No Light without Shadow

by MariaLee

Summary

According to the Republic, the war hero Revan was killed by Mandalorian rebels, and Supreme Commander Malak still champions his fallen friend’s name. According to the Jedi, The Revanchist fell to the Dark Side, forcing Malak to slay his fallen friend to prevent tragedy. According to the Sith, Darth Malak rose to power by slaying Knight Revan to prove his devotion to the Dark Side.

All of this is true. Yet it’s all a lie.

(A KotOR AU where the heroes do not all walk in the Light, and Revan doesn’t fall so much as saunters vaguely downwards.)

Notes

The title of this fic, along with some of the themes, come from this quote:
“There is no light without shadow and no psychic wholeness without imperfection. To round itself out, life calls not for perfection but for completeness; and for this the “thorn in the flesh” is needed, the suffering of defects without which there is no progress and no ascent.” - Carl Jung
Chapter Summary

In which an amnesiac mercenary and a disgruntled pilot meet, crash-land on Taris, and spend an inordinate amount of time snarking at each other.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A false peace reigns throughout the galaxy.

Since the end of the Mandalorian Wars, MALAK, Jedi Master and Supreme Commander of the Republic Military, has been enforcing the Galactic Republic’s will upon all who dare to oppose them. Venerated as a brilliant war hero, Malak enjoys the full backing of both the Republic and a majority of the the Jedi Order.

Thanks to Malak’s power, the Republic is utilizing the Star Forge to create an armada unlike any the galaxy has ever seen. When complete it will be an unstoppable force, capable of destroying entire solar systems in a single day.

Just when it seems that the galaxy is blind to Malak’s corruption, a small band of rebels rises from the obscurity of the Outer Rim. Embittered by their experiences with the now-corrupt Republic, and burdened by their pasts, they may be the only hope to stopping Malak’s total galactic domination...

1.

“So, what you’re saying, is that you need a pilot?”

Vann sighs, plastering a smirk on his face as he nods. “I need a ride,” he explains, not hesitating at the suggestive nature the last word takes. He watches the scruffy, brown-haired pilot in front of him, chuckling softly when he notes the way the man shifts uncomfortably. “A ride that will get paid more than their fair share, and that doesn’t ask too many questions.”

“Okay, alright! I get your point,” the pilot snaps. Nodding towards his battered, Dynamic-class freighter he sighs. “So, uh, where’re you headed?”

Pulling his datapad out of the inner pocket of his jacket, Vann scans the notes for his latest job. Just another gang boss who wants some extra muscle. Apparently, a big swoop race is coming up, and the local underworld wants to keep the rabble in line. “Taris,” he finally draws.

“Taris?” A look of trepidation crosses the pilot’s face, one hand moving to nervously straighten his worn leather jacket. “Isn’t that kinda close to Republic space?”

Replacing his pad, Vann snakes his head. “Not really. Besides, I doubt they’re going to pay much mind to a hunk of metal like yours.” Grinning, he gives the freighter a more careful inspection.
From the outside it looks like it’s been through a war, and it probably has. But he can see signs of custom work around the engines, of plating that’s been removed to make the ship lighter. It’s a perfect smuggler’s ship. And yeah, that would explain the pilot’s nervousness. “What? Hauling something that you shouldn’t be?”

The pilot huffs, suddenly indignant at the accusation. “No! Of course not!” he answers, just a little too quickly. “It’s just… I prefer to avoid the Republic Fleet when I can.”

“Don’t we all?” Sighing, Vann rakes his fingers through his hair. It’s getting long, almost to his shoulders. “Listen, I’m running on a deadline here. All you have to do is drop me planetside. Barely even have to land.” Taking a step closer to the pilot, he lowers his voice conspiratorially. “Just get me to Taris in one piece, and I’ll pay you double your asking price.”

“I didn’t even tell you my price yet!”

Van shrugs. “Exactly.” From what he knows, Taris is a pit of a city. There are a few Hutts of note there, and it should be an easy enough task to talk them out of parting with a few extra credits for bounties or good duals in the ring. He plans to fly out of the city with a hefty payday, so spending a little extra getting there shouldn’t be a problem.

Throwing up his hands in defeat, the pilot stalks towards the entrance of his ship. “Fine, fine!” he grumbles. “I’ll get you there, uh… What’d you say your name was again?”

“I didn’t. And what did I say about asking too many questions?”

The pilot scowls over his shoulder. “It’s not like I’m expecting your real name or anything. I just would like to call you something other than ‘hey you.’”

“Vann.” Admittedly, the name still sounds fake to him, but it’s the best he could come up with at the time. And now that his name’s gained a bit of a reputation with some of the right people, it’s not like he can change it.

Offering his hand in a firm shake, the pilot nods. “I’m Carth Onasi.” The palm of his hand is calloused, the pattern unmistakably made by the handle of a blaster pistol. “And do you have a last name there, Vann? For the sake of my passenger log.”

“Chis. Vann Chis.”

Carth nods again, heading into the ship. “Alright then, Vann Chis. We’ll be taking off in an hour. Best settle any accounts you have here.”

There’s something about the set of Carth’s shoulders, the way he moves with practiced precision, not a motion wasted, that makes Vann immediately think ‘soldier.’ He’s not sure how he knows that, he’s not sure how he knows a lot of things really, but somehow he does. The thought of traveling with a former soldier shouldn’t be comforting, not for a mercenary, but yet… it is.

* * *

The brief jump through hyperspace to reach Taris is uneventful, consisting mostly of Carth sitting at the ship’s helm as he stares gloomily at the field of stars as they rush past the transparisteel viewport. His shoulders are hunched, expression dour as his hands rest lightly on the ship’s controls. He’s silent, not asking questions or trying to make polite conversation like some of Vann’s rides have the tendency to do. And, honestly, that suits Vann just fine. For his part, he takes the time to check his weaponry, making sure that the beam-splitter and scope on his blaster are fitted properly, and that the edge of his vibroblade is well-honed. It’s simple work, but it passes the
“Coming up on Taris now,” Carth calls, voice flat and somewhat hoarse from disuse. It’s the first he’s spoken since the ship entered hyperspace. “Reading signs of a lot of ships in orbit around the planet… You expecting a crowd here?”

Holstering his blaster, Vann glances up at the sensor readouts. “Well, there’s supposed to be a big swoop race happening or something, so I’m guessing things might be a little more crowded than usual…”

Before Vann can finish, the freighter jumps out of hyperspace and into the sheer chaos of a firefight. There’s a Hammerhead-class cruiser stationed just about the planet, one of the older models still leftover from the Mandalorian War. Or, so Vann’s been told. The cruiser is taking heavy damage from all sides, as a hoard of smaller and more maneuverable fighters and assault ships rain down cannon-fire, only to dart out of the way before taking damage of their own.

“What in the hells is this?” Carth pulls-up on his freighter’s controls, quickly maneuvering the old ship away from a hail of cannon-fire from the cruiser. “I thought you said the Republic wouldn’t be a problem!”

Quickly settling himself into the position of co-pilot, Vann scans the data readouts. “I never said that!” he counters. “And I have no idea what this is!”

A small, heavily-customized fighter whizzes past, barely swerving right in time to avoid a collision. Carth curses, attempting to maneuver his freighter between the cannon blasts. “You know that price I told you? Triple it!”

“Yeah yeah,” Vann snaps, flipping a few controls to shift power between the engines. “Get us out of this mess, and then we can talk about price!”

On cue, Carth pushes several buttons and yanks a lever, the freighter’s engines roaring as the ship dives down towards the surface of Taris. It banks a sharp left, blowing past two fighters and an assault ship that seem genuinely surprised to see a dented Dynamic-class leave them in its dust. And yeah, Vann has no doubt that this is a smuggling vessel.

“Hold on tight, things are about to get a little bumpy…”

Vann’s hands hover over the co-pilot’s controls, eyes scanning the various sensor readouts as the surface of the planet looms increasingly closer, even as the ship continues to pick-up speed. He’s about to mention something, like how entering atmosphere this quickly might be a terrible idea, when the planet suddenly disappears from view.

Actually, it doesn’t disappear. It’s blocked.

One of the Republic’s new Interdictor-class ships has just jumped out of hyperspace directly in their path to the planet’s surface. Before Vann can shout a warning, Carth is pulling-up on the controls, forcing the freighter into a graceless u-turn that sends the ship spiraling twice from sheer momentum. Vann is fairly sure he’d be yelling if not for the fact that his throat is being pressed closed via the g-force created by the maneuver.

“Kriffing SHIT!” he manages to wheeze as the freighter levels off, now headed in the opposite direction of the planet.

Carth, however, is grinning in a grim-though-amused manner, a hoarse chuckle escaping him. “Wow,” he breathes. “Haven’t had to use a move like that since…” Trailing off he shakes his head,
expression sobering once more. “Never mind,” he mutters.

For a moment, Vann considers pressing the issue, genuinely curious as to how a man with the movements of a soldier and the skills of an ace fighter-pilot came to be smuggling good along the Outer Rim. However, his train of thought is interrupted when a loud boom erupts off the starboard side of the ship, shaking the entire vessel. Glaring out the viewport, Vann lets out a loud stream of curses in multiple languages. “Got any more moves like that, hotshot? Because that Interdictor is firing on us!”

“Shit,” Carth mutters, making a sharp right to avoid another round of cannon fire.

Already moving to open up a comm channel, Vann glances over at the pilot. “Maybe we should let them know that we’re just trying to land?”

Banking the ship to the left, Carth shakes his head. “No time! And also, that’s a bad idea. The Republic doesn’t care if we’re not the ones firing on them. We’re in the way, and that’s enough reason for them to shoot us out of the sky.”

Van blinks, moving his hand away from the comm button. “Sounds like you know this for a fact.”

Snorting in disgust, Carth’s tone grows frigid. “You could say I have some experience with Supreme Commander Malak’s Republic.”

There’s a note of venom to the words that sends a shiver down Vann’s spine, though it’s not out of displeasure. The anger is absolutely radiating off of Carth, and there’s something darkly satisfying about it. Something that sinks deep into the marrow of Vann’s bones and feels disturbingly right. He tamps down on his own glee at his companion’s barely-restrained emotions, shifting the entirety of his focus to the viewport. “If we can make it around their starboard side, we might be able to slip past the worst of their cannons and make it down to the surface.”

“There’s no way we can slip past their fire! Our ship’s too wide!” Carth narrowly slips between another set of cannon fire. “Not unless we…”

“Make the entry vertically?” Vann arches a brow, a reckless grin splitting his face.

Carth blinks, a thin smile creasing his own lips. “That’s so crazy it just might work…”

Without waiting for further permission, Vann begins to reset the ship’s thrusters, preparing to plunge past the Interdictor and make a nose-dive toward the surface of Taris. He just finishes making the adjustment when an explosion rocks the back of the ship. Warning lights flash and alarms blare as one of the engines sputters and dies. The little freighter immediately begins to lose altitude, plummeting towards Taris at breakneck speed.

“We’re hit! I think it was the Hammerhead!” Carth is frantically trying to regain control of the ship, punching buttons and jerking the controls. “Going down! I should have enough power to land her, but it’s not going to be pretty…”

Vann doesn’t have time to think. He acts on instinct as he mentally grabs for… something. It’s the thing that always feels like it’s just outside of his periphery, like a lost sense that he’s constantly trying to regain. He doesn’t know what he grabs at, or how he does it, but he wraps that thing around himself and Carth as the freighter plummets into Taris’s atmosphere. He’s only distantly aware of Carth wrestling the ship under control, and attempting to guide it into something vaguely resembling a crash landing. The jolt of the impact with Taris’s surface is detached and foggy. Vann expects there to be pain, but there’s not.
It all feels strangely familiar, Vann thinks, as blackness quickly claims him.

* * *

FLASH

Vann sees a man standing on the bridge of a cruiser as he observes a battle through the wide, transparisteel viewport. The man is dressed in dramatic black robes, his face obscured by a deep hood and hidden by a thick metal mask. There’s a sense of grim satisfaction as the man watches the violent battle unfold.

FLASH

The same masked man is boarding another ship, weapons grasped in each hand. With a whirr, he ignites a pair of glowing lightsabers, both a brilliant shade of blue. The sabers are a whirlwind of death as the man makes his way through the ship, striking down any who stand in his way.

FLASH

Lightsabers hum as the masked man faces down a towering, armored opponent. While the opponent is strong, the masked-and-cloaked figure is stunningly swift. He dodges blows with ease, sidestepping hits that could fell a Human with a single strike. Still, the man is tiring, and his opponent is well-protected even from the lightsabers’ harsh slashes. For a time it seems that this battle could go either way. At least until the masked man manages to get both blades past his opponent’s guard, sinking them through the metal armor and straight into his chest…

* * *

Vann wakes up with a scream caught in his throat, sweat already cooling across his body and making him shiver. His eyes fly open, searching around him for signs of the masked terror from his dreams, for the flash of a lightsaber blade ready to strike him down.

There’s nothing. Just a dimly-lit, unfamiliar room. He hears the sound of footsteps nearby, and instinctively reaches for the blaster at his hip.

The blaster that’s not there.

A surge of panic hits Vann, and he balls both hands into fists, ready to fight his way out of whatever situation he’s gotten himself into this time. While he’s not sure where his martial skills come from, they’re formidable. He’s not going down without a fight…

“Hey, easy there!” Brown eyes stare down at Vann, brimming with genuine concern. A pale face, marked with reddish stubble, slowly forms within the room’s low lighting, along with two hands held aloft in a placating manner. Carth. “It was just a dream. A pretty nasty one from the looks of it, but it’s over now.”

Vann sighs, fists unclenching as he draws a few shaky breaths. “Yeah,” he mutters, “Nasty.” Wiping one clammy palm over his brow, he asks, “Geeze, how long was I out for?”

Carth stares back a bit sheepishly. “Three days,” he admits. “You tossed and turned through most of it. I thought my nightmares were something, but… You? You take the prize.”

Groaning, Vann struggles into a sitting position, stretching out his body as he tests it for injuries. His left shoulder is a bit sore, and his joints feel like they’ve been shaken by a rancor, but it’s nothing a medpac and a pint of Tarisian ale can’t cure. “Three days? Really?”
“Yeah, I think you hit your head in the crash.” Carth continues to look sheepish, one hand rubbing the back of his neck. “Though, all things considered, we both got lucky. The ship was nearly totaled, but there was barely a scratch between us.”

With a nod, Van swings himself out of bed, bare feet landing on a cold, threadbare carpet. He glances around the room, taking it in for the first time. It’s shabby-looking, the lighting poor and most of the furnishings are in desperate need of repair. But it’s not the worst place he’s stayed at. “So, where exactly are we?”

“Taris,” Carth mutters. After a glare from Vann, he elaborates. “While you were out, I was able to find us an apartment. They mostly rent to aliens, or anyone else who can’t afford better living conditions. It’s not fancy, but they don’t ask a lot of questions.”

“So… how much do I owe you for all of this?”

Carth waves a hand, taking a few steps back when it becomes obvious that Vann can walk without assistance. “I sold some of the cargo from my ship, got us this room. No big deal.”

“Some of the cargo that you definitely weren’t smuggling?” Vann smirks, turning to collect his neatly-folded clothing from the wobbly little durasteel table.

Carth scowls at this, turning away. “Doesn’t matter now, either way.” He sighs. “Look, the crash was my fault. I should have seen that the second cruiser was coming around to fire on us, or at least noticed that the fighters were retreating. It’s my fault you got hurt and…”

Tugging his shirt over his head, Vann rolls his eyes. “Is this what you do? Blame yourself for every little thing that happens? No wonder you’ve got such a bad attitude.”

“Hey! I know I deserve that, and I know I don’t have the best attitude, but…”

Vann snorts as he pulls on his pants. “I was joking. And anyway, I’m the one who wanted to come to Taris. So it’s as much my fault as it is yours.” Reaching for his belt, he’s pleased to see that his customized blaster is still intact. “So let’s stop assigning blame, because that’s not going to get us anywhere. Instead, let’s focus on catching the first transport off of this rock.”

“Huh,” Carth arches a brow. “What, are you some sort of negotiator or something?”

Checking his weapons for any imperfections, Vann arms himself. “Nope. Just a common mercenary.” Slinging his vibroblade onto his back, he adds, “Now, about getting off this rock…”

Carth’s expression immediately sobers, a flicker of fear crossing his features. “So… I didn’t get a chance to tell you this, but there’s a problem…”

“A problem?”

“That battle that knocked us out of the sky? Apparently, a Republic officer was captured during the firefight.”

Vann nods, a sinking feeling entering his gut. “…And?”

“And her captors are supposedly hiding out on this planet.” Carth draws a slow breath. “And the Republic has set-up a planet-wide blockade until she’s returned.”

Closing his eyes, Vann groans. “Well, shit.”
“My thoughts exactly.”

Scrubbing his hands through his hair, which has gotten a bit greasy during his bout of unconsciousness, Vann tries to calm the rising panic. “So. Carth. Any ideas on how to get past a Republic blockade?”

“Without a ship? Nope.” Carth sighs, resigned. “And even with a ship, there’s no getting past a Republic blockade. They would shoot you down in a second. They probably have shields in place, alarms too.”

“And you know this from… experience?”

Expression darkening, Carth narrows his eyes. “Like I said before, I have some experience with the Republic.”

Deciding it best not to alienate his only potential ally on the planet, Vann doesn’t push the issue. “Good enough for me,” he finally shrugs, adjusting his blaster holster as he strides towards the door to the apartment.

“Wait! Hey! Hold-up!” Carth rushes after him, grabbing his own blasters from off a rickety chair and strapping them into place. “Just where do you think you’re going?”

“To the nearest cantina,” Vann quips.

Carth shakes head head, reaching for Vann’s shoulder. “You just took a pretty nasty hit to the head. Are you sure what you need is a drink?”

Fighting the urge to brush the other man’s hand away, Vann sighs. “For a smuggler, you don’t know a whole lot about the way things work here on the Outer Rim, do you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Turning around, Vann barely manages to suppress his second eyeroll of the day. “If you want any information about the local happenings, you go to the nearest cantina. So, if you want off this planet, you’d better come with me.”

“Oh.” With a sudden nod of understanding, Carth grabs his jackets and shrugs it on. “Right! Coming!”

With a smirk, Vann smooths his collar and exits the apartment, Carth close on his heels.

* * *

One drunken mess of a Republic soldier and two sets of “borrowed” Republic armor later, Vann and Carth are safely ensconced in the Lower City cantina, listening to the local gossip about the kidnapped Republic officer as they nurse pints of ale. The Upper City cantina was mostly a bust, with nothing but rich businessmen complaining about the blockade ruining their trade prospects. But the Lower City is already proving much more fruitful.

“I hear it was a group of Mandalorian rebels who took that Republic officer!” one man is exclaiming, his drink sloshing out over the rim of his glass as he gestures drunkenly. “They’re holding her captive as we speak. Demanding a ransom from the Republic!”

“Oh, it’s always the Mandalorians!” his companion slurs irritably. “Been that way since the war!”
The first man sneers, “Like you know anything about the war!”

Before a disagreement can derail the two men, a young woman two seats down shakes her head. “I bet you haven’t even heard the best part of this mess yet!”

The pair of old drunks wave the woman off with uncoordinated flaps of their hands. “Eh, shut up ya lousy cantina-fly,” one mutters. “Nothing but a gossip, you are.”

The woman huffs in indignation, reaching to pick up her drink and move away from her detractors. But before she can get away, Vann slides neatly into the seat beside her and offers a soft smile. It’s an expression that he’s discovered tends to make people open up to him. His natural gift of persuasion has served him well over the last few years.

“Hey, don’t listen to those two drunks,” he reassures the stranger, leaning casually against the bar. “I have to say, you’ve got me curious about what could be worse than this damned blockade.”

Biting her lip, the woman seems suddenly reluctant to speak. “I dunno,” she purrs, “It’s supposed to be a secret. Real hush-hush type of stuff.”

Vann nods sympathetically. “Hey, I understand. How about this? I get you a fresh drink, and we trade stories? Just two people, trying to see who can tell the more ridiculous tale.” He gestures to Carth with a mischievous grin, ignoring the glare the other man shoots him. “I bet you can’t top the story I have about this guy and an overly-amorous rathtar…”

“Oh, there’s no way that one’s true!” the woman giggles.

“Well then, I bet there’s no way your story’s true either.” With an idle shrug, Vann waves over the bartender. “Like I said, we’re just two people exchanging ridiculous stories…”

Realization dawns in the woman’s eyes, and her red-painted lips quirk into a dark grin. “Ohh, I gotcha,” she murmurs. “Well, then you’re definitely not going to believe this.”

“Try me,” Carth mutters, visibly beginning to lose patience.

Vann ignores his companion’s irritability. “Go on,” he encourages.

“So, my girlfriend is a Hidden Bek. You know, part of the swoop gang? She’s a real good rider, won a few races and everything!” The woman preens for a moment before continuing. “Anyway, the Beks know all of the best information. And my girlfriend told me earlier tonight that it’s no ordinary Republic officer who was kidnapped during that big battle overhead.”

Leaning forward slightly, Vann nods, offering the woman another encouraging smile. “Really, now?”

The woman’s grin broadens. “Oh yeah. Supposedly, she’s a Jedi. You know, part of Malak’s personal army. Word is that’s why the republic has this damn blockade set-up. They want to find this Jedi before anyone else does. They’re offering a real nice reward for her safe return, too.”

Carth visibly tenses at the mention of a Jedi, and Vann has the urge to put a hand on the other man’s knee and remind him to just act casual. But at the same time, the thought of a Jedi on Taris sends an odd jolt down Vann’s spine, like it’s something he should be excited for. As though this major inconvenience to his life is actually an opportunity. He draws a quick breath. “So, you think the Hidden Beks know any more untrue stories about this… Jedi?”

The woman laughs at this, obviously amused by the tourists stuck on her home planet by the
Vann lets out a sigh. “So,” he breaths, lowering his voice so that only Carth can hear him. “There’s a reward being offered? And it’ll open up this blockade?” Swallowing a mouthful of bitter ale, he muses, “I bet between the two of us, we could put in a damn good effort of finding this lost Jedi…”

“No. No way. Uh-uh.” Waving his hands, Carth scowls. “I don’t care if the rumors are true or not, if there’s even a chance of a Jedi being involved, I don’t want anything to do with this.”

“What do you have against the Jedi?” Peering at Carth from over his glass, Vann studies the other man, noting the premature worry lines around his eyes, and the way his jaw clenches in constant concern. “Aren’t they just… soldiers and peacekeepers?”

Scowl deepening, Carth whispers, “Malak’s a Jedi.” The name is laced with venom.

“...And?”

Sighing heavily, as though he’s trying to explain a simple concept to a petulant child, Carth shakes his head. “Look, I just have my reasons, okay?”

“Hey,” Vann stares at the other man. “If you plan on staying behind this blockade until someone else finds this Jedi, we’re going to run out of things to talk about really fast if you don’t start opening up.”

“And what about you? It’s not like you’ve told me much about yourself either.”

Vann tries to offer a nonchalant shrug. “Not much to tell, really. I’m a mercenary. I work whatever odd jobs people pay me to do. Sometimes people pay me really well to do some really questionable things.”

At the last admission, Carth frowns. “I saw you fight those Black Vulkars earlier. You have the skills of an elite commando, not just some Outer Rim mercenary. I… don’t even know where someone gets skills like that.”

“Wish I could tell you.”

“But if you do, you’ll have to kill me?” Carth forces a weak laugh.

Vann swallows hard, words rushing out in a rare burst of brutal honesty. “No, I mean, I really wish I could tell you.”

“What, you don’t remember who trained you to fight like that?”

“Nope.” Vann forces himself to take a casual sip of beer. It burns on the way down.

Blinking, Carth sputters as he places his glass on the cantina’s grimy counter. “Wait, what? You don’t remember? What, exactly, don’t you remember?”

Sighing heavily, Vann schools his features into casual nonchalance, trying to keep the never-ending sense of panic out of his voice as he acknowledges everything he doesn’t know about himself. “I was in a shuttle crash a few years back. Way worse than our little dust-up above this
rock. I... I don’t know how I managed to crawl away. But I did.” He gives an exaggerated sigh. “Anyway, since then my memory of the time before the crash has been... patchy.”

“So... wait. You don’t remember your life before the accident?” Carth’s eyes are wide, his mouth hanging open ever-so-slightly. He seems torn between disbelief and something dangerously close to pity. “Nothing?”

“Eh, bits and pieces here and there.” And that right there is a bold-faced lie. While Vann seems to have enough muscle memory to fight and otherwise function as a sentient creature, his past is a blank slate. A total void. He didn’t escape the crash with so much as a name. Vann Chis is just something he made up off the top of his head when he needed to tell strangers to call him something. For whatever reason, it sounded right at the time.

Carth continues to gape like a dying fish. “Really? Just bits and pieces of your entire life up until a few years ago?” He shakes his head. “I’m... I’m sorry. I just find that hard to believe.”

Glaring at the other man, Vann grits his teeth. “Believe it. Or don’t. Doesn’t make a difference to me.”

Something in his tone must convince Carth, or at least make the man realize that the topic is no longer up for discussion. “Right, sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s fine. Don’t mention it.” Despite not saying it, ‘ever again’ is heavily implied in the dark tone Vann’s voice takes on.

Both men slip into silence for several moments, the music and noise of the cantina floating around them. It’s an odd contrast to the irritation that sizzles between them. After a bit more uncomfortable silence, Carth clears his throat. “So...” he mutters, “Do you really think that you’re capable of finding a missing Jedi? I know you can fight, but tracking someone down is an entirely different set of skills.”

“Sure,” Vann shrugs. “I’ve found missing people before. It was mainly to shake them down for the debts they owed, but it’s the same basic premise.” He tries to keep his tone nonchalant, “After all, people who owe money to crime bosses are remarkably good at not being found.”

Carth frowns in distaste at this admission, though he doesn’t voice his concerns. “I still don’t like the idea of getting involved with a Jedi.”

Vann chuckles. “And I don’t like the idea of being stuck on Taris while the Republic tears the planet apart searching for their lost officer. This city is mostly underworld gangs. There’s too many places for her kidnappers to hide her. The Republic has too many enemies here already.”

“Touche,” Carth grumbles.

“Look, help me or don’t. If you want to leave me be and just look out for yourself, I won’t hold it against you. Seems like you’re the type who works better alone anyway.” Vann finishes the rest of his beer in two long gulps, and then sets the glass loudly on the counter.

Staring at his own beer, Carth swirls the remaining contents. “I’m sorry if I’m giving you the impression that I just want to look out for myself. Like I said, I have my reasons. And maybe I’ll tell them to you. Just not right now.”

Slipping out of his seat, Vann adjusts his coat to better conceal his pistol. “Your life, your choices Carth. Whatever you decide, I’m planning to spend my time on Taris trying to find this Jedi. I want to get off this planet, and I wouldn’t mind a nice fat Republic payday in the process.”
Carth draws a deep breath, and then finishes off his beer in a single long chug. Grimacing at the way the bitter ale slides down his throat, he shakes his head. “I must be crazy, but, fine. I’ll come with you.” He stares at Vann for a moment, eyebrows raised and lips pulled into a bemused smirk. “Because, as weird as this sounds, I think you’re my best bet of getting off this planet in one piece.”

Vann nods, a grin slowly tugging at his lips. “So, then, I guess we’re off to find Gadon Thek.”

“I guess we are.”

* * *

“So, let me get this straight.” Vann studies the stern face of Gadon Thek, searching for any signs that the older man is joking. “You want us to sneak into your rival gang’s base, through the sewers, and steal back some swoop bike prototype accelerator that you lost? All of this, just so that you’ll possibly trade information on a missing Republic soldier?”

Gadon’s expression remains impassive as he crosses his arms over his broad chest. “Two off-worlders come into my base, asking for information that only I have, and I’m supposed to just give it to you, no questions asked?” He arches a brow. “This is the Lower City. Nothing comes cheap, especially information. Besides, it’s not like I’m sending you in alone…”

“Oh, right, I forgot about that part.” Vann barely represses the urge to roll his eyes in disgust. “You’re sending us in with some kid and her pet walking carpet. Who we have to find first before they’ll lead us anywhere.”

“Mission may be young, but she and Zaalbar have spent more time exploring the Undercity than any of the Hidden Beks. I wouldn’t discount her as just ‘some kid.’” Gadon smirks. “And besides, I don’t think you have much room to negotiate.”

Vann feels his temper rising, crumbling the thin facade of the charming, devil-may-care mercenary. It’s an anger that always seems to be seething just beneath his skin, something cold and vicious that evaporates the thin thread of moral decency that he usually clings to. His anger, he knows, is dangerous. But sometimes he can’t help but welcome it like an old friend. “Or I could just shoot you in the kneecaps and make you tell me what I want to know,” he quips, voice and expression carefully neutral.

It takes some effort to ignore Carth’s sharp gasp of protest.

Gadon, for his part, actually laughs. “Oh please. You’re in my base, surrounded by my people. They’d pump you full of blaster bolts before you could even draw your pistol.”

Anger flaring into ice-cold rage, Vann swallows hard. He wants to lash out at Gadon for laughing, for having the gall to think that Vann needs a blaster to hurt him and bring him to his knees. Some long-forgotten instinct forces his left hand to twitch, fingers curling into a choking gesture. For a moment, he feels like he really could just reach out and choke the snirk off Gadon Thak’s face without ever touching the gang leader. Like he could drain the life out of every member of the Beks in a whirlwind of pain and unbridled fury. His fingers twitch again and then…

And then the sensation is gone, the rage ebbing back to nothing more than a casual whisper of violence.

“Hey, no need to draw any blasters!” Carth is holding up both hands, a terse smile on his face as he forces himself to match Gadon’s laugh. “We’d be more than happy to help you get your accelerator back. After all, it’s not like we have much else to do while we’re stuck behind the blockade. Right,
Vann snorts, jerking his head in a curt nods towards Gadon. “Whatever,” he finally growls out.

Placing a firm hand on Vann’s shoulder, Carth half steers, half drags the other man towards the entrance to the Hidden Bek’s base. His fingers dig harshly through the scant protection of Vann’s leather jacket and modest body armor. “Anyway,” he mutters awkwardly, still guiding the pair out of the room, “We’ll be back once we find that accelerator. And then we can talk more…?”

“Of course.” Gadon’s smile grows wider, though his tone is sardonic. “We’ll talk once you have *my* accelerator.”

Carth says nothing else until he all-but pushes Vann through the base’s front door, hand still retaining its iron grasp on the other man’s shoulder. It’s only after they’re several meters from the base that Carth leans in closer, hissing, “What is wrong with you?”

Vann blinks, expression suddenly one of faux innocence. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh don’t give me the innocent routine! I know that you can probably talk a Hutt out of his credits when you’re in the right mood.” Carth scowls, tone suddenly full of what Vann feels is a decidedly misplaced sense of righteousness. “You know *exactly* what I’m talking about. You can’t just… threaten to blow out someone’s kneecaps!”

Shrugging-off Carth’s hand, Vann continues striding through the Lower City streets. “It was a bluff. Gadon knew that, and he called me on it.”

Rushing after his companion, Carth shakes his head. “It sure as hell didn’t *sound* like a bluff! You looked ready to shoot out both of Gadon’s kneecaps, and frag grenade the rest of the Beks just for good measure.”

“It’s called intimidation, Carth. Comes in pretty handy in my line of work.”

Choking back laugh of indignation, Carth throws up his hands. “That’s not how sane, civilized people handle situations…”

Whirling around, Vann glares at the other man, both hands balling into fists at his sides. “And in case you didn’t notice, we’re not exactly in a sane or civilized situation!” He sighs. “Like I said before, if you don’t approve of me or my methods, you’re more than welcome to go and find your own way off of this festering bantha-shit of a rock.”

Blinking once, Carth frowns. “I like you Vann, I really do. I just… don’t trust you. But then, I really don’t trust anyone, so don’t take it personally.”

And that *actually* makes Vann laugh. “Oh, so you’re irrationally suspicious of me, but at least it’s nothing personal? That’s comforting.”

Stalking forward, wearing an almost sheepish frown, Carth mutters, “I’m sorry. I’m probably wording this all wrong. You honestly seem like a decent person Vann, all things considered. Yeah, there’s a certain darkness about you that I don’t necessarily enjoy, but you don’t feel entirely bad.”

“And you would know what a bad person feels like?”

“Yes, actually, I do.” Carth stares pointedly straight ahead, gaze cold and hard.

Lips quirking into a smirk, Vann can’t resist pushing the pilot further. “And what, exactly, makes
you such an expert? Is this what gave you all of your trust issues?”

Still refusing to look at the other man, Cath shakes his head. “Look, I said I don’t want to talk about it! At least, not yet.”

Quickening his pace, Vann swerves into his companion’s path, blocking the other man’s way down the narrow Lower City street. “We’re about to walk straight into a sewer full of rakghouls, and Force-knows what else. Our guide is going to be some street-kid, and her job is to lead us into a base full of violent gang members.” He gestures to the twin pair of blasters strapped to Cath’s hips. “As far as I can tell, you’ll probably be the only decent shot watching my back, so if this isn’t the time to air-out your trust issues, I don’t know what is!”

“You want to know about me? Fine!” Drawing a deep breath, Carth exhales shakily. “I was a pilot in the Republic Naval Starfighter Corps.”

Vann nods. “Yeah, I had that feeling.” When Carth arches a questioning brow he explains, “You move like a soldier. I could just…tell.”

“Well, yeah. I devoted my life to serving the Republic. And they…”

“Didn’t do right by you?”

Carth laughs, a sharp, brittle sound. “To put it mildly. I don’t want to get into details. Not here. But, let’s just say that they, that Malak, managed to betray everything I thought they stood for.”

And there’s that name again, spoken with absolute venom. Vann takes a slow breath, as though drawing in Carth’s sense out outrage. He, of course, is peripherally aware of who Malak, Supreme Commander of the Republic, is. It’s impossible to travel anywhere in the galaxy and not hear that name bandied about with varying degrees of awe and contempt. But Vann’s never met anyone who seems so personally slighted by the Jedi Supreme Commander. The fact that Carth apparently has a personal connection to the man tickles something at the very back of Vann’s mind, but the thought remains just out of reach.

Ignoring the nagging sensation that he should be remembering something, Vann merely offers Carth an accepting nod. “So, you’re a former Republic soldier who was betrayed by the very people you devoted your life to.” Pausing, he breaks into a smug grin. “And now you’re a smuggler on the Outer Rim.”

“Hey! I am not…” Carth sputters, before offering a weak smile of his own. “Yeah, well, you’re an amnesiac mercenary who threatens to shoot out people’s kneecaps when he doesn’t get his way.”

“We make a great pair, don’t we?”

“Oh yeah. Fantastic.” As they approach the elevator to the Undercity, Carth eyes it warily. “Nothing can possibly go wrong with the two of us working together.”

Retrieving the Republic passes bartered from Gadon, Vann flashes them at the armored guard in front of the elevator. It takes a moment for the guard to finally acquiesce and allow them to pass him, but he eventually waves them along. The elevator doors open with a hiss of stale air, the interior of the car ripe with the odor of rot and decay.

As they enter the rickety elevator car, Carth frowns. “I’m going to live to regret this, aren’t I?”

“Well,” Vann replies with an airy shrug, “That’s certainly the plan.”
Chapter End Notes

1. Obviously, this is an AU. Certain events are different in this universe, causing a ripple effect that impacts most of the characters. The universe's alternate history will be described throughout the story.

2. I know that, canonically (as canon as the EU/Legends can be), Revan was not a duel-wielder at the time of the Mandalorian Wars. (And in some canon, was never a dual wielder.) However, I needed him to have a Very Distinctive Saber Style for the purposes of this story.

3. I’m also aware that the characters aren’t quite this snarky and sassy in the game. In my defense, Obi Wan and Anakin are far more snarky in SW: The Clone Wars than they are in Episodes I-III.

4. Yes, the opening line is a reference to Episode VII.
Planet - Taris Part II

Chapter Summary

In which our heroes run amuck in the sewers, make new friends, and desperately want to get off the planet. (And Carth really needs to stop laughing about this Wookiee life-debt.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2.

As it turns out, the Undercity is certifiable proof that Taris is one of the worst bantha shithoops that Vann has managed to land on. The Outcasts stare at him and Carth with their sad, bright eyes as though the off-worlders are walking deities come down to rain blessings upon them. But they're nothing compared to the rakghouls that run wild around the settlement, inhuman monstrosities with beady eyes and poisonous maws. The only good news is that they don’t have to search far to find Mission Vao. The young Twi’lek practically runs into them, babbling incoherently about Gamorrean slavers and someone named ‘Big Z.’

“Slow down, Mission. Take a breath.” Carth is eyeing the teen cautiously, one hand hovering just above her shoulder. “Now, what is it that you’re trying to tell us?”

“Those Gamorrean pigs too Big Z! They’re gonna ship him off as a slave if we don’t do something!” Her amber eyes are wide with panic.

Vann sighs. Of course. “And… Big Z would be Zaalbar? Your Wookiee?”

Mission turns to glare at him, head headtails whipping about her shoulders. “Hey! Big Z doesn’t belong to anyone! Me and him, well, we look out for each other. He watches my back, and I watch his.”

“So, he protects you, then?” Carth nods slowly, as though he’s actually comprehending the weird twists this already ridiculous situation has taken.

With an exaggerated sigh, Mission frowns at both men. “Are you even listening to me? Me and Big Z take care of each other. I protect him just as much! Hells, sometimes I’m the one doing most of the work!” She puts her hands on her hips, scowling indignantly. “Anyway, we’re wasting time! Those Gamorrean slime balls aren’t just going to wait around for us to rescue Big Z. Come on! We have to hurry!”

“Whoa, wait a second!” Vann sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. He’s not sure if it’s the smell of the Undercity, or the lingering effects of the freighter crash, but he can feel a headache coming on. “Who said anything about us helping you? You’re supposed to be helping us.”

“And who exactly told you that?”

Carth frowns softly. “Gadon Thek. He told us that you… and Zaalbar… could get us into the Black Vulkar base.”
Mission blinks, eyes almost comically large and innocent, before she bursts out laughing. “And why in the hells would you want to sneak into the place?”

Cleaning his throat, Vann tries to muster-up the strength to swallow his frustration and turn up the charm. “We’re doing a small favor for Gadon while we’re on-world. Just retrieving a couple of small things that the Vulkars had the nerve to borrow without asking. You know.” He shrugs nonchalantly. “Since we’re not actually Bekš, Gadon figured we won’t be noticed as quickly inside the enemy base.”

A slow sense of realization begins to spread over Mission’s features, and then her laughter only increased. “Oh man! You’re the idiots Gadon got to steal back the swoop engine accelerator!”

Vann shoots Carth a dark glare, but the other man only shrugs helplessly. Of course they’re ‘those idiots.’ Of course. “Yeah,” he finally admits. “We’re being sent to get that prototype accelerator back. So, are you going to help us or not?”

“Hmm,” Mission purses her lips thoughtfully. “How about this? You help me to rescue Big Z, and I’ll lead you to the Vulkar base.” She sticks out her hand. “Deal?”

Before Vann can protest, or at least attempt to haggle the kid into leading them to the base before they rescue the Wookiee, Carth is taking her hand in his own firm grip. “Sounds like a fair trade to me,” the pilot replies, offering a shake to seal the deal.

Vann can definitely feel a headache coming on.

* * *

The sewers are just as delightfully terrible as Vann expected. They’re infested with rakghouls, which has the singular benefit of helping to take-out the hordes of Gamorrean raiders who have turned the labyrinth of tunnels into their base of operations. Of course, wading around through dark passages full of two separate types of enemies, both with different weapons and motives, does have a myriad of drawbacks.

One of which is the potential to become pincered between the groups.

“Ow! Geeze, that hurt!” Carth grimaces as he continues firing into a horde of slavering rakghouls. One of them is taking another swipe at his side, its jagged claws bypassing his armor and slicing through skin. “Ugh, not feeling too great here.”

Vibroblade carving two deep gouges through the warty thigh of a Gamorrean, Vann kicks the creature back before rushing towards the cluster of rakghouls. “Mission, can you handle the rest of these pig-faces?” He doesn’t turn to confirm her response, but he can hear the whizz of fire from her blaster pistol, and the squeals of the Gamorreans as the Twi’lek finds her mark.

“No problem V-man!” Mission quips back with a devilish grin.

Diving into the rakghoul horde, Vann slashes at whatever moves, simultaneously ducking the heavy strikes from their wickedly-curved claws. “What did I say about calling me that, huh?” he growls, delivering a double slash to one rakghoul’s chest. The slimy skin splits open, spilling a grotesque pile of foul-smelling entrails. Grimacing, Vann doesn’t notice the other rakghoul taking a double-swipe at him from behind.

Before the creature’s claws can make contact, two blaster bolts sizzle through the air. Vann glances over his shoulder just in time to see the the thing’s head explode in a messy spray of bone and grey matter. As the corpse collapses into a heap, he spots Carth a few paces away, smoke still rising
from the muzzles of both blasters. “I think,” Carth states with a sly smile, “That Vann said to call him ‘V-man’ more often.”

Delivering a final powerful strike at the last rakghoul standing, Vann watches as the thing drops like a slimy rock. “That’s definitely not what I said,” he snorts, though there’s no malice behind the words.

Carth just shakes his head, jabbing a medpac into his thigh as he surveys the scene. “That looks like it was the last of them. But someone should scout ahead and make sure…”

Mission immediately darts forward, flipping her stealth unit on in the process. With the field from the belt she easily blends into the shadows, making it hard to track her progress. Vann stops trying, instead sparing a glance at the still-panting Carth. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Just got a little rough back there.”

Vann considers saying something else, perhaps pointing out that the red stuff is usually supposed to stay inside of your body rather than decorating your clothing. But just as he opens his mouth, he’s interrupted by a breathless Mission.

“Big Z must be nearby! Look!” Her blaster is currently holstered at her hip, and in her hands is a large bowcaster. The Wookiee weapon looks absolutely gigantic in her petite grasp.

Carth winces, wounds still healing from the medpac injection. “You sure about that, Mission? He could have dropped it at any point…”

Shaking her head, Mission gestures frantically towards the unexplored tunnel. “He’s nearby, I just KNOW it! And I found this right by a locked door.”

“A locked door doesn’t mean…”

“A locked door that’s been jammed closed from the other side. It’s an old-style lock. Mechanical, not electric.” Mission offers a saccharine-sweet smile. “I tried to pick it open, but it’s jammed really tight. I think it needs a little more muscle…”

Flicking the excess blood from the edge of his blade, Vann rolls his shoulders as he shoots Carth a pointed look. The other man groans softly, but begins to walk in the direction Mission just arrived from. “Well, we’ve already fought our way through every other inch of Taris’s sewers. What’s one more tunnel?”

“Right. One more tunnel.” Vann’s voice is strained and sarcastic. “I’m sure that’s all it’ll be.”

Mission ignores the Human’s acerbic tone. “Right!” she chirps, “That’s the spirit!” Without waiting for permission she charges ahead, slinging the bowcaster across her back.

Carth and Vann follow after the teen slightly less enthusiastically, each gripping their weapons in expectantly. The way ahead is surprisingly straight and, just like Mission described, it ends in an incredibly rusted door. Vann tries the lock for good measure, only to discover that it’s indeed jammed shut, presumably from the other side.

“I told you, I tried that already.”

Shrugging, Vann shifts his grip on his blade so that he can aim his shoulder at the stubborn door. “Never hurts to try again.” Glancing at Carth, he nods to the open space beside him. “A little help here? Or is this a spectator sport?”
“I’m coming, I’m coming.” Carth flips on his blasters’ safeties as he prepares to drive his shoulder forward, throwing his full weight behind it. He draws a steadying breath. “Alright, on three. One… two… three!”

The door withstands the first barrage, though the rusted metal squeals in protest as it begins to give way. A second charge forward actually shatters the neglected hinges, shards of rusty metal flying through the air as the door flies open with an ear-splitting groan. Vann closes his eyes against the shrapnel, ducking his head slightly to avoid the worst of the spray.

“Oh shit.”

At Mission’s horrified exclamation, Vann opens his eyes and stares into the next room. Which is currently full of at least a dozen Gamorreans, all well-armed and glaring angrily at the intruders. “Well…” he mutters.

“This,” Carth confirms, “Is going to hurt.”

The Gamorreans all spring into action simultaneously, some of them leveling blasters at the intruders, while others swing their heavy war axes with surprising deftness. It’s all Vann, Carth, and Mission can do to bring their weapons into a defensive position and guard against the Gamorrean onslaught. Carth and Vann are seasoned fighters, and Mission is a wily little thing, but in the end they’re still outnumbered four-to-one by hefty creatures who have decided that their singular goal in life is eliminating the unexpected intruders.

Two axe-wielding Gamorreans manage to back Mission up against a wall, her blaster pistol doing little to deter them from taking vicious swings at her much smaller form. A shout of warning from Carth is the only thing that enables her to dodge a particularly hard blow, the war axe clanging harmlessly off the stone wall in a shower of sparks. Unfortunately, the warning Carth gives distracts him for a moment, and he manages to take a blaster bolt straight to the side. To his credit, he grimaces through the pain and keeps right on shooting without missing a beat, but Vann can see the discomfort starting to fray the other man’s concentration. For his part, Vann can feel beads of sweat running down his back as he parries swing after swing from a much larger war axe. The reverberation of metal-on-metal echoes ominously through the sewer tunnels.

There’s a muffled shout, and Vann is able to shift his angle just in time to see Mission take the broad side of an axe blade to the head. She crumples from the hit, her blaster clattering to the ground as it falls from limp fingers. “Dammit!” Vann glances over at Carth, and can see the sweat glistening on the other man’s brow, his posture partially slumped and his stance clearly favoring one leg. Having decided that Mission is satisfactorily incapacitated, both of the Gamorreans who were attacking her now turn their attention towards Carth. Who, honestly, doesn’t look like he can handle two more bloated pigs trying to cut him down where he stands.

Panic flares in Vann’s gut, blooming into something cold that flows through his veins and grips his mind in icy talons. This has happened once or twice over the years, and he still has no idea where it comes from. It’s as though, in the most desperate of situations, he can feed off of his own pain and fear. As though he can turn his own emotions into the strength to push himself just a little harder. If he could control it, the weirdness would actually be useful.

As of right now, it’s just scary.

Only half aware of what he’s doing, Vann runs over to Mission’s prone form, dodging two Gamorrean axes in the process. Still gripping his blade in his dominate hand, he uses his free hand to unsheath the vibroblade from Mission’s back. With the second weapon in his off-hand, he whirls to face the pair of Gamorreans who are preparing to gang-up on the already struggling Carth. It
must be latent muscle memory that pushes Vann forward, both blades whirling in a perfectly-coordinated, deadly dance of metal. A second blade improves his guard, despite the fact that he can’t recall ever dual-wielding, and he finds it shockingly easy to land three hard strikes on the closest Gamorrean, felling the creature. It’s like his body is on autopilot, cutting down enemies before he even realizes he targeted them. As he fights, he lets his conscious mind slip away, carried off by the haze of battle.

“Vann? Vann!”

Blinking sweat from his eyes, Vann whirs around to face his nearest attacker, blades raised and ready to strike. But there’s nothing to hit. No more enemies to fell. He’s practically alone, surrounded by the stinking flesh of dead Gamorreans. Chest heaving from exertion, his eyes dart frantically around the dim room, finally settling on Carth, who’s cradling an unconscious Mission. “Huh?”

“You, uh, okay there?” Carth stares for a moment, a medpac resting forgotten in his palm. Both of his blasters are holstered, though his free hand is barely starting to inch towards one.

All of the adrenaline leaves at once, and Vann’s shoulders sag, weapons quickly lowered to his sides. He’s suddenly aware of a multitude of aches and stings, various injuries he’s sustained without realized it. Swallowing hard, his throat feels sticky and dry. “Yeah…” he mutters. “I’m… yeah.”

Apparently satisfied that Vann’s not going to turn on his companions, Carth turns his attention back to Mission, injecting her with the medpac he’s holding. The medicine works quickly, and within moments her eyes are fluttering open. “Ugh,” she moans, face wrinkling into a grimace. “Did we win?”

“Yes, barely.” Carth offers the teen a terse smile, though it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Vann helped us both out.” Though the words sound complimentary, his voice is flat.

Mission doesn’t seem to notice, or has apparently decided to ignore Carth’s trepidation. She quickly pulls herself to her feet, stretching and flexing to check for any unhealed injuries. “Well, thanks V-Man,” she chirps, turning to face the still-panting Vann. “Wait, is that my vibroblade?!”

“Uh…” Vann stalls elegantly, trying to recall exactly where he acquired a second blade. “Yeah,” he finally admits, before extending the hilt to Mission. “Sorry. I just… needed to borrow it.”

“Pfft,” Mission shakes her head, casually slinging the sheath off of her back and offering it to Vann. “If you’d of just told me you could dual-wield, I’d have lent it to you earlier. You’re probably way better with it than I am. You can hold on to it for now.” She narrows her eyes playfully. “But don’t forget to give it back later. And I mean it!”

Taking the offered sheath, Vann mutters a weak, “...Thanks,” before slinging the item onto his back and sheathing both blades. Equipping both weapons feels odd, but not inherently foreign. Which he supposes makes sense, in its own nonsensical way.

Carth walks up and, without warning, jams a medpac into Vann’s thigh. Ignoring the other man’s shout of surprise, he uses the close proximity to whisper, “I’d ask you how you did that, but I’m guessing the answer will be ‘I don’t remember.’” His eyes sweep for further injuries, though his expression is anything but concerned. Lips pursed into a thin line he looks wary, almost suspicious.

Before Vann can offer an explanation, Mission’s delighted squeal fills the small room. Head jerking in the direction of the Twi’lek, Vann watches as she yanks a set of doors open, revealing
the imposing form of an irate-looking Wookiee.

“Big Z! We found you!”

All of the anger seems to drain from the Wookiee, and he trills happily as he races over to Mission. A moment later he’s wrapping the teen up in his hairy arm. “Thank you!” he exclaims. “I trusted that you would save me!”

“Oh, it wasn’t just me. I had some help.” Jerking a thumb at the two rather bewildered men behind her, Mission explains, “Vann here, he’s the one who did most of the work. Got us all out of a bind with those slimy Gamorreans!”

Turning to look at the pair of Humans, Zaalbar slowly walks towards them, dark eyes seeming to size them up. He pauses for a particularly long time before Vann, before slowly bowing deep at the waist. “Thank you, Vann.” he roars, voice somber. “You’ve saved me from those slavers. A fate worse than death.”

“Yeah, well, no problem.”

Zaalbar continues to look solemn. “I owe you my life. And, for that, I pledge a life-debt to you.”

“Oh, wow,” Mission breaths. “A Wookiee life-debt is a huge deal.”

Suddenly feeling incredibly self-conscious, Vann races through his limited knowledge of Wookiee culture, searching for a way to refuse the debt without being insulting. Of course, his mind comes up blank. “That’s, uh, that’s not necessary,” he assures Zaalbar.

Carth is doing a poor job of hiding his smirk behind his hand.

“You do not understand. My people are slaves on our own planet, trapped in bondage and slaughtered like animals. Such was my fate until you rescued me.” Zaalbar bows again, expression somber. “As such, the only way to repay your actions is to pledge my life to you.”

“I mean, I’m honored,” Vann stutters, “But you don’t have to…”

Zaalbar shakes his head, “My mind is made-up. From this moment forward, I will go wherever you go. I will serve you loyally and faithfully.”

“Well, that’s… fantastic.”

“And if Big-Z’s there, I’m there too!” Mission loops an arm around the Wookiee’s waist, though it only reaches about halfway around. “So, Vann, I guess you’ve got both of us from now on!”

“…Fantastic.” Vann forces a smile, though he knows it comes off as more of a grimace.

Carth strides up to the group, unable to contain his own smile. “You know, Vann, you should really be taking this more seriously. After all, Zaalbar and Mission are going to be with you for a long time to come. Wookiees live, what, hundreds of years?”

Vann barely manages to suppress a groan. “Shut-up, Carth,” he mutters.

He’s fairly sure that Carth laughs the entire way through the rest of the sewers.

* * *

“Mission!” Vann growls as he peers around the corner of the duracrete wall, “I thought you said
that you could get us onto this base!”

Rolling her eyes, Mission fires off two rounds from her position hiding beneath a table. “And I did! I never said anything about you not getting shot at once you’re here.”

With a hiss of frustration, Vann takes a shot at the nearest Black Vulkar, hitting the woman square in the chest. “You also failed to mention the rancor until the last minute!”

“And I managed to blow that thing to pieces, didn’t I?” Mission scoffs, firing at a Human inelegantly swinging a longsword.

Carth steps around a corner a few meters away, both pistols firing at two armored Black Vulkars. The shot drops one, but the other keeps coming. “She’s not wrong, you know!”

“Yeah, yeah!” Ducking back around his corner just in time to dodge a series of blaster fire, Vann looks to his left where Zaalbar is furiously typing into the Black Vulkar’s security terminal. “Hey Zaalbar, how’s the slicing going?”

Palming several computer spikes in his large hand, Zaalbar never looks up from the terminal. “I just need another second to get the security doors unlocked!”

As he speaks, a nearby door slides open with a woosh. A moment later, a hail of blaster bolts come flying out of the doorway, seeming to shoot in every direction simultaneously. It’s all Vann can do to keep dodging behind the wall. “Can you maybe do something about those damn turrets while you’re at it?”

Zaalbar continues typing, sliding another spike into the terminal. “That’s going to take a few more moments!”

“Don’t worry Big-Z, we’ll hold them off.”

“Easy for you to say, Mission! At least you were able to grab a blaster rifle from their armory.” Vann ducks low, firing off multiple rounds at three rapidly-approaching Vulkars. He ducks back to safety before he can see if his shots found their target, but the ominous thud of a body hitting the floor suggests that they did.

It’s several long seconds of dodging and shooting half-blindly around corners before the cacophony of turret fire abruptly ceases. Vann’s ears continue to ring as he adjusts to the comparable silence. With less threat of death, it’s a simple matter to finish off the last of the Vulkars with a few well-placed blaster shots, and he provides easy cover as Carth and Mission scramble to catch-up to his position at the end of a long hallway. Zaalbar joins them a moment later, tucking the unused Spikes into a pouch at his waist.

“Well, I’m going to guess this is the door,” Mission says with a grin. Her voice is strained, though, and she’s already retrieving a medpac from her jacket pocket.

Vann eyes the durasteel door, the electronic lock blinking green now that it’s disengaged. “Considering that we’ve opened every other door in this base, I’d have to agree.” Finger hovering over the latch button he takes a breath, steeling himself for whatever’s inside. He hopes that it’s the prototype accelerator, because he’s not sure if he has the patience to look anywhere else.

The latch disengages with a hiss, and the door slides open. Six rifles click into position as a half-dozen Black Vulkars glare angrily down the sights. Vann grits his teeth, raising his pistol as he debates how long it would take to drop the firearm and draw his swords.
“Wait, wait, there’s no need for violence!” an oily voice calls out with faux friendliness. A green Twi’lek steps out from behind one of the armed Vulkers, hands held up and a sly smile plastered across his lips. “You’re very talented to have come this far into our base. The Black Vulkers could always use talent like yours.”

“Really now?” Vann quirks a brow, not lowering his pistol.

The Twi’lek nods with a little too much enthusiasm. “Oh yes, Brejik is always willing to reward talented individuals such as yourselves! Especially individuals who are being so sorely used and abused by Gadon Thek.”

“Hey!” Mission shouts indignantly. “You leave Gadon out of this! He’s a good man. Way better than that lying traitor Brejik could ever dream of being!”

The Vulkar’s oily smirk only broadens. “Oh really? Is that why the Bek’s keep you as nothing more than a pet? Why they won’t let you join as a full member?” He clucks disapprovingly. “Mission, I thought you were smarter than that. Gadon doesn’t keep you around because he’s a good man. He keeps you around to laugh at you.”

From the corner of his eye, Vaan can see Mission’s bottom lip quiver ever-so slightly. However, she quickly grits her teeth. “That’s not true!”

“Oh, but it is.” The Vulkar shrugs innocently. “You don’t have to believe me, but I think you’re smart enough to see the truth.”

Vann narrows his eyes, clearing his throat just loudly enough to get the Twi’lek’s attention. “Alright,” he snarls. “Get to the point.”

Still wearing his exaggerated smile, the Vulkar nods. “Oh, it’s nothing serious. Brejik just asks that you reconsider your deal with Gadon. Rather than taking the prototype that we’ve, quite fairly, acquired for the Vulkers, why don’t you let us keep it? You can just walk out of here, no questions asked.”

“See, that sounds like a pretty bad deal to me, considering that we just wiped-out most of your base.”

“Oh, there are many more Vulkers in the Lower City, my friend.” The Twi’lek chuckles. “But, if you’re looking for a good deal, Brejik is willing to extend one. From what he understands, it seems that you off-worlders are looking for some… information.”

Nodding slowly, Vann continues to keep his blaster trained on the Vulkar. “Go on.”

Seeming to sense that the situation is swaying in his favor, the Twi’lek’s smile grows more genuine. “You should be aware that Gadon is never going to give you the information you want. He’s old, and infirmed. His little secrets are all he has left. He’ll make you run around, doing errands for him until this blockade is over, and never tell you a thing of value.

“Let me guess, Brejik’s different?” Vann cocks his head questioningly.

“Yes, he is. He’s more than willing to trade any information he learns for a fair price. We have several spies within the Bek’s, and they know everything that Gadon knows.”

“Huh.” Studying the Twi’lek for a moment, Vann considers his words before slowly asking, “So, then, what’s Brejik’s price?”
Steepling his fingers thoughtfully, the Vulknar considers the question. “For information about a hidden Republic officer? Well, that won’t be cheap. But it’s a much fairer price than Gadon.” He waits a moment for an objection, and upon receiving none pressing onward. “All Brejik wants is for Gadon to be… taken out of the Bek’s equation.”

Vann frows. “So, you want us to kill Gadon?”

“Oh no-no-no!” Shaking his head in mock-surprise, the Twi’lek gasps. “No need to kill Gadon. You merely need to discredit him in some way. Make him look like a fool, or a weakling. Though, I’m sure that if you were to kill him, Brejik would… acknowledge you accordingly.”

The Vulknar’s offer runs through Vann’s head, as the persistent ache from multiple earlier battles reminds him of the ridiculous quest Gadon’s sent him on. He lowers his blaster a few centimeters. “So, all we have to do is… ‘discredit’ Gadon, and Brejik will tell us whatever we want to know? No more games?”

To Vann’s left Carth shifts uncomfortably, giving the other man an angry glare.

Ignoring Carth’s objection, the Twi’lek nods enthusiastically. “Exactly! It’s quite simple, and everyone gets what they want.”

“I just betray Gadon, and whatever I want to know is mine for the taking?” Vann barks out a short laugh, finger twitching in rapid succession as he shoots three bolts straight through the Twi’lek’s chest. The holes smolder for a second before the green figure collapses to the floor. “Yeah,” Vann mutters, “I don’t think so.”

The rest of the Vulkars close in, their rifles all turning to aim at Vann.

Lowering his blaster, Vann rolls his shoulders. “Look, we just took out the rest of your base. You can do this the easy way, and give us the accelerator. Or you can do this the hard way.”

The Vulkars, of course, choose to do it the hard way.

In the blink of an eye, Vann drops to the ground. He holsters his blaster as he crouches down, and then draws both swords from his back. “Hard way it is,” he hisses.

* * *

“Here’s your damn accelerator,” Vann states, as Zaalbar and Carth deposit the item in the middle of the Bek’s base with more force than strictly necessary. Delivering the item feels less like victory, and more like resignation. He aches all over, and his veins thrum unpleasantly from the injection of multiple medpacs over the course of the evening.

Gadon walks over to the acceleration, circling around it a few times as he bends over to study the accelerator’s intake, and then its vents. Finally satisfied with his inspection, he straightens and nods in approval. “Very good work. I’m impressed.”

Vann snorts. “Yeah, so am I. That was some wild gizka chase you sent us on.”

Chuckling softly, Gadon slowly strides over to one of the many locked door within the base. “Honestly,” he admits, “I didn’t expect you to go through with it.”

“You… what?”

“Aw, really Gadon?” Mission is limping slightly, her arms crossed angrily over her chest. “That’s
mean, even for you. They might be off-worlders, but they’re not bad!”

Pausing in front of the door’s lock, Gadon frowns. “Mission, Zaalbar? Can you wait out here for a bit? I’d like to speak with these two men in private. After all, I think I owe them some information.”

Carth manages to muster up a glare. “You definitely do.”

Gesturing to one of the nearby Hidden Beks, Gadon asks, “Can you get Mission and Zaalbar something to eat? And take them out to the garage. I’m sure they’d like to see the new accelerator tested.”

At the mention of food Zaalbar immediately perks up. The Bek nods to her leader, quickly ushering both the Twi’lek and the Wookiee into another area of the base.

“Now then, for some explanations.” Gadon finishes punching in the door’s passcode, and it slides open with a pneumatic hiss. He walks through, not checking to see if Vann and Carth are following before quickly pushing a pad to close the door behind him. “To be honest,” he begins, “I thought you were Republic spies.”

Vann glances between himself and Carth, noting their worn, Outer-Rim clothing, and arching a questioning brow. “And what would give you that idea?”

Gandon continues to walk through the base, leading them along empty corridors. “Look at it from my perspective. Two off-worlders come into my base in the middle of a Republic blockade, asking questions about a missing Republic Officer. It all seemed a little convenient at the time.”

“So, what, you gave us the most ridiculous task you could think of?” Carth’s tone is terse, but tired.

Smirking, Gandon replies, “Exactly.” Unlocking the door to a small room, he gestures for his guests to follow him inside. Once everyone is within the windowless space, he swiftly shuts and locks the door behind them. “The way I saw it, if you were actually Republic spies you would have marched out of this base and never come back. I was half-expecting a Republic raid after you left.”

Slouching in exhaustion, Vann tries to subtly check the room for exits. Aside from the door they entered through, there’s only one other opening. And that also appears to be locked. “And what if we’d been killed down in the Undercity?”

A look of concern briefly flits across Gadon’s face, though it’s quickly replaced by nonchalance. “Well, then you wouldn’t be worthy of learning the information I’m about to tell you. After all, it’s not every day that a Jedi crashes on Taris.”

“So, the Republic officer really is a Jedi?” Carth also seems to be scanning the room.

“Indeed she is.”

Vann bristles, sensing his companion’s trepidation. “And is she really being held captive by a group of Mandalorian rebels?”

Humming softly, Gadon scrubs a palm across his chin. “A group of them? No. It’s actually only a single Mandalorian.”

“A single Mandalorian is holding a Jedi hostage?” Carth barks out a harsh laugh. “Forgive me if I don’t believe that.”
A smirk plays on the corners of Gadon’s lips. “As well you shouldn’t. After all, that’s not a very believable story, now is it? There’s a reason that I had to turn a single man into a ‘group of rebels,’ after all.”

“Wait a second. Are you trying to say that you started those rumors? That you’re the source of all the crazy stories floating around the Cantinas?” Vann blinks in disbelief, though his surprise quickly shifts to anger.

“Like I said earlier. Information is a very valuable thing down in the Lower City.”

Carth scrubs a hand over his face, letting out a frustrated groan. “So, is there even a Republic Jedi on this planet? Or are you making that up, too?”

Gadon studies the two men before him, unnaturally pale eyes watching their faces for several long moments as he stands in silence. Finally, he nods slowly. “There is indeed a Jedi. And a Mandalorian. Though, to the best of my knowledge, he’s not holding her captive.”

The anger ebbs out of Vann, replaced with confusion. “So, then what exactly is this so-called Mandalorian doing with a Jedi?”

“From what I’ve seen, he’d hiding her. Tending to her injuries.” The look of concern crosses Gadon’s features again. “She’s not doing very well, last I checked.”

“Last you… checked?” Carth’s eyes go wide. “Wait, so you’ve seen this Jedi?”

Chuckling softly, Gadon strides over to the other door. “I better have seen her. I’m hiding her in my base, after all!”

“The Jedi is here?” In an instant, Vann is following after Gadon. Without looking, he can tell that Carth is close behind. “She’s been here, in this base, the entire time?”

“Pretty good hiding place, isn’t it?” Gadon grins as he approaches the second locked door. “And now you can understand why I didn’t trust two off-worlders coming into my base, asking questions?” His fingers hover over the keypad, ready to punch in the passcode. “So, I suppose that you want to meet Bastila?”

Carth and Vann exchange a look of confusion, the former soldier actually taking a step away from the door. Vann merely sighs, closing his eyes as he takes a deep breath. “And Bastila would be the Jedi, I assume?”

“That she is.” Without waiting for further confirmation, Gadon punches in the code and unlocks the door. It slides open slowly, revealing a small space bathed in dull lighting. “I’ll go in first to try and make sure Canderous doesn’t shoot you both before you can get a word in edgewise.” With that, the Hidden Bek leader disappears into the gloom.

Hovering just outside of the doorway, Vann resists the urge to start pacing. “So,” he finally draws. “This just keeps getting weirder...”

“This is trouble.” Carth casts a longing glance at the door leading back into the hallway. “We never actually agreed to meet with this Jedi. We should go, before Gadon comes back.”

“And then he really will think we’re spies.”

Carth shakes his head. “Better than getting shot by some Mandalorian. Or sliced in half by a Jedi’s lightsaber.”
Frowning, Vann stares at the other man for a moment. “You… really didn’t have a good experience in the war, did you?”

Scoffing, Carth returns the stare. “Did anyone?”

Their conversation is cut-off as Gadon partially exits the room, beckoning both men forward. “You can come in, though I’d recommend minding your manners.”

Still shaking his head in disapproval, Carth arches his brows as he casts one final look towards the exit. Vann ignores the other man’s objection and, after a moment’s hesitation, he slowly crosses the threshold into the dimly-lit room beyond. As his eyes adjust to the lower lighting, he can see that the chamber is probably a converted storage closet, with most of the space currently occupied by a bed and a small durasteel chair. A large, heavily-muscled figure is currently perched in the chair, looking remarkably relaxed as he carefully trains his repeating blaster on the door.

“So,” the man in the chair demands, voice gruff. “What do we have here?”

“Friends, I hope.” Gadon is smiling softly, seemingly oblivious to the accusation already lacing the stranger’s words. “Individuals who might be able to help the pair of you get off this planet.”

Carth balks in the doorway, one hand slamming against the frame. “Woah, wait a second! We never said anything about helping a Mandalorian and a Jedi.”

Not taking his eyes off of the repeating blaster, Vann nods. “We’re stuck on this planet, same as everyone else. We were hoping to return the supposedly-captured Jedi and end this damned blockade, but…”

Still surprisingly casual, the Mandalorian scowls at Gadon. “Sounds like you brought me two Republic morons, is what you did.” He adjusts his grip on his blaster, aiming the muzzle directly at Vann. “And if you plan on taking Bastila anywhere, you’ll have to go through me, first.”

Unperturbed by the threat of violence, Gadon merely sighs. “Don’t be hasty, Canderous. I think that, once these two hear the whole story, they’ll be willing to help.” He chuckles. “And trust me, they’re not Republic.”

For the first time, Canderous’s steely gaze studies the two newcomers, carefully acknowledging their posture and their weapons. After a moment he snorts, though says nothing more.

Turning to Vann and Carth, Gandon smirks. “And you’re not giving yourselves enough credit. If you were clever enough to get my accelerator back from those damn Vulkars, you should be able to figure a way past the blockade.”

“Look, we didn’t exactly agree…” Carth sputters.

Gently, but firmly, brushing Carth’s hand away from the doorframe, Gadon gives the former soldier a friendly pat on the shoulder. “I have faith that you’ll work things out.”

Canderous continues to glower, somehow managing to loom even from his seated position. “We’ll see,” he finally growls.

Ignoring the tangible animosity, Gadon quickly slips out of the room. Once outside, his hand hovers over the button to shut the door. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll give you gentlemen a chance to discuss your future plans. Besides, I wouldn’t mind having a little plausible deniability when the Republic starts asking questions.” He chuckles once more, the door closing with a click behind him.
The dim, bluish lights of the small room are the only illumination that remains, casting everything in an eerie glow. Vann keeps his eyes trained on Canderous, hands ready to reach for his weapons at any moment. “So…” he begins, “Care telling us the whole story?”

“Like why a Mandalorian is protecting a Jedi he captured.” Back pressed against the door, Carth’s eyes narrow as he scans the room.

Canderous remains silent for several more moments, body lose but visibly poised to spring into action should the need arise. Finally, he grunts out, “I didn’t capture Bastila.” He pauses, carefully watching the other two men’s reactions. “She was defecting.”

Tensing in surprise, Vann cants his head to the side as he studies the Mandalorian, searching for a hint of deception. Or a sign that the man is telling a really bad joke. “…Defecting?” he asks. “Why would a Jedi defect from the Republic?”

“I can think of a few reasons,” Carth mumbles.

Canderous arches a brow, clearly having heard the former soldier’s barely-audible comment. For whatever reason, he relaxes slightly, sitting further back in the almost-comically-small chair. “Honestly, that’s not my story to tell.” He nods to the bed beside him. “It’s hers.”

For the first time, Vann realizes that there’s a person lying in the bed, her slender form barely visible beneath the coarse blankets covering her. The only thing visible is a head of chestnut-brown hair, mussed from sleep, and pale skin that almost seems to luminesce in the unnatural lighting. It’s hard to tell if the woman beneath the covers is asleep or unconscious, her chest barely moving with each slow breath she draws. From time to time her eyelids flutter, though she remains silent and otherwise still.

“Oh…” Carth draws a sharp breath, his gaze also settling on the woman in the bed. “Is she, uh, is she okay?”

Turning to look at his charge, Canderous shrugs one broad shoulder. “Honestly not sure. She’s been like this since I found her. Looks like her shuttle was pretty beat-up during her landing, but I couldn’t find any serious injuries.” Her frowns, looking pensive. “Of course, I don’t pretend to know how the Jedi or the Force works.”

Carth’s brow furrows. “Well, have you called a doctor? There’s gotta be someone familiar with Jedi in a city as big as Taris.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll call in a strange doctor in a Republic-controlled city to check on a Jedi who’s defecting from the Republic.” Canderous snorts in disgust. “Brilliant idea, moron.”

Vann is pretty sure that Canderous and Carth keep arguing, but he doesn’t hear their exact words. His focus has narrowed down to a single point in the room, entirely centered around Bastila. He can feel… something… radiating off of her; some type of power or aura that seems to call out to him. It clings to the subconscious part of his mind that always hovers just beyond his control. And, in an instant, his mind and Bastila’s seem to latch onto each other. That singular point of connection warps and twists together until a thread seems to dangle between them, precarious and yet unbelievably strong.

Without thinking, Vann approaches Bastila’s bed, mind instinctively reaching for that thing, that sixth sense that he’s constantly searching for but can only access in the most desperate of times. He thinks that Canderous moves to stop him, but he’s too quick, momentarily moving at a speed that shouldn’t be possible for the Human body. An instant later he’s at Bastila’s bedside, mind still
tugging and pulling at the same intangible presence that he used to shield himself and Carth when their freighter crashed. But this time he doesn’t shield Bastila. Rather, he uses his own feeble connection to the thing that surrounds them both, and attempts to bolster Bastila’s own connection. He takes his own thoughts, and emotions, and the steady thrum of his own heartbeat and infuses Bastila’s weaker presence, as though transferring his own life force into her via the delicate connection within their minds.

The dim little room is suddenly infused with a warm, bright glow. It would be comforting, even soothing, if it didn’t feel like it was burning through Vann’s skin like a brand, turning his veins to molten metal and searing through every cell in his brain. He thinks he screams, or at least opens his mouth to do so, but the only thing that comes out of his mouth is more of that pure, unrefined, fiery power. This isn’t the terrifying cold that accompanies his blood-soaked rampages against his enemies. No, this is something new, and pure, and almost cleansing.

After what might be seconds or hours the glow begins to recede, the energy ebbing back into Vann’s body. As the room returns to its former murky state, Vann finds himself slumping to his knees beside Bastila’s bed. He feels drained, as though he’s just fought a battle against an unseen enemy and come out worse for it. The unnamed thing, with all of its raw power and elusiveness, still throb at the back of his mind, more present now than it has been in any of Vann’s scattered memories. The thread between him and Bastila is also still there, an invisible tether made from the same primordial influence. Arms resting against the side of the thin mattress, Vann pants heavily, sweat beading on his brow.

“What the hells was that?!” Carth’s tone is hardly above a whisper, a mixture of shock and no small amount of fear.

Before anyone can answer, Bastila’s gray eyes flutter open and she draws a single, gasping breath.

Chapter End Notes

1. The only appropriate soundtrack for Carth and Vann’s adventures throughout this fic is Yakety Sax, played over and over on a constant loop. You’re going to hear that song as you read from now on. You’re welcome.

2. Yes, Zaalbar is speaking Shyriiwook. Yes, Vann (Revan) understands it. No, Carth cannot. He is, however, 100% fluent in Context Clues.

3. How the Force looks and feels tends to be described differently from source to source. This goes doubly-true for healing, which is barely touched upon in the core seven movies. So, let’s just say that this is my interpretation of The Force within Vann (Revan).
Chapter Summary

In which our heroes learn a little bit more about the current state of the Jedi Order, and a Very Easy Task becomes extraordinarily hard. Mines are disarmed, robots are befriended, and latent talents are discovered.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

3.

At this point in his life, Vann should be used to everything erupting into chaos.

The moment Bastila’s eyes open, Canderous is out of his chair and at her side, gruff voice nearly shouting at her to stay laying down and take calm breaths, dammit! Vann is fairly sure the Mandalorian has the worst bedside manner he’s ever seen, but he’s too damn tired to care.

Carth, for his part, has managed to shake off the initial shock and is currently attempting to haul Vann to his feet, all while repeatedly muttering, “Okay, what the hells Vann? What the hells?”

It takes a moment, but Vann manages to regain his footing and moan out an eloquent, “Dunno…” His words sound dazed and slurred, even to his own ears.

