For the record, my safeword is shuura,” Theron continued, just to see the other man blush.

He was not disappointed; Vector’s face turned a bright red. “We don’t even know –“

“It’s a kind of fruit,” Theron supplied helpfully, grinning. “Popular on Coruscant. Mixes well with alcohol.”

Vector sighed heavily. “We cannot decide if we hit you too hard or not hard enough. Still, if you are making jokes you cannot be too badly hurt, and attempts at bad humour do seem to indicate that you are, well, you. We were concerned that the trigger word might still be in effect, and did not know if you might have heard her command while you were unconscious. We would hate for you to try to shoot us now.”

Some of his levity – okay, pretty much all of it – dissipated, and Theron’s face fell. “That’s what she was going to order to me to do? Shoot you?”

Gaze focused on the handcuffs, Vector nodded, lifting one shoulder in a half-shrug. “Indeed. Given that we were at rather close range at the time, it would have been … rather effective.”

“Fuck,” Theron breathed, closing his eyes. He heard the jingle of the keys, followed by a click as the cuff was unlocked. The band came free of his wrist, landing on the mattress beside him with a muted thump. He rubbed his wrist with his opposite hand; it was sore, but only because he had been fighting the restraints. “I would’ve done it, too. Fuck.”

“Your facility with that particular expletive is rather remarkable, Agent Shan,” Vector replied mildly,
tone teasing. Warm fingers stroked his wrist where the cuff had been, and Theron opened his eyes to see the Joiner gazing down at him, a wry smile twisting his lips. His expression turned serious again. “Theron, it’s not your fault, and even if you had fired at us, we would not have blamed you for it.–“

“No, because you would be dead,” Theron retorted, but Vector snorted.

“Hardly. Besides, the command was for you to shoot us. She didn’t specify where.”

Slightly mollified, Theron allowed Vector to assist him out of bed. He was pleasantly surprised to discover that the world did not spin when he stood up. His head still hurt, but at least he wasn’t feeling sick or dizzy. On the general scale of Theron Shan concussions this one wasn’t too bad, and as he’d already said, he rather preferred it to the alternative. He was confident that if Amrielle had failed to specify where he should shoot Vector the first time, she would have been a lot more explicit with her second command. And if he had killed Vector …

He didn’t want to think about that.

“Okay,” he said briskly, forcing himself to focus on anything but the fact that Amrielle had very nearly forced him to kill his friend, “what’s our next move?”

Vector looked down at himself, taking note of the blood on his clothing. “We should very much like to shower first. We wanted to wait until you were awake, as we suspected you might be … troubled … by the circumstances of your awakening.”

Theron chose not to take that particularly juicy piece of bait. “Troubled” could not begin to describe what it had felt like to wake up handcuffed to a bed with no clue how he had found himself there, and only the fact that Vector had meant well – what if he had woken up while still under the effects of Amrielle’s command? It would have been easy as pie for him to get his hands on a blaster pistol or some other weapon, and then … stars, no, don't think about that – kept him from bringing that up. If he had woken up alone and bound, that would have been truly terrifying. Desperately searching for a distraction, he glanced down at himself and grimaced.

It was at that point that Theron realized he, too, was still clad in the clothes he had worn to the storage facility, and while he wasn’t as messy as Vector – most of his kills had been from a distance, ranged fighter that he was – he was certainly in need of a shower and a wardrobe change. It was tempting to suggest that the two of them conserve water by showering together (distraction!), but Theron suspected it was only a matter of time before the Killiks reported back on Miranza’s new location, and he didn’t want to be in the middle of getting it on with her husband when that happened. In the chronicles of Monumentally Bad Ideas that seemed to be the highlight reel of his life, getting caught fucking at an inopportune moment barely hit the top ten list of stupid things he’d done, but still. There was a time and place for everything.

The look Vector gave him suggested that the Joiner had considered making the same suggestion, however, and that warmed Theron in all the right places. He gave the other man a wicked smile before deliberately heading in the opposite direction. (Just because he and Vector seemed to be on the same wavelength didn’t mean it was any more appropriate to give in to … urges. Shared bad ideas were still bad ideas.)

Vector, apparently, was not above some light teasing, however.

“Theron,” Vector called, just before disappearing into the nearby ‘fresher. “Is your safeword really shuura?”

“I … uh … yeah.” Now it was Theron’s turn to feel his cheeks reddening. Force help him, he'd only
said it to discomfit Vector, and now ...


Oh. Oh … fuck, Theron thought, the Joiner’s thoughtful tone giving him all sorts of Monumentally Bad Ideas.

O o O o O

If Aethan was being honest with himself, being made to stand guard over an unconscious Imperial spy who was in no condition to get up out of bed much less make any concerted efforts to escape (no matter how talented she was rumoured to be) was considerably preferable to attending another garden party social held in his baby brother’s honour. It wasn’t that he didn’t love Micah, but Aeth was not a party person – or rather, the kind of parties he typically got invited to resulted in folks dancing drunkenly on the bar and if there wasn’t at least three fist-fights it was considered a dull night. Sitting around sipping tea and fruit-flavoured alcohol while pretending he gave a fuck about the latest fashion trends – or whatever these rich Alderaanian nobles liked to fawn over – was not his idea of a good time.

Playing jailer to the Imp spy wasn’t exactly ideal – Blondie wasn’t going anywhere – but at least he was allowed to be armed.

Once they realized who the woman was, things moved pretty quickly. She passed out almost right away – passed out or feigned unconsciousness to avoid questioning; either way the results were the same – and Aethan went with the guard captain, first to contact the head of security on Alderaan, then to contact Aeth’s superiors in the Republic military. General Garza acted like Aeth had taken down the spy himself, rather than her literally stumbling into his care; she’d heaped praises upon him (and the guard captain, who puffed up with pride and spent the next few hours being completely insufferable) and told him to take the woman into custody. Alderaan was no longer officially aligned with the Republic but with House Organa looking to be on the winning side of the current civil war and their close ties to the Republic well-established, Garza made it seem like claiming the Imp as a Republic prisoner was doing the Alderaanians a favour – like she was graciously cleaning up their mess, rather than seizing a high-value target for herself.

The spy was supposed to have been taken to a small holding facility within Pallista Spaceport, but her condition deteriorated before Aeth could arrange the transfer and Elara ended up spending several hours in surgery – aided, this time, by a doctor sent over from House Organa – to stabilize her. An attempt was made to put the woman in a kolto tank in order to speed up her recovery, but that resulted in rather dramatic spikes to her vital signs and as a result she was removed from the tank and put on life-support. The holding facility at Pallista didn’t have the equipment necessary to keep her alive (nor was there enough room to move said equipment in – it wasn’t as though the Pallista jail was all that large, just a couple of small cells and an office), so instead the spaceport’s med centre was emptied out, patients transferred elsewhere, and the spy was brought there. In Aeth’s opinion the med centre security wasn’t up to handling one of the most infamous spies in Imperial history, but even he had to admit that he didn’t think the woman was going anywhere, not when she was drugged to the gills with a breathing tube down her throat and her chest stapled back together.

Elara had been dead on her feet, so the spaceport administrator had given her leave to use his office to rest up. Aeth would have preferred his wife just go back to the Oretano estate, but Ellie was stubborn, they had a job to do, and if he was staying, she was staying. He knew his wife wasn’t happy with this recent turn of events; truth be told, he wasn’t particularly thrilled, either.

Now that he knew who she was, Aethan could vaguely remember Miranza Gerrick from Yavin 4. He hadn’t had much to do with her – he and the rest of Havoc Squad had been overseeing the
Republic grunts and weren’t involved in planning the assault on Revan – but he had certainly been aware of her presence. He couldn’t remember when he first heard someone call her the Ghost of the Empire; he thought it might even have been one of her own people, speaking in hushed, reverent tones. He didn’t know an awful lot about Imperial Intelligence, but she seemed to have a bit more leeway than the rest of the Imps, answering directly to Darth Marr and Grand Master Shan. She came and went as she pleased, which would have been suspicious as fuck if it weren’t for the fact that she seemed to spend all her time doing things to encourage the Imps and Pubs to work together.

And now she was here, in his custody, and it didn’t sit right with him. Imps were supposed to be hard, cruel people – they were the bad guys, for kriff sake! Not tiny little blonde girls who looked like they’d been through all nine Corellian hells, chewed up and spat back out again. Not women who he knew for a fact had done a lot of good not just for the Empire, but for the galaxy as a whole.

He was supposed to be fighting Sith Lords and cunning Imperial generals, not playing warden to women on life-support. Once her condition was stable enough for travel she was going to be transferred off-world, to Coruscant, where she would spend the rest of her days in prison – assuming she didn’t get shipped to Belsavis or wind up with her throat slit by an assassin sent by her own people to silence her. If she talked she could be a valuable resource for the Republic, but Aethan was under no illusions that the woman would talk, no matter what incentives his superiors offered her.

No, none of this felt right to him, but Aethan was a grunt, and orders were orders. Besides, she was an Imperial spy, and if half the things rumoured about her were true then she was every bit as dangerous to the Republic as General Rakton or Darth Marr. Just because she’d done some good in the world didn’t mean she wasn’t also guilty of doing bad.

Damned shame was what it was, that’s all. Aeth shook his head, sparing another glance at his unconscious prisoner. Damned shame.

Theron pushed himself away from the computer terminal with a muffled curse, disengaging his implants from the interface. Words and images stopped racing behind his eyes and he put a hand to his forehead, trying to dispel the familiar ache even as worry began coursing through him.

Unwilling to leave searching for Miranza up to the Killiks, Theron had sliced the various security feeds across Alderaan. He had expected the results to be similar to the last time he’d made the attempt – which was to say, he had expected to come up empty-handed – but this time around he’d found something. Slicing into transmissions to and from the Pallista spaceport, he intercepted a series of ongoing messages between spaceport officials (or at least someone working out of their office) and the Republic military. Technically speaking he was walking a very fine line between treason and … something that wasn’t exactly treason, but probably close enough as to make no difference if he got caught, since he was spying on his own people. Theron felt only the barest modicum of guilt for this, however, because most of him was too busy appreciating the results of his espionage: he had found her.

Miranza was alive and in Republic custody.

The first reports had indicated she was being held in an estate on Alderaan, some noble family Theron had never heard of. Before he could convey this information to Vector, however, he found some follow-up reports, and these said she had been transferred to a holding cell at Pallista spaceport, awaiting transfer. According to the reports submitted by one Major Tigano of Havoc Squad – and dammit, why did everything have to turn into some kind of family affair for Theron? – Miranza was in critical condition and couldn’t be transferred until Tigano’s medic signed off on her release. The fact that she was in rough shape shouldn’t have come as such a surprise to Theron, given Vector’s
profound reaction to learning what was happening to her, but it still caught Theron up short.

She’s alive, he reminded himself, and then swore again. Yeah, she was alive – and in the custody of Havoc Squad. Bad enough that she was being held by the Republic, but with the best squad in the galaxy keeping watch over her the odds of affecting a jailbreak were slim to none. And Theron had a sneaking suspicion that the moment he told Vector about his wife’s whereabouts, the Joiner was going to be planning that jailbreak in spite of those odds. Visions of the carnage at the Behani-Earle facility flashed through Theron’s mind, only instead of mercenaries in House Ulgo colours he was picturing a whole lot of dead Republic soldiers. Vector was a good man, a decent man, but he wasn’t going to let his wife rot in a Republic prison for the rest of her life.

Theron could simply … not tell him. If Vector didn’t know where Miranza was, he couldn’t send an army of Killiks to try to free her. Good people – good Republic citizens – didn’t have to die. But keeping this information to himself constituted a betrayal of the highest level, as far as Theron was concerned. He owed Vector and Miranza more than to just abandon her like this. She wouldn’t even be in this mess if it weren’t for him. And, realistically, the odds of the Killiks not being able to locate her on their own were pretty slim; all it would take would be for them to pick up her scent or overhear some communications, and they were know where she was. It wasn’t like people were being subtle about having her in custody.

Which brought up another cause for concern: if Theron knew where Miranza was, there was a good possibility that Amrielle knew as well. The Nautolan apparently had connections to House Ulgo, or at least to the branch that had ties to Behani-Earle Meat Solutions, and it wouldn’t have surprised Theron in the least if she also had spies within local Republic or Organa forces. Was she, even now, plotting some way to get at Miranza? He didn’t believe for a second that Amrielle was only interested in getting him back. And she was capable of working far more subtly than Theron or Vector were, at the moment.

Theron rubbed at his tired eyes, thinking hard. He just needed to come up with a plan to get Miranza out of there without endangering anyone at Pallista spaceport or putting good Republic soldiers on the line. Something that didn’t involve an army of rampaging Killiks and a protracted firefight with Havoc Squad.

Havoc Squad.

Shit.

He had an idea. A bad idea. A terrible idea, one that Vector almost certainly wasn’t going to agree with, but that would, if executed properly, keep everyone alive and – hopefully – far away from Amrielle.

Theron stood and headed for the communications terminal on the far side of the Cortess estate. This was a holocall he didn’t want an audience for.
Chapter Thirty-Four

It might have been his imagination, but it seemed to Theron that his holo-call was answered almost immediately, the harried image of the Supreme Commander of the Republic Military coming into blue-filtered focus. His father looked older than Theron remembered, although that, too, may have just been his imagination. Theron couldn’t deny that there was a strong part of him that wanted his father to have been worrying about him.

“Theron!” There was no mistaking the relief in Jace Malcom’s voice, his dark eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled at his son across the holocomm. “Thank the Force, you’re alive!”

Theron ducked his head, trying to ignore the warmth that suffused him at the realization that his father cared. Jace had been trying to get to know his son ever since learning of Theron’s existence, but it was a slow, awkward process. Jace had no clue how to relate to his fully-grown son and Theron had no frame of reference for child/parent interactions, and for the most part their once-a-month lunches felt a lot more like two colleagues shooting the breeze about work and sports than whatever father-son bonding Jace had had in mind. Not that Theron knew what father-son bonding was supposed to look like.

“Are you hurt? Do you need exfiltration?” Jace continued, not noticing Theron’s hesitation. He looked down at something out of sight of the viewscreen, frowning. “Your channel’s encrypted. Where are you calling from?”

Let’s just get this over with, Theron thought, before taking a deep breath and plowing ahead.

“Have you been getting any reports out of Alderaan?” he asked abruptly.

Jace’s frown deepened and he cocked his head. “Alderaan? The war effort’s been focused on –“

“Jace.” Theron cut him off. “Alderaan. Have you read any reports from there?”

For a moment Jace turned, bending to pick something up. When he straightened he was holding a datapad, the fingers of his right hand flicking across the screen as he scanned through something. The scars on his face twisted, pulling his features into a scowl.

“Garza’s been handling this, but yes, something about an Imperial spy captured outside of …” Jace looked up, staring at Theron across the viewscreen, comprehension dawning. “The mouthy blonde piece. Gerrick, right? Miranda – no, Miranza Gerrick. She’s the spy Major Tigano captured.”

‘Mouthy blonde piece,’ Theron mused. Yeah, that about summed Miranza up. She hadn’t been lying when she’d said she and Jace had spoken.

“I’m not sure that ‘captured’ is the right word for it, but yeah, that’s her.” Theron sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I need you to arrange a prisoner transfer.”

“You need …” Jace trailed off in disbelief, shaking his head. “Theron … Son … Are you compromised? Has she … done … something to you?”

Theron let out a snort. You have no kriffing idea, Jace. “It’s not … It’s not like that. Miranza was part of the team that rescued me. She saved my life, Jace. She saved … more than my life. I can’t … I don’t want to go into details over holo, but … I owe her. We let Havoc ship her back to Coruscant,
best case scenario is she gets to sit in a five-by-ten cell for the rest of her life. Worst case –“

“Worst case, her own people execute her before she ever sees trial.” Jace frowned again, brows furrowing. “Hazards of the job, Theron. She knows the risks, same as you. She’s a legitimate high-priority target. The Republic isn’t going to hand her back to the Empire just because you ask nicely.”

“I’m not asking you to just … hand her back,” Theron said, then played the only card he had: “I’m asking you to arrange for a prisoner transfer. Her for me.”

Jace was silent, strong jaw working back and forth as he struggled for words. Theron thought he could see pain – not physical, but actual emotional pain – on the older man’s face, and again it stirred something in him, something he wasn’t quite prepared to deal with right now.

“You’re on Alderaan,” Jace breathed at last. “Are you … Are you all right?”

Isn’t that the question of the day? Truth be told, no, Theron was far from all right. He was afraid for Miranza – the reports he’d managed to slice indicated she was on life-support, and he’d stopped himself before reading too much of the details, knowing he’d lose any hope of rational function if he discovered exactly how badly hurt she was. He was worried about Vector, who was angry and anxious for his wife, and who Theron could pretty much guarantee would not be on board with this plan at all. And he was worried about himself, because without Miranza or Vector he didn’t know if he would ever have the opportunity to break free from his conditioning, and Amrielle was almost certainly not going to stop looking for him.

Honesty, then. Theron sighed again, running his hand over the back of his neck. “I’m not going to lie, I’m pretty fucked up right now.” Jace winced; Theron ignored him and continued. “But, look: she’s a high-priority target. I’m a high-priority target. Ghost of the Empire for the Technoplague – fair trade, right? Havoc gets to play heroes for bringing me home and she … she gets another chance.”

“Another chance to strike at the Republic, you mean.” Kriff, he’d almost forgotten the man’s unreasoning hatred of all things Imperial.

“Dammit, Jace …” Theron was not going to call him ‘Dad,’ he was not. Calling Jace Malcom ‘Dad’ or ‘Father’ would just be emotional manipulation at this point, and while Theron certainly didn’t consider himself beyond such tactics, he suspected Jace was smart enough to see right through him. But it was close. Fuck, was it close. “Miranza protected the Republic on Yavin 4 –“

“Because it served the Empire at the same time –“

“—and she saved my fucking life, Jace,” Theron snapped. “Not because it was beneficial to the Empire or the Republic, but just …” He faltered. How was he supposed to explain this to his father when he had no kripping clue himself why Miranza would have done all the things she had done on his behalf? It made no fucking sense to him, and he had been there. He ran his hand over the back of his neck again, forcing himself to calm down before speaking. “Her for me, Jace. You gonna help me or not?”

Jace sighed, shoulders slumping, and for a moment Theron was certain his father was going to refuse, that even the lure of getting his son home safe and sound wouldn’t be enough to convince him to release an Imperial spy.

“Yes,” Jace said simply, even as he shook his head in disbelief. “Force save me, I’ll help you.”
It was three days before Elara signed off on transferring the captive, and by then of course their orders had changed. Aethan wondered if his wife had anticipated that or if she had simply been doing her best to ensure her patient received the best possible care before releasing the blonde from her custody; knowing Ellie it was most likely a combination of the two. She had a solid understanding of how the military worked – on both sides of the fence, thanks to her Imperial background – but she was also one damned dedicated doctor, and no way in hell was she going to let her patient go before she was good and ready.

On Day Two Aeth was contacted by General Garza. At first he thought the General was following up on the captive’s condition – she had asked Aethan and Elara to keep her updated on the woman’s recovery – but she quickly corrected that impression. The prisoner was no longer being shipped to Coruscant for trial (and continuing treatment; they weren’t fucking savages), but was instead to be brought to a neutral location on Alderaan, where she would be exchanged for a Republic prisoner of war of roughly equal rank and standing. Aeth didn’t quite know how to feel about that. On the one hand he was disappointed: the woman was a pretty high-ranking spy who could likely provide a lot of extremely useful intel on the Empire – given the right motivation. On the other hand, though, he had already admitted to himself that he wasn’t completely comfortable with how things were probably going to go down for her once she got to Republic space, and he didn’t honestly think she was going to turn for them. It’d be a waste for her to spend the rest of her life in prison, and at least trading her for one of their own would be a reasonable exchange.

On the plus side, Havoc Squad had new orders that should keep them busy on Alderaan for a little while. In addition to arranging the transfer of prisoners, General Garza had passed on intel regarding some seriously shady activity being perpetuated by House Ulgo, something to do with possible chemical warfare and the Killiks. The details were vague, but Aethan had called in the rest of the squad to investigate. It was bad enough that the Imps had an alliance with the local insectoid species; they didn’t also need to have rival factions on Alderaan finding ways to cause trouble with them, too. And the Mirodari Nest – whatever the kriff that meant – was way out in Ulgo territory, which meant Aeth and his crew could be certain they’d be wading hip-deep through enemies. As far as Aethan was concerned, beating the shit out of Ulgo thugs was pretty much the definition of heaven.

On Day Three Ellie deemed her patient stable enough to travel, and two days later arrangements were made to affect the transfer. Aethan and Elara were the only members of Havoc Squad currently on the planet – the rest had been given shore leave elsewhere, since none of them had been invited to Micah and Iryss’s wedding, and would be returning to Alderaan shortly in order to participate in the House Ulgo investigation – so House Organa offered the assistance of an Alderaanian security detail, providing an armed escort for the two Republic troopers and their prisoner. The spy was loaded onto an anti-grav stretcher and they set out.