Despite Canderous’s repeated insistence to stay laying down, Bastila is attempting to sit-up, one pale hand resting against her brow as her eyes glance around the room, taking in her surroundings with a notably shrewd and calculating gaze. As her attention settles on Vann, she arches a slender brow. “What… happened?” she whispers, voice somewhat hoarse from disuse.

Everyone else in the room freezes, turning to look at each other in a desperate attempt to formulate the answer to that particular question. Apparently unable to find a suitable response, Carth finally shrugs, nervously replying, “I think that, uh, we were going to ask you the same thing.”

Canderous, having given-up on getting the Jedi to do anything he says, rises to his full height, blaster still at the ready. “We’re safe, Bastila,” he offers. “An acquaintance of mine is hiding us.”

“Well, that’s good news.” Running a hand through her tangled hair, the Jedi turns to study the two strangers in the room. “Is one of these gentlemen your acquaintance?”

“No, Miss,” Carth stutters, suddenly straightening. Vann is honestly surprised he doesn’t add a little salute after his words. “I’m Carth Onasi, and honestly I’m not sure where we stand in this whole situation.”

Feeling Bastila’s attention turn to him, Vann meets her gaze. Their eyes lock for a moment, and he feels the thin thread connecting their minds sizzle like a live wire. “Vann,” he offers, inclining his head. “I’m…”

“Remarkably Force-sensitive.” Bastila finishes, admittedly not with the words the mercenary was planning to use. “Though, not a Jedi. I’m surprised the Order didn’t sense you sooner. Power like
“yours is… quite rare.” She seems to be talking to herself now, musing out loud without realizing it.

Carth turns an accusatory stare on Vann, mouth hanging partially open. “You’re Force-sensitive?” he demands, sounding almost hurt.

“Oh… no?” Vann tries, the denial falling decidedly flat.

“Yes, you are.” Bastila is watching the mercenary carefully, no small amount of curiosity sparkling within her gaze. “Though, I suppose you may not have realized it. It’s entirely possible that your sensitivity was only recently awakened, perhaps via trauma. That would explain why the Order didn’t sense you as a child…”

“I really don’t think I’m…”

“Could, oh say, a really nasty hit to the head count as ‘trauma’?” Carth is still eyeing Vann suspiciously, arms crossed over his chest.

Bastila inclines her head thoughtfully. “Well, yes, that could definitely…”

Using his thumb and forefinger to produce a shrill whistle that echoes through the small room, Canderous glares at everyone around him. “Hey!” he shouts, “I hate to break it to you, but we have bigger things to worry about than if Vann here is some sort of latent Jedi. Like, I dunno, getting past the Republic blockade and off this planet.”

“…Republic blockade?” Bastila’s eyes go wide. “Oh dear.”

“Yeah, you can say that again. Maybe with a few more curses thrown in.” Canderous chuckles mirthlessly. “Seems like your plan to escape the Republic unnoticed completely backfired.”

Slumping back to rest against the wall behind the bed, Bastila sighs heavily. “Yes, well, unfortunately things did not go quite as planned from the start. For one thing, I didn’t expect the Endar Spire to be attacked in-orbit.” She lowers her voice, tone suddenly dark. “And for another, I didn’t expect the shuttle I boarded to have a faulty engine. I’m… actually a bit concerned that Malak sensed my deception and tried to sabotage my escape.”

“Wait… Malak? As in ‘Supreme Commander Malak?’” Carth’s voice rises in pitch, panic creeping into his words.

“Do you know any other Malak in the Republic military?” Canderous scowls. “Moron.”

Slowly backing towards the door, Carth shakes his head. “If you’re directly connected to Malak, I’m gonna have to wash my hands of this mess. That is a can of sandworms that I have no interest in opening.”

“Hey!” Canderous snaps, “Why don’t you listen to what the lady has to say before you go passing judgement? You Republic twits are always claiming that us Mandalorians are uncivilized, but at least I had the decency to listen to her the first time we met!”

Massaging his aching temples, Vann glances between the Mandalorian and the Jedi. “Have to admit, I’m curious about why the two of you are working together to do… whatever it is that you’re doing.”

“Yes,” Bastila breathes, “I suppose I do owe everyone an explanation. Canderous included. Since we seem to be secure, at least for now, it might be the best time to share what I know.”
“Please,” Carth snaps sarcastically, “Go on.”

Smiling pleasantly in the face of Carth’s irritation, Bastila begins, “As I mentioned, I have trained under Master Malak. I possess a rare gift among the Jedi, something known as Battle Meditation, and the Commander wanted to hone my skills for use with the Republic forces. Training with such an esteemed Jedi is an honor and a privilege, but…”

“Let me guess, Malak isn’t everything he seems?” Vann arches a brow.

Bastila blinks. “Actually, you’re quite right. But how did you…?”

Sighing, Vann jerks his head towards Carth. “Seems to be a running theme of late. Anyway, continue.”

“Yes, as I was saying, spending so much time around Master Malak has enabled me to see him as few others do. And what I’ve seen, well, I don’t much like it.” She swallows hard. “I’ve begun to suspect that the Commander has been seduced to the dark side. That he’s being corrupted by war. And by an outside influence…”

“Really? It takes a Jedi to figure that out?” Eyes rolling, Carth clenches his jaw so tightly that his teeth audibly grind. “If you’ve finally figured out what should have been obvious years ago, why don’t you just tell somebody? Like your esteemed Jedi Council?”

Bastila lets out an indignant breath. “Because, Mr. Onasi, it’s not that simple!” She takes another breath, this one slower. For a moment, her anger runs like ice water through the connection she shares with Vann. “Malak is a war hero. He’s credited with ending the Mandalorian War, and with maintaining peace in the intervening years. The Jedi, as a whole, believe him to be an upstanding member of the Order, and a beacon of Light within an otherwise tumultuous galaxy.” She sighs, gaze dropping to where her hands rest in her lap. “Discrediting such a man, especially without any specific proof, would only result in me being reprimanded. If not exiled from the Order entirely.”

Letting out a harsh laugh, Carth stares at the Jedi for several moments. “How can everyone else not realize that Malak is corrupt? He destroys entire planets! He uses the Republic fleet as his personal army! He…”

“Does what’s necessary to win a war and maintain peace,” Canderous finishes. “You might think his tactics are harsh, but to my people ruthlessness is necessary. It’s a way of life.”

“If anything, that says more about your people than it does about Malak,” Carth sneers haughtily.

“Enough!” Slamming her palms against the thin mattress, Bastila glares between the former soldier and the Mandalorian. “There’s no use arguing about what’s ‘right’ and what’s ‘wrong’ in this situation! The fact of the matter remains that Malak, despite his actions, is highly respected and trusted. Discrediting him right now is not an option.”

Vann studies the Jedi for a moment, nodding slowly. “So, instead you fled?”

Closing her eyes, Bastila cradles her head in her hands for a moment, letting out a heavy sigh. “That wasn’t my original intention. I was planning to make it seem like I had found a lead on a dangerous rebel cell, and that I had to follow it before I lost the trail. That excuse would have bought me weeks, if not months, away from Malak.” Slowly lifting her head, she peers around the room, expression somber. “In that time, I was hoping to contact the few Jedi who oppose Malak, and to try and collect indisputable proof of his fall to the dark side. I thought that I could find allies, organize a resistance… It all sounds so foolish now that I say it out loud. The naive hopes of Jedi
Expression softening, Carth steps towards Bastila’s bed. “That’s… not foolish. If anything, you’re the first Jedi I’ve met in a long time who seems to have an ounce of sense.”

“Huh, same thing I said when I first met her.” Canderous’s tone is smug at the admission.

“Speaking of which…” Vann gestures between the Mandalorian and the Jedi, “How, exactly, did you get dragged into this whole mess, Canderous?”

Eyes crinkling in visible amusement, Canderous chuckles. “Let’s just say that any enemy of Malak is an ally to the true Mandalorians. Unfortunately, there aren’t many of us left.”

“Wait a second, I thought you said that the Mandalorians respect Malak?” Carth’s eyes narrow as he watches the other man warily.

“Also,” Vann muses, “Aren’t there Mandalorian rebels all over the galaxy? I’ve seen more than a few working as mercenaries.”

Growling in irritation, Canderous glares at the other two men. “As a Mandalorian, I can respect Malak’s ruthlessness. He’s willing to do whatever it takes to win. But I don’t respect him. He’s a coward, shooting at worlds from high above, never willing to fight his enemies face-to-face or get his hands dirty.” He focuses directly on Vann. “And most of those mercenaries dishonor the name Mandalorian. They’re individuals who fled the final battles of the war, afraid of defeat. Now they fight nothing but unworthy opponents, selling their services to the highest bidder.”

“You’ve got one thing right,” Carth quips. “Malak is a coward.”

Running through his patchy knowledge of the Mandalorian War, Vann tries to piece together what he knows about the Mandalorians. As it turns out, it’s not much. “Wait, I thought… no, nevermind.” Waving his hand in frustration, he turns to focus on Bastila. “So, we know why you’re here. But we don’t know how you ended up unconscious in the base of a swoop gang.”

“Is that where we are?” The Jedi chuckles softly. “Well, to answer your question, I think I collapsed from exhaustion. The Republic had me using my Battle Meditation during the fight with the rebels who were attacking the Endar Spire. That severely depleted my resources.” A worried expression crosses her features. “I would have been fine to land on Taris, had my shuttle’s engine not been malfunctioning. To prevent crashing, I had to use the Force to guide my landing all the way through the atmosphere. I pushed myself far beyond my limits, and, well,” she gestures to the bed, “This is the result.”

Carth glances between Bastila and Vann, eyeing them both suspiciously. “So, what? If Vann hadn’t come along and did… whatever the hells he did, you would have just laid there until the Republic found you?”

Bastila shakes her head. “No, I suspect that I would have awoken in another day or so, refreshed and no worse for the wear. But Vann’s presence was indeed helpful.”

Leaning forward, the mercenary lowers his voice as he cautiously asks, “What, exactly, did I do?”

“Well, simply put, you healed me. Or, more correctly, healed my connection to the Force. It was a bit battered after my overexertion.” She smiles, eyes twinkling with amusement. “Though, I honestly can’t explain the exact nature of what you did. Many Jedi can’t heal, even with years of training. And yet, you managed to do so instinctively.” She locks eyes with Vann, her own sense of curiosity seeming to ripple between them. “You are a truly remarkable individual.”
“Pfft, I bet you say that to all of the guys who find you unconscious on a blockaded planet.” Vann shrugs off the compliment, mind still struggling to comprehend that the mysterious thing he’s occasionally able to access might be the legendary Force wielded by Jedi. The thought still feels preposterous. And yet not…

“Well, as much as I’d love to stay here and chat all day, there’s still an entire damned Republic blockade we need to get past.” Canderous snorts at the thought. “I might know a guy with a ship we can use.”

Frowning, Bastila slowly swings her legs over the side of the bed, wincing slightly as she applies weight to her unused muscles. “I don’t care how good a ship your friend has, there’s no way we’re getting past the Republic blockade without their codes.”

“Codes?” Vann stares blankly.

“Remember the shields and alarms I mentioned before?” Carth glances at Bastila for confirmation. “The Republic always has codes that a pilot can enter to bypass that system. It’s the only way to safely blockade a planet when using turrets that can blow a ship to pieces.”

Bastila regards Carth thoughtfully. “You sound like you speak from experience.”

Nodding, Canderous adds, “And you move like a soldier.”

“See,” Vann jokes, “I told you.”

“Alright, alright.” Carth waves a hand through the air, as though to brush away the accusations. “I used to be a Republic pilot, but that was a lifetime ago. These days, I don’t want anything to do with them. Trust me.”

Canderous chuckles darkly. “Oh, I recognize a disgruntled Republic soldier when I see one. They tend to have a grudge against Malak, and an inordinate distrust of Jedi.”

“Check aaaaand check.” Vann nods knowingly.

“Hey, I have good reason for both of those things, thank you.” Carth crosses his arms irritably, glaring around the room.

Stepping in before the situation can escalate, Bastila offers Carth a sympathetic smile. “Well, whatever those reasons are, I must ask you to at least trust me. If we work together, I think I can get us past the blockade.”

Vann sighs. “Why don’t you have the codes already?”

“Unfortunately, in a situation like this, the Republic changes the codes on a daily basis. New codes are produced less than 24-hours before they go into effect, and only given to senior officers.” Bastila forces a rueful smile. “Even if the blockade went up before I landed on Taris, my codes would no longer be valid.”

Carth groans, scrubbing both hands over his face. “I’m afraid to ask, but what’s the plan? Assuming you have one.”

“Well, there are two options.” Though her tone is hopeful, Bastila’s voice lacks any real sense of comfort. “We can try to slice the Republic computers remotely. It would be extremely difficult, even if someone knows an expert slicer…?” She glances hopefully at Canderous.
Shaking his head, the Mandalorian offers an apologetic shrug, “Sorry sister, no can do. Not on this planet, anyway.”

Nodding in resignation, Bastila presses on. “I was afraid of that. The only other option would be to sneak onto the Republic base and try to steal the codes directly from their system.”

“What?! Are you insane?” Carth’s jaw drops, his dark eyes going comically wide. “No. There is no way any of us are going onto that base. They’ll shoot us on sight!”

Speaking over Carth’s objections, Bastila explains, “If two or three of you can manage to acquire Republic uniforms, you should be able to disguise yourselves well enough to sneak past the initial guards. Beyond that, any decent utility droid ought to be able to slice into the system once inside.” She glances down at herself. “I’d go with you, but I’m fairly sure I’d be recognized.”

“Problem,” Vann points out, holding up a finger. “We don’t have a utility droid. And they’re not exactly cheap.”

“I like that this is where you see a problem,” Carth mutters sarcastically.

“Davik usually has one in the shop. He’s always upgrading his.” Canderous muses.

“…Davik?”

Nodding, Canderous continues, “Yeah, Davik Kang. He’s a local ‘businessman,’ has a hand in all of the dealings that go on around Taris. He’s pretty neurotic, and gets his droids upgraded and wiped regularly. If you’re persuasive enough, you can convince the shop-girl that he sent you to pick-up one of his units.”

Cracking his knuckles, Vann nods. “Well, that should be easy enough. So, what? We grab the droid, acquire some uniforms, and then… just walk through the front door?”

“Pretty much,” Bastila shrugs helplessly. “It does sound a bit too easy when you put it that way.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m sure it’ll end-up being incredibly complicated once we’re inside,” Carth sighs.

“I sure hope it is,” Canderous grins. “I’ve been sitting around here for five days. I’m itching for some excitement!”

Throwing his hands up in defeat, Carth grumbles, “Fine. Whatever. Let’s just hope this is another thing that I live to regret.”

* * *

“Beep-beep-boop-beep!”

Carth groans, attempting to pull his ‘borrowed’ Republic cap further over his eyes. “Oh hells, you have got to be kidding!”

“What did Tee-Three say?” Vann leans closer to Carth, the pair of them shielding the new utility droid as it slices into the Republic’s reception terminal.

Carth frowns. “I still can’t believe that you speak Shyriiwook and Ryl, but not Binary!”

Rolling his eyes, Vann hisses, “Well, I’m sorry that in my past life I was too busy learning a half-dozen alien languages to memorize Binary! Now just translate what the damn droid is saying.”
“He says that the codes for the blockade aren’t in the main computer.”

“Oh HELLS!” Closing his eyes, Vann makes a subtle motion to Canderous, who is ‘patrolling’ nearby in his illicitly-acquired Republic armor. The mercenary is fairly sure that the three individuals who ‘donated’ their uniforms to this spectacularly-failing plan ought to be waking-up locked inside of an abandoned apartment in the Lower City any time now. Which will not help things go smoothly.

Striding over in a remarkably good impression of a Republic guard, Canderous asks, “Problem, gentlemen?” The voice modulator does an interesting job of garbling his voice.

Carth visibly grits his teeth. “The codes aren’t in the main computer.”

“Well then, where are they?” Even with the modulator, Canderous’s voice is gaining a distinctive growl.

“Boop-beep-beep! Boop-boop-beep-whoo!”

“Huh.” Frowning, Carth translates, “Tee-Three says that the codes for the blockade are only authorized to a single individual on this base. A General Lang.”

Grunt of approval audible even through his helmet, Canderous nods towards the set of doors beyond the reception desk. “Easy enough. All we have to do is find this general, knock him out, and get access to his personal datapad.”

Vann shrugs, pulling at the slightly-too-short sleeves of his jacket. “Shouldn’t be too hard. Unless…”

“Let me guess? Now you choose to remember something useful.” Carth casts his companion an accusatory look. “Alright, spit it out.”

“Well,” Vann muses, “Isn’t ‘General’ the default rank given to Jedi who are in command of a large group of troops? Like, oh say, a military base?”

“...Shit. It is.” Carth taps T3-M4 on his head, nodding towards the door. The little droid squeaks, and then begins to roll towards the base entrance. “Well, I think it’s time to cut our losses and get out of here while we can.”

Remaining at his position beside the reception terminal, Vann shakes his head. “No! This is our best plan, and probably our only chance of getting off Taris.”

“This is our only plan,” Carth hisses, beginning to head towards the door. “And it’s already a mess. Hells, if there’s a Jedi on this base, I’ll bet they already know we’re here.”

“I don’t think that’s how the Force works…” Vann glances towards the doors that lead to the main portion of the base. The locks are surprisingly basic, and he can probably slice them open without T3-M4’s help.

Carth pauses halfway to the exit, whispering through clenched teeth. “You found out you’re Force-sensitive less than a day ago, and you’re already an expert on how the Force works?”

Attempting to look nonchalant, should the droid’s overrides of the security cameras be failing, Vann pretends to sort through datapads on the desk. “No! It’s just… Well, I don’t think being a Jedi makes you omnipotent. Bastila obviously didn’t know that her entire plan had turned to Bantha-shit.”
“Hey boys? Trouble’s here!” Canderous is already pointing his repeating blaster at the swiftly-opening elevator doors, which reveal a half-dozen armed Republic troopers. Without asking questions, they open fire on the intruders.

Quickly dodging behind the desk, Carth draws both of his blasters and begins to fire on their assailants. “You were saying?” he demands angrily.

“I… could be wrong,” Vann admits, drawing his own blaster. “All Jedi excluding Bastila may, in fact, be omnipotent.”

Either the troopers sent down in the elevator were new trainees, or Canderous is a one-man wrecking crew. Whatever the reason, it’s only a few moments before the screech of blaster fire falls silent, and all six of the Republic soldiers are lying motionless in and around the elevator. As soon as he visually confirms that all opponents are down, Vann rushes out from behind the desk, holstering his blaster as he begins to check the troopers for anything useful. Unfortunately, none of them have so much as a passcard, confirming his suspicion that these are just the poor suckers sent down to deal with a presumed ‘easy’ threat.

Shows how much the Republic knows.

“Well,” Vann mutters as he kicks the last of the troopers’ blasters into the far corner, “I think it’s safe to say that they know we’re here.”

“You don’t say.” Carth is re-checking the receptionist, who’s currently taking a nap beneath her desk thanks to whatever drug Canderous acquired and Vann subtly injected her with under the pretense of flirting. “Oh. Well… damn.”

Pausing as he adds the Medpacs he found on the troopers to his personal stash, Vann quirks a brow. “What now?”

Voice muffled by the desk as he fiddles with something underneath, Carth calls out, “I think the receptionist pushed the panic button as she fell unconscious. It’s currently on alert, but I think I can… yup. Switched it off.”

“Well, that’s a better explanation than ‘omnipotent Jedi,’” Vann grumbles, nodding towards the defeated soldiers.

Already urging T3-M4 to slice the main door open, Canderous spares a single glance at his companions. “Even with that alarm turned off, there’s no making a clean getaway from this. So we might as well go all-in and do this right.”

Drawing both swords from their sheaths, Vann cracks his neck. “Doesn’t look like we have any other option.”

“Just so long as I’m on record saying that this is a terrible plan.” Raising both of his blasters, Carth gets into position just beyond the doors, taking aim as they slide open with a gentle ‘woosh.’

As the doors open, they reveal two Republic officers already marching down the hallway, joined by eight armed and armored troopers. None of them look happy.

Canderous hoists his hefty blaster. “Now this is what I was hoping for!” The unrestrained glee is audible, even through the voice modulator.

“We’re going to get in, find the general, and get out, okay?” Carth takes-up a defensive position, providing cover for Canderous as the Mandalorian bowls through the armored troops. “Nothing
excessive, no fancy stuff.”

Vibroblades glinting dangerously in the bright light of the base, Vann charges into the fray. He’s dodging as much blaster fire as he can, and fights through the sting of pain when a bolt finds its mark. “What’s that Carth?” he calls with a smirk, parrying one of the trooper’s swords with one blade while he uses the other to slash through layers of armor. The woman moans as her flesh is ripped open, falling to the ground in a bright crimson spray. “Can’t hear you over this racket.”

“I knew I liked you, Vann!” Canderous continues his one-man charge through the troopers, repeating blaster mowing down at least three individuals before he manages to take a shot to the leg. His borrowed armor takes the brunt of the hit, but he still lets out a stream of Mando’an expletives.

Without missing a beat, Vann sneaks up behind the trooper who shot the Mandalorian, easily driving both blades through the man’s back. The well-honed edges shred through his armor, and he lets out a single shout before crumpling to the ground in an awkward heap of plastoid and metal.

The last of the Republic soldiers dispatched, Carth rushes out from the cover of the doorway, blasters still held at the ready. Glancing down at the impaled trooper, he gives Vann an accusatory glare. “Was that really necessary?” he growls under his breath.

“Probably not,” Vann admits unabashedly. “But it was effective.” Sheathing one sword, he immediately joins Canderous in checking the downed soldiers for anything useful. “Any of these General Lang?”

Tossing one semi-conscious man aside, Canderous shakes his head. “Nope. But I did find this.” Held between the armored fingers of his Republic-issued gauntlet is a passcard.

Eyeing the card, Vann glances down the long corridor the trio has entered. Doors line both sides of the hallway, each one closed and locked. “Well, let’s see what that opens.”

* * *

“Of course the only door that card works on is a room full of mines.” Carth and Canderous are standing guard in the hallway as Vann attempts to disarm the explosives. The trio has already dispatched two more patrols on their way through the base, with T3-M4 slicing door locks when the passcard proved ineffective.

The triumph they felt when it finally worked was, predictably, short-lived.

“So,” Carth draws, eyes scanning the hallway. “Bet you wish we’d let Mission come along after all.”

“Shut-up, Carth.” Wiping his forearm across his brow, Vann carefully disables what he thinks is a fairly nasty gas mine. “You’re not helping.”

In all fairness, the mercenary is currently wishing Mission had come along. Her skill at disarming just about anything far outstrips his own, but in the end she wouldn’t have blended in well enough on the all-Human base. The young Twi’lek had initially been disappointed that she and Zaalbar weren’t allowed to tag along, but Vann had managed to convince her that staying behind with Bastila would be more interesting. Mainly by informing Mission that the Jedi was in possession of a dual-bladed lightsaber that she would absolutely be willing to show-off with enough pestering.

Vann is fairly sure this was not Canderous’s intent when he returned Bastila’s saber. He only hopes the apartment is still standing when they get back. If they get back.
The gas mine beeps once, and then deactivates. Sighing with relief, Vann gently nudges the now-defunct mine out of the way, and turns to the last obstacle blocking access to what appears to be a large terminal. “Okay,” he breathes. “Got this.”

Initial inspection reveals that it’s a plasma mine, loaded with enough plasma to really cause some trouble if it goes off. While Canderous might be protected in his trooper armor, Vann and Carth are only wearing the standard uniforms assigned to lower-ranking officers. “Please,” the mercenary begs the mine as he delicately removes its casing, “Do not go off.”

“Everything okay in there?” Carth’s head appears around the doorway, expression concerned.

Finger hovering over the now-revealed buttons, Vann all-but whispers, “We’ll find out soon enough.”

“Well, can you find out a little faster?” Eyes wide, Carth nods towards the hallway. “Because we’re about to have company!”

“Krif!” Fingers flying nimbly over the mine’s buttons, Vann hopes that he’s hitting them in the right sequence. Sweat covers his palms, but he doesn’t dare to take the extra moment to wipe them on his borrowed pants. Instead, he bumbles through the disarm as efficiently as he can.

It’s like watching a bad holo-movie when he feels his finger slip and hit the red button rather than the green. The mine blinks rapidly, red and white lights flashing in turn.

Scrambling to his feet, Vann can hear blaster-fire filling the corridor. His hat falls from his head as he leaps away from the mine, running towards the doorway just as Carth and Canderous rush in from the hall, blaster bolts trailing them the entire way. T3-M4 is close on their heels, trilling and whirring in agitation as he fires his own blaster at the incoming Republic troopers.

Panting, Carth presses himself against the cover of the wall, eyeing the flashing mine. “Did, uh, did you disarm it?”

Vann can feel his eyes go wide, and he peeks out into the hallway. Six special-ops troopers are running towards them, all armed with long-range blaster rifles. Three of them fire at his head, and he narrowly dodges the bolts as he ducks back behind the doorway.

“Close the damn door!” Canderous thunders, alternately firing at the troopers and ducking behind the wall. “And jam the lock while you’re at it!”

“You might not want to…” Vann doesn’t get to finish, as the mine chooses that moment to beep loudly, glowing a dangerous shade of plasma-orange just as it....

Beeps one last time, and disarms.

Letting out a breath that he didn’t realize he was holding Vann slumps against the wall, just as T3-M4 manages to slice into the door’s locking system and slam it shut, effectively trapping everyone within the room. “Might not want to lock us in,” he finishes, turning to Carth with a forced grin. “And yes. I definitely disarmed the mine.”

Carth stares at the deactivated mine, and then back at Vann. His eyes narrow. “Did you? Did you really?”

“Well, it’s off, isn’t it?”

“...That’s not an answer!” Carth sputters. He keeps eyeing the mine like it might walk over and
detonate directly on his face.

Vann shrugs. “Just, maybe don’t touch it?”

Blinking, Carth shakes his head. “I… I am really beginning to regret meeting you.”

“Oh would you two stop?” Canderous is currently working the latches to the trooper helmet, further distorting the growl of his voice. “You sound like a pair of kids. Or an old married couple.” He eventually wrestles the helmet from his head and scowls at it. With a flick of his wrist, he tosses the offending item across the room.

Where it lands on the plasma mine.

Instinctively ducking, Vann squeezes his eyes shut and waits for the inevitable pain. He briefly, fleetingly, wonders just how many memories he’s going to lose this time.

A tick later, the mine hasn’t exploded. It’s still inert and unlit, disarmed and harmless in the middle of the room. Exhaling, the mercenary straightens, brushing off his jacket. “See,” he says, voice audibly shaken, “It’s disarmed.”

Carth takes a moment to scoff, but he’s already walking towards the large terminal that dominates most of the room. T3-M4 follows him, chirping amicably. Or, at least it sounds amicable.

“Alright,” the former soldier replies, “See what you can do.”

“Beep-beep-whoo!” Extending one his probes, the utility droid rolls over to the computer and quickly begins interfacing with it, slicing his way through the system with an efficiency that few organic creatures could hope to match. As he works, he keeps up a series of chatter that only Carth can understand.

“Well, that doesn’t sound too bad…” Carth is peering at the terminal over the droid’s head, watching as various security feeds and systems options appear. “Tee-Three says that General Lang has a private office on the second floor of the base. There’s a single elevator that leads directly to it that’s just down the hallway.”

Canderous grunts. “That sounds a little too easy.”

The terminal continues to flicker as T3-M4 keeps slicing the system. “Whoo-boop-beep!”

“Apparently the elevator entrance is a large room that can be sealed-off.” Carth is nodding to the droid, looking uncharacteristically positive about the situation. “So all we have to do is get past the troopers in the hallway, seal-off the room and…”

“Beep-boop-beep-whoo-whoooo!”

“And what?!” The positively instantly drains from Carth’s countenance. “Say that again Tee-Three?”

The droid whirs indignantly for a moment. “Boop-whoo!”

“What did he say?” Vann searches the terminal screen for hints.

Carth stares at the droid for several moments, finally closing his eyes. “Apparently the ‘only’ thing we have to get past in order to use the elevator is a shielded and heavily armed battle droid.” T3-M4 offers a few beeps of reassurance. “But Tee-Three has total faith that we can get past it with minimal casualties.”
“Well, that’s just…”

“Why I brought these along.” Canderous grins, reaching into the regulation pouch attached to the trooper armor. After a moment he produces three grenades, each of them resting awkwardly against his gauntlets. “Two ion and a frag. The first two should take the thing’s shields down, and the second’ll blow the damn thing to bits.” Keeping one grenade for himself, he offers the other two to his companions.

Gently accepting the frag grenade, Vann examines it for a moment. “These could just work.”

“Of course they’ll work! Idiot-proof, too.” Canderous uses his thumb to point to a pin on the side of his grenade. “Just arm them and throw.”

“Yes, thank you, I know how to use a grenade.” Carth sighs as he tucks the ion grenade into his jacket pocket, and then draws his blaster. “Come on, let’s just get this over with. Tee-Three, can you get the door open?”

Whistling jauntily as he rolls across the room, the utility droid pauses in front of the door’s control panel. He extends his probe and slices the door open, the locks disengaging with a mechanical ping.

Nodding to the others, Canderous heads to the door, which has become suspiciously quiet over the last couple minutes. “I’ll take point. Someone else disengage the latch.”

“On it.” Carth immediately takes his place beside the doorframe, hand hovering over the release button as he aims one blaster at the door.

Vann crouches low, swords at the ready as he prepares to cut down enemies below the standard line of fire.

Carth hits the door-release, and it swings open with a hiss of pressurized air.

Just outside of the door are twelve special-ops troopers, all of their rifles trained directly where the door used to be. Standing behind them is a greying, middle-aged man who looks oddly out-of-place in his dark brown robe and tan tunic. Upon seeing the door open, he ignites his lightsaber and brings it up into a defensive position. The blue blade crackles and hums with energy, casting eerie shadows across his face.

“General Lang,” one of the troopers asks, “Should we take them alive?”

Carth sucks in a breath through his teeth. “Well,” he whispers, “At least we don’t have to take out that battle droid.”

“One, maybe,” the Jedi responds. His eyes travel over the heads of his troops with the same shrewd awareness Bastila possessed. Slowly, his attention settles on the crouched-and-waiting Vann. “That one,” he informs his troops. “The Force is strong with him. I’m sure that Malak and the Order will be very interested in a Force-sensitive rebel.”

Anger bubbles up in Vann’s gut at the idea of becoming some sort of pawn. Of being nothing more than a potential weapon to the Republic. Cold runs through his veins, and he clings to the sensation. “Yeah,” he mutters, “I don’t think that’s how the Force works.”

Without another word, he charges directly into the cluster of troopers, both vibroblades whirling so fast that the air whistles around them.
Suddenly, everything erupts into violence.

No longer worried about going low, Vann directs his attacks at anything around him that moves. The specialized armor of these troopers is tougher than what he had to cut through previously, but that doesn’t deter him from slashing and slicing his way through the first soldier in line. Two blaster bolts manage to make contact, and he hisses in discomfort as he presses further into the fray. Rather than concerning himself with defense, he uses both blades to attack, landing combination strikes on multiple troopers before they realize he’s beside them. The blades, both honed to a razor-edge, manage to find flesh beneath the armor, sending out sprays of crimson.

Without warning, a blue saber blade slices through the air with shocking swiftness, its owner jumping high above the troopers to land a devastatingly-hard hit from above. Vann’s not sure what muscle memory suddenly kicks-in, but the sight of that blue lightsaber coming at his head causes him to instinctively pivot on one heel, crouching down and crossing both vibroblades above his face to block the strike. The sheer power of the hit reverberates down his arms and into his shoulders, and it takes all of his strength to keep the saber from making contact with his skin.

Clearly surprised that his attack was blocked, Lang’s landing flip is less-than graceful, and his footing is imperfect when he brings his saber back into a guard position. Seeing the mistake Vann presses the offensive, swinging both of his blades in complementary arcs so that they attack different areas simultaneously. The Jedi manages to block the first two slashes, but a third finds its mark, and he winces as a deep gouge is carved into his side.

“Juyo,” Lang mutters angrily, glaring icily at Vann. “How could an Outer Rim, back-water mercenary like you possibly know Juyo?”

Vann almost answers that he doesn’t know, but he’s too busy fighting off the Jedi’s renewed attack to formulate an appropriately-witty retort. Instead, he focuses on parrying each of the lightsaber’s wide swings, compensating for Lang’s more acrobatic style with his own pure, focused power. He actually never knew that there was a name for the style he fights in, just that it came to him as instinctively as breathing.

Delivering another powerful hit from above, Lang batters at Vann’s defenses, this time managing to get through the other man’s guard. Using the momentum of his first strike to deliver a series of smaller, more rapid slashes, he manages to loosen the vibroblade in the mercenary’s off-hand. With a final arcing slash, he knocks the blade from Vann’s grasp, and it clatters to the floor with a sharp, metallic twang. Panting hard, Vann readjusts his grip on his remaining blade, feeling a fresh surge of cold fury flood his system. He draws upon the feeling, letting it infuse his every movement.

“Oh, there’s darkness in you,” Lang remarks, smirking. “Fear, anger, frustration. I can sense it all. But you’re untrained, and your feeble darkness can never hope to overpower a true Jedi.”

An unexpected blow from an unseen source pushes Vann backwards a few meters, and he lands sprawled on his back. It takes all of his concentration to keep gripping his vibroblade, which he brings up to block another aerial strike from Lang. Now at a notable disadvantages, he attempts to roll to his feet, only to be thrown into a wall like a child’s toy. The air rushes from his lungs, and he’s barely able to block the next two fierce slashes from the Jedi’s lightsaber. “I’d rather not have to kill you,” Lang taunts. “But I will if I have to.”

Sweat drips down Vann’s back, and he’s barely able to pull himself to his feet in time to parry a blow to his side. Grunting in exertion, he mentally feels for his connection to that thing, what he can only assume is the Force, and tries to pull it into himself. He expects resistance, as usual, but this time the raw, primal power seems to flow over him like water. It’s rejuvenating, like sight being suddenly returned to him after years in the dark. Reinvigorated, Vann presses forward,
meeting each of Lang’s strikes with two of his own, wearing the Jedi down with the absolute ferocity of his blows.

“How…?” Lang is muttering, eyes wide in disbelief. “You’re untrained!”

“And you’re an arrogant piece of bantha shit!” Vann growls, knocking the lightsaber aside with two fierce slashes. A third slash catches Lang’s bicep, cutting deep, and a fourth carves a nasty gouge in the Jedi’s forearm. A powerful kick to the hands disarms Lang, and his saber flies through the air for a moment before it clinks against the ground, blade powered down.

Lang’s features twist into a feral snarl as he glares at his opponent, and for a moment Vann swears that the Jedi’s eyes glow an eerie shade of yellow. Despite being disarmed, the man laughs. “Do you think a Jedi needs a weapon to defeat someone as weak as you?” One hand moves upwards, fingers arching as though to grasp something.

Vann’s throat immediately closes, strangled by an invisible hand possessing unnatural strength. His second vibroblade tumbles from his grasp as he reaches up to try and unwrap the fingers from his throat, but there’s nothing there. Gasping and choking, his nails rake red lines into his skin as he tries to free his airway, to remove the intangible obstacle between himself and a much-needed breath.

“Struggle all you want,” Lang sneers, “It will all be over soon.”

As much as he wants to deny the Jedi’s words, Vann can already see black spots appearing in his vision as his lungs fight to draw in air. He can feel his consciousness slipping away, his grasp on the Force slowly ebbing. His hands fall from his throat, reaching out to clutch at the air around him. Somewhere between awareness and the dark allure of unconsciousness, Vann senses that there’s something nearby. Something important. All he has to do is reach out and grab it… His waning connection to the Force flows through him in one final surge, stretching out to grasp what his hands cannot.

The lightsaber ignites the moment it touches Vann’s finger, the weight of it so very different from a vibroblade, and yet so intimately familiar. His body aches from lack of oxygen, but he still has the strength to swing the saber in a long arch, the glowing blade easily slicing through both of Lang’s wrists in a single motion. The stench of burnt flesh fills the air, and the Jedi screams in agony. Vann, for his part, can’t feel anything but relief as he finally, finally draws several gasping breaths. Still shaky, he rolls to his feet, the saber grasped in both hands.

Everything takes on a dream-like quality as Vann charges at Lang, using the lightsaber to carve twin slices across the man’s chest before driving the blade directly into the Jedi’s gut. He gurgles once, and then collapses beside his still-smoking severed hands. The hum of the saber is like music to Vann as he turns to face what’s left of the troopers, who have Carth pinned behind a wall. Canderous is on the ground, grimacing as he keeps firing on his assailants.

Vrrrring! The lightsaber blade easily pierces through the trooper’s armor, melting a neat hole in the plastoid as it sinks into her chest. Vann draws the weapon out before the woman even has a chance to collapse. Vrrrring! Another trooper’s rifle is severed, before a wound is carved deep into his thigh. Vrooom-vrrrrring! Two more troopers are downed in a flurry of blue.

Twirling the blade elegantly around him, Vann moves back into a defensive position, ready to deflect any blaster bolts as his eyes scan the area for his next target. But there’s nobody else standing. Nobody except…

“You’ve got to be shitting me.” Carth is standing in the doorway, brow furrowed and mouth
hanging open as he stares in abject horror and fascination at the glowing blue blade in Vann’s grasp. “How are you able to…” He waves his hand, which is still clutching his pistol. “You know what? Don’t answer that yet.”

Jamming a Medpack into each thigh, Canderous sighs as he climbs to his feet. “Now that,” he announces, clapping one large hand onto the mercenary’s shoulder, “Was damn impressive. Not that we didn’t have ‘em on the run.”

“Yeah… That’s one interpretation.” Holstering the blaster in his off-hand, Carth reaches into his jacket and retrieves a Medpac of his own. Injecting it, he glances over at Vann. “Thanks for rescue. I’m appreciative, I really am. I was just a little… surprised… to see you with a… Vann? Vann!”

The pain hits like a freighter to the chest, and Vann feels himself sway on his feet. He’s taken more than a few hits from the troopers’ blasters, and he’s just now realizing that not all of Lang’s strikes were misses. While he was lucky enough to block the worst of the blows, his skin still stings from a half-dozen shallow burns. Not to mention the way his throat continues to throb from his windpipe being crushed. “I’m… fine,” he croaks, powering down the lightsaber.

“Sure you are, buddy.” Carth rushes over, holstering his other blaster. “But how about you sit down for a second?” He’s already digging in his jacket for another Medpac, which he promptly jams into Vann’s thigh without asking for permission. The mercenary is tempted to point-out that this is the second time that Carth has done this, but he’s not sure his voice will hold up.

The instant rush of healing warms Vann, and the worst of the aches and pains float away in a medicinal haze. Some of the saber burns sting as they close, but otherwise the feeling is almost pleasant. However, it does little to soothe the exhaustion creeping into his mind. His connection to the Force has retreated again, little more than a faint glow that hovers just beyond conscious thought. “Thanks,” he finally manages to wheeze out. “But I’m fine, really.”

Carth leans in closer, lips practically touching the shell of Vann’s ear as he hisses, “Fine enough to explain how in the hells you know how to use a damn lightsaber that well?”

“Once I figure it out myself, you’ll be the first to know.”

Giving Vann an overly-rough pat on the back, Carth grumbles, “I had that feeling.” He turns to where Canderous is rifling through Lang’s grisly remains. “Please tell me that you found something useful.”

Holding up a small datapad, Canderous grins as he taps the screen. “Nothing really,” he says with obvious sarcasm, “Unless you count tomorrow’s blockade codes.”

“Are you sure those are real? Not just some trap the Republic is setting?” Carth hurries over to the Mandalorian, calling for T3-M4 on the way. “Tee-Three, can you check this out? See if the codes are genuine?”

“Beep-beep-whoo!” The little droid hurries out from where it was positioned partially behind a wall, its stun ray still extended.

It takes a few moments for the utility droid to go through the data, quietly conferring with Carth the entire time. In the meantime, Vann collects both of his vibroblades and sheaths them on his back. It’s only when the second blade is in place that he realizes he’s still clutching the lightsaber. For a moment he considers leaving it with Lang’s corpse, but that somehow feels… wrong. With a shrug he clips the saber to his belt, finding that the small bit of added weight at his hip feels strangely comforting, if not slightly off-balance.
“So then, these are genuine?” Carth looks expectantly at T3-M4, who merely whirrs in conformation. “Finally, some good news. Though, that only gives us… fourteen hours to get off of this planet?”

Canderous shakes his head. “Probably less, once they discover that the codes have been stolen.”

Brow furrowing thoughtfully, Vann studies the droid. “Tee-Three, memorize those codes, will you? And Canderous? Put the pad back on Lang, in the pocket you found it in. They’ll probably change the codes sooner anyway, but that might buy us an hour or two.” He immediately begins to rifle through the troopers’ pouches, collecting anything of value. “The Republic is going to know they were attacked either way. But if they think it’s just some underworld thugs looking for supplies, they might not decide to reprogram the codes as quickly.”

“Good plan.” Carth immediately joins in the looting, shoving adrenal stimulants into his pockets, and removing scopes and energy cells from the troopers’ rifles. “Actually, that’s really clever.”

Canderous is already tucking the datapad back into place, giving Lang’s body a final roll to make everything settle more naturally. “Done,” he announces a moment later.

“Alright, good.” Carth has loaded the pockets of his uniform with as much as he can comfortably hold, and is passing the rest to Vann. “Let’s go, before they send another wave of troops.”

“Hey,” Canderous pauses, halfway down the hall. “While we’re this close, why don’t we try and take out that battle droid…?”

Carth and Vann’s shout of ‘NO!’ can probably be heard in the Undercity.

Chapter End Notes

1. Some of you may be wondering how Bastila managed to knock herself out for five days, just by using the Force skills she’s trained with almost her entire life. Rest assured, the characters will be revisiting this later.

2. I don’t have any reference for Revan practicing Form VII/Juyo, but as a character who’s known both for his martial prowess and his connection to the dark side, I thought that it was a natural fit.

3. I also don’t have any reference for Carth speaking Binary (and in fact there’s evidence to the contrary). However, I needed someone (not Revan) would could translate T3-M4.

4. Yes, there’s another Episode VII reference in this chapter
In which our heroes decide to acquire a ship, only to discover that nothing on Taris comes without a host of complications.

“I’m sorry, can you repeat that? You want us to do… what?” Carth is standing in their shabby apartment and temporary base of anti-Republic operations, staring critically at Canderous.

The Mandalorian stares right back, tone flat as he replies, "Steal a ship. It's called the Ebon Hawk. Dynamic-class, but highly customized. She’ll outrun almost anything the Republic can throw at us.”

Even as he nods, Carth’s wide-eyed expression suggests that he refuses to believe what he’s hearing. “Okay. But can go over who you want us to steal it from, just one more time?”

“Davik. Kang.” Though his voice stays even, there’s a visible twitch of annoyance beneath Canderous’s left eye. Possibly because this is the third time he’s repeating this information.

Carth shoots Vann a desperate look, obviously seeking reassurance that the current plan of action is as ludicrous as he seems to believe. And, to be honest, it’s a borderline insane plan. But so far, that’s been par for the course on Taris. “Don’t look at me,” the mercenary says with a shrug. “I just want off this rock.”

When nobody else offers any reassurance, Carth sits on the edge of the bed, resting his head in his hands. “Canderous,” he says, voice partially muffled, “I thought that you said that you knew someone who would lend us a ship.”

Chuckling darkly, the Mandalorian shakes his head. “No, what I said is that I know a guy whose ship we can use. I never said that he was just gonna let us use it.”

“Precision of language, and all that,” Bastila muses, lips quirking into an amused smile.

Vann sighs, dropping onto the bed beside Carth. He briefly considers offering the former soldier a comforting pat on the back, but settles for scratching the other man's head like an overgrown dog. Carth glares up from between his fingers, which is a dramatic improvement from the moping he seemed set on commencing. "So, are we breaking into another building? Not that I’m objecting, I’d just like some advanced warning before I’m shot at. Again.”

“Not this time.” Canderous’s mischievous grin should be worrying. “This time, we’re being cordially invited inside.”

Carth finally raises his head. “And how, exactly, did you manage that when we just spent multiple hours getting our asses handed to us in a Republic military base?”
“Actually,” Bastila interjects, “The invitation is my doing. While you were… preoccupied… with acquiring the blockade codes, I was busy contacting Davik on behalf of Canderous and arranging a meeting. Mr. Kang is always looking for skilled mercenaries to add to his team, and has been scouting Canderous for quite some time.” She smiles primly, but there’s a sly upturn to the corners of her mouth. “I took the liberty of adding Vann’s name to the offer. I thought it would be best to have at least two people invited inside… I do hope you don’t mind.”

Vann tries to shrug nonchalantly, though he can feel his brows raising in admiration. “Don’t mind at all,” he remarks, “Though, shouldn’t you be resting? Recharging your Force connection or whatever?”

“She spent almost five damn days asleep! It’s about time she earns her keep.” Canderous’s tone is still gruff, but there’s a hint of affection creeping into his voice.

“Are… are Jedi even allowed to make overtures to crime-lords? Isn’t that against some type of code or something?” Carth is currently peering around the room as though everyone else has succumbed to space-madness.

Placing her hands on her hips, Bastila scoffs at the accusation. “I will have you know that being a Jedi is not merely lightsabers and space battles! First and foremost, we are peacekeepers and diplomats.” There’s a mischievous twinkle in her eyes as she continues, ”And sometimes, as a diplomat, one must make deals with less-than-savory individuals. For the greater good, of course.” She waves a dismissive hand. “Besides, it’s not like Davik knows I’m a Jedi. He’s never even seen my face. He thinks I’m Canderous’s secretary.”

The Mandalorian barks out a laugh. “He thinks I have a secretary?”

“I know! As though I’d be a mere secretary.” Bastila scoffs again, more playfully this time. “If anything, I’d at least be your personal assistant. But that aside, Canderous and Vann are supposed to meet with Davik this afternoon at his estate. That should give you a workable window of time to get in, steal the ship, retrieve the rest of us, and get us through the blockade before the codes change.”

“Right,” Canderous nods, expression suddenly turning serious. “I’ve been to Davik’s estate before, about a year back. To the best of my knowledge not much has changed. The main thing we need to do once we’re inside is slice into his system. The launch codes for the Ebon Hawk should be stored there, along with the codes to unlock the hanger.”

Vann stands from the bed, holding his hands up, “Don’t look at me. I can slice really basic things, but I need a lot of spikes to do it. Computers aren’t my thing.”

Carth arches a brow, “Oh, you mean there’s actually something you’re not good at?”

“I happen to have a rather specific skill-set, tailored to my line of work.”

“Yeah,” Carth grouses, “Amnesiac death-machine is a pretty niche market.”

“Amnesia…?” Bastila casts Vann a worried glance.

Snorting Carth cuts in before the Jedi can ask more questions. “Don’t bother asking about it, because he won’t remember anything useful. It’s really damn convenient.”

Vann glares at the former soldier, “Just what are you imply…”

“So,” Canderous barks, gruff voice immediately putting an end to the disagreement, “Can any of
“you morons slice a computer or not?”

“The only slicers here are Mission, Zaalbar, or of course Tee-Three.” Vann makes a vague gesture towards the little droid.

“What’s that? You need something?” Mission looks up from where she and Zaalbar are using the room’s workbench to tinker with the Wookiee’s bowcaster. From the pieces strewn across the surface, it looks like they’re having limited success.

Rubbing his palm across his chin, Canderous nods thoughtfully. “Hmm. Davik has Twi’lek girls… serving him. He might believe that the kid belongs to us.”

Lips pulling into a worried frown, Vann asks, “Yeah, but would Mission be expected to, you know, do anything to make Davik believe that she’s not a threat?”

Catching the implied meaning, Canderous’s expression takes on the same concern. “I’m not sure. She’s young and pretty… he might want to ‘share’ the ‘goods.’”

“Yeah,” Vann grimaces, “I’m going to pass on that option.”

“I’m not just some dumb kid you know!” Looking rather child-like as she pushes her oversized goggles atop her head, Mission glares at both men. “I can take care of myself, Davik Kang be damned!”

Shaking his head at the young Twi’lek, Vann's tone is firm when he speaks. "I'm not worried about you taking care of yourself, Mission. I know you can because I respect you as a person. Which is why I'm not going to drag you into Davik's compound so that he can treat you like a piece of meat. I wouldn't do it to Bastila either. Carth, though…” He shakes his hand in a ‘maybe’ gesture.

“Hey!” Carth yelps, indignant.

“What?” Vann asks innocently. “You have pretty eyes. Come with us and charm Davik. Also, how is it that you speak Binary, but are such shit with computers?”

“I speak Binary because it makes it easier to communicate with astromech droids." Carth blinks, mind suddenly catching up to the rest of the conversation. "And just what are you trying to say about my eyes?!”

“Speaking of droids,” Bastila chimes in, her proper tone slightly more terse than normal, “Need I remind you that you can’t exactly take Tee-Three?”

Vann snorts bemusedly. “What, is going into Davik Kang’s compound with the droid we stole from him a bad idea?”

“Hmm,” Canderous considers aloud, “We could tell him that we found his droid on the black market, and are returning it. Might earn us some bonus points.”

Carth shakes his head, “But then we’d be down a utility droid. And, if we’re already stealing Davik’s ship, we might as well keep the droid who can help us repair it.”

From the corner, T3-M4 beeps in apparent agreement.

“So,” Vann breaths, “That leaves you, Zaalbar. I don’t think it would be hard to convince Davik that you’re my Wookiee bodyguard, especially if he doesn’t speak Shyriiwook, but I’m not going to make you do this if you don’t want to.”
Zaalbar looks thoughtful, carefully placing his tools on the workbench. “While I would never want to be someone’s servant, I have pledged a life-debt to you, Vann. As such, I do serve you.”

Arching a brow, Vann mutters, “That’s not exactly an answer, buddy.”

“No,” Zaalbar replies, “It’s not.” He draws a breath, though it sounds more like a growl. “My actual answer is this. Since we’ve met you’ve treated me as an equal, Vann Chis. I feel that you would never ask me to bow down to you or presume that my debt makes me your slave. As such, if you need me to pretend to serve you in order to get this group to safety, I believe I can play the part adequately.”

Vann offers the Wookiee a grateful smile, and it feels like the most genuine expression he’s worn in years. “Thank you, Zaalbar. I really appreciate it.”

“So…?” Canderous arches an expectant brow, “What did the carpet say?”

“He said he’ll do it,” Mission replies, rolling her eyes. “Does nobody else speak Shyriiwook? Geeze! It’s not that hard to learn!” She turns to grin at Zaalbar, “Big Z, me and you could have so much fun with this. I mean, if V-Man doesn’t tattle on us first.”

Opening his mouth to deny the thrice-damned nicked yet again, Vann pauses, thoughtful. “Actually,” he finally says, “Mission has a point.”

“So you’re finally accepting that your nickname is V-Man? I mean, it’s a clever play on sounds…” Carth smirks.

“No,” Sighing, Vann nods to the Wookiee. “What I mean is that I doubt Davik or his people speak Shyriiwook. Zaalbar can pass information back to me without anyone else knowing what he’s saying. It could definitely be useful.”

Canderous nods thoughtfully, grunting to himself for a moment before announcing, “So it’s settled. Me, Vann, and the carpet are going to meet with Davik. The rest of you be on standby, and be ready to move once we have the ship.” He glares around the room. “If you’re too slow, we’re leaving you behind.”

Carth frowns. “Bad time to ask, but one of you can fly a Dynamic-class, right?”

“Yes, I can fly a damn freighter!” Canderous snorts, “I may not be ‘smuggling spice onto Tatooine right under Czerka Corp’s grubby noses’ good, but I can manage.”

“Wha… I…” Carth stutters, “I… don’t know what… you’re referring to?”

An amused smirk splitting his face, Canderous presses on. “What, you didn’t think anyone else would recognize the name Carth Onasi? Hate to break it to you, pal, but you’ve gotten yourself a bit of a reputation in certain parts of the Outer Rim. A good smuggler who even Czerka Corp can’t catch is pretty rare.”

“Aw, Carth,” Vann feigns, “I thought you said that you weren’t a smuggler.”

“I’m not… It’s just…” Drawing a shaky breath, Carth stares daggers at Canderous. “First of all, it wasn’t spice, it was medpacs. And second of all, it’s not that Czerka can’t catch me. It’s that they can’t buy me with their damned blood money.” He throws up both hands in obvious frustration. “And anyway, can we not talk about this right now?”

“Wait!” Mission’s eyes go wide, “You’re that Carth?”
Casting a helpless glance at Canderous, Carth sighs heavily. “Look what you did!”

Vann smirks, adding, “Yeah, Canderous. Now the kid’s going to think Carth is cool. You’ve literally ruined her entire worldview from this point forward.”

Barely managing to suppress her own amused smile, Bastila chimes in. “While I think that what Carth did for the miners on Tatooine was very noble, I’m sure he can regale us with tales of his heroism another time. Perhaps after we acquire the Ebon Hawk, hmm?”

Doing his best to swallow his smile, Vann nods in mock seriousness. “Right, right. Davik.”

“I’ll brief you before you leave, so that you’re aware of my complete correspondence with Davik.” Bastila retrieves a datapad from the durasteel table. “This way we can minimize any potential surprises.”

Canderous is shooing Mission and Zaalbar from the workbench and brushing away their motley pile of parts. His heavy blaster takes up most of the bench as he begins to check and re-check its functionality. “Your planning is taking all of the fun spontaneity from my life, Bastila.”

The Jedi sighs, looking Vann over. “I think we’ve all had enough ‘fun’ spontaneity in the last few days to last a lifetime, thank-you-very-much.” She slowly strides over to the mercenary, eyes falling to his waist. Her next words are practically a whisper. “Speaking of mitigating potential problems, you might want to remove that from your belt before you meet with Davik, least he gets the wrong impression.”

Hand immediately falling to the lightsaber at his hip, Vann grasps the metal hilt for a moment before swiftly unclipping it. “I… forgot it was there,” he admits, immediately offering the weapon to the Jedi. “I was going to give it to you anyway.”

“Where did you even get that?” Bastila accepts the offered ‘saber, turning it over in her hands for a moment as she studies its design and craftsmanship.

“I, uh…” Vann swallows, quickly attempting to construct a façade of nonchalant arrogance. “There was a Jedi on the base. He attacked, I defended myself. It’s not like I stole it or something.”

Bastila nods. “I wasn’t accusing you of anything. I was just… curious.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you took that thing.” Canderous casts a dismissive glance over his shoulder. “I mean, I guess you earned it. Called it to your hand and everything. Looked like a real kriffing Jedi for a second there.” He chuckles, as though the situation is merely amusing rather than completely absurd.

Looking down at the lightsaber, Bastila arches a brow. “You… used the Force to call it to you, Vann? That’s remarkable. But then, you have shown a great deal of instinctive talent.” She forces a weak laugh. “Though, calling an item to yourself is one thing. It’s not as though you can use a lightsaber with any efficiency.”

“Does mowing down a trained Jedi and four Republic troopers like they were gorgs count as ‘using a lightsaber efficiently?’” Carth is still perched on the bed, staring critically at both the mercenary and the Jedi. “Cause from where I was standing, it looked like he knew how to use the damn thing.”

Eyes going wider Bastila studies the saber for a moment, as though it might contain some answers. “The lightsaber is not an easy weapon to master. Jedi Initiates aren’t even allowed to construct one until the time of their Trials.” She looks up at Vann. “Even with your strong connection to the
Force, I find it hard to believe that you instinctively knew how to use this.”

“I know how to use a sword. A ‘saber isn’t much different,” Vann lies. He can still recall the difference in weight between the lightsaber and his vibroblade, and the unique hum the ‘saber made as it cut through the air.

Wrapping her fingers firmly around the lightsaber hilt, Bastila clears her throat. “Yes, well. I supposed this is something else we can discuss once we manage to get past this blockade.” She carefully places the ‘saber on the table, casting one last glance at it before resuming her study of the datapad. “Now then. Shall we review my notes?”

“Even if I say ‘no,’ you’re gonna read them anyway.” Canderous scowls as he begins polishing his blaster. “So we might as well get this over with.”

“Why Canderous, you know me so well!” Bastila sighs, settling herself into the rickety chair that matches the table. “Force willing, you should be able to get in and steal this ship with far fewer complications than your last endeavors.”

“Fifty credits say that she just jinxed you,” Carth quips humorlessly.

Vann chuckles. “Carth, nobody here is going to take that bet. We all know she just jinxed us.”

* * *

“This feels suspiciously easy.” Hand hovering over the grip of his vibroblade, Vann’s eyes dart from side to side as he trails Canderous down the long hallway of Davik’s vast compound.

Canderous seems less perturbed by the lack of complications, striding down the hall with an easy swagger. “We’re barely out of the guest quarters. There’s still plenty of time for everything to get blown to hell.”

Sighing, Vann lowers his hand and continues to follow the Mandalorian down the hall, glancing over his shoulder just long enough to catch a glimpse of Zaalbar’s shaggy body following in his wake.

The trio makes their way through the garishly decorated estate, past a series of unmarked doors that Vann can only assume are best left unopened. Everything is sealed with complex electrical locks, speaking to Davik’s notorious paranoia. After a second left down yet another seemingly identical hallway, he can’t help but wonder if they’re beginning to walk in circles. “Canderous,” he asks, “Are you sure you know where we’re going?”

“It’s been a year since I’ve been here, not a lifetime! What, you think I’m gonna forget the layout of a tactically important location in a year?” Canderous keeps walking, not bothering to turn around to acknowledge the question. “Besides, Davik designed the place like this for a reason. Harder for anyone snooping around to find their way.” He lowers his voice a little as he veers right. “And harder for his slaves to escape.”

Vann sighs. “Charming.”

Pausing before some ostentatious double doors, Canderous motions for the others to stop as well. “This is Davik’s throne room.”

Noting the stylized purple D.K. decorating both doors amid swirls of silver and blue, Vann chuckles humorlessly. “Of course it is.”
Nodding in agreement to the subtle critique of the crime lord’s inflated ego, Canderous continues. “The control room for Davik’s computer system is just off this room. We’ll probably have to rewire the door to get in, but that’s half the fun, right? Anyway, you can probably guess that there’s just one catch.”

Vann just sighs, glancing back at Zaalbar who merely offers a shrug of his hairy shoulders. “And just what is it?”

“There’s actually three rooms connected to the throne room. And I don’t know which of the three is the control room.”

“So,” Vann draws, “When you said you knew the layout…”

“It’s not like they include that information on the tour they give potential employees.” Canderous sneers. “What, do you think they tell every idiot who walks through the front doors how to access the room where you can override the entire security system?”

Nodding thoughtfully, Vann grumbles, “Alright, point made. So, we go in and rewire doors until we find the control room. We’ll need some extra time, but…”

“We don’t have extra time.” Glancing down the hallway, Canderous doesn’t bother to hide his near-manic grin. “As soon as the security system senses that someone is trying to bypass it, it’ll alert the guards. Davik has his own private security force, mostly ex-military and whatever other scum he can pay to keep quiet and follow orders.”

Vann rolls his shoulders, trying to shake off the rush of adrenaline already surging through his system. “What you’re saying is that we want to be in the control room with the door closed before the guards show up.”

Slamming the door controls with a meaty palm, Canderous only grins wider. “Unless you want things to get really interesting, really fast.”

Mouthing the word ‘interesting’ with a sour grimace, Vann follows the Mandalorian into the throne room. It is, as expected, elaborately decorated with polished scrollwork swooping around the stylized D.K. logo. And, yes, there is an actual throne sitting in the middle of the room, intricately carved out of actual wood and upholstered in rich purple fabric. The oversized seat dominates the space, placed on a literal pedestal that elevates it half a meter above the rest of the floor. Overall, the aesthetic speaks to Davik’s bloated sense of self-importance, and Vann barely swallows his urge to roll his eyes. Instead, he makes his way to the western door. Slipping a multitool from his pocket, he carefully unscrews the protective cover from the door’s security panel, revealing the multitude of wires beneath.

“Zaalbar, Canderous? Can each of you rewire one of the other doors?”

Canderous has the gall to laugh. “Do I look like I can rewire one of the other damn doors? If you wanted someone who could do that, you should have brought the Twi’lek kid along.”

“I’m sorry, Vann,” Zaalbar holds up his paw-like hands. “I’m not very good at wiring. I could break the door down, but I don’t think that’s what you want right now.”

“Kriffing hells, really?” Vann is already studying the door’s wiring, fingers delicately hovering over two selections that he’s fairly sure will override the locking mechanism if connected. “Why are you even here, Canderous?” Carefully severing one of the wires, he waits for any signs of a problem before even more cautiously severing the other.
Raising his blaster, Canderous points it towards the throne room doors. “I’m here to get you through the front door,” he announces. “And to kill the guards, after you take too kriffing long to rewire things.”

Crossing the pair of severed wires, Vann breathes out a quiet sigh of relief when the door lock clicks in response. Without a second thought, he hits the button to disengage the latch, and the door glides open with a gentle hiss. Bringing Vann face-to-ocular-sensor with a large interrogator droid. Upon sensing movement, the hovering droid’s black durasteel body whirrs to life, various clamps and knives swinging about its spherical form. The motion alerts a second droid, and they both immediately direct their focus on Vann.

Punching the door’s latch button, Vann leaps back just as one of the droids slashes its knife through the air a mere centimeter from his nose. The door whooshes softly as it slides shut, catching the extended droid limb in its track. Luckily, rewiring locking system also seems to override the sensors, and the door continues to close even with the obstruction. There’s a dull metallic crunch as the droid’s appendage is caught in the airtight sealing mechanism, and Vann can hear the angry beeps and thuds as both interrogators attempt to batter the door back open.

“What was that?” Canderous asks, one brow arched even as he keeps his blaster trained on the room’s entrance.

Vann sprints to the north door, using the multitool's knife to cut through the screws that attach the protective panel to the wall to save time. The panel falls to the ground with an audible ping, but he's too busy cutting wires to notice the noise. "Not the control room," he grits out. "Probably the room we're going to end up in if we don't manage to steal this ship."

“Well then, I got bad news for you.” The rest of Canderous’s words are drowned out by a plethora of blaster fire, which starts the moment the double doors of the throne room burst open.

Vann barely manages to dodge a bolt that lands just above his right shoulder, a few centimeters away from the control panel he’s rewiring. Over the shrieks of blasters, he can hear a few curses in Mando’a as they mix with the low growl of a Wookiee’s trill. “Keep them busy!” he shouts, wincing as the wires he’s connecting spark against his fingertips. It hurts, but at least he’s rewarded a moment later when the lock disengages. He presses the latch button, and the door hisses open.

A long corridor stretches out in front of Vann, decorated in the same garish and confusing style as the rest of the estate. The three unmarked doors along the hall are already opening, and several armed guards are pouring out, blasters firing. The body armor makes it hard to identify specific species, but Vann can tell that it’s a diverse assortment of races that frequent the mercenary profession.

Slamming his palm against the latching button, Vann announces, "That was also not the control room." The door beeps once but remains stubbornly open. Cursing in a myriad of languages, he ineffectively punches the button twice more before giving up and running towards the south door. “Also, heads-up! We have more company incoming.”

“And you were wondering why I’m here!” Canderous is disturbingly cheerful as he uses his blaster to mow through Davik’s guards, kicking and punching any who manage to get within reach.

Bowcaster humming as it fires, Zaalbar growls, “Could you please hurry, Vann? The situation is about to become dire!”

Swinging around to confront the new wave of guards, Canderous shouts over the blaster fire,
“What did the carpet say?”

“He said that I’m doing a great job, and deserve way more credit!” Vann snorts, cutting the panel free. Zaalbar grumbles his disagreement but is apparently too preoccupied to press the issue. Gritting his teeth through the pain as the wires repeatedly shock his fingers, Vann quickly crosses the necessary parts to override the lock. The work is sloppy, but functional. Especially considering the number of blaster bolts he’s had to duck in the process.

Smacking the latching button, Vann waits expectantly for the door to open and reveal the control room. He figures there might be a mine or two in place, and mentally prepares himself to disarm whatever unpleasant surprises Davik has in store for an intruder. However, the door doesn’t open. Instead it clicks once before what’s left of the control panel lights up red. "No," he mutters, "Come on, come on!" When fiddling with the wires only produces more shocks he gives up, turning to look at where Zaalbar and Canderous are efficiently fighting their way through the guards. "So," he calls out, "I think they overrode the doors."

“I told you that you were taking too long.” Canderous smirks as he delivers a hard kick to the chest of a Rodian guard, sending the smaller creature flying back. “So, what’s the new plan?”

Vann looks at the Wookiee, inclining his head towards the door. “Hey Zaalbar, you said that you can break the door down, right?”

“I can indeed…?” the Wookie responds questioningly.

Drawing both swords Vann rushes the nearest guard. With two swift slashes, he disarms the man, incapacitating him with a quick stab to the gut. "Well, then break that damn door down!" He gestures towards the southern door. “If you spot any mines, let me know. Otherwise, slice your way into the computer!”

Zaalbar doesn’t wait for further instructions. He merely fires a final shot into the nearest guard and then charges at the door with impressive speed. Vann doesn't see the resulting impact but he definitely hears it, the twisting of durasteel and crackle of snapped wires audible even over the din of the battle. When the Wookiee doesn’t ask for help or raise an alarm, Vann throws his entire focus into combat, letting his instincts guide him as his blades whistle through the air, slicing and carving their way through numerous guards. The Vibroblades don’t slip through armor with the grace of a lightsaber, and it takes more work to reach delicate flesh.

Seeming to notice the mercenary’s struggle, Canderous laughs. “You should have kept that lightsaber,” he chides.

With a grunt, Vann stabs through the thin chest armor of a Twi’lek guard. Blood sprays hot against his hand, though he ignores it as he whirls on his next opponent. “I gave it back to the real Jedi,” he responds, a hint of regret tingeing his words.

Shrugging, Canderous continues to fire on anything that dares to move within his line of sight. “You damn sure looked a lot like a real Jedi to me.”

Frowning, Vann mentally reaches for his connection to the Force, dragging it to the forefront of his mind. The presence has been little more than a whisper in the back of his head ever since he almost collapsed in the Republic base, ever-present but ultimately useless. Still, he tries to immerse himself in the remembered sensation of power, attempting to draw upon whatever instinctive skills he apparently possesses. Remembering Lang's own abilities, and the infamous techniques utilized by Jedi across the galaxy, Vann extends his hand towards the cluster of four guards currently firing at him. Grasping his own connection to the Force, he attempts to throw the guards back.
Nothing happens.

Feeling imminently stupid for even trying the maneuver, Vann charges at the guards, dodging low and using the momentum to carve a deep gash into one’s thigh. “Nope,” he deadpans, “Definitely not a Jedi.”

From the control room, Zaalbar growls his current predicament. “There are no mines or other traps in here,” he reports, “But this system is far more complex than anything I’ve ever sliced before. It may take some time.”

“We don’t have time!” Deflecting a blow from a guard’s sword with his offhand, Vann strikes back with his dominant hand. The hit only manages to graze the Rodian, making her angrier. “So hurry!”

Shooting the Rodian in the back, Canderous grunts as she crumples to the ground. “What’s the carpet saying now?”

“He says that things are going well,” Vann lies, crossing his blades to block another guard’s powerful slash.

“Why do I get the sense that you’re not translating what the Wookiee is actually saying?”

“Hey,” grinning, Vann reverses his grip on one blade, delivering a sharp stab to the guard behind him. The creature groans once before collapsing. “If you want an exact translation, learn Shyriiwook.”

Another bellow comes from the control room, just as Zaalbar’s head peers past the dented remains of the door. It’s still sparking in places, the thick durasteel bent and crumpled like the discarded wrapper of a ration bar. “I’ve got the launch codes for the Ebon Hawk,” he reports. “But I’m still struggling to get the hanger doors open. I can’t access the security feeds to the area, so I don’t…”

“Just get the doors open!” Vann ducks two blaster bolts, managing to avoid one even as the second strikes his left side. He grunts in pain, using the icy wave of frustration that follows to bolster his next movements. “No fancy stuff. We can figure out the rest once we’re in the damn hanger!”

Zaalbar nods, disappearing back behind the wreck of the door.

Diving into a forward roll to avoid another round of blaster fire, Vann comes out of the maneuver in a low crouch. Lunging forward he slashes at the legs of two guards, attacking from behind and managing to disable both in a single hit. Leaping over their prone forms, he kicks their blasters out of the way as he sprints towards where Canderous is holding off the last wave of guards. Reversing his grip on the blade in his dominate hand, he uses the other blade to knock a guard's blaster off-target, causing her shot to soar above the Mandalorian's head. In the next moment, he stabs the second blade into her side, forcing a gurgle of blood through what passes for lips. She clutches at her abdomen, managing to get off a final shot before collapsing completely.

“I had that,” Canderous grumbles, even though his tone carried a hint of mild relief.

Vann nods. “Sure you did.”

Bowcaster in his large hands, Zaalbar comes running out of the control room. “I have the hanger doors open,” he announces, “Though I’m not sure how long they’ll stay that way.”

“The doors are open!” Vann accurately translates.
“Well then let’s go!” Canderous bellows, kicking a guard out of the way as he turns towards the throne room entrance.

Letting the Mandalorian take point, Vann follows in his wake as the repeating blaster mows down more guards in a wild spray of bolts. For his part, the mercenary takes down any stragglers with swift, efficient slashes of his vibroblades. Zaalbar takes up the Humans’ six, guarding their backs as they wind their way through Davik’s long and snaking corridors. Vann is still unconvinced that Canderous actually knows where he’s going, what with all of the hallways looking almost exactly alike save for the number of doors that line the walls. A few security droids try to stop them, sending out shrill alerts until sliced down or shot from the air. At this point, it’s a safe bet that Davik knows they’ve left the guest quarters, so speed trumps stealth.

Eventually, the trio stops before a huge doorway, the massive set of double doors already opened to reveal a large hanger. There are several vehicles parked in the expansive space, including multiple speeders and a few custom swoop bikes. But the obvious star is the Dynamic-class freighter occupying most of the hanger’s east side, its custom painted exterior freshly-scrubbed and shining.

“There she is,” Canderous states, nodding towards the freighter as though the vehicle’s not already obvious. “The Ebon Hawk. Davik’s personal ship, and probably the fastest thing on Taris.”

“Well, what are we waiting for, an invitation?” Vann looks to Zaalbar, who’s still holding his bowcaster at the ready. “Got those codes?”

“Yes, I have them ready for when we board the ship,” the Wookiee confirms.

With a mutual nod of agreement, the trio sprints across the hanger, aiming directly for the Hawk’s already-lowered gangplank. Something about the way the ship is resting, almost inviting them to board, feels suspicious to Vann. Like an icy thread of doubt creeping up his neck. However, he ignores the sensation and continues his forward charge. These mild inklings of impending danger are part of his daily life and have become simple enough to ignore. Avoiding hazards in his line of work tends to be counter-productive.

But when Davik Kang and his personal entourage of guards steps out from the shadow of the Ebon Hawk’s gangplank, Vann really wishes he’d listened to his instincts.

“And what do we have here?” Davik’s wrinkled countenance curls into a bemused smirk. “Three little rats, caught in my trap.”

Skidding to a halt, Vann raises both Vibroblades as he shifts into a defensive position. For the second time, he wishes he’d kept Lang’s lightsaber. Beside him, he sees Zaalbar’s gaze dart to the gangplank, and then to the men blocking the way. He seems to be assessing something.

“What are you trying to imply, Kang?” Canderous asks, tone gruff and unyielding.

Custom armor glinting in the high overhead lights of the hanger, Davik snorts. “I don’t think you’re in a position to ask questions. After all, I’m not the one who just got caught trying to steal a ship.”

Vann blinks, a sly smile curling across his lips. “What good would stealing a ship do us?” he asks, tone incredulous. “The entire planet’s locked-in by this blockade. What are we going to do, drive it around the Lower City?”

For a moment Davik’s smug grin melts from his lips, and he glances between Vann and
Canderous. “Why else would you be in my hanger?” he demands.

Still gripping his blades, Vann lowers them ever-so-slightly, rolling his shoulders in an easy shrug. “Full disclosure? We were paid by a swoop gang to get the specs on a few of your bikes. Rumor has it that you have some custom engines that everyone’s afraid of.” He sees the flicker of doubt that crosses the crime boss’s face and presses on, playing up the façade of the slick mercenary. “Hells, this planet is so obsessed with swoop racing that I could make a living collecting specs from one gang and selling them to another. Just the other night…”

“Oh save it Chis.” Davik’s thin lips pull into a snarl. “Your charm isn’t going to sway me. I’ve seen the likes of you before. You’re nothing special.”

Vann would rebuke the insult if it wasn’t for the fact that nearly everything special about himself is safely categorized as ‘things best kept secret from Taris’s preeminent crime lord.’ Instead, he chuckles darkly. "And just what makes you think I’m lying?"

Shaking his head in mock disapproval, Davik sighs heavily. “Do you think I got to where I am without keeping my ear to the ground? That I haven’t heard that three men, one with a Mandalorian-style repeating blaster, broke into the Republic base last night and killed a general?”

Still holding his blaster at the ready, Canderous gives a noncommittal grunt. “Like I said before, what are you trying to imply, Kang?”

The guards close in as Davik continues to speak, on alert with their blasters aimed at the heads of their captives. They’ve probably been told to shoot if anything goes amiss. “See, the Republic is still trying to puzzle out if the attack was just some of the Lower City rabble, making a point. They claim the only things stolen were a few blaster rifles and some adrenal stimulants. Basic black market stuff. Almost anything of real value was apparently overlooked.” As he gestures for his men to disarm his former guests, Davik grins triumphantly. “Everything except a lightsaber. And that got me thinking.”

Vann wants to kick himself, but he’s too busy being manhandled by three of Davik’s men. He considers fighting back, but the tactician in him knows this isn't an opportune moment. Instead, he growls at the nearest guard as the man roughly jerks the vibroblade from his hand. "Hey, watch it!" he snaps. "You want me in one piece if you don't want that Wookiee ripping your arms off for fun. I’m pretty sure that I’m the only one here who speaks Shyriiwook." Silently, he prays that Zaalbar gets the message.