Their party was met on a grassy field in Glarus Valley, near the site of Elysium. Aethan, Elara and their complement of Organa soldiers were met by a single Imperial officer and a number of soldiers in full Imperial armour, complete with helmets. Standing just slightly behind and to the left of the officer was a man about a decade younger than Aeth, hands bound in front of him in heavy-duty stun-cuffs.

The officer was tall and lean, his black hair combed back from his high forehead and a haughty look on his face. The other man – no doubt the Republic prisoner – was slightly shorter, with spiky brown hair and implants glittering above his left eye. Aeth had the nagging sense he’d seen both of them before, but in the prisoner’s case that was almost to be expected, given that he was supposed to be some high-ranking mucky-muck if he was worth trading the Imp for.
After a tense staredown the Imperial officer flicked his gaze towards Aethan’s prisoner, his face expressionless as he took in the sight of the woman bundled up on the anti-grav stretcher. He looked back at Aeth, then motioned for his own prisoner to step forward.

“No funny business,” the officer said, although it was unclear whether he was speaking to the other man or to the Republic soldiers.

The man took a few steps away from the Imperials, his shoulders squared as much as possible considering the cuffs restraining him. He paused briefly to look down at the blonde Imperial spy, his expression softening – Imp or not, Aeth had to admit she was a pretty pitiable sight – then continued until he was standing with Aethan and the rest of his crew. After the briefest of hesitations Elara moved forward, pushing the anti-grav stretcher ahead of her until she reached the Imperial officer. She handed him a datapad; Aethan couldn’t hear what she said to the officer, but he already knew that the datapad contained a record of the injuries the blonde had sustained and the treatments provided. The officer looked down at the pad, gloved fingers curling around the edges of the device so tightly Aethan thought he could hear the casing crack from where he stood, and then nodded politely at Elara. She hurried back to join her husband and the others.

“Major!” the Imperial officer called, holding out his hand and making as if to throw something. When Aethan reacted, bringing his own hand up, the officer tossed him a set of keys.

Aeth caught the keys easily and saw that they were for the stun-cuffs. He quickly unlocked the cuffs, setting the Republic prisoner free. The man nodded in gratitude and rubbed his wrists before saying, almost gruffly, “So we done here?”

Biting back a sarcastic reply – something along the lines of *A thank-you would be nice, your Majesty* – Aethan simply nodded, looking the other man over. Once again that sense of familiarity nagged at him; he had definitely seen this man before.

“What’s that?” Aeth asked, pointing.

Blinking, the man reached towards his pocket, pulling out a datapad. For a brief moment Aeth was certain the man hadn’t expected to find that there, but then his confused expression cleared and he shrugged again, smirking.

“Field report,” he said, tapping the datapad against his thigh. “A month and a half in Imp custody wasn’t a complete waste of time – I managed to get some useful intel out of the deal.” Then, before Aeth could comment, the other man yawned loudly and asked, “You got anything to eat? You wouldn’t believe how bad the field rations are on the other side …”
surrounded by Republic accents again; Dorne’s Imperial accent was a surprise, but after all the time he’d spent with Vector and Miranza she sounded more familiar to him than her Corellian husband and the Organa troops.

Once Dorne had given him a clean bill of health – tsk-ing a little over the still-healing bump on his forehead – he was able to slip into one of the spaceport ‘freshers, ducking into the nearest stall. He wasn’t terribly surprised to discover he was shaking.

Stars, he didn’t even know how to begin processing all of this. First the sight of Vector in an Imperial officer’s uniform – where the hell had he even found that? – and then Miranza, tucked away in that anti-grav stretcher, looking so tiny and battered but alive, thank the Force, she was alive … He’d come very, very close to giving the whole thing away, just falling to his knees and crying for joy because she was safe. It had taken every fibre in his being for him to just keep on walking, to go and stand with the Major and his crew.

And now … this. Theron drew the datapad out of his back pocket, turning it over and over in his hands. He recognized it from a few days ago – and from earlier that morning, when he and Vector had sat down to go over the plan one last time. Vector had wanted to make another attempt at breaking Theron’s conditioning, and had used this datapad as his guide. It was the instructions Miranza had written up for them, the entire word-for-word transcription of the steps she had undergone to free herself. Vector hadn’t been successful this morning – and the sorrow on his face at the realization that he had failed, again, had nearly been enough to reduce Theron to tears – and Theron had been so certain he was going back to Republic space with the Castellan restraints still in place.

The restraints were still active, of course, but with Miranza’s instructions and a trustworthy friend, Theron could still be freed. He had thought he was giving up any chance at freedom in order to get her back – and he had been fine with that; her life and freedom seemed a fair exchange for his – but Vector must have slipped the datapad into his pocket when they were hugging goodbye. He hadn’t even felt it.

*I’m free,* Theron thought, tucking the datapad into a pocket inside his jacket, where it would be safe. He stepped out of the stall and went to splash water over his face.

*I’m free.* He’d never thought he’d think those words again.

Strange. He hadn't thought freedom would feel so much like having his heart broken.
Six Months Later

As traps went, one could do a whole lot worse than a fancy, five-star hotel on Manaan. It was definitely a step up from Club Ufora, and damn if Theron hadn’t walked into that one with eyes wide shut. Still, he was half-expecting armed soldiers to leap out from behind the front desk as he went to check in, and was mildly surprised when all that happened was an exceedingly polite Selkath took the voucher from him and went over to register him in her computer terminal.

The hotel was nice, all gleaming marble floors and vaulted ceilings. Fancier by far than any place Theron had ever stayed before, and that included the luxury condo suite Samar had used. The place was well above his pay-grade, that was for certain. He’d long ago realized that if wealth was what he wanted out of life, he was in the wrong line of work.

Or possibly working for the wrong side.

“Thank you, Mr. Shan,” the Selkath said when she returned, handing him a room key. “If you require anything your room holocomm has a direct line to the front desk. Thank you for staying with us. Please enjoy your stay.”

Theron accepted the key, turning it over in his hand as he slung the straps of his backpack – the only luggage he’d brought – over one shoulder. He felt disheveled and out of place; he hadn’t been expecting anything so swanky as this. When the package came in the mail – sent to him anonymously at his office on Coruscant – it had just given him a date and time and a voucher for the hotel. He’d looked the hotel up on the HoloNet, of course, but Theron was perfectly aware that online resources could be misleading, and he’d dismissed the glowing reviews as being the work of corporate shills. At least he had thought to pack a couple of nice things to wear so he wouldn’t look hopelessly uncivilized. He wouldn’t want to embarrass his hosts.

If it hadn’t been for the familiar spicy-sweet fragrance and the handwriting on the single piece of flimsiplast inside the package, he would’ve bailed entirely. But it had been six months since he had returned to Coruscant, and damned if he wasn’t more than a little curious.

Six long months, with the first week or so spent in the med centre attached to the SIS offices as doctors put him through every test they could reasonably conceive of (and a few more that didn’t seem particularly reasonable to him). His entire body was scanned for implants, tracking devices and any other attempts those filthy Imperials might have made at compromising him, and his cranial implants were removed (arguably his least favourite part of the whole process, because that fucking hurt) and processed for bugs and viruses and exploits. Finally, finally, Theron was given a clean bill of health and sent on his way – to what Director Trant called ‘compassionate leave,’ during which time he was expected to be in counselling sessions three times a week until they could be certain he had his head screwed on straight.

Theron’s therapist, Doctor Zywes, was a very nice woman and he was probably going to drive her to early retirement. Or drink. Possibly both.

He got it. He really did. Director Trant, Satele, Jace – stars, even Jonas – they all just wanted to be certain Theron was all right. He’d been through a trauma (Force, did he ever hate that fucking word,
especially when it was applied to himself) and it was perfectly understandable for him to need some time to recuperate. What they failed to understand was that Theron didn’t want time off; he wanted to get back to work, to put Samar and the Star Cabal and yes, even Miranza and Vector – as good as they were, as good as they’d been for him, they were a part of the whole messed-up package – as far behind him as possible, and move on with his fucking life.

And, of course, aside from wanting to know that he was all right, they all wanted to be absolutely certain that Theron hadn’t somehow been persuaded into joining the Empire, that he wasn’t secretly working for the two spies who had kept him isolated for weeks on end while everyone else was trying to rescue him. That he wasn’t compromised.

Fuck. As if any of them had any idea. Screw the Empire – Miranza Gerrick and Vector Hyllus had had him compromised since krying Rishi. Theron wasn’t going to jump ship for them (outside of some incredibly graphic dreams that left him aching and wanting in the wee hours of the night, with nothing but his hand to service him), but anything short of treason they wanted from him, he was pretty damned sure he’d do it.

He realized after about two weeks of therapy that his refusal to talk to Doctor Zywes wasn’t helping him in any way. The Togruta therapist was kind and compassionate, but there were aspects of his captivity that Theron wasn’t comfortable discussing, and in trying to protect himself his instinctive response was to shut down with her completely. It wasn’t until he realized that his silence just meant he’d be stuck meeting with her even longer that he started opening up: little things, at first, like what it had felt like when he was first kidnapped in Club Ufora, and then finally branching out to deeper, older hurts. Doctor Zywes was familiar with his personal history; she was delighted to have Theron open up about old childhood trauma. And old childhood trauma was an excellent way to deflect her from asking him about all the more recent stuff. Some things he kept to himself. He didn’t want to talk about what Samar did to him. He’d talked to Vector, and while the Joiner wasn’t a qualified counsellor he was certainly easy to speak with. Doctor Zywes asked about Corellia; Theron deflected by telling her about the time Master Zho had him on the run from a cult of cannibals. She wanted to know about Miranza; he told her about meeting his mother for the first time as an adult. He was a spy. He knew how to manipulate others - even others who should really know better.

Two months in, Doctor Zywes gave him the green-light to go back to work. Theron dove in head-first.

For the first two months he was mostly kept to light administrative duties – not out of concern for his physical health, which was perfectly fine, but so that Director Trant could keep an eye on him. Theron reviewed files submitted by other agents, tracking reports of Imperial activity, submitting his recommendations and concerns, and otherwise keeping his nose clean. At first he saw Miranza’s hand in every Imperial operation he reviewed, but eventually he realized that was just his imagination; after all, she was a freelancer, not an official member of Sith Intelligence, and it was ridiculous to think she was single-handedly tackling every assignment the Empire had going. Still, he thought of her and Vector often, even if he never mentioned either of them to Doctor Zywes.