Off to his left, the Wookiee roars as someone makes a grab for his bowcaster. “Vann, I assume you’re asking if I have a plan. So far, all I can say is that if you and Canderous can keep Davik and some of his men busy, I can get onto the ship and enter the launch codes. Provided they still work.”

“Easy there, buddy,” Vann calls, nodding. “I hear you.”

The guard, who’s now collected both vibroblades, glares from behind his helmet. “What’s the animal saying?”

“He says he wants to turn you into a bloody pink paste,” Vann retorts cheekily. “Like I said, he’s got a temper.” Glancing at Davik, he keeps his voice even as he asks, “And what’s this about a lightsaber? Do we look like Jedi? What the hells would we need a lightsaber for?”

“Oh, not you,” Davik scoffs. “But a certain missing Jedi might be able to make use of it. Especially once you get her off-planet.”
Canderous meets the crime lord’s eyes, his expression stony. “And what am I gonna do with a Jedi? You know how I feel about them. The only good Jedi is a dead one.”

Unimpressed with this answer, Davik keeps up his personal monologue. “Well, that’s the part I’m not sure of. But I know this much,” he presses his face close to the Mandalorian’s, eyes narrowed and voice hard. “You, and your friend here, are up to something. I know you, Canderous, and you’re good. But even you wouldn’t know how to break onto that base. I think you had some help.” He gestured between himself and his current captives, adding, “And this little meeting here? Do you think I’m dumb enough not to notice how convenient it is?”

“Then why’d you agree to it?” Canderous all-but spits, pressing his face closer to Davik’s.

Grimacing as a fine spray of spittle lands on his cheeks, the crime lord draws back slightly. “Because I thought you’d be smart enough to make a deal.”

From the corner of his eye, Vann sees Zaalbar take a small step towards the ship, disguising it as a restless shuffle. The men guarding him re-aim their guns when they notice the movement, but do nothing more when the Wookiee lets out a deep growl. “So…” the mercenary draws, “What kind of deal are we talking about?”

Davik grins, stepping away from Canderous and striding towards Vann. “At least someone here has some sense,” he chuckles, “Or, at least I hope you do. The deal’s simple. I know that you have something going on with this missing Jedi… Bastila Shin or whatever her name is. And that means you probably have the blockade codes.” He grins at this, all teeth. “Whatever you’re planning, I want in.”

Also seeming to notice Zaalbar’s gradual shuffle towards the Ebon Hawk, Canderous turns to glare at Davik. “Sure,” he snorts, “Like you’re just gonna let us off the planet.”

“I’ll even provide you with a ship,” the crime lord offers, “Not my ship of course, but something serviceable. If it’s a good enough deal, I might even throw in a few credits to make everything worth your while.”

Vann blinks, shifting his feet slightly so that he’s bettered angled to watch both Davik and Zaalbar simultaneously. The guard to his left jabs the butt of his blaster rifle into Vann’s ribs, but the better angle is worth the pain. “So, you’ve told us the deal. Care to tell us what happens if we say ‘no?’”

Shrugging, Davik studies his captives as he replies, “Then I’ll just have to hand you over to Supreme Commander Malak, and let him find out what you’re up to.”

It’s not fear, but ice-cold anger that blooms through Vann’s chest at the thought of facing Malak. “Save your threats,” he hisses between clenched teeth. “Like the Supreme Commander of the Republic military has time to interrogate two Outer Rim mercenaries.”

“Oh, his flagship the Leviathan is in orbit as we speak.” Davik practically preens at this, chest puffing slightly as he speaks. “Seems that he takes the ‘kidnapping’ of his padawan very personally.”

“See, you claim you know me Davik. But that goes both ways, because I also know you.” Canderous stares darkly at the crime lord. “You’re going to sell us out to Malak either way. You’d just hoping to get the codes before you do it.”

Shaking his head in mock disappointment, Davik sighs. “So little trust these days.”

“There’s just one problem with your plan,” Canderous continues, expression still grim.
“Oh, and what’s that?”

Without warning Canderous surges forward, breaking free of the two guards restraining him. He head-butts one, sending the woman to the ground, before grabbing the other’s blaster rifle. Kicking the guard’s chest so hard that something audibly cracks, Canderous manages to wrest the weapon free. With a flick of his wrist, he has the blaster aimed, sight trained directly on Davik’s head. “Your plan won’t work if you’re dead. We both know I can paint that ship with your brains before those men can take me out.”

Davik just smiles. “Not so hasty, Canderous,” he warns, holding up one hand.

For the first time, Vann notices that the crime lord has been grasping something throughout their conversation. It’s a small, cylindrical item that fits perfectly in his palm, his thumb resting heavily against the top. He’s seen something like this before, and the implication sits heavy in the pit of his stomach. “Dead man’s switch,” the mercenary mutters.

“Very good, Mister Chis.” Davik nods to the switch in his hand. “Right now, this little transmitter is sending a signal to the Leviathan. Nothing noteworthy, just a steady beep. But the moment I lift my finger, the beeping stops. And Malak knows to start razing the city.” His smirk broadens. “Starting with that slum of an apartment on the south side of the Upper City. The one that mostly rents to aliens, but has experienced a high volume of Human renters of late…”

Canderous keeps the blaster aimed. “You’d really let the Republic destroy your own city?”

Shrugging, Davik keeps the switch extended. “What do I care if I’m dead? Now put the blaster down before you do something stupid.”

The guards’ attention is almost solely focused on Canderous, giving Zaalbar a chance to shuffle even closer to the ship. One good sprint and the Wookie would be on board, but he seems transfixed by the scene playing out. Vann can’t blame him. He’d give the signal for Zaalbar to make a break for it, to board the ship and try the codes, but his tongue feels stuck to the roof of his mouth. The icy rage in his chest seems to be spreading, pulsing out into his limbs and creeping into his brain. His connection to the Force suddenly flares to life within his mind, as though feeding on his anger.

Mission is in that apartment. She’s just a kid! And Bastila, who truly believes that she can somehow take Malak down. And Carth, who got dragged into the entire situation by virtue of taking the wrong job… The emotions Vann feels towards these people, these virtual strangers who have all become inexplicably tied to himself through fate and dumb luck, are varied. But they’re strong, and they somehow entwine with the primal anger already pulsing just beneath his skin. He sees Canderous slowly lowering the blaster, the remaining guards swarming him even as Zaalbar finally makes a break for the ship, unnoticed by a triumphant Davik who’s crooning about his control over this absolute dung heap of a rock.

And suddenly it’s all too much. With a snarl that he hardly recognizes as his own, Vann thrusts his hand towards the guards flanking him and Canderous. It’s the same Force push he attempted earlier, only this time there’s actual Force behind it, and the men go flying back. Without waiting to see what becomes of them, Vann wheels to face Davik, hand still extended. This time his fingers curl, grasping at air. It’s the same sensation he had in the Hidden Bek base, when he wanted to choke the life out of Gadon. Only this time the Force isn’t a mere inkling in the back of his mind. It’s a surety that floods his higher functions, flush with his emotions and infused with the rage he currently feels towards this pathetic man who thinks he can control everything that happens on this shitty little planet.
Vann squeezes, remembering what it felt like as Lang choked the life out of him. He can tell by Davik’s expression that it’s not the same deadly grip the Jedi possessed, but it’s still enough to make the other man gasp.

“…How?” Davik wheezes. “You’re… not a… Jedi…”

“No,” Vann states, voice cold and surprisingly even. “I’m not.” Extending his free hand, he calls his vibroblade into his palm. It lacks the smooth shape of a lightsaber hilt and clutters awkwardly across the ground before the grip lands slightly askew. It doesn’t matter. Striding slowly forward, he carefully points the blade at Davik’s neck. “Call off Malak,” he orders, tone calm amidst the chaos. “Now.”

“I… can’t…” Even rasping for air, Davik still manages to smirk. “I… already… let go.” The dead man’s switch falls from his hand, clanging against the durasteel floor of the hanger.

A moment later, the entire estate shakes, as though rattled by a giant hand from above. Vann’s concentration breaks, his invisible grip on Davik’s throat released. The crime lord coughs and sputters, glaring up at Vann even as the vibroblade’s point remains aimed at him. A second unearthly shake is accompanied by the deafening boom of a nearby explosion. A third and a fourth quickly follow, each louder and more violent than the last.

Davik sways on his feet as each explosion rocks his estate, eyes wide and smirk gone. “Why are they attacking here?” he demands, “That apartment is halfway across the city!”

Running towards the Ebon Hawk, his own blaster now in hand, Canderous shakes his head at the bewildered crime lord. “Did you really expect the Republic to make a deal with you?” He nods to Vann, “Come on, get on the ship! Don’t think I won’t leave you behind.”

For the first time, Vann realizes that the Hawk’s engines have roared to life.

When another blast sends Davik to his knees, the man looks up at the mercenary with pleading eyes. Any hint of pride has vanished, replaced by desperation. “I… I didn’t think they’d really raze the whole city! I swear!” He forces a smile, and it still manages to feel oily. “Take me with you. I can talk to Malak, make this right!”

Staring impassively at the man kneeling at his feet, Vann sneers. “This entire city is going to be destroyed because of you,” he states, tone still oddly calm. “There’s no chance we’re taking you with us.”

“Please!” Davik tries.

“Death is too good for you.” With a swift jerk of his forearm, Vann drags his blade across the crime lord’s throat. The wound spurts blood for a moment before the body slumps over, painting his face in a gory tableau of brilliant red. He impassively wipes the sleeve of his jacket over the mess.

A shaggy figure appears on the Ebon Hawk’s gangplank. “Vann, please get on!” Zaalbar trills. “We need to get Mission and the others before the Republic destroys the entire city!”

The Wookiee’s voice breaks through the cold wall of impassive rage that’s settled into Vann’s mind. Suddenly the rest of his emotions rise to the forefront of his brain, beating back the tidal wave of anger that temporarily overcame them. He stares at Davik’s corpse for a moment, and then at Zaalbar waving frantically from the gangplank. “…Coming!” he shouts, the detached coldness gone from his voice.
Quickly sprinting towards the group of downed guards, some of them now sporting blaster wounds that he assumes are courtesy of Canderous, Vann searches the mess for what he knows is Mission’s vibroblade. It glints weakly, partially hidden beneath the bulk form of bolt-riddled guard. Grabbing the hilt, he wrenches the blade free and swings it into the sheath on his back as he dashes towards the Ebon Hawk’s gangplank. Noting Zaalbar’s questioning look, he explains, “Hey, I promised Mission I’d return her blade.”

Zaalbar merely nods, reaching out to grab Vann’s arm and practically drag the man onto the ship. The door closes just as the ground is once again rocked by the systematic decimation of Taris.

Chapter End Notes

1. As a Jedi Sentinel, I imagine Bastila has a wide range of skills beyond just being a Jedi. Combined with her natural charisma, I don’t think it’s a huge stretch to imagine her posing as someone’s secretary.
The Ebon Hawk Part I

Chapter Summary

In which secrets are revealed, pasts are acknowledged, and deals are struck. And one of our heroes accidentally learns a little bit more about himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

5.

"Great news! They're shooting at us!" Carth's tone is grimly determined as he veers the Ebon Hawk through the Republic blockade, several rounds of cannon fire narrowly missing her starboard side. "Which means that those codes are doing krif-all right about now."

"Unfortunately, codes don't mean much when Malak is attempting to destroy the entire planet…" Bracing herself against the navigation terminal, Bastila's fingers dig into the durasteel surface. "Though, at least they got us past the mechanized turrets!"

"And right into the sights of the fighters currently on our tail!" Jerking the freighter's controls, Carth banks the ship into a sharp right. He manages to avoid most of the incoming cannon fire, but one blast finds its mark. The impact rocks the ship. "Hey," the pilot shouts, "If someone could hurry up and man the cannons, that would be really helpful. I can't get us into hyperspace if I'm too busy dodging enemy fire!"

Already rushing out of the cockpit, Canderous nods. "On it!"

Vann hurries after the Mandalorian, planning to man the ship's second cannon, when a slim hand grasps his wrist with surprising strength. "Vann, I need your help with something more important." Bastila's lips press into a terse, pleading smile.

Frowning, the mercenary attempts to twist his arm from the Jedi's grasp, but she holds firm. "What's more important than shooting these kriffing fighters out of the sky?" As he speaks, the ship vibrates from another blast of enemy fire.

Bastila shakes her head. "There's no time to explain. I just need you to trust me." Her eyes are imploring. "Please."

The thin thread connecting their minds flares to life, suddenly alight with urgency and something that vaguely feels like hope. The sensation runs down Vann's spine, and he barely suppresses a shiver of anticipation. "Okay," he finally mutters. "Fine. Lead the way. But if the Republic blows us all to dust, it's your fault." He glances at the pilot. "Hear that, Carth?"

"Vann, as much as I love our conversations, I'm kind of busy trying to save all of our asses!"

"Well if you can't, blame Bastila!" A thin smirk playing on his lips, the mercenary allows himself to be hurried out of the cockpit, the Jedi leading him into the small room just beyond the main hold. He's fairly sure that the space is designed for additional storage, but right now it's completely empty.
Bastila quickly shuts the airtight door behind them. Turning to look at Vann she holds out both of her hands, palms facing up. Her expression is serious, almost somber. "Meditate with me."

"What?" Staring at the Jedi, brows furrowed and jaw slightly open, Vann glares. "We're being shot at, and you drag me in here to do what? Think about peace and tranquility?" He snorts. "Hells, I don't even know how to meditate! In case you forgot, I'm not actually a Jedi."

Exhaling sharply, Bastila snaps, "Of course I didn't forget! I'm well aware that you're little more than a Force-sensitive despite your rather remarkable instincts. But right now we don't have a lot of other options." She stares back, pale eyes meeting the mercenary's dark gaze as the ship shudders from another round of cannon blasts. "In fact, I don't think we have any other options!"

"Alright, fine!" Thrusting out his hands, Vann places them atop the Jedi's with a harsh slap. He can feel the warmth of her skin, and the rough callouses formed by her dual-bladed lightsaber. "But I still don't get what thinking about peace is supposed to accomplish in the middle of a space battle. For the record, there is another option. And that's one of us manning that second cannon."

Gently wrapping her fingers around the larger palms now atop her own, Bastila draws a slow, steady breath. "If my plan works, the Ebon Hawk won't need to fire another shot. This isn't regular meditation, after all," she explains, her voice suddenly taking on a calmer timbre. "I don't have time to utilize my full Battle Meditation, but I might be able to send out a single push to help drive back Malak's troops. However, I need your help to do so."

Vann mimics the Jedi's breathing, finding it surprisingly easy to synchronize each breath he draws. "I don't know how much help I'll be," he admits, voice already starting to sound dreamy and distant.

"While untrained, your raw power and connection to the Force are, as I've stated before, quite remarkable," Bastila murmurs. "And, while I'm not sure you would have noticed, you and I apparently share some sort of connection."

Suddenly acutely aware of the thread linking their minds, Vann nods. "Yeah, I've noticed."

A thin smile playing on her lips, Bastila remarks, "Hmm, perhaps that will make this easier. I'm hoping to utilize our connection as a sort of amplifier for my own powers. Think of it like adding a scope to a blaster rifle. I'll be the scope, the precision instrument. And you..."

"I'm the bolt to the chest," Vann finishes bemusedly.

"I was going to describe you as the sheer, raw power. But I suppose we don't have time to analyze analogies."

"So," continuing to match Bastila's breathing, Vann swallows, suddenly feeling his usual confidence melting away. "How do we do this?"

The Jedi seems to sense the mercenary's apprehension, and her hands press just a little bit tighter. "Just follow my lead through our bond. Let go of your emotions, and allow the Force to guide you."

Squeezing his eyes shut, Vann tries to banish the dozens of thoughts and doubts swirling through his mind. "Let go of my emotions. Huh, that's easier said than done you know."

Upon receiving nothing but silence, he refocuses his attention on clearing his head. Slowly, and rather surprisingly, the worst of his discomfort and uncertainty begin to fade. Softly he wonders, "Do you really think this will work?"
The ship rocks beneath their feet, taking more fire from the Republic fleet. Bastila closes her own eyes, drawing another deep breath as she admits, "Well, we're about to find out. Remember, just follow our bond. The Force is with us both…"

Mentally clinging to the thread linking their minds Vann attempts to trace it, to sink his own consciousness into the connection and let it guide him forward. For a moment there's nothing, just the steady thrum of the Force in the back of his head as their bond pulses like a heartbeat. And then, suddenly, the thin trickle of a connection reverberates like an explosion before expanding into a vast sea of dual awareness. The unfamiliar Force currents overwhelm Vann's conscious mind, threatening to suck him under and shatter his concentration.

Relax. Just breath.

The voice in Vann's head is Bastila's, and yet it's not. She's not speaking to him with words, but rather with her very essence. Her unique presence in the Force glows within his mind, a brilliant beacon amongst the turmoil. He breathes, and pushes the tension from his shoulders. The overwhelming tidal wave of their opened bond slows to the steady flow of a river, and he allows himself to ride the current directly into the Jedi's mind. He expects warmth, and light. And those are present. But there are other things as well. The cold edges of prideful arrogance and the fiery heat of passionate emotions lick at the edges of Bastila's thoughts, ever-present but pushed to the fringes of her mind.

Part of Vann wants to swim deeper, to see what else he can find, but another part refuses to be that intrusive. Instead, he releases his grasp on his conscious mind, letting his instincts and raw connection to the Force take control.

Good. Now just let your connection to the Force join my own.

Perhaps it's the meditation, or perhaps it's the benefit of the bond, but this time Vann doesn't struggle to draw upon his own Force affinity. His awareness of the Force surges to the front of his mind and he wraps the primal power around his consciousness like a cloak. It feels raw, electric, and achingly familiar all at once. Still drawing power from his connection, he pushes that energy towards Bastila. Her consciousness is currently occupied by something far more complex than his own burgeoning Force abilities. From what he can tell, she's utilizing her own link to the Force to craft a singular thought, or perhaps it's an emotion, split into a hundred tiny needles meant to pierce the minds of her enemies. As intertwined as their minds have become, Vann gradually understands that she's creating a sensation of complete demoralization, designed to sap an opponent's will to fight back.

Alright, I'm ready. When I tell you to, push what I've created towards our enemies.

Continuing to gather the Force about him, Vann can sense his own raw power building. It feels nothing like Bastila's singular and precise attack, and everything like a volcano about to erupt. When he perceives the Jedi reaching out to the Republic fleet beyond, Vann follows her consciousness, mentally flowing with their bond.

Now!

Acting on pure instinct, Vann releases the Force power he's been building. He almost expects the entire ship to shudder from a physical blow. But what he releases is actually a mental hit, a wave of emotion that crashes down on the Republic fleet, digging into their minds as their bodies are left unscathed. It's a single sensation driven through the Force, designed to pierce their morale and crumple their resolve. Distantly, perhaps via his connection to Bastila, he can feel the shuddering surge of their collective doubt. It's as though every being aboard a Republic vessel in the vicinity
suddenly loses the will to attack the Ebon Hawk. The thrill of battle dies within them, replaced by a vague sense of hopeless malaise.

*It worked! We did it!*

Vann's not sure if the thought is his or Bastila's. Perhaps it's both, their Force signatures temporarily connected into a single, cohesive unit via their bond. The flow of thoughts and emotions has increased, traveling almost freely between their minds. Lost as he is in the connection, it's accidental when he finds himself once again traveling into the private recesses of the Jedi's consciousness. Most of what he experiences are merely surface memories; Bastila's surprise at their first meeting, her delight at discovering his Force sensitivity, and another more inexplicable set of emotions that seems to swirl around her discoveries of his ever-increasing abilities. Hope, a bit of fear, and something else. Something verging on familiarity…

Travel along the Jedi's memories and emotions comes to a crashing halt when Vann slams into what feels like a duracrete wall running through her mind. The experience is jarring, an almost physical jolt that rattles his thoughts and yanks him out of Bastila's consciousness like a rubber band stretched to its limits and compelled to snap back into place. Disoriented, he gasps as his eyes fly open, mind still reeling as it settles back into his own head. Stumbling backward he braces one palm against the cold, durasteel wall of the ship.

"What," he breathes, chest heaving slightly, "Was *that*?"

Bastila frowns, looking far more composed despite her own slightly labored breaths. "I believe you encountered my mental shields," she admits.

Vann blinks. "Your… what?"

"Jedi learn to construct mental shields. It protects our minds from other Force users, either malicious or benign." She offers a comforting smile, though it doesn't quite reach her eyes. They remain wide and visibly startled. "Shielding prevents others from rifling through our thoughts uninvited. It's a basic technique, taught to Initiates early on. Though, I was always told that mine are rather poor…"

Rubbing his free palm against his forehead, Vann winces. "Felt pretty solid to me."

"Well, yes. To an untrained mind I suppose they would."

Scowling, Vann pushes away from the wall, raking his fingers through his hair as he concentrates on slowing his breathing down to a normal rate. He tentatively reaches out his mind to probe the connection he shares with Bastila, feeling a surge of relief upon discovering that it's shrunk back to a mere thread. "So," he mutters, "We have a *connection*? How did *that* happen?"

"For one thing, it's technically a Force bond." Bastila smiles, though the expression is strained. "These bonds are common enough between Jedi who work closely together for many years, but rather rare between two individuals who hardly know each other. At least, not without consciously creating one."

"Alright, that's the what." Vann stares. "Now answer the 'how.'"

Smoothing her hands over her robes, Bastila shrugs one shoulder. "Honestly, I'm not sure." Noting the stormy expression that crosses the mercenary's face, she continues, "Though I know a place where we might be able to get some answers."

Tracing a thin line of thought that trickles through the bond, Vann scowls. "Are you thinking
about… the Jedi?" Glaring, he shakes his head. "If you're planning on dragging me to Coruscant to
speak with the Jedi Council, you can forget it. And anyway, I thought you were trying to get away from your Order."

"No, not Coruscant," Bastila reassures him, the vague attempt at comfort managing to travel through their connection. "But I do want you to speak with some Jedi. Individual who aren't associated with Malak and the Republic."

Arching a brow, Vann blinks in surprise. "There are Jedi who aren't aligned with Malak? I find that hard to believe, what with him being some big Jedi hero and the Republic savior."

Nodding slowly, Bastila stares down at her hands for a moment. When she speaks, her voice is hushed. "Like myself, there are some Jedi who believe that Malak has fallen to the Dark side, and that he's willing to drag the rest of the Order with him." As she looks back up, there's a flare of determination in her gaze. "These are the individuals who I was hoping to work with after escaping Malak. They have a small enclave on Dantooine. It's not large, but…"

"So. You want to take me to an Outer Rim enclave of rebel Jedi who oppose their own Order? To, what? To have my brain looked at?" Vann pinches the bridge of his nose, suddenly feeling rather protective of his shattered mind. "You do realize how insane this sounds, right?"

Bastila sighs. "These 'rebel Jedi' may be our only hope for discovering the source of our bond and what it means." Her tone softens. "Vann, you have a remarkably strong connection to the Force. It's a gift, truly. But you need some training to control it, least you become a danger to yourself and others. Or worse, are captured and used by another."

Frowning, Vann can't help but remember the cold rage he felt in Davik's estate, or when he was facing Lang. The fear and anger that flowed forth and exploded into outpourings of barely-controlled Force abilities. Yeah, admittedly that might be dangerous. "By 'another' you mean Malak, right?"

Nodding, Bastila all-but whispers, "Yes. I mean Malak."

"This enclave, they'll train me? Help me learn how to control… all of this?" Vann's tone is doubtful.

"I… I can't promise anything. The Order doesn't usually train adults. But, once I explain your situation, I'm sure they'll make an exception." Bastila is speaking faster now, gaze shifting guiltily around the room. "Perhaps they'll even be able to unlock some of your lost memories and heal your amnesia…"

"And just what makes you bring that up?" Jaw clenching, Vann takes a step towards the Jedi. "I know Carth has a big mouth and probably mentioned something while I was off having a tea party with Davik, but what exactly did he say?"

"Nothing. At least, not anything beyond the offhanded comment he made in front of you." With a heavy sigh, Bastila shakes her head. "When you fell into my mind through our bond, it went both ways. I… was also absorbed into your memories. And since you don't have any mental shields, I couldn't help seeing a few things. I apologize. I tried not to but…"

The irritation fading from his expression, Vann's voice is genuinely curious as he asks, "What did you see? Do you… find anything? Uncover anything?"

Frowning softly, Bastila admits, "No, Vann. I'm sorry. What I found was, well. It's as though your
mind is covered in shadows. There are thoughts and memories that are shrouded and locked away from even your own consciousness, not to mention the sights of any who try and search beyond that shroud."

Swallowing the disappointment that swells in his gut, Vann idly shrugs. "Hey, I've survived this long without them. It's... no big deal."

"You shouldn't have to 'survive' like that, Vann." Brows furrowed, Bastila stares at the mercenary for several long moments before her expression softens. "The Jedi may be able to help. They have mind healers who specialize in these sorts of situations. They're most likely your best chance at retrieving your lost memories."


A bright smile spreads across Bastila's face, the tension easing from her features. "Oh, I'm glad to hear that you're agreeable to this! And I truly believe that they can and will help you."

"Carth isn't going to like this," Vann muses.

"Oh, I suspect he'll absolutely hate this."

* * *

"No, absolutely not!" Carth is reclining against one of the seats in the main hold, taking a break from the bridge while Canderous babysits the autopilot. Arms crossed, his expression is stern as he glares between Vann and Bastila. "I am not going anywhere near a Jedi enclave!"

"Hey, you're welcomed stay on the ship once we land." Vann grins at the pilot, attempting to break the other man's sour mood.

"Though," Bastila muses, "It would be a bit of a waste. Dantooine is an absolutely lovely planet."

Blinking in visible disbelief, Carth grumbles, "What about the word 'no' is so hard for you to understand? I'm sorry I don't speak half a dozen other languages, or I would repeat myself in all of them. So, for now, let's go with this. N-O. NO."

Sliding into the seat beside the pilot, Vann casually slings one arm over the other man's shoulders. "Come on, Carth. I did hire you as my pilot..."

Attempting to squirm out from beneath the mercenary's grasp while still retaining some dignity, Carth huffs. "Yes, you did. And if I recall correctly, the deal was that I'd get you to Taris. Which I did. And then I also managed to get you off Taris." He turns to glare at the man beside him. "So, from where I'm sitting, that deal is done."

"So, what? Are you just going to dump everyone on the nearest inhabited planet and ride off in the Ebon Hawk to continue your life of smuggling?" Vann arches a brow, managing to swallow the grin that threatens to take over his face.

"No! I would never..." With an exasperated sigh, Carth finally shoves away the arm draped over his shoulders. "I am perfectly fine if you want to drop me off on the nearest inhabited planet. Preferably one far away from the Republic. And if you want to throw in the credits you owe me, that would also be great."

"But your ship was wrecked," Vann points out helpfully.
Carth grits his teeth. "Yes, I remember."

A sly smile playing on his lips, Vann adds, "And, I'm pretty sure you had to sell whatever you were smuggling."

"I remember that too."

"So," Vann draws thoughtfully, "I don't think it would be fair to just drop you on an inhabited planet…"

Turning to glare at the mercenary, Carth snaps, "You know what else isn't fair? Making me ferry you to a Jedi enclave!"

The argument is interrupted by the sound of quick footfalls echoing across the durasteel floor of the ship. Everyone turns to watch as Mission's slight form hurries in from the direction of the ship's garage, one hand balled into a fist by her side. Her other forearm swipes hastily over her eyes, muffling a soft sniffle as she walks.

"Mission, are… you okay?" Bastila's voice is kind, but stilted, as she speaks.

Carth gapes at the Jedi. "What the hells kind of question is that? You saw what happened on Taris! You were right next to both of us when we ran out of that apartment building…"

"I'm fine, okay?" Mission pauses mid-stride, turning to glare at the gathered adults. Her eyes are moist, tears stuck in her lashes, and her voice is strained. "It's just… I'm just…"

Something in Carth shatters at this, his lips pressing into a thin frown as the fine lines of worry around his eyes seem to deepen. He looks at the young Twi'lek, brown eyes full of sympathy and yet simmering with something darker. "It's okay, Mission. Whatever you're feeling, you can say it. You deserve to say it."

"I…" Mission draws a slow breath, her voice trembling as it becomes absolutely venomous. "I hate him, okay? I hate him! I… I don't think I've actually hated someone before, at least not like this. But… I hate Malak! I want… I want to find him, and I want to hurt him, and I want to make him pay for what he did to Taris!" The tears are streaming down her cheeks, and she angrily wipes them away with the palm of her hand.

Vann watches the teenager, suddenly at a loss for words. "Mission…"

"What gives him the right, you know? I mean, I realize Taris wasn't the best place. Hells, half of it really was just a pile of shit. I know that!" She looks up, eyes glistening, "But it was my home! It was my home and those were my friends and… and I hate him! I hate him so much!"

Sliding off his seat Carth slowly walks over to the Twi'lek, his expression grim. There's something unreadable about his mood, something dark and dangerous. "I know, Mission. Trust me, I know."

With a growl Mission shoves both hands against the pilot's chest, attempting to push him back. It's a futile effort, partially due to the fresh wave of tears running down her face. "Yeah, sure you do Carth. You're not my dad, and you don't have to pretend to be, okay? I'm not some dumb kid! You don't have to act like…"

"I'm from Telos."

The name is like an itch in the back of Vann's mind, a strange sensation that he should be remembering something. But the memory remains behind his mental shroud, just out of reach.
"Telos?" Using the sleeve of her shirt to wipe her cheeks Mission sniffs again. "Wasn't that planet?"

"Destroyed," Carth finishes for her. "Orbital bombardment, not too long after the Mandalorian Wars ended. While Malak was still a general." His voice is flat, almost monotone, devoid of any emotion aside from cold rage.

Bastila gasps softly, her eyes going wide. "Carth," she breathes, "I'm so sorry…"

Whirling to face the Jedi, Carth snarls, "Yeah sure, you and every other Jedi who let it happen. Who gave Malak power and let him abuse it! You claim to be 'peacekeepers,' but it was your damn Council that gave Malak and the rest of the Revanchists permission to enter the war, but only after waiting just long enough for the Mandalorians to control half of the galaxy."

Shaking her head, Bastila practically whispers, "No, that's not…"

"If the Jedi had entered sooner, just a few years earlier, the Mandalorians wouldn't have been able to bully so many peaceful planets into providing them safe havens." Carth continues to glare, jaw tense and voice quivering with anger. "Planets like Telos, where my family was!"

Lapsing into silence, Bastila quietly folds her hands before her, wringing her fingers together as she continues to offer a thin, sad smile. She barely moves, even as Carth continues to rage.

"Mission, you want to know how I understand exactly what you're going through?" Carth doesn't wait for the teen's response before more words tumble from his lips. "It's because Malak destroyed my home too. All because some Mandalorians had a hideout there. He decided that, if he couldn't force them out, he was just going to destroy the whole planet to make sure that the… the handful of Mandalorians couldn't rise-up against him."

"Why didn't they evacuate the planet first? Or maybe, send the people to shelters?" The feral rage seems to have drained out of Mission, replaced by a colder sense of indignation. "They had to of tried, right? The Republic wouldn't just…"

Carth shakes his head, some hair falling into his eyes. "The Republic didn't care about lives or casualties! They saw the destruction of Telos as 'strategic.' They didn't warn the people or evacuate because they were afraid that the Mandalorians would be alerted." He snorts in disgust. "'Lives sacrificed for peace,' that's what they called it."

A thin whine of desperation laces Mission's voice, and it's no longer clear which planet she's crying for. "But, you got your family off? Right?"

"Admiral Karath, my commanding officer, he knew what Malak was planning." Carth's fist pounds the nearby table, rattling the already-dented surface. "He knew, so he sent me halfway across the galaxy so that I wouldn't interfere and ruin their strategic victory. And while I was gone, they bombed the planet…"

"Krif," Vann breathes, chest feeling hollow. "The Republic… they couldn't have expected you to just stay loyal to them after they killed your family…"

Swallowing hard Carth shrugs, the motion jerky. "I… honestly don't know. My family didn't die from the bombing. It was a dry year on Telos. The grass was like straw. The fires, from the bombs, they spread quickly. At least, that's what I heard." He blinks rapidly, though his eyes look startlingly dry. "When I found out what happened I rushed home, order be damned. But our house was already in ruins. Most of the area was charred beyond recognition."
There's nothing but silence as Carth speaks his next words.

"I found my wife's body. She was… she looked okay. I think it was the smoke that got her. But my son, he… There was no body to find. I didn't stick around to find out my next orders from my family's murderers."

Mission is crying outright now, no longer attempting to hide the angry sobs that wrack her chest or the tears that pour from her eyes. She sniffles loudly, both arms wrapped around her torso as though she's attempting to hug herself. "I… that…" she stutters.

Bending down slightly, Carth places one hand on each of the Twi'lek's shoulders as he looks her in the eyes. "What I'm trying to say, trying to explain, is that what you're feeling now? It's okay. Hate Malak. Hate him. He's a monster." Expression somber, he adds, "And if you ever find a way to get that bastard back for what he's done, let me know. I'll hold him down while you stick the blade through his cold, black heart."

As Mission nods, looking both miserable and furious simultaneously, Vann can feel something akin to a chill rolling off his companions. The sensation pulls at him, flowing into him through his connection to the Force. It's oddly empowering, like all of the instances when his own rage acted as fuel in a fight. Yet, it also feels wrong. This frigid sensation is something that he associates with himself, and all of his personal frustrations and oft-misplaced anger. He's always viewed it as a side effect of his broken brain and lost memories. A sign of his own defects. But it feels wrong, almost perverted, coming from Carth who is apparently the only smuggler in the Outer Rim with enough of a conscience to smuggle medpacs. Or Mission, who was a bright-eyed kid less than a day ago. These aren't beings who should share his rage, his darkness.

"Bastila," Vann whispers, leaning closer to the Jedi. "Can you help them? Shouldn't you comfort them, or something? Isn't that what Jedi do?"

Blinking slowly, Bastila turns to study the mercenary. "If they were Jedi, I would warn them that anger and hatred are paths to the dark side. And I would tell them not to give in to their hatred for Malak." She sighs softly. "But if they were Jedi, they would also have years of experience in resisting negative emotions, and in releasing those emotions into the Force. They would be able to meditate on their feelings, and to understand that there is no emotion, only peace."

Vann frowns. "I sense a 'but' in your next statement, oh wise one."

"But they're not Jedi." Bastila offers a terse, watery smile. "They're beings who were raised outside of the Order. Beings who, in this moment, are hurting. And for good reason. Malak truly has fallen to the dark side, and his actions speak to this. There's little I can say or do to ease their pain."

"So, what? You just let Malak be cruel, and let them be angry, and then let the cycle perpetuate until the entire galaxy destroys itself?" Vann scoffs. "Sounds like a brilliant plan."

Humming thoughtfully, Bastila cants her head. "Well, ironically that is a large component of the beliefs of many dark Force users. But no, that's certainly not my plan."

Vann casts the Jedi a questioning look, frowning softly and arching a brow as he waits for the rest of her explanation.

A gentle smile plays at the corners of Bastila's lips. "They are experiencing dark emotions right now, and there is a darkness about them. But they are not dark creatures. The anger, the hatred, and all of the other negative emotions will burn away, leaving them with only one thing."
Recalling the hollowness and exhaustion that often arrives in the wake of his anger-fueled rampages, Vann mutters, "And what's that?"

"Lightness," Bastila replies, voice serene. "And with that comes peace and harmony. And most of all, hope."

Turning to glance at the others, Vann notes that Mission is currently sobbing against Carth's chest, while the pilot stares stonily at the reinforced walls of the freighter. The pilot's lips are pursed and his eyes are alight with fury. "You really believe all that?" the mercenary grumbles doubtfully.

"Of course I do." Offering something that could almost be construed as a wink, Bastila airily comments, "I don't think any of us would have gotten this far without hope."

"So, uh," Vann swallows awkwardly, eyes still trained on the two survivors of Malak's cruelty. "When do we talk to them?"

Bastila also turns to look at the pair, her own eyes looking distinctly moist. "This may sound trite, given the situation. But the Force will tell you when they're ready."

"When Malak's dead," Vann nods sarcastically. "Got it."

"Vann," placing a warm hand on the mercenary's shoulders, Bastila continues to watch Carth and Mission. "If there's one thing I've learned as a Jedi, it's that beings will constantly surprise you with their resilience, and their light. Just have hope."

* * *

FLASH

The masked man from Vann's previous dreams is back, still dressed all in black. He's charging through what appears to be the remains of an ancient city, lightsaber hilts in-hand and movement purposeful. Using the Force to pull a door from its hinges, he strides unquestioningly into a building. Once inside the 'sabers ignite, and begin slicing through anything that moves.

FLASH

The haunting figure is now standing amongst a collection of holocrons, bodies strewn at his feet. His deadly lightsabers are back on his belt, hidden beneath the billowing folds of his cloak as he reaches for one of the black, pyramid-shaped items. As his gloved hand grasps the object, Vann can practically feel the man's sense of satisfaction. This is the end of a long quest. Or perhaps only the beginning of one.

FLASH

Now the masked man stands before what appears to be another set of ancient ruins, the black stone structure still solid and imposing even after millennia exposed to the elements. There's a door barring entrance to the building, something akin to a keyhole carved into the dark surface. The man raises his hand, preparing to use the Force to open the door.

But someone stops him.

Though the man's eyes, Vann sees the second figure just behind his right shoulder. And he recognizes the man. Younger, and lacking the prosthetic jaw, but still sporting the same recognizable tattoos. It's Malak, Supreme Commander of the Republic military. Mass-murderer, and fallen Jedi. Malak is standing behind the masked man. Is placing a hand on the black-clad
This time, Vann does wake-up screaming. His shoulders are tense, hands scrambling at his sides as he attempts to escape the monsters that haunt his sleep. The thin blankets on his bunk cling to his skin, which is covered in rapidly-cooling sweat. He shivers, partially from the memory and partially from the cold air circulating through the freighter. Wiping a hand across his face, his palm comes away moist. He's not sure if it's sweat or the tears of panic that pooled in his eyes. Either way, he scrubs his palm against the blanket and then draws a shaky breath.

Glancing around the dimly lit crew quarters, he notes that nobody else was around to hear his less-than-dignified awakening. Good. Acknowledging that he won't be getting any more sleep Vann swings his legs over the edge of the bunk, stretching awkwardly as he moves to collect his clothing. He might as well see what everyone else is doing.

Stumbling into the main hold, boots untied and still struggling to pull his shirt over his head, Vann grunts as he sits down in one of the seats.

"What's wrong with you?" Canderous has several knives spread out across the table and appears to be methodically sharpening each one.

Carth, who is clutching something that smells suspiciously like instant caf, watches the mercenary with a critical eye. "Didn't you just lay down a couple of hours ago?"

The scent of caf doing more to wake him up than his half-clothed trek through the chilly corridors of the Ebon Hawk, Vann nods. "Yeah. Couldn't sleep."

"Well, you look like shit." Carefully gliding one of the knives across a whetstone, Canderous grunts in disapproval.

Frowning, Carth gently places his mug on the seat's armrest as he peers closer at the man beside him. "Vann, is everything okay? You really don't look good."

Without asking for permission Vann grabs the abandoned mug, bringing it to his lips and taking two long gulps of warm liquid. Apparently, the Force is with him today, because Carth also takes his caf black. "I'll be fine," he grumbles, still clutching the mug.

"Hey! I didn't mean for you to…"

"Good morning gentlemen," Still blinking sleep from her eyes, Bastila slowly strides into the hold. She's dressed, but her hair is loose about her shoulders rather than in its usual, more elaborate style. Despite her smile, there's a haunted look about her, the dark circles beneath her eyes emphasizing her unusually pallid complexion.

"Why didn't anyone tell me it's 'look like shit day'?" Canderous chuckles, holding the freshly sharpened knife up to the light.

Leaning against the table, Bastila forces a smile. "Oh Canderous, I thought you already knew. You're certainly dressing the part."

With a grin, the Mandalorian glances down at the stained shirt he's currently sporting. "Yeah, laugh it up, sister. At least I can go change."

Having apparently given his caf up as a lost cause Carth turns to look at the Jedi, a worried frown
"Alright, what the hells is going on? First Vann comes in here looking half dead, and now you look like you've seen a ghost."

"You know," Bastila hums quietly, "I'm fairly sure I dreamt of a ghost." She takes a step closer to Vann, observing him with her shrewd gaze. "Or, at least one of us did."

Caf cup halfway to his mouth, Vann pauses. "Wait, dream?Were you in my… did you see him?"

A faint smile playing on her lips, Bastila whispers, "I'm fairly sure that I did."

"Oh great!" Carth throws up his hands in defeat. "Now neither of them is making sense."

"Jedi? Not making sense?" Canderous rolls his eyes. "Never."

Plucking the caf cup from Vann's lax grip, Bastila swirls the contents thoughtfully before taking a long sip. She grimaces, immediately handing the cup back as she mutters. "Ugh, never mind."

"You know, there's more caf in the storage room. Carth gestures down the corridor. "Everyone is free to go make their own."

"Yes, I might have to do that. But first we really should discuss the dream Vann and I shared through our bond."

"Your… bond?" Arching a brow, Carth glances between the Jedi and the mercenary.

Taking another long gulp of caf, Vann swallows slowly before replying, "Force bond, unknown origin, very rare and complicated."

After placing the sharpened knife in a sheath, Canderous studies the line of unsharpened knives. "I can't decide if that sounds romantic or creepy."

"If they're sharing dreams, I'd go with 'creepy.'" Carth turns to peer at Vann, or perhaps just his cup of caf.

"It's neither creepy nor romantic," Bastila clarifies. "A Force bond can be experienced by any two Force-sensitive individuals. But either way, the bond is not the issue."

Still too tired for this particular train of thought, Vann drains the cup before offering it back to Carth. "No, the issue is that you are now experiencing my dreams. Which, for the record Bastila, is, in fact, creepy."

"Hmm," smiling coyly, Bastila arches a slim eyebrow. "How do you know that you are not experiencing my dreams?"

"Because I was having them before I met you."

Accepting the empty caf cup with a scowl, Carth adds, "If you mean the nightmares you had when we landed on Taris? Yeah, I can vouch for those."

Eyes going wide, Bastila manages to murmur a thoughtful, "Ah." She's silent for a moment, before blurting out, "How long have you been experiencing dreams about Revan?"

Fully prepared to be asked about Malak's appearance in his nocturnal subconscious, Vann can only blink at the unfamiliar name. He thinks he's heard it once or twice, mostly connected to the Mandalorian Wars, but it doesn't trigger any specific memories. There's only a vague sense that this is something he should know but doesn't. "…Who?" he finally manages to mumble.
Three pairs of eyes turn to look at the mercenary in astonishment.

"The Republic war hero?" Carth asks incredulously.

Bastila smiles fondly, "The Jedi Knight!"

"The warrior, and one of the few soldiers in the Republic with any damn honor." Still working on his knives, something akin to respect flits across Canderous's features.

"Nope," Vann mutters, suddenly wishing for more caf. "Doesn't ring any bells."

"When, exactly, did you lose your memories?" Pushing away from the table, Bastila moves to perch on the arm of the mercenary's seat.

Pointedly not thinking about the months he spent in a desolate town on a backwater planet at the very edge of known space, his mind in tatters and his body healing from a myriad of injuries, Vann casually responds, "Three standard years? Maybe less."

Nodding thoughtfully, Bastila admits, "I suppose that makes sense, then. Unfortunately, Revan died a bit before you lost your memories. If you've been outside of Republic influence since then, you probably wouldn't have heard his name much at all."

"Huh, I still can't imagine not knowing who the Revanchist is." Still holding the empty caf cup Carth's voice is slightly bitter.

"Wait, wait. Weren't all of the Jedi who joined the Mandalorian Wars 'Revanchists'?" Vann studies the others, suddenly anxious to fill the gaps in his knowledge.

Bastila nods. "Yes, technically they were. But Revan was their leader. He was the original Revanchist, you see, and he named himself accordingly."

"Well, that's... surprisingly conceited for a Jedi."

"You must understand, Vann," Bastila's tone is tentative, as though she's carefully parsing each word she says. "Revan was not an ordinary Jedi. He was ready to defy the entire Council, the leaders of the Jedi Order, and join the war without their permission. He was prepared to go against millennia of Jedi tradition to defend the people of the Republic."

"He should have gone against your damn Council!" Carth clenches his jaw, eyes cold. "If Revan and the rest of the Jedi had joined the war when they wanted to, instead of waiting for the Council's permission, a lot of lives could have been spared."

Bastila scowls at the pilot, eyes narrowing. "The Council asked Revan to think more carefully about his decision to enter the war, which he agreed to do. They, in turn, agreed to reconsider the Jedi's policy of non-interference. It's as though she's reciting from memory when she adds, "The Revanchists entered the war when it was appropriate for the Jedi to do so. After all, the Jedi are peacekeepers, not soldiers."

Pausing to rub the heel of his hand over his eyes, Carth sighs. "Look Bastila. You're free to be as idealistic as you want, and to buy into the Council's excuses. Really. But you weren't there. You didn't see the bodies, the death..."

"I was there." Speaking up for the first time since Bastila and Carth started arguing, Canderous places his final knife into its sheath. "And I can tell you this much. It wouldn't have mattered if Revan joined the war earlier or later. The results would have been the same."
Vann is sitting forward in his seat, absorbing the discussion around him. "And that would be…?"

Canderous stares at the mercenary as he admits, "The defeat of my people."

Of course Vann knows that the Mandalorians lost the war. It's common enough knowledge that even his damaged mind picked-up on that information. But knowing the facts and hearing the admission feel like entirely separate entities. "Were the Jedi… that powerful?"

"No," Canderous growls. "It wasn't the Jedi who made the difference. It was Revan. He was willing to do what nobody else in the Republic would."

"Oh?" Carth asks, tone terse. "And what would that be?"

"He was willing to fight like a Mandalorian." A grim smile graces Canderous's lips as he speaks, his eyes staring into the distance. Or perhaps into the past. "Revan wasn't afraid of casualties. He didn't coddle anyone. If a city needed to be occupied to achieve a strategic position, he occupied it. If a town needed to be destroyed to keep its resources out of enemy hands, he burned it to the ground."

Vann stares at the Mandalorian, processing this new piece of information. "Once again, not very Jedi-like."

Teeth worrying her bottom lip, Bastila's voice is low as she explains, "Towards the end of the war, Revan's tactics became… rather utilitarian. He and the Council often butted heads over his decisions."

"Revan's tactics were effective," Canderous corrects the Jedi. "He was a brilliant strategist, and unlike Malak, he wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty." The expression of admiration once again flits across his face. "Revan was the only one willing to fight our leader, the Mandalore, one-on-one. He didn't bomb us from above. He came down and fought like a true warrior. He won, too. Ended the whole damn war with a single duel."

Arching a disbelieving brow, Vann glances at the others. "That, uh, that true?"

"Well, yes. But also no. I mean, technically..." Carth groans, staring mournfully into the empty caf cup. "Revan's defeat of the Mandalore was the last official battle of the war. But, in case you didn't notice, the fighting didn't exactly end there."

"So, let me get this straight." Vann studies each of his companions in turn. "Revan was a Jedi Knight, with all of the training and honor that includes. But he was also a loyal soldier of the Republic, and turned the tides of the war. Oh, and he was also the only adversary the Mandalorians respected, because he was a skilled tactician who single-handedly killed their leader and ended the entire damn war. Scoffing, he rolls his eyes. "Sounds too good to be true. I'd accuse you of lying if you didn't look so damn sincere about this guy."

Slowing wringing her fingers together, Bastila hums. "I do suppose that, when one dies a hero, one's legend can become a bit... disproportionate. But Revan was a complicated man. He was all of the things that we've described. A Jedi, and a soldier, and a brilliant tactician. But there was more to him than that."

Vann stares at the Jedi. "You talk like you knew him."

"I didn't, not really." Bastila sighs wistfully. "Revan died before Malak took me as his official pupil. But I did train in the field with some of the Revanchists while I was perfecting my Battle Meditation. I met Revan then. But I can't say that I truly knew him."
"Must be hard to get to know someone who goes around wearing a mask." Vann shifts in his seat, still carefully observing the Jedi. "But since you did at least meet him, maybe you can explain something to me."

"I can certainly try."

"Why in the hells am I dreaming about this dead guy?!" The vividness of his recent dreams still lingers in the back of Vann's mind, and he can practically hear the hum of Revan's lightsaber as it slices down his enemies. "And, while we're at it, why was Malak there?"

"Wait, you're dreaming about Malak now?" Carth's knuckles turn white where he grips the caf cup. "Alright, now you've definitely passed 'creepy.'"

"You don't know…? No, I don't suppose that you would," Bastila muses out loud. "Revan and Malak were friends. They grew up together and remained quite close throughout their lives. Malak was actually the second Revanchist, and the first Jedi to offer to join Revan in his defiance of the Council's orders."

"Alright. So they were friends. But why am I dreaming about them in the first place?" Throwing himself against the back of the seat, Vann shakes his head in an attempt to clear it. But Malak's younger countenance still lingers in his mind.

Nodding thoughtfully, Bastila takes a few steps away from the others. "I'm not entirely sure, other than to say that the Force has decided to show you these moments from Revan's life. Though, I have a few theories…"

"Of course you do." Carth finally gets up and deposits the empty cup on the table. "The Jedi are nothing but ideas and theories."

"Oh, quiet! Just let me think on this for a moment." Bastila continues pacing, the dark circles under her eyes adding to the intensity of her expression. "This is a rather unique situation."

Slipping a knife into each of his boots, Canderous smirks. "In case you haven't noticed, Bastila thinks best when her mouth is moving."

"Shh!" Rolling her eyes towards the ceiling, the Jedi quietly states, "In the years following the war, Malak and Revan were sent on a variety of highly secretive missions. Their attire in your dream indicates that we were witnessing one such mission."

Vann scrubs his palm over his eyes, yawning. "Still doesn't explain why they're reliving their glory days in my head while I sleep."

"Just give me a moment, I'm getting there! Not many know this next part, after all." Ceasing her pacing, Bastila turns to watch her companions. "Revan suspected that there was a larger power behind the Mandalorian Wars. Something far darker than the Mandalore. He wanted to discover the source of that power, but…"

Silence descends upon the room, attention trained on the Jedi. She doesn't speak for several more moments, though her expression remains thoughtful. Finally, Vann calls out a strained, "But what Bastila?"

Quietly she continues, "But Revan feared that the search for this mysterious power was corrupting him, drawing him to the dark side. He also believed that Malak had already been corrupted during the course of their search." She turns to look at the mercenary, expression drawn. "There are Jedi, myself included, who suspect that Malak's fall was caused by an outside source. However, we have
yet to determine *what* this source might be." Clearing her throat, she explains, "As contrived as it may seem, it's entirely possible that Revan revealed this information to aid you, to aid *us*, in discovering the source of Malak's fall."

"So. A dead guy is sending memories into Vann's dreams?" Carth nods sarcastically. "Okay, sure, that sounds reasonable."

"You keep forgetting that there are Jedi involved." By now, Canderous has concealed his various knives throughout his clothing. "They don't have to make sense or be reasonable."

Drawing an exasperated breath, Bastila raises her voice. "What I'm *saying* is that Vann may have previously unknown information about the last years of Revan's life. And that information may reveal exactly *what* happened to Malak." She pauses, voice dropping to a whisper, "Information that could restore him to the light… or reveal the key to defeating him."

"What? Wait, Bastila, are you saying that my *dreams* might show us how to stop Malak from bombing more cities? We might be able to prevent another Taris…" He glances at Carth, quietly adding, "Or another Telos?"

The pilot stiffens at the mention of his now-destroyed home planet.

"I… I don't know anything for sure. But I genuinely believe that it's possible for Revan to be speaking through you. That it's a gift from the Force." Bastila also turns to look at Carth. "The Jedi on Dantooine would be able to tell us more."

"Oh no!" the pilot shakes his head, taking a step back. "Not this again…"

"Carth, please," Bastila pleads, "With this revelation, it's more important than ever that we speak with these Jedi. And you're our best hope for evading the Republic while we do so."

Canderous reclines in his chair, swinging his feet up onto the table. "She's right about that," he chuckles. "I can fly us places, but there's not a lot I can do to keep us from being blown out of the sky if the Republic catches up."

Continuing to shake his head, Carth turns away. "For the last time, no! If you want to go to Dantooine, fine. But first, drop me somewhere else."

"No." Pushing himself out of his seat, Vann strides over to the pilot. Pressing his face centimeters away from the other man's, he glares in challenge.

Staring back, Carth snaps, "What are you going to do, kidnap me? Make me come with you by force?"

"I could," Vann admits, completely unremorseful. "But I'd rather we make a deal."

"Yeah, because that's gone *really* well for me so far…"

Talking over the pilot's complaints, Vann continues, "Get me to Dantooine so that these Jedi can poke around in my head and figure out why some dead guy is sending me messages, and I'll help you get what you want most in life."

Carth's brows rise doubtfully. "And what, exactly, would that be?"

"Revenge on Malak."
Jaw snapping shut, Carth stares for several long moments as though attempting to assess the seriousness of the offer. Eyes locked with the mercenary he finally states, "That's a kriffing suicide mission."

"It might not be." Vann shrugs, nonchalant despite the way his heart pounds in his chest. "You heard the Jedi, I'm apparently getting all sorts of secret information about the Supreme Commander's past."

From off to the side, Bastila lets out a sharp squeak of protest. "This is not what I meant when I said…"

Under his breath, Canderous mutters, "Bastila, if you actually want to get to Dantooine I'd suggest shutting your damn mouth right now."

"You're insane." Carth finally breaks eye contact, shaking his head as he scrubs both hands over his face. "Hells, I'm insane for even listening to you!"

"Yeah, probably." Grinning, Vann extends his hand to the pilot. "So, do we have a deal?"

Carth's eyes dart between the mercenary's face and the offered hand. After a moment, he accepts with a firm handshake. His jaw clenches as he grumbles, "Fine. Fine! I guess I'm hauling all of your asses to Dantooine."

Chapter End Notes

1. Once again, my idea of how the Force works (in this case, a Force bond) is probably not 100% Star Wars canon. Sorry?

2. This chapter was planned before the story review was posted. However, it conveniently answers a few questions. Of course, any number of these answers is subject to future change, since all of these characters are horribly unreliable narrators.

3. Sorry, Carth. (I'm not actually sorry.)

4. I combined the Front Crawl/Prologue and Chapter 01 into a single chapter for the purposes of streamlining the reading process, and making the chapter numbers align properly. This will in no way impact the actual reading of the story, but may make it seem like I deleted something.
Planet - Dantooine Part I

Chapter Summary

In which our heroes manage to piss-off a few Jedi Masters, share some heartfelt emotions, and possibly make a new friend through conversation and violence.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

6.

Dantooine is beautiful, just as Bastila described. The lush, rolling plains are dotted with trees, providing just enough shade to escape from the glaring warmth of the sun. The only break in the sea of green is the chain of rocky hills that rise-up amidst the fields, slate gray peaks casting jagged shadows along the horizon. A few compounds are scattered across the verdant wilderness, but otherwise, the land is unspoiled by civilization. The bright, cheerful sky is a welcome relief from the grimy gray of Taris or the unending steel hull of the Ebon Hawk as it traveled through hyperspace.

All of this beauty and Vann is stuck inside of the modest Jedi enclave, arguing with four Jedi masters who, he's decided, almost-certainly hate him.

"We are a refugee enclave, not a training facility!" Master Vrook Lamar is glaring at Bastila while gesturing emphatically to the cracking pillars and patched walls of what serves as the chamber for the enclave's makeshift Council of Masters.

Seeming to ignore the disrepair of her surroundings, Bastila meets the Jedi Master's stare. "But there are multiple Padawans training here!"

"Padawans, yes. But no Initiates." Master Vandar Tokare offers what passes for a weak smile, his wrinkled green features crinkling further with the effort. "We don't have the resources to train younglings."

Shifting his glare to Vann, Master Lamar scowls at the mercenary. "And, need I remind you, he is no youngling!"

"Masters, please!" Despite her serene expression, Bastila's tone is acquiring a sharp edge. "I respect
everything you are saying, just as I respect our ways and traditions. But this is a unique situation." She shoots a pleading look at the mercenary, eyebrows raised. "While I acknowledge the potential risks in training this man, can you honestly tell me that they outweigh the dangers of leaving him untrained? Malak and his forces gain ground every day, and if Vann should fall into their grasp…”

Holding up a hand, Master Zhar Lestin gestures for the Padawan to be silent. His voice is thoughtful, almost gentle, as he remarks, "There are dangers in both scenarios, which is why all factors must be taken into consideration." His odd lavender eyes shift to study Vann, gaze critical but not unkind. There's a certain curiosity in his tone when she speaks again. "Vann, you have yet to speak within this chamber. Why do you feel that we should train you?"

Sighing, the mercenary resists the urge to shrug. "Well," he admits, "Supposedly I'm a danger to myself and others."

This answer seems to amuse Master Lestin, and the Twi'lek chuckles softly to himself. To his right, Master Lamar grits his teeth in visible irritation. "Glib and arrogant!" the Human Master snarls. "Everything a Jedi should not be."

"We've already discussed the dangers that your Force-sensitivity pose," Master Dorak sighs. "What the Council is seeking is your own explanation for why you believe that we should make an exception and train you. In your own words."

"Honestly? No kriiffing clue." Vann stares at the Council members in turn, lips twisting into a bemused grin.

Beside him, Bastila digs a sharp elbow into the mercenary's side as she hisses, "You could at least pretend to take this seriously!"

"Why should I?" Vann demands through his teeth. "They already decided that they hated me the moment I walked into this room. Nothing I say, short of lying my ass off, is going to convince them that I'm worth their time."

"Well then, why don't you try lying your ass off?" Bastila shoots the mercenary a glare as Masters Lamar and Lestin debate the flippancy of Vann's latest remark. "From what I've seen, you're quite convincing."

"That," Vann smirks, "Is a very un-Jedi-like thing to recommend Padawan."

"Bastila!" Finally noticing that the Padawan's attention has drifted from the Council, Master Dorak chides her. "You claim that there are extenuating circumstances in this situation, proof that the Force is sending visions to this man?"


This seems to grab the Masters' attention, and all four Council members turn to look at the mercenary. Master Tokare nods his wrinkled head. "Please, continue."

"I don't know what else to tell you," Vann shrugs helplessly. "I've been having dreams about a masked man who Bastila tells me is a dead Jedi war hero named Revan. I keep seeing… things he did during the war, I guess. It's not like I want these dreams. Honestly, I'd like them to stop, but I'm guessing that's not something you can make happen."

"I've seen some of these dreams," Bastila interjects. "And, from Revan's attire, I suspect that they actually portray some of his missions after the Mandalorian Wars. Around the time of Malak's
suspected fall…"

"Interpreting the visions of others is not your place, Padawan," Master Lamar scolds.

Hairless brow furrowing, Master Lestin studies Bastila. "How is it that you were able to see into this man's dreams?"

"I… we…," Bastila fumbles, her usual eloquence suddenly vanishing. "Somehow, through reasons unknown to myself, Vann and I seem to have developed a… a Force bond."

Master Dorak's brows furrow in visible disbelief. "You've known each other for less than a week. How is that possible?"

"Hells if I know," Vann quips.

"Rare as it is, individuals can form a bond in a short amount of time if the Force wills it," Master Tokare explains. "This may be a sign of greater things to come."

Once again peering critically at Vann, Master Lestin nods slowly. "If you truly are experiencing visions of Revan, this situation bears the need for further exam…"

"Masters, let's not be hasty!" Master Lamar snaps at his fellow Council members. "The only proof we have is the words of a Jedi Padawan and an untrained Force-sensitive." He glares at Vann, eyes narrowing. "While these supposed visions do merit further study, they by no means indicate that this man should be trained…"

Arching a brow at the squabbling Jedi Masters, Vann sighs. "So, what? You'll poke around in my brain because my dreams interest you, but you still won't teach me anything? That doesn't seem fair."

Vrook Lamar continues to level his gaze at the mercenary. "We are not concerned with what is fair in your opinion, Mr. Chis. We, as Jedi, are concerned with what is best for the galaxy as a whole."

"But can we truly expect this man to remain here, allowing us access to his dreams, and offer him no ways to control the very Force connection that grants these visions?" Master Lestin challenges his fellow Jedi.

"Masters, please, there are further extenuating circumstances…" Bastila pleads with the Council, but her words fall on deaf ears as the Masters resume debating the situation among themselves. She huffs under her breath, shooting a helpless glance at Vann.

"Hey, don't look at me," the mercenary mutters. "I'm apparently old, glib, and arrogant."

Casting a last desperate frown towards the squabbling group of Jedi Masters, Bastila's expression hardens. She grits her teeth as she reaches for something at her belt, gaze flicking to the man at her side as she plasters a faint smile over her lips. Grasping the item, she tosses it into the air as she calls out, "Vann, do keep up!" Through their bond, she sends a sensation of reassurance, her mind whispering, just catch it and follow my lead.

Arm shooting out, Vann instinctively calls the item to his hand, immediately recognizing the metal hilt of Lang's lightsaber. Thumbing the button he activates the blade, the hum of the 'saber surprisingly comforting. Muscle memory taking control he adopts a defensive position, bringing the blade up to protect his front just as Bastila descends on him in a flurry of yellow-hued strikes.

For a moment Vann is confused, trying to puzzle-out why the Jedi is attacking him. However, their
mental link sings with amusement, a playful challenge that appeals to his sense of mischief rather than any of his more violent inclinations. *Just trust your instincts,* Bastila murmurs. So, Vann does. Letting his conscious mind fade away, he draws upon his connection to the Force and wills his body to flow into the series of parries and strikes that feels as natural as breathing.

Sparring with Bastila is far different from the battle with Lang. Vann isn't fighting for his life or attempting to gain an edge in a situation with no room for error. Rather, this is more like a dance, the rhythm, and steps flowing through their bond. It's easy to find their tempo, with Bastila's dual-slashes easily batted away by Vann's more aggressive 'saber style. At first, he gets the feeling that the Jedi is holding back, taking it easy on him. But as he begins to gain the upper hand, driving her back towards one of the cracked walls of the Council chamber, a look of gleeful determination sparks in her eyes.

Using the Force to propel herself, Bastila leaps off the wall and flips over Vann's head, landing behind him with her lightsaber aimed at his throat. However, the intended jab is blocked as the mercenary spins expertly on his heel, crouching down and meeting the blow from a lower angle. This tactic is apparently unexpected, putting Bastila on the defensive as Vann drives forward with a series of harsh, vicious strikes that she barely manages to knock away before they connect with her torso. Both combatants are breathing heavily now, and Vann can see the sweat beading on the Jedi's brow. Similar rivulets are running down his neck and back from exertion, even as his body seems to delight in the challenge of combat.

"I think I win," he chuckles smugly.

Bastila coyly arches a brow. "Are you so sure?" She nods towards her own longer lightsaber which she has surreptitiously aimed at his left side, poised to slice through his abdomen in a single deadly blow. "I'm fairly sure this is a draw."

"Enough!" Master Lamar roars. "What is the meaning of this? How did he even acquire a lightsaber, and how does…"

"That's Juyo," A faint smile playing on his lips, Master Dorak studies Vann with a new sense of respect and no small amount of curiosity. "Though, I must ask where you learned that."

Nodding to Bastila in silent thanks, Vann powers down the 'saber. "I honestly don't know," he admits.

Powering down her own double blade, Bastila bows to the other Jedi. "My apologies, Masters, but I felt that a demonstration was the only way to appropriately portray my point."

"You certainly have our attention," Master Tokare replies, inclining his head. "Continue."

"Vann… After looking within his mind through our bond, I've come to believe that he's missing a good deal of his memories. But, from what I've witnessed, he already possesses some degree of Jedi training." She offers the mercenary a faint smile. "Or his instincts are remarkably good."

"…Already trained?" Smiling thoughtfully Master Lestin hums to himself, echoing the thought
racing through the mercenary's mind. "That would indeed change things."

The entire situation takes on a surreal glow, and Vann can do little more than stand there and grip the lightsaber hilt as the Jedi around him discuss his future. He wonders if Bastila is lying about her suspicions, or if this is information that she's known for a while but has chosen to keep to herself. Most of all, he wonders if it's true. He probes their bond for answers but is greeted with mental walls and stony silence.

Staring at his fellow Council members as though they've all lost their minds, Master Lamar waves his hands violently in disapproval. "It changes nothing! This man could be an Initiate who was already turned away from the Order. It makes him no less dangerous…"

"Initiates don't learn Juyo, Vrook," Master Dorak remarks lightly.

"However Mister Chis was trained this is indeed a… unique situation." Glancing at Zhar Lestin, Master Tokare draws a slow breath. "While I sense that we still have some things to discuss, I am personally of the mind that it might be best to grant him admission to this enclave. At least for now."

Smile growing broader, the Twi'lek master nods in agreement. "Yes, I think it would be best," he casts a meaningful glance at Master Lamar, "For the galaxy as a whole."

* * *

"So, how's training going?" Carth smirks as he leans against the battered metal workbench in the Ebon Hawk's workshop.

From his place sitting cross-legged in the center of the room, Vann is currently floating two pairs of pliers, a hammer, and several random swoop bike parts through the air. They weave and bob around each other in their individual orbits, each one held aloft via a separate branch of the Initiate's Force connection. "Boring," he states, idly adding a spanner to the mix.

"Really?" Poking at the hammer, Carth watches as it wobbles for a moment before resuming its gradual rotation around the Initiate's head. "Because from here it looks like you're having a little too much fun."

"I'm practicing," Vann mutters, momentarily wondering if he currently has the mental fortitude to lift the workbench. Or maybe just Carth. "This is entirely academic in nature."

"Uh-huh." Starting slightly when the workbench begins to shake beneath him, the pilot leans forward, eyes going wide. "Not that I haven't missed you aboard the Hawk, but shouldn't you be practicing with the rest of the Jedi?"

Focusing a good portion of his attention on the bench, Van feels a smirk of satisfaction ghost across his lips as the heavy object begins to float. It's too large for him to add to the ever-increasing number of items that are currently orbiting him, but he still has the command to hover it a meter above the ground. "If I have to sit and meditate on releasing my emotions for one more minute, I'm going to stab someone."

"Yeah, see, that attitude might be why they took away your lightsaber." Carth is, of course, referring to the fact that Vrook Lamar insisted on confiscating Lang's lightsaber soon after Vann and Bastila's little 'demonstration' in the middle of the Council chamber. That was over a week ago. "And I'd like to point out that you're in no position to complain. You were the one who wanted to come here."
"I wanted to come here because I thought they'd be able to help with my…" Vann makes a vague gesture towards his head. "Not because I wanted to spend most of my day meditating on peace, knowledge, and the release of negative emotions."

"Well, from what I've seen, you're already good at releasing negative emotions." Eyeing the still-hovering workbench, Carth takes a step away from the object. "You just tend to do it in a way that features a lot more violence and bloodshed than the Jedi normally condone."

"Gee, thanks."

Sighing, Carth slowly walks over to the Jedi Initiate, lowering himself to sit beside the other man. He takes care to avoid bumping into the spanner that floats by his shoulder. "You… never did tell me. What did they say about your missing memories?"

"Nothing useful." Dropping the bench back to the ground with a resounding clang, Vann grits his teeth. He can feel the various tools beginning to spin faster, growing erratic in their orbits. He makes no effort to steady them. "It's an injury, which I already knew. Waking up covered in my own blood was a big clue."

"So… they can't heal it?" Ducking his head as the smaller pair of pliers whizzes by, Carth hisses a low curse. "Hey, watch it!"

Redirecting the orbit of the pliers to circumvent the pilot beside him, Vann shakes his head. "Nope. They claim there's nothing they can do." Sighing, he adjusts the movement of all the currently-levitating objects so that they circle around Carth. "Apparently it's up to me to 'meditate on my thoughts' and 'look to the Force for guidance.' Whatever that means."

"I admit that I'm about as Force-sensitive as a wall, but that sounds a little harsh even to me." As a set of parts for a swoop bike engine swirl past Carth's left ear, his brows raise. It's hard to tell if he's impressed, or merely startled. "What do they expect you to do, heal your own head just by thinking about it hard enough?"

"Funny thing is, that approach almost makes sense considering that I may have done this to myself…" The objects seem to shudder simultaneously, their orbits temporarily becoming stilted. Carth turns to stare at the man beside him. "What do you mean 'did this to yourself'?"

Lowering his head, Vann studies his hands where they rest in his lap. He's silent for several moments, and when his voice does come it's uncharacteristically quiet. "When I crashed, I may have protected myself a little… too well. When I tried to shield my mind, I might have walled-off my memories." He sighs, "Which is why nobody can get to them. At least, not without hurting me."

"…Oh."

Letting out a frustrated growl, Vann feels the lurching of the objects intensify. Raking his fingers through his hair he draws a slow breath. "Supposedly, being 'mindful of my thoughts' might eventually open up everything that got locked away." Several of the swoop bike parts dip...
dangerously low. "Or it might not. Those memories may be gone forever. Nobody knows."

Visibly at a loss, Carth continues to watch his companion for several long moments, mouth opening and closing as he attempts to find something to say. When he finally speaks, it's stuttered and strained. "Vann, I... I'm sorry..."

"Don't be." The words spill forth too quickly, even as the items begin to quake in midair. Soon, the workshop fills with the clacking of shaking metal. "I didn't need those memories before, and I don't need them now."

Carth seems about to say something else but his jaw closes with an audible click as the hammer and spanner both pause mid-orbit, continuing to shudder and bounce. Both pairs of pliers rattle in time, flapping along their hinges. It's an odd cacophony, a reverberation through the Force that somehow manages to echo the nameless frustrations ever-present within Vann's head. It's a reflection of the distress hidden behind the thin facade of the flippant mercenary, and the specter of every emotion that he's supposed to have replaced with peace and harmony. The objects he's mentally floating all quiver with the dull rage that constantly simmers within him, no matter what he does to let the emotion go.

Left raw and exposed through his ties to the force Vann drops everything that he's been levitating, the objects vibrating the durasteel floor of the ship as they come back down. The spanner hits particularly hard, a piercing bang echoing through the workshop. It's the scream that the Initiate sometimes feels like he's been holding back for years. For a moment it feels like he might actually yell, but the sound sticks cold and dry in his throat. He swallows.

A warm hand tentatively settles on Vann's shoulder, the heat transferring easily through the thin material of the tunic he's wearing. The touch is light and noticeably apprehensive. On the surface the Initiate feels like he should pull away from the contact, to deny that he wants or needs any displays of comfort or sympathy. But he also fights to prevent himself from leaning into the reassuring weight of Carth's palm. Physicality outside of combat is not something Vann has experienced much of, or even allowed himself to appreciate, in the years since losing his memory. It's foreign, yet familiar. Unwelcome, yet craved. And so, caught within that dichotomy he chooses to hold perfectly still, surrounded by the tools and swoop bike parts that he's littered around the room.

For his part Carth is equally silent and still, his gaze flickering between the man beside him and some nondescript point on the ship's inner hull. When he does speak, he voice is slightly rough. "Look. About what happened before... on the Hawk, right after Taris was destroyed?" His hand lingers on the Initiate's shoulder for a moment longer, before quickly moving to rest against the floor. "I'm... I'm sorry for blowing up like that. I should've done that. I said some things and..."

"Stop." Turning to glare at the pilot, Vann moves his fingers to dig into the other man's knee, reestablishing their contact. "Like you said to Mission, you have every right to feel that way."

"I know I do. It's just..." Carth briefly meets his companion's gaze, only to drop his eyes a moment later. "It's an ugly part of me that you shouldn't have to see."

"We all have those parts. They're normal." The ever-present rage surges just beneath Vann's skin. "People have darkness in them."

Carth blinks and then barks out a terse laugh. "...That's not a very Jedi thing to say."

Finding himself chuckling along, Vann shrugs. "Yeah, well, I'm not a Jedi."
"I mean, you don't have a lightsaber." The shadow of a genuine smile ghosts across Carth's lips, only to vanish as quickly as it appeared. "Anyway, well, just... I'm sorry. Even if you don't want my apology, I'm sorry. And, uh, I'm not going to hold you to what you agreed to do for me."

"Stop apologizing for things that aren't your fault." The gentle chiding comes automatically to Vann, and it takes a moment for his brain to decipher the latter part of the pilot's statement. "Wait, what?"

Looking up once more, determination flashes within Carth's eyes. "I'm... I don't expect you to actually go after Malak for me. It's suicide." He nods his head in the general direction of the ship's exit, the gesture caught between nonchalant and amusingly awkward. "I'm here on Dantooine, and it's not bad... I don't mind being here. And even if I did, I still wouldn't make you keep that promise. I'm... I'm not cruel."

Vann blinks, turning away. It's his turn to stare at a random point in the distance. "You should hold me to it."

"...Wait, what?" Jaw hanging open slightly, Carth shakes his head as he speaks. "I just said that going after Malak would be suicide!"

"The memories I do have? Of my life? I've never done anything meaningful." Vann tries to make his words nothing more than a statement, but he feels a fresh wave of frustration vibrate through his Force connection. The spanner shudder from its place on the floor. "I'm not like you or Canderous, I never fought for a cause I believed in. And I'm definitely not like Bastila, who actually believes that she can change the entire Jedi Order through the power of hope."

"That doesn't make you a bad person..."

"But I'm not a good person. And I'm okay with that." Shifting his gaze to watch his companion, Vann notes the wrinkle of concern that appears between the other man's brows. "But you Carth? You're better than that. And... maybe if I can help a good person who's taken as much shit from life as you have, it'll make me better. Balance some of the things I've done."

A sound between a cough and a laugh escapes Carth, and he raises an eyebrow. "You said it yourself. Everyone has their own darkness." Glancing down, he seems to realize that the Initiate's hand is still digging into his knee. "I said it before. There're things about you that I don't like. Or, at least, that I don't trust. But that doesn't mean I want to see you dead." He sighs heavily. "Especially not for something stupid that I said because I was angry."

Also seeming to note the position of his hand for the first time, Vann relaxes his fingers. He does not, however, move. "Hey," he jokes, tone regaining just a hint of its normal irreverence. "Don't get so attached to me being alive."

Eyes going wide Carth mutters, "What, you know something I don't?"

"Well, I know how much the Jedi Masters hate me, despite hate literally being banned by their code." Vann scoffs at this. "So my guess is that they'll find a creative way to get me eaten by a kath hound before the week is up."

"Oh," groaning, Carth snorts at the thought. "Don't even joke about that!"

Smirking, Vann studies the other man for several moments before asking, "Why, does the thought of my death actually bother you?"

The answer to this question seems to surprise Carth if the visible jolt of his head is any indication.
"You know, it just might," he admits.

"Well, then, you might want petition the Masters to spare me." Sighing, Vann winces slightly as he adds, "Because, according to Bastila, they're already devising 'tasks' for me to complete."

A grim smile tugging at his lips, Carth mutters, "I'm sure it won't be that bad. They're Jedi, after all. How bad could it be?"

* * *

Somehow, the Jedi Masters have managed to devise a task worse than culling the kath hound population.

"You know," Vann grumbles to himself. "I'd take kath hounds over kinrath any day."

The Jedi, of course, have offered a perfectly logical reason for Vann to be creeping through one of Dantooine's pitch-black caves, vibroblades in hand as he waits to be ambushed by a swarm of venomous arachnids. According to Master Dorak, this cave is a natural repository for the rare crystals necessary for lightsaber construction. After studying Lang's lightsaber, and discovering that both the hilt and the crystal are of inferior quality, the Masters have decided that Vann must rebuild the weapon as the final test in his Initiate training. Part of this process, or so says Master Tokare, is going into the cave alone in order to select a crystal that 'resonates with the user's connection to the Force.'

Of course, there's a catch. Because with the Jedi, there's always a catch. In this case, it's the fact that Dantooine's crystal cave is also teeming with aggressive kinrath. Which Vann is expected to eliminate before he can select his crystal.

At least Master Lestin had the modesty to look slightly abashed as he explained the assignment.

Vann's not sure how far he's trekked, but so far he hasn't seen any sign of a kinrath or a crystal formation. Which may just mean that he's lost. Cursing at the small light on his belt that is currently doing krif-all to illuminate the cave, he sighs and pauses for a moment to try and regain his bearings. From what he was told, there's only a single passageway leading to the crystal formations. However, as Master Lamar pointed out (rather gleefully, in fact), it's quite possible for a large colony of kinrath to dig additional tunnels, even through solid rock.

Wiping the back of his hand over his brow, Vann grimaces. The cave is surprisingly warm, despite not winding too far past Dantooine's surface. He's fairly sure that one of the Masters mentioned that the crystals give off a natural heat, thanks to their connection to the Force, but he mostly stopped paying attention somewhere around 'large, venomous arachnids.' Still… If the crystals are actually attuned to the Force, it stands to reason that he can use his own connection to reach out and sense their presence. At least, that makes about as much sense as anything else involved with this ridiculous assignment.

Closing his eyes the Initiate draws upon his own Force connection, something that's become second nature throughout the course of his training. He feels his own power surge forward, still a primal fount of energy despite the Masters' numerous attempts to tame it. Sending tendrils of awareness throughout the cave, he searches for signs of anything else that resonates with the Force. He's expecting a faint echo, perhaps something that barely thrums along his own connection. So, the ice-cold jolt that shudders its way through his awareness and down his spine is entirely unexpected.

Eyes flying open, Vann grips his vibroblades tighter as he shifts into a defensive stance. Drawing
back his Force connection he pulls the power back into himself, reinforcing the foundations of his rudimentary mental shields. Whatever he just sensed is not a rock, and probably not a kinrath either. In the fleeting glimpse he caught of the other presence, he felt a swirling miasma of cold fury tinged with the acrid tang of fear. It shot ice through his mind, so similar to his own cacophony of unsuppressed emotions and yet distinct to this individual. The sensation is entirely different from the steady hum of peace and serenity projected by most Jedi.

For a moment Vann considers going back to the enclave and reporting that there is something wrong in this cave. But he quickly banishes that thought, jaw clenching as he slowly slinks forward, body tense and senses alert. The last thing he wants to do is return to the Masters with no crystal and a crazy story about a monster in the dark. *Prideful*, Master Lamar's voice echoes in his head. Yet another emotion that should be released, but that the Initiate continues to subconsciously cling to.

Despite his efforts to be silent, Vann's boots still make soft scuffing sounds against the uneven cave floor as he creeps along, each noise amplified by the high cavern walls and the eerie silence that surrounds him. The darkness is pervasive, and he finds himself relying on sound more than anything. Occasionally he pauses mid-stride, attempting to trace the source of an echo that he's fairly certain is another set of footfalls. Hesitantly he releases his tamped-down Force connection, this time only sending out a single tendril of awareness into the dark. Another jolt of frigid fury lashes back, this time stronger and more conscious of his presence.

So, you know I'm here, Vann thinks to himself. Well, this could be interesting...

A glowing slash of crimson is the only warning that Vann gets as his unseen opponent strikes from the darkness. Falling back on instinct, he immediately crosses his blades to block the blow that comes in from overhead. It's a similar move to what Lang opened with, and he thinks that he recognizes a distinct style in the attack. *Ataru*, he recalls from his training. And then he has no time for more analysis because his assailant is striking at him again, a red-bladed lightsaber humming and hissing as it cuts through the gloom.

A vicious slice barely misses Vann's thigh, blocked just in time by the blade in his off-hand. Before the enemy can strike again he lunges forward, jabbing into the dark at what he hopes is his opponent. But his blade cuts through the air, and he's back to parrying a series of lightning-quick slashes all aimed at his torso. Whoever he's fighting is fast, faster than Lang or Bastila, and he thinks that he sees some of his own technique in their aggression. Unfortunately, this makes it no easier to drive back the aerial attack aimed directly at his head. As the glowing red blade descends he barely manages to dive forward, tucking into a roll along the rough floor of the cave. A particularly jagged rock digs into his shoulder as he twists to his feet, and he grimaces as he lands in a crouch with both blades guarding his body.

Vann thinks that he hears a laugh at his opponent races forward, using the Force to propel their body faster than should be possible. The speed makes the next hit that much harder, and he barely manages to deflect the red lightsaber with his own blade. While the 'saber doesn't find its intended mark it does manage to gaze his bicep, burning a shallow gash through his clothing and into his skin. He hisses in annoyance, letting the pain course through his system and drive him forward with a renewed sense of frustration. Lashing out in a flurry of dual strikes he charges at his hidden adversary, his blades finding mostly air and darkness. However, one hit manages to cut flesh, and he feels a sense of satisfaction as his opponent growls in discomfort.

"You were lucky," an accented feminine voice hisses out. "But I know you are blind in this darkness. Unlike you, the Force grants me sight."
As the red lightsaber blade whirs around in an aggressive arc, Vann dives away again. This time he manages to remain upright, boots skidding across the cave floor as he's driven deeper into the subterranean cavern. The woman's words jog his memory and he realizes that yes, he can use the Force to his advantage. Relaxing the shields around his mind, he reaches out his own connection to probe the nearby darkness. It's not true compensation for vision, but it does let him feel beyond his limited senses. It grants him a new awareness of the woman he's fighting, her Force signature glowing brilliantly within his increased perception. If he focuses, he can pinpoint the center of her signature. Suddenly she's not a hidden menace, but a living creature illuminated within his mind. A living creature who can be sliced, and stabbed, and cut.

With a grim grunt of satisfaction, Vann lunges forward, finally able to attack offensively now that his opponent is partially visible. He senses a burst of surprise from the woman, her Force signature rippling with displeasure as he blocks one of her strikes and answers with two of his own. She dodges the first with a graceful flip through the air but lands too slowly to fully parry the second. Vann's dominant blade slices through her guard, carving a fresh gash in her side. She roars in pain, her presence in the Force growing frigid with her anger.

"Impossible," the woman snarls. "You are no Jedi!"

"You know," Vann smirks, knocking away her saber the instant before it pierces his abdomen, "People keep saying that."

Now on the defensive, the woman backs further into the cave, possibly moving in the direction she came from. Vann continues to drive her back, blades hacking and slicing against her lightsaber. Each time they pierce her flesh it sends a new wave of rage through the Force as her frustration mounts. Her movements are becoming less precise beneath her onslaught of emotions, but she's still unbelievably quick. A few burns mar Vann's skin, stinging painfully with each movement he makes. He knows that he's supposed to release that pain and accept serenity in its place, but instead he clings to the sensation. The discomfort is a cold lump in his chest, radiating outward and propelling his limbs forward.

The pair continues their duel, the red lightsaber hissing and whirring as it connects with the metallic surfaces of Vann's vibroblades. He can hear the woman panting, the breaths almost in time with his own. His clothing clings uncomfortably to his skin, adhered by a layer of sweat. Desperation licks at the back of his mind as his muscles burn with exertion. He can't keep going at this pace much longer, and holding back to preserve his strength will only give the woman an opportunity to slice him open. Something has to give, and he's becoming acutely aware that it might be him.

Distantly, he wonders if Carth is genuinely going to be pissed when he turns up death.

Deflecting two quick slashes aimed at his right shoulder, Vann uses the momentum of the second block against his opponent. Jolting her arm back at an awkward angle with his off-blade, he lunges forward and drives his dominant blade towards her shoulder. She manages to duck the hit but the razor-sharp edge still pierces her bicep, a thick stream of blood immediately flowing from the wound. Barely maintaining the grip on her lightsaber she grunts in pain, presence in the Force flaring with renewed anger. But that moment of distraction is enough to leave her unprepared as Vann hits with a flying kick, both boots landing square in her chest as he uses the Force to propel himself forward.

The woman goes soaring back, temporarily knocked off her feet from the momentum of the kick. She turns her own movement into a backflip, but lands poorly. Her footing is imperfect, the lightsaber held too loosely due to her injury. Even so, she howls her outrage and lunges at Vann,
using the Force to add extra strength to her charge. Her red 'saber arcs in a powerful swing, aiming to slash the Initiate across the chest and abdomen. Barely managing to react in time Vann manages to catch the lightsaber between both his blades, the glowing crimson edge still singeing a fresh wound in his left pectoral. Wresting against the woman's hold he finally manages to wrench the metal hilt from her hands, yanking his vibroblades back and sending the lightsaber flying through the air. He hears it land somewhere behind him with a metallic clink, blade humming as it powers down.

Golden eyes staring in disbelief, the woman snarls at Vann as he points the tip of his dominant blade to her throat. The lighting in the cave is somewhat brighter here, a faint glow seeming to emanate from the cavern beyond. In the low light, he thinks he catches a glimpse of pointed teeth and distinctive striped markings on a feline countenance. A Cathar.

"No! I will not be beaten!" Face twisting in rage, the woman reaches out her hand.

Vann can feel the pull of the Force as his adversary calls the fallen lightsaber to her, and he instinctively drops the vibroblade not aimed at her throat. Thrusting his own hand into the air he summons his connection to the Force, mentally grabbing for the 'saber with all of his will. He senses his own Force command battling against the woman's, her ice-cold rage and fear temporarily overcoming him. Harnessing his own frustration he unleashes a swell of emotions, his connection thrumming with the raw power. Metal whistles as it soars through the air.

The hilt of the lightsaber lands in Vann's palm with a satisfying thud. The instant he feels it, he thumbs the blade back on and brings it to bear against the woman before him. A smirk plays on his lips as the glow of the lightsaber reflects off his vibroblade, both weapons pointed at the throat of his opponent. "I think," he mumbles smugly, "That I beat you."

A feral snarl escapes the Cathar woman, and she glares darkly at the Jedi Initiate. "How?" she demands. "How did you defeat me, even with my strength from the dark side?"

Pressing the lightsaber just a hair closer to the woman's neck, Vann arches a brow. "Uh-uh. You don't get to ask questions. I have your 'saber, so I'll lead the damn interrogation for now."

"So ask your questions, Jedi." Jutting her chin into the air, the woman remains almost perfectly still. "You, who have made a fool of me this day."

"I thought you said that I'm not a Jedi." Vann can't keep the mocking tone from his voice. "I was wrong." The woman's gaze sweeps the man before her. "Now I have seen you fight, and have felt your true presence in the Force. Clearly, despite your dress and weapons, you are part of the Order."

Chuckling, Vann shakes his head. "Actually, you were right the first time. I'm just an overgrown Initiate. Don't even have a lightsaber yet. I was actually in here trying to fix that problem." His expression darkens, eyes narrowing. "Which brings me to my next question. Who are you, and why are you in this cave?"

Squaring her shoulders, the woman announces, "I am Juhani, an apprentice of the dark side of the Force." Her eyes flick towards the deeper part of the cavern, where the soft glow emanates from. "My master Quatra sent me here to collect a red crystal from a kinrath egg. A crystal forged in darkness, to represent my own fall from the light."

"Ah." Glancing down at the red bladed lightsaber in his hand, Vann examines the color for a moment before looking back at his defeated foe. "And now that, I assume, you have this crystal,
what are you supposed to do?"

"From here, I am supposed to use that lightsaber to complete my final challenge." She frowns, lips curling into another growl. "At least I was until you bested me, *Initiate*."

"…And that challenge would be?"

Juhani narrows her eyes, voice steely as she explains, "To prove my final descent into darkness, I was to kill the Republic betrayer Zhar Lestin and bring his lightsaber to Quatra as proof of my superiority."

"Yeah, that's not happening." Tightening his grip on the 'saber, Vann glares back at the Cathar. "For one thing, I'm not going to let you. Lestin is the one Master who doesn't hate me. For another, how in the hells did you expect to kill a Jedi Master when you couldn't even beat me?"

"You underestimate yourself, Initiate. The foolish Masters may not recognize your skill, but I do." Juhani's voice turns to a pleasant purr. "You fight with the prowess of a Jedi knight and more passion than I have seen in one loyal to the Order. Tell me, if the Masters treat you so poorly, why do you still claim loyalty to them? Do you not realize that they have turned their back on the Republic, the very government they pledged to protect?"

Jerking the lightsaber blade up a little higher, Vann lets the heat brush against the woman's chin. He hears her hiss at the contact, though she says nothing more. "Like I said, I'm asking the questions here," he reminds her. "I know who these Jedi are, and who they're loyal to. My reasons for being here are none of your business. Though, I have to ask… You claim you study the dark side of the Force? But you're loyal to the Republic? Aren't the Jedi who follow Malak all supposed to be 'one with the light'?"

"Malak! Hah!" Juhani turns her head a fraction, spitting on the ground at the name. "I pledge no loyalty to Malak. But the Republic? They are no fools. They recognize that those who embrace the dark are just as useful to them as the hypocrites who claim to walk in the light. Quatra's loyalties are to the Republic's higher purpose. But she has no love for Malak."

"Well, that makes two of us," Vann mutters. "So, you and Quatra are just a couple of rogue dark siders who happen to agree with the Republic's current goals of crushing any resistance under cannon fire, huh? Delightful."

"I once walked in the light, training as a Jedi. But my Cathar blood burns too angry for the preferences of the Order. I was turned away after they grew to believe that my emotions would never be controlled." She snorts at this, but there's something else in her eyes. Something sad, and almost wistful. "Quatra found me when I had nothing. She's trained me in her dark ways since then, and through her, I have embraced my own darkness."

Nodding once, Vann sighs heavily. "Great. Quatra sounds like a wonderful individual." He jerks his head towards where he believes the entrance of the cave is. "I hope you still like Jedi because I'm taking you back to the enclave. *They* can figure out what to do with you, cause I sure as hells have no idea."

Jaw clenching, Juhani raises her chin defiantly. "Kill me, then. I would rather die at the hands of one who has bested me than languish away in the clutches of the Jedi. Death from you has honor. Imprisonment has none."

"Oh, don't get kriffing dramatic with me, Juhani." Vann rolls his eyes towards the cave ceiling, for once trying to find the peace and serenity promised by his training. As usual, it eludes him. "I'm
not going to kill you. But what am I supposed to do, let you go crawling back to Quatra?"

Stiffening at the mention of her master's name Juhani closes her eyes for several long moments, shoulders slumping. "If I return to my master, I will still face death. Quatra will kill me once she learns that I have failed, and then she will take a new apprentice who is worthy of her dark teachings." Her voice is weak as she admits, "I have failed in my quest for darkness, just as I failed in my studies of the light. Death is the only honor I have left."

In that moment something sparks in Juhani's Force signature, drawing Vann's attention away from her physical form. Stretching out his mind he probes the Cathar's presence in the Force, this time examining it more closely than its mere surface elements. Initially, it's just as he found it before. A cold stream of steady rage that seems to scream out its presence. But he pushes deeper, trying to sense whatever odd surge captured his awareness in the first place. The anger, as it turns out, is only the veneer. Beneath it are flickers of impatience and arrogance, unfavorable emotions according to the Jedi, but not truly dark. The further he dives the more negative traits seem to float away, revealing a very different core. The center of Juhani's Force signature is warm, not quite peaceful yet recognizably harmonious in its components. It flows calm and determined, a serene pond beneath the rapids.

The realization slowly trickles into Vann's mind, wisps of thought eventually crystalizing into a singular conclusion. "Juhani," he asks, voice growing serious as he speaks. "Did you ever think that your master never intended you to survive this?"

"Quatra selected me because of my potential for darkness," the Cathar insists, though her voice wavers slightly.

"Oh bantha shit," Vann sneers. "Every sentient being in this whole damn galaxy has the potential for darkness. Hells, one of the best people I've ever met has an entire rant about how much he wants to stab Malak in the damned heart. And he's a kriffing smuggler who distributes medpacs to poor miners on desert planets!"

Juhani studies the Human doubtfully. "What is your point?"

"My point is that everyone is capable of doing dark things. Bad things. Evil things. That doesn't mean they're inherently dark, or bad, or evil." Taking a step back, Vann continues to keep both the lightsaber and the vibroblade pointed at the Cathar. "Just because you couldn't please the Jedi doesn't mean that you're some lord of darkness."

"And you," Juhani demands, "What do you know of darkness, Initiate?"

"You ever killed someone?"

Nodding, Juhani admits, "Of course. As both a Jedi and as Quatra's apprentice, I've been in battles. I have fought and defeated many opponents."

"But those were killed-or-be-killed situations, right? You or them." Vann quirks a brow, frowning softly.

"Sometimes they were fights that I initiated." A look of confusion crosses Juhani's features. "What is your point, Initiate? Do you plan to talk me to death?"

"My point," Vann snaps, "Is that every time you've taken a life, it's been for a good reason. You attacked me, why? Probably because you thought it was the only way out of this cave and to the enclave. You had a reason to do so, and you saw that I was armed. Maybe not the noblest course of
"action, but it's not cold-blooded murder."

"I have never killed an unarmed opponent!"

Vann blinks, expression neutral. "I have. Multiple times." He sees the look of surprise that crosses the Cathar's face, but doesn't pause in his explanation. "I'm a mercenary. People pay me a lot of credits to do terrible things. Some of those things have involved killing people, unarmed people, in order to get the job done."

"So," Juhani assesses, "You are an assassin? It would explain your skills."

"No. The people I've killed didn't have a hit out on them. They just had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time." The coldness in Vann's chest seems to spread as he speaks, crawling over his skin and flooding his veins. The anger somehow ebbs into numbness, with the only sensation a faint prickle at the back of his neck. "I was there, I had a job to do, and so they died. Simple as that."

Swallowing hard, Juhani merely nods as much as she is able with two blades pointed at her throat. "So then, you do know darkness." Her eyes close. "I sense it in your now. I should have felt it before, but I was overcome by my own anger." Scoffing at this, she adds, "Perhaps you should kill me and become Quatra's new apprentice."

"That's not happening either." A bemused smirk playing on his lips, Vann carefully watches the woman before him. The prickling sensation along his neck has gotten stronger, but it's an easy enough nuisance to ignore. "So you sense the darkness in me? Well, I sense the light in you. It goes both ways. Just like the darkness, I think the light is part of you. You're never going to get rid of it."

Head bowing slightly, Juhani winces. "Quatra… said as much on a few occasions. But that was early in my training…"

"Maybe she stopped saying it because she knew that you'd never fully leave the light," Vann shrugs, fighting the urge to shudder as the prickling suddenly spreads down his spine. "So maybe you should just come with me back to the damned enclave. Because I'm not going to kill you no matter how many times you ask, and I'm not going to let you go back to Quatra so that she can do the job instead."

"I think…" Junahi looks up, determination visible in her gaze. "I think that…" A moment later the determination leeches out of her, golden eyes going wide as she stares ahead. When she speaks, the words spill out in a panicked rush. "I think that you should give me back my lightsaber!"

Chuckling humorless, Vann raises his brows. By now the odd sensation is practically pins-and-needles along his entire back, annoying yet unimportant amidst his current conversation. "Why, so that you can stab me with it? I don't think so."

Juhani's expression remains one of barely-restrained dread. "So that I can help you destroy the kinrath who are headed down this tunnel!"

"Yeah, okay." Vann rolls his eyes again, tone sarcastic. He focuses on the Cathar, rather than the way that the tingling in his back seems to have turned into a sensation of foreboding that catches in his throat. "Like I'm really just going to turn and look behind me so that you can disarm me and take my weapons? How stupid do you think I a…"

The rest of the words die in the Initiate's throat, replaced by a yelp of pain as two sharp fangs
pierce the back of his right shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

1. Vann and Carth's conversation wasn't supposed to be as long and heartfelt as it became. I wasn't planning on making this a Revan/Carth story, but ships happen?

2. Some of the things mentioned by Juhani regarding Quatra and the Republic will be revisited later.

3. I'd apologize for the minor cliffhanger, but I'm not actually sorry.
Chapter Summary

In which Carth finds out something he's not supposed to, and our hero has a wonderful adventure with some friendly arachnids. More information is revealed as visions seem to speak for the dead.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

7.

(Interlude – Carth)

As the pleasant afternoon sun beams down from the cloudless sky, Carth closes his eyes against the bright light. It's filtered enough through the overhead tree branches that it doesn't hurt, but this much sunshine is still jarring after the time he's spent within the confines of the Ebon Hawk. Despite being on Dantooine for over two weeks, he's only started venturing beyond the ship in the last few days. Possibly because that's when Vann stopped skulking around the workshop, levitating all the tools in the name of 'academic progress.'

And there's a whole can of sand worms that Carth is not going to dwell on right now.

Instead he leans against the rough bark of the tree, basking in the refreshing breeze and warm sunlight that Dantooine offers. His most recent years have been spent throughout the Outer Rim, primarily on some of the most inhospitable planets that the galaxy has to offer. This is the first planet he's been to in recent memory that has pleasant weather, and he's quickly beginning to enjoy it. The lush landscape reminds him a bit of Telos.

And that's another train of thought that he has no desire to follow.

Sighing, Carth opens his eyes and gazes out on the rolling field before him, the verdant plain shadowed by the rocky gray hills scattered across the countryside. He checks for movement, having been told by a half-dozen individuals to watch out for kath hounds while in the groves beyond the Jedi enclaves. Patting the blaster at each hip, he feels reassured that the creatures shouldn't pose a risk. In the past month he's faced down swoop gangs, Republic troopers, and orbital bombardment. He's fairly sure that a few overgrown mutts would be the least threatening thing on that list.

The warm sunshine makes it easy to let his mind wander, and he's lost somewhere around whether he should go back to the ship for food or make do with the ration bar currently jammed in his pocket. He's about to settle on the bar when two voices break the silence that otherwise fills the grove. Straining, he can barely identify the individuals as they gradually grow closer. One he recognizes as Bastila, her notably chipper tone a sharp contrast to the sterner male voice that joins her. It takes a lot longer for Carth to place the second speaker, but he thinks it's one of the Jedi Masters from the enclave. Vrook Lamar maybe? He's not entirely sure.

"...but how would that be possible?" the Padawan is asking as the pair slowly stride across the
"Many Jedi disappeared during the Mandalorian Wars. They were marked as dead in the archives, though bodies were not recovered for every name recorded." The older Jedi sounds thoughtful, though slightly irritated all the same.

"Surely there's a way to check?" Voice rising in pitch, Bastila seems genuinely surprised at the implication of whatever the Master is saying.

Lamar merely sounds annoyed when he replies, "If we were in the temple at Courscant, perhaps I could verify my theory. But at this enclave, we have no access to the Order's main archives." He pauses, chiding, "Need I remind you, Padawan, that we are a refugee enclave and not a major temple?"

Bastila sounds appropriately chagrinned when she responds, "Of course, Master. I apologize for my thoughtlessness."

"Hrmph." The pair of Jedi continues their slow stroll through the grove, momentarily lapsing into silence.

Sprawled beneath the boughs of an impressive tree, his back pressed against the wide trunk, Carth realizes that the Jedi probably can't see him from their angle. He knows that he should probably let them know that he's here, if they can't already sense him through the Force, but something keeps him from talking. Since Malak's systematic domination of the Republic, the pilot has been naturally suspicious of the Jedi Order. Even this refugee enclave, supposedly one of the last true bastions of light and freedom within the galaxy, feels like it's cloaked in half-truths hidden beneath serene smiles. This sounds like yet another example of the Jedi knowing something important, and keeping it to themselves. Typical.

"Master," voice apprehensive, Bastila's steps pause amidst the waving grasses. "I appreciate your confidence and feel honored that you have shared this information with me. But I must ask… why have you told me these suspicions?"

When Master Lamar speaks, his tone is more furtive than before. "The Revanchists, as you well know, were not traditional Jedi."

Carth can practically hear Bastila nodding in agreement. "Yes, of course. Jedi are traditionally diplomats and peacekeepers, but they were soldiers. They held ranks within the Republic military and…"

"Hush, Padawan. No need to repeat everything you've been told throughout your studies." Lamar sighs heavily, his voice suddenly sounding very old and tired. "There is more to the Revanchists than most know. Than the Jedi Order has made public."

And isn't that interesting? Holding as still as physically possible, Carth barely breathes while he continues to eavesdrop on the Jedi's conversation. He's suddenly very glad that he decided to stay hidden and listen since the topic of conversation has taken a turn for the clandestine. This is proof that the Masters know more than they admit publicly, and that definitely has his attention.

"Master…"

"Stop interrupting, Padawan." Muttering under his breath about impatience versus serenity, Master Lamar finally clears his throat. "Revan always had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, something that we initially praised. It's rare to find a young student who enjoys spending time
within the archives, lost in study. And so, when he began researching dark mysticism, we thought little of it."

Bastila gasps audibly, her voice a whisper as she speaks. "But surely you can't mean…"

"Oh, it's not as though he was memorizing Sith spells! We were naïve, not idiots." Resuming his grumbling, the old Master quickly adds, "Revan was studying theory and principle, things that he claimed would be useful in combating the dark forces throughout the galaxy. Combined with the rest of his skillset, it made sense." There's a touch of fondness in his tone now, though it's also laced with bitterness. "A scholar, a tactician, and a voice for the oppressed. In many ways, Revan was the ideal Jedi of his time."

"Forgive my ignorance Master, but if Revan was such a paragon of the Jedi Order, why the concern over the Revanchists? He was their leader, after all." Clearly expecting another rebuke for interrupting, Bastila's tone is hesitant.

However, Lamar is silent for several more moments, the only sound his makes his slow footsteps through the grove.

A cold sense of realization settles in Carth's gut, and he has to bite his cheek to keep from cursing out loud. If the Jedi are discussing Revan, then their conversation must somehow connect to Vann and his so-called visions. From everything that the former mercenary has described, the Jedi have been cryptically vague about the meaning of his dreams. The Masters repeatedly claim that they're still 'deciphering the potential ramifications.' However, they apparently know more than they're letting on.

"Yes," the Jedi Master finally states, "Revan was their leader. And that's where the problem lies. Hungry for knowledge, fascinated by dark mysticism, and impatient with the Order's leadership, he possessed many traits that we consider to be… dangerous in a commander. And he went on to pass many of his negative traits to those who followed him. To corrupt them with his own distorted habits and ideas."

"Malak?" Bastila breathes. "His fall…?"

Heaving another regretful sigh Lamar continues, "Revan freely shared much of what he learned about the dark side, and often encouraged his followers to be skeptical of the Jedi Council's leadership. Thus, it was no surprise when Malak and many of the other Revanchists showed signs of being lured to the dark."

"So, more Jedi than just Malak succumbed to the dark side?" Voice hushed, Bastila is hard to overhear as she speaks. "But surely this all occurred after Revan's death? Malak's attachment to Revan and the arrogance he displayed at taking over Revan's command were the catalysts…"

"Yes, yes, I know the official story!" Brushing off the Padawan's words, Master Lamar snorts. "But the truth is that a few members of the Jedi Council had circumstantial evidence to suggest that Malak's fall, and the fall of many other Revanchists, began long before Revan's death. Unfortunately, they chose to ignore this information until it was too late."

Clucking in disapproval, Bastila sounds understandably confused. "But why would members of the Council refuse to act on such information?"

The Jedi Master's tone is terse as he admits, "The same reason that it's become nearly impossible to discredit Malak today. No matter how much proof one has, the public will believe what it wants. And tarnishing the name of a war hero only angers the millions of individuals who have placed that
hero on a pedestal. The Jedi were already unpopular due to their late entry into the Mandalorian Wars, and they needed public support." He sounds particularly defeated as he adds, "The Order cannot flourish if people do not send Force-sensitive children for training."

"And accusing the Revanchists, the heroes of the people, of falling to the dark side… and with only circumstantial proof… could have doomed the Order," Bastila finishes with a note of newfound understanding. "Of course Master, now I understand. But please, explain this to me… were the Revanchists corrupted by Revan directly? Or did they merely find an outlet for their own dark tendencies thanks to Revan's leadership?"

"Unfortunately, that question has no definitive answer. But I can tell you this much. Revan was undoubtedly a hero, but he was also flawed. His own practices and teachings speak to his personal faults. In fact, there is a bit of evidence to suggest…” Suddenly cutting himself off, Master Lamar huffs quietly. "No, no. This is not the time or the place for that."

Bastila seems to hold her breath, waiting for further explanation. When none comes, her tone is desperate as she begs, "Please Master, share your wisdom with me. If what you told me earlier is true, anything relating to Revan and the Revanchists could be important!"

There's another moment of tense silence before Master Lamar draws a shaky breath and whispers something to the Padawan. It's too hushed for Carth to overhear, even as he strains his ears to catch a few fleeting words. His heart pounds the entire time, a mixture of anger and anxiety roiling in his gut. Unfortunately, whatever passes between the two Jedi remains a secret. The information must be shocking, because it's followed by Bastila's sharp intake of breath and a softly muttered, "But that's not possible!"

"Nobody else was there that day, and thus no one can truly judge what is or is not possible." The Jedi Master's voice is stern. "While Malak is a liar, his words do have an echo of truth."

It's Bastila's turn to lapse into silence, her breathing audible even above the gentle breeze that rustles the tall grass of the grove. "Master," she finally asks, voice plaintive, "What do you expect me to do with this knowledge?"

"Be vigilant, Padawan. Let this be a lesson that the lure of the dark side is pervasive, even for those whom others believe are above reproach." Lamar's tone softens slightly as he adds, "Be mindful of your own actions, and those of your companions."

Manner gravely serious Bastila replies, "Yes, Master. I will remain mindful and vigilant."

"Good." Footfalls gradually retreating towards the enclave, the Master calls out. "I will leave you to meditate on what you have just learned. May the Force be with you, Bastila."

"Thank you, Master…” Sounding almost dazed, the Padawan is left alone in the grove with a pensive look on her face. Her brows are furrowed, and the knuckles gripping the hilt of her lightsaber are white with tension. She seems lost in her own thoughts, her shoulders slumping with the weight of whatever knowledge she's just gained. Only after Master Lamar has disappeared into the fields does she mutter a rather ineloquent, "Well, shit!"

Slowly creeping out from his hiding place behind the tree, Carth hopes that he can take advantage of Bastila's current distraction. If he can make it look like he's just strolling into the grove, and hide the fact that he was eavesdropping on an obviously private conversation, he might be able to get the Jedi to confess whatever information she just learned. The pilot is aware that he's not the best liar, at least not compared to individuals like Vann, but he assumes that he can manage to walk nonchalantly. Provided that he can swallow his own sense of personal outrage at the entire
Carefully angling his body so that he appears to have come from the main path through the grove, Carth slowly ambles up to where Bastila is still standing in silent contemplation. The Jedi doesn't seem to notice his approach, her gaze lost somewhere in the grassy fields beyond. "Hey there," he calls out, wincing slightly when his voice is just a little too chipper.

"Oh, Carth!" Startling out of her private reverie, Bastila blinks as she offers the pilot a terse smile. "I apologize, I didn't notice you walking up."

"No problem. I was just, uh, out for some air. You know, a view beyond the ship's hull." Carth glances in the direction that Jedi Master departed in. "I just passed by Master Lamar… at least I think that's his name? Anyway, were the two of you… talking about anything?" Inwardly, he winces at his complete lack of subtlety and vows to leave the lying to someone else in the future.

Though she gives no outward signs of noticing the loaded question, Bastila's response it less-than-desirable. "Hmm? Oh, no. I didn't even know Master Lamar was out here. Many of the Jedi within the enclave come to this grove to meditate, and he must be one of them." She offers an airy shrug, "I thought that I would try it myself."

"So, you were just out here… alone?" Hackles immediately raising at the blatant lie, Carth feels his voice growing suspicious.

Laughing softly, Bastila gestures to her lightsaber. "I assure you, Carth. I can take care of myself. No need to worry about me wandering about on my own, despite the kath hounds in the area."

Swallowing his rising frustration, Carth hears the coldness in his own voice when he says, "Well, so long as you're safe." Pausing to gather his thoughts, he tries a different angle. "So, have, um, any of the Jedi Masters mentioned anything more to you about Vann's dreams? The ones about Revan?"

"They're not dreams, they're visions," Bastila corrects. "And no, I haven't heard anything else. Why, has Vann told you something new? I would hope that he'd come to me with any further visions of Revan, but I'm also aware that he's been hiding on the Ebon Hawk to get out of his meditation lessons with Master Dorak…"

"Yeah. He hides in the workshop." A thin smirk tugs on Carth's lips at the thought of the Initiate's petulant antics. "And no, he hasn't said anything new. I was just… concerned."

Smiling softly, Bastila offers the pilot a friendly pat on the shoulder. "While your concern is rather sweet, I can personally confirm that Force visions are in no way harmful. The only side effect is a bit of lost sleep, but that's nothing a strong cup of caf can't cure."

"Well, that's… good to know." Carth hopes that his voice sounds relieved, rather than increasingly distrustful. "But, if you do learn anything new, you'll tell me?"

"Of course!" Seeming to have shaken herself from her funk, Bastila's natural poise has returned. "I fully plan to share anything that I can."

And isn't that a telling statement? For a fleeting moment, Carth considers calling the Jedi out on her lies and demanding to know exactly what Lamar told her. But he's also aware that course of action is unlikely to yield any tangible results. If anything, Bastila will just spin a fresh set of excuses and make the pilot feel like he's the one acting out of turn. Torn between the two options, he bites his tongue so hard that he expects to taste blood. Honestly, he's beginning to suspect that
Force-sensitivity just makes people better at obfuscating the truth.

Dantooine's sunshine and fresh air suddenly lose their appeal, the clear sky seeming to mock the foul mood that's brewing in Carth's mind. He curses himself for wanting to trust Bastila, and for thinking that she might actually be different from the other Jedi. That iota of faith is gone, replaced with the same suspicion that he's used as a shield since he deserted the Republic. It's a cold comfort, but at least it's better than placing his trust in someone who will ultimately betray him. Better to survive detached from those around him than to have his life shattered yet again.

"Well, that's that, then. I guess I'll be heading back to the…" Before Carth can finish excusing himself from the Jedi's presence a deafening boom rocks the area, causing the ground to shake and the air to quiver. The pilot instinctively ducks, keeping his head down as both hands reach for the blasters at his hips. Nearby, he hears the humming of dual lightsaber blades powering up.

"What was that?" Bastila has moved into a defensive position, her double bladed 'saber poised and ready to strike. "It sounded like an explosion!"

Gazing upwards in search of a Republic fleet orbiting the planet, Carth braces himself for the sight of yet another world destroyed by Malak's wrath. But the skies above Dantooine are as clear and bright as ever. His eyes shift their focus, scanning the horizon and surrounding grove for signs of an attack. But once again, there's no threat to be seen. "I think it was an explosion," he finally confirms. "Sounded close, too. But I don't see any signs of smoke…" His mind races, replaying the memory of the earth-shaking blast. Slowly, the details become clearer. "With tremors like that, maybe it was underground?"

Realization dawns in Bastila's pale eyes. "Perhaps… in a cave?"

"Yeah," Carth confirms. "Sounds about right."

"Such as the Dantooine crystal caves?" Voice rising an octave in worry, the Jedi frowns. She's already moving out of her defensive position and looks like she's ready to sprint across the grove.

Nodding in confusion Carth replies, "Crystal caves, sure. Any type of underground structure, really…"

"Like the crystal caves where Vann was just sent?" At that Bastila takes off running, her eyes trained on the nearby hills that border this area of the grove.

Without missing a beat Carth sprints after the Jedi while muttering, "You've got to be shitting me! Why is it that whenever there's shooting or an explosion, Vann is always involved?"

Saber humming by her side, Bastila only offers the cryptic response of, "Destiny, I suppose!"

Unwilling to think too hard about the Jedi's response, Carth keeps running. Destiny, he decides, is just a code word for 'troublemaker'.

* * *

A cave full of delicate, Force-attuned crystals is probably the worst place for Vann to use the frag grenade Canderous gave him back on Taris. At least the damn thing is effective.

"Careful, you fool!" Juhani's lightsaber carves a crimson arc around her as she turns to glare at the Initiate. "You'll damage the crystals."

"Well, it worked, didn't it?" Glaring right back, Vann jabs one of his vibroblades in the direction of
the dozen or so kinrath that have been reduced to charred and smoking corpses. Several were blown apart by the explosion, their legs still twitching a few meters away from their bodies.

Growling, Juhani shifts to focus on the still-living arachnids. "That," she snaps over the hum of her lightsaber, "Is not the point!"

"The point is that we're not dead!" Slashing at a slightly-singed and now-enraged kinrath, Vann pauses to glance at the nearby crystal formations. "And the rocks are just fine, so stop worrying."

For at least the fourth time during this battle, Juhani shouts, "They are not rocks!"

Also for at least the fourth time, Vann snaps back, "Do I look like I care right now?" The edge of his blade sinks into the exoskeleton of the kinrath with a sickening crunch, severing its head from its abdomen. The creature continues to flail for several moments, legs twitching and kicking before curling up in death.

Using the wall of the cave for leverage, Vann kicks off the uneven surface and uses the Force to propel himself into a forward flip. The momentum is enough to carry him over another cluster of kinrath who have appeared from within their hive, this group thankfully smaller than the last. Landing solidly behind the creatures he utilizes the momentum to deliver an overhand blow from both vibroblades, managing to decapitate two of the arachnids in a single move. Not pausing to watch the things shudder their death throes, he dives back into the writhing mass of enraged arachnids. Using his off-blade to block a set of venomous mouthparts from digging into his arm, he swings his dominant blade around to knock back three of the creatures. The honed edge cuts into their chitinous exoskeletons, carving fresh wounds into the delicate flesh beneath. Clicking their displeasure, the kinraths' legs skittering as they renew their charge.

"How in the hells did you manage to steal a crystal from inside of an egg?" Vann growls at his companion.

Slicing apart two kinrath with three quick slashes, Juhani flips backward to drive her red blade into the abdomen of a third. "The hive was not awake at the time," she explains.

"Well, they're awake now!" Vertically cleaving the head of the nearest arachnid, Vann kicks the still-writhing body out of the way so that he can slash the legs off another. "And I think you pissed them off!"

"You cannot possibly blame this on me!" Taking a moment to huff in indignation, Juhani glares at the Initiate as she stabs her lightsaber through two kinrath simultaneously.

Reversing his grip on the vibroblade in his dominate hand, Vann drives the point into a creature attempting to attack him from the back. It chitters at him before he lops its head off with his second blade. "I can, and I will!"

Breathing hard, Juhani takes two graceful steps back to put some space between herself and what remains of the hive. "Kinrath," she describes, "Are attracted to warmth. It's possible that our battle…"

"For the fifth time, do I look like I care?" Muscles burning with exertion and mind feeling fatigued, Vann barely summons the energy to use the Force to propel him into a run. Utilizing the additional speed, he's able to strike down four of the arachnids as he rushes past. Stopping before a fifth he slashes at it, managing to carve off a piece of its abdomen. Unfortunately, it's not enough to kill the beast. Aggravated by the injury, the kinrath retaliates by lunging forward and snapping its mouthparts. Vann manages to dodge a full-on bite, but one of the fangs still pierces deep into his
left side. "Kriffing hells!" he swears, the wound stinging fiercely as the venom enters his bloodstream.

Still attempting to keep a healthy distance between herself and the arachnids, Juhani turns to glance at her companion as he curses. "Did one manage to bite you again?"

"I'm fine!" Vann lies, even as he feels his veins begin to burn from the venom. The Jedi Council provided him with two packs of anti-venom before he left the enclave, and he was forced to inject one after the bite that started this entire mess. He's fairly sure that the first envenomation was worse, and he's reluctant to use the second pack unless he absolutely has to. From what he knows, kinrath venom isn't deadly to a creature his size. But that doesn't mean it won't ruin his already shitty day. The wound in his side is already dripping blood from the hemotoxic properties, and he can feel his left hand developing a slight tremor from the neurotoxins.

"Careful, Initiate!" Juhani cautions. "One bite can make you extremely ill."

Attempting to control the shaking of his off-hand Vann growls, "You don't say!"

Grimly facing down the last of the kinrath hive, Juhani moves her 'saber blade into a defensive position. Her chest is heaving from exertion, the acrobatic nature of her fighting style obviously taking its toll. As a pair of arachnids charges at her from both side, she adopts a simpler technique, parrying them aside with hard strikes rather than raining down swifter blows. The sheer power of the hits seems to stun the kinrath for a moment, which is just enough time for the Cathar to dive forward and decapitate both with a single whirling swing. Unfortunately, the grandiose motion destroys her guard, enabling a third kinrath to attack from her blind spot. Legs scrambling, it manages to plunge its fangs directly into Juhani's unprotected thigh.

Vann sees the bite happen just as he's slashing apart two arachnids of his own. He opens his mouth to shout a warning, but it's a fraction of a second too late. The Cathar howls in pain as the venom enters her system, and she whirls around to gut her assailant in one swift motion. But the damage is already done, a full dose of kinrath venom now coursing through her veins.

Running forward on shaky legs, Vann manages to drive the points of both vibroblades into the abdomen of what appears to be the last living kinrath in the cave. Viciously twisting both hilts, he carves a pair of gruesome holes into the creature. It clacks in pain for a moment, legs flailing as it struggles to get away. But the Initiate merely drives the blades deeper, watching as the kinrath's movements become more erratic before finally ceasing altogether. He waits several moments, body tense as he draws his blades from the arachnid corpse. When nothing else in the cave moves, he exales a sigh of relief. After giving both weapons a perfunctory cleaning he quickly sheathes them, his left hand jerking violently with the effort. "You know Juhani, I still blame you for this."

There's no response from the Cathar.

Startled by the sudden silence that fills the cavern Vann's eyes dart around, searching the gloom for his newfound companion-in-arms. It takes a moment to find her where she's collapsed against one of the crystal formations, body spamming as blood pools around her thigh. Despite how unsteady his legs feel, the Initiate hurries to her side. "Juhani!" he shouts. "How many times were you bit?"

Eyes unfocused, the Cathar's words slur as she replies, "Only one."

"You sure about that?" Vann watches her doubtfully, noting the way that her muscles seize uncontrollably. "I wasn't this bad after my first bite."

"Cathar biology… different from Human biology," Juhani offers, visibly struggling to speak. "We
are more… sensitive to venom."

There's a faint tremor to his right hand as Vann reaches into his jacket and retrieves the final anti-venom pack. He looks it over for any labels denoting what species it will work for but finds nothing. With a shrug, he moves to inject the yellowish liquid into the Cathar's good thigh.

"No!" Shaking her head as best she can, Juhani glares at the Human. "You use it. You were… also bit."

"Yeah, but I already have a dose in me from earlier." Vann is almost positive that's not how anti-venom functions, but he doesn't voice this theory. "And I'm not going to die from my bite. You look like you will."

Breath becoming more labored, Juhani closes her eyes. "A… noble death. I accept it."

"What did I tell you about the damned melodrama?" Without another word Vann jabs the anti-venom into the woman, silently hoping that the mixture actually works on her species.

For a moment, there's no response. Then, almost miraculously, the uncontrolled seizing of Juhani's muscles gradually ceases. The blood flow from her bite wound also slows, and her breath appears to come easier. As she draws a deep lungful of air, her golden eyes begin to open. "You fool!" she whispers, realization mixing with anger on her feline countenance. "Why would you do that?"

"I told you before," Vann snorts, attempting to ignore the way his own lungs are beginning to feel tight, "I'm not going to kill you. Same goes for not letting you die when I'm literally holding the antidote."

Casting an accusatory glare at the Initiate, Juhani gradually moves into a more upright position. She retrieves her lightsaber from where it lies beside her on the ground, attaching it to her belt. "I attacked you, tried to kill you, and threatened your Master. And yet you spare me. You, who claims to have so much darkness within you." She scowls. "It makes no sense."

Slowly stumbling over to one of the other crystal formations, Vann shrugs. "Quatra tricked you, Juhani. And you don't deserve to die for that." He pretends to not notice how sloppy and uncoordinated the gesture is, instead focusing on the fact that he can finally complete the task that he was sent into the Force-forsaken cave for in the first place. Silently he vows to not leave this cave without a crystal.

"You said before that you do not think that my master intended me to survive this test." Eyes narrowing, the Cathar tracks her companion's increasingly erratic movements. "What makes you think this?"

Chuckling darkly Vann presses his hand against the crystal formation, attempting to see if it somehow resonates with him. From what he can tell, it's just a glowing blue rock. "Did you really think that you'd be able to sneak into the enclave? There are about twenty Jedi living and training there. Five of them are Masters."

Raising her chin defiantly Juhani sneers, "This test was not merely about brute strength. It was also a test of cunning. The dark side strengthens both the body and the mind!"

"Alright, so you manage to sneak onto the enclave unnoticed. And you get lucky enough to find Master Lestin alone, and not in a conference with the other Masters or some of his students. And you manage to beat him in one-on-one combat." Vann wheezes as he stumbles to the next crystal formation, this one green. "What then? You had to realize that you'd never make
it off the enclave without being caught. Lightsaber battles tend to make a lot of noise."

"Do you doubt my skill?" Juhani snarls, teeth glinting sharp and white in the dim lighting. "Are you calling me incompetent?"

"Not incompletely, just naïve." The second formation also seems oddly mundane for being a Force-attuned rock. Vann isn't entirely sure what he's supposed to be looking for in a lightsaber crystal, but his instincts tell him that this isn't it. "Definitely naïve if you thought this idiotic plan would actually work just because you're 'one with the darkness' or whatever else you claim."

Anger practically vibrating through the Force, Juhani leaps to her feet. The movement is far from graceful and she stumbles into an awkward crouch, one hand braced against the cave floor. "I am not naïve! I have seen much in my life, and have experienced great pain and hardship. Though my trials I have become stronger than those coddled Jedi in your enclave!"

"Alright, so you're strong and knew what you were getting into." Voice strained, Vann half-walks and half-crawls towards a third, smaller crystal formation in the corner of the cave. "All that means is that you should be smart enough to recognize the truth," he insists, "Search your feelings, or whatever."

"Do not presume to know anything about me, Initiate!" Climbing to her feet, Juhani slowly stalks towards where the other Force user is limping across the cavern. "You may be a skilled warrior and strong with the Force, but you know nothing of who I am! Nothing of the pain and shame that I have experienced."

Shoulders twitching as he attempts to shrug, Vann gives up on any extraneous movement and focuses his physical strength into the difficult task of walking. "Admit it," he pants, chest uncomfortably tight. "You knew you weren't going back to Quatra after this. You knew you were coming here to die."

"And so what if I was?!" Voice echoing across the high ceiling of the cave, Juhani's eyes narrow as she stares accusingly at the Initiate. "So what if I knew that Quatra sent me here to die with honor?" Her steps waver, hands balled into fists at her side. "Though she gave up on me, at least she offered me an honorable death. Unlike the Jedi who merely turned me away when I did not meet their standards, leaving me to live with the shame of my failure!"

"So you came here to die?"

"I came here to die with the last shreds of dignity that I have left." Voice proud, Juhani squares her shoulders. However, all sense of hubris seems to deflate in an instant as she softly adds, "Or, that was my goal. Until I met you, Initiate. Until you saved me."

Both of Vann's arms are trembling uncontrollably, and his vision is beginning to blur when he finally reaches the crystal formation. "I guess I'm just that nice." His tone is more strained than he realizes, lacking its usual sarcastic bite. "So, now you have a second chance. Maybe you can learn something from this whole damned experience."

Despite the bitterness lingering in her voice, Juhani's expression soften. "And what is that?"

"Stop trying to be something you're not!" Pressing his shaking hands against what appears to be another blue crystal, Vann notes that it seems to pulse a bit under his touch. Or maybe that's just him shivering. "You couldn't make the Jedi happy, and you obviously pissed Quatra off if she sent you on a suicide mission. So just... stop. Maybe try making yourself happy for once?"
As she makes her way towards the fallen Human, a look of concern crosses Juhani's feline features. "And how should I go about that, Initiate?"

"Hells if I know. I haven't been happy for a long time." The admission seems to come out of nowhere, and distantly Vann wonders if the venom coursing through his system has also loosened his tongue. "But I guess you should just… find your own path to follow? I don't know, I might be starting to hallucinate."

"Find my own path to follow?" Juhani pauses, Force signature pulsing thoughtfully around her. "And what if I believe that my path lies with you, Initiate?"

Hand trembling against the crystal, Vann tries to shake his head. It doesn't work. "That's a terrible idea," he mutters. "Find a different path."

A faint smile creases Juhani's lips. "Is it, though? You have shown me more kindness and displayed more thoughtfulness in a few hours than I have experienced in my entire life. You know darkness, and yet you walk the path of the light." Now standing beside the collapsed Human she adds, "You have more wisdom than you realize. And as you have already stated, there are far worse individuals for me to follow."

As another spasm shudders through his body, Vann's fingers flex against the very edge of the crystal formation. The seizing of his muscles causes his hand to jerk uncontrollably, breaking off the very tip of the crystal. It digs into his palm, oddly warm and seeming to pulse in time with his own rapid heartbeat. If this doesn't count as some sort of Force providence, he doesn't know what does. "You really want to follow me?" he slurs out. "Just so you know, I'm nothing but trouble."

"Then I suppose we will find trouble together." Reaching down Juhani attempts to gather the shuddering Human in her arms, though she struggles to hold him as another series of spasms wracks his body. Her gaze shifts to where blood has soaked through one side of his shirt, and a hint of worry enters her eyes. "I am sure that there will be trouble to spare when I return you to the enclave."

Noticing the Cathar's concern, Vann glances down at himself and sees the growing red stain adhering his shirt to his skin. "I'm bleeding on you," he mumbles with genuine surprise. "See, already trouble." He tries to force out a laugh but is stopped by another involuntary shudder.

Juhani's lithe figure takes a step forward only to stumble from a combination of the Human's weight and her own partially-healed injuries. Silently, Vann thinks that there is no way either of them is getting back to the enclave without more help, and a sense of dread sinks in his gut. The sharp edges of the crystal he's still clutching dig into his palm, its steady pulsing managing to ground him against his own rising panic.

"…are you in here?"

For a moment, the Initiate thinks that he's hallucinating additional footsteps in the cave, along with the ghostly sound of echoing voices. However, Juhani's head also jerks to attention at the sounds. Straining his ears, he struggles to shout out, "Over here! In the… the crystal cavern?"

Two sets of footfalls rush through the cave, joined by a pair of familiar, albeit frantic, voices.

"Vann, I swear that if you got your ass killed by a bunch of kinrath I'm going to murder you…" Despite the humor in Carth's words, there's also a hint of genuine worry. Vann silently notes that the pilot is actually pissed at the thought of him dying, and files that fact away for later.
Bastila rushes into view, slender form illuminated by the yellow glow of her lightsaber. Her gaze sweeps the area, taking in the multitude of kinrath corpses, the charred rock created by the grenade, and the trail of blood that smears the cavern floor. "Vann!" she cries, finally spotting the man where he is slumped against Juhani.

"What the hells happened in here?" Carth is close on the Jedi's heels, his jaw visibly dropping as he also observes the carnage scattered around the room. "Are you even capable of doing anything without violence?"

Swallowing his relief Vann mutters, "…No?"

Swinging her 'saber into a defensive position, Bastila eyes the Cathar cautiously. "And who might you be?"

"I am Juhani. A… student of the Force," she offers, still supporting Vann with both arms.

Lightsaber not wavering a millimeter, Bastila's eyes narrow suspiciously. "A student of the dark side, perhaps." She nods to the Initiate, "I'm going to have to ask you to step away from my friend, and to keep your hands where I can see them." A cold spark of anger shoots through the Force bond.

Tensing, one of Juhani's hands twitches towards her own 'saber, but she manages to suppress the motion and retain her grip on the Human. Her Force signature ripples with apprehension, though her expression remains resolute. "This Initiate saved my life," she replies, her words terse. "I am merely returning the favor."

Mind swimming against the venom coursing through his system, Vann is only distantly aware of the tension thrumming through the Force. His own connection is tenuous even for him, flickering in and out of focus in a haze of distorted awareness. The only thing tethering him to reality is the gently-pulsing crystal in his hand. He tries to lift his arm to study the object, but his limbs refuse to obey as his entire body collapses, legs buckling and head lolling to the side when his torso goes limp. The arms supporting his shoulders fail to maintain their grip, and suddenly he's tumbling towards the ground in an uncoordinated heap. As he lands the rough cavern floor scrapes against his skin, body jolted when he impacts the hard rock. He thinks he should feel pain but all sensations are distant, as though happening to someone else.

He's fairly sure that Bastila abandons all pretense of peace and serenity, and starts yelling. But it's hard to tell exactly what's happening as everything around him is rapidly engulfed in the black void of unconsciousness.

* * *

FLASH

A black stone door slowly swings open, revealing a dark hallway beyond. Revan's masked form strides through the revealed doorway, both lightsabers igniting as he walks further into the unknown. His movements are confident, if wary, his emotions otherwise unreadable thanks to his mask. A few paces back, Malak follows in his friend's wake as he ignites his own blue 'saber. The pair doesn't speak, seeming to both understand their shared goal without words. Eventually, their forms are swallowed up by the darkness.

FLASH

Revan and Malak are standing within a stone room, shoulder-to-shoulder as they stare at what
appears to be some sort of ancient mechanical device. A moment later Revan bends down, his black robes fluttering around him as gloved hands reach for the mysterious object. When the Jedi's hand makes contact, the tall arms of the device shift downward and a glowing orb materializes in its center. It's hard to tell Revan's reaction, but a sense of excitement seems to radiate from his being.

FLASH

Dust and debris fill the air, Revan looking on impassively as a structure collapses in the distance. A detonator is clutched within his gloved hand, and a collection of unarmed mines lays at his feet. Malak is a meter or so behind his friend, also watching the destruction with grim determination. His lips move, though no sound comes out of his mouth, and then he turns away from the rubble that the explosion created. Revan, however, continues to watch, even as the dust settles and the air is still once more.

* * *

Everything aches as Vann gradually regains consciousness, the lingering images of his vision filling his mind. This is the first time that a dream about Revan hasn't ended in him wanting to scream, though that's probably because his body hurts too much for him to do anything but groan.

"Ugh, what happened?"

"Do you mean before or after you blew-up part of a sacred Jedi cave, battled an entire hive of kinrath, and almost died of envenomation because you gave the last of your damned anti-venom to a stranger who tried to kill you?" Carth's face slowly materializes in the early morning sunlight illuminating the makeshift Jedi medical bay. "Though I am impressed… I've never seen someone piss off the Jedi so thoroughly while completely unconscious."

"...Oh." The memories of Vann's adventure in the crystal caves gradually filter back, somewhat jumbled but entirely present. He tries to say more, but his mouth feels dry and gritty.

Sighing, Carth stands from the chair he's apparently been occupying. "I should go tell Bastila that you're awake. Though, fair warning, she's probably going to come in and yell at you."

Probing his connection to the Force, Vann traces the thread that connects his mind to the other Jedi's. There's a gentle thrumming of irritation in response, the bond opening just a bit wider as sensations of annoyance and relief flow through it. "She already knows," he croaks.

On cue Bastila bursts into the med bay, expression pinched with worry even as her eyes shine merrily. "Well, at least we know the anti-venom works quickly!" she announces. "And now that you're awake, you'll actually be able to hear me give you a piece of my mind. What were you thinking?!

"I'm pretty sure the problem is that he wasn't thinking." Carth is glancing bemusedly between the two Force users, arms crossed over his chest.

Struggling into a sitting position, Vann notes that most of his aches seem to radiate from a single point on his left side. "There was thought involved in… at least half of what I did."

"That doesn't make you any less of an idiot." Carth scoffs in disapproval, but there's a fondness to his tone. The hint of levity doesn't last long, immediately vanishing when Bastila turns to look at him.

"Carth, could you please give us a moment?" The Jedi offers a weak smile. "There are a few things
that I would like to discuss with Vann in private."

The request seems to jolt the pilot, and a faint flicker of disdain passes over his features. Any trace of affection leeches out of his voice, replaced by stony detachment. "Sure, no problem," he agrees, words void of almost all emotion. Without looking back, he strides from the room, closing the door behind him with a harsh shove.

Vann blinks at the now-closed door, brow furrowing in confusion. "Who pissed in his caf?"

"I think Carth is feeling a bit left out, and I suppose that's mostly my fault." Bastila sighs, sounding unconvinced as she adds, "But… it's safer for him if there are things he doesn't know. Especially if he plans on departing from our little group."

"I dunno if he's actually going to leave," Vann comments, still staring in the direction the pilot retreated in. "I think we might just be stuck with him at this point."

"Still, there are some things that must remain private among the Jedi here. We have ways of protecting our minds, should we fall into the hands of Malak's people. But should someone without mental shields accidentally divulge this information…" Lips pulling into a frown, Bastila quickly settles herself into the chair that Carth was previously using.

Swallowing thickly, Vann's throat clicks with dryness. "Yeah, yeah. I've heard it all before. Now, what did you want to talk about?"

"Here, I thought you might be thirsty when you awoke. Master Dorak mentioned that it's a side effect of the anti-venom." Bastila thrusts an open canteen of water towards the Initiate, liquid sloshing over the edges. "And, well, I think you can already hazard a guess about what I wish to discuss."

Grabbing the canteen, Vann greedily gulps down half its contents before the Jedi is finished speaking. Wiping his lips across the back of his hand, he grumbles, "Well, I'm assuming that you want to talk about Juhani… who, by the way, I don't have an explanation for. Or is this about my mystical lightsaber rock?" His voice lowers, "…Or Revan's latest visit to my subconscious?"

"Okay, so there are a few things that we should discuss…"

"I don't know what to tell you about Juhani." Reaching down, Vann gently probes the tender spot in his side. There's a bandage covering his flesh, but he can feel the still-healing wound beneath. "I'm guessing that the Masters won't buy the excuse that the kitty followed me home?"

Sighing at the irreverent response, Bastila studies the man lying in the bed. "Unfortunately, the Jedi are as confused as you are. She's deeply enmeshed in the dark side of the Force, yet she's not truly fallen. Still, she is dangerous…"

Hastily interrupting his companion, Vann studies her skeptically as he asks. "They're, uh, not going to hurt her or anything, right?"

"The Jedi don't believe in harming or executing prisoners," the Padawan remarks primly. "For now, she's being confined to the enclave, with the Masters keeping a close watch on her. I hear that she's already requested to speak with Master Lestin, to discuss her future."

A cold chill runs down Vann's spine. "You… didn't leave her alone and armed with Master Lestin, did you?"

Scoffing, Bastila shakes her head. "Of course not! I confiscated her lightsaber almost immediately
after you passed out. And we're not foolish enough to leave her alone with any Jedi in this enclave."

"Ah. Well. That's what I… figured." Vann pretends to nod in agreement. "Good work on getting that 'saber away from her, by the way."

As he speaks, the Initiate partially pulls back the covers so that he can examine the visible skin on his torso. The worst of the lightsaber burns he received during the duel seem to have healed or at least have blended with the numerous other blemishes he bears. Granted, nothing marring his body is as gruesome as the jagged scar that nearly bisects his abdomen. While he doesn’t recall how he received the grisly injured, he knows it has something to do with the crash that took his memory. Which, to be honest, explains almost nothing whatsoever. Though the wound has healed to a pearly pink, it’s still disconcerting to look at and tends to raise a lot of questions that he’s unable to answer. Luckily, the mark is currently hidden beneath the swath of white bandages wrapped around his torso to stanch the hemorrhaging kinrath bite.

"Oh please, it's not as though I dueled her for it." Bastila reaches forward to swat the other Human's hand away from the bandage that he's still probing. "She surrendered it when she realized that both Carth and I were armed and uninjured. Frankly, she was less concerned with her own safety and more worried about your sorry state."

Arching a brow, Vann smirks at the Jedi. "What, are you jealous?"

Barking out a soft, genuine laugh, Bastila rolls her eyes. "Hardly. I have much more important things to worry about than what a dark Force user thinks of you." She chuckles softly at the thought. "Frankly, Vann Chis, you believe yourself far more charming than you actually are."

Vann's eyes go wide in mock hurt. "I think you're just desensitized because of our Force-bond."

"I'm quite sure that's not the case." Shaking her head at this response, Bastila sober a bit. "Though, speaking of lightsabers, this brings me to my next point of discussion."

Moving to place the canteen on the bedside table, Vann sighs. "Which would be…?"

Folding her hands in her lap, Bastila mutters, "The crystal that you found."

The memory of an object, warm and resonating with his own connection to the Force, resurfaces in Vann's mind. "The blue one?"

"It's… not blue." Bastila's voice is apprehensive, her eyes shifting to study a faint stain on the otherwise white sheets.

"I'm pretty sure that, even envenomated, I know my colors," Vann states, watching the Jedi curiously.

Glancing up, Bastila arches a brow. "Oh please. By the time we found you, I'd be surprised if you knew your own name."

"Alright, smarty," A faint note of confusion laces Vann's words, "What color was it?"

"Violet." Expression growing worried, Bastila repeats, "It was a violet crystal."

Vann stares in disbelief, "You're nitpicking over…"

"Violet crystals," Bastila interrupts, "While not inherently dark like red crystals, tend to resonate best with Force users who have some form of connection to or understanding of the dark side."

"Inherent"
"Oh for the love of…” Throwing up his hands in frustration, Vann winces when the action pulls at the wound in his side. "It's a kriffing rock, Bastila! It's a fancy, glowing rock!"

Meeting the Initiate's gaze with a look of fierce determination, the Jedi shakes her head. "It is not just a 'rock,' Vann! A lightsaber crystal resonates with the Force signature of its user. Thus, the best crystals are also a direct reflection of those who use them. And your crystal, aside from being of exceptional quality, also implies that there is innate darkness in you." She frowns, irritation suddenly replaced with concern, the emotion flooding the Force bond. "Can you please try and be serious for a moment and understand why this is so troubling?"

Letting the sensation of worry wash over him for a moment Vann finally mutters, "I know that you want to see the best in me. But have you ever considered that, maybe, I do have some darkness?" He sighs, slowly admitting, "The Masters aren't wrong when they say that I have some… un-Jedi-like qualities. I have attachments, fear… a lot of anger. Maybe my crystal just… reflects that."

A pensive expression crosses Bastila's countenance, and she nods slowly as her companion speaks. Though concern still lines her brow, the worst of her anxiety slowly fades from the mental link the pair shares. "Perhaps," she murmurs thoughtfully. "That… would be a reasonable explanation."

"Of course it's a reasonable explanation," Vann states, tone playfully mocking. "Just like me, my rock is 'glib and arrogant.'"

Pointedly ignoring the use of the term 'rock,' Bastila nods again. "Yes, yes. I suppose that is the most logical, and least troublesome, answer that we have." Pausing, she casts a critical look at the man beside her. "Though, you should still be concerned. You need to work on releasing your negative emotions into the Force. On letting go of your anger and finding peace. Perhaps if you didn't neglect your meditation…"

"I'll meditate on that suggestion."

"I will hold you to that," Bastila warns. "Also, you should know the crystal that you brought back it actually too large for a single lightsaber."

"Hey," Vann states with a suggestive smirk, "It's not the size, it's how you use…"

Bastila glares darkly, putting an end to that train of thought. "You have enough raw material for two crystals, which may be useful later."

"So, if I ever decide to construct a second 'saber, I don't have to go back into that damned cave?" Grinning, Vann reclines against his pillow. "Sounds like nothing but good news to me. And now that this is settled…"

"We should discuss your most recent vision." Bastila frowns softly, her voice gentle. Grimacing, Vann attempts to quash the fresh burst of anxiety that he's sending through their bond. "…I was hoping that you'd forget about that."

"I can't forget about your visions," Wringing her hands in her lap, Bastila's tone is strained. "Especially not when you were experiencing the same three moments from Revan's life for the entire day that you were unconscious from the kinnath bite."

"…I had that dream more than once?" The thought sends a shudder through Vann.

Nodding, Bastila replies, "Yes. I believe it may be due to the fact that you couldn't awaken naturally. So, your mind kept replaying the same vision until you were recovered enough to wake
Vann gulps. "Sorry you had to keep seeing that."

"It's not a problem. Seeing that vision replayed enabled me to describe it to the Masters in great detail yesterday evening." A thoughtful smile flits across Bastila's lips. "And they recently came to a rather important realization."

"You say this like I'm not going to enjoy their realization." Jaw clenching, Vann seals himself for whatever new torment the Jedi Masters have devised while he's been asleep.

"Oh," Bastila confirms. "You're not going to like this one bit."

Chapter End Notes

1. This chapter features the first Interlude, a section of a chapter told from the POV of a character who's not Vann/Revan. There are a few planned, each featuring a different character.

2. I don't have any canonical proof that violet crystals have ties to the dark side. However, in the game almost all the violet lightsabers belong to dark Force users. (I believe one member of the Jedi strike team that captures Revan also has a violet crystal.) Obviously, Mace Windu has a violet lightsaber in the films, but the reason is literally "because that's what Samuel L. Jackson wanted." ( Seriously! Look it up!)

3. I apologize that this chapter took so long to produce. Real Life got incredibly busy, and I had no time to write for about five days. The good news is that Chapter 08 is almost finished (07 and 08 were originally designed to be a single chapter that I eventually separated), so that will be up shortly.
Chapter Summary

In which our hero breaks down some mental walls and rediscovers his true strength. Plans are made, arguments are had, and disguises are worn. Things are starting to get... complicated.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

8.

"So, we're looking for a building that's not here." Staring impassively across the rolling field east of the Jedi enclave, Vann sighs.

At his side, Bastila barely restrains herself from rolling her eyes. "We are looking for the remains of a building."

The verdant plains of Dantooine spread out before the pair, rolling hills and valleys visible against the horizon. Small copses of broad-trunked trees dot the landscape, casting faint shadows in the mid-morning sun. It's pleasantly warm, mildly breezy, and rather picturesque. And there is absolutely no sign of any manmade structures within eyesight.

"…Right." Casting another cursory look over the surrounding land, Vann is ready to call this search futile less than an hour in. "Remind me again why the Masters sent us out here to look for something that doesn't exist?"

Sounding mildly irritated by the Initiate's lack of faith and flippant attitude, Bastila clenches her jaw for a moment before delicately clarifying, "The structure we're searching for, or at least its ruins, was definitely present on Dantooine decades ago when the current enclave was an official Jedi Temple."

Slowly striding through the field, Vann clutches the polished hilt of his newly-rebuilt lightsaber. He's heavily modified it from Lang's original design, and despite being slimmer in profile it feels more substantial in his hand. "And this structure is supposedly the ruins from my vision of Revan, right?"

"Yes, precisely." Bastila is doing her best to move quietly through the tall grass. "When I described our first shared vision to the Council, Master Tokare recalled something from his youth. He did some research, and confirmed that a black stone structure, seemingly identical to the one we saw Revan and Malak entering, was a noted oddity on Dantooine when the Jedi originally lived here."

"Seems kind of weird," Vann remarks, arching a brow, "That so many Jedi used to live here, but Malak and Revan were the first to discover that the ruins had a purpose. Assuming the building Tokare remembers and the one from my vision are the same thing."

Obviously expecting this line of questioning Bastila quickly explains, "For many years the Jedi attempted to study the ruins, but were unable to gain access inside the building. At least, not
without damaging the ancient structure.” She shrugs a bit. "Believing the ruins to be sacred to whatever species lived on Dantooine prior to the Jedi, they did not wish to desecrate such hallowed ground. Thus, they left the ruins untouched for the centuries that they lived here."

"So how did Revan and Malak manage to get inside when centuries of Jedi couldn't even open the damned door?" Vann waves his hand. "According to my vision, Revan just used the Force and walked right on in."

"Unfortunately, that's something only Revan and Malak can answer. From what we do know, during their travels they uncovered additional information previously unknown to the Jedi Order." Pursing her lips in thought, Bastila stares at the ground for a moment. "And they may have achieved an understanding of the Force that prior generations… did not."

Vann feels a chill run down his spine. "You mean they understood the dark side?"

It's several moments of terse silence before Bastila whispers, "Yes, I mean the dark side. If those ruins had a connection to the dark, it would explain why other Jedi were barred entrance over the centuries."

"Whatever side of the Force those ruins were connected to, I think we can agree on one thing.” Vann cast a sidelong glance at his companion. "They're no longer here. Which means that we're literally searching for a building that doesn't exist."

Gritting her teeth, Bastila turns to glare at the Initiate. "Yes, the visible ruins had apparently vanished when the refugees fleeing Malak's reign recolonized the abandoned Dantooine temple about two years ago." Her tone is a bit haughty as she adds, "Though if your most recent vision was any indication, they vanished because Revan and Malak destroyed the structure after it served their purpose."

Swallowing his smirk Vann draws, "So, we're searching for some ruins that literally don't…"

"They exist!" Jabbing her lightsaber hilt towards her companion, Bastila uses her free hand to gesture frantically at the open plain. "The Jedi records indicate that the ruins were in this very field until Revan and Malak came along, and we are going to find them."

"How?" Peering critically at the wide expanse of grass before him, Vann frowns at the Jedi. "Well, that's the complicated part." Sighing gently, Bastila offers her companion a weak smile. "If Revan and Malak truly destroyed the ancient ruins, most visible remains were probably scattered to the winds or otherwise reclaimed by the fields. But if the structure was somehow attuned to the Force, it would be impossible to wipe away all traces of its existence."

A sense of foreboding settles in the pit of Vann's stomach as he grumbles, "This is the part where we have to do something ridiculous, isn't it?"

"It's not that ridiculous.” Bastila's thin smile falters for a moment as she explains, "Vann, you have a connection to Revan. For better or worse, the Force has chosen you to view moments of his life that were previously unknown to anyone but himself and Malak.” Her tone becomes pleading. "If you can focus on these visions, somehow attune yourself to Revan's memories in the Force and his residual presence on this planet, we may be able to…"

"I can't do that, you know it. I have absolutely zero control over anything involving these damned visions! Hells, I barely have control over most of my Force abilities." Cold fury hums just beneath Vann's skin, trickling into the bond that he and the Jedi share. "I don't want to dream about Revan.
I don't want *any* of this!

"And yet, the Force has other plans." Oddly serene in the face of her companion's outburst, Bastila offers an enigmatic shrug. "Whether or not you accept it, you *are* connected to Revan. Inexorably so."

Attempting to swallow the exasperation that flares in his chest, Vann balls his free hand into a tight fist. "I've *accepted* that I'm stuck with these visions, at least for now," he growls, "What do you want me to *do* about it?"

"Stop fighting who and what you are." Through the Force bond Bastila sends a wave of comfort, a glowing contrast to the icy surges of frustration already there. "Since our first meeting, you've been struggling to deny your connection to the Force. Fighting your own power every step of the way." Expression serious, her pale eyes regard the man beside her. "And no matter what you choose to believe, you are quite powerful. Almost... overwhelmingly so at times."

With a derisive snort, Vann meets the Jedi's gaze with a stony glare. "So you and the Masters keep saying. And alright, maybe I'm willing to believe it. But I still don't know what you want me to *do*."

Drawing a slow breath, Bastila replies, "Let go and allow your full connection to the Force flow through you. Whether or not you realize it, you've been holding yourself back."

"You probably don't want me to just... let go." Chuckling, more to himself than at anything his companion has said, Vann shakes his head. "You've said it yourself. I've got a lot of negative emotions. And right now, if I stop holding back, they're all going to come flooding out."

"So then use those emotions."

Blinking back his shock Vann studies the Jedi doubtfully, searching for any sign that this is some Jedi mind trick. But she remains serious, nothing but hope and support flowing through their mental connection. "I'm new to this, but I'm pretty sure that using my anger goes against Jedi philosophy."

A faint note of worry creasing her brow, Bastila nods. "If we had the time you would study under a Jedi Master for many years, learning to control your emotions and find peace through the Force. But time is one thing we lack." Her eyes shift skywards, watching the wispy clouds as they float overhead. "Malak has a fleet that grows by the day. The Republic is conquering any world that opposes their rule, and innocent lives are being lost in the struggle." She turns her gaze back to the Initiate. "So for now, if your anger and frustration are what it takes for you to realize your full potential, *use them.*" Her lips quirk into a lopsided smile. "We can work on control after the galaxy is safe."