He read with satisfaction the results of Havoc Squad’s assignment on Alderaan: the successful destruction of a chemical engineering laboratory underneath the House Ulgo estate, the rounding up of every scientist involved in that “experiment,” and finally, the unfortunate necessity of taking down the infected Mirodari Killiks after it was discovered that there was no cure for what the scientists had done to them. He wondered what Vector would think about that, and if the Joiner realized it had been necessary to keep the other Killiks safe – or if he thought the destruction of the Mirodari was just another Republic ploy to cripple the Empire.

Theron wasn’t surprised that Amrielle’s name – or even her physical description – wasn’t in any of
the reports he read. The Nautolan woman seemed to have gone to ground along with the other remnants of the Star Cabal, but this bothered him less than he would have expected.

One month to the day of his return to Coruscant, Theron used the datapad Vector had given him to break the Castellan restraints. He would have tried sooner, but he was too afraid of failure and what it would mean for him. If he tried before he was ready and it didn’t work, he feared it would render him incapable of making another attempt. As much as he wanted the restraints gone, Theron decided it would be best to exercise patience for once in his life.

Rather than ask Jonas or Jace or even Trant to help him, Theron had used a protocol droid to run him through the various steps outlined on the datapad. The droid didn’t have any reason to try to interfere with Theron’s conditioning, and its restraining bolt meant it couldn’t talk about the deprogramming afterwards. Theron wiped the droid’s memory clean anyway – just in case.

He knew Jonas would have been more than willing to help him if he had asked. Same with Jace and Director Trant. In fact, Theron could think of a number of people who would have had no problem taking him through the deprogramming process, but he was afraid to ask. Every single person he could think of would have some reason to interject their own commands instead of freeing him. Not for any nefarious purposes, of course – Jonas, Jace, Trant, Doctor Zywes, they were all good people – but because altering Theron’s conditioning was the only way to completely and finally silence their concerns that he was somehow still compromised. He knew they were all worried about him and that they would only have the best of intentions, but being compelled to serve the Republic without question was just another form of imprisonment, and Theron wanted to be free.

Sad, that: he had been fine with Vector deprogramming him. Or Miranza, if she had been there. The two people all his friends and coworkers thought posed the biggest threat to him, and they were the only ones he trusted to respect his wishes.

At the end of two months Theron was back in the field. Trant kept him close to home, initially, which suited him just fine. When a name he had flagged came up in the reports as having touched down on Coruscant, Theron didn’t have to travel far to get the job done. Afterwards he called in a few favours and tucked the report away for future reference. Trant’s leash started getting longer and longer, and finally Theron was cleared for full active duty. The first time he left Coruscant he thought his heart was going to explode in his chest, he was so excited.

Six months in, he received a package at the office. A slip of flimsiplast that smelled like spiced honey and a voucher for a luxurious hotel on Manaan. He was free to come and go as he pleased.

Theron went.

The door opened on the first try, letting Theron into his hotel room. It was every bit as fancy as the lobby downstairs, but disappointingly empty. A single door connected his room to the one next door, however, and he knocked, hoping to be welcomed in. Silence. He was alone.

He turned, surveying the room again. On the desk by the window there were a number of flyers and brochures for nearby attractions. Although this was far from his first time on Manaan he didn’t recognize any of the restaurants or shops nearby – his previous experiences had involved entirely different kinds of entertainment (swoop-bike racing, initially - he’d been a rebellious youth - and then tracking down traitors to the Republic; Manaan seemed to be one of those planets he kept coming back to for one reason or another). His eyes fell on a card left folded among the brochures; after a moment’s hesitation he picked it up and opened it.
It was the same handwriting as the flimsi: *Silver Lotus, 1900 hours.*

Theron glanced at the chronometer and saw he had a little over half an hour to get ready. He hit the shower.

O o O o O

The Silver Lotus was an expensive restaurant attached to the hotel. A line of well-dressed guests already waited outside the doors when Theron arrived, but he was able to peer inside the restaurant and saw that his table was waiting for him. His heart picked up the pace as he made his way towards them.

Miranza and Vector had acquired a table situated next to an open stretch of water, and although the restaurant was slightly crowded the tables around them were mysteriously empty, granting them some privacy. They were engaged in quiet conversation when Theron approached, but looked up at him at the same time, both of them smiling warmly.

For a moment all he could do was stare.

Force help him, they were beautiful.

Miranza was dressed in a low-cut dress made out of a soft, shimmery red fabric that hugged every curve and glittered when she moved. Her blonde curls were pulled up into some intricate hairstyle on top of her head, and she was wearing a deep red lipstick that matched her dress and did fascinating things to the shape of her mouth. Vector wore a dark suit with red accents, perfectly complementing his wife’s attire while at the same time highlighting his own elegant beauty. The two of them looked like they could have stepped out of a glamour shoot, they were so perfect together.

Perfect – and perfectly healthy, so far as Theron could see. Relief washed over him, and he had to sit down before he fell down.

“Theron?” Vector’s voice, so warm and familiar, was filled with concern. “Are you all right?”

Theron was silent for a moment, struggling to get his emotions under control. Six months – it had felt like an eternity. “I just … I didn’t think we’d ever see each other again,” he answered finally, feeling his cheeks flush with embarrassment. “I figured, if we did meet, it would be … you know … as enemies again.”

“We haven’t been enemies in a long time,” Miranza replied, reaching across the table to grasp his hand. He noticed that her right hand was slightly stiff, the skin somewhat pale and shiny compared to the rest of her body, but he didn’t comment on it. Instead, he focused on how warm she was, how real. She’d been a recurring fixture in his dreams for the past six months, her and Vector both, but now she was here. Now they were here. Not a dream, reality.

“We would have contacted you sooner,” Vector said, sharing a quick glance with his wife. Theron sensed some unspoken communication between the two of them, and the Joiner ducked his head, clearing his throat before continuing, “It has been difficult for us to find the time. Our schedule has …”

“Things are different,” Miranza supplied, when he trailed off. She smiled faintly, biting her lip. “I wasn’t sure if you would come. It’s a long way to travel for what might be an Imperial ambush, after all.”

“If you’d contacted me earlier, I might not have,” Theron admitted. “I’ve only been granted travel clearance for a month or two. And before that … I’m pretty sure Trant would’ve been on my case if
I’d taken off for a visit with the Empire.” That was putting it mildly – if Director Trant had caught Theron sneaking off for some private one-on-two time with a pair of Imperial agents, after everything Theron had been through with them, he probably would’ve clapped him in irons and locked him up under the Senate Tower. Or shipped him off to Tython for Satele to deal with.

Before he could remark on it further, Miranza gave him a long, searching look, studying his face. He knew what she was going to ask before the words were out of her mouth, but he still waited for her to say it.

“Did you break the restraints? Are you free?”

Theron gave a hard, tight smile before nodding, answering, “Completely free. Try me.”

Miranza immediately demurred, looking uncomfortable at the very idea. It was Vector who gave Theron a calculating look and said – even as his wife winced beside him – “Keyword: Atychiphobia. Stand up.”

When Theron didn’t move a muscle, Vector and Miranza exchanged relieved glances, and Miranza let out a long, shuddering sigh. Theron’s smile turned smug, and he arched an eyebrow at them both.

“See?” he said lightly, trying to disguise the fact that he was shaking in spite of himself. Even knowing the conditioning was gone, hearing Vector used the command word on him want to run screaming. “All better.” It wasn’t quite a lie: he was better, if not one hundred percent improved.

“Good,” Vector said emphatically. “We are pleased to know it worked.” Then, with another arch glance at his wife, he added, “That will help our plans immensely.”

Oh, stars. They had plans for him. Any other Imperials and Theron would be worried about what those plans might be, but with these two – with the way Miranza was biting her lip and the low, husky quality of Vector’s voice as he spoke – he felt nothing but sharp, burning need. He was suddenly glad he was sitting and that the table hid his lower half from view, because his pants were too damned tight to disguise the way his body was responding.

They still had to get through dinner first. And then, presumably, get back to their hotel room. Nice restaurant like this, it was probably déclassé to fuck on the table.

Theron felt a delicious shiver ripple through him at the thought, then hid his response by reaching inside his jacket and pulling out the small envelope he’d brought with him. Now was as good a time as any. He set the envelope down on the table; then, after a moment’s hesitation, slid it across the table towards Miranza. She gave him a curious look, arching one delicate blonde eyebrow at him before picking the envelope up and peering inside.

“What’s this?” she asked, shaking out the small datapad.

“Just … open it.”

Vector shuffled his chair closer to his wife’s, leaning in so he could look at the viewscreen with her. Theron just kept his gaze focused on their faces, uncertain what he would see there. There were only two items saved to the datapad, and Theron knew them both by heart.

The first item was a news article from Alderaan, something taken from the high society section under local affairs. It was a brief obituary for one Baron Alric Ulgo, nephew of the late Bouris, summarizing his sudden and unexpected death while away on a business trip to Coruscant. According to the article, Alric had suffered a heart attack shortly after attending a celebration in his
honour at the Dealer’s Den cantina. His death had come as a shock, given his relative youth, but he had been under an awful lot of stress lately, following on the heels of so much family tragedy: first his uncle’s death, then his father’s, and his sister’s absence. Such a shame. He had held so much promise.

The second item was the surveillance feed from a hotel room. Theron knew the feed was grainy and patchy - the hotel had been fancy but their security was shit - but he knew it was possible to make out what was happening: a lean, athletic young man with dark hair and a neatly-trimmed goatee, returning to his room after an evening of drinking and carousing. He made it about five feet into the room before a dark figure stepped out of the shadows and grabbed him from behind. What followed was a brief fight that ended with the man being stabbed in the chest by a vibroknife.

His death had been instantaneous. Theron had meant for it to last longer.

Miranza set the datapad back onto the table with a loud thump, both hands flying up to her mouth to silence whatever cry she had been about to make. Vector wrapped an arm around her shoulders and drew her in close, tucking her head in under his chin.

“Curious,” Vector commented dryly, meeting Theron’s gaze over Miranza’s elegantly coiffed head. “We’re not accustomed to heart attacks being so … violent.”

Theron bowed his head slightly. “I’m just sorry it was so quick.”

When Miranza lifted her head again Theron could see that her eyes were red but her face was calm. “Thank you, Theron.”

It was strange, being thanked for killing a man. Stranger still was how good it made him feel. Theron had been shocked to see Alric Ulgo’s name on the list of Coruscant arrivals, but the man had made little effort to hide his comings and goings. He likely hadn’t realized that Miranza had Republic allies (stupid of him, really - Miranza might be an Imperial, but she was an Imperial spy and having connections and contacts across the galaxy was a part of the job), and had thought himself safe in the capital of the Republic. Tracking him down had been easy, and breaking into his hotel room easier still, for a man of Theron’s skills. The clean-up had just required him to call in a few favours, which Theron had been more than happy to do, considering the results.