"Okay, fine." Drawing a shaky breath, Vann closes his eyes. "But I can't promise that this is going to work. And I still think it's a terrible idea." He cautiously turns his mental focus inward, finding his natural connection to the Force and drawing upon it. Throughout his limited Jedi training, his progress has been notably inconsistent. At times this has been caused by the same raw power that Bastila described, complicating tasks with far too much might and not nearly enough finesse. But the real trouble stems from the disconnect Vann often feels when accessing the Force. And yes, *maybe* it's because he's been fighting against the terrifying current that is his natural sensitivity. Either way, utilizing what should be innate is like defusing a mine while wearing thick gloves. There's a troublesome barrier that makes it noticeably harder, though not impossible, to get anything done.
Stretching out his own mind, Vann feels his consciousness slide into the greater Force energy that surrounds all life. His awareness blooms, tendrils of his own essence stretching across the open Dantooine plain. But the farther he pushes his mind, the more the Force becomes static in his brain. It fizzes, connection tenuous and uncertain. He can sense the swift current of his own abilities racing in circles that swell beyond his grasp before shrinking back, barely wrestled into something resembling control. He wants to draw back, but the pulsing of the Force bond stops him.

Let go... Bastila's words flow through their connection, a gentle whisper amid the torrent of Vann's own thoughts. Push beyond what you believe to be possible.

Swallowing so hard that his throat croaks with the effort, Vann pushes his Force connection harder than he knew was possible. His power surges forward again, continuing to fizzle as he attempts to uncover whatever echo of Revan's presence still exists on Dantooine. There's a cracking sensation, not quite painful but still disquieting, and he feels his control falter. Fear sinks in his gut, chest tight and skin tingling with the invisible claws of his own emotion. He begins to reel back.

Use it! The Force bond flares with encouragement. Right now, your emotions are your strength.

Fear and frustration swirl together, a miasma of frigid sensations so cold that they practically burn through Vann's mind. He clings to them, allowing them to sink into his skin and infuse his very being. The coldness is pervasive but not unpleasant, even as something more ominous seems to lurk just beyond his awareness. He doesn't stop. Rather, he uses his emotions to fortify himself, strengthening his connection to the Force and pushing his conscious mind further beyond his physical being. It sinks into the ground, flowing through the tiny grass roots and whatever crawling things dwell in the soil.

As the hair-thin semblance of control he was maintaining slowly slips from his grasp Vann lets it go, and his last traces of restraint dissipate. Suddenly he's adrift in the raw currents of his own Force connection, being sucked under by a tidal wave of everything he's been told to release. Anger, fear, frustration, disappointment, and even cold shards of bitter hatred swell in his chest, imbuing him with their icy tendrils. The cracking sensation from earlier grows sharper and more persistent until whatever was fracturing finally shatters. A long-forgotten barrier within his mind collapses, and suddenly the disconnection is gone. It's replaced by a rush of energy that brings a new level of awareness.

And Vann is truly aware. He's flowing through the currents of his own power, carried by them rather than fighting against the rapids. The Force is clear to him now, a sensory extension of his own being. He can practically see Bastila's Force signature, vibrant and shimmering amidst their mental connection. But beyond that is something colder and more subtle. It's less of a presence and more of an echo resounding within the depths of his mind, tethered to something that lies beneath the plains.

"This way!" Body driven by instinct Vann is already running as he speaks, heedless of whether Bastila is following him. Distantly, he feels a rush of joy surge through their bond as her footsteps fall in line with his own. Together they're racing across Dantooine's fields, towards an unknown goal that pulses with its connection to the Force.

Distantly, Vann notes that the Jedi were wrong. The ruins are several hundred meters beyond the field, hidden behind a copse of twisted trees and shadowed by the craggy peak of a hill. Somehow he knows this location, even before he sees it, and can practically taste the way the air feels a few degrees cooler even in the sun. As both he and Bastila run past the knotted trunk of the largest tree they both spot the uneven way the ground lays, a carpet of brittle grass helping to disguise the irregularity without fully hiding it.
Moving his free hand through the air, Vann utilizes his newly rediscovered strength in the Force and reaches out with his mind to pull at something that he's subconsciously positive lurks just beneath the soil. The ground shakes for a moment, trees trembling and leaves quivering off the branches. Suddenly a long split appears in the grass, dark soil erupting from the fissure. It's from that wound in the earth that something dark and jagged arises, the object as tall as a man and charred black in places from the fires of a vicious explosion. Despite its mechanical appearance, the thing seems nonfunctional as it's unceremoniously dropped onto what remains of the nearby grass. At least until it whirs to life, parts grinding loudly against each other with a blood chilling series of squeals and clanks. Something that sounds almost like speech chatters out, though it's not recognizable as any of the multiple languages that Vann speaks.

"What is that?" Bastila is standing beside her companion, both hands gripping the hilt of her lightsaber as she looks on in rapt fascination.

Vann blinks, shaking his head as he also stares what whatever he's just unearthed. His connection to the Force hums within him, the newly regained sense of awareness feeling like recovered sight after years spent blind. "I have no kriffing clue."

The thing groans again, something that looks like a spidery leg kicking awkwardly against the air. Part of the limb is charred black, warped and twisted beyond use.

Frowning, Bastila takes a step forward. "Perhaps… it's a droid of some kind? A very primitive one. Could it be attempting to communicate?"

"If it is a droid, it might be beyond communication…" Vann admits.

"I… functional," the ancient droid whirrs in what sounds like a dialect of Selkatha, though it's nearly unrecognizable.

Both Force users start in surprise when the thing speaks, giving each other a look of confusion. Bastila takes a tentative step forward, voice gentle as she politely asks, "Forgive my ignorance, but what are you?"

"I was… by the Builders," the droid explains. "Guarding… information. Waiting for… who prove… worthy."

"The Builders?" Vann arches a brow, eyeing the remains of the droid suspiciously. "Who are they?"

The droid whirrs for a moment, misaligned gears screeching. "…Infinite Empire. Conquerors… many worlds. Creators of the… Forge."

Something in this broken statement seems to catch Bastila's interest, her eyes going wide as a breath catches in her throat. "No…" she whispers. "It couldn't be. Could it?" Hesitantly she says, "What forge do you speak of?"

"…Star Forge," is croaked out, the sound barely discernible over the shriek of burned metal. "Ultimate… of the Infinite Empire."

Vann sees the Jedi gasp in astonishment, one hand moving to cover her mouth as their bond is flooded with a sense of shock and disbelief. "The Star Forge? Is this something I should know about? 'Cause I definitely don't recognize the name."

In its damaged state, the droid must not realize that it's not the target of the question. Single leg creaking as it kicks again, it replies, "…created by the Builders. The… of the Infinite Empire."
Proof of… dominance over… worlds.

Before the droid can finish speaking, Bastila murmurs, "The Star Forge is Malak's secret weapon. It's how he's managed to build such a massive fleet for the Republic."

"If this forge is big enough to build an entire fleet, how is it a secret?" Vann glances between the droid and the Jedi. "Wouldn't it take hundred, if not thousands, of people to man? I feel like someone would notice an operation that large."

Bastila lowers her voice, words little more than a breath. "I don't know the exact specifications. Nobody does. But the Star Forge is somehow connected to the Force. Malak can control it alone, and most often does." She clenches her teeth. "Even as his apprentice, I was not privy to the nature or the location of the Star Forge."

"Ah." Vann nods once. "Well, whatever it is, it sounds… powerful."

Still speaking as much to herself as to her companion, Bastila continues, "When Malak offered the power of the Forge to the Republic, they leaped at the chance. After all, despite winning the Mandalorian Wars, their resources were severely depleted. And there was Malak, the Jedi Knight and war hero, offering them a new larger fleet for almost no cost. All he asked was…"

"Let me guess," Vann hisses, his head spinning with the implications, "He wanted to be Supreme Commander of the fleet he created?"

"Malak and Revan already controlled one-third of the Republic fleet during the wars. And Malak was a skilled commander, perhaps not as skilled as Revan but…" Bastila closes her eyes, wincing at the memory. "The Republic didn't ask questions about where their new ships were coming from. Nor did they take the time to wonder why a Jedi, supposedly above material attachments, would request such a high military command."

Gaze falling to the freshly unearthed pile of dirt, Vann tries to calm the growing anger that sits coldly in his chest. "And now we have Supreme Commander Malak, destroyer of worlds." He draws a sharp breath. "Why didn't the Jedi stop him from using this Forge? If it uses the Force, they could have shut it down."

"The Jedi Order knew nothing of the Star Forge until Malak had already made his deal with the Republic," Bastila admits. "And by then, they were powerless to stop it. As I said, Malak keeps the location of the Forge to himself, and has revealed nothing about what it is or how it works."

The droid lets out another piercing sound before falling silent, something within its dented shell still clicking. It seems to have powered down for now, though it's not completely off. Vann fights the urge to go up and hack the thing to pieces. Instead, he turns accusingly to the Jedi, voice rough with barely-controlled indignation. "How did Malak even find this Star Forge? And how is Revan involved? And what does this… this droid have to do with any of this?"

Meeting the Initiate's gaze with a glare of her own, Bastila scowls. "I don't know, Vann! I don't know any more than you do at this moment." She gestures angrily towards the droid. "I have been trying to find out more information about the Star Forge for close to a year now, and until this moment I had absolutely nothing to show for my efforts!" She jabs a finger at him. "The fact that you have discovered so much merely through visions and instinct is clearly the will of the Force. But it's also supremely frustrating!"

"Like I said, I don't want any of this! You want my visions so badly? Have them!" Irritation flickers through the bond, a dual stream of cold, raw emotion.
"I'd take them from you if I could!" Voice rising in volume, Bastila huffs irritably for another moment before the annoyance ebbs from her body. Shoulders slumping, she draws a shaky breath. "But, unfortunately, I can't relieve you of this burden. The only thing I can do is share the weight, as best I can."

Feeling a strained sense of comfort flooding their connection, Vann lets out a heavy sigh. "Fine. Okay. So, I'm the chosen one here." He shakes his head, attention once again drawn to the droid. "But I still don't understand what Revan or those ruins have to do with any of this. It's pretty obvious that the Star Forge isn't on Dantooine."

Nodding thoughtfully, Bastila hums for a moment. "The Jedi have always suspected that Malak discovered the Forge with Revan, throughout the course of their travels both during and after the Mandalorian Wars."

"In my dream, err… vision," Vann mutters, "Revan was looking for something. I could feel it, almost like I was him."

"Force visions can be quite powerful, transmitting emotions along with sounds or images." Turning to study the broken droid, Bastila takes another step towards it. "And it's quite possible that the ruins here on Dantooine were part of their quest. A piece of the puzzle, if you will."

Revan's sense of determination as he pressed forward in his search, and his satisfaction at uncovering new evidence to fuel his quest, replay themselves in Vann's mind. "Droid, you said that you're guarding information. What information are you referring to?"

The ancient droid whirrs again, gears squealing as it returns to full alertness. It croaks something unintelligible for a moment before managing to explain, "…guarding the… Map."

Two sets of eyes snap to look at each other, Bastila's jaw dropping slightly as Vann barks out a sharp laugh of disbelief. "The map to the Star Forge?" he clarifies. "Was it in these ruins?"

"The Star Map… locked chamber. Open to… worthy." The droid's mechanical voice is becoming harder to decipher.

A desperate note laces Bastila's words. "Is there any way for you to know if this Star Map survived the explosion?"

"Both myself and… Star Map… built using the… technology as… Forge," the droid whirrs by way of explanation. "Through the wisdom of… Builders… hard to destroy."

"If this droid survived the explosion, then…" The realization dawns in Bastila's eyes. "Vann," she orders, "Can you sense anything else down there?"

Closing his eyes, Vann lets his conscious mind drift on the Force currents surrounding them. This time he focuses specifically on the strange echo that resonates beneath the ground, almost like the shadow of a long-forgotten memory. He clings to that sensation, diving deeper into the earth until something seems to tremble when his mind brushes against it. Gathering the power of the Force, he physically drives it into the ground and wraps it around whatever object is responding so strongly to his own presence. Slowly moving his hand through the air, he begins the process of unearthing whatever he's discovered.

A fresh spray of dirt flies up from the ground, partially reburying the droid in the process. Vann can't bring himself to care, even as the thing groans and croaks in protest. Whatever he's found is larger than the droid, and buried much deeper beneath Dantooine's surface. The fissure splits
further open, and the ground shakes violently as the object is dragged into the bright light of day. 
With one final heave, another piece of ancient machinery lands heavily in the uneven pile of dirt
and ruined grass.

The object is more charred than the droid, most of its parts destroyed beyond recognition.
However, what remains appears to be a large disk as big around as a Human's torso. The burnt 
remains of two limb-like extensions curl around the object's base, though additional stubs indicate 
that there used to be more. Overall the thing appears to be nonfunctional, but that's the same belief 
Vann had about the droid.

With slow, tentative steps Vann approaches what he's unearthed, stepping carefully over the 
uneven mounds of dirt that now litter the area. Recalling the events of his vision he extends a hand 
towards the disk, carefully pressing his palm against its charred surface. He remembers that the 
arms swung down for Revan, and tries to bite back his disappointment when he receives no such 
response. Muttering a curse, he starts to draw his hand away when there's a horrible grinding 
sound. At the same time the object shudders, the two remaining arms dropping away from the base 
with jerky motions. They collapse against the dirt with a thud, tossing more soil through the air. 
The moment the arms are down, the center of the disk begins to glow.

An orb forms within the glow, pale blue and ethereal even beneath the bright sun. Slowly the orb 
expands in size, the light flickering and fading as the glowing image grows. Lines begin to appear, 
shimmering through the air as they connect a variety of dots into a single, unified pattern. As 
rudimentary and fragmented as the image is, it's clearly a map with certain points labeled in a 
multitude of languages. From a meter or so away, Bastila gasps in astonishment.

"This must be the Star Map," she breathes, quickly retrieving a datapad from her robe and 
transcribing the information presented. "I know these planets!" Rushing towards the map, she 
gestures to each one in turn. "Right there is where we are now, Dantooine. And there are Tatooine 
and Kashyyyk. This one is Manaan, and I believe that one is Korriban."

Vann nods in agreement, recognizing the locations from past mercenary work. "So, we have part of 
a map." He gestures to an area where the map is flickering and fading, "I've probably been to all 
these planets. And none of them have a forge."

"But perhaps there's more information on those planets," Bastila muses. She rushes over to the 
half-buried droid, brushing some of the dirt from its mangled body. "Do you know where we might 
find the rest of the Star Map?"

The droid creaks and squeals, parts sounding more damaged than ever. "The enslaved planets of… 
Infinite Empire. Map… incomplete… must be… combined."

"Well, there's your answer," Vann sighs. "Though trying to find more of these maps is going to be 
pretty close to impossible if we have to search four kriffing planets top-to-bottom."

Bastila sends a burst of hope through their bond. "But you could sense this map! Perhaps you can 
also sense the others once we're closer?"

Shaking his head Vann explains, "I could only sense this one because we were practically on top of 
it. It wouldn't have been possible if we didn't know the rough location of the ruins." He frowns. 
"No matter how good you think I am, I can't search an entire planet at once."

"But you also experienced a vision that helped guide our way." Voice warm with a renewed sense 
of confidence, Bastila watches her companion. "Perhaps Revan's residual presence in the Force will 
reveal more once you're on these planets."
"Or maybe searching for these maps is a huge waste of time!" A fresh sense of aggravation surges beneath Vann's skin. "There are probably a dozen other things either of us could be doing..."

"What could possibly be more important than stopping Malak and his army?" Bastila's eyes shine with fierce determination. "After all, it's been the goal of the Masters on Dantooine for a few years now."

"Well," Vann snaps, "So far that seems to be going great."

"The Masters tried to reign Malak in after he took control of the Republic fleet," Bastila clarifies, "But it was already too late."

Vann frowns. "Malak's a Jedi. Why couldn't they just order him to stop?"

"Because Malak had fallen too far from the light. Plus, he had, and still has, an army. As strong as the Jedi Order is, they cannot hope to stand against the might of what the Star Forge built."

Something dark passes over Bastila's features as she adds, "I believe Malak's exact words were, 'The Masters have made their decision. Now let them enforce their will.'"

Chuckling incredulously, Vann arches a brow at the Jedi. "And what, you think that we can succeed where a bunch of Jedi Masters failed?"

Bastila nods once, jaw set with resolution. "I think that we have to try. We're the only individuals in the galaxy who possess this information. It's our duty to use it to prevent further tragedy."

Watching in silence as the Star Map flickers out of existence and the arms of the device gradually creak back into place, Vann attempts to tamp down the fear and dread that are steadily rising within him. "I'd just like to have it on record that I think this is a horrible idea, and that I don't want anything to do with it."

"Duly noted." Bastila glances down at her datapad, tapping a few things into it. "Though, I don't think you'll have much choice in the matter once the Masters learn of our discovery."

"Oh no," Vann mutters. "Do you really have to tell them?"

Holding up the pad, Bastila smirks. "I already did."

* * *

"I'm sorry, the Jedi want you to do what?" Carth is standing beside the Ebon Hawk where it's docked within the Jedi enclave, watching as Zaalbar loads a large plastisteel bin of supplies into the cargo hold.

"Search a bunch of Outer Rim planets for some maps that may or may not exist," Vann clarifies with a heavy sigh.

Nodding in obvious disbelief, Carth's brow furrows. "Yes, I got that part. But why are these maps, which may not exist, so important?"

"Because they may or may not be the key to stopping Malak." It takes a lot of effort for Vann not to curse in frustration, his irritation with the Masters' orders seething just below the surface.

"Uh-huh." Eyes following Mission as she carries a much smaller container into the ship's hold, Carth reaches up to scrub his palm over his face. "Okay. You're aware that makes no sense, right?"
"Acutely." Tone dry, Vann glares at the pilot.

With a shrug, Carth lets out a sarcastic, "Good. Just making sure." He barely manages to jump out of the way as T3-M4 comes barreling through, beeping what seems to be an apology as he rolls up the ship's gangplank. "Alright, just one more question."

Vann rubs his temple. "And that would be?"

"Why is everyone else coming with you?!"

"Ah." Peering into the Ebon Hawk, Vann can hear Mission and Zaalbar bickering back and forth about the placement of supplies. Their tone is lighthearted, and the young Twi'lek sounds like she's regained some of her optimism. "Well, Zaalbar swore a life debt to me. Which you should remember because you were there laughing the entire time."

Nodding, Carth smiles at the memory. "Oh yeah, I remember. But what about the rest of them?"

Gesturing towards the ship Vann adds, "Well, it's not like Mission has a lot of places to go. And she wants to stay with Zaalbar, so..." He shrugs at this. The Jedi offered the Twi'lek a place to stay, but she quickly turned them down. Something about not wanting to stay with 'a bunch of stuffy ol' Jedi when there's a whole galaxy to explore.' Honestly, the former mercenary can't help but agree. "And Tee-Three goes wherever the ship does, or at least I think that's what he said..."

"That sounds about right." Carth glances towards where the little droid is currently whistling and beeping at the ship's other occupants. "So, what about the Cathar? Do you... trust her?"

Gazing across the Jedi compound, Vann spots Juhani enjoying a philosophical debate with Masters Dorak and Lestin. Something metallic gleams from her belt, the shape suggesting that it's her recently-returned lightsaber. "Yeah," he admits, "I do."

Casting the other man a doubtful glare, Carth finally blurts out, "But she tried to kill you!"

Without batting an eye Vann quips back, "You crashed a ship with me in it."

"That's... that's not the same thing!" Exasperated, Carth gapes at his companion. "I did my damnedest to land that ship. And I already apologized for it!"

"And Juhani apologized for trying to kill me." Holding up two fingers, Vann grins. "Twice, in fact." Noting the dejected expression on the pilot's face he sighs, placing a hand on the other man's shoulder and giving it a gentle squeeze. "Kriffing hells, Carth. I said it before, and I'll say it again. I don't actually blame you for crashing or Taris. And hey, if we didn't crash we wouldn't be having this little adventure."

"Yeah. Fantastic." Expression dour, Carth stares blankly across the enclave.

Rolling his eyes, Vann gives the pilot a final pat on the back. "Hey, at least pretend you're having fun." He nods towards the Cathar, who's still in deep discussion with the Jedi Masters. "I know you find the concept of trusting anyone hard to believe, but I trust Juhani. And it's not like we have much of a choice in taking her with us. The Jedi have no idea what to do with her, and she has nowhere else to go."

Carth looks contemplative for a moment, a smirk slowly tugging at the corner of his lips. "I can't believe it," he mutters.

"What?"
Chuckling softly, Carth's tone is teasing as he points out, "You literally picked-up a stray cat."

"Oh shut-up." Driving his shoulder into the pilot's bicep, Vann gives the other man a playful shove. "I'd rather have a Force-wielding kitty than a grouchy former soldier any day."

The moment of levity is all too brief, Carth's laughter quickly replaced by a thin frown. His expression is distant, eyes glancing around without seeing anything at all. "You keep talking like I'm coming with you," he states. "But I don't remember signing up to ferry you and a bunch of misfits across half the Outer Rim."

Vann's stomach drops, panic flooding his system at the thought of his companion's departure. Logically he thinks it's because he can't afford to lose a good pilot. This ludicrous assignment is already risky, and without someone competent flying the Hawk the danger increases tenfold. But a deeper, nagging voice in the back of his mind keeps screaming that he can't afford to lose Carth. "I already told you," Vann says hurriedly, voice lacking its usual bluster, "I can pay whatever you want. And the offer to go after Malak still stands."

"And I already told you, I don't want you to go after Malak." Carth turns to look at the other man, detachment fading as his brow furrows with concern. "I was stupid to even consider making that deal in the first place…" He shakes his head, rubbing his palm against his forehead. "Look, Vann, it's… it's not you who's the problem. It's this whole damned mission. You know it sounds impossible, right? That these Jedi are just grasping at straws…"

"You think I don't know that?" Anger blooms in Vann, and he can feel the shudder it sends through the Force. "You think I don't realize that these maps, that this entire 'assignment' is just a bunch of old Jedi trying to fix a mistake that they should have prevented years ago?" Several nearby stones vibrate with the power of his rage.

"Alright, so I guess you realize…"

"That I'm just a tool for them? Yeah, Carth. I figured that one out." The stones begin to float a few centimeters off the ground. "If you come with us, at least you get to stay on the kriffing ship. I'm the one who's being sent into the middle of Force-knows-what, to search for something that might not even exist!"

"I know!" Carth glances at one of the stones out of the corner of his eye but quickly shifts his attention back to the source of their levitation. "And… and I'm sorry."

There's a sharp bang as the stones clatter back to the ground, a few of them still quivering with residual Force energy. Vann draws an unsteady breath, raking his fingers through his hair. It's gotten longer in the past few weeks, and he wonders if he should start tying it back. "Stop apologizing, dammit! It's not like this is your fault either."

"It's not my fault." Placing his hands on the other man's shoulders, Carth attempts to meet his companion's gaze. "But I'm still sorry this is happening to you. Nobody deserves to be used like this."

"Yeah, well, here I am." Snorting, Vann locks eyes with the pilot, expecting to find the same cold detachment that's been present for the past few days. However, he's surprised to find the sense of disinterest replaced by genuine sympathy. "I'm their tool, and there's not much I can do about it."

Glancing around the enclave, Carth lowers his voice to a whisper. "You could say no," he suggests. "Get away from Dantooine and disappear back into the Outer Rim."
"You could do that," Vann mutters, gritting his teeth. "Me? Not so much. Jedi can sense each other's Force signatures. And with my bond to Bastila..." Trailing off he lets his shoulders drop, defeated. "They'd find me. And then they'd guilt me into helping them all over again."

With a mirthless laugh, Carth drops his hands. "I guess I keep forgetting that you're a Jedi now."

Scowling, Vann growls, "I'm not a Jedi. I mean, I'm technically a Padawan now, same as Bastila. But... I'm not one of them. At least I don't feel like I am." He sighs, glancing back at the ship. "Look. If you don't want to be caught up in this mess, I understand. Just... go. Go disappear and be free from the Jedi, and the Republic, and whatever the hells else you have every right to avoid for the rest of your life." The words are hard to say and stick in his throat.

Drawing a deep breath, Carth squares his shoulders. "Look, I'm not leaving, okay? I'm not abandoning you and Mission and Zaalbar to whatever sarlacc pit the Jedi are throwing you into." He frowns, eyes darting towards the remains of the Jedi temple. "I've got a bad feeling about some of the people involved in this mess and, well... someone's gotta watch your back."

"I can watch my own damn back!" Vann grumbles, even as a faint ripple of pleasure diffuses through his mind. "And is this still about Juhani? Because I told you..."

"This isn't about Juhani," Carth hisses, attention still trained on the temple entrance. "It's about them." There's venom to his tone, a spiteful note usually reserved for Malak and the Republic.

Shifting his gaze to search for whoever's riled the pilot, Vann looks up just in time to see Canderous and Bastila striding down the worn flagstone path between the temple and the docking area. The Mandalorian has a heavy bag slung over one shoulder, and a second sack draped over his forearm. He's wearing a satisfied smirk, eyes rolling at something the Jedi is saying. As he strides up to the ship, he nods towards the cargo he's carrying.

"Where do you want this stuff?" Canderous asks, holding up the sack.

Vann shrugs, gesturing towards the Jedi who's cheerfully bounding up the path. "No idea. Ask Bastila, she's in charge here."

Pointedly not asking the Jedi for orders, Canderous simply strides onto the ship with his cargo in tow.

Leaning in closer so that his lips almost brush the former mercenary's ear, Carth whispers, "Remember earlier when I said I only had one more question? I lied. I apparently do have more."

Under his breath, Vann murmurs, "And they would be...?"

"For one thing, what the hells is Bastila wearing?" One of Carth's brows is arched, an expression of confusion etched across his features.

"Vann!" Tugging at the hem of her waist-length, brown canvas jacket, Bastila strikes an awkward pose. "How does it look? Believable enough?"

The jacket is only part of the Jedi's new ensemble. Her usual robes, which mark her as a member of the Order, have been replaced with a cream-colored tunic, the aforementioned jacket, and a matching brown leather vest. Her pants are dark grey and slightly looser fitting than her normal style, though the fit helps to camouflage the baster that's holstered against her thigh. She's even restyled her hair into a simpler ponytail, a few stray chunks still hanging in her face. As she poses, she fluffs her greyish scarf so that it comes almost to her chin.
"At the very least you don't look like Jedi anymore," Vann acknowledges, nodding in approval. For Carth's benefit, he explains, "We can't let anyone recognize Bastila as being part of the Jedi Order. Especially since Malak is probably still looking for her. So… now she has a disguise."

Carth blinks. "Well, mission accomplished I guess. Though, what're you disguised as?"

"We're posing as mercenaries," Bastila explains, reaching down to awkwardly adjust the blaster pistol she's wearing. "Vann's using some of his contacts to try and see if there are any jobs available on the worlds that we need to examine, and he's introducing me as part of his crew. Which, ironically enough, is fairly close to the truth."

"Uh-huh." Still sounding unconvinced, Carth nods to the holster strapped to the Jedi's thigh. "Do you even know how to use that thing?"

"Of course I know how to use a blaster!" Deftly unsnapping the strap holding the pistol in place, Bastila quickly draws the weapon. Flicking the safety off with her thumb, she aims at a nearby rock and fires two bolts in rapid succession. The first shot misses by a few centimeters, though the second manages to blow a chunk off the side.

Eyebrows raised in obvious surprise Carth admits, "Not too bad."

"Well, this is a bit clunky when compared to a lightsaber. No offense meant." Flipping the safety back on, Bastila returns the weapon to her holster.

"Sorry we can't all be Jedi," Carth remarks sardonically.

"She might not pass for a career mercenary, at least not with that accent, but she's plenty believable as a kid raised on a Core World who's hanging out with us roughnecks for kicks." Still grinning, Canderous exits the Ebon Hawk. "And she's a surprisingly good shot for someone who's used to fighting with an oversized laser."

Eyeing both Force users suspiciously, Carth cautiously asks, "So… you're not bringing any lightsabers along?"

Their bond between them rippling with amusement, both Vann and Bastila open their jackets. Strapped to the lining of the Jedi's are a pair of twin shotos, their shorter hilts easier to conceal with the help of her vest. Vann's standard lightsaber fits against his larger frame, the outline of the hilt hidden by the bulk of his heavy leather coat.

"I should have guessed," Carth seems to chide himself. He frowns for a moment before adding, "And I also assume you can...?"

Without letting the pilot finish, the Force users summon the 'sabers into their hands. The blades ignite in a glow of yellow and violet, casting the area in a whirl of color as both wielders instinctively move into an attack position. Giving his relatively new weapon an easy twirl, Vann arches an expectant brow at the other man. "Any more questions?"

Powering her shotos down Bastila hurriedly remarks, "These, of course, are for emergency use only." She tucks the hilts back into her jacket, and then refastens the garment. "Unless we have no other choice, Vann and I will both be utilizing blasters as our primary weapons."

"Apparently, I have a 'distinctive' fighting style, even with a vibroblade," Vann gripes sourly.

"Juyo is an incredibly distinctive style," Bastila explains, "Especially when utilizing Jar'Kai. In fact, off the top of my head, I can only think of one Jedi who managed to master the technique..."
Waving a dismissive hand, she smiles demurely. "But I digress. My point is merely that, in order to preserve our cover and divert as much suspicion as possible, Vann and I will not be relying on melee combat."

"That would be my job." Drawing a heavy sword of Mandalorian design from the sheath on his back, Canderous shifts the weapon so that the vicious blade glints dangerously in the Dantooine sunshine. "And I gotta say, I'm looking forward to using this again."

Clearing her throat, Bastila shoots a dark glare at the Mandalorian. "Though, we should all remember that violence and bloodshed should be avoided as much as possible during this assignment. Our goal is to draw as little attention to ourselves as possible."

"Yeah, yeah," Canderous snorts. "I heard it all from the windbags in the Council chamber."

"So, apparently I'm the only one here who the Jedi Council hasn't briefed on this adventure?" There's a distinct note of hurt in Carth's voice. "I mean, I assumed the Jedi would know what's going on, but I'm a little confused about why Canderous knows more than I do."

Still gripping his sword in both hands, the Mandalorian strides towards the pilot. "I was settling some other matters with Bastila and her friends. Not that it's any of your business Carth."

"Canderous, is this really necessary?" Crossing her arms over her chest, Bastila frowns at her friend.

Still staring at the pilot the Mandalorian growls. "If he has something to say, he should say it. Isn't that what you Jedi preach? Releasing your feelings and all that?"

"For whatever reason, they really discourage releasing your feelings by yelling at each other," Vann quips mirthlessly, his humor doing little to break the tension.

Carth meets the Mandalorian's gaze, unshaken by the other man's intimidating presence. "Alright Canderous, how's this? I want to know how someone like you got wrapped up in the affairs of a Jedi. You say that you have business with the Council? I want to know what. Because from where I'm standing right now, I don't get it. And I don't trust what I'm seeing."

"You don't trust me because I'm a Mandalorian?"

"I don't trust you because you haven't given me a reason to." Jaw clenching, the challenge in Carth's eyes never wavers.

Scoffing, Canderous swings his sword back into its sheath without ever taking his eyes off the pilot. "Yeah, well maybe I don't trust you either. I don't like people who aren't honest with themselves about what they are."

"Canderous!" Bastila's irritation ripples through her Force bond with Vann, an icy wave of emotion that contrasts her placid demeanor.

Ignoring the Jedi, Canderous jabs a finger towards the pilot. "You're a smuggler, Carth. And from what I hear, you're also a deserter. None of that makes you a bad person, not in my eyes, but it also doesn't give you the right to go around acting like you're entitled to information like you're still a hotshot pilot with the Republic Navy." His eyes narrow as he adds, "The Republic is on the wrong side of history. Best keep that in mind when you start acting high-and-mighty over being their little soldier once upon a time."

"Last I checked, the Mandalorians were also on the wrong side of history." Carth's chin juts up
defiantly. "Best keep that in mind, Canderous."

"Oh would you both shut up!" Vann can feel the Force ripple through his words. It's not enough to blindly influence people, at least not individuals with wills as strong as his companions', but it still gets their attention. Both men pause in their argument, turning to look at him. "Hey, guess what, you're both wrong! The Mandalorian Wars are over, but everyone's still fighting. People are still dying. Nothing changed!"

"Nothing changed because of Malak," Bastila whispers, "And nothing will change if we don't stop him. And the key to stopping him is finding these maps."

Slowly nodding in acquiescence, Canderous turns to study Carth for another moment. "You want to know why I agreed to this ridiculous little mission? It's because of that. Because I hate Malak as much as you do, and I want to see him stopped. I want to see him hurt."

"Well, there's something we can finally agree on…" the pilot mutters.

"I think we can also agree on loyalty. You didn't volunteer to be our pilot because it's part of your sparkling personality," Canderous chuckles at his own humor. "You're doing it because you're loyal to Vann. And I respect that."

"I'm doing this because…"

"I know why you're doing this, so just let me finish!" Shaking his head in frustration, Canderous mutters a few curses in Mando'a. "The lady here did me a favor about a year back. She went out of her way to help me when she didn't have to. We made a deal shortly after, and I'm damn sure going to hold up my end of the bargain."

"Oh come on!" Eyes shifting between Canderous and Bastila, Carth throws up his hands in defeat. "There's got to be more to the story than that. Mandalorians and Jedi don't just make deals."

Laughing, Bastila shrugs innocently. "Well, he is oversimplifying things a bit. Though I suppose he's told you the essence of the story."

"Of course there's more to it!" Canderous snaps. "And maybe someday I'll tell you the rest. But it won't be today."

Something inside of Vann's jacket buzzes, breaking the tension that's settled among the group. He hastily retrieves his datapad from an inner pocket, eyes scanning the new message that's appeared on the screen. "Well, you'll have plenty of time to chat while we're in hyperspace." Vann plasters a smirk on a grin, though he's well-aware that it's more of a grimace. "Because I just heard from one of my contacts."

"Oh? So soon?" Nodding in approval, Bastila hurries over to where the former mercenary is studying his pad.

With a heavy sigh, Vann checks the information that's being comm'd to him. Most of it is still coded, but what he can decipher makes him yearn for the simplicity of fighting kinrath in a pitch-black cave. "Apparently this job is considered 'high priority.' Meaning that it's happening soon, and nobody else wants to take it. Though it does pay well…"

"What's so terrible about what this employer is asking?" Bastila continues to peer at the datapad over her companion's shoulder.

Scrolling through the message, Vann's frown deepens. "Well, for one thing, it's on Tatooine."
"Oh no…" Carth mutters. "Anywhere but there…"

"And, to make this even better, they're looking to hire guards for a big game hunt." One line of text catches Vann's eye, but he's convinced that he's misreading it.

Bastila wrinkles her nose in distaste. "Game hunting has never really seemed sporting to me. But I suppose this is as good a cover as any."

Apparently, Vann did read the message correctly. It's just too ridiculous to be believed at first glance. "Oh," he chirps sarcastically. "By the way, they're hunting a kriffing krayt dragon."

Chapter End Notes

1. I'm not sure if datapads canonically function like tablet computers or e-readers, capable of sending and receiving text-based communication on a wireless network. I assume that if they are capable, each datapad connects to a local comm unit which traffics information between pads in the area. For off-world messages, the data is probably sent to a local comm unit and then broadcast to its destination via communication satellites. For the sake of simplicity, let's say this is how it works. Because a galaxy without texting and email isn't worth saving.

2. Bastila's disguise is heavily based on Jyn Erso's outfit in Rogue One.
Chapter Summary

In which our hero is reminded how difficult mercenary work can be, and everyone realizes just how much they dislike deserts. And sand... everyone hates sand.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

9.

"You know, every time I think I've made my peace with this planet, I find a new reason to hate it." Readjusting the linen cloth that he's draped over his head, Carth grimaces beneath the heat of Tatooine's twin suns.

Panting, Vann wipes the sweat from his brow. Unfortunately, this only manages to rub more coarse sand into his skin. "Don't give in to the hatred, Carth," he mumbles. "Helena will start yelling again."

"I did not yell," Bastila clarifies, her posture looking distinctly wilted. "I merely… expressed some concern over Carth's earlier frustrations." She readjusts the scarf covering her hair and the lower half of her face. "And anyway, I barely have the energy to talk right now."

"You? Unable to talk?" Canderous manages to chuckle at the thought. "It's a desert miracle."

Scowling, the Jedi mutters, "Oh do be quiet. There's enough hot air around as it is."

Despite looking supremely amused with the situation, the Mandalorian does cease teasing Bastila, who's been going by the pseudonym of Helena. The choice seems to have a backstory, but nobody's gotten an opportunity to ask about it without the rest of the hunting party overhearing something they shouldn't. Sensing that their banter is becoming dangerously personal, the makeshift group of 'mercenaries' lapses into silence as they trek through the seemingly-endless expanse of the Dune Sea. Their attention is split between searching the vast ocean of sand for potential threats, and keeping a careful watch on the group of game hunters that they've been hired to protect.

It's been two brutally hot days in the desert, with no sign of the Star Map or anything else related to Revan's past. Actually, since docking in Anchorhead there hasn't been much to see aside from sand and a few particularly smelly banthas. And a handful of Czerka Corporation goons who proved a little too interested in Carth's identity. Apparently Czerka is still mad at him for his past exploits, and they're keen to arrest him in the name of petty revenge. It was too risky for him remain with the Ebon Hawk in Anchorhead's port, resulting in him being dragged on this mission far beyond the settlement's wall. Which has led to the current situation, along with an unending stream of complaints.

"I still can't believe I let you talk me into this," the pilot gripes, using his hand to shield his eyes from the suns. "I should have just stayed with the ship. I could have hidden in one of the smaller holds with the door locked…"
"And they still would have found you," Vann counters bemusedly. "And then we'd be breaking you out of Czerka custody, rather than enjoying a lovely stroll through Tatooine's lush and beautiful landscape."

Carth frowns, glancing over at Bastila and Canderous who have moved to flank the hunters to provide better protection. "I don't even know why Czerka's so mad at me. All I did was bring in a few extra medpacs for the miners in addition to the shipment I was carrying."

"You gave them away for free, when Czerka could have made a small fortune by selling those medpacs to their employees for an inflated price." Staring out at the sand dunes, Vann scans the horizon. "And for a company like Czerka, cutting their bottom line is worse than murder."

"But those bastards let their miners be attacked by the Sand People." Though hushed, Carth's tone is full of righteous indignation. "Czerka was the reason their employees were injured in the first place!"

Turning to face the pilot, Vann gestures to his mouth. "Read my lips, Carth. They. Don't. Care." Teeth clenched he hisses, "And before you start complaining again, just think of this job as your punishment for being stupidly selfless. Because that's just about the dumbest thing you can do in the Outer Rim."

"Well, I'm sorry I'm not some asshole mercenary who only looks out for himself!"

The comment cuts deeper than expected, though Vann buries his fleeting sense of shame beneath an air of detachment. "Yeah, well I guess the galaxy needs some good people." He turns away, expression cold. "I'm just not one of them."

Seeming to just realize what he's said, Carth shakes his head. A spray of sand comes loose in the process. "I… I didn't mean it like that. I don't think that you're… well, you're not…" He swallows, closing his eyes as he gathers his thoughts. "I guess it's just weird to see you at work. I always knew what you did for a living, but I never really thought about it."

"Then don't think about it," Vann snaps, focusing on an indistinct point in the distance "Just keep quiet and let me do my job."

Retort at the ready, Carth opens his mouth. Unfortunately, this causes a fine sprinkling of sand to get in, and he sputters for several moments as he attempts to spit out the grains. Seeming to accept this as a sign that the conversation should end, he gradually makes his way over to the other members of their covert group. After exchanging a few hushed words Bastila agrees to switch positions, and jogs across the dunes until she falls into place at Vann's side.

"Is everything alright?" the Jedi asks softly.

Glancing over at Bastila, Vann shrugs. "I'm trekking through a desert, sweating my ass off and getting sand in places where sand should never be." He laughs sardonically. "I'm just great."

Smiling weakly beneath her scarf Bastila murmurs, "That's not quite what I meant."

"I know what you meant." Their mental connection flares for a moment, a thin flutter of reassurance flowing between them before it shrinks back down to a barely perceivable thread. Though nobody in the group of strangers seems to be Force-sensitive, they've been keeping their Force use to a minimum and dampening their bond as much as possible. "I'm fine," Vann states, tone flat.

"Hmm." Bastila sounds doubtful, but she doesn't push the issue. Rather, she casts a curious glance
at the assorted group of sentient beings who have hired the 'mercenaries' for this sweltering journey through Tatooine's desert. "Are all of your jobs like this?"

It's a pretty broad question, and Vann would normally ask for clarification before answering to prevent giving away any unnecessary information. But it's just too hot to overthink these things. "Some are better, some are worse. Our employers aren't too bad, but the conditions are absolute shit."

"Well, I suppose things could be far more unpleasant than some sun and heat." Despite her words, the Jedi takes a moment to ineffectively fan herself.

"I'd like to thank you for jinxing us yet again with your optimism," Vann smirks, rolling his eyes. 

"By now you should realize that the Force doesn't work li…"

Before Bastila can finish, she's interrupted by a nimble figure bounding over to the pair of makeshift mercenaries. "Greetings, security staff!" the Rodian says, sounding disarmingly chipper despite the heat. He's told them his name is Hulas, and that he's arranged this entire hunting trip for himself and his three business partners. Unsurprisingly, he's been suspiciously quiet about the type of business they conduct. "I'd like to remind you to remain alert in this area of the Dune Sea. It's Sand People territory, and they're known for attacking outsiders."

Expression growing serious, Vann easily slips back into the persona of a seasoned mercenary. His eyes scan the distance, assessing it for threats before glancing at his employer with a mixture of respect and apathy. "Well, that's what you hired us on for." He pats the blaster at his hip. "We plan to earn our keep."

"You're being paid too much," Vorn Daasraad snorts. The Gamorrean flexes his bulky form, showing off the battle axe strapped to his back. "Hulas thinks we're weak like him, but the rest of us can handle ourselves."

"The Sand People may seem primitive, but they travel in numbers. Underestimating them, especially in this desert, could be fatal." Hulas nods solemnly, but there's a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Besides, the desert holds many other dangers. I sleep better at night with some extra protection."

A gurgling sound that might be a laugh bubbles out of Ithorak Guldar. When he speaks, the Selkath's voice is raspy from the dry desert air. "I told you last time we made camp, best sleep with one eye open Hulas. They're mercenaries. They'll slit your throat for your credits as readily as they'll protect you."

"Assessment: They are only Human, Master. Easy enough to defeat if they get out of hand." The scuffed crimson form of HK-47 trudges through the sand beside Ithorak, a blaster rifle clutched in his hands. The droid is some sort of custom model, and acts as the Selkath businessman's personal security. While an effective combat unit, its interpersonal skills are questionable at best.

The Selkath laughs again. "And this is why I prefer to use droids for my security. Far more reliable and loyal."

"Statement: Thank you, Master. Your faith in my abilities is appreciated, though unnecessary. I am superior in every way when compared to these meatbags that Hulas has hired." The droid's red eyes stare at the 'mercenaries,' clearly finding them wanting.

"If we're moving through Sand People territory, we should do what we can to be off their lands by
nightfall." Rulan Prolik, the only Human member of the hunting party, narrows his eyes at the others. "We're here for a krayt dragon. The sooner we find it, the sooner we can get out of this kriffing desert."

Hulas nods in agreement, scurrying away from the mercenaries and approaching the orange-skinned Twi'lek leading the party. "Komad! Friend! You will be able to lead us through the Sand People's territory before nightfall, won't you?" The question is posed innocently enough, but there's an air of menace to the Rodian's words.

The only Tatooine native in the group, Komad Fortuna is also the only one who seems relatively comfortable in the desert. His lightweight clothing is almost the same color as the sand dunes, and he moves easily through the ever-shifting terrain. A faint grimace passes over his features at Hulas's request, and he frowns. "The area the sand people claim as theirs is vast, and has no definitive beginning or end. I cannot make any promises…"

"Some guide you hired," Vorn mocks his colleague.

"What's the point of hiring a native if you can't even get us past the Sand People?" Hulas presses closer to the Twi'lek, his round eyes narrowing.

Komad sighs, something he's been doing a lot over the past two days. "I can help you avoid the Sand People," he explains, "But I cannot promise that you won't face a few raiding parties along the way."

"We can handle a few raiding parties." Vann glances between himself and his companions, silently praying that they have the sense to shut-up and agree with him for once. From across the way, he sees Carth begin to speak, only to be silenced as Canderous gives him a firm slap on the shoulder. The mercenary has the feeling that he's going to owe the Mandalorian quite a few drinks by the time they get back to Anchorhead. "We're here to take care of any… complications that arise."

Apprehension fading, Hulas is once again manically-cheerful as he replies, "Well, why didn't you say so?" He gives the rest of the party a bright grin. "See, it's all fine! Now, Komad, what do you recommend we do from here?"

 Barely managing to not roll his eyes, the Twi'lek nods in a vaguely eastward direction. "We still have a few hours before the suns are at their highest point, and the heat is the worst. The Sand People will seek shelter during that time, and we should too."

"At any point in this trip will we actually get to hunt a krayt dragon?" Sneering at the group, Rulan casts a particularly baleful glare at the Rodian.

"Yes, yes! Of course we will!" Hulas gestures to the Twi'lek. "I've already explained this. His father was the last hunter to take one of the beasts down, and he has already assured me that he knows where one has made its lair."

Nodding slowly Komad adds, "The dragon's current den is close. If we start moving again once the suns begin to set and keep traveling through the night, we should reach it by mid-morning tomorrow."

"Traveling through this desert in the dark? Won't that increase the risk of attacks by the Sand People?" Canderous frowns, voice doubtful.

"It's a trade-off." Seeming frustrated with the entire situation, Komad's tone is terse. "The Sand People will be at an advantage in the dark. But traveling through the night is the only way to
ensure that we don't have to spend an extra day in their territory."

Hulas glares at the Mandalorian, gesturing to him and Vann in turn. "I thought that you said you
could handle any raiding parties!"

"Oh, we can," Canderous replies. "I just wanted to know exactly what we should expect."

This response appeases Hulas, and his doubt vanishes. "See? They've got this!" Smirking at his
business partners, he nods in satisfaction. "No need for droids and axes. They're all the protection
we require!"

"Observation: Master, no matter what this meatbag says, you are fortunate to have me along on this
trip."

Plodding along beside his droid Ithorak sneers. "I am fortunate not to be a fool like Hulas." He pats
HK-47's arm. "We will see whose guard is more effective. If we all make it back to Anchorhead
alive, then perhaps these mercenaries will be worth their price."

"Yes, yes!" The knowing glint has returned to the Rodian's eyes. "You'll see how smart I am once
we're back in Anchorhead."

* * *

Raising her voice above the barely-controlled chaos that's overtaken the hunting party, Bastila's
tone is surprisingly placid as she comments, 'Just so that you're aware, I don't think that Carth
meant to insult you with whatever he said earlier."

Ducking behind the pile of refuse that's proving cover from the onslaught of Sand People, Vann
turns to glare at the Jedi beside him. "Bastila, this really isn't the time!"

"I'm sorry, I don't know who this Bastila is. My name's Helena." Tone dry, the Jedi peers over the
warped collection of metal as she aims her blaster pistol at the nearest attacker. Firing two rapid
shots, she doesn't take the time to see if they've hit before ducking back down. Arching a brow, she
adds, "Also, you should really speak with Carth. He seems rather put-out by this entire situation."

"I'll take that under advisement." Still crouching behind the assortment of junk, Vann adjusts his
position so that he can catch one of the Sand People in the scope of his own pistol. Taking aim, he
fires a single shot at their chest. The bolt hits its mark and the target collapses into the sand. "Right
after we finish saving everyone from this ambush."

Sliding forward, Bastila swings around the side of the refuse pile and fires another two shots at one
of their attackers. It's hard to hear if she's done any damage, as the area is currently consumed in
the deafening shriek of blaster fire and the harsh barks of the attacking Sand People. The pervasive
darkness of the desert further obfuscates the situation, with the only illumination provided by the
handful of lights that the hunting party is carrying, and the irregular flash of blaster bolts whizzing
through the air. Vann is fairly sure that he and the Jedi are faring better than everyone else because
they can sense their assailants' presence through the Force, though even this is a limited advantage.

"Some of them are using some sort of energy shield!" a voice calls from nearby. It sounds like
Canderous.

"Of course they are," Vann mutters, raising up to take a shot at the Sand Person who is currently in
melee combat with Vorn. He can't see well enough to know how the duel is going, but a squeal of
pain implies that the Gamorrean is on the losing end of a gaffi stick. Taking aim as best he can in
the dark, the mercenary fires at his employer's assailant, all while silently hoping that this job hasn't
completely gone to shit.

Still firing from around the side of their current cover, Bastila glances over her shoulder. "So, how does this **currently** rank among your past work?"

"Pretty kriffing low," Vann admits as he watches the bolts he just fired deflect off the Sand Person's shield. Gritting his teeth, he flips his baster's safety on and holsters it. "Cover me!" he tells the Jedi as he hurdles over the refuse pile. "I'm going in!"

"Vann, no!" Bastila shouts, but it's too late. "Damned idiot!" she grumbles irritably, turning to provide cover fire as her companion rushes into the fray.

It's immediately obvious that this was not one of the mercenary's smarter ideas. Now in the center of the battle, he can see that there are a lot more Sand People than he originally assumed. Their pale robes blend into the desert, even in the dark, making them seem like nothing more than mirages. Even more distracting is the friendly blaster fire that's coming from all directions. By crouching low to the ground he's able to avoid the worst of it, but he knows that in the dark it's nearly impossible for his allies to see him.

Rushing over to where Vorn is still scuffling with his attacker, Vann kicks the opposing Sand Person square in the side. This seems to surprise the other being, who immediately lets out a bray of frustration. Leveraging this to his advantage the mercenary throws a punch at the creature's face, aiming for their jaw. Unfortunately, he doesn't account for the filter worn over their mouth, and his knuckles hit nothing but metal. Cursing as pain shoots through his hand and down his arm, he takes a step back and falls into a defensive stance. Vann knows that he's not the largest man around, his lithe frame standing on the shorter end of average, so fighting barehanded isn't exactly a strongpoint. The Sand Person turns to face him full-on, bringing the gaffi stick down in a fearsome chop aimed directly at the Human's head.

Managing to catch the weapon in both hands, Vann wrestles with the Sand Person for control of the stick. His adversary is taller, close to Canderous's height, and strengthened by a harsh life in the desert. It's a struggle just to keep hanging on, and a solid shake from the Sand Person almost knocks him to the ground. Luckily he manages to twist around and regain his footing, still clinging to the gaffi stick for all he's worth. For a moment, he considers using the Force to drive his opponent back, but he catches Vorn watching them out of the corner of his eye. He doesn't know how good Gamorrean vision is in the dark, but he's willing to bet that his employer will notice if the Sand Person goes flying backward from an unseen push.

Stuck doing things the hard way Vann dives forward onto the ground, still clutching the gaffi stick with all his might. His momentum drags the Sand Person with him, throwing the other being off balance and loosening their hold on the weapon. Twisting to his feet the Human give one final tug, using the Force to add just a little reinforcement to his own natural strength, and manages to wrench the stick from the Sand Person's grasp. Without pausing to celebrate his victory he whirles on his opponent, wielding the gaffi stick and delivering two solid blows to the head and torso. A stab with one of the spear-like ends drives the Sand Person to the ground, blood flowing out across the dunes.

Vann can feel the Force-driven haze of battle beginning to cloud his mind and he tries to shake it off, unwilling to risk blowing his cover. But even with his connection to the Force tamped down he can still feel his font of cold, raw power beginning to flow into his limbs. Rushing the nearest Sand Person he swings the gaffi stick in a low arc, sweeping their feet out from under them before bashing the heavier end into their head. Kicking to his left he knocks another Sand Person back, before slicing a fourth open with one of the stick's sharpened ends. His next series of blows is
parried by whoever he's fighting against, their gaffi stick managing to slice into his forearm. Blood drips onto the sand as the pain floods his system, a cold wash of rage overtaking his mind. With a growl, he lunges forward and…

FLASH

The blackness of the desert night is replaced with the searing brightness of mid-afternoon. The suns beat down, blisteringly hot against the black robes that cover Vann's frame. As he looks down at his hands, his own fair skin is replaced by a pair of dark gloves, the gaffi stick morphing into the twin hilts of a pair of lightsabers. The already sweltering air sizzles as the blue blades carve through a Sand Person, the style, and color of their robes notably different from the group that ambushed the hunting party.

Silently, Vann fights his way through the group of Sand People, his 'saber blades humming as they slice apart gaffi sticks and stab into ribcages with ease. Frustration floods his mind throughout the battle. He tried to reason with this tribe of nomads, but they refused to cooperate. So now he must destroy them to get the information he needs…

FLASH

Darkness seeps back into Vann's vision, the bright noonday light fading back into the dead of night. The lightsabers also vanish, returning to the crude form of a gaffi stick. Blood stains both ends, the same crimson splatter marring the pale flesh of his ungloved hands. It takes a moment for his senses to adjust to the weight of his jacket on his shoulders, the leather moving differently than the swirl of black robes in his… hallucination? Vision? He can feel sweat running down his neck, despite the cool night air, and he shivers as a breeze dries the moisture on his skin.

Panting, he peers through the dark in search of his next opponent. However, the only thing in his immediate vicinity are the prone bodies of multiple Sand People, slowly bleeding out as they bark their last breaths. A few blaster bolts still illuminate the night, and he rushes towards the nearest source. He still feels disoriented from the images that overtook his mind, and the scene around him continues to flicker between dream and reality as he runs. A bolt whizzes just past his left ear, snapping him fully into the present. Reaching out his connection to the Force, he senses the identity of the shooter and pulls up less than a meter away from the man. From this distance, he can just make out the pair of blaster pistols currently aimed at his head. He manages to throw his hands up and shout, "It's me!" before Carth can take another shot.

"Bantha shit!" Breathing heavily, the pilot pulls both of his blasters back just in the nick of time. "Dammit Vann, I can hardly see a thing! And… why are you holding a gaffi stick?"

"…I took it from a Sand Person?" The mercenary clutches the weapon, hands still expecting to feel the smooth hilts of twin lightsabers.

Hurrying towards his companion, Carth's brow furrows in concern. "Are you okay? You look… off."

Vann considers lying, but his mind is still reeling. "No," he confesses, "Not really."

Seeming to sense his distress, the bond with Bastila flares to life and a rush of concern floods his mind. It's a soothing sensation, and he lets it wash over him for a moment before sending back his own sense of worry. *Revan was here*, he adds, still not entirely sure what the implication is.

"Are you doing the whole…?" Carth makes a general gesture to his head, still watching the other man with an unsettled expression.
The mental connection remains open, and Bastila's voice fills his mind. *Can you sense the Star Map?*

Slowly nodding to Carth, Vann glances around for signs of their employers. However, the rest of the hunting party still seems to be collecting themselves while trying to assess their damage and losses. "Yeah, I'm… that." Lowering his voice to a barely audible whisper he asks, "Can you watch my back for a minute? Let me know if anyone's coming?"

"Are you about to do something stupid?"

Not bothering to dignify the question with a response, Vann closes his eyes. Drawing a deep breath, he sends out his Force connection as much as he dares, unsure of what he'll find. He lets his mind sink deep below the sand, flowing with the shifting dunes as he probes the area for the same thrumming sense of familiarity that he found on Dantooine. Something in the distance seems to resonate back, its faint reverberations filling his mind, but it's hard to pinpoint a location. And even harder to definitively tell if it's the Star Map. Drawing back his awareness he opens his eyes and focuses on the bond.

*I sense something. Not sure if it's the map.*

A flicker of curiosity travels between the Force users. *Perhaps you can check again later,* Bastila proposes. *When we're in a different location.* With that, the bond once again shrinks down to a thread, thoughts, and emotions ceasing to pass between the pair.

Still adjusting to the sensation of being alone in his own head, Vann is startled out of his personal reverie as something hard drives into his side. He immediately tightens his grip on the gaffi stick, ready to attack, but a strong hand grabs his shoulder and physically turns him partway around so that he's facing a different direction. He manages to catch a glimpse of Carth's face, a warning expression flashing over the other man's features as he once again digs his elbow into his companion's ribs. "Look alive," he murmurs.

"Ah, friends!" Hulas is wearing a terse smile as he bounds up. "Thank you for assisting in that confrontation with those Sand People! Nasty beings, they are. I'll have to speak with Komad about this incident. There were many more raider than he described…"

"Like I said," Vann grunts, clearing his throat. "We can handle a raiding party."

"Yes, yes you did!" The Rodian chuckles. "Despite what Vorn says, you are worth your price. And don't think that I didn't notice you saving his life back there!" He reaches out and pats the mercenary's shoulder. "Good work. Good work indeed!"

Struggling not to shrug off his employer's hand, Vann merely replies, "Just doing our job."

"And doing it well! Far better than that miserable droid that Ithorak brought with him." Hulas turns to look at the rest of the party, most of them still hidden by the cover of night. "Where is that droid anyway? Useless thing…" With that, he begins to wander back towards his business partners.

Leaning in closer, Carth whispers into his companion's ear, "Am I the only one who's got a bad feeling about that guy?"

Arching a brow, Vann inclines his head a bit so that his forehead is pressed directly against the pilot's cheek. Stubble rubs against his skin, though it's not altogether unpleasant. "He hired a bunch of mercenaries as security for a big game hunt that he's undertaking for fun. And those are his more endearing qualities."

"So this is someone who I should be suspicious of?" There's a hint of levity to Carth's words, but
his expression remains serious.

Still pressed close to the other man, Vann nods. The proximity is surprisingly enjoyable, and even with his connection turned inward he can still sense the other man's presence in the Force. It resonates differently than a Force-sensitive individual, but still has a comforting hum. "Just keep your eyes open" he warns. "And don't be surprised if he tries to get out of paying us what he owes."

"If that's the worst he does, I'll be impressed."

Before Vann can respond, he's interrupted by Hulas's shout of indignation. "Shut down? What do you mean the useless thing shut down?"

"Well," Rulan snaps angrily, "It could have something to do with the fact that Ithorak is dead!"

Turning to exchange worried glances, Vann and Carth immediately break into a sprint towards where the rest of the hunting party is gathered. Their cluster of lights manages to illuminate the otherwise pitch black landscape. As they approach, Vann notes that Hulas is standing beside a non-functioning HK-47, the droid's normally glowing eyes dull and lifeless as he hunches forward at the waist. Less than a meter away, a body lays crumpled in the sand. Rulan is crouched beside it, expression pensive as he examines the remains.

"Dead? DEAD? How is that possible?" Hulas is throwing his hands in the air, head swiveling between Ithorak's corpse and HK-47's equally-still body. "Shouldn't this droid have protected him?"

Vorn approaches the scene, with Bastila and Canderous close on his heels. He snorts twice as he glances over the remains of his former colleague. "Heh," he chuckles, "Guess you did overpay these no-good mercenaries after all."

The Rodian immediately turns to glare at his hirelings, his eyes narrowing in accusation. "You said that you could handle a raiding party!" he yelps. "But look at this. Poor Ithorak is dead, no thanks to you. You're not doing your job very well!"

"Hey, just a minute!" Canderous steps forward, shoulders squared and chain raised in haughty indignation. "We did exactly what you asked, and took care of that raiding party. It's not our fault we couldn't see a damned thing! You and your partners were the only ones with lights."

Bastila nods slowly, voice acquiring an air of authority that Vann thinks of as 'Jedi negotiator.' "If anything, Ithorak was the best protected out of everyone here. HK-47 was surely programmed to defend his master at all costs."

Seeming to ignore the argument brewing around him, Carth strides over to the fallen Selkath, dropping to one knee beside Rulan. His hands move over the corpse with surprising gentleness, a frown tugging at his lips. "Hey Vann, can I see that gaffi stick?"

"Sure…" Covering the short distance between himself and the pilot, Vann cautiously extends the weapon. It's taken from him a moment later.

Carefully grasping the gaffi stick Carth closely examines both pointed ends, eyes flicking between the bloodstained metal and Ithorak's body. His frown deepens as he looks up again, suddenly staring at Hulas. "Ithorak wasn't killed by one of these."

"Carth, what are you saying?" Bastila immediately moves to crouch beside the pilot, also examining the stick in his hands.

"See these pointed ends? They're uneven. The Sand People obviously make their weapons by
hand." The pilot gestures to one sharpened tip. "And that means that the holes they leave are jagged. Messy."

Vann nods in agreement, vaguely recalling the spray of blood that swirled around him as he stabbed and bashed his way through the Sand People. Pressing close to Carth's back, he also peers at the corpse. "These holes are almost perfectly round," he observes. "And practically no blood. Unlike a gaffi stick which, well…" He gestures to the gory remains that litter the sand, expression remorseless in the face of his carnage.

"These are blaster holes," Bastila breathes, understanding spreading across her face.

"So? Maybe one of you shot him by accident." Hula's expression doesn't change, even when presented with this new information. "And that would be even worse!"

Canderous shakes his head with a dark chuckle. "Not likely. None of us were in the right position to make a shot all the way over here." He points to the weather remains of a speeder several yards away. "Carth and I started out over there."

"Vann and I were quite a distance away as well." Bastila points towards the refuse pile that served as their makeshift cover.

"Granted, things got a little more interesting," Canderous pats the sword that's sheathed on his back. "But I still think that one of you accidentally shot your buddy here."

Vorn glances between the 'mercenaries,' large head nodding in agreement. "I saw where you slime were taking cover like cowards. You couldn't have hit Ithorak from way over here."

A thoughtful expression also crosses Rulan's face as he stands back up. "Hulas," he murmurs, tone rich with faux innocence, "Weren't you the closest to Ithorak? Shouldn't you have seen what happened to him?"

The Rodian holds up his hands, voice losing its anger and becoming far more placating. "Hey now, let's not say anything we don't mean!" He forces a weak smile onto his lips as he looks around at the assembled group. "It was dark, and I couldn't see anything. Nobody could! In the end, does it really matter whose shot accidentally killed poor Ithorak? We'll probably never know what truly happened…"

"Shooting one of your own hunting party by accident is a bad omen." Komad, who was observing silently until this point, crosses his arms over his chest. "We should head back to Anchorhead. This… this is not good."

"No! If anything, this is your fault!" Hulas jabs an accusing finger at the Twi'lek. "You were supposed to guide us through this desert. You were the one who told use to travel by night!"

Swallowing hard, Komad hurriedly reassures his employer, "In my experience, this was the best course of action. But I made no promises…"

"Well, we're not turning back! After all, I paid for the right to hunt a krayt dragon." Hulas gestures to his other business partners. "We all did. Ithorak knew the risks of this venture, and he accepted them. There's no need to turn back because he was foolish enough to get killed."

"Hey, a second ago you were…" Before Carth can say anything else, Vann reaches out and squeezes the other man's shoulder with a little more force than necessary. The pilot hisses in surprise, turning around just enough to see the mercenary give a subtle shake of his head. He immediately falls quiet.
Vorn and Rulan have grown equally silent throughout this discussion, seemingly lost in their thoughts. Both of their expressions are somber, gazes shifting between Hulas and Ithorak's body. Finally, Rulan speaks. "What happened to Ithorak is a tragedy, but Hulas is right. He knew the risks coming in. We were warned about the Sand People several times."

"He was weak," Vorn snorts. "And now he's dead."

Komal's jaw drops at the hunters' callous attitudes, arms falling to his sides. "But…"

"You said that we should reach this dragon's den by tomorrow, right" Rulan raises a brow at the Twi'lek.

"Yes," Nodding, Komad's voice is tentative as he explains, "If we continue walking through the night we should."

"Alright then." A thoughtful smirk playing on his lips, Rulan proposes, "If we can reach the dragon and hunt it while there's still light tomorrow, we will. If we can't find the beast by nightfall, we turn back."

"Yes, I agree." Vorn's bulging neck ripples as he nods.

Without waiting for the guide's consent, Hulas claps his hands. "Excellent, excellent!" He pauses for a moment to cast one final look of pity to his fallen business partner. "I will send a message to Anchorhead, to see if someone can collect poor Ithorak while we hunt."

Turning to look at HK-47 Vann asks, "What about the droid?"

"What about it? Useless thing!" Hulas shakes his head disapprovingly.

"Should we reactivate it? It might be useful during the hunt." Rapping his knuckles against the droid's chest plate, Vann checks to see if there's any visible damage.

Waving his hand dismissively Hulas sneers, "It couldn't protect Ithorak. What good would it do us? No, just leave it here to rust. Perhaps they'll pick it up when they come for poor Ithorak's body."

This seems like a waste of a perfectly serviceable, if not ill-tempered, droid. Though honestly, Vann found his 'meatbag' comments amusing. Still, he's not in a place to argue. "Alright, whatever," he says in a disinterested tone.

"Good. Yes!" Rubbing his hands together, Hulas moves to gather his bag of supplies. "Now that we have all this nasty business settled, we should keep moving. After all, we have a dragon to hunt!"

* * *

"Have I mentioned that I hate sand?" Vann scowls as he makes a futile attempt to shake some of the grains out of his clothing.

Chuckling, Carth replies, "Once or twice in the past hour."

"Yeah, well, I still hate it." Abandoning his efforts to clean himself off, Vann settles for readjusting his jacket. He's also beginning to regret his preference for dark colors. "It just… gets everywhere. And it's irritating."

"And you wouldn't know anything about being irritating." Completely deadpan, Carth manages to bite back his shadow of a smile.
"Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up." Shading his eyes against the early morning sun, Vann glares at his companion. "I bet you also have sand chafing inappropriate places."

Expression still serious Carth merely responds, "I do. But from what I was told, it's probably punishment for being 'stupidly selfless' a year or so back…"

"Seriously?" Exhaling heavily through his nostrils, Vann actually feels several grains of sand fly out. "How long have you been holding that one in?"

Shrugging one shoulder Carth mutters, "Since right before the Sand People attacked?"

Blinking slowly, Vann stares at the other man. "That long, huh?" He shakes his head, a few strands of stray hair sticking to the sweat covering his face. "You have some problems expressing your emotions, you know that?"

"You're one to talk." Tone clipped, Carth shifts his gaze to watch the horizon. "So, you ever going to tell me what happened back there during the raid?"

"Nothing much to tell." It's a blatant lie, and Vann knows it. The pilot saw him immediately after his vision and didn't need to be Force-sensitive to recognize how shaken the experience left him. What's he's not sure about is whether he's lying to protect their cover, or to protect himself.

"Huh," Arching a doubtful brow, Carth's voice is distinctly sarcastic as he asks, "So, you just went murderous, pale, and shaky… in that order, I might add… for no reason?"

Clenching his teeth Vann hisses under his breath, "No reason worth mentioning."

Something dark passes over Carth's features and the emotion slowly drains from his face. His jaw tightens as he speaks, but he's otherwise cold and detached. "Trust is a funny thing. It goes both ways, you know."

"Yeah, I recall you and Canderous yelling about that not too long ago…"

Seemingly unamused by the mercenary's humor, Carth presses on. "Look, I understand if you want to keep secrets. It's what people like you and Helena are best at, after all." His lip curls in distaste. "Just don't expect me to pretend that I'm okay with it."

"Oh for the love of…" Hands balling in exasperation, Vann draws a slow breath. "I can't tell you what I don't know, okay?"

"What do you mean, 'what you don't know'?!" Turning to study his companion, Carth's dark gaze sweeps the other man for several terse moments. "This is all happening to you, right? Are you going to tell me that you're just along for the ride?"

Swallowing his own frustration, Vann feels a cold stab of fear radiate through his chest. "That about sums up my experience so far."

"Wait, what?!" Concern breaks through Carth's icy façade, creasing his brow and tingling his voice with worry. "Vann, that's… that can't be good."

"Oh, no, it's fantastic." Unable to hold back his sarcastic retort, the mercenary feels the words come tumbling out. "I wasn't sure where I was earlier. Or even who I was. But other than that, it's all going great."

Placing a hand on his companion's shoulder, Carth pauses midstride. "Geeze," he breathes.
"That's… well, honestly, that's terrifying. Have you talked to Bas, errm… Helena about it yet?"

Pulled out of step by the fingers digging into his flesh, Vann turns to scowl at the other man. But the expression falls flat when he spots someone breaking away from the main hunting party and moving towards them at a rapid clip. "Not really the time or the place, you know?"

"Yeah, but this goes beyond weird dreams." Carth doesn't seem to be catching his companion's hint. "You're… you're kriffing hallucinating!"

"Like I said," Vann growls out, trying to keep his voice hushed as he jerks his head in the direction of the figure rushing towards the two men. "Not. The. Time."

"Oh, I hate to interrupt your conversations," Hulas quips, tone acerbic, "But Komad just informed me that we're quite close to the dragon's lair."

Nodding crisply, Vann lets one hand idly drift towards the blaster at his hip. "No problem," he replies. "What do you need us to do?"

Hulas points one scaly finger at Carth. "You," he says, eyes narrowing slightly, "You can go help Komad with whatever preparations he needs to make." Turning to Vann his expression brightens. "But you should stay with me. There might still be some… Sand People around, and I like the way you handled them last time."

Worry still pulling at the corners of his mouth, Carth casts a cautious look at their employer before slowly nodding in acquiescence. "Right. Got it." He shoots the mercenary an uneasy frown before turning away and jogging towards where the Twi'lek already seems to be spreading out a pile of supplies from his pack.

As the pilot moves out of earshot, Vann leans closer to Hulas and asks, "So. You want personal protection, is that it?"

"I am the head of this expedition," the Rodian preens. "It's important to keep me alive!"

"Right, of course," struggling not to roll his eyes, Vann doesn't manage to suppress a sigh. "So. I'm on the lookout for Sand People. Anything else that I should be watching for?"

A flicker of amusement crosses Hulas's countenance. "Oh, you are a sharp one. See, this is why I hired you!"

"You hired me because I'm the only idiot who would agree to trek through this burning wasteland to help keep you safe."

"Either way, you're worth the price!" Turning his head to glance at the rest of the hunting party, a hint of worry passes through Hulas's round eyes as he explains, "Keep alert for anything, and anyone. You never know what, or who, might become vicious in this desert."

"Of course." This time, Vann does roll his eyes. However, it's only because the Rodian has already rushed off to micromanage Komad's careful assessment of his hunting gear.

For the next hour, the mercenary shadows Hulas in everything he does, which mostly feels like a whole lot of nothing. However, being this close to his employer provides a chance to study the Rodian more carefully. It's immediately obvious that the bumbling, nearly clueless persona is just an act. Despite his repeated rambling and run-on commentary, everything Hulas does feels carefully calculated. His movements are precise and efficient, flailing limbs and excessive words not managing to hide his natural grace and poise. Nor does it disguise the way his gaze is
constantly studying everything around him. And that careful attention seems to be mostly focused on his business partners.

A little over an hour into Vann's guard duty, Canderous strolls up. He raises his voice a little louder than needed as he announces, "Hulas, Komad wants to talk to you. Says he's almost ready for the real fun to begin."

"Excellent!" A grin spreading across his features, the Rodian looks up from the commlink he's been idly fiddling with. Tucking the item back into his pocket, he gestures for the mercenary to follow him. "Come on! I want to finish with these plans as quickly as possible."

"Actually, I need to talk some things over with Vann here."

Hulas remains unimpressed. "No, no. He comes with me."

"You're paying us to watch your back, right?" Chuckling bemusedly, Canderous stares down at the Rodian. "Well, we can't do shit if we're not allowed to talk with each other. Look, it'll only take a minute to go over some tactics. Pretty boring stuff, though. Nothing an important guy like yourself needs to worry about."

Though he puffs his chest out in pride, Hulas's eyes remain suspicious. "I don't trust Komad," he finally sneers.

"I don't blame you, Tatooine breeds 'em slimy." Canderous jerks a thumb in the direction of the hunter. "But Helena's over there with him. She'll look out for you. And if you can't trust a classy woman like that, well..."

"Alright, fine!" Huffing out an irritated breath, Hulas begins to move towards the Twi'lek. "But don't take too long, okay? I don't want you distracted if the Sand People come back."

The moment Hulas is visibly preoccupied with planning the hunt, Canderous grasps Vann by the bicep, hauling the other man closer. Switching to Mando'a he hisses, "Am I the only one who gets the feeling that this isn't actually a dragon hunt?"

"Gee, you mean the suspicious death of a 'business partner' in the middle of a kriffing desert didn't make that obvious?" Tone dripping with sarcasm, the mercenary hopes that his rusty attempt at the Mandalorian language is still understandable.

A flicker of surprise crosses Canderous's face, though his voice is neutral as he comments, "Your accent is atrocious." His gaze shifts to where Vorn is sitting, sharpening his axe. "Just be careful guarding Hulas. I think his two 'colleagues' are plotting something."

Nodding in agreement, Vann plasters on an easy smirk to help disguise the suspicious nature of their conversation. "Good luck to them. I'm betting Hulas planned this whole excursion just to throw them into the dragon's lair."

Coughing out a harsh laugh, Canderous lowers his voice to a hushed growl. "With any luck, they'll all kill each other before this job is done."

"But then we won't get paid." For a moment, it's all too easy for Vann to slip back into the role of a mercenary, and to forget the real reason for their trip to Tatooine. Memories of swirling black robes and the twin hum of lightsabers rush to the forefront of his mind, but he manages to keep those thoughts at bay.
Not seeming to notice the mercenary's distress, Canderous grins. "Even if these morons are all dead by the end of the day, there's still a dragon to hunt. Probably a more noble quest than keeping those three alive." He jerks his head towards their guide. "I'm sure Komad would be willing to split the profits with us if we take the beast down."

Glancing towards where Hulas is currently arguing with the Twi'lek, Vann sighs. "I'll keep that in mind," he grumbles.

"Hey, when this all goes to shit just remember that I told you how to do things right." Chuckling darkly, Canderous begins to amble back towards Bastila. "It's not like Helena's the only one around here who can think up a plan."

It seems like only seconds pass before Hulas is back, once again chattering inanely. "Komad may seem dense, but he knows how to hunt! We'll be heading towards the dragon's lair in just a moment. Exciting, no?"

"Sure is," Vann mutters dryly.

Ignoring the mercenary's lack of enthusiasm, Hulas adjusts his small pack of gear. "Just stick close to me, okay? And tell your friends to remain alert!"

Vann wants to point out that none of them are foolish enough to let their guard down at this point, but he settles for nodding silently as he falls into step behind the Rodian. The rest of the party is back in a loose formation soon enough, Komad taking the lead as the 'mercenaries' flank their employers. Tension fills the hot desert air, and Vann doesn't need the Force to sense the increasing swell of emotions. It's close to an hour's walk before they can actually see the cave that the dragon has chosen for a lair, one noon melting into another as the twin suns rise to their peak in the cloudless sky. Sweat drips down Vann's back, his dark clothing absorbing the hot sunlight and practically baking him as he walks. He yearns to remove a few layers, but one look at the furtive glances Rulan and Vorn are exchanging and he decides that keeping his lightsaber close is currently more important than comfort.

The only consolation is that one glimpse of the rest of his companions proves that nobody is enjoying the blistering heat. Bastila's pale cheeks are flushed a rosy red, and Carth is futilely attempting to protect his face and neck with a single piece of cloth. Only Canderous seems to be remotely comfortable, and even he's angrily wiping sweat from his brow in irritation.

Holding up one hand, Komad calls out, "Stop!" Turning to face the rest of the party he explains, "This is as close as we can get before we set the mines."

"Mines?" Bastila's voice is strained and breathless from the heat, but she still manages to sound vaguely insulted by the suggestion. "That doesn't seem very sporting…"

Nodding, the Twi'lek swings his large pack off his shoulders. "We're only using them to create a safe zone, should the dragon prove to be more aggressive than expected." He offers the Jedi a weak smile. "The hope is that we never need it, but it's better to be safe than sorry when hunting such dangerous quarry."

"So then set the mines!" Hulas drops his gear into the sand, sending up a spray of grains in the process.

Heaving yet another sigh, Komad shakes his head. "Everyone needs to help set the perimeter. With a dragon this size, it has to be large… a few dozen meters across." Opening his pack, Komad retrieves a few stacks of intricate-looking mines, their wiring attached to some type of metal disc.
"So, not to ask a stupid question, but what's to stop someone from accidentally stepping on one of these if things get messy?" Carth eyes the mines suspiciously.

Tapping a disc Komad replies, "These are pressure plates. You'll bury them in the sand beside the mines. None of us weigh enough to trigger them, but the dragon is another story…"

"Heh, clever," Canderous comments, nodding in admiration.

Dividing the mines into stacks, Komad begins handing them out. "Everyone take four. You'll be burying them about two meters apart, in a semi-circle starting over there," he gestures westward, "And ending there," he points north. "Arming them is easy. Just press the blue button."

"And once these mines are set, then we hunt?" Eyes narrowed, Hulas stares at the Twi'lek suspiciously.

"Yes," Komad confirms, sounding tired. "Then the hunt begins."

The party splits up, or at least attempts to, with Bastila also sensing the growing tension and choosing to keep a close eye on Vorn and Rulan. Canderous and Carth each volunteer to take the furthest ends of the perimeter. It's hard to tell if they're just playing the part of the hired guards, or if they're purposely trying to get as far away from Hulas as possible. Vann, unfortunately, isn't as lucky. The Rodian all-but drags the mercenary along, dumping his share of the mines into the Human's arms while making a thinly-veiled excuse about getting the chore done faster if they work together.

Of course, Vann is the one who actually does all of the physical labor. Aside from the sheer discomfort of standing beneath Tatooine's broiling suns as he digs through the ever-shifting sand to bury eight mines, the focus required to complete the task makes it hard to pay attention to his surroundings. He briefly considers using the Force to raise his awareness, but quickly abandons the idea under the guise of trying to keep his Force presence to a minimum while surrounded by strangers. It sounds like a good excuse, even as a twinge of ice-cold fear gnaws at the back of his mind. The reality is that he's afraid to access the Force right now. After all, he doesn't know what, or who, might make an appearance.

Because of his distraction, Vann only gets a faint tingling at the back of his neck to warn him of impending danger. As the sensation creeps down his spine he jerks his head up, bleeding rushing uncomfortably to his brain from the sudden jolt. His eyes scan his surroundings, noting the two figures who are slowly striding towards him and Hulas. Quickly rising from his crouched position, his hand drifts towards his blaster pistol. For his part, the Rodian's posture has become noticeably tense.

"Vorn! Rulan! Are you done burying those mines already?" Somehow Hulas manages to keep his tone chipper, giving no hint of any apprehension.

"Yeah Hulas, we're done," Rulan snarls as he comes closer.

Currently holding his axe in both hands, Vorn snorts, "We're also done with your games."

Quickly drawing his weapon, Vann angles himself so that he has a clear view of both the Human and the Gamorrean. He's not a crack shot like Carth and his blaster lacks the sheer power of Canderous's, but if he augments his movement with the Force he might be able to incapacitate both threats out before they can do much damage. But that would also blow his cover.

"Friends, what are you talking about?" Holding up both hands in a placating manner, Hulas smiles
crookedly at his business partners. "The only game here is the dragon! Aren't we all here to hunt…"

"You think we can't see through that excuse?" Deep voice rumbling with disapproval, Vorn slowly stalks towards the Rodian. "Did you honestly believe that we wouldn't figure out why you really brought us here?"

"I almost believed your story, Hulas. That you were interested in solidifying a business venture with like-minded individuals." For a moment Rulan's voice is tinged with genuine respect, though it quickly fades to disgust. "But then you went and killed Ithorak in the dark like a coward."

Snorting his disapproval, Vorn shakes his head. "If you had waited to take all three of us out at once, it might have worked… But now we know your plan."

Vann's finger itches to pull the trigger, anticipation burning in his muscles and flowing through his connection to the Force. However, Hulas hasn't given him any orders to attack. And besides, he's honestly curious about this bizarre turn of events.

The bumbling façade quickly fades away, and Hulas's expression grows cold and calculating. His round eyes blink slowly, tone almost bored as he asks, "And what makes you think that things aren't still going according to plan?"

Wide throat vibrating with laughter, Vorn casts a doubtful look at Vann. "What, do you think these pathetic mercenaries are going to be loyal to you?" He nods to Rulan, and then turns to glare at Vann. "Mercenary! What is this slime paying you? We'll double it."

"Triple it, even," Rulan says, pulling a datapad from his pocket and typing in a few numbers. He turns the screen towards the mercenary, revealing the sum of a rather large bank account. "All you have to do is walk away right now."

For a moment Vann honestly considers just taking the credits and running. Possibly without telling the others. Luckily suspicion trumps greed when Hulas doesn't even attempt to counter the offer.

Continuing to watch the scene play out with a placid expression, the Rodian merely sighs. "Oh, I don't doubt that you can buy off these humans with a few credits. They're just hired help, after all. Not part of our esteemed guild."

A flicker of doubt crosses Rulan's features, and he slowly frowns. "So if your protection is so unreliable, why the arrogance?"

"Because they're not my protection." A sly grin spreads across Hulas's face, his head canting slightly to the side. There's a faint rumble in the distance, a mechanical roar that sounds like it's growing closer by the second. "These mercenaries are just a useful distraction."

Vann sees his companions come rushing towards him, weapons drawn and concern palpable. At first, everyone directs their attention towards their employers as the trio continues their awkward standoff beneath the harsh desert sun. However, that focus shifts as the mechanical rumble grows louder by the second. Suddenly a half-dozen speeders race into view, sunlight glinting off their polished sides as they roar across the dunes in a cloud of engine noise and sand gusts.

"What the hells is going on here?" Carth demands, blasters raised. His confusion is echoed by the stunned expressions worn by both Vorn and Rulan.

Hulas continues to smirk. "What, did you honestly think that I would try and take sole control of the Genoharadan without ensuring that the members are loyal to me?" He practically giggles in
glee. "It's ironic. You'll both be killed by the individuals you've overseen for years."

The speeders howl as they race towards the motley group, and Vann can finally see their riders. Multiple species seem to be represented, though it's hard to make exact identifications as their faces are obscured by goggles, masks, and scarves. Every single individual speeding into view is heavily armed, with most of them carrying expensive blasters equipped with complex scopes and beam splitters. 'Assassin's pistols,' Vann thinks to himself. 'These are Force-damned assassins.'

From the corner of his eye, he spots Bastila moving her hand towards her jacket, presumably to retrieve her lightsabers. Opening the Force bond, Vann slowly shakes his head as he sends her a quick, _No!_ The Jedi turns to look at him with a quizzical expression, compelling him to clarify, _No use blowing our cover. This isn't our fight._

Bastila slowly nods back, hand dropping to her side. However, her expression remains concerned, and a sizzle of irritation flows through the mental connection. Even without words, Vann is fully aware that the Jedi is prepared to _make_ this their fight, no matter how ill-advised the thought may be.

Luckily, any attempts at heroics are quickly squashed by a hail of blaster fire. Engines screaming, the speeders fly in a tight circle around the hunting party as their riders unleash a rain of bolts from their weapons. It's only through the power of the Force that Vann knows to duck before the attack happens, and he instinctively reaches out tendrils of his own power to drag Carth and Canderous to the ground. At the same time, he sends a warning to Bastila through their bond, though she's already dropping down before the thought travels between them. None of them land elegantly, and Vann finds himself spitting sand and curses as he crawls along in an attempt to escape the carnage erupting all around him.

Shoving his pistol back into its holster, he glances over his shoulder just in time to see Rulan's body shimmer in a flash of light, changing size and shape until his human form is replaced by a horned-and-clawed monstrosity. The creature lunges at one of the speeders, massive front claws rending the metal and sending its riders flying through the air. Vorn meanwhile is charging through the hail of blaster bolts, swinging his axe with throaty roars as he slices and chops at the assassins as they whizz by. Through all this madness, Hulas seems to be laughing.

Attention shifting back to his companions Vann continues his crawl over the sand, jaw clenched as a colorful variety of swears pour from his lips. Nearby he can see Bastila attempting to drag Canderous away from the fray, even as the Mandalorian moves to charge forward, sword drawn. Just as he's wondering if he should help, a yelp of pain from off to his right makes the decision for him. Wincing after taking a stray bolt to the thigh, Carth is struggling to limp away from the fight while staying low enough to avoid further injury. The entire effort is hampered by the fact that he had the misfortune of being a few yards closer to Vorn and Rulan than anyone else. Both of his pistols are holstered, and one of his hands is currently occupied with protecting the wound in his leg.

Without thinking Vann lunges forward and tackles the pilot, grasping the other man's collar as he uses his momentum to drag them both away from the fray. Carth makes a strangled sound, possibly because he's literally being choked by his own shirt, but that's still got to be better than being shot full of holes in the crossfire.

"Can't… breathe…" Carth wheezes, which immediately proves that he can, in fact, breathe.

Moving his hand so that he's grasping the back of the pilot's jacket, Vann sighs. "The words you're looking for are 'thanks for saving me.'"
Arching a brow at the mercenary, Carth snorts. "I was just fine saving myself, thank you."

"Yeah, sure." Reaching into a pocket, Vann produces a medpac and jams it into his companion's thigh, right above the blaster injury. He savors the hiss of surprise and discomfort that the other man makes, considering it payback for the two times he's been subjected to the same treatment. "You really looked like you had it handled."

"I did!" Tone indignant, Carth shifts his gaze between the mercenary and the battle occurring mere meters away. "What, you think I can't crawl away from a firefight on my own?"

Two streaks of red whizz through the air headed straight for where Vann and Carth are huddled. As a jolt of warning flows through the Force and shoots down his spine, the mercenary yanks his companion forward as he dives into the sand. The stray blaster bolts soar harmlessly onward, mere centimeters above their heads.

"What was that about not needing help?" Reaching out his Force connection Vann wraps it around both of their bodies, infusing them with an added level of protection should any more blaster bolts come their way. It's not a complete shield, not like what he instinctively made during the crash landing on Taris, but it's something.

Carth must feel the tingle of Force energy flowing through him, and he gapes at the other man. "Are you…?"

Mind partially occupied by maintaining their defense, Vann shrugs his free shoulder. "I don't only look out for myself," he murmurs.

Poised to say more, Carth is cut off by a roar of agony, and both men turn to observe the nearby battle just as one of the assassins leaps off a speeder and onto the back of the creature that was once Rulan. Raising her blade the woman drives it into the beast's back, carving through muscle and bone with a sickening crunch. The beast roars in pain, and there's another flash of light as Rulan morphs into something much smaller and attempts to scurry away. He manages to jump over the smoldering wreck of a speeder, which lays beside the still-twitching body of Vorn. Despite the dozens of holes that fill the Gamorrean, his hand still clutches his axe, wrist feebly attempting to swing it even in his death throes.

Rulan, or whatever he's turned into, runs across the sand in a flurry of panicked paws and whiskers. Diving beneath one speeder, he scampers away from two assassins who barely miss chopping him in two with their blades. Just as it looks like he might scurry to safety three powerful hits from a blaster strike him squarely in the chest, sending tufts of fur and shards of bone into the sand. A final flash of light illuminates the dunes and the creature transforms for the last time, becoming a twisted body barely recognizable as a sentient being.

Clutching his still-smoking blaster, Hulas grins as he surveys the carnage around him. The remaining speeders begin to slow, the roar of their engines fading to a dull whine as they pull up beside the Rodian. The hail of blaster fire ceases, even as the masked assassins slowly gather around their overseer, obviously awaiting their next orders. Watching the scene unfold before him, Vann feels a cold lump of rage expand in his chest. It quickly spreads, diffusing through his limbs and surging beneath his skin like an icy torrent. Releasing his grasp on Carth, he draws his Force power back into himself. A quick glance to his left assures him that Bastila has managed to reign in Canderous, though the Mandalorian looks about as murderous as Vann currently feels.

Teeth clenched, the mercenary slowly climbs to his feet as he stares unblinkingly at Hulas. "So," he growls, "You were just using us?"
The Rodian has the gall to laugh. "Of course! You're just mercenary scum. Good for small jobs, but not for anything important."

Vann can practically feel his anger crackling around him, resonating with the Force in searing bursts of raw emotion. He can feel Bastila tugging at their bond, but he forcibly closes his end of the connection. "Say what you want," he snarls, "But we did exactly what you asked us to. So, you better be paying us accordingly."

Letting out an exasperated sigh, Hulas shakes his head. "You did your job well enough," he admits. "But I'm afraid I can't pay you."

"Why you little kriffing slime-ball son-of-a…" Canderous swings his sword into an offensive position, muscles tense as he visibly prepares to charge at his former employer. However, he's stopped in his tracks when all of the remaining assassins simultaneously point their blasters directly at him, fingers on the triggers.

"Oh friend, you won't get two meters before my men pump you full of more holes than poor Vorn here." Hulas frowns, though there's a wicked little gleam in his eyes. "Not that it matters."

Vann feels the sizzle of emotion flow into his hands, and he has to consciously prevent himself from calling his lightsaber from inside his jacket. Nearby, Bastila seems to be having the same dilemma, one hand digging into Canderous's bicep while the other slowly moves towards her vest.

"Alright, fine." Carth is carefully climbing to his feet, expression stony. "So you're not going to pay us. You can at least let us go."

"I apologize, but I can't do that either." Hulas shrugs helplessly, though the gesture is clearly exaggerated. "You've seen, and heard, too much. It's far too dangerous to keep you alive."

Eyes narrowing, Bastila carefully moves one hand through the air as she calmly states, "You don't need to kill us. We won't tell anyone what we've seen." Her words are tinged with the persuasive powers of the Force.

Hulas stares for a moment and then chuckles. "What, you think you're some type of Jedi or something? Ha! Even if you were, those tricks don't work on me." He gestures to his assassins. "No, I'm afraid we're just going to kill you all."

The mental connection to Bastila flares brightly in Vann's mind, and he can sense that she's calling her twin shotos into her hands while encouraging him to draw his own 'saber. She wants this fight, her frustration and wounded pride bright and cold between them.

But it's nothing compared to the rage that Vann is currently feeling. He's trekked through this Force-forsaken desert, listened to hours of pointless babble, fought off Sand People, and was tossed into the middle of some type of assassination plot. All for what? To be shot like a kath hound gone mad? No. NO! The energy crackling at his fingertips blazes to life, his whole limb seeming to ignite with primal Force power. Reaching his hand out, Vann expects to calls his lightsaber from its hiding place. However, what he summons is very different.

He almost doesn't recognize his own voice as he hisses, "You're the one who's going to die." This is partially because the words are drowned out by the white-hot sizzle of brilliant violet lightning as it erupts from his fingertips.
1. I was originally going to leave the characters' heights ambiguous. But after a few scenes where I wasn't sure if Character A can see over Character B's shoulder, or if Character C can look Character D in the eyes, I decided to give everyone a set height. Everything I know indicates that Revan isn't incredibly tall, with suggestions ranging from 5'7" (1.7m) to 5'11" (1.8m) depending on class. I split the difference and made Vann/Revan 5'9" (1.75m), as it also puts him at the same height as Mark Hamill/Luke Skywalker. I enjoy the idea that Revan isn't very tall, but that might just be me.

For reference:

Zaalbar: 7'6" / 2.28m  
Canderous: 6'2" / 1.88m  
Carth: 6'0" / 1.83m  
Jolee: 5'10" / 1.78m  
Vann: 5'9" / 1.76m  
Juhani: 5'8" / 1.73m  
Bastila: 5'6" / 1.68m  
Mission: 5'4" / 1.63m  
Malak: 6'7" / 2.00m

2. This chapter includes references to Episodes I and II. They're not my favorite movies, but the characters are on Tatooine so I couldn't resist.

3. Want updates as I write? Follow me on Twitter @Ergo_Maria!
Chapter Summary

In which our heroes continue their desert adventures, continue to hate sand, and manage to slay a dragon... along with a lot of other sentient beings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

10.

"So, when you report our entire adventure to the rest of the Jedi, you might want to leave this part out." Carth's gaze flicks towards Bastila, a grimace pulling at his lips. The acrid scent of burning flesh fills the air, catching in his throat as he speaks.

"I… uh… ahem." Awkwardly clearing her throat, the Jedi glances at the pilot for a moment before turning to wince at the scene before her. Both shotos are still grasped in her hands, the blades powered down. She moves one arm up to cover her nose as she mumbles, "Yes, right. Perhaps they don't need to know about… everything…"

Chuckling darkly, Canderous moves between Bastila and Carth, placing a muscled forearm on each of their shoulders. "I don't know what you two are so upset about," he smirks, "If you ask me, that was amazing!"

"Amazing. Right." Scoffing at the Mandalorian, the pilot shakes his head. "That's certainly one word for it." Moving to peer around the other man's broad torso, he glares at the Jedi. "So, was this supposed to happen?"

"Um, this…?" Mouth opening and closing like a dying fish, Bastila finally snaps her jaw shut with an audible click. A faint cough escapes her throat as the particularly bitter odor of charred hair wafts on the warm desert breeze.

"Yeah…" Carth draws, "That's what I thought."

Brows furrowing, Canderous's tone is more subdued as he mutters, "Somebody should probably go check on the kid. He looks a little…"

"You know I can hear you, right?" Jerking his head around, Vann glowers at his companions. "I'm standing right here."

Ducking under Canderous's arm, Bastila hurries over to her fellow Force user. "Vann," she says softly, pointedly not covering her face against the nearby stench, "Are you alright?"

The mercenary can feel the flicker of reassurance that's being sent through the Force bond, though it's tinged with apprehension. He quickly shuts off his side of the connection, drawing his power within himself and slamming up mental walls. "I'm fine. Why does everyone keep asking me if I'm okay?" He feels his hands tremble slightly, something they've been doing intermittently for the past few minutes. Growling, he shoves them into his pockets. "What? It's not like I've never killed someone before!"
"Yeah, but you've probably never killed a dozen sentient beings with electricity that you shot out of your hands. And then reduced the poor bastards to smoking corpses amidst their uncontrollable screaming." Canderous shrugs, lips twisting into an amused smile. "Just a thought."

**FLASH**

The bright afternoon sunlight fades away, shadows lengthening in the dusky glow of twilight. The most dramatic of those shadows is cast by the long black cloak that billows around Vann, blown by the dry desert winds. The breeze carries the scent of ozone and the more bitter smell of burnt flesh.

He extends his gloved hand and watches as a fresh burst of lightning arches from his fingertips. But this time it's not a surprise. This time there's intent. Staring through the slits of a metal mask, he watches as the Sand People cower in their tents, men trying to shield their wives and children from the brilliant purple bolts of electricity that crackle through the air. But it doesn't matter how brave they are now. In the end, they'll tell him everything he needs to know. It's a shame it's come to this, but there's no time for finesse, not when the galaxy hangs in the balance. This is a single cruelty for the greater good. It will save millions and ensure peace for generations to come…

**FLASH**

The terrified Sand People being tormented at Revan's hand slowly fade into the already-deceased bodies of Hulas and his assassins. They're scattered across the sand around the still-running speeders, limbs splayed unnaturally and wisps of smoke rising from their remains. There are char marks on their skin and armor, highlighting points where the lightning entered and exited their bodies. What faces can be seen are twisted in pain, mouths affixed in eternal silent screams.

The sizzle of electricity tingles through the tips of Vann's fingers, and he stares at them for several long moments. He can't tell if the feeling is a residual effect from this latest vision or an actual sensation from his own use of Force lightning. The howls of the dying assassins replay in his mind, blending with the pleas of Revan's victims and creating a surreal cacophony of wails that echoes in his ears until they ring. The only thing that's nauseatingly real is the foul smell of the charred corpses that lay a meter or so away. The more cleansing breaths he tries to take, the more the acrid stench fills his nostrils. Swallowing so hard that his throat aches is the only thing that keeps him from retching.

Drawing a shaking breath through his mouth, Vann shoulders past Bastila, turning his head so that he doesn't have to meet her face. He can feel her push at their bond, her mind a battering ram of overwhelming concern. He continues to shut her out. "So I've never killed anyone with the Force before!" The images from his vision echo his most recent memories, and for a moment he feels like he has summoned electrical death more times than he can count. He shakes his head, trying to clear the lingering sense of déjà vu. "It happened. Can't we all just… be alright with it happening?"

"No!" Carth's eyes go wide at the very suggestion, his voice rising in pitch and volume. "This is not alright! This is the opposite of alright!"

"At least stop yelling!" Vann takes a long step towards the pilot, internally wincing as the other man flinches back slightly. "It's not like I can go back in time and undo it!"

"So, the Jedi… can't control time?" Canderous nods to himself appreciatively, looking genuinely thoughtful. "Good to know."

Releasing a groan of frustration, Carth reaches up to rub both hands across his face. This, of course, only manages to scrub sand into his pores, causing him to groan louder. "This is ridiculous! How do we even get ourselves into these situations?"
"Usually it's because of me." Teeth clenched, Vann stares defiantly at the other man. "So, if it makes you feel better, just blame me for everything that happened out here. Call me a monster and get it over with!"

"Argh!" Throwing his hands up in defeat, the pilot sighs heavily. "You're... you're not a monster, Vann. You're not." It's hard to tell who he's currently trying to convince. "But, it's just..." He jerks one hand towards the smoking remains of Hulas and his assassins. "You realize that's a bad thing, right? Bastila, please, explain to everyone why this is not a good thing to have happen."

Pursing her lips, the Jedi's gaze drops to the sand for several moments as she quickly shoves her lightsabers back into the safety of her jacket. Fingers toying with the zipper of her vest, she quietly admits, "Well... it was effective."

Carth's jaw drops. "You have got to be joking..."

"No! Please, hear me out." A guilty half-smile crosses her lips as she continues, "We were in trouble. As much as I'm sure we're all reluctant to admit how poorly that situation could have gone, we must acknowledge that we were heavily outnumbered and outgunned."

"Ha," Canderous snorts defiantly. "I could have handled 'em."

"You keep telling yourself that," Carth mutters under his breath.

"Anyway," Bastila continues, voice raised slightly as she cuts off any potential arguments, "A fight with Hulas and his followers would have been extraordinarily dangerous. One of us could have easily died. She's quieter as she admits, "Or worse, been injured and stranded in this desert. That would be a horrendously slow and painful death."

Grimacing at the imagery, Canderous grumbles, "Yeesh, cheerful much Bastila?"

"As disturbing as the thought is, it's true." Using her scarf to gently wipe away some of the sweat beading on her brow, she hurriedly adds, "But my point is this. As... gruesome as his technique was, Vann saved us all. We didn't have to engage in a fight that we might not have won, nor did any of us sustain a life-threatening injury."

"While I admit that all of this is true" Carth mutters, expression dour, "Vann still electrocuted twelve sentient beings while they screamed at the tops of their lungs. I admit that I don't know a lot about the Force, but even I realize that's pretty dark."

"Thirteen," Canderous clarifies. "It was technically thirteen beings. A lucky number on some planets."

Carth gapes at the Mandalorian. "That doesn't make it any better!"

"Oh, get your head out of your ass, Carth!" Sneering at the pilot, Canderous gestures angrily at the bodies. "It's not like those were innocent people. They were thieves, liars, and murderers. They deserved everything they got, and then some." A satisfied smirk plays on his lips. "Hells, it's not like they actually suffered. Bastila didn't even have time to stop Vann before they were all dead."

Inhaling sharply the Jedi mumbles, "Admittedly, my reaction time may have been a bit... hampered by the unexpected turn of events."

"That's not particularly comforting." Casting a worried glance at the others, Carth whispers, "Bastila, come on... are you really okay with this?"
"Like Vann said, there's nothing that can be done now. What happened is in the past. All we can do is… learn from it?" Brows arching hopefully, the Jedi looks at her companions.

"I lost control," Vann finally hisses. "I admit it. I was angry, and I just… It erupted out of me." What he doesn't admit to is the moment of clarity that he experienced, a fraction of an instant when he knew the storm of Force lightning was coming from his fingers, the cold rush of raw Force power channeling through his body in torrents of electricity. In that flash of time he could have pulled back, but he didn't. Something, some part of him turned numb from the icy chill of his own rage, wanted Hulas to suffer. He could see the fear in the Rodian's eyes and hear the screams of his victims, but he couldn't bring himself to care. And then the moment of control was gone, even as the Force kept flowing through him into jagged bolts of energy. And the raw, agonized shrieks kept coming, along with the stench of burnt flesh…

It takes a while to realize that his hands are trembling again.

"Vann." Reaching out, Bastila wraps the mercenary's hands in her own. Her fingers are warm and slightly damp from sweat. "You did lose control. And honestly, it's disturbing to know that this can happen when you give in to your anger."

Eyes drawn back to the bodies that litter the sand, Vann scornfully mutters, "Disturbing is probably an understatement."

Moving one hand to grasp the mercenary's chin, Bastila's tone is fierce as she orders, "Look at me!" She waits until brown eyes lock focus with her own. "You did something disturbing, but you also feel remorse for it. And that is not dark. Not in the least."

"How do you know that I feel remorse?" Vann quirks a brow. "I could just be shaking with excitement."

Smiling softly, Bastila chuckles. "I'm in your head, remember?" She leans in a little closer, voice a bit sharper as she whispers, "And we will talk about your latest vision later."

"I hate to break-up this tender moment," Canderous announces. "But in case everyone forgot, we're still stuck in this kriffing desert."

"Hadn't noticed," Carth remarks dryly.

Carefully releasing her hold on Vann, Bastila glances thoughtfully at the still-running speeders that are idling nearby. "Well, we could use those to get back to Anchorhead. I don't think their original owners will miss them."

Jogging over to one of the speeders, Canderous looks the vehicle over with a critical eye. He kicks the side a few times and then fiddles with the various gears. "Pretty good quality. We can probably sell whatever we drive back for a decent chunk of credits."

"That's… honestly not a bad plan." Carth raises his brows in surprise, though he nods approvingly at the idea.

"Like I told Vann earlier," Canderous comments, "Bastila's not the only one who can come up with a plan."

Moving towards another speeder, the Jedi examines its controls for a minute. "So then, I suppose it's settled. We'll take these four speeders back to Anchorhead and…"

"Please don't go yet!"
Three heads swivel towards the source of the voice, hands moving to reach for weapons. However, before anyone can draw, the nervous figure of Komad Fortuna comes slinking out from the shadow of a narrow rock formation. The Twi'lek's hands are raised above his head, and his skin is covered in a fine coating of sand. Eyes darting between the 'mercenaries,' a look of desperation is etched in his features.

"Please," Komad repeats, "I need your help."

Gesturing to one of the speeders, Vann says, "Feel free to take one and head back to Anchorhead. Not much else we can do for you, given the uh… current circumstances."

"Just how long have you been hiding over there?" Canderous's eyes narrow in suspicion.

Swallowing hard, Komad replies, "Since Vorn and Rulan told me that they'd shoot me if I came out. But, well, it sounds like they won't be a problem anymore?" A hopeful smile dances across his lips.

"They're pretty kriffing dead." Gesturing to the corpses scattered around the sand, Canderous adds, "So is Hulas. I hope you got paid up front."

"Credits were never the issue." Slowly creeping towards the remaining members of the party, Komad keeps his hands up. "The only reason I agreed to head this hunting party is because the dragon we're after needs to be killed."

Blinking in surprise, Bastila's voice echoes her confusion as she yelps, "What? How is it that a krayt dragon needs to die?"

Sighing heavily, though not from exasperation this time, Komad explains, "This dragon has been attacking settlements and moisture farms. It's caused a lot of damage and has injured quite a few individuals."

"Can't you just encourage it to move elsewhere, perhaps?" There's a certain naïve innocence to Bastila's question, which immediately makes Canderous roll his eyes.

Komad shakes his head. "Unfortunately, no. This dragon will only grow larger and more aggressive with age. The only viable option is to kill it." He sees the disappointed look on the Jedi's face, and quickly adds, "But in time his death will enable other dragons to claim his territory. And they, in turn, will raise their young here. It's a precarious balance that we hunters keep, but keep it we must."

This answer seems to mollify Bastila, and she nods her head in acceptance. "Very well. I suppose I understand the necessity of this. As gruesome as it might seem."

"So, where do we come in?" Carth looks between their small group, noting how poorly they've adapted to the desert conditions. "We're not exactly hunters."

"Neither were they." Komad scowls as he gestures to where Rulan, Vorn, and Hulas lay dead in the sand. "I don't need hunters to help me. I just need able-bodied individuals who are willing to do a bit of running."

"Sounds like this is more dangerous than you're letting on." Canderous grins crookedly. "Count me in."

Komad looks taken aback by this response. "It… actually should be fairly safe if we utilize the mines that were set earlier. And, of course, I'll be sure to compensate you for your assistance with
the reward money being offered for this dragon."

"How exactly are you supposed to prove that you killed this dragon?" Vann's tone is curious. "It's not like you can just bring the corpse back to the lodge."

"With the pearl, of course."

"...Pearl?" Something tingles in the back of Vann's mind, as though there's a forgotten memory waiting to be unlocked.

Breath catching in her throat, Bastila murmurs, "Krayt dragon pearls are considered a rare and exotic treasure. Certain people will pay a small fortune for them."

"Of course she has no clue why the damned lizard needs to die, but she knows everything about the treasure in its gut." Canderous snorts at this, chuckling in amusement.

Bastila whirs to glare at the Mandalorian. "I'll have you know that krayt dragon pearls are also very valuable to Jedi. They can be used to augment lightsaber blades and..."

"Didn't we agree not to mention the whole Jedi thing?" Carth glances apprehensively at Komad. For a moment Bastila looks abashed at her slip, but the Twi'lek speaks before she can make any excuses. He hurriedly reassures the group by saying, "I, well, I may have seen a few things from where I was hiding. And I'd really rather not have that one mad at me." He nods to Vann. "So please, consider your secret safe. The affairs of the Jedi are no concern of mine."

Lowering his voice to a harsh whisper, Vann sidles up beside Carth as he sardonically quips, "See, sometimes a little bit of darkness comes in handy."

"Oh yeah, I'm really thankful for your murderous tendencies," Carth snaps back under his breath, though there's no real malice to his words.

Ignoring his companions' banter, Canderous cracks his knuckles. "Komad, I really don't care what everyone else says." Extending his hand, his grin nearly splits his face. "You've got yourself a deal."

*  *  *

"The mines are active, and the safe zone is set," Komad announces, wiping his hands against his tunic. He glances around at the other party members, drawing a breath to steel himself. "All that's left is to lure the dragon out of its lair."

Carth scowls. "Which, I assume, is harder than you're making it sound?"

"It's a dragon," Canderous snorts. "It's not supposed to be easy."

Tone placating, Bastila reassures everyone, "I'm sure there's a way to minimize the danger involved in such a feat." She stares pointedly at the Twi'lek, "Correct?"

Chuckling weakly, Komad admits, "Normally, I'd use banthas to draw the dragon out. They are a favorite prey item, after all."

"But...?" Vann arches a brow.

Gesturing to what remains of Hulas and the rest of the hunting party, Komad smiles meekly. "The commotion earlier appears to have scared the local herd off. We might be able to track them down
again, but doing could take an extra day, if not more."

"So, we need bait," Canderous surmises with a grin. "Live bait."

Seeming mildly disturbed by the suggestion, Komad quickly shakes his head, lekku swaying behind him. "Not necessarily! We may be able to throw a few sonic grenades towards the entrance of the cave. The sound ought to attract the dragon's attention, though…"

Vann groans. "And here comes the catch."

"Someone will have to leave this safe zone to actually throw the grenades." Komad points to the cave that looms in the distance. "We're a little over two hundred meters away right now. I don't know about you, but I can't throw that far with any accuracy."

Turning to look at the two Force users, Carth gestures between them. "Is there any chance one of you could just, you know…" He waves one hand through the air. "Float the grenades over?"

Lips twisting thoughtfully, Bastila is silent for a moment before slowly shaking her head. "Unfortunately, the distance is a bit too far to merely 'float' a grenade. Once again, accuracy is the issue, along with speed. The amount of Force power required to move a grenade into place before it detonates…"

"Alright, I get it!" Carth sighs. "A simple 'no' would have worked."

"Yeah, but then she wouldn't get to experience the joy that came with delivering that long-winded explanation." Rolling his shoulders with boredom, Canderous turns to look at the speeders, which have been parked nearby. "I could take one of those and drive up to the cave to deliver the payload. The extra noise a speeder will make can't hurt, either."

"And it will be a bigger, louder, less maneuverable target for the dragon to chase." Carth nods in mock agreement. "It's not really a great plan unless you're actively looking to get yourself killed."

"I don't see you coming up with anything better." Narrowing his eyes, Canderous challenges the pilot. "Besides, you can't deny that facing down a krayt dragon on a speeder in the middle of the desert is a battle for the ages."

Brow furrowing in confusion, Carth shakes his head. "What? This isn't about having an epic showdown with the dragon! It's about taking it down safely and responsibly…"

"And humanely," Bastila chirps.

"Oh right," glowering at the Jedi, Canderous snorts. "Force forbid we hurt the feelings of the dragon that we're about to kill!"

As his companions bicker back and forth, much to Komad's seeming irritation, Vann stares at the cave. Squinting against the harsh suns he judgments the distance between the mines and the dragon, tensing and relaxing his own muscles in the process. Opening his own Force connection, he lets the energy flow through his body, the surge of power like an electrical jolt to his system. He thinks back to his fight with Juhani, which feels like it happened a lifetime ago, and remembers how he augmented his own physical abilities. How much better will he be now that he's fully connected to the Force around him?

"I bet I can run for it and throw those grenades without slowing down much," he announces.

Canderous paused in the middle of some rant about Bastila, chuckling harshly at the mercenary's
statement. "And what makes you think that you can run faster than a speeder?"

"In quick bursts, I can run almost as fast as one. Not naturally, but if I harness the Force…" He blinks, turning to look at the others. "And anyway, I'm way more maneuverable than a speeder. I can jump higher too."

"This… is true," Bastila admits, albeit reluctantly. "When a Jedi channels the Force, they're capable of physical feats far beyond the normal Human spectrum. Still, that plan is incredibly risky."

"So send Canderous after me as a distraction!" Vann's suggestion immediately makes the Mandalorian grin. "If he doesn't have to worry about slowing down to throw a grenade, he'll be able to race up and back without any fancy maneuvering. That's what these speeders were designed for."


Sensing that he's about to get his way, as much as he potentially doesn't want to, Vann press on. "Plus, I'm alive. For all we know, that dragon could get spooked by a speeder. But if he smells me first, he might be more inclined to make an appearance."

"I like this plan." Clapping a large palm over the mercenary's shoulder, Canderous nods in approval. "Vann'll draw the dragon out, I'll distract it from Vann, and the rest of you will stay back here to finish it off."

"It sounds suicidal." Carth is staring at everyone else in palpable disbelief. "Bas… erm, Helena, are you really agreeing to this?"

Opening her mouth, a noncommittal squeak escapes the Jedi as she shrugs helplessly. "We don't have any other plans. And I do trust Vann and Canderous's abilities to… make the most out of a potentially lethal situation."

"Besides," Canderous throws a lopsided smirk at the pilot. "I'm counting on you to keep that thing off my back." He nods to the pair of blasters strapped to the other man's waist. "So maybe less yapping like a scared kath hound, and more lining up your shot?"

"Did you just call me a…?"

"The plan should work!" Komad's lekku twitch in irritation, his voice louder than it's been all day. "Krayt dragons are fierce, but their depth perception is poor. They've evolved to hunt slower moving prey like banthas, not speeders or… Jedi." He swallows hard at this, glancing nervously at the mercenary. "Anyway, two fast-moving targets ought to sufficiently confuse the dragon. That, plus the mines, should make it an easy target for the rest of us."

Gesturing to the Twi'lek, Canderous glares at the rest of the group. "See? Listen to the hunter. He knows what he's doing!"

Vann nods, taking a step towards Komad and pointedly ignoring it when the other man shies away. "Alright, I trust you," he states. "Just tell me what I need to do."

The rest of the planning goes much smoother, with the hunter taking charge and drawing a few rough diagrams in the sand. He cites his personal experiences with other beasts and even throws in a few stories about the dragon hunt that his father completed decades ago. It's fascinating in a weird way, and the more the Twi'lek speaks, the more Canderous's eyes shine at the prospect of this upcoming battle. Inversely, Carth becomes more sullen and withdrawn.
Taking his position about 25 meters ahead of the mines, Vann stretches for a moment as he waits for the signal to bolt. Glancing over his shoulder, he catches a glint of light as Canderous mounts the fastest of the speeders left behind by Hulas's people. Another few moments and he'll be off, using the Force to enhance his speed, hopefully making himself fast enough to avoid being caught by an angry krayt dragon. The grenades are strapped to his belt, ready to be thrown on the run.

Hearing Carth's voice just behind him is a surprise, especially since the pilot is supposed to be safely behind the protective string of mines. "Vann, are you insane? Actually, don't answer that. Just..." He shakes his head as he lopes closer. "There's still time to change your mind!"

"And why do you care if I get eaten by a dragon?" Vann arches a brow, throwing the other man a haughty glare. "There's a pile of electrocuted bodies just over there that, by your standards, says I'm not worth your concern."

Pausing, Carth peers in the direction of the earlier massacre for a moment before scrubbing one palm over his face. "Hulas and his people are not the point here."

Clenching his fists in frustration, Vann retorts, "You were mad at me about them, what, an hour ago?"

"I was mad at the situation! …Which you caused." Carth draws a deep breath through his nose. "But still! That doesn't mean that I want you to die."

"Look. You can like me or you can hate me, I understand either way." Vann shrugs airily, before pointing an accusing finger at the pilot. "Just make up your damned mind which it is!"

"It's not that simple. You're not that simple!" Carth glares right back, though his expression quickly softens. Lips pressed thoughtfully, he slowly admits, "Sometimes I feel like there are two people inside of that head of yours. One who's trying really hard to do the right thing, and one who's disturbingly okay with setting the galaxy on fire just to watch it burn."

A sense of weariness settles in Vann's chest, weighted down by memories that he can't recall. "There's dark and light in everyone," he finally mutters. "And sometimes the only way to do the right thing is to burn everything down and try again from scratch."

Carth stares at him like he's grown a second head. "That makes… no sense."

From within the safe zone, there's a momentary flash of light, caused by the bright Tatooine suns reflecting off a small sliver of mirror. That's the signal to begin, and off in the distance, a speeder engine revs in response. Turning to the pilot, Vann offers a twisted little grin. "Well, using yourself as bait to lure out a krayt dragon doesn't make much sense either." Closing his eyes, he centers his Force connection, infusing his body with the raw power. "But, here I go."

"Vann, wait!" Carth shouts, but it's too late.

Taking off like a blaster bolt, Vann feels his body surge forward with preternatural speed. Racing across the desert on foot is exhilarating, the hot air whipping his hair back as his feet practically fly over the sand. He can't tell exactly how fast he's going, but it's enough to make his breath catch in his throat from the thrill of it all. At the same time, he can feel the exertion burn in his muscles as the Force drives him forward while rapidly depleting his energy. He won't be able to keep this pace for long.

The cave comes into focus after only a few moments of running, its jagged entrance like the gaping maw of a primordial beast. Reaching for his belt Vann unclips a grenade, thumbing on the
activation switch as he sprints the final several meters into throwing range. Even from the distance, he can see the imposing form of the krayt dragon silhouetted against the darkness, its head stretched out and its tail curled around its massive body. Barely breaking stride, he lob the first grenade towards the mouth of the cavern. A moment later there's a deafening shockwave of sound that shakes the ground and sends a blast of sand flying in all directions. Dashing past the front of the cave he throws the second grenade, and then the third.

Letting out a roar of irritation, the krayt dragon comes charging out of its den before the final device has time to detonate. This results in the creature taking a sonic blast straight to the face, sand blowing into its eyes and nostrils as the physical pulse of sound vibrates around its head. Enraged, the dragon shakes its massive form as it searches for the source of its discomfort. The anger it's experiencing is palpable, an icy chill that resonates through the Force like a cold wind. And that reverberation bounces off something inside of the cave, thrumming with raw power and resonating through Vann with jolting familiarity. It's not the same haunting echo that he experienced on Dantooine, but it's similar enough to be recognizable.

The damned Star Map is in that cave. Behind the krayt dragon. Because of course it is.

The roar of Canderous's speeder is almost on top of Vann as he pauses for just a moment, a few meters away from the increasingly irate dragon. The plan is for him to use the last of his Force energy to dart to his left, while the speeder takes off to the right. According to Komad this should confuse the dragon enough to prevent it from attacking a single target, while still drawing it into an ambush from the collection of mines and the three other members of the hunting party. For all its flaws, it's a decent plan. Which is why Vann almost feels guilty for ruining it. Almost.

Drawing a deep breath into his already aching lungs, Vann floods his limbs with another burst of Force energy. It tingles as it flows through his system, colder than before yet almost invigorating. Pushing his body to its limits, he rushes directly up to the dragon. Not bothering to veer away from the beast he speeds between its front legs, head ducking down to avoid scraping its scaly belly. Air blows past his left ear, and he can smell the rank odor of the creature's breath as fangs barely miss digging into his shoulder. The dragon moves, attempting to wheel on him, and it's only thanks to his advanced reflexes that he's able to slide to the ground and avoid a swipe from its massive claw. Skidding across the rocky cave floor, he narrowly dodges the lashing tail that sweeps through the air mere centimeters above his head.

The ground shakes as the krayt dragon bellows again, and he can hear his name being shouted from outside. The bond with Bastila flares with concern, her own Force connection pounding against his mental walls. He doesn't have time to do more than send a quick burst of reassurance through the connection before pushing it aside. Holding out his palm, he calls his lightsaber to his hand and ignites the weapon, violet blade illuminating the dim cavern with an eerie glow. Whirling around to face the mouth of the cave, Vann shifts into an offensive stance, ready to be an idiot and face the krayt dragon alone. But the only thing he sees is its rapidly retreating form, tail twitching hard enough to knock several chunks of rock from the cave walls as it charges into the bright daylight. The howl of a speeder engine being repeatedly revved to its brink is audible from just beyond the cavern, joined by a cacophony of blaster fire. Twin pistols, from the sounds of it. Carth. Oh, he is going to be pissed about this.

Still holding his 'saber defensively across his torso, Vann carefully backs up further into the cave. His eyes remain glued to the entrance, even though the dragon's bulk is rapidly shrinking into the distance. The speeder engine and the blaster fire are also growing fainter, and he breathes out a sigh that he didn't realize he was holding. A moment later all other noise is drowned out by a cacophonous boom, the brilliant yellow lights of a distant explosion illuminating the already
dazzling desert landscape.

Well, hopefully, that takes care of that. Holding his lightsaber forward, Vann uses it to guide his path as he carefully turns around and picks his way through the dragon's lair. Now more aware of his surroundings, he almost gags at the rancid smell that fills the space. Eyes slowly adjusting to the gloom, he can see the partially-consumed corpses of multiple banthas scattered across the cavern floor. Littered among them are the chewed-up, decomposing remains of a few sentient creatures, their exact species hard to decipher thanks to their advanced stages of decay. Swallowing the bile that rises in the back of his throat, he shakes his head. It does nothing to clear the nauseating odor, which seems to cling to the inside of his nostrils like a fetid oil.

Vann thinks there's more shouting in the distance, and he's tempted to check on his companions, but something towards the back of the cave sends a ripple of energy through the Force. He cautiously moves towards whatever seems to be beckoning him, only half aware as his boots crunch through the desiccated shards of bone and horn strewn across the cave floor. The source of the energy slowly reveals itself, shrouded in the cool violet glow of his 'saber. Standing at the back of the cave is another ancient mechanical device, this one fully intact and waiting to be accessed. As its Force connection melds with Vann's own, his mind becomes hazy and distant. For a moment, the violet blade seems to flicker to a more vibrant blue, though that might just be a trick of light.

Couching down he places his free hand against the device's disc-like base, instinctively channeling his own Force energy. Despite his skin being bare, he swears that he feels the sensation of gloves encapsulating his fingers. As it's infused with the Force user's essence, the claw-like arms of the device creak for a moment, and then swing down as a bright ball of light forms at its center. The light expands, just like on Dantooine, illuminating the entire cavern with its shimmering blue gleam. A map fragment appears within the levitating orb, providing a fresh set of lines and locations than can be fused into the larger Star Map. It's almost an afterthought for Vann to retrieve his datapad, transcribing the information into his notes as though in a fog-like dream.

He feels like he's done this all before, and in a way, he has. This is a repeat of Dantooine. But this is something more than mere déjà vu. It's somehow achingly familiar, and yet just beyond his realm of accessible memories. If he could only break through…

"Vann! What the hells is going on?!"

Blinking, Vann realizes that he's currently kneeling against the rough cave floor, rocks digging into his knees. The Star Map has disappeared, arms folded back into place and the glowing orb nowhere in sight. He's not sure how long he's been like this, but the growing ache in his thighs suggests that it's longer than he realized. The datapad is still clutched in one hand, new coordinates added to the existing data. His powered-down light saber rests in the other. Holding up the pad, he breathes, "I found the map…?"

"And almost got eaten by a krayt dragon." Carth is standing a couple of meters from the entrance of the cave, blasters holstered and arms crossed angrily over his chest. There's a small cut on his forehead, half healed from the application of a medpac. "Oh, and you almost got Canderous killed in the process."

"Ha! You wish." Chuckling at the very suggestion, the Mandalorian strides into the cavern. There's a slight limp to his left leg and blood stains the left side of his shirt, but he's wearing a wide grin and his eyes sparkle with mischief. "It'll take more than a kripping dragon to take me down."

Blinking, Vann looks down at his hands again. He can still feel the gloves covering them, even if he can't see them. And the 'saber in his hand is supposed to be blue. "I… Sorry," he mumbles,
"How did a map call to you?" Carth's eyes narrow, worry pinching his brow as he slowly walks towards the mercenary. "You're not making sense."

Nodding in recognition, Canderous snorts. "Right, Jedi stuff. Got it."

Carth is now standing over the mercenary, and he places a hand gingerly on the other man's shoulder. Giving it a gentle squeeze he mutters, "This isn't just Jedi mysticism anymore. This is getting scary. And it's getting worse."

Only distantly aware of the other man's proximity, Vann closes his eyes as he subconsciously leans into the touch. "I think I was here before," he admits.

"Here on Tatooine?" Canderous shrugs, though there's a bit of uneasiness to the gesture. "Wouldn't surprise me."

"Do you mean Tatooine, or do you mean this cave?" Carth's voice is hushed, tentative.

"Both, possibly." Vann's head cants to the side, his mind still untethered to the present. "Or, at least, Revan was here before. But this time it didn't feel like Revan. It felt like me."

Lips pressed into a concerned frown, Canderous nods once. "Yeah, definitely time for you to talk to Bastila about this. Because I don't have a kriffing clue what you're going on about."

Gritting his teeth, Carth reaches down to help his companion to his feet. "I don't think she knows what's going on half the time."

"Yeah, well, either way, we should get back to her." Canderous turns, heading towards the cave's exit. "Leave her alone with Komad long enough, and she's liable to try and bring the damned krayt dragon back to life."

Reality slowly seeping back into his mind, Vann blinks. "The... speeder?" Tucking both his lightsaber and the datapad back into his jacket, he draws a slow breath. Probably not the best idea in the cave's rancid air. Choking back a gag, he coughs, "What happened to the speeder?"

"Well, it was fine until the damned dragon got ahold of it." Canderous turns, heading towards the cave's exit. "Leave her alone with Komad long enough, and she's liable to try and bring the damned krayt dragon back to life."

"Well, it was fine until the damned dragon got ahold of it." Canderous chuckles at the memory. "After that, all bets were off."

"...The dragon did what?"

Turning to glare at the man beside him, Carth hisses, "Well, once the dragon only had one target to chase after, it managed to grab the back of the speeder and shake it apart. Sent Canderous flying a good four meters across the Dune Sea in the process."

Swallowing hard, Vann winces at the thought. "Sorry," he mutters. "Things just got... weird."

"Don't apologize." The Mandalorian's tone is gruff as he speaks. "You had your mission, and I had mine. I wanted to face down a dragon, and I did. It's dead, and I'm still here to tell the tale."

"And to my people, that's called being suicidal." Carth rolls his eyes.

"With an attitude like that, it's amazing that you managed to win the war." Barking out a bitter
laugh, Canderous continues to stride out of the cave. "Sometimes to win a battle you gotta take
risks, Carth. Revan knew that. You should take a note from him."

Scoffing, the pilot shakes his head. "Yeah, well, I'm not particularly fond of Revan right now
either. It's his damn fault we're out here in this desert, looking for remnants of his past."

Waving his hand dismissively, Canderous doesn't bother to turn around. "Yeah, yeah. Tell your
complaints to Bastila when we get back."

The rest of the walk across the dunes is almost entirely silent, each of the three men lost in their
own thoughts. Carth occasionally casts a worried glance at Vann, mouth opening to say something,
though he never voices his concerns. Getting back to their rendezvous point takes far longer with
Force augmented speed, and the sweltering suns feel that much hotter because of it.

As the trio walks over the final crest the prone body of the krayt dragon is immediately visible, it's
dark scales a vivid contrast against the paleness of the sand. Blood is splattered across the
landscape, as are the remains of multiple mines. However, the shifting terrain and blowing winds
are quickly hiding the gruesome remains of the battle, repairing the desert's pristine façade. As
they draw closer, a sour smell fills the air. The source of the odor quickly becomes visible as more
of the carcass comes into view. Someone has already gutted the creature, its entrails spilled out
onto the dunes in a hot, soupy mess. The stench is coming from an organ that's been slit open,
green bile oozing across the sand.

Perhaps more disturbing than the eviscerated corpse of the dragon is the much smaller form of
Bastila, her blaster clutched in her shaking hands. It's pointed at something just out of view, her
eyes blown wide from shock. The sight is enough to send all three men running, their boots sinking
awkwardly into the sand as they hurry towards the Jedi.

"Bastila!" Vann is the first to reach her, possibly because he subconsciously increased his speed
with the Force. "What happened? You're shaking." He tries to reach out to her through their bond
but her end is nothing but static, mental walls firmly in place.

"Hey kid," Canderous's voice is surprisingly calm, as though he's speaking to a startled animal.
"Mind putting down that blaster?"

Blinking rapidly, Bastila's head jerks towards her companions. She lets out a soft gasp, eyes darting
towards the blaster pistol as though just realizing that she's holding it. With a yelp, she drops the
weapon into the sand, hands still trembling slightly. "He… Komad… He's not what he claimed!"

Now close enough to see what the blaster was pointed at, Vann spots the still form of the Twi'lek
hunter collapsed in the sand. There are at least three visible blaster holes burned into his chest.
"What do you mean, Bastila?"

Drawing a shaking breath, the Jedi runs her fingers through the front of her hair. It's come loose
from its ponytail and is hanging in her face in bedraggled chunks. "After the dragon was down, and
Carth and Canderous went to check on you, Komad… I suppose he thought I was just a weak little
girl. That I would be easy to intimidate."

A dark expression crosses Carth's face at the implication. "And then what?"

"Nothing physical," Bastila reassures the others. "He just threatened me. Implied that he'd changed
his mind about not telling anyone that we're Jedi." She swallows hard. "He said that he knew we
weren't with the Republic and that he could probably get a better reward for us than for the
dragon."
"Kriffing hells..." Canderous growls angrily. "That slimy son-of-a kath hound!"

Eyes still narrowed, Carth glares at Komad's body. "Didn't he think we'd track him down? I thought he was afraid of Vann!"

Bastila shakes her head, "He knows this desert far better than we do. He said as much. I think he was planning on taking one of the speeders and utilizing a shortcut back to Anchorhead. You were all still in the cave, and I couldn't reach Vann through our bond..." She sighs, wrapping her arms around her torso. "He was frightened. And angry. So many dark emotions."

"That greedy little coward! He had a krayt dragon and it's kriffing pearl right here." Canderous sneers at the corpse. "He could have been set for years!"

"A pearl might only keep him comfortable for a couple of years. Turning us over to the Republic... that could have set him up for life. Gotten him off Tatooine and onto a Core World. An easier life than hunting in this desert." Carth looks grimly thoughtful, lips pale and thinned with anger.

"That's what he was implying. He mentioned that Czerka probably has a direct line to the Republic, and all he had to do was walk into their office and talk to someone..." She trails off, closing her eyes as she draws another unsteady breath. "I tried to talk him out of it, to use the Force and convince him to stay. But his mind was too strong, or perhaps too clouded by the dark side. He wouldn't listen to me and..."

Vann nods slowly, and he probes the bond once more. It's beginning to reopen, Bastila's mind tumultuous and hard to decipher. The pride and fury that normally stay to the periphery are more noticeable, a cold chill amongst her naturally sunny mental outlook. "And you shot him," he finishes for her.

Nodding weakly, the Jedi hangs her head, eyes downcast. "I tried to get him to listen to reason, to sit down with us and work out a deal. I even offered for him to take the speeders and the pearl, and whatever else he thought was valuable, as compensation."

"You didn't do anything wrong," Canderous snaps, ducking his head down in an attempt to meet his companion's eyes. "So, stop thinking that you did."

"But I lost control of my emotions. I gave in to fear and violence rather than promoting peace. It's not the Jedi way!" Bastila casts a pleading look at the Mandalorian. "What I did was dark. It was wrong. But after what he said at the end..."

"And what did he say?" Carth gently prods.

Blinking, Bastila studies each of her companions in turn before admitting, "He said that we were more dangerous than any creature out on these dunes, the krayt dragons included." Her jaw clenches as she continues, "And that, like any dangerous creatures, we had to be taken care of least we pose a threat to those trying to earn an honest living."

A cold stab of rage surges through Vann, and he feels the Force crackle at his fingertips. It's not lightning this time, but he gets the sense that he could call forth that power with very little effort. Komad was referring to him specifically. He's the only true mercenary of the group, and he's the one that the hunter visibly feared. Bastila, Carth, even Canderous were only out here because of him... "If I were you, there wouldn't be a body left to find," he grits out.

"Bastila," Carth crouches down and retrieves her blaster from the sand, holding it out to her. "Vann and Canderous are right. You did everything you could to avoid bloodshed. Hells, you probably
did more to try and promote peace than the three of us could manage combined."

"Not gonna argue with that," Canderous chuckles.

Delicately accepting her blaster from Carth, Bastila flips on the safety before turning the weapon over in her hands. "I warned him. I said that I'd shoot, but I don't think he believed me…" She forces a watery smile, her lips quivering a bit. "I'm honestly a bit embarrassed for falling apart like this. But I've never just… shot someone before. There's always been a duel, or a battle, or… This is not the Jedi way!"

Feeling woefully inadequate, Vann slowly approaches his companion and places his hands over her own, grasping the blaster between them. It's an odd mirror of the comfort that she provided earlier, and recognition surges through their mental connection. Clearing his throat, he carefully whispers, "The Jedi protect people, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, you protected us. And our mission." Feeling slightly awkward in his attempt to provide earnest reassurance, Vann stumbles over words that would come naturally if only they were a lie. But it's the truth, as far as he sees it. "And by protecting our mission, you're probably protecting thousands of people across the galaxy. If we can stop Malak, or even just slow him down, we'll save a lot of lives." He peers into the Jedi's grey eyes, which are slightly misty with unshed tears. "So, you did the right thing, okay? Even if it feels like the wrong thing right now."

Weak smile growing to become more genuine, Bastila nods. "That's… a very Jedi thing to say." Laughing softly, she asks, "When did you become so wise?"

Falling back on his infamous glibness, Vann responds, "See, there's this little voice that's always in my head, telling me to do the right thing. And I guess she rubbed off on me or something." He offers a dramatic shrug of his shoulders.

A ripple of amusement passes through the bond, and Bastila laughs again. "Ah, well, that presence in your mind must be an incredible talent."

"Not really." Vann shakes his head. "She's just very good at nagging."

Gasping in mock insult, Bastila pulls her hands away before giving the mercenary a playful slap on the shoulders. "I do not nag!" she scolds him.

"No," he replies with false seriousness. "Never!"

"So, I've got a question for the group." Canderous is standing over Komad's body, holding up something spherical between his thumb and forefinger. It gleams in the sunlight, a rainbow of colors shimmering across its silvery-white surface. "How much do you think this is worth?"

"A lot," Carth surmises. "Easily enough to pay for fuel and supplies for the rest of the planets Vann wants to visit."

Staring at the pearl, a stab of guilt shoots through Vann's core. He can feel Bastila's fascination with the object, and the faint hum of Force energy that surrounds it. It's not just a jewel, but something akin to their lightsaber crystals in the way it resonates with power and life. "Give it to Bastila," he finally demands. "She earned it."

Gaping at the mercenary, Canderous asks, "Are you nuts?"
"You know," Carth quips, "I ask that same question at least once a day…"

Still staring in disbelief, the Mandalorian continues to hold the pearl. "You cannot be serious. She said it herself, this thing is worth a small fortune!"

"Bastila killed Komad," Vann states, spitting out the fact as quickly and plainly as possible. "That pearl was on his corpse. So, stands to reason that the pearl, and anything else on him, is hers."

Grinding his teeth in visible frustration, Canderous growls. "Appealing to my warrior's honor? That's low. I respect you for it, but... Arrgh!" Casting a last mournful look at the pearl, he growls as he tosses the small orb to the Jedi. She catches it on instinct, cradling it in her palm.

"Thanks, Canderous," Vann replies sweetly, ignoring the Mandalorian's visible outrage.

Still staring at the object in her hand, Bastila whispers, "Vann… I don't know if I can accept this."

"If you feel bad about keeping it, then sell it. We'll be visiting other planets, and it might be worth even more there." He leans in a little closer. "But if you want to use it for yourself, then do it. The Force works in mysterious ways, right? Maybe you were meant to have this pearl."

"I'll think on it," the Jedi breathes, but there's a certain delighted glint in her eyes that says her mind is already made up.

"You know, I liked you better when you were incoherent inside of that cave." Canderous shakes his head as he walks past, muttering in Mando'a about idiots with no common sense.

Carefully tucking the pearl into a vest pocket, Bastila frowns at the Mandalorian's words. "… Incoherent?"

"I'll explain it later," Vann replies airily, with no actual intent to ever explain anything.

Mounting one of the remaining speeders, Carth glances over at his companions. "Well, this should be an interesting ride back to Anchorhead."

Pausing to point at Bastila, Canderous shouts, "We're going to talk about that damned pearl." With that, he kicks his own speeder into gear. The engine roars to life, blowing up a gust of sand in its wake.

There's only one speeder left at this point, two having been destroyed in the original battle and a third by Canderous's showdown with the krayt dragon. It's a good thing that Komad didn't manage to steal a speeder for himself, because that would have necessitated a level of sharing that would probably result in another shooting. Come to think of it, the Twi'lek died a couple meters away from the vehicles, which makes Vann wonder just how pissed-off Bastila really was. It's pretty impressive.

Bastila also notes that they'll be sharing a speeder back to Anchorhead. "Oh good," she says with mock delight. "Now we'll have plenty of time to discuss the visions you've been experiencing."

"Oh great," Vann mimics sarcastically. He hops onto the speeder in one smooth motion, the Jedi following close behind. Before the engine is fully running, she's already asking questions about what the mercenary saw during the 'lightning incident,' and what he encountered while inside the cave. For his part, he's already trying to figure out how to claim that the speeder's noise also interferes with their mental connection.

Luckily, they've only been traveling a short distance before Canderous mentions the krayt dragon
pearl again, which ignites its own argument that is blissfully free of any mentions of Revan or the Force. This is a good thing because Vann's animosity towards Tatooine's vast desert is only increasing as the disconcerting nature of his recent visions continues to weigh heavily on his mind. They're not just dreams anymore, but full blown hallucinations. And as much as it pains him to admit it, Carth is right. They're getting worse.

He drives on in sullen silence for a little while longer, listening to Bastila and Canderous bicker back and forth over the din of the engines. Sand is buffeting his face and stinging his eyes, making it difficult to see. So difficult that he to swerve to avoid a humanoid-shaped figure standing in the middle of the dunes. The unexpected jolt causes Bastila to bounce in her seat, ramming into Vann's back to prevent being thrown from the speeder. Jamming on the breaks the mercenary pulls the vehicle to an abrupt stop, sending out a spray of sand in his wake. Both Carth and Canderous pull-up beside him a moment later, staring confusedly at the completely still form half-buried in sand.

Leaning in closer, Vann grins when he recognizes the distinctive scuffed red paint. "Hey," he calls, "We found H-Kay!"

Carth chuckles humorlessly. "Hard to believe that droid might be the last surviving member of the hunting party."

Thoughtfully studying the disabled droid, Vann turns to the other men. Gesturing to the extra space on their speeders he asks, "Hey, can one of you carry him back to the settlement?"

Canderous shifts to adjust his pack of supplies, remarking, "If I transfer some stuff to Carth's speeder, I can probably fit him on my back without a problem. Why? You planning on selling him too?"

"Nah," Vann shrugs, amused. "I was actually thinking I might take him with us and fix him up between planets."

"Really?" Carth's brows arch in exasperation. "That droid has the worst personality…"

"I kinda like him," Vann counters. "Besides, he could be useful. He has some combat programming, and might be a good compliment to Tee-Three."

Bastila peers at the unresponsive unit. "Well, I suppose it can never hurt to have an extra droid around, even one with as foul an attitude as this one."

Already beginning to transfer supplies between the speeders, Canderous also pauses to look at the droid. "Hey, maybe once he's repaired he'll be less hostile. That Selkath might have loaded him with a bunch of junk programming to make sure nobody would want to steal him."

"Honestly?" Vann states, "I hope he stays exactly the same."

"Of course you do," Carth grumbles with a sigh. "Of. Course."

Chapter End Notes

1. Two-for-one chapter update! Long story short, Ch. 10 and 11 were originally a single chapter that I split in two when it became obvious that I had enough material for two chapters.
2. Fun things I got to research for this chapter: the effects of electrocution and lightning strikes on the human body. Did you know that ~90% of individuals struck by lightning in the U.S. actually survive? Or that the electricity produced by a 9-volt battery is enough to kill a human IF it reaches their heart continuously for three seconds? Never say this story isn't educational.

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Chapter Summary

In which Mission has her own mission, as does Juhani, and nothing goes quite as planned. New information is uncovered, and secrets are kept.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

11.

(Interlude – Mission)

"Watch the ship, Mission. It's important." The young Twi'lek rolls her eyes, her voice a mocking, nasal falsetto. She's reclined on the Ebon Hawk's bridge, sprawled in the pilot's seat with her feet resting beside the controls. It's been four days since most the crew agreed to take some sort of shady-ass job that has them exploring Tatooine's vast Dune Sea. Before they left, they managed to convince Mission to stay behind in Anchorhead with the Hawk. Which means that everyone else is out having fun while she's bored out of her mind in the galaxy's hottest and most miserable port.

Of course she asked, and then begged, to come along with V-Man and Bastila. But the adults decided to act like her parents or something and were suddenly concerned for her wellbeing. Whatever. At least Vann had the decency to make it sound like staying with the ship was important. He told the Twi'lek that she had to stay on the Hawk, since Czerka was probably going to try and snoop around to find some dirt to extort them with. "I can't believe V-Mann had the nerve to try and compliment me! Saying stuff like, 'Oh Mission, you're fast, and you're smart, and they're going to underestimate you.'" She scoffs again. "At least I knew that a was a load and a half. I saw right through that bunch of bantha shit!"

Technically it took her over a standard hour to realize that staying on the ship was not a reward, and by then the others had vanished into the desert. But as soon as they get back, she is going to tell them the hells off for sticking her with this lousy, boring-ass job. Oh, you better believe she is going to tell them exactly what she thinks about being left here to rot…

From his position awkwardly squeezed into the copilot's seat, Zaalbar lets out a low-pitched trill that's equal parts sympathetic and weary. "I still believe that Vann is just trying to keep you safe."

"Of course he is! Because he thinks I'm just some dumb kid," Mission turns to look at her friend, nose wrinkling in distaste. "Like I can't handle myself! He saw me on Taris, he knows I'm not afraid to pump someone full of blaster holes." The mention of her destroyed home world sends a jolt of sadness through her, and she quickly she shakes her head to dismiss the thought.

"I know you can handle yourself, Mission." Zaalbar gives the teen a pointed look, his expression a good approximation of a frown. "And I'm sure Vann does too. But Tatooine is a dangerous place…"

"So was Taris! You telling me that rakghouls ain't dangerous?" Scoffing, the Twi'lek turns to stare out of the transparisteel window, the dull browns of Anchorhead spread out before her. "And
besides, me and you together can handle anything."

Sighing, Zaalbar shakes his head. "There are things out there that scare even me." Growling thoughtfully, he adds, "Vann respects you, and he does treat you with honor. But there's also honor in trying to protect those younger than yourself…"

"Just 'cause you pledged a life debt to the guy doesn't mean that you have to agree with everything he says." Sighing in irritation, Mission lets her arms dangle lifelessly off the seat. "I mean, you can at least pretend that you think V-Man is a giant asshole for leaving me here. You were my friend first…"

"I'm still your friend…"

"I know, Big Z." Swinging her legs down from the Hawk's console, Mission lets out an exaggerated sigh. "It's just so boring watching this stupid ship!"

By now realizing that there's nothing he can say to alleviate his friend's ennui, Zaalbar offers a noncommittal trill. When this only earns him an irate glare, he suggests, "Maybe Juhani has found something to do?"

The mention of the Cathar perks Mission up, and she stretches lazily before leaping out of the pilot's seat. "Geeze, I sure hope she's thought of something fun. Lately, all she does is sit there and meditate. Boring!"

"Well, she did let you watch while she practiced with her lightsaber." Zaalbar takes the opportunity to unfold himself from the copilot's chair. "You seemed to enjoy that."

"Yeah, that was pretty cool," Mission draws. "At least she let me watch. Bastila's got a stick up her ass about that sort of thing. Always saying stuff like 'Lightsabers are not toys' and 'Of course I never use the Force for frivolous reasons.'" She's once again using her nasal falsetto, the tone that she's assigned to any adult who tries to tell her what to do.

Zaalbar offers a noncommittal shrug. "I don't know anything about the ways of the Force." His voice is hopeful as he adds, "But perhaps Juhani might be able to explain in better?"

Jabbing her elbow into the Wookiee's side, Mission grins. "That anxious for someone else to listen to me complain, huh?" She rolls her eyes. "Come on, Big Z. Let's go see if we can find some fun."

Running on ahead, the Twi'lek is almost to the doorway of the bridge when the ship's comm panel starts flashing and beeping. Zaalbar lets out a nervous trill, gesturing to the buttons. "I believe we have an incoming message," he warns.

"Maybe? I don't know!" Rushing over to the panel, Mission stares at the blinking lights for several moments all the while cursing in a mixture of Ryl and Basic. "Dammit, Carth! Why didn't you explain how to use this kriffing thing?!"

"I think he did," Zaalbar mutters, one large hand moving to rub the back of his head. Glaring at her friend from the corner of her eye, Mission scowls. "Well, he should have done a better job!" Studying the panel for another moment, she finally pressed a series of buttons that seem right, at least in theory. There's a faint hiss of static, the crackle filling the small bridge for an instant before a faintly accent voice breaks through.

"Mission, are you there?" Juhani's voice is hushed and slightly muffled by what sounds like wind.
Frowning, the Twi'lek nods for a moment before remembering that this isn't a video comm. "Yeah, me and Big Z are here. Something wrong?"

There's a brief pause, and then, "There are two men headed towards the ship, both wearing Czerka uniforms." An irate hiss slips into Juhani's voice. "I do not have a good feeling about them."

"Wait, where are you?" Mission leans her hands against the comm panel, pressing her face closer to where she thinks the microphone is located. "Are you off the ship?!"

"Yes." There's an exasperated note to Juhani's words, possible because she's also spent the last four days listening to the Twi'lek rant about being stuck on the Hawk. "I needed to acquire some supplies. A brief errand, at most."

"And you couldn't take me with you?" Despite knowing how petulant she sounds, Mission can't help but whine.

Tone terse Juhani growls, "Now is not the time, child!"

"Child? I ain't no kid, Juhani!" Small palms slamming against the panel, Mission grits her teeth. "I'll have you know…"

"Mission, please!" Zaalbar's roar fills the bridge, echoing off the durasteel walls. "This seems like it's important."

"Focus!" Voice rising above a whisper, Juhani sounds like she's becoming genuinely angry. "These men, I believe they are what Vann was worried about. See to it that you send them away. Do not let them access our records or anything else on the ship."

Scoffing at the simple orders, Mission waves her hand dismissively. "Alright, alright! I got it. No problem at all."

"Good." For a moment, the comm crackles with more static, suggesting that the transmission has ended. However, it quickly clicks back to life as Juhani adds, "Be careful. These Czerka employees… they have no morals or honor. They are dangerous."

"Don't worry, Big Z's got my back." Glancing back at her friend, Mission is glad to see the Wookiee nod in agreement. "We can handle this."

"Fine, then. Good luck to you," Juhani is tentative as she mutters a quick, "And may the Force be with you."

Sighing heavily at the traditional Jedi farewell, Mission waits until the other end of the comm is nothing but static. The various lights on the panel blink once more, many of the greens now replaced with red. She assumes that this means the Cathar has terminated communication and quickly closes the line on the Hawk's end.

The panel has just returned to its previous silence when there's a loud rapping on the Ebon Hawk's entry door, followed by a scraping sound. The bridge is too far away to determine exactly what's happening, but it only takes a few moments for Mission to access the various cameras that are scattered throughout the ship. Switching between views, she's able to get a decent angle on the pair of men who currently appear to be trying to slice the door open. "Bantha shitbags!" she sneers. "Can't even wait a minute for someone to answer?"

"I don't think they want an answer," Zaalbar growls, sounding equally frustrated.
"Probably not," Mission reaches down to tap the blaster at her hip. "But I'm gonna give 'em one anyway!" Dashing towards the bridge's exit, she glances over her shoulder to shout, "Keep an eye on those cameras, okay? If I look like I'm in trouble, you know what to do!"

Zaalbar shifts uncomfortably gaze torn between the view screens and his friend. "The entrance is on the other side of the ship…"

"Yeah, and you run fast!" Pausing at the doorway between the bridge and the corridor, Mission grins. "I can take care of myself for a minute, you know."

"Be careful Mission." Still frowning, Zaalbar growls worriedly.

Patting the stealth field generation around her waist, the Twi'lek giggles. "Hey! Nobody's gonna catch me if I don't want them too." Before she can be given any more unsolicited advice, she turns and bolts down the corridor, footsteps rattling off the durasteel floor.

It's a few quick twists and turns down the narrow passages of the Ebon Hawk before Mission is standing a meter or so away from the ship's entrance. Drawing her blaster pistol, she carefully aims it at the door as she slams her palm against the latching mechanism. There's a pneumatic whoosh of air as the seal releases, the door swinging up and letting in a blast of hot desert air. The heat is oppressive, though less incapacitating than the blinding light of the twin suns. It's only by virtue of her Twi'lek biology, evolved to tolerate the extremes of Ryloth, that Mission is able to remain focused on the pair of Human men who are standing at the ship's entrance, poised to slice the door open.

"Excuse me!" the teen snaps, blaster now pointed at the men. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

The first man, a light-skinned individual with the rougher accent of an Outer Rim native, doesn't bother to look ashamed. "We knocked, but nobody answered."

"Well, you didn't give me time!" Mission's eyes narrow. "But I'm here now. And I'm only gonna ask this once. What do you want?"

Straightening his uniform, the second man glares at the Twi'lek. His skin is much darker than his companion, and when he speaks his voice has the refined qualities of a Core denizen. "It has come to our attention that your ship, and its cargo, have not been inspected by Czerka authorities." He seems unfazed by the blaster pointed at his torso.

Lowering the blaster ever-so-slightly so that it's aimed at crotch level, Mission cants her head to the side. She has to stop herself from grinning because clearly, these two idiots have no idea who they're dealing with. "Well, your records are wrong. We were inspected when we paid our docking fee." She even manages to make her voice sound hurt, as though the lack of trust legitimately wounds her pride.

The second Czerka employee checks the datapad in his hands, tapping in a few things before shaking his head. "No, I don't see any record of an inspection."

"Oh well, I have the information right here." Casting one last glance towards the two Czerka creeps, Mission takes a step to her left and grabs the malfunctioning datapad that she stashed near the ship's entrance just for this purpose. Vann did say that she's good at giving people the runaround about stuff like this, though she thought he was just appealing to her ego. Powering up the pad, she taps in a few codes that ought to make its glitchy software that much worse. "I mean, the guy we paid signed-off and everything. Just look here!"
Practically snatching the pad from the Twi'lek's hand, the first Czerka goon glances it over, only to scowl after a few moments. "This doesn't say anything! I can't even read this damn thing."