“That bastard is never going to hurt you again,” he said fiercely, catching her hand in his.

“No.” Miranza looked down at the datapad, which had switched off. “He’s really not.”

Their waiter arrived a few seconds later to get their drinks and appetizers order, dispelling some of the seriousness that had fallen over the table. Miranza slipped the datapad back in its envelope and gave it to Vector, who tucked it into a pocket inside his jacket. Sensing a need for a change in subject, Theron set about regaling Miranza and Vector with stories from his return to Coruscant, doing his best to put a humorous spin on his weeks of forced convalescence. By the time their drinks arrived all three of them were laughing, their cheerful reunion restored.

It was quite a bit later when Theron, Miranza and Vector headed for the elevator up to their hotel rooms. Theron had barely stumbled onto the elevator – he’d had a few drinks with dinner; not enough to get him intoxicated, but enough to alleviate some of his tension and inner turmoil, and he was feeling pleasantly buzzed – when Miranza backed him up against the mirrored wall, going up on tiptoes to kiss him hungrily. Vector
crowded in close, one hand on the small of Miranza’s back while the other gripped Theron by the hair to draw his face down to meet his.

The elevator chimed when it reached their floor, the doors sliding open to let them out. The hallway was mercifully empty – not that Theron cared all that much – and for a brief moment Theron pushed Miranza up against the wall, his hands sliding up under her dress to brush teasingly over the silken fabric of her panties. The wanton moan she let out at his touch made his entire body thrum with need. He was perfectly willing to have her right then and there (and judging by her reaction, she was perfectly on board with that plan) but Vector got their hotel room door open – Theron had been right, their room was the one adjacent to his – and then all three of them were stumbling inside, Vector closing and locking the door behind them.

Theron kicked off his shoes and socks at the same time as he shrugged his way free of his jacket, leaving a trail of clothing on his way into the room. Vector was only slightly more refined, draping his jacket over the back of a chair rather than dropping it onto the floor although his own shoes and socks went the way of Theron’s. Miranza’s heels made it as far as the bed. Theron was about to pull Vector in for a kiss when the Joiner suddenly drew back, strong hands twisting through Theron’s hair.

“Before we go any further,” Vector said, giving both Theron and Miranza a meaningful look, “we need to be perfectly, absolutely, explicitly clear: nothing that happens here will be happening without complete and enthusiastic consent.” Yanking Theron’s head to one side, the Joiner pressed his lips to Theron’s neck, drawing forth a long, needy moan. “You’ve both been through –”

“Please don’t say ‘trauma,’” Theron groaned.

“A difficult experience,” Vector continued, as if he hadn’t interrupted. “We wish to be mindful of certain … triggers. We are willing to do anything you want, but we must know that you want it.”

“Anything?” Theron repeated, the thought making him a little weak in the knees.

“Anything,” Vector promised, with a wicked smile that gave Theron goosebumps. “We simply wish to know that if something makes you uncomfortable or could potentially be a trigger for you, you will tell us and we will stop.”

It was Theron’s turn to grip Vector by the hair, pulling the other man in close so he could feel that hard, lean body against his. He ground himself against Vector’s hip, delighting in the small gasp Miranza made behind them as she watched.

“My safeword,” Theron said, tone completely serious, meeting Vector’s eyes before leaning in and mouthing the curve of his jaw, “is shuura.” Vector shuddered, closing his eyes and nodding. The Joiner licked his lips as Theron ground against him again, and Theron murmured in his ear, “Now that I’ve made it clear what I want, what do you want, Vector?”

Vector’s eyes flew open and the look he gave Theron was pure, unadulterated sin.

“You,” he answered, in a voice gone thick with need. “On your knees.”
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

This is pretty much just smut.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty-Six

“You. On your knees.”

By the Force, Vector Hyllus was going to be the death of her.

Between the husky rasp in his voice and the hungry, needy look he was giving Theron, Miranza couldn’t have been more turned on by her husband if she’d tried. She loved how considerate and patient he was, but damn, the moment he took charge … Her knees went weak.

From the looks of things Theron was feeling much the same way. He let out a startled gasp, licking his lips, then obediently knelt in front of Vector, landing on his knees with a dull thump. He leaned in, mouthing Vector’s erection through his pants before reaching up and tugging at the buckle at Vector’s waist. When it looked like Theron was struggling with it Miranza moved in behind him, her hips pressing against Theron’s back as her hands made short work of her husband’s belt. She quickly unfastened Vector’s pants, one hand sliding inside to curl around his cock as her other hand carded through Theron’s hair. Vector made a sound low in his throat as Theron let her guide his head towards her husband’s cock, and she leaned forward to swallow Vector’s moans with her kisses as Theron took him in his mouth.

This, this was what Miranza never understood about more traditional couples. Watching Theron go down on Vector, hearing the moans her husband made and knowing how good Theron was making him feel – she didn’t understand how something like that could make someone else jealous. What could be better than knowing someone you loved was experiencing pleasure? Vector enjoying himself at Theron’s touch didn’t diminish what he experienced with her. Jealousy – as if somehow she was the only person in the galaxy who had the right to make Vector feel good – made no sense to her at all.

As if she would deprive herself from seeing this.

Theron’s hand – the one not feeding Vector’s cock between his lips – slid up the back of her leg, dextrous fingers leaving a trail of fire in their wake, skimming the short hem of her dress up along her thigh. Vector reached down, bunching the fabric of her dress in his hand and pulling it up, exposing more of her to Theron’s touch. The SIS agent’s multitasking skills were remarkable: he managed to hook one finger in the flimsy strap of her lacy black panties, tugging them down even as he continued to work his mouth along Vector’s length. She had to lift her arms – reluctantly releasing her hold on Theron’s hair – so that Vector could pull her dress over her head, and then Vector’s hand was sliding down her back to cup the curve of one buttock inside her panties, his fingers digging in with just enough pressure to leave her gasping.

“We’re not going to last at this rate,” Vector gasped, stroking his other hand through Theron’s spiky dark hair.
Six months since they’d last seen each other – none of them were going to last long, given how pent-up they all were.

“We’ve got all night,” Miranza promised, sinking to her knees before her husband. “Let’s take the edge off, shall we?”

Vector let out a strangled groan when she ran the tip of her tongue along the parts of him that Theron’s mouth couldn’t reach, her hands going up to pull his trousers and briefs down the rest of the way. His hands on both of their heads as if to support himself, Vector stepped out of his trousers and kicked them off to one side along with his briefs. Theron pulled his mouth away from Vector’s cock, turning his head to kiss Miranza hungrily; when their lips parted she took over, her cheeks hollowing as she took her husband in as deep as she could while Theron’s talented tongue licked patterns along Vector’s inner thighs.

She felt Vector’s fingers tightening in her hair, making a mess of her elaborate coif as he fought to keep from bucking his hips against her face. She made an encouraging noise, mouth vibrating over his cock, and he groaned again and thrust once, experimentally, his eyes on her face to gauge her reaction. At another hum of approval from her he threaded his hands through her hair, bucking hard as she did her best to open up her throat to take him in all the way. Beside her Theron let out an appreciative sound at the sight of Vector fucking her face in earnest, and Miranza felt the agent shift until he was behind her, his own pants-clad erection pressing into her back as his hands slid inside the cups of her bra.

Then Vector was coming with a shout, both hands on her head as he spilled down her throat, his eyes closed and his knees quaking. She kept her mouth on him until he was done, pulling away with a long, leisurely lick at his still-twitching cock as she swallowed and sank back on her heels. Theron’s hands worked at the clasp of her bra, his lips roving along the sensitive skin of her neck before his mouth came to rest over her pulse-point, licking and sucking hard until she was breathless. As her bra came loose she let Theron guide the straps down off her shoulders, slipping it free of her arms to discard it on the floor with the rest of their clothes. Vector held out his hands to both of them, drawing first her, then Theron to their feet, then motioning for Theron to get on the bed.

Before Theron could take more than a couple of steps Miranza was attacking the buttons on his shirt, desperate to have him naked and accessible to her. Her fingers were stiff and clumsy with need, and Vector – his own sense of urgency diminished somewhat by his orgasm – quickly took over before she just gave up and ripped the shirt off the other man. Then somehow Theron’s shirt and pants and boxers were on the floor and he was tumbling backwards onto the bed, Vector shrugging free of his own shirt as he and Miranza followed.

The sight of the two most beautiful men in the galaxy naked and sprawled across her bed was enough to make her head swim.

*And I get to play with all of that,* Miranza thought, as Vector guided Theron onto his back in the middle of the bed.

She could just stand back and watch the two of them, the picture was so glorious. Theron, his body that perfect inverted triangle, all broad shoulders and tight, hard abs, his nut-brown skin stretched taut over smooth planes of muscle. His hair – softer than it looked, and mussed now from both her and Vector running their fingers through it. And his eyes, hazel irises almost completely taken over by dark pupils gone wide with lust – she could drown in them. And leaning between Theron’s splayed legs was Vector, all long, lean lines: tall, slender, somehow always managing to look perfectly composed and elegant even when he was coming apart in her mouth or hands. She could spend hours just smoothing her fingers through that jet-black hair, and when she got a handful of it, the
sound he made when she wrenched his head to one side so that she could plant kisses over his throat… It made her wet just thinking about it.

Theron noticed her hanging back, observing him and Vector. He shifted up onto one elbow and raised his other hand, crooking his fingers in a beckoning gesture, his lips quirking in a wicked grin. Vector glanced at her over one shoulder, his eyes taking on that glazed look she knew so well, and held out his hand to her, helping her up onto the bed. Theron yanked her forward until she was straddling his stomach, his hands rubbing up and down her thighs. She watched his eyes drift upward and a faint look of confusion settled on his face as his fingers splayed across her belly.

“Your scar’s gone,” he murmured, fingertips stroking the unmarred skin.

Vector leaned forward to plant a gentle kiss at the small of her back before settling once more between Theron’s legs. She turned to look, but his dark head obscured his face from view; she could guess, however, from the way Theron’s mouth suddenly fell open and a low moan tumbled from his lips – and the wet, sloppy sounds she heard coming from behind her.

“I had a few scars removed,” she replied, without going into details. She didn’t want to talk about the words Alric Ulgo’s mercenaries had carved into her skin. The shrapnel scar had been the least of her concerns; she’d had no intentions of going through the remainder of her life with her rapists’ names slashed into her flesh like an artist signing his work.