"Well, it's not my fault if you're not literate in Basic." Mission scoffs, blaster still at the ready. "Do I gotta point to where the info is?" She walks up to the man, rolling her eyes as she leans in close enough to look at the datapad's screen. Letting her face fall in an expression of shock, she gasps theatrically, "Oh hells, what did you do to my pad?"

There's a note of panic in the Human's voice as he quickly assures the teen, "I didn't do anything! It was like this when you handed it to me."

By now having a little too much fun at these goons' expense, Mission rapidly shakes her head. "Uh-uh! No way! It was working just fine until a moment ago." Placing her free hand on her hip, she pouts angrily at the men. "First you try to break into my ship, and then you accuse me of not having my cargo inspected when I totally did, and now you're calling me a liar? I think I'm gonna march right down to the Czerka office and…"

"Oh give it a rest, kid!" The second creep is glaring at the teen as he shoulders his associate out of the way. "I know this isn't your ship. So why don't you go get an adult who we can talk to?"

"I ain't some random kid, you know!" Mission has to bite back her anger at the implication. "I'm a member of this crew, and if you've got something to say you can say it to…"

A strong hand closes on the Twi'lek's bicep, yanking her towards the ship's entrance. The dark-skinned Czerka employee has her arm firmly in his grasp, fingers tight enough to bruise. "That's enough out of you," he snarls. "Now either you can comm whoever's actually in charge, or I can just hold you right here while my partner examines your cargo for himself."

"Hey!" When her arm refuses to wrench free from the man's grasp, Mission points her blaster at his head. Her tone is icy as she states, "I ain't afraid to shoot you right between the eyes, you slimy son-of-a…"

The first Czerka creep moves faster than expected, both hands grabbing the Twi'lek's wrist and twisting hard until she yelps in pain, finger tapping the blaster's hair trigger twice before it slips from her grip. Unfortunately, the bolts fly wide of their mark and soar harmlessly into the air as the pistol clatters to the floor, leaving her defenseless. With a grim smirk of satisfaction, the lighter skinned human continues to pin the teen's wrist in place. "Calm down," he scolds. "If you hold still and let us do our jobs, we won't have to hurt you."

Drawing in a deep breath, Mission arches her neck as she hocks up a wad of saliva and spits it directly in the face of the first Czerka employee. "Krif you!" she shouts, grinning triumphantly when the spittle lands directly on his cheek in a wet, glistening glob. Without thinking twice, the darker skinned man backhands the teen with all his might. The hit is hard enough to jerk her head to the side, the rest of her lean form shuddering slightly from the force of the impact. She yelps at the pain, but it doesn't break her tough exterior. Rather, she turns her head to glare at the Human, a thin coating of blood painting her teeth. "Oh," she says, laughing humorlessly. "You just made a huge mistake. Big Z, why don't you come out here and…"

Mission expects the hairy form of a Wookiee to come barreling through the Hawk's entrance, roar shaking the durasteel walls and causing these slime-balls to piss themselves in terror. So, she's appropriately shocked when she's rescued by the hum of a lightsaber, its brilliant crimson blade cutting a swath of pain as it arcs gracefully through the air. There's a sharp sizzle, followed by the rank odor of burnt flesh, and one of the Czerka creeps restraining the teen lets out a howl of pain as his arm drops to the ground beside his feet. The saber hums again as it plunges through his chest,
and he falls silent.

Mouth agape in horror, the other Human's eyes are almost comically wide as he watches his partner slump across the entrance ramp. His head swivels from side to side, feet shuffling for a moment as he tries to decide which direction to flee in. He never gets the chance to make that decision as the deadly red blade of the lightsaber hisses once more before slicing across his abdomen, burning a deep gouge into his gut. A keening moan escapes him as he clutches the wound, sinking to his knees in the process. The next moment the 'saber blade stabs directly through his heart, and he collapses beside his partner.

Expression cold, Juhani is still crouched in an offensive position as she powers down her lightsaber. Quickly clipping the hilt to her belt, she adjusts her cloak to cover it as she straightens to her impressive full height. Her golden eyes study Mission for a moment, sweeping the teen's figure in a clinical manner. "Are you alright?" she asks softly.

"What the hells was that?" Her arms still tingling from where that Czerka-slime grabbed her, the Twi'lek gapes at her companion for a moment, mouth hanging open. Her eyes dart down to the set of bodies near her feet, and she quickly takes a few steps back to distance herself from the corpses. "Geeze! A little warning next time?"

Bowing slightly, Juhani arches a brow. "I had to attack while the element of surprise was in my favor." She coughs out a harsh laugh. "But next time I save your life, I will be sure to warn you first."

"Oh please," Mission reaches down to retrieve her blaster, flipping on the safety as she tucks it back into its holster. "Those creeps weren't going to kill me. They just wanted to rough me up a little. Honestly, I'm surprised that Big Z even let that happen."

"Hmm." Juhani seems distinctly unimpressed, and she turns that expression on Zaalbar as he comes sprinting down the corridor, bellowing at the top of his lungs.

The Ebon Hawk's entrance shakes for a moment, rattled by both the Wookiee's heavy footfalls and sheer volume of his shouts. It falls still a moment later as he pulls up short, a confused expression passing over his hairy features as he studies his companions, and then the two corpses lying across the ship's ramp. "What happened here?"

"You took too damned long to get out here is what happened!" Mission retorts, turning to glare at her friend. "Juhani took care of those goons, though."

"I am so sorry, Mission!" Zaalbar's trills are pleading. "I received a transmission from Vann just as those men arrived, and I was finishing my conversation with him when they grabbed you." He hangs his head. "It is because of me that you were injured."

Using the back of her hand to wipe away a drop of blood, Mission shrugs. "Hey, this ain't the worst I've ever felt." She grins, a bit of blood still smeared across her teeth, and gives the larger figure a friendly slap on the arm. "Chin-up, Big Z, I'm fine. And anyway, you should have seen Juhani. It was awesome, she had her lightsaber out and everything!"

A look of concern crosses Zaalbar's face. "Her lightsaber?" His eyes dart to the corpses once more, and then peer out at the otherwise deserted port.

"Big Z's worried about you chopping these guys up," Mission explains to the Cathar. "Oh, and apparently he took so long rescuing me because he was busy chatting with V-Man."
"The death of this scum will not be a problem," Juhani reassures the others. "And, more importantly, you heard from Vann? Is everything alright?"

Tossing his head back thoughtfully, Zaalbar shrugs his massive shoulders. "I suppose so. He said they're heading back to us, and should be here by nightfall. He wants us to make sure the ship is fueled and supplied by the time they get here."

Sighing at having to play translator, Mission mutters, "Apparently, we're supposed to get the ship loaded and fueled before he's back here tonight."

"Was there a… problem?" Brows furrowing in worry, Juhani watches the Wookiee's body language.

"That," Zaalbar admits, "He did not say."

Shrugging, Mission paraphrases, "Big Z's not sure. But, knowing V-Man and Carth, there was probably a lot of shooting." Poking one of the corpses with the toe of her boot, she sighs. "Probably a lot of death, too."

Zaalbar also looks at the bodies, dark gaze shifting to glare at Juhani. "Did you have to kill them? This is only going to cause more problems."

Snorting at even having to translate this, Mission offers the Cathar an apologetic half-smile. "Big Z wants to know why you sliced these guys up. I mean, I get it, but he thinks this is going to be big trouble later."

"I was doing my job," Juhani purrs. "Mission, you were ordered to guard the ship and to talk any interested parties out of searching it for information. I, however, had different orders."

"And those would be?" Mission quirks a brow.

Smirking with pride, Juhani explains, "I was told to cut down anyone who managed to get past you. A job I did with pleasure."

"I could tell," Mission is once again staring at the bodies, trying not to think too hard about the vacant way their eyes stare up at the cloudless sky. "But enjoyed it or not, I think Zaalbar's right. We gotta do something about these guys before someone catches on."

Nodding, Juhani moves towards the two corpses. "If Zaalbar is willing to help, we can move them somewhere else. Perhaps onto the ship for now. There we can disguise them as cargo and hide them away from the dock. An alleyway perhaps, or out in the Dune Sea."

"Yes, I will assist you," Zaalbar trills, nodding his head to ensure that Juhani understands his agreement.

"Great!" Mission's tone is sarcastic as she quips, "Let's go! Before these slime-balls start to really stink."

Having a Wookiee around always has its benefits, and it only takes a few moments before both bodies are carried into the ship and dumped unceremoniously onto the floor of the workshop. This, of course, includes the severed arm, which Mission is tasked with transporting. It's as gross as it sounds. By the time she drops the limb back atop its body with a grimace of revulsion, Juhani is already dragging over an empty plastisteel footlocker that previously held a collection of spare parts for future repairs. It's a fairly large container, and can definitely fit a single body if said
corpse is creatively manhandled.

Away from the door and no longer being blasted by oppressive heat, Mission feels like she can think more clearly. And realization quickly dawns on her as she stares at the dead men. "As much as I hate to say this, and as much as I really don't want to do it, we should strip these guys."

Juhani pauses, dropping the footlocker with a loud clang. "What do you mean? How will them being naked help?"

"Oh ew, I don't want them naked." Mission wrinkles her nose at the thought. "I just mean we should take their uniforms off. And anything else that identifies them as Czerka. That way, if anybody finds 'em before we're off-planet, it'll be that much harder to figure out what happened."

"Hmm," Nodding thoughtfully, the Cathar examines the bodies. "That would probably be best. A wise idea."

"Yeah," Mission shrugs in a show of faux modesty. "I'm a lot smarter than people give me credit for."

Looking down at his large, clawed hands, Zaalbar sighs. "I don't know how much help I'll be with that. My people don't have much experience with clothing."

"Yeah, yeah," Mission crouches down next to the darker-skinned goon and begins to unfasten the shirt of his uniform, roughly tugging the hem from his pants. "I'll let you slide this time big guy. But you gotta carry these slimes out of here!"

Taking a step back to watch the proceedings, Zaalbar nods. "That is fair."

Stripping the other body with quick efficiency, Juhani doesn't seem to be paying attention to her companions' banter. Instead, she's busy separating the Czerka employee's meager possessions, placing his blaster and credit chips to one side and the bits of his uniform to another. She gives his datapad a cursory glance, only checking the main screen for any information of note.

In contrast to the Cathar, Mission is happily rooting through every pocket she can find, taking the time to examine each item she uncovers like it's a new treasure. The datapad is particularly interesting, at least until most of the information proves to be locked behind passwords and security clearances. Pursing her lips, the teen considers putting it aside until the bodies are moved. But the hidden information is practically an affront to the nosey side of her personality. She wants to know what else the pad contains, and she wants to know now.

Slipping a few spikes from her pocket, Mission immediately jams one into the datapad's port, flooding the device with a barrage of garbage data and making it easier to slice into the operating system. It still takes a few tries, and more than a few spikes, before she has complete access to the system. However, the wealth of information is immediately worth it. Tapping the screen, she quickly pushes aside the files that display the names and titles of the dead men, a nagging sense of guilt gnawing at her gut. They were slime-balls and deserved to die, but… she doesn't need to know their names. Probably better for plausible deniability anyway.

"Mission!" Juhani's sharp tone cuts through the Twi'lek's concentration. "Are you almost done? Stop playing with that datapad and..."

"Oh please, it's not like this guy is going anyway!" From her placed seated on the floor, Mission gives the half-clothed body shove with her boot. "Besides, the information in this pad could be important. I might be able to, you know, find the route these two were taking."
"Hmm," snorting in audible disbelief, Juhani shakes her head. "Fine. Try to find something we can use. But Zaalbar and I must move these bodies before someone else from Czerka comes looking for them."

"Uh-huh. Right." Only half paying attention, Mission continues to flick through information on the pad. Most of it is pretty pointless, though she'll probably have T3-M4 analyze it later just to be sure. However, one message catches her eye. The eight-spoked wheel of the Republic crest stands out among the more mundane Czerka Corporation logo, foreboding against the title 'WANTED – For Questioning.' Hand shaking, the teen nervously opens the message, her heart thudding in her chest and echoing between her ears. The included text is fairly mundane, thanking the reader for their loyalty to the Republic and asking them to report any sightings of the three individuals pictured below. It goes on to warn that the individuals are wanted alive for questioning in regards to an incident on Taris and that they should be considered armed and dangerous.

Breath catching in her throat, Mission scrolls past the text to check the image files included in the message, praying to the Force that this isn't what she thinks it is. Unfortunately, she's just too damn smart, and the pictures are exactly what she was afraid of. "Uh-oh," she mutters. "This isn't good."

"Mission, what's wrong?" Zaalbar's growl is low and worried, and he quickly rushes to his friend's side.

"I think," the Twi'lek groans, still scrolling through the images, "That Vann, Carth, and Canderous are a bunch of idiots!" She angrily jabs at the datapad, gritting her teeth. "What type of kriffing morons forget to turn off all the security cameras when they're storming a Republic military base, huh?"

"A… Republic base?" Juhani looks up from where she's just finished stripping the second corpse, tossing a pair of pants into the clothing pile she's already accumulated.

Nodding in exasperation, Mission doesn't look up from the pad. "Yeah, long story. I'll fill you in later. Right now the important thing is that our boys got caught on camera, and they're in some serious trouble."

Most of the pictures are grainy black-and-white stills taken from the Republic base security feed. They've been enhanced as much as possible, but they're still not completely clear. Which would be a relief, except for the fact that the Republic is smart enough to realize that a couple of blurry photos isn't enough to go by. Someone, somewhere, has apparently taken the time to match the faces from the videos to the Republic database. The only piece of good news is that, as a Mandalorian, Canderous doesn't have an official Republic picture. There's a rough description of him, including his facial scars and the suspicion that he may have been involved in another 'incident' about a year back, but nothing definitive. Good.

Carth, however, wasn't so lucky. Included in the message is an older portrait of the pilot that must have been taken as part of his service in the Republic Navy. He's several years younger, and his eyes lack the haunted look that seems to constantly shadow them now. It's the same weariness Mission's begun to see on her own face every time she looks in a mirror. There's something so earnest and determined about the image that the teen chokes out a giggle despite her tension. It's a horrible picture, and she's going to tease Carth endlessly once they're all safe.

There is one final image attached, which Mission almost ignores out of sheer frustration at the situation. However, she forces herself to look at it, cursing irritably the entire time. It's older than anything else included and seems to be from someone's personal collection. The man in the image is hard to place at first, and the Twi'lek actually squints for a moment before realization hits her like a swoop bike going full speed. It's Vann. A much younger version of him, not much older than
Mission is now. He's smiling, which seems absolutely alien, his high cheekbones and sharp chin rounded with youth and lacking his current dark stubble. His right arm is draped around someone who's been cropped from the picture, only adding to the surreal effect. Oddest of all are the tan tunic and brown robe clothing Vann's lithe frame, barely hiding the glint of a metal hilt clipped at his waist. There's no name attached to the photo, just the words 'unknown rogue Jedi.'

"Juhani, get over here. Now!" Clutching the pad in her quivering hand, Mission's eyes are wide as she stares at the Cathar.

Tossing aside the pile of Czerka uniforms that she was preparing to move, Juhani rushes over to the teen. "What's wrong?" she demands.

"You... you were a Jedi, right?"

Nodding, Juhani drops into an easy crouch. She scowls as she replies, "For a time, yes. But only an Initiate. They did not see me as worthy of further training."

Ignoring the bitter edge to the woman's voice, Mission thrusts the datapad at her. "Yeah, that's not what I was asking about. I just... Would you be able to tell if someone in a picture is a Jedi? Like, if they're wearing Jedi robes and stuff?"

The apprehension in the teen's voice catches Juhani off-guard, and her expression softens. Taking the pad almost delicately, she nods. "Yes, I should be able to do that. But, why do you ask?"

Shaking her head, Mission's lips press into a thin line. "Don't ask. Just... just look."

"Alright. I..." Eyes shifting to study the image on the datapad screen, Juhani gasps softly as she recognizes what she's seeing. "This is Vann, yes?"

"That's what I was thinking." Mission swallows hard.

Peering closer at the image, Juhani's finger traces the strange-yet-familiar face for a moment before she quickly nods. "He is most certainly wearing the robes of a Jedi. A Padawan, from the looks of it." Her voice is slightly awed, though her brow is pinched with worry. "Though, more than that I cannot say."

"That's all I really needed to know." Mission glances over at Zaalbar. The Wookiee is watching carefully, peering at the photo from over Juhani's head. "What do you think this means?"

Rising from her crouched position, Juhani hands the datapad back. "I do not know. Though I will admit that Vann, well, he moves like a Jedi when he fights. And his command of the Force... it is more than a mere novice should be able to accomplish."

Staring down at the picture in disbelief, Mission frowns. "So, you think that before all of this, before V-Man went and got his brains scrambled, he was a Jedi?"

"It would not surprise me." She waves a hand through the air as though to brush away the thought. "But to presume anything from a single picture would be unwise. No, we must not make assumptions about things we know nothing about."

"Oh come on!" Leaping to her feet, Mission jabs a finger towards the image. "We have a picture right here! And a guy with no memory! At the very least we should tell him about this. Who knows, maybe it'll knock something loose in that head of his."

Eyes narrowing, Juhani studies the teen for a moment before hissing, "We must be very careful.
Revealing a truth that he is not ready to remember could do more harm than good." She pauses, sighing softly. "We must be cautious about how we share this information."

"Aw, what's the point of finding out something so fun if I've gotta sit on it?" Closing out of the image, Mission quickly adds it to the file that she plans on transferring to T3-M4 for further analysis. "At the very least, we should tell those idiots that they're wanted men."

"Yes," Juhani murmurs. "That information we should share. As for the rest of it…"

Humming thoughtfully, Mission asks, "Hey, why don't we just wait and see how Vann is feeling when he comes back from this job? If he's in a good mood, we tell him everything. If not, well… I can be patient. Really!"

Arching her eyebrow doubtfully, Juhani finally offers a nod of agreement. "We shall wait and see what the future brings." She glances over at Zaalbar, who's shuffling uncomfortably at the tense conversation. "For now, we keep this information between us, yes?"

"Of course," Zaalbar growls, low and deep. "My life debt to Vann has nothing to do with his past. I have no concerns over who he was before we met."


"You guess?"

"Alright, alright!" Sighing dramatically, Mission places one hand over her heart. "I swear that I'll keep this our secret for now. I ain't gonna blab, okay? Geeze!"

"Good. I am glad we could come to an understanding." Walking over to the pair of corpses, Juhani nods in approval as she picks one up. "Now, I need you to do your job and watch the ship while Zaalbar and I hide these bodies."

Narrowing her eyes, Mission pouts. "Really? I still have to stay with the ship?"

"Yes!" Dropping the corpse into the footlocker with a harsh clatter, Juhani glares at the teen. "Stay here, and make sure that no more Czerka employees come in looking for their friends. Use the droid to keep the door locked, if you must."

Zaalbar frowns, trill laced with worried as he adds, "And please stay safe this time."

"Yeah, yeah. I've heard it all before." Mission waves a dismissive hand at her companions as she moves to exit the workshop, datapad still clutched in her hand. "Stay here, and make sure that no more Czerka employees come in looking for their friends. Use the droid to keep the door locked, if you must."

And the intervening hours really do feel like forever. Once they manage to safely disguise the bodies as cargo, Juhani and Zaalbar depart the ship with a datapad that Mission managed to whip-up. It's loaded with false information about their supposed freight, some of it 'verified' with additional files gleaned from T3-M4's analysis of the Czerka documents. It won't hold up to close scrutiny, but it's apparently enough for them to pass through Anchorhead without any incriminating questions.

The suns are low in the sky by the time the pair returns to find Mission half asleep on the bridge, once again sprawled in the pilot's seat and looking rather content. She spent the entire time watching the damned controls, just like they asked her to, but there's been no word from Vann or the rest of the crew. Juhani is, of course, worried about this, but Mission doesn't share the Cathar's concern. She tells the woman as much before stalking off the bridge and leaving someone else to
'watch the ship' for once during this Force-damned trip.

That was over an hour ago. Currently lounging across three of the seats in the ship's main hold, Mission picks at some sort of weird dried meat stick that Zaalbar brought her back from Anchorhead. It's nothing more than a consolation prize for being stuck inside for so long, but she appreciates the gesture. Popping a bite-sized piece into her mouth, she chews thoughtfully. It's a bit spicy, though not altogether unpleasant.

The entrance to the ship beeps twice, alerting her that someone with the locking codes is coming onboard. Juhani and Zaalbar should have been alerted on the bridge, so there's no need to tell them in person. Plus, Mission wants to be the first to greet their returning crewmembers, what with being the one who did all the real work in their absence. Straightening slightly, she keeps her feet propped on the seat beside her. As the door swings open she can feel the hot, dry air of Tatooine blow in, raising the ship's temperature and carrying the odor of sweat and the odd assortment of smells that comprise Anchorhead. Craning her neck, she peers towards the door, managing to catch sight of the rest of the crew as they troop onto the ship. Shows how much Juhani knows. Mission didn't need the Force to tell her that everyone would be okay.

"Hey there," the teen draws, taking another bite of her dried meat stick. "How'd it go?"

Vann stalks into the hold, brow furrowed and a scowl painted across his lips. His normally fair cheeks are reddened with sunburn, and smattered with more than a few freckles. This somehow makes him seem younger, and the picture from the datapad suddenly doesn't seem as alien. His normal stubble has grown into a short, dark beard, grains of sand visible within the coarse hairs. Actually, sand is visible on all of his clothing, blowing into the air as he drops his pack of supplies onto the floor with a resounding thud. Turning to stare at the teen, his dark eyes narrow slightly as he straightens, making a futile attempt to brush some of the sand from his jacket. "Not well," he finally grits out.

"Hey, we got what we wanted and we came out ahead!" Canderous appears to be lugging something on his back. It looks like a disassembled droid, though it's hard to tell from this angle. "We sold those speeders for a decent price. And if someone would let us sell that pearl…"

Placing her pack on the floor with a more delicate hand, Bastila turns and glares at the Mandalorian. "I've told you at least a dozen times! It's worth more than mere credits to a Jedi."

"Pearl…?" Mission glances between the adults, lips pulling into a confused frown.

"Don't. Ask." Carth just looks weary, dark circles under his eyes and a healthy dose of rapidly reddening sunburn marring his cheeks and nose. "Just… don't. Please. I've had to listen to this same damn argument for the past four hours. I can't listen to it again."

"I can't help it if that pearl is worth more than half the crap on this ship!" Canderous disappears into the workshop, and something bangs loudly as he deposits it amongst the other assorted tools and parts stored there.

Gritting her teeth in exasperation, Bastila raises her voice over the metallic din. "Credits are not everything, Canderous!" she calls. "This pearl has a connection to the Force that cannot be given a value in credits."

Glancing between the Jedi and the workshop, Vann blinks once before announcing, "I'm going out."

"Wait!" Mission tumbles out of the seat, nearly tripping over her own legs in the process. "V-Man,
you just got back!"

"Yeah," Carth agrees, "Just where do you think you're going?"

Voice strained Vann snarls, "I am going to the nearest cantina to drink until I forget how much I hate this kriffing planet. And its kriffing dragons. And the sand. I kriffing hate this sand!" His voice trails off as he heads back towards the ship's entrance, boots echoing loudly across the floor.

Jogging out of the workshop, Canderous grins as he sprints to catch up with the other man. "Sounds like a good plan. Count me in!"

"No!" Bastila frowns, crossing her arms over her chest. "After everything that happened, you are not going out and getting drunk!" She turns to look at the mercenary, but he's already disappearing back outside in a rush of hot evening air. "Vann. Vann! Are you even listening to me?" Letting out a frustrated sigh, she quickly rushes after her companions with a disapproving glare.

"Oh hells, you have got to be kidding…" Carth glances towards the ship's door, then back to Mission. "I should really go after them," he mutters apologetically. "At this rate, Bastila is just going to make things worse." Forcing a thin smile, he looks the teen in the eyes. "Can you do me a big favor?"

Arching a brow, Mission swallows her excitement. She's hoping that she'll get invited to the Cantina, or at least be sent to pick up some last-minute supplies in Anchorhead. Trying to keep the anticipation out of her voice, she adopts a bored tone as she quips, "What's up, old man?"

"I'm not that old!" Drawing a slow breath, Carth laughs weakly. "And it's easy, okay? I just need you to watch the ship for a little longer. Can you do that?"

Jaw dropping, Mission stares at the Human. "I've been watching this damn ship for four and a half kriffing days!"

"Then you should be a pro at it by now! It'll just be for a few hours. I hope…" Running towards the door, Carth calls out a final, "Thanks, Mission! We owe you one," before disappearing into the growing dusk.

Still staring in disbelief, Mission glances around the now-empty hold as she shouts, "Are you kriffing kidding me?!"

* * *

"Ugh," Vann peers up from where he's slumped over the table in the main hold, a cup of caf clutched in one hand and a splitting headache pounding behind his eyes. "Why did you let me drink so much?"

"I didn't let you do anything." Carth scoffs, even as a smirk tugs at the corners of his mouth. "You, as a mature and consenting adult, decided to drink that much. I just didn't stop you."

Pressing his forehead against the blissfully cool durasteel surface of the table, Vann lets out an eloquent, "Uggghhh." Still clutching his mug, he debates making the effort to take a drink. Of course, his stomach chooses that moment to roil uncomfortably, implying that anything consumed is probably going to come right back up.

"By the way," looking altogether too smug for someone running on limited sleep after spending four and a half days trekking through the desert, Carth reclines in his seat. "You are a maudlin drunk."
"Really? See, from where I was sitting, he seemed less maudlin and more… Touchy? Clingy? Subtly horny?" Canderous's voice is like a siren, blasting through the hold and reverberating off the walls. "Seriously Vann, when was the last time you got laid?"

Still face down on the table, the mercenary groans again. "Please stop talking," he begs, voice partially muffled by the metal surface.

"You deserve every moment of discomfort you are currently experiencing." Delicately picking at some sort of local vegetable dish that smells nauseatingly spicy, Bastila glares at her companion. "Perhaps this will be a learning experience, hmm?"

Lifting his head up just enough to peer at the Jedi, Vann manages a weak smirk. "I can tell you from experience that, by midday, I will have learned absolutely nothing."

Canderous chuckles, "Attaboy!" His humor fades slightly at the venomous look the Jedi shoots him, though it doesn't die completely. "Oh, come on Bastila! Take pity on the kid and heal him already."

Eyebrows raising, and then immediately lowering when that simple movement makes his headache worse, Vann murmurs, "Wait, you can heal this?"

"Of course!" Huffing indignantly, Bastila continues to pick at her food. "Though the powers of a Jedi should not be used for frivolous things like curing a hangover."

"You just want to watch him suffer longer, don't you?" Carth slowly reaches over and snatches the untouched mug of caf from the mercenary's hand, encountering no resistance. He takes a long gulp.

Smiling demurely, Bastila shrugs with faux innocence. "Perhaps…" Upon seeing the pleading look the other Force user gives her, she sighs. "Though, he would be more than capable of purging his own system if he wasn't in such a sorry state."

"Maybe he just needs a hug from Carth?" Canderous's shit-eating grin is back, and he arches a suggestive brow at the pilot. "I mean, you were the one he was clinging to the most last night. And you didn't seem to mind…"

Blinking rapidly, Vann searches his recent memories for anything past his first few drinks of the evening. But everything between that point and waking up this morning wishing for death is an alcohol-soaked blur. "Back up," he orders, attempting to push himself into a more upright position. "I did what now?"

"And that would be my cue to go start the ship." Taking another sip of caf, Carth offers the mercenary an almost-sympathetic smile. "Try not to throw-up during takeoff."

Brain still struggling to regain its higher functions, Vann stares after the pilot's retreating form for several moments before he actually processes the other man's words. "Wait, takeoff? Where are we going?"

Sighing heavily, Bastila places her half-finished food on the table, centimeters from her companion's overly-sensitive nose. "While you were otherwise occupied last night, one of your contacts got in touch with us about a job on Kashyyyk." She smiles softly. "I took the liberty of replying back and accepting the work."

"Oh." Nodding in false comprehension, Vann slouches in his seat, flinging his forearm over his eyes. "Great. Sounds perfect. Let me know when we get there."
"Unfortunately," Canderous booms, voice altogether too loud for the enclosed space, "Bastila didn't check who we're working for before accepting the damned job. And now that we're apparently wanted, things might get a little interesting."

Arm dropping away from his face, Vann's head whips around to look at the Mandalorian. "Wait. We're wanted? When did that happen?"

"It's a bit of a long story," Bastila admits. "Mission and Juhani were lucky enough to stumble upon a message from the Republic. I can tell you the rest on the way to Kashyyyk." She arches a judgmental brow. "Perhaps when you're a bit more… cognizant."

"The details aren't important." Canderous snorts, casting a dark look at the Jedi. "The real crux of the problem is that the genius over here accepted a job working for Czerka Corporation. Who, in case anyone else forgot, is in the pocket of the Republic."

"Great." Slinging his arm back over his eyes, Vann leans his head back. There's still pain throbbing at both temples, but his mind seems to have cleared a little. "So, what's the plan? If there even is one."

Sighing gently, Bastila finally replies, "Well, Canderous and Carth will most likely have to stay on the ship, at least until we can determine how close this particular branch of Czerka is to the Republic. You, unfortunately, still need to be in the thick of things."

"Lucky for us we have the walking carpet to help make it look like you belong." Canderous sounds amused by the prospect.

Nodding as much as his headache will allow, Vann swallows down a fresh bout of nausea as the ship rumbles beneath his feet. He wouldn't be surprised if Carth makes takeoff as rough as possible, just to spite him. "Sounds like a decent plan." Drawing a slow breath through his nose, he adds, "I don't suppose you can tell me what the job is?"

There's a moment of silence, and the mercenary has the feeling that his companions are trying to decide the best way to explain whatever they've agreed to. Bastila's the first to speak.

"Something about stopping some sort of saboteur who's been interfering with Czerka's attempts to perform an ecological survey of the planet." The Jedi sounds unsure as she speaks.

"It sounds fake as all hells," Canderous summarizes. "But it's a job, and an excuse to go and find the next part of your map."

"Fantastic," Vann draws, voice dripping with sarcasm. "Can't wait. I'm sure everything will go perfectly."

Chapter End Notes

1. I don't know if Jedi Padawans usually take pictures of each other. But I assume that teens and young adults have an inclination for occasionally snapping photos with their friends if the technology is available. For the record, Vann is in his late teens/early 20's in the photograph described.

2. Maudlin is a word that I doubt exists in the Star Wars universe. It's derived from the
French word Magdalena, referring to the Christian figure of Mary Magdalen. None of these things exist in Star Wars. But since "maudlin drunk" is the best descriptor for the situation, let's pretend that it's a term derived from Mando'a, referencing the legend of a female soldier crying over her fallen comrade.

3. I have no idea if Jedi can cure hangovers. However, the 'Heal' Force power can cure poison. Alcohol is technically a poison, so it stands to reason that they can, at least mechanically speaking.

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Chapter Summary

In which our heroes exchange trekking through a desert for trekking through a jungle, and manage to make a new friend. All while appreciating the native wildlife.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

12.

"Look at that flower! It's like… the size of my head! That's unreal!" Mission grins as she runs up to a particularly vivid bloom, slender fingers reaching out to touch one of the velvety-looking petals.

Zaalbar is behind the Twi'lek in an instant, his large paw slapping her hand away before it can make contact. "Don't touch that!" he scolds. "The flowers of that vine secrete a contact poison. Wookiees are protected by our fur, but you… Your entire arm would probably go numb within minutes."

Blinking in disbelief, Mission's enthusiasm isn't diminished by this new information. "Really?" She continues to study the flower, head tilting curiously. "That's so cool!"

"Hey, Zaalbar?" Vann calls from a few meters back, "Has anyone ever told you that your home world is terrifying?"

Walking along beside the mercenary, Bastila is also transfixed by the tropical jungle surrounding them. "Terrifying, perhaps, but also breathtakingly gorgeous," she sighs. "Though, I suppose some of the most beautiful things in the galaxy are also some of the most frightening."

"So, am I gorgeous because I'm frightening, or just frighteningly gorgeous?" Vann flashes a cocky smile at the Jedi, amusement only bolstered as she rolls her eyes at him.

"I can assure you that the answer is neither." Frowning at her companion, Bastila can't prevent the ripple of amusement that flows through their mental connection.

Pausing to look over his shoulder at the two Humans trailing him, Zaalbar growls worriedly. "The Shadowlands should be terrifying! They're a dangerous place, which is why they're so revered by my people." He trills nervously. "Neither you nor I should be here…"

"Don't take this the wrong way," Vann mutters, "But it's not like we want to be here. Like I told the Wookiee guarding the basket down here, this is just business. The sooner we find the map, the sooner we can get out of here."

Head downcast, Zaalbar nods Sadly. "Vann, I understand that your mission for the Jedi is far more important than the beliefs of my people." His dark eyes flash with anger for a moment. "But that doesn't mean that I have to accept Czerka turning our sacred hunting grounds into a killing field."

Arching a brow at Bastila, Vann innocently remarks, "Hear that? A Wookiee believes that what Czerka is currently doing would be considered a… what was that again? A 'killing field'?"
Scoffing in disgust, the Jedi narrows her eyes. "Yes Vann, I heard! I have two ears and I heard exactly what he said!"

"So, you're ready to admit that the term 'ecological survey' is actually just code for 'poaching'?
"Chuckling softly, the mercenary ignores his companion's venomous glare.

"Seriously Bastila? How kriiffing stupid do you have to be to believe that load of bantha shit those Czerka creeps tried to sell?" Mission pauses to gawk at the other woman, eyes wide and jaw slightly slack. "Practically everyone knows that fancy science terms like 'ecological survey' are just slang for 'being absolute slime.'"

Drawing a frustrated breath, the Jedi jerks her chin up defiantly. "Perhaps I just like to try and see the good in others, hmm? Is it wrong to believe that there are still honest people in this galaxy?"

"There is nothing good about Czerka." Zaalbar's head continues to hang, though his words are harsh. "They continue to profit from destroying my home and enslaving my people."

"All right!" Pausing mid-stride, Bastila crosses her arms over her chest as she scowls at her companions. "So, I was foolish! I accepted a job protecting poachers. I can admit when I make a mistake, and I apologize. But if Vann hadn't been such a drunken mess…"

"Hey!" Vann snorts in false indignation. "Don't blame this on me. I suffered enough for my irresponsible life decisions, thank you!"

Stamping her foot in irritation, Mission puts her fingers in her mouth and lets out a shrill whistle. It's suspiciously similar to the technique Canderous utilizes. "Hey!" she shouts, "I hate to be the adult here, mainly 'cause that's a scary thought, but can we talk about the serious problem we're gonna have?"

Vann stares at the teen for a moment before prompting, "And as much as I hate to say it, you're going to need to be more specific about which problem you're referring to."

Mission blinks, tone sarcastic as she asks, "Uh, how are we supposed to stop a saboteur who we don't technically want to stop?"

And, okay, that's a reasonable question. So far, their little group has been on Kashyyyk for about a day. They arrived just as the sun was rising, its rays burning off the morning mist from the tall boughs of the wroshyr trees. It would have been an awe-inspiring sight if the entire landing process hadn't been one extended argument over who was staying on the Ebon Hawk and who was going with Vann and Bastila into the Shadowlands. Zaalbar was a natural choice to pose as a guide and employee, despite the Wookiee's reluctance to be back on his home planet.

At seeing her friend's discomfort, Mission insisted on going with Zaalbar to provide moral support. Carth, quite accurately as it turns out, claimed that releasing a curious teenager into an untamed jungle was probably a terrible idea. From there it devolved into an extended verbal sparring match about the pilot being an idiot for getting caught on camera at the Republic base, and about a dozen other things that Vann eventually tuned-out. The end result was supposed to be Mission staying behind with Carth, Canderous, and Juhani. But the Twi'lek had other plans.

While checking-in at the Czerka office for the details of their job, which very clearly involves nothing resembling an ecological survey and everything resembling a tach poaching operation, Mission appeared from out of nowhere thanks to her stealth field generator. She immediately claimed to be a Shyriiwook translator attached to the group and ingratiated herself with the Czerka scientists using the grace and wit that Vann actually wanted her to apply to anyone looking to get
onto the Hawk in his absence. Because, honestly, he doesn't trust Carth, Canderous, or Juhani to talk their collective way out of the flimsiplast bag. Fight their way out, maybe, but that would destroy the attempt at subtlety that they're trying for.

But here Mission is, in the middle of the Shadowlands, trying to poke venomous plants and asking reasonable questions about how to handle the saboteur they've been hired to stop. She claims that she left Carth a note before leaving, and Vann is going to trust that she's not lying. Mainly because this is the literal definition of 'Carth's problem,' what with the pilot being careless enough to misplace an entire teenage girl. Even if she is incredibly stealthy and a bit too clever for her own good.

"I can guarantee the Czerka isn't going to let us leave their port if we don't get this job done." Vann glances at his companions as he speaks. "Which means that we have to convince this saboteur to stop whatever they're doing, at least until we can get off-planet."

Nodding in agreement, Bastila adds, "But how do you propose getting this individual to stop doing something that, quite frankly, is the morally upstanding choice?"

"Bribery, mainly." Vann grins, running a hand over the blaster at his hip. "Followed by threats of physical violence, if necessary."

"Charming." Bastila wrinkles her nose at the implications. "Though I suppose threats are better than actually harming this individual."

Lips twisting into a wry grin, Vann comments, "Hey, I never said that I was only going to threaten them. I don't like to limit my creativity, you know?"

Throwing her head back in exasperation, Mission stomps one foot. "Ugh, I don't care if we pay this person off or shoot their kneecaps out. Can we just do something? Those Czerka creeps gave you the location of this saboteur's hideout, so why don't we just go there and…"

"The suspected location," Bastila corrects. "And we can't just barge in. We need a plan."

"How's this for a plan? Keep walking!" Mission makes a dramatic gesture down the barely visible path through the trees. "It's too hot to just stand around yapping."

Bastila gives a haughty little chuckle. "If you're too warm, perhaps you should go back to the ship where there's climate control."

"Because the Hawk's climate control sucks!" Mission rolls her eyes. "It's gonna be hot on there too, and about a million times more boring."

Dark eyes scanning the mist-shrouded trail ahead, Vann lets out a soft hum as he tilts his head towards the teen. "Huh," he says, allowing a worried expression to creep onto his features. "That's some pretty rough terrain ahead of us. It's going to be hard going in this humidity."

"For you maybe," Mission scoffs, lightly hopping over a gnarled tree root in the path. "Not as sply as you used to be, I guess. Hells, I bet I could run laps around you old people."

Jaw dropping, Bastila primly arches a brow at the teen. "Excuse me! Just how old do you think I am?"

"Older than her, which automatically makes you old," Vann explains, his expression gradually turning uncertain. "And Mission, I seriously doubt you could just sprint through this jungle. You'd probably get lost halfway in. I mean, come on, look at this place!"
"Shows how much you know!" Mission grins smugly as she brags, "I memorized most of the Tarisian Undercity and the sewer system. And that's way more complex than this stuffy jungle." She turns to give the Wookiee a pointed glare. "You tell 'em, Big Z!"

Growling in agreement, Zaalbar's voice quickly becomes hesitant. "We did explore a good portion of the Undercity before…" He coughs awkwardly. "Before we met you."

Voice turning patronizing, Vann nods to the teen in mock acknowledgment. "Okay, sure. So, you explored a bunch of sewers where nobody but some pig-faced Gamorreans wanted to go. But this is different, we're up against a professional. I bet you'd get caught by this saboteur before you got within a hundred meters of their base."

"Ha!" Hooking her thumbs into the stealth field generator around her waist, Mission gives a cocky little swish of her hips. "Nobody sees me if I don't want 'em to!"

A sense of triumph sings through Vann's blood as he nods to the teen. "Alright then, prove it."

Some of the swagger falls away as Mission blinks once, her eyes darting down the path and then back to the assembled group. "Fine," she drawls, "What do you want me to do?"

Pointing towards the overgrown trail, Vann's tone becomes more serious, expression sobering. "Go northwest about a hundred meters, and then circle around about fifty more moving from west to east." He ticks the next points off on his fingers. "Look around and check for traps, mines, tracks, or anything else suggesting that someone has been staying in this area."

"Is that all?" Quirking a brow, Mission waves a dismissive hand. "Easy stuff!"

"Memorize anything of note, whether it's natural or artificial. Know the route, and be ready to guide us." Vann's eye narrow as he adds, "And do not get caught. Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah," moving towards the nearest shadows, Mission slinks into the undergrowth. Her lean form blends into the misty gloom, and she seems to disappear. "I'll be back before you realize I'm gone."

Pulling out his datapad, Vann shifts his attention to the screen as he calls out, "You have ten minutes. After that, I'll assume a plant ate you." There's a final rustle in the brush, and then silence. He thinks it's safe to assume that the Twi'lek is gone, and will remain occupied for the next several minutes. "Alright, that's one problem taken care of," he announces under his breath.

"Did you really just manipulate that girl into running off alone into the wilderness of a strange planet?" Bastila turns to study her companion, eyes narrowed. Her expression is odd, a mixture of irritation and the barest flicker of admiration.

"What you mean to say is that I convinced an experienced scout to do her damn job, and do it well." Shooting the Jedi an exasperated look, Vann continues, "If I just told her, 'hey, go scout ahead and tell us what you find,' she'd either refuse or half-ass the entire thing."

Sighing softly, though it sounds more like a growl, Zaalbar agrees, "Though she is young, Mission is quite determined when she puts her mind to something. Especially if she thinks that she has something to prove."

"Like he said," Vann translates, jerking a thumb towards the Wookiee, "Mission's the type who does her best work when she wants to prove everyone else wrong."

Nodding slowly in comprehension, Bastila's lips twist into a thoughtful grimace. "And just like
that, you're getting precisely what you want with minimum effort.”

Jabbing a finger in the direction Mission disappeared into, Vann snorts, "In case you forgot, this is also what Mission wants. She did manage to give the slip to a trained Force user, a Mandalorian, and our favorite hotshot pilot just to be down here."

"Perhaps you're misunderstanding me," Bastila shakes her head, slim fingers pushing a few stray hairs from her face. "I'm not disapproving of your technique. I'm just a bit taken aback by how skillfully you convinced her to do exactly what you wanted. And this isn't the first time that you've demonstrated such skills. After all, you did convince Carth to stay on as our pilot, despite his misgivings. And you've earned the trust and respect of Zaalbar here, something that Wookiees do not often give to outsiders."

Gaze shifting between the two Humans, Zaalbar slowly explains, "Vann has proven himself to be more honorable than most outsiders. No offense meant to the rest of your people."

"And let me guess, Bastila." Adopting a bored air, Vann stares down the path. "That worries you?"

Shaking her head, a smile small plays on Bastila's lips. "On the contrary, actually. I'm impressed. It's good to know that you can be serious for a moment, or at least use your wit and charm for something other than personal gain."

"You know, I already explained this to Carth." Vann chuckles darkly. "I don't only look out for myself."

"Admirable as your occasional selflessness is," Bastila admits, her smile growing thoughtful, "My mind actually went less altruistic places. My expression remains serious, a flicker of concern passing between their mental connection. "And this demeanor isn't your natural state. It's your defense mechanism."

Still wearing a razor-thin smirk, Vann meets the Jedi's eyes. "Aww, and here I thought you liked my wit."

"Your wit is indeed… admirable." Bastila's tone has acquired the formal air that she reserves for serious negotiations. "As are your intelligence and your martial skills."

Vann rolls his eyes, voice deadpan. "Stop. You're making me blush."

"You could be a skilled commander. Something that the galaxy needs more of." Watching as the mercenary openly snickers at the suggestion, Bastila scolds, "Don't laugh, it's something that you really ought to consider!"

Still choking back bemused laughter, Vann asks, "What do you want me to do? Lead an army? That's not exactly something I can imagine myself doing."

"I'm not asking you to lead an army, though I don't doubt that you could, at least with the right motivation." Drawing a slow breath, Bastila's voice rises a bit as she states, "I'm asking that you consider lending your strengths to something larger and farther reaching than yourself. On a
more permanent basis."

The implication hangs heavy in the air, thick as the ever-present mist that swirls around their feet. Vann wants to hate the idea, instead promising to disappear back into the Outer Rim as soon as he's done playing errand boy for the Jedi. But there's a certain appeal to becoming something more than a mercenary. The idea nags at a long-forgotten part of his brain, trying to tug at a thread that won't come lose. Partially lost in his own thoughts, he mutters, "I'll consider it. But I think you're giving me too much credit…"

A loud boom shakes the nearby tree branches, causing a cacophony of rustling leaves and the panicked cries of half a dozen different species of wildlife. It's hard to determine where the sound is coming from, as the thick jungle distorts every noise and dampens any potential echo. The perpetual gloom of the Shadowlands doesn't help, and Vann strains to spot the faint plume of smoke that's billowing between the creeping green vines that hang from the branches above. Sniffing the air, he catches the unmistakable odors of smoke and chemicals, two manmade scents that float above the cloyingly sweet aroma of tropical flowers and the musky odor of damp soil.

Noting that the smoke is drifting above the path that Mission took, Vann breaks out into a run. He doesn't look behind him as he calls, "See? This is why I shouldn't be the one giving orders!"

Zaalbar is growling out his frustration. Longer legs capable of much faster speed he quickly outpaces the humans as he sprints towards the source of the smoke. "Mission!" he hollers, "Are you okay? Answer me!"

Not attempting to keep pace with the Wookiee, Vann quickly falls behind the larger creature. Bastila is beside him, worry flooding their bond. That sensation is almost enough for the mercenary to miss the tingle of warning that prickles the back of his neck, immediately shooting down his spine in sparks of distress. Danger the Force is telling him, and this time he listens. Digging his heels into the soft soil, he manages to drag himself to a full stop. He assumes that the Jedi also felt the warning, and doesn't bother to verbally alert her to the potential trouble ahead. This, of course, proves to be a mistake when she goes rushing past, impulsiveness apparently trumping caution.

"Kriffing hells…" Vann mutters under his breath, eyes darting around the forest in search of whatever alerted him in the first place. He hears more than sees something snap directly beneath Zaalbar and Bastila, who are currently several paces ahead as they stare at the open space a mine has recently cleared in the forest floor.

Without thinking Vann lunges at his companions, using the Force to propel himself. Ideally, he'd like to push the others out of the way, but he's still not sure what they just triggered, and it feels more imperative to be by their side rather than pushing them further into potential danger. He manages to drape one arm around Bastila's shoulders, pulling the woman down just as he fits one hand partway around the Wookiee's hairy wrist. He's not sure where to proceed from here, though the decision is ultimately made for him when the ground beneath the trio shakes as something springs out from beneath the damp earth.

Rich, black dirt flies everywhere as whatever was hidden beneath it flies up to wrap around the small group, engulfing them as it pulls them off their feet. A moment later they're being yanked a good three meters into the air, stomachs dropping as they're suspended off the ground by some type of primitive netting. It's disorienting and pushes the trio into an awkward ball of limbs and fur, their bodies pressed close together due to the flexible nature of the material that surrounds them. Upon closer inspection, it seems to be some sort of woven fiber, though, in all honesty, Vann couldn't care less. Even worse, Mission is nowhere in sight.
Zaalbar roars out his rage, hot breath filling the enclosed space with a sour odor as the sound reverberates through the treetops. "Mission!" he howls, claws swiping frantically at the netting. "Where are you?"

Despite the furious slashes the Wookiee makes, he does little more than scratch the netting. It must be made out of something local that's designed to resist the sharp claws of the natives. His own ineffectiveness only seems to infuriate Zaalbar further, and he continues to futilely tear at the fibers imprisoning them. He manages to catch Vann with a sharp elbow to the side, knocking the air of the Human and drawing a hiss of discomfort.

"Ow, dammit!" Maneuvering his hand as best he can in the enclosed space, the mercenary reaches out and places a palm against the Wookiee's shoulder. "Would you calm down?" he snaps. "Throwing a fit isn't getting us anywhere!"

"You should listen to your friend." The voice floats out of the murky darkness, slightly grizzled with age but audibly amused just the same. "That net is designed to hold a Wookiee. So, I wouldn't plan on getting out of there anytime soon."

Roaring again, Zaalbar glares down at the ground. "Slaver!"

A chuckle rises from the underbrush. "Do I look like a slaver to you?"

Squinting at the small clearing below, Vann quips, "Hard to tell, since we can't exactly see you."

"True, true." The mysterious voice chuckles again. "But then again, you don't need to see me. Or even believe me. After all, I'm not the one trapped in a net."

"Great," Vann hisses under his breath. "Not only are we stuck in here, the guy who caught us thinks he's funny."

Voice hushed, Bastila leans in closer. Which really isn't hard given their current conditions. "We might not be as stuck as you think."

Sending a flicker of curiosity through their bond, Vann tries to give the Jedi a pointed look. However, it's blocked by the shaggy body of the Wookie between them. Opening their mental connection a little further, he patiently waits for a response.

*Mission* is the single word that floats between their minds. However, it's joined by a subtle urge to look down and to the left. Fingers twisting around the rough fibers of the net, Vann peers into the gloom. It takes a moment for his eyes to see the subtle flutter of leaves in the underbrush, the delicate play of light and shadow ever-so-slightly different near the base of a particularly wide tree trunk. He can't definitively say that the Twi'lek is the source, but the mercenary has seen her stealth field in action enough times to hazard a guess that it's her. He sends a glimmer of mirth back to the Jedi as the nearly-invisible teen slowly moves closer to where they're dangling from a tree branch.

Leaning his cheek against what he believes is the Wookiee's shoulder, Vann whispers, "I have some good news, but I need you to be quiet, okay?"

Growling in confusion, Zaalbar falls still as he nods his shaggy head.

"Mission's okay. I think she's below us, trying to get us down from here."

There's a chortle of joy from the Wookiee, though he quickly muzzles his mouth with one massive paw. Managing to nod again, his attention shifts downward as he searches for the teen.
"Just stay calm. Hopefully, Bastila and I can distract this guy long enough for Mission to do her thing." Glancing at Zaalbar one last time to assure himself that the Wookiee is complying, Vann lets his Force connection flow outwards, allowing him and the Jedi to communicate more fully through their mental link.

A soft hum of consideration travels through the bond, though it's not joined by any definitive plan. Rather, flickers of ideas and emotions surge forward, none of them organized but all of them alight with hope.

"And just what do you think you're doing up there?" The grizzled voice is louder now, sounding both annoyed and perhaps a touch anxious. "Feels like you're up to something funny…"

Both sides of the Force bond snap shut simultaneously, Force signatures once again reigned in as mental shields slide into place. A flood of cold irritation swells in Vann's gut, though it's tempered by a jolt of fear at the implication of the stranger's words. Teeth clenched, he mutters, "Is this guy Force-sensitive?"

Bastila's head shakes, or at least it seems to. "I can't be sure without him sensing me as well," she murmurs. "Though I suppose anything's possible when the Force is concerned."

Holding back a growl of frustration, Vann sighs. "I mean, we can probably goad him into telling us more…" When neither of his companions objects, he leans his forehead against the net as he calls out, "And just what do you think we're up to?"

"Oh, don't play coy with me!" The voice chuckles humorlessly, the sound seeming to float from every direction at once. "You young people always think us old timers are blind, deaf, and dumb. You think I could survive in the Shadowlands all this time without my senses being good and sharp?" There's a pause, the voice growing sly. "And I do mean all my senses."

Sensing a sore spot in their captor's somewhat cantankerous personality, Vann grins to himself. "What are you talking about, old man?" he asks, adding emphasis to the final two words. "If you're trying to accuse us of something, just come out with it already. Unless you're planning on boring us to death!"

"All bravado and no brains! That's why I'm down here and you're in a net in a tree!" The undergrowth rustles wildly, an entire bush seeming to move between the vines and into the clearing. "Though I do have to wonder… What are a couple of Force-sensitives and a Wookiee doing working as Czerka poachers?"

It takes a moment for Vann to realize that it's not a bush he's looking at, but rather an elaborate disguise constructed from the native foliage. This man, whoever he is, has apparently woven a cloak out of leaves, vines, branches, and other jungle refuse, enabling him to blend almost perfectly into his surroundings. It's one of the reasons that he was impossible to spot, even when talking. And it's probably also why Czerka has been so hard-pressed to track him down. It's difficult to tell what he looks like under all that plant matter, though the mercenary thinks he catches a glimpse of dark skin and a tattered brown robe.

Eyes darting towards where Mission is hidden, and then back towards their captor, Bastila clears her throat before she explains, "Well, the answer to your question is quite simple, actually. We're not poachers."

"Funny how poachers always say that…" The man peers up at the net, dark eyes sparkling with glee even in the dim light of the Shadowlands.
"But we're not!" Zaalbar trills, tone harsh even by Wookiee standards. "Why would I destroy my own planet like that?"

"Either you're lying, or you haven't been back home recently." The stranger chuckles, shaking his head. The leaves surrounding his face rustle. "Either way, I don't have time to explain things to you. Let's just say that I've seen plenty of Wookiees enslaving their own people and poaching their own lands since Czerka came."

Roaring in outrage, Zaalbar's bulky form shakes the entire net as he lunges at their captor. "Don't compare me to those traitors!" All this manages to do is rock the nearby tree boughs, their sturdy branches holding firm against the assault.

"Hey, buddy! Not helping here!" Vann winces as he's pinned against the net, fingers pinched painfully between the fibers. He can see a slight shimmer in the foliage below, which he hopes means Mission is doing her damn job. "Ow! Just calm down. This isn't getting us anywhere."

Gasping as she's also tossed about, Bastila wraps one hand around the net and clings tightly. "As you can see, this is all a bit of a misunderstanding," she calls down. "If you could perhaps let us down from this net, we can have a civilized discussion about…"

"Or I could leave you up there until you decide to tell the truth." Crossing his arms over his leaf-covered chest, the stranger nods to himself. "Or until your Wookiee friend gets frustrated enough to crush both of you. Honestly? I'd probably prefer to speak with him rather than either of you."

"But we are telling the truth!" Tone plaintive, despite the fact that she's also keeping a careful watch on the hidden Twi'lek, Bastila raps her palms against the net in frustration. "You can't just leave us here!"

Still craning his head to look up at the net, the stranger challenges, "Oh, can't I? My net, my rules." He seems content to stand and watch his captives, an expression of amusement dancing across his weathered features. Or, at least he's content until a growl rings out through the dense undergrowth. With a sigh, the man lowers his head to look over his shoulder. "Damn katarns," he grumbles, "Always trying to get into my food stores…"

Reaching under his tattered cloak, the man draws the metallic hilt of a lightsaber. As it ignites, the blade illuminates the surrounding area in a rich green glow. Giving the weapon an easy swing, the stranger grins up at his captives. "Well, best go scare away my food thieves. You don't go anywhere, you hear?" Laughing at his own humor, he jogs off into the thick brush.

Glaring at their retreating captor, Vann shifts his attention to searching for any signs of the stealthy teen. Unfortunately, there's none. "Mission, if you're down there, now would be a really good time to let us out," he calls, keeping his tone somewhat hushed.

Pale eyes darting from the underbrush to the net, Bastila lowers her voice as she suggests, "If Mission can't get us down, I think one of my shotos may be short enough to ignite without harming either of you."

"You think?" Vann clarifies. "Because the last thing we need is to be sliced up while trying to escape. Lightsabers aren't exactly meant for close quarters like this…"

"Well, I don't hear you coming up with any better!"

"How's it hanging?" Flickering into view just below the net, Mission grins up at her companions. "Seems like you might need my help…"
"Mission! You're alright!" Trilling with relief, Zaalbar smiles down at the teen.

Posing dramatically with her hands on her hips, Mission shrugs. "Where you honestly worried, Big Z? Like one mine is gonna take me out!"

"I told you not to get caught!" Vann growls, glaring at the Twi'lek from within the net. Which, admittedly, is probably less-than-intimidating.

Hands still on her hips, Mission snaps, "Well, from where I'm standing, I'm not the one in the net!"

Heaving an exasperated sigh, Bastila stares imploringly at the teen. "Mission, please! Just get us down from here. We can discuss any further matters later."

"Like the fact that it's your fault that we're in this damn net in the first place!" Vann continues to glare at the teen, though there's no real malice in his voice.

"Alright, alright! Geeze!" Walking over to the tree's thick trunk, Mission begins to fiddle with something that looks like a tangle of vines. "I was actually taking a good look at this thing while you were busy yapping with the old guy. Good work distracting him, by the way!" She tugs at a few of the vines, deft fingers making quick work of a series of knots. "Anyway, it's a pretty simple trap. All I have to do is pull this and… Oops."

In an instant, the cluster of vines holding the net in place comes unraveled, slipping from Mission's grasp even as she makes a desperate grab for them. She manages to catch a few trailing ends, though it's not enough to prevent the net from coming loose. With a sharp snap, the vines break in her hands, leaving nothing but a few green coils resting in her palms. With a series of colorful Ryl curses, she watches as all three of her companions plummet to the ground.

Instinctively reaching out with the Force, Vann wraps it around himself and his allies, providing a defensive cushion as they plunge into the damp soil below. His Force connection shimmers around them, pulsing with protective energy. Despite the spongy nature of the ground and the additional shielding they have, the trio still lands hard in an awkward heap of limbs. It's enough to knock the air from their lungs, and the mercenary is immensely grateful that he managed to land beside Zaalbar rather than beneath him.

Still gasping for breath, Vann draws back his connection, blinking up at the jungle canopy as he mentally checks for any signs of injury. Around him, he can hear Bastila and Zaalbar doing the same, though the Wookiee seems to be less shaken. In an instant he's on his feet, wrapping Mission in a tight hug as he croons his relief over her safety. The Humans are slower to get up, each taking the time to knock dirt and leaves from the clothing as they stretch their legs.

"You shouldn't have used the Force to protect us," Bastila scolds. "That man will have sensed it!"

"Oh, so I should have let us break a few limbs instead?" Rolling his shoulders, Vann snorts. "Like it matters? He already knows we're Force-sensitive."

Sighing, Bastila nods in acquiescence. "I suppose that's true."

Turning to look at the Twi'lek, Vann complains, "Also, ouch!"

Scoffing playfully, Mission rolls her eyes. "Well, I got you down, didn't I?"

Vann stares for a moment before exclaiming, "It's still your fault that we were up there in the first place!"
"Oh really? You didn't have to come running after me when that mine went off." Mission is brushing her hands against her pants, leaving behind subtle green stains. "I had it handled."

Before Vann can come back with a clever retort, Bastila's voice rises above his own in her overly-chipper tone. "As much as I'm enjoying this riveting argument, might I suggest taking a moment to formulate a plan before our friend comes back and discovers that we've escaped?"

"Can't you just, you know?" Mission swivels her hands around her head. "Do your Jedi thing and mess with his mind? Make him forget that we were even here? Or like, convince him to just stop sabotaging Czerka?"

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, even if we ignore the ethical problems that would arise from using our abilities in such a manner." Casting a disapproving frown at the teen, Bastila only receives an eye-roll in response.

Reaching to draw his blaster from its holster, Vann nods grimly. "So, we're back to threats of physical violence. Got it."

"No! We are not…"

Before Bastila can finish chiding the other Force user, there's a sharp yelp of pain from several meters away. It echoes oddly through the thick jungle, the sound distorted and swallowed by the lush foliage. As the yell tapers off, it's followed by the dry snap of twigs and the rustling of leaves as something sizeable charges through the dense underbrush. Plant matter flies in all directions as a scaly beast bursts forth, several smaller vines twisted around its horns. It bellows once, long tail swishing irritably as its beady eyes spy the four sentients gathered in the clearing. A moment later there's more rustling, and two more of the creatures erupt from the plant life about a meter away.

"Hey Zaalbar," Vann calls, aiming his pistol at the beasts. "Are these by any chance katarns?"

Bowcaster at the ready, the Wookiee growls loudly as he nods. "Young ones, but yes. They are indeed katarns."

"These are young ones?" Eyes going wide, Vann studies the thick, armored hides of the creatures eyeing him and his companions. They're larger than kath hounds or kinrath, and their bulky forms imply significant strength and fortitude. "Like I said, your home world is terrifying."

"As much as I'd prefer not to harm the native wildlife, in this situation I think we can all acknowledge that incapacitating these creatures would be in our best interest." Bastila draws her own blaster, the weapon still seeming awkward in her grasp.

Modified pistol clutched firmly in both hands, Mission nods. "Right there with you!"

The brilliant red glow of blaster bolts illuminates the gloom of the Shadowlands, the shriek of pistol fire joining the cacophony of animal calls that constantly fill the air. Most of the shots are true to their aim, the broad sides of the katarns hard to miss even in the low light. The creatures howl as the bolts sting their thick hides, though they seem to shake off the pain with remarkable ease. Even Vann's carefully aimed shot to the neck doesn't seem to faze his target for long, and he finds himself scowling in frustration. Despite the blaster fire keeping the katarns at bay, it doesn't seem to be doing much damage.

"I don't think your pistols are going to be powerful enough to do much harm!" Zaalbar cries, even as the metal quarrel from his bowcaster manages to sink deep into the side of one katarn. "The weapons of my people are designed to fight the beasts of the Shadowlands. But the weapons of
outsiders…”

Glaring at the ineffective weapons in his hands, Vann turns to stare at the Wookiee. "Well, then, what do you suggest?"

"Traditionally, my people fight with swords. A good blade is always useful in these dangerous lands." Another magnetized shot zings from the bowcaster, gouging a fresh hole in the katarn's hide.

"Hey Bastila," Vann calls as he holsters his blaster, "Zaalbar says that we need 'good blades.'" Without further warning, he reaches into his jacket and draws his lightsaber, igniting it with a single flick of his thumb.

"Right then," the Jedi nods, holstering her own pistol. "I suppose this counts as an emergency." Drawing her shoto hilts, she powers up the yellow lightsabers and shifts into an offensive stance.

Twirling the violet blade of his 'saber, Vann glances over his shoulder at the Twi'lek. "Mission, cover us! Even if you can't do much damage, you can distract these things."

"On it!" Grinning mischievously, the teen takes careful aim at the trio of katarns even as the beasts charge forward.

A brief flash of determination sings through the Force bond, and then Vann and Bastila charge forward as a single, cohesive unit. Their blades sing as they slice through the air, the white-hot plasma of their lengths easily cutting through the katarns' thick hides. Using the shoto in her off-hand defensively, Bastila fends off the thick horns of one beast. The keratin sizzles as it's burned, releasing a bitter odor into the air. Dominant arm swinging around in a sharp arc, she carves a deep gash into the creature's abdomen, causing a roar of pain.

Sensing that the Jedi has one katarn handled, Vann dives for a second that's trying to rush at Mission and Zaalbar. Using the Force to flip through the air, he lands directly overtop the beast's head. Clutching the hilt of his lightsaber in both hands he drives the glowing blade directly into the thickly-armored forehead, slicing through a tough layer of hide and bone. Howling in agony the katarn shakes its head from side to side, movements sluggish and uncoordinated thanks to its massive head wound. Leaping back, Vann barely avoids taking a blow to the chest from its horns. Pivoting on one foot he maneuvers himself into the creature's blind spot, using the opportunity to make two hard slashes into its flank. Still disoriented from its injuries, the katarn attempts to whirl on its attacker, head thrashing from side to side. This time the edge of its horn manages to catch the Human in the thigh, gouging his flesh.

Hissing in pain Vann dives low, skidding across the soft soil as he swings his blade around to carve into the katarn's abdomen. The more tender flesh of the creature's belly slices easily open, 'saber crackling as it digs deep into internal organs. With a grunt, the mercenary uses both hands to drag the blade swiftly across the beast's gut, splitting it open in a putrid wash of entrails and burnt skin. The katarn gives one last bellow of defeat as its legs collapse, body falling to the ground even as its tail twitches for a final instant.

Rolling to his feet, Vann is upright just in time to hear a hollered, "Watch yourself, V-Man!" He ducks at the warning, whirling around to see the third katarn charging directly at him. However, its pursuit is slowed as its face is peppered with pistol fire, the bolts singeing the delicate skin around its eyes and nostrils. Snorting in frustration, it shakes its head.

"Thanks, Mission," Vann calls out, using the Force to propel himself forward with an added burst of speed. Whizzing past the katarn, he makes a series of sharp slashes at its ribs and flank as he
passes. This sudden attack seems to surprise the creature, and it stops in its tracks to look around for the source of its current discomfort.

This distraction is all Bastila needs as she rushes the beast's blind side, propelling herself into a flying leap and plunging both of her blades into its side just below its spine. Each yellow lightsaber sinks into the flesh between a rib, humming as it carves a smoking path down the creature's side and splitting it open. It growls in pain, body twitching and bucking as it succumbs to its injuries. Without a second thought, Vann dives forward, slipping his blade beneath the katarn's chin and slitting its throat in a single, smooth motion. There's a final choked gasp and their opponent collapses to the ground, eyes glassy in death.

Panting softly from exertion, Vann's head jerks to his left when there's another shout of distress from somewhere in the distance. It's closer than the last cry, and he feels his muscles tense as he considers sprinting to the aid of the stranger who, only moments before, seemed content to keep him trapped in a net. Glancing over at Bastila, he notes that the Jedi's lips are twisted into a thoughtful smile, their bond crackling with a sense of uncertainty.

"Should we help?" Vann asks out loud, glancing between his companions as he studies their faces.

Mission worries her bottom lip with her front teeth, shrugging one shoulder. "I mean, he's an old guy, right? He's probably going to break a hip or something if we don't…"

Nodding in agreement, Zaalbar trills, "He seemed honorable for an outsider. Strange perhaps, but then many of your ways are strange to me."

"I must admit," Bastila begins, "I do have some questions for this man."

Suddenly there's a ripple through the Force, a single burst of panic that reverberates through Vann, seeming to originate from a point several meters away to the northwest. The exact direction the man with the lightsaber disappeared into. Before the mercenary has time to think about it, he's running towards the source of the distress, the Force flowing through his body and enabling him to move preternaturally fast. Leaves slap his face as he charges through the dense underbrush, stinging his skin even as the gouge in his thigh aches from exertion. However, the adrenaline surging through his system is enough to keep the discomfort mostly at bay, and he's able to hurdle over a low bush and burst into a second small clearing without breaking stride.

He arrives just in time to see four katarns circling the stranger, jaws slavering and tails swishing in irritation. All of them are marred with lightsaber slashes and two are noticeably limping, though they still seem plenty capable of attacking. The man is clutching his side with one hand, the leaves covering his chest stained red with blood. As he lunges at the nearest katarn, the creature behind him leaps at its prey. Its sharp teeth dig into the stranger's lightsaber arm, fresh blood running down its chin as it chews harder on its prize. With a yelp of pain, the man drops his 'saber, the metal hilt sinking into the damp soil as it powers down. Seeming to sense a turn in the tide of battle the other three katarns close in, jaws aimed for different parts of the now-defenseless Human.

It's instinct, pure and raw and frighteningly cold, that floods Vann's system as he reaches out his free arm. Channeling the Force through his body he summons the anger that always seems to be simmering beneath his skin. It erupts forth, bursting from his fingertips in jagged bolts of brilliant purple electricity. The scent of ozone fills the air, heat and light surrounding the area as bolts of Force lightning shoot into three of the katarns. They scream, bodies shaking uncontrollably as they're electrocuted in place. The acrid scent of burnt flesh rises off their armored hides.

As the lightning subsides, leaving a tingling sensation in Vann's arm and hand, two of the katarns fall to the ground, unmoving. The third stumbles awkwardly, limping and whimpering as it
attempts to get its bearings. At seeing the plight of its brethren, the fourth katarn releases its hold on the strange Human, turning its beady eyes on Vann as it growls angrily. Haunches tensing it lunges at the Force user who just electrocuted its companions.

Relying on his combat instincts, Vann waits a moment before dodging out of the katarn’s way. Rolling forward, he grasps the lightsaber in his dominant hand as he extends his off-hand into the air. A moment later the stranger's fallen 'saber lands in his palm with a heavy thud, the hilt unfamiliar but the weight of a second weapon feeling oddly comforting. Igniting the off-blade, green and violet create a swirl of color as he swings the weapons experimentally, adjusting to the new-yet-familiar balance.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Bastila leap out of the undergrowth, her 'sabers glowing as she scans the scene. She pauses when she spots Vann charging both katarns, the pair of lightsabers carving a path of violence through the jungle. "Go help the old man!" he shouts above the loud hum of his weapons. "I've got this!"

Shifting the blade in his dominant hand to a reverse grip, the mercenary drives it into the armored hide of the katarn attacking his right side. The creature yowls as the blade is buried in its shoulder, stumbling mid-stride. The borrowed lightsaber in his off-hand moves in tandem, driving forward and sinking deep into the chest of the beast still stumbling from the effects of the Force lightning. Shaking its head in pain and frustration, it howls, trying to ram its horns into the source of its distress. However, this only drives its body further onto the saber's blade.

Carving upwards with both 'sabers, Vann crouches down as he slices through the katarns. He can feel the tearing of flesh as the plasma cuts through them, both beasts growling and roaring in pain. The already injured katarn wheezes once more, falling to its knees before crashing to its side, chest still. The remaining creature snorts in agony, head shaking as it prepares to charge its opponent one last time. Lightsabers whirring and heating the air, Vann circles the katarn before rushing forward. Slashing viciously at its neck and throat, he uses the blades in unison to sever its head. There's a stunned expression on its face as the body collapses, cranium rolling away in the opposite direction.

Adrenalin still singing in his veins as his heart pounds from exertion, he powers down both sabers as he turns to look behind him. Bastila is crouched beside the strange man, a soft glow emanating from her hands as she tends to the bite wound in his arm. She's speaking softly, a gentle smile on her face, but her patient doesn't seem to be paying attention.

Instead, he's staring at Vann, confusion etched across his features.

Drawing a deep breath to try and calm his body, Vann straightens and looks down at the strange lightsaber in his hand. It's heavier than his own hilt, its parts appearing rather piecemeal as though it's been repaired multiple times with whatever spare bits were available. Striding over to the stranger he offers the 'saber back to its owner, pointing the blade towards his own body in a sign of trust. "I… think this is yours," he mutters, trying to force a smile.

Yanking the lightsaber away with his good hand, the man scowls at the mercenary. "Just what do you think you're doing?!

Jerking back in surprise, Vann glares defiantly. "Saving your ass, apparently."

"I didn't need your help!" Tone gruff, the older man brushes off Bastila's gentle hands as he climbs to his feet. "I was doing fine on my own!"

"It sure didn't look like it, Gramps." Mission lopes into view, a cocky grin on her lips. "V-Man, I
don't care what this geezer says, that was kriffing amazing!"

Looking Mission up and down, the strange man only frowns harder. "And I suppose that you're the one who set off my mine?"

"That thing was a hunk of junk!" Mission sneers at the older Human. "It was rusted over. No way to disarm it safely! You're lucky it was me and not a Wookiee who stumbled on it."

"I was hoping that it would be a poacher who found it." Grumbling loudly, the man glances down at his healed arm, flexing the limb. "And not some idiot kids."

"Hey! I ain't no kid, Gramps!" Mission crosses her arms petulantly.

Sighing, Vann carefully tucks his lightsaber back into his jacket. "Mission," he warns, "I'm probably a kid to this guy."

"Damn right you are! And a foolish one at that." He turns his 'saber hilt over in his hands, examining it for damage. "Who do you think you are, barging in on an old man's fight and showing him up with his own weapon?"

"I assume this means that you're at least willing to acknowledge that we're not poachers?" Bastila arches a brow, studying the man curiously.

Snorting in disgust, the man tucks his lightsaber back into his oft-mended leather belt. The faint remains of beadwork suggest that it was originally a Wookiee creation. Now that he's closer, it's obvious that most of his clothing is similarly pieced together. While his tattered brown robe looks distinctly like the cloak of Jedi, the vest that covers his coarse tunic appears to be made from some type of hide, possibly that of a katarn. Similarly, his boots look like they've been reclaimed from a Republic uniform, scuffed from wear and time. "You're not poachers," he finally admits. "Fools, yes. But not poachers. Which raises more questions than answers, if you ask me."

"Actually," Bastila breathes cautiously, "I have a few questions for you as well. Perhaps we'd be able to trade information?"

Waving his hand, the older man turns away from the assembled group and begins trudging off into the jungle. "Just because I have questions about you doesn't mean that I actually want to know more," he grumbles. "In fact, I have a feeling that the less I know about you, the better my life will be."

"But that makes no sense!" Mission is already charging after the man, heedless of the tangle of plants around her feet. "And besides Gramps, we saved you! Or, at least, Vann did… So, you owe us some explanations."

Pausing, the man turns to peer at the mercenary, eyes narrowing. "Vann, huh? That's the name you go by?"

A thin burst of panic prickles the back of Vann's neck, and for a moment he feels like this stranger can somehow see through his made-up name and false bravado. Slamming his mental shields into place, he finally nods in acknowledgment. "Yeah, that's my name. And fair is fair. What's yours?"

Chuckling, the older man finally inclines his head. "Most used to call me Jolee Bindo, but I suspect that Czerka has created a few colorful new epithets by now."

"Jolee… Bindo? As in, 'pulling a Bindo'?" Bastila's brows furrow, her lips quirking into an amused little smile.
Vann gives the Jedi a curious glance. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Waving her hands dismissively, the Jedi shakes her head rapidly. "Nothing, never mind!" A faint blush creeps along her cheeks as the mental link is gently probed for more information. "It's... it's a silly little term used by some of the Padawans at the academy. It's what we called a Jedi who got married in secret, against the wishes of the Order."

"Really? That's my contribution to the Jedi Order?" Jolee barks out a harsh laugh. "I'm the Padawan word for a cautionary tale?"

Gasping in astonishment, Bastila rushes up to the older Human's side. "So, you really are that Jolee Bindo?"

"One in the same," Jolee admits sourly. "And you are...?"

"Bastila Shan," the Jedi offers, bowing politely at the waist.


"No, I don't suppose you would have." Bastila shrugs lightly, seemingly unperturbed by the lack of recognition. "By the time my Force-sensitivity was discovered, you had already left the Jedi Order."