Sensing that he was touching on something still raw and hurting, Theron kissed his fingertips, then brushed those fingers over her unmarked flesh as if bestowing a blessing. His hands fell back along her thighs before hooking around the curve of her hips, tugging her forward until she suddenly found her panty-clad crotch hovering over his face. Behind her, Vector did something with his mouth that made Theron gasp, and then the agent was tugging her panties to one side and drawing her down so that he could run the tip of his tongue along her cleft. She let out a gasp of her own and closed her eyes.

Once again Miranza was amazed by Theron’s ability to multitask. She knew that if she were the one Vector was pleasuring there was no way she would also be able to focus on someone else – but Theron seemed to have no problem whatsoever, sucking in the sensitive skin along her inner thighs, letting the suction go with an audible pop and then licking his tongue over the small hickey he left behind. His fingers parted her lips, finding her wet and aching, and when his tongue finally touched her clit she thought she would burst from that brief contact alone. He moaned under her, the vibrations doing amazing things to her heated core, and from behind her Vector made a helpless sound, releasing Theron’s cock from his mouth with a noisy smack of his lips.

“Turn around,” Vector said to her, voice ragged. “We want to see your face when you come apart.”

The way he said it – as a man dying of thirst, begging for a drink of water – made her quick to comply, and with Theron’s help she managed to wriggle around until she was straddling Theron’s face, her hands splayed across his abdomen. Theron went back to work, his tongue probing between her lips before suddenly thrusting inside her, making her fingers clench down on his abs. Vector lifted Theron’s cock with one hand and licked the underside, his eyes focused on her, drifting from the blissed-out expression on her face to Theron’s mouth working between her legs. Theron’s tongue flicked out, lightning-quick twitches over her sensitive nub just as he slid first one, then a second finger inside of her, hooking his fingers just right until the roughened pads were rubbing over that magical, swollen spot inside her walls.

Miranza felt rather than heard Theron’s whimper as Vector licked a stripe up one side of his cock and down the other before wrapping his mouth around the head. The sight, combined with everything Theron’s mouth was doing to her, was enough to topple her over the edge, and she came,
shuddering and crying out just as Theron let out a muffled shout, Vector milking every last drop out of Theron’s orgasm.

She collapsed on her side on the bed, her legs shaking too much for her to do anything else, and Vector stood and disappeared into the ‘fresher for a moment, returning with a damp wash cloth that he used to clean Theron off. He leaned forward, kissing Theron hard on the mouth, lingering over her taste on the other man’s lips and tongue.

“Damn,” Miranza whispered, heat beginning to coil in her belly again at the sight of them.

“Am I dead?” Theron mumbled, staring up at the ceiling with a goofy expression on his face. “I’m pretty sure I’m dead. ‘Here lies Theron Shan, fucked to death by Imperial spies.’ It’s got a good ring to it. I like it.”

“You talk a lot for a dead man,” said Vector, sitting down on the edge of the bed. He ran his hand over the curve of Miranza’s hip, making her shiver. “Did we wear you out, Theron? Such a shame. We think we could go again.”

Miranza turned her head, peering incredulously at her husband’s groin. Sure enough, his cock had twitched back to life, swelling to hardness between his legs. Theron rolled up onto his side, an impressed look on his face as he, too, assessed the situation. He licked his lips slowly and seemed to come to some sort of decision.

“Do we … uh …” He blushed and cleared his throat, trying again. “Do we have any lube? Because it would be a damned shame to let that” he motioned at Vector’s erection “go to waste.”

Miranza and Vector exchanged glances, a small smile quirking the corners of Vector’s mouth as he stood again and disappeared for a second time into the ‘fresher. This time when he returned to the main room he had a small bottle in his hands.

What followed was a few minutes of discussion and negotiation. In spite of his earlier comment Theron was a little hesitant to proceed, and it took a bit of time before he admitted that he hadn’t engaged in anal sex since his time with Samar – or rather, he had tried to, but this was most definitely one of those triggers Vector had worried about before. Theron confessed to some awkward fumbling with a few would-be one-night-stands, but it had never gone anywhere; every time things got to a certain point he found his heart racing and his breath coming in too fast, and that was pretty much the end of the encounter because it turns out panic attacks aren’t the least bit sexy.

During the course of their conversation the three of them cuddled together on the bed, Miranza and Vector doing their level best to be as comforting and nonjudgmental as possible with Theron. He ended up on his side, his head resting in Miranza’s lap as she ran her fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp. Vector leaned against his wife, his head on her shoulder while he gently stroked a hand up and down Theron’s flank. Finally, when Theron wound down his explanation, clearly embarrassed and ashamed, Vector bent down and kissed him lightly on the hipbone.

“You do not have to do anything you don’t want to do, Theron,” he said quietly.

“I know.” Theron let out an exasperated sigh. “It’s just … I do want this.” He glanced up at Miranza, smiling up at the underside of her bare breasts. “I’m just afraid we’ll get started and then I’ll freak out again.”

“So?” Miranza asked, tone gentle. “So what? We’re not going anywhere.” She felt like pointing out that it was months before she felt comfortable having sex with Vector again after she recovered from the injuries she had sustained on Alderaan. She knew it might be helpful for Theron to hear that he
wasn’t alone in this, but she didn’t want to make it about her own recovery – not when she, at least, had had the benefit of having Vector there with her every step of the way. Whatever progress Theron had made, he had made it on his own. It wasn’t the same.

Teron worried at his lower lip, his gaze shifting from Miranza to Vector and back again.

“Could we maybe just … fool around for a bit, and see how I do?” he asked finally.

“Of course,” Vector replied. “We want what you want.”

Not for the first time Miranza admired her husband’s tact. She had the patience for dealing with Theron’s insecurities – and she certainly understood them – but Vector was simply so much better at this. Where she knew she would come across as insensitive or impatient, Vector was compassion personified, letting Theron take the lead while still ensuring the other man was actually doing something with that lead. If it had been her, she would either have pushed too hard, too soon, or she would have given up entirely and called the whole thing off.

Vector leaned down and kissed Theron – a gentle, coaxing kiss that was no less passionate for it. Theron made a small sound in the back of his throat before pulling the other man towards him, hands hooking around Vector’s neck. Then, at a subtle touch from Vector, Theron was kissing Miranza instead, her body melting against his.

They’d spent enough time talking and relaxing that Theron had had time to recover, and Miranza could feel him stirring against her belly as she writhed against him. She ran her hand over his length, curling her fingers around him, and he let out a small hiss as she stroked him back to full hardness. Vector settled in behind Theron, kissing the back of his neck and over his bare shoulders while Theron lowered his head to pull one of Miranza’s nipples into his mouth. He sucked hard, releasing her with a soft, wet pop before moving to the other nipple and repeating the process. Vector’s hand slid between them, cupping the breast Theron wasn’t nuzzling, rubbing the pad of his finger over the pebbled tip.

After a few minutes of this Theron drew Miranza down beside him, hooking her leg over his hip and slipping his hand between her legs, finding her wet and ready for him. She gave a low moan as he slowly eased his cock inside of her; her sigh turned into a breathy gasp as his hips snapped forward, impaling her in a single hard thrust. She kissed him on the mouth, tongue pushing between his lips, tasting his moans and gasps as he began to fuck her.

It wasn’t long before Theron turned to Vector, giving the other man a terse nod. He pulled out, allowing Miranza to flip around to face the other way so that Theron could enter her from behind. Once he was back inside her he wrapped his arms around her waist, bringing his hands up to cup her breasts. She felt Theron tense, ever so slightly, as Vector began to tease and probe him between his buttocks, but the hoarse whimper that ghosted over her ear was definitely a sound of pleasure and anticipation. Miranza wished she could see what Vector was doing, but the sounds – wet, amazingly dirty sounds that combined with Theron’s cries to send hot, tingly shivers racing through her – told enough of a story.

“Is this all right, Theron?” Vector asked, in that damnably controlled voice of his, as if he wasn’t in the process of reducing Theron to a shuddering heap, as if Theron wasn’t fucking Miranza as though their lives depended on it.

Teron groaned, burying his mouth in the curve of Miranza’s neck. She felt his consternation when, that not being enough of a response for Vector, the Joiner pulled away. Theron let out a low, frustrated growl, lifting his head away from Miranza long enough to hiss out, “Yes, Vector, fuck, will you please fucking fuck me?”
Before Miranza could comment on Theron’s incredible grasp of vulgar Basic, she felt him tighten around her and then give a long, shuddering sigh as Vector finally complied. There was a brief pause as all three of them adjusted, striving to find a comfortable pace, and then Theron resumed thrusting into her, his rhythm matching Vector’s. Theron muffled his cries against her neck, his hands squeezing her breasts as if they were a lifeline, his thumbs stroking maddening circles around her peaks. Then another hand was sliding between her legs, Vector’s long fingers rubbing her clit in time to their thrusts. She felt Theron lift his head, and turned just enough to see him and Vector locked in a passionate kiss. That sight was enough to push her a bit closer to the edge, and when their kiss broke and Theron’s teeth sank down into her shoulder she cried out, her entire body quaking with release. Her clenching around him was enough to tip Theron over, groaning helplessly against her shoulder. Vector’s fingers stroked her a few seconds longer, drawing her orgasm out until she was trembling and sobbing, and then she heard him cry out as he came.

The three of them lay tangled together for the span of several heartbeats, breathing heavily. Theron kept his face pressed against Miranza’s shoulder and for a moment she was afraid he was upset – that it had been too soon, that in spite of their best efforts he wasn’t ready for this. Then he pulled away, kissing the line of her jaw and letting out a long sigh of contentment.

“That is why I’d make a terrible Jedi,” he said after a moment’s consideration. He slapped Miranza lightly on the ass and slowly eased out of her, pressing a line of kisses down her spine. “Not because I’m too passionate, but because I’m too kriffing horny. Who the fuck would ever want to give up that?”

Vector snorted. “You would know better than us,” he remarked dryly, “but we do not think that this was specifically forbidden by the Jedi Code.”

Theron sat up between them, leaning down to kiss them both on the mouth, one at a time, before climbing up off the bed. Miranza pushed herself up onto her elbows, her eyes following Theron as he moved, naked as the day he was born, around the hotel room. She made no effort to hide how much she was enjoying the view.

“That ass, she thought dreamily, already contemplating round three. That ass is so perfect it should be a war crime.

Waggling his brows at her – if she didn’t know better, she would’ve guessed he was Force Sensitive and was reading her filthy thoughts – Theron picked up the room service menu and began scanning it. He peered up at her over the edge of the menu.

“What say we order some food, get cleaned up before it gets here, eat, and then get back to fucking each others’ brains out?” he suggested. “More or less in that order?”

Miranza opened her mouth to respond but found herself too distracted by all the images his words conjured to mind, and closed her mouth again with a snap. Beside her, Vector ran a hand over her hip, tracing languid patterns on her sweaty skin.

“That,” he said, “sounds like a delightful plan.” Then, in a warm tone, “We’re glad you’re here with us, Theron.”

Naked as he was, it was impossible to fail to notice Theron’s blush: it stretched from the tips of his ears all the way down to his chest, and he hung his head, suddenly bashful. The look he gave Vector was filled with uncharacteristic longing, and when he spoke again his voice had gone soft.

“Thanks. I’m glad I’m here with you, too.”
Chapter End Notes

Ever since I first started writing this fanfic, the song that’s played in my head every time I think about Theron, Miranza and Vector has been Sia's "Fire Meet Gasoline." I had it playing when I wrote this, and I think of it basically as their theme song.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Morning sunlight reflecting off the oceans outside the hotel room woke Theron from what was easily the best sleep of his life, and the sight of the two most beautiful people in the galaxy sprawled beside him was enough to leave him breathless. Miranza was curled up on his left, her arm flung across his stomach so that her fingers were resting lightly on Vector’s bicep; she had her face nestled against Theron’s shoulder, the fall of her hair keeping the sun out of her eyes. Her left leg was slung over his, her right tangled in the sheets, most of her naked body exposed to his appreciative gaze. On his right, Vector lay facedown, almost ramrod straight, sheets rucked down around his lean hips, baring just a tantalizing hint of magnificent ass. His face was turned away from Theron, towards the door, and Theron just got an eyeful of sable, sleep-tousled hair. Nestled between them on his back, Theron watched Miranza’s pale arm rise and fall with the steady rate of his breathing, and wondered how long he could lie there before his need to use the ‘fresher spoiled the moment.

The three of them had certainly earned their respite the night before, and whatever lingering fears he’d had about sex – with them, at least – had been put to rest. His body ached in a way that had everything to do with hours of enthusiastic, acrobatic fucking and nothing to do with injuries or a lifetime of reckless living. He was thirsty and hungry and definitely in need of another shower, but he had no desire whatsoever to get up out of bed.

Theron didn’t want to say that good sex solved everything, but for him there was no denying that it sometimes helped. Part of it came from the reunion itself, the three of them having the opportunity to catch up on all the things they’d missed during their time apart – Miranza’s recovery, Vector’s response to learning what had happened to the Mirodari, the (baby) steps Theron had been making in therapy. It had felt good to reconnect; in a way that was far too cheesy for Theron to look into it all that closely, it felt like coming home. And then they’d had good sex – great sex, fucking amazing sex – and he hadn’t broken down or fallen apart or freaked out, and afterwards they were just relaxed and comfortable with each other. He didn’t think he was fixed, exactly, but between the sex, the companionship and the peaceful night’s sleep he was feeling pretty positive for a change.

Just as Theron was starting to think he’d need to wriggle his way free of his two slumbering companions so that he could hit the ‘fresher, Vector jerked awake beside him, coming to with a suddenness that spoke of one struggling to free himself from nightmares. Vector lay still for a moment, breathing heavily, then cautiously extricated himself from the bed and tiptoed across the room. Although the Joiner was doing his best to be quiet, Theron could hear him gulping in air, taking great, shuddery breaths as he sought to calm himself. After a moment’s indecision Theron slid out from underneath Miranza’s arm, untangling his leg from hers as he made his way out of the bed. She murmured sleepily and rolled into the warm spot he’d left behind.

After a quick detour to the ‘fresher, Theron padded out on silent bare feet and sat down beside Vector, who had made his way onto the low couch out in the seating area. The Joiner watched him, waiting until Theron settled in beside him before speaking, his voice barely above a whisper.

“We didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t,” Theron replied, just as quiet. Behind them Miranza didn’t even stir; she was right out. He gave Vector a sympathetic smile. “Nightmare?”
“Yes.” Vector ran his hands over his bare thighs as if trying to warm himself.

“Do you get them a lot? I never noticed before.”

Vector was silent for a moment, considering his response. “Often enough. We do not typically respond as … ah … violently as you and Miranza, so it's easier for us to avoid disturbing you.”

“So, what, you just get up and … go for a walk or something?” Theron couldn’t help the note of disbelief in his voice. He knew, from hearing Miranza talk about it, that Vector was almost always present to comfort her in the wake of her own nightmares. Vector reassured her and talked her down when necessary, and Theron knew how much that comfort and support meant to her. That Vector had been making an effort to avoid waking her – and Theron – with his own sleep disturbances bothered Theron. “You hide this?”

“Our nightmares started after Corellia – the first time,” Vector clarified, knowing that that seemingly cursed planet featured in a number of their unpleasant experiences. “We were present when the Star Cabal had her tortured. We were … under orders … not to interfere.”

“That’s … I’m sorry, Vector.”

Vector shrugged lightly. “It’s hardly the same as what she went through – what you’ve both gone through.”

“It’s not a competition.” Still, Theron knew that being made to stand by and observe a loved one being hurt must have been a torture unto itself for Vector, who was – in Theron’s estimation – very much the kind of man who would rather go through the pain himself than witness another suffering it. And then, after having gone through that, for Vector to have lost Miranza not once, but twice afterwards, knowing she had been captured by enemies and being powerless to prevent anything bad from happening to her … There were different kinds of torture. Just because he hadn’t been the one being beaten didn’t mean Vector hadn’t been in pain.

“It is what it is,” Vector said quietly. “We were under no illusions when we married her. This is the life we’ve chosen for ourselves.”

“Yeah,” Theron agreed, “but what if … what if you both decided to choose something else?”

Vector stiffened, going still, and Theron saw something complicated move across his features. Finally the Joiner spoke, and Theron couldn’t get a read on the emotion in his voice.

“We think this is a discussion Miranza should be a part of – and that it can wait until after breakfast.”

Breakfast came courtesy of room service, delivered on a cloth-covered cart by a relentlessly cheerful Selkath. Theron was unsurprised to discover he was starving, and gorged himself on pancakes, bacon, porridge with berries and cream (he found himself blushing with surprised delight that Miranza and Vector had remembered his favourite breakfast food) and excellent dark-roast caf.

Afterwards the three of them showered together (funny how much longer it takes to get clean when there are so many pleasant distractions involved) and then spent a few minutes packing and tidying before settling down together in the comfortable seating area.

Vector and Miranza sat side by side on the couch, facing Theron. He had the uncomfortable sense that he was about to be the target of an intervention or a talking-to of some sort, and to him it felt as though the beautiful fantasy he’d been wrapped up in – the happiness of the three of them together – was about to come crashing down under the weight of a decidedly less pleasant reality. That
perception was not helped by the serious expressions on the Imperials’ faces.

“So … what’s going on?” he asked finally, making no effort to hide the concern in his voice.

The couple exchanged glances, Vector giving Miranza a tight nod. She sighed.

“Theron,” she said, after a moment’s hesitation. “You recall when we left Corellia, I told you I had orders from the Dark Council to bring you in?”

Fear rippled through Theron, but he forced himself to sound calm when he replied. “Yes. You said …” He cleared his throat, heart thudding dully in his chest. “You said you weren’t going to do that.”

Inside his head he was screaming. Had this all been nothing more than a trap? After everything they had been through, everything they’d done – everything he thought they felt and shared – was this it, they were just going to haul him in before the Dark Council? Theron was under no illusions as to what would happen to him there, in the heart of Dromund Kaas – the heart of the Sith Empire. All the fears and worries he had had for Miranza in Republic custody were a dozen times worse, because Theron knew the Sith wouldn’t hesitate to torture him to get the information they wanted. There’d be no prison cell on Coruscant or Belsavis, no likelihood of a rescue, just a lifetime of pain and suffering as the Sith and their minions delved his mind for every last secret. There would maybe – maybe – be a slim chance the Imperials would try to ransom him back to his mother in exchange for high-ranking prisoners of war or perhaps some other concessions, but Theron didn’t believe for a second that Satele would jeopardize the safety of the Republic just for him.

Then Miranza spoke, cutting through his blinding panic. “And we’re not. But those orders haven’t changed, Theron, and that means … we need to talk.”

**We need to talk.** When, in the history of the universe, had those four words ever signalled the start of something pleasant?

“Okay,” Theron said dully, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. He couldn’t look up, couldn’t meet their eyes. “Let’s talk.”

Vector and Miranza exchanged looks again.

“Our orders have not changed,” Vector said carefully, “but we have no more desire to see you in Imperial custody than you had to see us in a Republic prison. We’ve no intention of bringing you in, but … we are under closer scrutiny this time. We did not come to Manaan alone.”

“I … what?” The panic returned, and Theron looked up. Judging from the sudden concern on their faces his expression must have been rather ghastly. “So there’s … what? An ambush here? Waiting for me?” Because if other Imperials do it, it’s not their fault, they’re not the ones taking me into custody …

“Yes,” Miranza replied simply. “Which is why we need to talk.”

“Talk about what, exactly?” Theron burst out, suddenly furious. “About how you lured me here, got me alone on Manaan so you could … could just let your Imp buddies do the dirty work for you? Let me guess, I walk out that door” he stood and gestured violently in the direction of the hall “and there are ten goons with electro-nets and stun-cuffs waiting for me?”

“What? No!” Miranza looked hurt, then angry. “Theron, just sit down and shut up, would you? Listen to me.”

“What am I supposed to listen to?” He refused to sit, refused to be still. “I thought you cared about
me. I thought …” He let the words trail off, unable to bring himself to say it. “But this was all just a trap. A trick. Well, you got me, Miranza. Congratu-fucking-lations. I’m not going down without a fight, though.”

“Oh, for fuck’s –“

“Theron.” Vector’s voice was urgent, serious, overrunning his wife’s angry outburst. “Listen to us. We’re not bringing you in. We are not. We are, however, forced to give the illusion that we are doing so – that we are, in fact, making a very concerted effort to capture and contain you.”

“Our handlers know we’re here,” Miranza continued, having regained her calm, although Theron had the sense her grip on it was rather tenuous at best, “and there are Imperial operatives throughout the hotel, but the timeline is our own. They have no idea when we intend to act. I’ve earned enough clout with Sith Intelligence to be able to operate under my own initiative, with minimal interference. Provided I do the job. Or ... am seen to be doing the job.”

Theron sat, landing back on his chair with a thump. He was still angry, but some of the raw panic had bled off with the knowledge that Miranza and Vector had no intentions of taking him into custody.

“So … what’s the plan?”

“In the closet by the door there is a suitcase,” said Vector, standing and motioning with one hand. “Inside the suitcase is an improvised explosive device, designed using fairly standard Republic schematics, but with less than the regular explosive payload. We can set off the bomb whenever we choose, and when it explodes it will trigger emergency alarms throughout the hotel. In the resulting confusion, you will escape, going out that window” he gestured towards the window facing the water “and getting to safety. You will find a speeder a short swim to the north, hidden under some debris. There are credits tucked inside a compartment under the driver’s seat, with a smuggler operating out of the spaceport who will take you to any destination you choose, no questions asked.”

“That’s …” Theron paused, uncertain. “This is insane. You’re just going to blow yourselves up? Blow up the hotel?”

Miranza gave him her best Don’t be an idiot, Theron look, rolling her eyes. “Of course not. We’re fond of you, Theron, but we’re not planning on killing ourselves just so you can get away. There’ll be a lot of noise and smoke, but we’ll be knocked out at worst, not killed. We’ve tested it a few times, just to be sure. Kaliyo helped, and if anyone knows her way around explosives, it’s her.”

“As for the hotel,” Vector continued, moving towards one of the walls and wrapping it with his knuckles, “we chose this one for a reason, and not just because we appreciate the turn-down service. The rooms are all self-contained and insulated – ostensibly to reduce noise pollution, but also unofficially to minimize the likelihood of the entire hotel being destroyed in the event of a terrorist attack. Manaan is neutral, but the Selkath have every reason to suspect the war between our factions will spill over here, and they’ve taken precautions to protect their own interests. When the device goes off, the blast will be contained to this room, the resulting pressure shattering the windows – which are supposed to be shatterproof, by the way, which is why there won’t be any Imperial guards waiting for you outside.”

“This is still one hell of a risk,” Theron said.

“It’s a risk we’re willing to take,” Miranza replied confidently. “Our handlers need to see us working to capture you. If we don’t make a big song and dance out of it, they’ll know we’re compromised, and that won’t work out for any of us – least of all you. It was bad enough when we returned from
Alderaan empty-handed, but at least then we had what happened to me as a convenient excuse."

“You could be killed. All this … What if they don’t believe you? What if they see through all of this? This isn’t … I’m not *worth* all of this.”

“Of course *you* of all people would need this spelled out for you,” Vector replied, his tone an odd mixture of acerbic irritation and fond exasperation. “Theron … people make sacrifices for the ones they love.”

*For the ones they … Oh.*

Theron ran a hand over the back of his neck, then over his head. “You could’ve just broken up with me over holo.”

Vector snorted, sounding amused, and sat down on the arm of Theron’s chair. “You had to be seen coming to meet us. This had to look sincere. Besides,” he said quietly, tone thoughtful, “this isn’t a breakup. Not exactly. We’re in each other’s orbits, Theron. We rather doubt this will be the end of things between us.”

“You could come with us,” Miranza said, leaning forward on the couch. Her expression was earnest. “Voluntarily, of your own accord. Defect. The Empire could use a man with your skills and training. We could bring you in safely.”

Miranza’s words brought to mind a similar conversation Theron had had years ago, when he and Master Zho were investigating Darth Mekhis and the Sun Razor. They had been taken prisoner by the Imperials and when Theron was identified as an SIS agent the ranking officer had made him an offer not unlike Miranza’s. Worded differently, of course, and with decidedly less affection and promise, but the gist had been the same: come to the Empire, your skills will be rewarded, we could use a man like you. Theron had turned down the offer in the only way he knew how: he mocked the man who made it, pointing out the officer’s slave brands as a way of highlighting the treatment most Force-blind received in the Empire.

Miranza and Vector weren’t slaves, at least not in the traditional sense. And they were making him the same offer. He could go with them. He could join the Empire, defect from the Republic, and the three of them could be together. He could be happy with them. Didn’t he deserve to be with someone – *someones* – who loved him and made him happy? He’d served the Republic faithfully and tirelessly for his entire life. Wasn’t it time he served himself for a change?

Theron’s face fell, a feeling not unlike a knife twisting in his gut settling over him. That wasn’t him. He wasn’t a traitor.

“I can’t,” he said quietly.

Vector nodded, unsurprised by Theron’s response. Miranza gave a small shrug of her shoulders, affecting a nonchalant expression. “Then the plan stands. We trigger the bomb and you live to spy another day.”

“Or …” Theron’s heart was racing again, and it was his turn to lean forward, excited. “Or you could come with me. We trigger the bomb and all *three* of us escape. You and Vector hop that smuggler’s ship with me and we go back to Coruscant together. You’d be free of the Empire.”

“Free of …?” Miranza blinked, shaking her head. “Theron … we don’t *want* to be ‘free’ from the Empire. We serve as loyally as you do.”

“But the things the Empire does … The things the *Sith* do …”
“Theron.” Vector’s voice was calm, filled with patience. “The Empire is not just the Sith. There are good people in the Empire – innocent people, people who want peace and security and happiness just as much as any Republic citizen. We don’t serve the Empire out of fear or because we feel the need to kowtow to our Sith overlords. We serve the Empire to protect those people, those innocents. The Empire is capable of great things – great good – and if we leave … if we defect, we won’t be there to help those who need it most. We hand the Empire over to those who would commit all those sins and atrocities you think us all guilty of.”

The knife in his gut twisted a little more, but Theron nodded dully. “So … that’s a no, then?”

Miranza gave him a gentle smile. “That’s a no, Theron.”

They were at an impasse, and it was one Theron should have seen coming from light years away. He had known from the moment he first met Miranza Gerrick and Vector Hyllus that the pair of them were loyal servants of the Empire, accustomed to putting that loyalty first, above all else in their lives – even, he suspected, above each other. That’s why their flirtations back on Rishi and Yavin 4 were never supposed to go anywhere. It was just supposed to be a lighthearted diversion, a one-night-stand that was meant to end when the truce did. It was never supposed to be like … this.

He wasn’t supposed to fall for them.

Theron suddenly and painfully had a solid appreciation for the Jedi Code and for the proscription against attachments. No attachments made it easier to do the right thing, to do your duty. No attachments meant you didn’t end up sitting in a hotel room with a pair of Imperial agents who were putting their lives and their careers on the line in order to keep you safe from their own employers.

“Okay,” he said softly. He stood, and looked at the two of them. “When … How … What happens next?”

Vector stood with him, a hand on Theron’s shoulder. “As tempting as it is to fall back into bed for another enthusiastic round of goodbyes, we think it would be best if we just got on with it. Like ripping a bandage off, yes?”

Theron was torn on the subject – falling back into bed sounded like a fantastic option, as far as he was concerned. But Vector’s comment had merit. The longer they hesitated, the harder this was going to be, and nervous anticipation wasn’t going to be of any benefit to his libido, regardless. He nodded, sighing. “I still think this is crazy, just for the record.”

“Noted.” Miranza rose, standing in one graceful, fluid motion, and grabbed Theron by the lapels of his jacket, yanking him to her. She kissed him, a hard, almost angry kiss that had him strongly reconsidering his stance on the whole extended goodbyes scenario, and then released him, heading over to the bed and tugging the coverlet loose. She handed it to him and motioned him towards the desk by the window.

“Cover yourself,” she said simply, “and get under the desk. That should protect you from debris and broken glass.”

But what’ll protect you? Theron thought, as Vector grabbed him to give him a goodbye kiss of his own. Once the Joiner let him go he did as he was instructed, draping the coverlet over his head and shoulders and then crawling under the desk. His heart was pounding in his ears and his throat had gone dry, and he startled briefly when Vector tossed his backpack under the desk beside him. He’d almost forgotten the single piece of luggage he’d brought with him.

“Cover your ears, Theron,” Vector called. Theron couldn’t see him, hidden under the coverlet and
the desk as he was, but it sounded like the Joiner had moved to the centre of the room. “It will be somewhat loud.” He paused, then added, “Take care, Theron.”

Theron didn’t have the chance to respond before the bomb went off.

*People make sacrifices for the ones they love.*

O o O o O

[Encrypted text transmission from User: balkarinteriorrefurbishments@republic.gov.net to User: tshan23@republic.gov.net]

[Subject: Re: Re: Re: Any luck?]

I had to dig deep for this. Imps had it buried, caused a bit of a stir on Manaan.

According to eyewitness accounts, a man and a woman matching their descriptions seen leaving in the company of about 10 Imp soldiers. Minimal injuries, subjects left under their own power, def. not detained. Looks like they got away clear.

Guess I owe you a beer, Shan.

[End transmission]

O o O o O

[Encrypted text transmission from User: ninerniner@traceless.holo.net to User: agenthotpants@traceless.holo.net]

[Subject: No subject]

Next time, you can be the one to blow yourself up.

XOXO

[End transmission]

~ End ~

Chapter End Notes

Well, this is the end of "The Voices of Thieves and Robbers," but it's not the end of their story. I've already got a followup Theron/Vector/Miranza fic in mind that will be (somewhat, for me) more lighthearted.

I'm sorry I couldn't let them stay together forever, but that's one of the things I appreciated about the ending of Shadows of Revan: Imp-side, if you romance Theron Shan then that relationship ends with SoR. It gets picked up again in KoTFE and KoTET because of the nature of the alliance, but without that alliance your character would still be on the opposite side of a very, very tall fence. Because of who these characters are, they aren't just going to easily accept the idea of defection, no matter how they all feel about each other. (I *did* let Theron consider it here, though, if only for a
moment.)

But as Vector says (in a line I shamelessly stole from Andronikos Revel, another of my favourite LIs and not just because he's voiced by Steve Blum), they're in each other's orbits now. This won't be the end of things between them.

End Notes

This fic owes its existence to three things: me falling into the abyss that is Theron Shan hell, and the works of Miri1984 (particularly the scene between Sith Warrior Vopenir and Jace Malcom in “Bite the Hand”) and Wordslinging (specifically the reference to headcanon that sees the Imperial Agent and Vector Hyllus as — and I quote — “pansexual polyamorous space nerds who will happily sleep their way across the galaxy while remaining devoted to each other” — which is precisely how I see my Agent/Vector relationship). All that, and the fact that there aren’t nearly enough fics out there about happy, healthy polyamorous relationships, so I figured, what the hell, I’ll write one myself. If my story is even half as entertaining as theirs are then I will be a happy woman. Thank you for the inspiration.

Since AO3 is wonderful but it doesn’t have a direct way to get in contact with the authors outside of commenting on their work, I made up my own Tumblr: https://www.tumblr.com/blog/salaciouscrumpet So if you want to message me directly, feel free. :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!