"Ah. Well, nice to learn your whole life story, Bastila." Jolee shakes his head, shifting his focus directly to Vann. Eyes narrowing, he studies the other man for several moments before carefully stating, "But the story I'm really curious about is this one."

It's easy enough for the mercenary to give his usual canned response to this situation. "Nothing to tell, really."

"Bantha shit!" Jolee practically spits as he speaks. "You can't come down here, fighting like that, using Force lightning... which I'm pretty sure the Jedi Council still does not approve of... and not have a story to tell."

Gaze shifting to stare at his hands, Vann balls them into fists before turning to look the older man in the eyes. "Alright, here's my story old man. We're on Kashyyyk..."

"Looking for something rather specific," Grinning, Jolee nods sagely. "I know."

"What... makes you say that?" Bastila's tone is cautious, verging on suspicious.

"Because there are only two reasons for Force-sensitive individuals to be on this planet." Jolee ticks the points off on his fingers as he recites them. "One is that they're rogue Jedi hired by Czerka. The second is, well, the other thing that's on this planet."

Vann chuckles darkly. "Sorry to ruin your day, but we're actually rogue Jedi."

"Heh. Good try."

Reaching into his jacket, the mercenary retrieves the datapad with all the information about their current job. Holding it out towards the older Human, he announces, "Here are our Czerka credentials."

Barely even glancing at the pad, Jolee pushes it away with his palm. "Sorry, but I still don't believe you. If you were really working for Czerka or at least took your job seriously, you'd have left me to
die back there. Not healed my arm… and did a piss-poor job of it, by the way!" Scowling at Bastila, he adds, "Just what are the Jedi teaching Padawans these days?"

The Jedi fumes for a moment, opening her mouth to say something scathing in response. However, she's cut off by Vann as he asks, "Alright, so if we were theoretically looking for the, uh, other thing, where would we begin searching?"

Jolee smiles mysteriously. "Well, I'd tell you, but that would ruin half the point of finding the thing that you're looking for."

Rolling her eyes, Mission jabs an accusing finger at the older Human. "You're not making any sense, Gramps."

"I'm not supposed to. I'm old, I'm allowed to be cryptic." Jolee points a finger right back at the teen. "When you get to be my age, you can be cryptic too!"

Sighing heavily Vann mutters, "Alright, here's an easier question. How do we get you to stop sabotaging the Czerka poachers, at least for a little bit? We may have taken a job with Czerka as a cover, and we'd really like to be able to get off-planet without being fired on."

Reaching up to rub his beard thoughtfully, Jolee finally drawls, "Well, you could take me with you when you leave."

"Really, that simple?" Vann narrows his eyes suspiciously. "We just need to give you a ride?"

"Of course it's not that simple!" Jolee chuckles. "But offering me a ride off this planet would be a good start."

Fighting to keep her voice calm, Bastila's tone is overly-formal as she asks, "Well, what else might we offer you? Or, more specifically, what else do you want?"

"I want my bones to stop aching when it rains, my hair to grow back, and idiot kids to stop asking me stupid questions!" Waving his hands through the air in frustration, Jolee finally lets out a soft groan. "But I'll settle for you helping me to free the locals."

Vann arches a brow. "The… Wookiees?"

"No, the tachs! Of course, the Wookiees!" Staring at the mercenary in disbelief, Jolee snorts. "Look, I wouldn't have to chase the poachers away if the Wookiees were back in charge of their own planet. And they'd be back in charge if their leaders, their real leaders and not those puppet chieftains that Czerka put in place, weren't all locked up in a prison camp."

Zaalbar's voice shakes the nearby branches as he roars, "What have they done to my people? Where are these leaders? How is Czerka able to contain them?"

"Easy there, big fellow, I'm getting to that part!" Holding his hand up in a placating manner, Jolee's tone is less derisive as he explains, "Czerka turned the village closest to their port into a prison for any Wookiees foolhardy enough to oppose them. Most of the original chieftains are there, being made an 'example' of. Bust them out and get them back into power, and my poaching problems are solved."

"…So, what? You want us to start a revolution or something?" Vann can't help laughing at the ridiculousness of the situation.

"Well, say it like that and it sounds pretty difficult!" Jolee leans in conspiratorially. "Makes you
wonder why I'd need help doing it."

"Alright, suppose that we agree to help free Kashyyyk from Czerka's control." Bastila taps her chin thoughtfully, her tone doubtful. "It all sounds well and good in theory, but from what I've seen the Wookiees aren't going to listen to outsiders like us. Especially not the chieftains."

Gesturing emphatically at Zaalbar, Jolee scolds, "You have a Wookiee with you! Geeze, do I really have to spell this out for you?"

"I… I would be of no help in this situation. My people do not respect me." The Wookiee's shaggy head droops, his eyes downcast as he admits, "I was outcast from my village many years ago, and have done nothing to earn the right to return. I have no more power here than any other outsider."

"Huh. I guess that does put a crimp in my plan." Scratching his hairless scalp, Jolee ponders, "Though I suppose there's always that sword…"

"That who-what now? Gramps, come on. Stop talking in riddles." Mission rolls her eyes again, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I'll talk in riddles if I want!" Jolee snaps at the teen. "And the Wookiee ought to know the sword I'm talking about. Big ceremonial thing, supposedly hidden in the Shadowlands by its last owner?"

"Bacca's Blade! Yes, I've heard of it." Immediately perking up, Zaalbar nods enthusiastically. As he speaks, Vann continues to paraphrase his words for Bastila's sake. "My people says that the blade was cast into a great rock that was sent from the skies above. Supposedly he who can find the blade and draw it from the rock will be worthy to lead our people during times of strife… But nobody has found the blade in many generations."

"I did!" Jolee's chest puffs out slightly, though it quickly deflates as he adds, "But apparently, I'm not worthy to lift it. And by that, I mean it's stuck."

Eyes going wide, Zaalbar stares at the Human in disbelief. "You… have seen Bacca's Blade?"

"I've seen a lot of things in my time down here!" That mysterious smile once again creeps across Jolee's lips. "Though I think you'll find the blade's location… humorous."

Vann glares at the older man. "I'll bet you that I won't."

"Well, we'll just see about that." Waving his hand towards the gathered group, Jolee once again begins to crunch through the underbrush, making no effort to be silent or stealthy in the process. "I'll lead you kids to the blade. And if you can get it out, you should be able to rally the Wookiees behind you. And if you can rally them, they should be willing to rise up against Czerka. Etcetera, etcetera."

Cautiously following the older man, Vann growls, "That seems like an awful lot of work when I could just shoot you in the knees and drag you to Czerka for the reward. The way I see it, that would save a lot of time and energy."

Bastila turns to gape at her companion. "Vann!"

"Fine then, shoot me for all I care." Jolee doesn't even turn around as he speaks. "My knees ache half the time anyway. But I think I know you better than you think."

Vann's tone is icy when he says, "You don't know anything about me."
"I know that you're going to do the right thing. Not necessarily because you believe in the right thing, but because your friends here do." Jolee makes a general gesture to the figures following in his wake. "And I think you do believe in your friends."

"Vann, please!" Zaalbar's trills are plaintive as he begs, "My people need assistance. I know that I pledged a life debt to you, and I will follow you no matter your decision. But I also know you to be a man of honor..."

"Come on V-Man, the Wookiees need our help!" Mission's bright eyes stare up at the mercenary as she jogs along beside Zaalbar. "And just think about how good it'll feel to stick it to those Czerka creeps! Hells, I bet even Carth'll have fun with that."

When he glances over at Bastila, the Jedi's lips are quirked into a half-smile and she shrugs one shoulder in response to his proverbial question. However, the Force bond ripples with a bright sense of hope that speaks louder than any words.

It's still several moments of tense silence before Vann finally grits out, "Okay, fine. I won't shoot the old man and turn him in for the reward." He sighs as he nods to the Wookiee. "We'll help your people, Zaalbar."

Bowing as best he can while continuing to walk, Zaalbar growls out, "Thank you, Vann Chis."

Teeth still clenched, the mercenary grumbles, "But there better be a really funny story about this damn blade..."

"Oh," Jolee chuckles to himself, "It's hilarious."

"...This is not funny, Jolee." Vann stares in aghast horror at the sight before him, his Force presence rippling with a mixture of frustration and no small amount of anger.

"See Vann, in these situations you have to learn to laugh." The older Force user claps the mercenary on the shoulder just a little harder than strictly necessary. "You won't live to be my age unless you can laugh about these things."

"I must admit, this is... quite unexpected." Bastila is also staring, grimacing slightly.

Mission cants her head to the side as she looks up, wrinkling her nose thoughtfully. "So, how did they even manage to shove the sword through there?"

Nodding in admiration, Zaalbar growls, "It is said that, when the last warrior to use Bacca's Blade was finished with his task, he came down to the Shadowlands to hide the sword, lest it fell into the hands of someone unworthy." Pointing to where the weapon is currently lodged, he continues, "When he discovered this rock, which fell from the sky many ages ago, he determined it to be the only proper resting place for a weapon of such importance. As he was a mighty warrior, he was able to thrust the blade into the rock. Thus, only a warrior of his caliber can retrieve Bacca's Blade."

"Yes," Vann hisses, jaw aching from how hard he's clenching his teeth. "But that's not a kriffing rock!"

Brow furrowing, Mission asks, "Well, obviously. But what the hells is it?"

"It's the kriffing Star Map!" Gesturing emphatically at the ancient device surrounded by the mist of
the Shadowlands, Vann groans as he adds, "And it's held closed by that damn blade!"

"Can't you, I don't know..." Mission makes a general sweeping motion with her hands, "Use the map *around* the blade?"

"Unfortunately, I don't think that's possible." Bastila continues to frown at the map, eyes studying the large sword that's currently pinning the arms together. The hefty blade has been shoved directly through the tips, spearing all of them in place. "You see, those parts need to swing down in order to reveal the coordinates. Which, at this moment, just isn't possible."

"See, like I said," Jolee continues to chuckle, "It's hysterical."

Turning to glower at the former Jedi, Vann growls, "Keep laughing, old man. See if I don't shoot your knees out for my own amusement."

Sobering slightly, Jolee quips, "Hasn't anyone told you that anger is the path to the dark side?"

"Repeatedly."

Finally turning away from the puzzle at hand, Bastila casts an imploring glance at the mercenary. "Vann," she says, "It seems like this blade was put in place long before recent memory. But to the best of our knowledge, Malak and Revan were here only a few standard years ago. So, it stands to reason that they discovered a way to circumvent this little problem. Perhaps you can channel the residual Force energy connected to this piece of the map?"

Nodding in acknowledgment, Vann closes his eyes and draws a slow breath. Reaching out his Force connection, he searches for any signs of Revan's memories within the wealth of life and energy that flow through Kashyyyk. As his awareness spreads around him, he can feel the familiar rumble of the Star Map as it brushes against his own consciousness, practically calling to him. The sensation is both haunting and comforting, yet no visions come. Nor have they since the incident on Tatooine. Frustration floods his system, simultaneously cold and hot in his gut.

"Nothing," he finally confesses. "Of all the times to be silent, that asshole picks now."

"What exactly do you know about Malak and Revan?" Jolee's brows are furrowed, his lips pressed into a thoughtful frown.

"You mean, besides the fact that Malak is Supreme Commander of the Republic, and Revan is a dead man who occasionally invades my head? Not all that much." Vann peers curiously at the older man. "Why, do you know something?"

Ignoring the question, Jolee quietly wonders out loud, "So, Revan's a dead man, huh?"

Jerking his hands in confusion, Vann stares at the older man. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Frowning gently, Bastila asks, "Did you not know? I suppose that news doesn't always reach this far into the Outer Rim." She sighs softly as she quickly summarizes, "Revan died a little over three standard years ago. He and Malak were attacked by a cell of Mandalorian rebels while on a mission for the Jedi Council. Revan was killed in the ensuing battle. Malak survived but... he was never the same."

"Funny how Mandalorian rebels are always to blame ever since the last war." Jolee's expression is grim, though there's a mischievous glimmer in his dark eyes. "And before that, it was Exar Kun and the Sith. And before that..."
Vann's confusion only deepens. "Are you saying that you don't believe the story of Revan's death?"

"I'm an old man who's been lied to more than a few times in my life. I don't believe a lot of things."

Frustrated with the cryptic nature of the older Force user's words, Vann swallows a growl of irritation. "How's this for thinking for myself?" He turns to his companions, calling out, "Hey, Zaalbar, a Wookiee put that sword through the Star Map. Can you maybe… pull it out?"

"I'm sorry Vann, but by the laws of my people, I am not worthy to do such a thing." Head downcast, the Wookiee stares remorsefully at his claws. As he turns to look at his leader, he notes the Human's visible annoyance with the situation and quickly adds, "Also, whoever put that sword through the map was much stronger than I am. Even if I wanted to, I don't think I could remove it."

"Perhaps if we all work together?" Bastila's voice is all false cheer. "Though, granted, I believe Zaalbar is the only one tall enough to actually reach the sword."

"Oh, come on!" Jerking her thumb at the gathered Humans, Mission yelps, "There are three kriiffing Jedi here!"

Pointedly not looking at Jolee, Bastila whispers, "Technically only two Jedi."

"Really, he's a Jedi?" The older force user glares at Vann accusingly.

"I'm really not a Jedi…"

"Well, whatever you are, you're telling me that you can't just… use the Force and yank the sword out?" Mission moves her arms in a pantomime of someone pulling the blade from the Star Map.

"That is actually a good point. I'm a bit ashamed that I didn't think of it in the first place." Offering an apologetic smile to the Twi'lek, Bastila barely avoids rolling her eyes when she receives a haughty little smirk in return. "Vann, you were able to move an entire piece of the Star Map's machinery back on Dantooine."

Pointing to the blade visibly lodged in the metal of the ancient device, the mercenary arches a brow. "I'm pretty sure this is a little different."

"Well, yes. But Jolee and I can assist you." Voice once again just a touch too optimistic for the situation, Bastila glances hopefully between the other Force users.

"Hey now, don't look at me." Shrugging, the older man stares down at his lean, slightly weathered body. "Brute strength was never my forte. Either when fighting or when using the Force. Think of me as here for moral support."

Jutting her chin out in determination, Bastila squares her shoulders. "Well, no matter, we must at least try."

Sensing that this entire plan is resting on his reluctant agreement, Vann sighs as he grumbles, "Alright, fine. Let's get this sword out."

"Well, you don't have to sound so excited about it!" Jolee chortles at his own joke as takes a conscious step back from the Star Map, his smile terse and cautious.
Vann bites back another sigh as he turns to focus on the hefty blade lodged in the Star Map. Gathering his connection to the Force, he extends his arm and sends out a burst of raw power, wrapping the energy around the weapon and attempting to pry it loose from its prison. This is similar to the technique he used on Dantooine but requires far more precision. The ancient metal of the Star Map's mechanical housing also provides more resistance than a pile of grass and dirt. Beside him, Bastila's burrow is furrowed in concentration as she adds her own Force strength.

Despite their combined efforts, the sword only manages to shake in place, the entire mechanical device shuddering from the sheer power. For a moment, there's the low screech of metal rubbing against metal, though the sword only twists slightly before continuing to remain stubbornly in place. Vann hisses under his breath, channeling more Force energy through his body as he attempts to throw his current frustration into his efforts. A chill rushes beneath his skin, and his sense of awareness flickers out of focus.

FLASH

A black glove appears on Vann's outstretched hand, familiar in its weight and texture, and matching the equally dark robes that cover the rest of his body. Consciously, he begins to channel his natural anger into his efforts, an aspect of his own Force connection that he's learned to accept over these past few years. The blade before him shudders in place before slowly beginning to slide from the arms of the Star Map.

Glancing to his right, he can see a taller figure performing the same exercise in Force control, the tattoos along his scalp warping as his eyes squint with his effort to focus. Nodding to his friend, Revan grunts out his approval as the blade continues to slip from the metal it's been encased in for the last few centuries. To have the strength to perform this feat, they've had to harness the dark side. But it's only a means to an end. A step from the light so that they might achieve a greater peace…

FLASH

"Malak, don't fight the darkness." Vann barely recognizes his own voice as he speaks, the words sounding foggy and dream-like to his own ears. "Your pride, your impulsiveness… embrace it. Just this once."

Startling, Bastila's concentration suddenly slips as her eyes go wide. "Did you just call me…?"

"Just do it!" Tone rich with command, Vann refocuses his efforts on the blade, watching as it gradually slides out of the metal that he… that Revan placed it back into after the Star Map was accessed last.

Lips pursed in concern, Bastila finally heaves a shaky breath before redoubling her own focus on the hefty weapon. Metal groans for an instant, the entire Star Map continuing to shake and shudder as it surrenders its last bit of resistance and finally gives up its treasure.

With a low pitched screech, Bacca's Blade flies loose from the arms of the map, hovering in the air for an instant before the sheer momentum needed to pull the weapon free causes it to tumble out of control. The heavy blade makes the air whistle as it falls to the ground, gaining speed as it plummets edge-over-hilt before finally sinking into the damp earth with a reverberating clang. The blade is sucked about halfway into the moist soil, standing almost perfectly straight, pommel pointed towards the far-off canopy.

Ironically, Bacca's Blade has come to rest directly at Vann's feet. How it managed not to sever a limb in its freefall is a mystery of the Force.
"Well damn," Jolee snorts, amused. "I guess this makes you chief of the Wookiees."

At hearing these words, Zaalbar immediately bows his head, growls soft and respectful as he agrees, "Vann, you have retrieved Bacca's Blade from the rock in which it rested. Though you are an outsider, that grants you great respect among my people."

Swallowing hard, Vann quickly points out, "…Bastila helped!"

"You called me Malak!" The Jedi's eyes are once again wide in disbelief, one finger jabbing accusingly at the mercenary.

"He was here!" Vann protests. "Or, at least, it felt like he was here. He was definitely here when Revan was! And for a moment, you looked like him. Well, not you…" Sputtering for lack of an explanation, he finally blurts out, "It was a vision, okay?"

"Vann… Carth mentioned that your visions were becoming more concerning. I originally believed he was overreacting, but now that I've witnessed one I'm not so sure." Wringing her hands, she whispers, "You told me to tap into my negative emotions. To utilize darkness."

"Hey! You told me the same thing back on Dantooine." Glaring at his companion, Vann narrows his eyes. "So, don't start with the high-and-mighty Jedi routine!"

Taking a defensive step back, Bastila draws a slow breath. "Well, no matter. I didn't do what you, or Revan, told me to."

"I know what I felt, and I can safely say that at least one of you was tapping into the darker side of the Force right there." Jolee nods sagely. "But that's not necessarily a bad thing. The dark side is just that. It's dark. But that doesn't make it inherently evil." His expression grows somber. "Take it from an old man who's seen a lot that he'd like to forget. It's not about light and dark. It's about how people use their power."

Entire body jerking back in shock, Bastila objects, "But the dark side…"

"Like he said, stop with the high-and-mighty Jedi routine!" Jolee shakes his head sadly at the young woman. "That's half the reason I left the damn Order in the first place."

Looking only somewhat admonished, Bastila silently fumes to herself for a moment, drawing several breaths that sound neither calming nor peaceful. Continuing to glower at the older Human, her tone is prim as she states, "As you are no longer a member of the Order, you are entitled to your opinions about the Force. Just as I am entitled to think that you're wrong."

Rolling his eyes at this acquiescence, Jolee slowly drawls, "Though, I am curious." He arches a brow at Vann, "How is it that the Council allows someone who commands Force lightning to run amuck in the Outer Rim?"

"They, uh, might not know about the lightning yet…" The mercenary clears his throat pointedly. Chuckling at the implication, Jolee offers a grunt of understanding. "Well, you might want to keep it that way."

"That would be the plan." Sighing, Vann turns to look at the large blade still planted at his feet. "Speaking of plans," he murmurs, "Zaalbar, you should be the one to take this."

Growling in protest, the Wookiee shakes his head. "Vann, I can't. You were the one who removed the blade…"
"And I'm also an outsider to your people. They're not going to follow me, especially not in a rebellion against Czerka Corp." He points to the ceremonial sword. "They're your people, Zaalbar. You should be the one to rescue them, whether they like it or not."

"But Vann…"

Giving the Twi'lek a sideways glance, the mercenary adds, "Mission, do me a favor and convince Zaalbar to take the damn sword and be the hero. 'Cause I'm getting sick of it."

Grinning, the teen nods once in acknowledgment before placing a small hand on the Wookiee's much larger forearm. She says something in a hushed tone, the words seeming to calm her friend. The rest of their exchange is lost in the louder conversation around them.

"So," Bastila queries, still mildly peeved at the fallout of Vann's latest vision. "What exactly is your plan, then?"

"Well, for one thing, I'm going to get the rest of this Star Map." Stepping around the blade still poking out of Kashyyyk's rich soil, Vann strides over to the ancient device. It looks decidedly out-of-place in the towering forest. Drawing a breath to steady himself, he kneels beside the mechanical object and places his palms against the base. It feels surprisingly warm to the touch thanks to the muggy air of the planet. Channeling just a bit of his own Force energy into the map, he braces himself for another vision.

None comes.

Breathing out a soft sigh of relief, Vann watches as the arms of the device swing down and a familiar orb begins to swirl and glow at the center. Peering over his shoulder, he sees Bastila copying to new data into her pad as it appears, adding more coordinates to their version of the map to the Star Forge.

"So," the Jedi murmurs, still looking at the new information, "What's your plan beyond this?"

"Well, now I have to head back to the ship and convince a grumpy pilot, a Mandalorian, and a murder-cat to help us start a Wookiee uprising." Dusting his hands against his pants, Vann winces at his own words. "Actually, I changed my mind. I'll lead the Wookiees. Zaalbar just has to lead the rest of the crew."

"Sounds like you have quite the motley assortment of weirdos following you," Jolee comments.

Raking his hands through his hair, Vann stares at the older man. "Oh, you have no idea."

Chapter End Notes

1. This is Chapter 12, and I think it's the first time the word "Sith" has been mentioned in this story. And it was only used in passing. I think this is a new record for anything involving Star Wars!

2. I'd apologize for going straight to "the sword in the stone" when it comes to Bacca's Blade, but the original three Star Wars films (Episodes IV-VI) are also heavily influenced by Arthurian Legend. There's some scholarship on the subject, and it can be pretty interesting if you like that type of thing.
Planet - Kashyyk Part II

Chapter Summary

In which staying with the ship is not as boring as everyone thought, the Republic is more persistent than originally believed, and Carth still has trust issues.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

13.

(Interlude – Canderous)

Glancing over the table of supplies that the merchant has displayed, Canderous crosses his arms over his chest and he spots the listed prices. "You're joking, right?"

The merchant squirms under the Mandalorian's critical gaze, though he keeps a slimy smile plastered on his face. He's exactly the type of sleaze that likes to set up shop on remote Outer Rim worlds, peddling used goods for exorbitant prices. "Not a lot of shops here on Kashyyk," he points out. "Rule of supply and demand, you know…"

"How about the rule of my fist meeting your face if you don't make a reasonable offer?" Placing both hands on the table, Canderous smiles menacingly. "Not a lot of shops here. Not a lot of law and order, either. A man could practically get away with murder on a remote planet like this."

Shuddering slightly, the merchant plucks one of the flimsiplast price tags from the table, pretending to examine it with surprise. "Oh, I didn't realize this was the price listed! It's the wrong tag, my apologies. The actual price is, oh, twenty credits lower? Does that sound about right?"

Snorting at the still-inflated number, Canderous's grin turns into a snarl. The only thing worse than a liar is a coward who lacks the spine to stand by his lies, but at least, in this case, it's working to the crew's advantage. Rolling his shoulders, he feels his joints crack audibly, the motion stretching the material of his vest. "That's the best you can do?"

"Perhaps thirty credits lower?" Despite his uneasy shuffling, the merchant's voice is surprisingly firm.

"Careful you do not draw too much attention to yourself." Sharp teeth biting into some type of local produce, Juhani punctuates her statement with the sharp crunch of the fruit's flesh snapping away from its core. She chews thoughtfully, hovering just beyond the Human's left shoulder.

Carrying a small sack full of whatever fruit the Cathar is eating, along with a few other packages of fresh food, Carth mutters, "I still think it's a bad idea for us to leave the ship."

Narrowing his eyes at the pilot, Canderous hisses, "We needed supplies, didn't we?" Turning back to the merchant, he eyes the pile of secondhand ship parts for a moment before slowly stating, "I'll get back to you."

A sly smile spreading over his lips, the merchant warns, "These might not be here when you
change your mind!"

Canderous nods smugly. "I'll take that chance." The truth is that they don't actually need any supplies. The crew stocked up before they left Tatooine, using the credits from selling Hulas's speeders to purchase enough fuel, food, and spare parts to last through Kashyyyk without needing to resupply. But he's been surviving almost exclusively on ration bars since leaving Dantooine and his tolerance for the grainy, flavorless excuse for a meal is wearing thin.

Originally, Canderous was planning to head out alone. He figured that a single human wouldn't be enough to draw attention, especially with the Ebon Hawk legally docked and registered with Czerka. He hadn't counted on Juhani prowling after him, unabashed about the fact that she was following him, and yet silent even when he noticed her stalking his shadow. She's been on his tail all day, always within sight of him while continuously dancing just out of arm's reach. There's a feral sort of beauty in how she operates, all wild eyes and deadly grace. But then, for his part, Canderous has a great deal of respect for the Cathar. They fought admirably and their destruction wasn't personal, at least not for him. For him, it was always about the reclamation of his people's honor. Maybe not honor as everyone sees it, but then everyone isn't a Mandalorian.

Carth, however, has been a different issue. He took about twenty standard minutes to notice that the rest of the organic crew was missing, and proceeded to bumble around the dock until he found them. And yet, somehow the damned pilot's got it in his head that he's the responsible one who needs to keep everyone else in check. As though Canderous is the idiot who lost the kriffing Twi'lek kid. Honestly, Carth wouldn't be so bad if he'd just keep his mouth shut. And stop looking so nervous. How the man managed to survive as a smuggler on the Outer Rim is clearly a miracle of the Force.

"Dammit, Carth. Calm the hells down." Reaching into the bag of produce that the pilot is carrying, Canderous pulls out one of the oblong, purplish fruits. He sniffs it for a moment, savoring the pungently sweet scent before taking a bite. It's slightly bitter and quite a bit firmer than he expected, but still pleasant. "You're the one who's going to get us caught."

"I am calm!" Carth retorts in a decidedly irate manner. "I just think we need to be on alert. In case you forget, she ran into trouble at the last Czerka port." He nods to the Cathar, glaring.

Taking another bite of fruit, Juhani carefully sucks the juice from the flesh before purring, "Oh, but I am on alert. One who is truly attuned to the Force is difficult to catch off guard."

About as Force-sensitive as a duracrete block, Canderous doesn't pretend to understand how these things work. But he's seen enough Jedi and gotten his ass kicked by more than a few of them, to know that there's more to the Force than just lore and superstition. There's real power behind the Force and those who wield it. He respects that type of power. Respects what it's capable of.

Unfortunately, Carth has yet to learn the same respect. Despite watching a Jedi summon lightning to kill a dozen sentients. Because apparently, Carth is blind as well as an idiot.

"Look, Juhani, I know that you can sense things that I… that we… can't." He shoots the Mandalorian a pointed look. "But it's still dangerous for us to be off the ship right now." He's speaking to both of his crewmates when he adds, "We have our supplies. Can we head back now?"

Drawing a deep breath through his nose, Canderous tilts his head back to stare at the tops of the trees. Kashyyyk is a uniquely impressive planet. Though a bit too humid for comfort, and a bit too lush to be tactically advantageous to anyone but the locals, it still has its appeal. "Can't you relax for once? Maybe enjoy being somewhere other than marching through the desert, or crammed into the hold of a ship? Try to enjoy something for once in your life?"
Carth sputters indignantly for a moment before blurt out, "I enjoy plenty of things!"

"Something besides brooding over the Republic, or dispassionately flying a starship?" Watching as the pilot's expression scrunches up in irritation, Canderous doesn't wait for a verbal response before practically shouting, "Have some passion! Get laid, or get into a fight, or do something other than overthinking everything in your life!"

Expression still dour, Carth snorts, "Do you think about anything but fighting and sex?"

Adopting an easy, suggestive grin Canderous airily replies, "Not if I can help it."

"You seem to live your life with quite a bit of passion." Juhani regards the Mandalorian for a moment, golden eyes studying him carefully as she idly tosses away the core of what she was eating. "Some might say such an outlook is dangerous."

"Only dangerous if you're stupid about it." Scoffing at the implication, Canderous meets the Cathar's gaze. "Hey, we're both warriors. You can understand what I'm saying, right?"

Juhani nods slowly, tone thoughtful. "My people's blood runs hot. We are passionate about all that we do. Much as the dark side of the Force finds strength and power in strong emotions."

"Exactly." Canderous jerks a thumb at the Cathar as he shoots the pilot a triumphant smirk. "She knows what I'm talking about."

"Silence, Mandalorian. Just because we share a certain understanding does not mean that we are kin." Voice lowering to a feral hiss, Juhani's hands ball into fists by her sides. Her eyes narrow, teeth glinting sharply as she speaks. "Nor does it mean that I forgive you or your people for the sins they have committed. For the pain they have caused."

Canderous doesn't need to be Force-sensitive to feel the rage rolling off the Cathar. He can see the fury in her gaze and knows that it's the same bloodlust that he's experienced hundreds of time in his own life. His heart pumps a little faster, adrenaline coursing through his veins. "That's fair," he finally states, tone measured. "My people killed yours out of revenge. You survived. It's your right to seek out your own revenge against me and mine."

"And then who seeks revenge against her?" Gesturing emphatically to the Cathar with his free hand, Carth shakes his head in visible disgust. "Can't you see that it's all a vicious cycle of violence? That nobody wins and everybody loses?"

"Says the man who dreams of nothing but shooting Saul Karath and Malak through the hearts," Canderous levels his gaze at the pilot, chuckling darkly. "Hey Carth, remember when I said that you need to be honest with yourself?"

"I never said that I don't want revenge!" Awkwardly shifting the bags he's carrying, Carth snaps back, "But at the same time, I don't try to disguise it as the right thing to do. Or think that it makes me honorable in some way."

Jaw clenching at the mention of his own honor, Canderous grits out, "And what would the Republic know about honor?"

Opening his mouth to spit out a response, Carth fumbles for words for a moment before his jaw clicks shut. He swallows hard, brows furrowed and a mixture of anger and pain flickering across his features. Clearing his throat, his next words are cut off by a warning hiss from the Cathar.

"Silence!" Holding up one hand, Juhani's other slips smoothly beneath her robe to where her
lightsaber is hidden. "I… sense something. Something dangerous."

Dominant hand immediately moving to brush the blaster at his hip, Carth snarls back, "See, I knew it wasn't safe to be out here!"

"The entire Outer Rim is dangerous! It's not safe here, period!" Canderous sneers in contempt, mentally counting the number of knives he currently has hidden on his body. In an attempt to be discrete, he didn't bring his beskad or heavy blaster on this outing, but he's not foolish enough to leave the ship unarmed.

"Shut up, you fools!" There's a loud whirring sound as Juhani draws her lightsaber, igniting it as she falls into a defensive stance. The crimson blade casts an eerie glow across her face. "Someone has us surrounded…"

The air sizzles for a moment as a volley of blaster fire flies in from all directions. Most of the shots are quickly blocked by a series of lightning-quick parries from Juhani's lightsaber, though more than a few go soaring into the makeshift market. The nearby merchants shout as the bolts come towards them, and many wisely choose to flee the scene along with the few unfortunate Czerka employees caught in the fire while out on patrol. The panicked footfalls echo on the wooden walkway, goods rolling off overturned tables as people scramble to escape the chaos.

In an instant, Canderous drops into a crouch, both hands reaching for the long-bladed knives concealed in his boots. From the corner of his eye, he spots Carth equally crouched and tense, fingers hovering over his blasters. The bags of supplies lay scattered across the ground, some of the produce rolling slowly along the walkway. However, before either human can move there's a sharp humming as Juhani flips through the air and lands less than a meter away from one source of the blaster fire. Her first two slashes seem to hit nothing but air. However, the third strike sizzles loudly as the crimson blade cuts into metal, the air shimmering as a hidden advisory is forced into view.

Canderous's eyes narrow when he catches the familiar lines of a warrior's beskar'gam, the painted iron appearing dull beneath the dappled light of Kashyyyk. Despite bearing the distinct form of a Neo-Crusader's armor the coloring is different, mostly black with bold stripes of scarlet. The colors of Malak's Republic. The air around them ripples again as multiple stealth field generators are deactivated, revealing three more figures in almost identical gear. A chill runs down the Mandalorian's spine, even as his heart hammers within his chest. These are his people that they're facing, though whether these are true Mandalorians or merely cowards who sold their skills to the highest bidder has yet to be seen.

Legs tensing, Canderous slowly draws his weapons and prepares to charge. A set of vibroknives won't do much good against full beskar'gam, but he knows the armor's weak points. If he can get close enough, he can slide the blades between the joints and do real damage. It's a dangerous plan, but there's risk in all honorable combat. From just over his left shoulder, Carth has already started to provide cover fire for Juhani. His blaster pistols are surprisingly potent at this short range, and his shots are successfully harrying the four opposing warriors.

Before he has time to rethink his plan, Canderous lets out a whoop as he rushes forward. Juhani already has one opponent occupied, her lightsaber a blur of red as she fends off attacks from her adversary's much larger beskad. Every strike she meets is parried with two deadly-quick slashes of her own, the plasma of her blade cutting through even beskad steel. Canderous would be impressed if this wasn't something he saw dozens of times while facing down the Revanchists. He'd honestly trade a little of his strength for a Jedi's flexibility right about now, his body bending awkwardly as he tries to dive beneath the bolts of a warrior's blaster. He's not limber enough, and two bolts dig
into his right shoulder. It stings like all hells, and he growls in pain even as his regeneration
implant kicks in.

Diving to the ground, he moves in a controlled slide towards one of the warriors. Raising both
knives, he shouts in triumph as he drives the blades into the delicate line of the beskar'gam's knee
joint. His adversary howls in agony, injured leg collapsing in a spray of blood. It's enough to throw
them off balance, but not to prevent them from leveling their blaster directly at Canderous's head.
He bares his teeth as the muzzle brushes his forehead, eyes staring up challengingly. Despite the
adrenaline pumping through his veins, a sense of serene acceptance settles in his mind. This isn't the
worst way to die. Even stripped of his traditional weapons and armor there's still honor in this
combat. He fights the urge to close his eyes, wanting to see the helm of this final opponent until his
very last moment.

Juhani's voice is a distant whisper as she hisses, "Fool! I am your doom!" Equally vague is the
choked gasps of a final breath, and the heavy thud of an armored body hitting the wooden
walkway.

Bracing for pain, Canderous can't help the surprised wheeze that escapes his lungs as his body
goes rigid, muscles frozen in place and limbs unable to move. He tries to growl out that this is a
coward's way of ending a life, but his throat won't cooperate. The words die anyway when he sees
the warrior in front of him lower their blaster, head turning to stare at some new presence on the
Great Walkway.

"Excellent work," a masculine voice murmurs in approval. "Turn them towards me. I want to see
the faces of the rebels who have caused my master so much trouble."

Reaching out an armored hand, the warrior roughly grasps Canderous's shoulder and spins his
paralyzed body around. His boots scrape the rough wooden planks, legs twisting awkwardly. He
wouldn't be standing if his joints weren't currently locked in place. Forced to stare in front of him,
he sees a dark-clad man who wasn't originally part of this battle. Or, at least he wasn't visible.

The stranger slowly strides towards the group of Mandalorians, gaze cataloging the scene before
him. His black, high-necked tunic and loose pants are a variation on the Jedi's preferred style,
though the customized armor that covers his torso is more reminiscent of the Revanchists and the
additional protective gear they adopted during the Mandalorian Wars. His head is bald, though he
sports dark facial hair that's offset by his unnaturally pallid skin. A lightsaber hilt is loosely gripped
in one hand, its blade powered down. But even without the defining weapon, he has a certain air
that immediately identifies him as a Force user.

Brows furrowing, the stranger man snarls, "Wait, where are the others?"

One of the Mandalorians steps forward, his blaster still trained on Juhani's now-immobile form.
There are a few extra symbols painted onto his armor, marking him as the leader of this group.
"These were the only three we tracked, Bandon. Sir." The voice is familiar to Canderous, though
he can't quite place it.

Now circling his prisoners, Bandon eyes each one critically. "These aren't the individuals my
master is interested in." Turning to glare at the lead Mandalorian, his eyes seem to flash yellow for
a moment before fading back to their original brown. "He wants the Padawan. And the rogue
Force-sensitive training with her."

The leader's grip on his blaster tightens. "But sir, these are two of the men who broke into the
Republic base." His voice takes on a darker tone as he nods to Canderous, adding, "I personally
plan to turn that one in and..."
"Yes, I'm well aware of your vendetta against your former commander. And you're more than welcome to turn them all in for the credits…” Bandon's voice trails off threateningly, "After I have interrogated them for the information I need."

For a moment, the Mandalorian leader seems like he wants to argue, a modulated growl drifting from his helmet. However, he quickly swallows the emotion and bites out a clipped, "Very well, sir." Those words are just enough for Canderous to recognize the voice. Jagi.

And oh, this is not going to be good.

Sneering, Bandon slowly stalks towards Juhani. He uses the hilt of his saber to tilt her chin upwards until she's forced to meet his eyes. "Hmm," he murmurs. "You're Quatra's errant apprentice. Perhaps my master will have use for you." He turns to study the two Humans, a cruel smirk playing on his thin lips. "As for the Mandalorian and the deserter... I'm sure you'll give me the information I need."

Armor clanking, Jagi takes a step forward. "Sir, the Republic wants them alive." His tone is terse, made monotone by his helmet. "And I want Canderous to be aware of the price of his betrayal."

"Oh, they'll be physically whole," Bandon reassures the warrior. His eyes sweep Canderous's form. "Though I can't promise the shape their minds will be in…"

Jagi looks like he's going to protest, but before he can say another word the Force user is lunging forward, one arm outstretched as he pulls Canderous's paralyzed body towards him. There's no way to fight the invisible grasp, and a moment later it's the only thing holding the Mandalorian up as his mind is overtaken by the sensation of a red-hot knife being plunged into his brain. He's always believed that he was a mentally strong individual, honed from years of battle and a strict adherence to Resol'nare. But the moment Bandon enters his thoughts, it's like a whirlwind ripping through a sheet of flimsiplast.

"Don't try to fight me," The Force user warns. "I can pull any information I desire out of minds as untrained as yours. The less you fight me, the less this will hurt."

That feels like a filthy lie to Canderous, because even when he's too mentally exhausted to struggle against the invasion of his mind, the pain continues. The singular knife becomes a set of claws that shred their way through his brain, digging up every secret he's ever had and holding it against the bright light of day. Images blur together, dozens of memories swirling amidst the sharp pain.

"You know something about the Padawan. About Bastila…” Bandon's voice echoes as he speaks both physically and within Canderous's head. "Something that my master does not. She… made a deal with you. Interesting…”

The urge to deny everything Bandon has discovered is hard to ignore, even as Canderous's body remains frozen in place. He mentally struggles against the Force user's hold, but it does no good, even as the pain slowly ebbs out of his head. His temples continue to throb, vision blurry and thoughts reeling. Unbidden memories continue to replay themselves, images from different points in his life swirling together into a single montage that dredges up a myriad of emotions. It's only thanks to his experience fighting through physical hardship that he's able to tamp those thoughts down long enough to focus on what's going on around him.

Attention turned to Carth, Bandon is carefully studying the other man. From the sweat beading on the pilot's brow, it's a safe bet that the Force user is now prying his mind open for information. As though to confirm this, Bandon whispers, "You know this rogue Force-sensitive well. Have come to respect him… even, care for him? How unfortunate."
Carth is panting now, even as the rest of his body is held in place. His throat twitches, as though he's trying to say something, but the words remained lodged in place when his lips refuse to move. There's a flicker of pain in his eyes, his gaze glassy and unfocused.

Humming softly in satisfaction, the Bandon nods to three remaining warriors under his command. "Take them to my ship," he orders. "I believe I can use them to lure out the rest of their crew."

"But sir…" Jagi seems like he's going to object, his shoulders squared and proud within his beskar'gam. But he deflates from a single, withering glare from the Force user. "Of course, sir. Right away." As he strides over to the still-immobile Canderous he hisses, "Don't think that I won't have my revenge. The longer I wait, the more satisfying it will be."

After injecting a medpac into their wound, the warrior Canderous stabbed manages to walk over to Juhani, blood still staining their armor. Roughly grabbing the Cathar by the arm, they attempt to haul her over to Bandon. But they don't get very far.

The air hums with the crimson glow of Juhani's saber as it slices in a downward arc. Metal and flesh sizzle as the blade cuts through the warrior's forearm, severing it clean through and leaving the Cathar unrestrained. A feral grin splits her lips as she sneers at Bandon, twirling her weapon elegantly before she leaps into the air, flipping once before driving her blade down directly over the other Force user's head. "Did you really think you could hold me?" she growls, "While you were distracted with prying thoughts from unwilling minds?"

The aerial attack is blocked a mere millisecond before it can make contact, as Bandon ignites his own 'saber and uses his slightly broader red blade to protect his head and face. He snarls at the Cathar, ineffectively slashing at her as she somersaults just out of his reach.

The second that the two lightsabers make contact, Canderous's body nearly goes limp as the invisible force holding him in place suddenly dissipates. He heaves a deep breath, simultaneously stabbing the knife he's still clutching upwards and sinking the blade hilt-deep into the unarmored space beneath Jagi's armpit. The warrior howls in surprise, jerking back just far enough to give the other Mandalorian room to duck down and tumble away from his opponent.

Lightsabers hissing and humming as they clash, Juhani and Bandon continue to duel across the wooden walkway. Canderous doesn't have time to check how the battle is going as he slides out of Jagi's reach and towards the corpse of the warrior that the Cathar defeated earlier. While it's sad to see yet another of his brothers-in-arms taken out by a Force user, there's no time to mourn the death. Instead, he grabs the heavy blaster laying on the ground and quickly arms himself, spinning around to aim the weapon at whatever opponent is closest.

"So," Carth gasps from a couple of meters away, "You two know each other?" He's crouched down, sweat trickling down his temples as he aims both blasters at Jagi.

Canderous shakes his head. "Not anymore," he mutters grimly, firing his own weapon at the figure charging at them. It takes a couple of shots to adapt to the blaster, a newer model than his own, but he's able to fire a few bolts into weak points in the beskar'gam's chest plating. Jagi roars in frustration, shaking off the hits while simultaneously firing at the two men.

"If you truly knew me, you'd never have left me to die so that you could chase glory!" Jagi shoots directly at the other Mandalorian, even as the man ducks down and rolls out of the way. "If you knew me, you'd have known that I'd survive. And that I would seek my revenge."

Still fleeing the barrage of blaster bolts that rain down just behind him, Canderous snarls at the other man. "That's not how it went, Jagi!" He manages to get a few rounds off before he's forced to
move again. "I wasn't chasing glory."

"Is this really the time for this discussion?" Carth is currently holding off Jagi's remaining warrior, having managed to incapacitate the Mandalorian who Juhani quite literally disarmed.

Jagi sneers from behind his helmet. "The battlefield is a place of great honor for my people," he explains, firing two more rounds at Canderous. "There is no better place to discuss the dishonor of a traitor before he is put down."

"If anyone is the traitor, Jagi, it's you!" Doubling back, Canderous manages to avoid most of the blaster fire as he ducks down beside one of the two fallen warriors. Tossing the blaster to the side, he draws the beskad from their back. Testing the weight and balance of the blade, he swings it once before bringing it up defensively. "You fight for Malak now? A man who destroys worlds from above?"

Reaching up to unfasten his helmet, Jagi is grinning as he removes the item and drops it by his feet. The metal clanks loudly against the walkway. "I fight for the man who won the war," he replies. "The man who will soon control the galaxy." He drops his blasters next, before drawing his own beskad. "But that doesn't matter. What matters is that we finish this."

Nodding grimly, Canderous slowly stalks towards the other Mandalorian. "Yes," he nods. "Let's."

"This is how you're going to solve the problem? Really?" Carth fires a series of shots at the remaining warrior, simultaneously moving in a wide circle around the walkway. "We don't have time for this! We have to get away and warn the others…"

"Then you do it!" Canderous snaps, never taking his eyes off Jagi. "I have to do this. For my people, this is about honor. Not that you'd understand."

"Funny, Canderous," the other Mandalorian growls. "I wouldn't think that you know much about honor, either." With that he leaps forward, bringing his blade down in a vicious cleave.

Deflecting the blow, Canderous counters with a sweeping slash of his own. It's partially parried, but it does manage to dig deeply into the side of his opponent's beskar'gam. The blade leaves a gouge, with only seems to infuriate the other man as he drives his own weapon forward with added ferocity. Though Canderous manages to dodge the worst of the hit, the tip of the beskad still carves a bloody gash across his chest. The sight of blood brings a wicked grin to Jagi's lips.

Mostly unarmored Canderous finds himself on the defensive, once again wishing for some of the unnatural agility that the Jedi seem to possess. From nearby, he hears the hum of lightsabers as Juhani and Bandon continue their own battle. His chest is stinging fiercely, and his limbs are already sore from taking a few hits from blaster bolts. He's going to have to be careful, something that he doesn't exactly excel in.

"Jagi," he snarls, blocking two blows aimed for his head, "I wasn't chasing glory on the battlefield!"

Snorting derisively, the other Mandalorian is too distracted to dodge a strike that slices through a weak spot along his elbow. "Then why did you leave us to die while you went to face the fleet captain alone?" He grits his teeth against the pain, injured arm visibly weaker. "Why did you abandon your own men?"

Breathing heavily Canderous aims his next blows lower, leaving himself more open to attack in the hopes that the move will be unexpected. One of Jagi's hits manages to carve a deep gash in his
shoulder, but it's not enough to prevent him from taking advantage of the weak point in the beskar'gam's knee. It's not a hard enough blow to cripple his opponent, but it does draw out a shriek of agony. "I saw an opening, and I had to take it," he pants, "By taking out the fleet commander, I saved many more lives."

"By sacrificing my entire unit?" Jagi's eyes are alight with rage, and he snarls like a feral beast. He lashes out with three heavy strikes, though they're less coordinated in his fury. "How can you claim to save lives when so many were lost?"

Canderous's arms ache as he deflects the blows, the third catching his forearm and leaving another deep cut. "I regret the death of those men," he admits, jaw clenching at the memory. "But it was a choice I had to make. And I'd make it again."

Only managing to parry one of the other Mandalorian's slashes, Jagi stumbles as a particularly hard blow cleaves the chest plate of his armor apart. He wheezes for a moment, the breath knocked from his lungs as he swings ineffectively at his opponent. "You'd sacrifice an entire unit of your own men for a mere chance at saving more?"

"The Mandalore teaches us to be opportunistic in battle," Canderous recites, sweat dripping down his face as he leaps upwards, bringing the beskad down against his opponent's shoulder. It's not enough to sever the man's arm, but it still cuts deep. "And to be flexible in our technique."

One leg buckling beneath him, Jagi groans in pain as he tries to steady himself. He manages to regain enough balance to block the next strike, though his good arm is visibly tiring. "Yes, he does," he finally breathes. "Perhaps that is something I forgot in my grief…"

"You've forgotten a lot, Jagi," Canderous kicks out, driving his boot into the weak point in the other man's chest plate. "Like how Malak and Revan humiliated our people by burning our bes'uliik and beskar'gam. Or how Malak proceeded to hunt our people down like animals."

Toppling to the ground, the other Mandalorian's eyes are downcast as he allows himself to fall backward. "In my anger and my grief, I've forgotten a lot." He manages to lift his head slightly, chin jutting defiantly. "I've forgotten what it is to be Mandalorian. I… I thank you for reminding me."

Nodding grimly, Canderous adjusts his grip on the beskad. "You're welcome, old friend." Raising the blade, he murmurs in Mando'a, "Farewell."

"Wait!" Carth's voice cuts through the moment. "You can't just… kill him!" The pilot is currently panting heavily, blaster burns marring his clothing and sweat sticking the cloth to his skin. "Please, just… leave him," he pants. "Juhani needs our help."

Head jerking towards the sound of humming lightsabers, Canderous spots where Bandon has the Cathar pinned against the railing of the Great Walkway. She's fighting back valiantly, but her movements are sloppy and desperate. The Mandalorian turns away. "Then go help her!" he instructs. "I need to finish this."

"But you can't just…"

"I'll die here, or at the hands of Malak for my failure," Jagi explains, voice pained as he drags himself to his knees. "And I'd rather die with honor. As a true Mandalorian."

Panic flashing in his eyes as Juhani barely dodges a lethal blow from Bandon, Carth finally shakes his head in surrender. "Fine. Do what you need to do," he hisses as he sprints towards where the
Cathar is barely holding her own.

Raising the beskad once again, Canderous meets Jagi's gaze. "Farewell, friend."

Head held high, the other Mandalorian nods. "Thank you," he breathes, never averting his eyes. "For restoring my place among the Mandalorians."

"Until we meet again." Arms tensing, Canderous brings the blade down in solid chop, the well-honed edge of the beskad easily slicing through the Jagi's neck and severing his head in a single, swift motion. The action happens so fast that it's a moment before the blood flows, a hot red spray across the Mandalorian's chest and arms. An instant later the body slumps to the ground, the head landing half a meter away. There's a serene expression on Jagi's lifeless face.

Duty complete, Canderous nods to himself as he straightens, still clutching the beskad in both hands. Gaze scanning the scene, he spots Carth providing cover fire for Juhani as the Cathar makes several renewed attacks on Bandon. As he deflects one blow, Bandon scowls and turns to face the pilot, arm extended. With a wave of his hand, he uses the Force to push the other man back at least a meter, knocking him down and sending him skidding across the walkway. Carth rolls to his feet a moment later, eyes going wide as he watches Bandon lunge at Juhani, blade aimed directly at her heart.

"Revan," Bandon calls, tone one of reverence, "Guide your 'saber as I strike down the enemies of your Republic."

The dead Jedi's name seems to startle the Hawk's crew, though it apparently feeds into Juhani's fury. At the last moment, she dives away from the deadly strike, the tip of her opponent's lightsaber still managing to catch her left shoulder. She growls as her flesh burns, but her focus never wavers. Already on her feet, she drops into a defensive stance, weapon held protectively across her body. She's exhausted and probably won't survive another close call.

Drawing a breath, Canderous roars as he charges at Bandon, swinging his weapon menacingly above his head. He's relying on the intimidation factor more than an actual attack, his own body aching from injury and exertion. He has no illusions about holding his own against a Force user for more than a few rounds in his current condition. Luckily, the threat of another opponent is enough to draw Bandon's attention, and he turns for an instant to meet the charge head-on. Gathering the Force, he thrusts his hand out again, this time lifting the Mandalorian into the air before knocking him back a meter.

The air leaves Canderous's lungs as he lands hard against the wooden planks, back dragging painfully across the rough surface. The beskad clatters from his hands, sliding to his right as he digs his heels into the walkway to slow his movement. Never taking his eyes from the battle, he grins triumphantly when his distraction is just enough to allow Juhani, gasping with exertion, to crouch low. Her strike manages to slip past Bandon's defense, the glowing blade of her lightsaber sinking into his abdomen just below his belt and piercing straight through his body until it comes out his back. With a roar, the Cathar jerks her weapon upwards, burning through flesh and fiber weave armor as she delivers her fatal blow.

Staggering beneath the pain, Bandon looks down in shock at the lightsaber now jutting through his body. "...Revan," he whispers, voice stunned, "Why... has your weapon... failed me?" He gasps one last time as Juhani yanks the blade from his abdomen, hands clutching the wound as he slumps to the ground.

"A dead man cannot save you," the Cathar pants, "Go. Be one with him and the Force." With a final snarl, she drives her lightsaber down one last time, carving a final hole into her opponent's
chest and ending his last pained breaths.

Limping over to where Bandon's body now lies, Carth glances around a few times as he holsters his blasters. "Did... did he just call out to Revan?"

Juhani nods solemnly, powering down her lightsaber and tucking it back into her belt. "Yes. It is not an unusual battle cry for many of the Force users who serve Malak. The Supreme Commander has turned his fallen friend into a martyr." Her tone is sardonic as she adds, "A noble Knight who devoted his life to creating a perfect Republic."

Digging a medpacs from the pouch on his belt, Canderous mutters, "Yeah, but he didn't just say 'for Revan' or something. He claimed he was wielding Revan's weapon. Creepy as that is."

"Perhaps just an intimidation technique." Crouching down, Juhani picks up the lightsaber hilt that rests in Bandon's open palm. "Many dark Force users practice a Sith tactic known as Dun Möch. It is designed to expose doubts, to disrupt one's connection to the Force."

"Seems like a really specific doubt to bank on." Shrugging, Canderous jabs the medpac into his thigh, sighing as the healing relief spreads through his body. "Why not just say, 'Hey, you're gonna lose'?"

Turning the hilt over in her hands, Juhani frowns softly. "I never had the patience for Dun Möch," she admits, "So I cannot claim to understand its complexities."

As the metal of Bandon's lightsaber catches the filtered sunlight, Carth's eyes go wide. "Wait," he breathes, rushing to the Cathar's side, "Let me see that!"

"What," A playful smile dances across Juhani's lips, "Do you think you are a Jedi now?" Despite her teasing, she offers the hilt to the pilot.

"No, of course not!" Snatching the item from his companion's grasp, Carth studies it in silence for several moments. "Is this...? It can't be..." Running his fingers over the polished metal, he examines the weapon for several moments before finally sighing and shaking his head. A flicker of relief washes over his features. "No, it's different. Definitely different. But still..."

Still limping slightly, Canderous stalks over to the pilot. "Mind sharing with the rest of us?"

Handing the lightsaber back to the Cathar, Carth sighs again. "It's just... odd. For a moment, I thought that was Vann's saber." He makes a general gesture to the weapon. "They look really, startlingly similar."

"And just how do you know what Vann's, ah, lightsaber, looks like?" Arching a brow with the implication, Canderous smirks at his companion. It's a terrible innuendo, but completely worth it when the pilot sputters for a moment, a faint wash of pink creeping over his stubbled cheeks.

"I... that...!" Carth growls in frustration, rubbing a hand over his face. "Vann rebuilt his 'saber in the Ebon Hawk's workshop, okay? I didn't have much to do on Dantooine, so I practically watched him break the entire thing down and reconstruct it." He stares challengingly at the Mandalorian. "So yeah, I know what Vann's lightsaber looks like."

Holding his hands up in mock innocence, Canderous takes a playful step back. "Hey, I was just asking a question," he says with a smirk.

"Yeah," Carth snaps back, "I know what you were asking."
Ignoring the jovial teasing going on around her, Juhani stares thoughtfully at the hilt in her hands. "Perhaps… that does make sense…” she murmurs.

"You know I'm using the word 'lightsaber' as a euphemism, right?” Canderous chuckles as the Carth scowls at him, baring her teeth.

"Be serious for a moment, please!” Shaking her head, Juhani clutches the 'saber hilt tighter. "Bandon probably built his weapon with guidance from his master. Who is Malak, if the rumors are true." She nods, mostly to herself. "And Malak learned his skills from the Order…”

Glancing down at the Force user's corpse, Carth frowns at the Cathar. "Uh, Juhani, can you back up a little bit? Maybe explain how you know Bandon?"

"I did not know him," The Cathar glares at her fallen foe. "But I know of him. Like my master… my former master, Quatra, he was one of the dark Force users who serve the Republic. But unlike Quatra, Bandon was rumored to report directly to Malak."

"Wait, what?” Waving one hand through the air, Carth uses the other to pinch the bridge of his nose. "Slow down. Look, I know the Republic has fallen from their ideals in recent years, but since when did they start employing dark Force users?"

"Oh, you naïve creature." Juhani looks at the human with a mixture of amusement and pity. "From what I understand, your precious Republic has always employed those who embrace the dark side. There will always be tasks connected to the Force that are too… questionable… for the likes of their sanctified Jedi Order. But yet, these tasks must be done."

Turning to stare at the Cathar, Carth shakes his head again. "Look, I don't pretend to understand the Force, or how it works, or how the Jedi function. But I was always told that the dark side is just that. Darkness, corruption, and everything else that's bad in this galaxy."

"Yes, that is what the Jedi wish for you to think." Juhani sighs sadly, staring down at the lightsaber in her hands. "But the dark side is far more complex than that. There are many who embrace the dark, yet they wish to devote themselves to more than mere destruction and corruption. They want to lend their skills to building something greater. Even if what they build is not necessarily one with the light."

Carth stares for a moment, hands clenching into fists by his side. "Somehow, that's not exactly comforting."

Shrugging, Juhani meets the pilot's gaze. "It's not meant to be."

"Yeah, yeah," Canderous watches as his companions each slip into silent contemplation. "There's the Force, and it's very complex. I got it." He nods to Bandon's corpse as he asks, "But what does that have to do with lightsabers, or Revan, or any of this other shit?"

"Patience, I was getting to that part!" Juhani glares at the Mandalorian, her melancholy falling away. "Bandon is rumored to do more than report to Malak. During my apprenticeship with Quatra, I heard that Bandon was the Supreme Commander's lesser-known apprentice."

Nodding impatiently, Canderous moves his hand to try and encourage the Force user to speak faster. "Mmmmm. Right. And?"

"If Malak was Bandon's master, he most likely taught his apprentice many things. Including how to construct a lightsaber." Juhani studies the hilt in her hands with a critical eye, voice lowering as she adds, "A skill Malak most likely learned from the same place as Vann…”
"The… Masters on Dantooine?" Carth's brow wrinkles in confusion.

Seeming to speak mostly to herself, Juhani muses, "More likely the Academy on Coruscant."

Blinking, she clenches her jaw for a moment before hissing, "What I am about to say… it must not
go beyond us, yes?"

"Look, if you know something important, spit it out already!" Canderous growls, crossing his arms
over his still-healing chest. "It's bad enough we're running all over the kriffing Outer Rim playing
messenger for the damned Jedi Council."

"What, I thought the Council were your friends?" Carth asks, eyes narrowing suspiciously. "You
apparently made some type of deal with Bastila, at any rate…"

"I told you before, that's none of your business!" Sneering at the pilot, Canderous squares his
shoulders.

Knuckles almost white around the lightsaber hilt, Juhani's expression scrunches in irritation as she
listens to the pair of humans. "Enough!" she finally shouts. "None of that is important right now!"

Without waiting to see if her companions have fallen silent, she presses on. "Mission and I, we
found something in the Republic memo that we did not inform you of."

"What?" Carth's jaw hangs open slightly as he gapes at the Cathar. "Why wouldn't you tell us?"

"It is information that we could not confirm. Dangerous information…"

"Because it's not like we're in danger from the Republic as it is…" Snorting Canderous glances
around at the bodies lying on the ground.

"Vann was a Jedi!" As soon as the words burst forth from Juhani's lips she winces, as though she
immediately regrets blurting them out.

"WHAT?" Both humans turn to stare at the Cathar, wearing similar expressions of confusion.

Shaking her head, Juhani quickly clarifies, "Or, at least, we found a picture that suggests such.
Vann is much younger in it, and wearing the robes of a Padawan…" She bites her bottom lip for a
moment, softly adding, "It was not much to go on. Too many assumptions to be made with too little
evidence. But… it would explain many things. The similarities between the lightsabers, where he
learned to fight, why his command of the Force is so remarkable…"

"Healing Bastila, using Lang's lightsaber back on the base..." Carth's eyes go wide with sudden
realization. "It all makes sense. But… but why wouldn't he tell us?"

"Kid says he lost his memory, right?" Canderous shrugs, attempting to downplay his own shock.
Admittedly, this new information does fill in a few blanks, but it also creates a whole lot of new
questions. "So, he can't exactly tell you something he doesn't kriffing remember."

Still shaking her head, Juhani mutters, "More I cannot tell you. Perhaps I have said too much
already."

"No, you're going to tell us what you know!" Pointing an accusatory finger at the Cathar, Carth
glares at her.

Staring right back at the pilot, Juhani scowls. "I know nothing more! This is why I was reluctant to
say anything in the first place. There are too many assumptions to be made, and not nearly enough
information." She sniffs haughtily. "You cannot force someone to remember what they are not
"I know that!" Carth sighs, rubbing the heel of his hand against one eye. "I realize that we can't make assumptions off, what, one picture?" He sighs. "It's just... it's a lot to process."

Nodding slowly, Juhani's tone softens as she speaks again. "Mission says that she loaded the image into the droid, Tee-Three. Perhaps you can access it back on the ship. See it for yourself."

"I just might do that."

"Look, what does any of this matter?" Canderous throws his arms up in frustration, shaking his head. "Maybe Vann was a Jedi. Maybe he wasn't. Hells, there's a good chance he left the Order before he even lost his memory. And guess what, we'll probably never know!"

"What does it matter?" Carth gestures to the corpses all around them. "Malak apparently wanted Vann and Bastila badly enough to send his secret apprentice after us. And I'm guessing that he's not going to stop here. So yeah, it matters."

Pursing her lips thoughtfully, Juhani hums in agreement. "It is worrisome that Malak would send Bandon after Bastila and Vann specifically. I sense that there is more to this than what we are seeing."

Gesturing to the Cathar, Carth nods in agreement. "Exactly! There's something going on here, and we're only getting half of the story." His eyes narrow slightly as he hisses, "And I bet it also involves the Jedi..."

"Malak is still a Jedi, after all. So, their involvement would not surprise me." Juhani nods solemnly, lowering her voice conspiratorially. "But perhaps we should get back to the ship before we discuss this further."

"Well then," Canderous glances around, quickly reaching down to retrieve one of their dropped sacks of fruit. Most of it has been crushed or bruised, but some of it is salvageable. "Let's stop yakking and get the hells out of here."

Also collecting some of the dropped goods, Carth bundles them into his arms as he says, "And on the way back, maybe you can tell us about this deal that you made with Bastila."

Already striding in the direction of the ship, Canderous doesn't turn around as he snaps, "What happened a year ago has nothing to do with this current mission."

Carth scoffs derisively. "Bandon apparently thought that whatever deal you made would be important enough to use against you."

"And now he's dead," Canderous states succinctly.

"But he will not be the last individual Malak sends after us." Juhani frowns softly, balancing the last of their goods on her hip. "The more knowledge we share with each other, especially concerning the members of this mission, the less chance that information can be used as a weapon."

Still walking at a grueling pace back towards the ship, Canderous grits out, "I already told you, it's none of your business."

"Well, you know what? I'm making it my business!" Rushing to keep up, Carth's footfalls are heavy against the walkway. "I'm your pilot. It's my job to keep everyone safe while we're flying, and that's pretty hard to do when nobody tells me anything!"
"You're just not going to let this go, are you?" Canderous turns slightly, glancing at the pilot out of the corner of his eye. "You and your kriffing trust issues…" By now the port is in view, several Czerka employees rushing around in the wake of the nearby battle. He bets things are only going to get worse once someone discovers the corpses now littering the Great Walkway.

Looking to Juhani for help, Carth only receives a half-hearted shrug in response. Growling in frustration he stalks the rest of the way to the ship, pausing at the entrance to glare at the Mandalorian. "No, I'm not going to let this go! You're right, I have trust issues. I don't trust the Jedi, I don't trust Bastila, and I don't trust you." He punches in the code to the door, fingers angrily jabbing the buttons.

"Hey, leave Bastila out of this!" Pushing past the pilot, Canderous rushes onto the ship as soon as the door swings open. Dumping the now-bruised fruit onto the table in the main hold, he sneers, "You want to take your issues out on me? Fine. But she's got nothing to do with this."

"Observation: Oh good. The meatbags are back." A sarcastic voice floats out from the workshop, accompanied by uneven footfalls as the incomplete form of HK-47 limps into view. Half of his protective plating is still missing, wires and circuitry exposed. Vann has been working on upgrading the droid but seems to take more parts off than he puts back on. "Evaluation: It was far more pleasant when you were gone."

Narrowing his eyes at the droid, a vein in Carth's temple visibly throbs as he pointedly turns away and carefully deposits his own bags. "I still don't get why a Mandalorian is protecting a Jedi," he challenges. "Care to at least explain that to me?"

"Observation: Ah, you're arguing again. How refreshing and novel." HK-47 watches the Humans, impassive face still managing to appear supremely bored. "Query: Perhaps it would be more efficient to kill each other, rather than wasting your limited lifespans arguing over trivial matters?"

Canderous also pointedly ignores the droid, something he's gotten quite good at since Vann reactivated the damn thing a few days back. Staring at the pilot for several long moments, he finally sighs. "You wanna know why I respect Bastila? It's because she saved my life."

Softly placing the remaining goods on the floor of the hold, Juhani sets Bandon's lightsaber on the table beside her as she slips silently into one of the nearby seats. Her eyes track the movements of her companions, but she doesn't say a word.

"She… what?" Carth blinks, leaning one hip against the table as he crosses his arms over his chest. "Let me guess? You're just going to leave it at that."

"Well, since you're not going to shut your kriffing mouth about this, I might as well tell the rest." Squaring his shoulders Canderous continues to watch the pilot, mentally cataloging his reactions. "A little over a year back, I was trying to gather the remains of my people. We'd scattered after the war, clans blown across the galaxy with no purpose. No goals." He shakes his head sadly.

Brow furrowing, Carth asks, "So, you wanted to restart the war?"

"No! I'm no fool. Revan destroyed almost everything that made us warriors. We'd stand no chance in battle." He remembers back, images of destroyed bes'uliik flashing through his mind. Their mechanical screams still echo in his ears. "I merely wanted to gather the few of us who were left. To unite us under a common goal of rebuilding. To give my people a greater purpose than as mercenaries and bounty hunters, serving the highest bidder."

"I understand, Mandalorian," Juhani's tone is soft, yet firm, as she speaks. "You do not need to
"explain yourself. Go on."

"It doesn't matter what I was trying to do. It failed." His jaw clenches, teeth gritting in irritation. "Malak heard about my efforts, and he sent his own Padawan to kill me for posing a threat to the Republic. I didn't know it at the time, of course." He chuckles at this, the sound dry in his throat. "All I saw was a pretty face with a posh accent. I had no idea she was a Jedi."

Nodding slowly in understanding, Carth murmurs, "At least, not until she tried to kill you? Is that it?"

Barking out a laugh of indignation, Canderous shakes his head. "She never got a chance. You've probably realized this by now, but the Mandalorians made a lot of enemies during the wars. And many of them have been waiting to take advantage of our loss to avenge their own."

Voice tinged with bitterness, Juhani spits, "Understandable."

"With so many Mandalorians in one place, it was a choice location for an attack." Canderous's tone is grim as he continues. "I'm not sure who attacked us, but they pinned us down. The planet we were on was swampy. It was hard to use the terrain to our advantage..." As he speaks, he recalls the musty odor of black, silty mud and brackish water. The oppressive humidity and the tangled roots of trees that made the muck and mire that much more impassable.

"Statement: Attacking an assembled group of targets is a tactically advantageous choice. And would lead to an extremely satisfying body count." HK-47 nods in approval, apparently having decided to stick around despite his self-proclaimed loathing of 'meatbag conversation.'

Offering a nod of acknowledgment to the droid, Canderous shakes his head to banish the memories. "Bastila was pinned down with me, stuck in a stinking hole in the swamp for three days. By then I'd seen her fight with that 'saber of hers. I knew what she was sent to do..." He laughs humorlessly. "Hells, I would almost have welcomed it. But she didn't kill me. We just... talked. About the war, and my people, and the Republic. Every day I expected to feel a lightsaber through my heart, but it never came."

Carth arches a brow. "So, how'd you get out of there?"

"On the third day, we were running out of fresh water. Half of the Mandalorians I'd gathered were dead, but you can be damn sure they took more than half of our attackers with them." Clenching his fists with pride, Canderous continues, "We had no choice but to fight our way out. It was dangerous, but we knew we had a good chance of making it. Just as we were ready to make our charge, Bastila turned to me and said that no matter what happened, she wanted me to live. That I deserved it."

Shaking his head disappointedly, HK-47 complains, "Commentary: An assassin who did not complete her assigned assassination? And I thought that you meatbags couldn't get any more pathetic."

"She protected me through that fight, and I did what I could for her. I'd never fought alongside a Jedi before. It was... one of the most thrilling battles I'd experienced in a long time." Canderous feels his voice grow fond at the thought. "We made it to our ships. I knew that I owed her for sparing me, and for going against Malak. So, I asked her what I could do to repay my debt."

"Taris...?" The name of the planet is little more than a breath on Carth's lips.

"Exactly," Canderous confirms. "Bastila contacted me a few months back and started arranging the
whole thing. You know how it went from there."

Sitting forward in her seat, Juhani frowns. "But why did she spare you in the first place? I cannot imagine that failing Malak would be an... appealing prospect."

Shrugging slightly, Canderous admits, "You'd have to ask her, 'cause I don't have a kriffing clue." He waves one hand through the air. "She said something about the Force telling her that I have a greater destiny or some other mystic bantha shit. I didn't understand at the time, and I still don't."

"Answer: Meatbags are prone to poor decision making due to sentimentality. It is one of your many shortcomings." Scoffing, HK-47's feet clank against the ship's floor as he begins to limp back into the workshop, audibly disgusted with the whole discussion.

Lips pursed thoughtfully, Juhani offers the Mandalorian a half-smile. "The Force is often a mystery, even to those who are sensitive to its ways. But if Bastila sensed a destiny about you, I am sure it will be revealed in time."

Snorting at the suggestion, Canderous raises his brows at the Cathar. "We'll see," he replies.

Before the crew can say any more on the subject, the door to the ship beeps an alert as someone punches in the code to unlock the entrance. All watching cautiously, their hands subtly reach for weapons as the airlock slowly releases.

"Aw, come on Big Z! You're not even a little bit excited?" Surprisingly chipper for someone who's been trekking through the Shadowlands for the past two days, Mission bounds aboard the Ebon Hawk, followed closely by the Wookiee who growls out some type of response.

Relaxing his arms, Canderous watches as the rest of the crew begins to board the ship. He trains most of his attention on Vann, watching the dark-haired mercenary closely. There's a fresh coat of stubble along his cheeks and jaw, and his expression is borderline murderous. Not that this is much of a change from his normal state. The bigger surprise is the elderly human who trails him, dressed in piecemeal clothing and what looks like... leaves? Twigs? Well, that's a new one.

"I don't want to talk about it, Jolee!" Voice terse, Vann glares at the older man. "For the third time, I don't remember where I learned to fight. Or anything else that you keep asking me!"

The older human chuckles. "Well, we had a long walk. I figured it couldn't hurt to ask again. On some planets, they say that the third time's the charm you know."

"And the fourth time you ask is the time that I punch you in the..."

"You remember what the Jedi say about anger, right?" The older man, Jolee apparently, grins as he waggles a finger at the mercenary.

"So!" Bastila's voice is somewhat strained as she steps away from the group, hair limp from the humidity and clothing stained green in places. "Would anyone care to tell me why there are so many Czerka security personnel around the port?" She primly arches her brow. "Or why there are rumors of a lightsaber battle?"

Carth and Juhani share guilty glances, like children caught stealing sweets before dinner. For his part, Canderous remains passive towards the question. "Where'd you hear that?" he snaps.

"Really? Really?" Vann stalks further into the hold. "What happened to laying low?"

"Canderous got hungry," Carth quips, jerking an accusing thumb at the Mandalorian.
Pulling a somewhat crushed piece of fruit from one of the bags, Canderous takes a bite. The juice runs down his chin. "I got sick of being stuck inside with him, is what happened."

"See! It's kriffing boring being told to watch the ship," Mission gripes. "And you were only here for, what, a couple days?"

Wringing her hands, Bastila's tone is clipped as she asks, "While I understand wanting some fresh air, why would you feel the need to use a lightsaber?" She aims her disappointed glare at Juhani, who has the decency to look somewhat abashed. "We've already discussed the dangers, and…" Pausing mid-rant, her eyes land on the 'saber hilt still lying on the table. "Where did that come from?"

"Huh," Vann looks equally puzzled, staring at Bandon's weapon for a moment before slowly reaching for it. "Looks a lot like my…"

The second the Force user's hand touches the lightsaber hilt, his face goes slack and his eyes acquire a glazed quality. Fingers clutching the weapon, he ignites the blade with a casual flick of his thumb, the crimson glow illuminating the hold. There's a loud humming as Vann twirls the 'saber in an intricate set of combat maneuvers, body flowing into each move with deadly grace. It would be impressive to watch if only his vacant expression didn't make it so kriffing creepy. Suddenly, he turns to stare at Canderous, dark eyes seeming to simultaneously look at and through the other man. He mutters something too quietly to be understood, though the cadence sounds distinctly like Mando'a.

An instant later Vann powers down the lightsaber with a startled jerk of his hand, practically throwing the hilt away from his body as though it's burned him. It clangs heavily against the durasteel floor, rolling for a moment before falling still. Carefully studying the Force user, Canderous notes the same startled, foggy expression that he wore back on Tatooine, right after his encounter with the Star Map.

"How…" voice shaky Vann glances between his companions, visibly bewildered. "How did you get Revan's lightsaber?!"

"Hells," Canderous chuckles dryly, "The kriffing bastard was telling the truth!"

"Revan's lightsaber?" Bastila's brows shoot up to her hairline. "That's not possible! His weapons were all destroyed in the same battle that killed him…"

Shaking his head in disbelief Carth mutters, "Apparently not. But then, is anyone surprised that Malak and the Jedi lied about that, too?" Lips pulling into a concerned frown, he slowly walks over to the mercenary. "You, uh, okay?" Placing a gentle hand on the other man's shoulder, he adds, "These visions are getting worse, aren't they?"

"Well, he didn't call anyone by the wrong name this time," Jolee shrugs amusedly. "So that seems like an improvement to me."

"I believe we all have much to discuss," Juhani states, her gaze slowly settling on the older man. "As it sounds like we are not the only ones with a story to tell."

"Hey, don't look at me!" Jolee holds his hands up innocently, even though he's grinning in amusement. "I'm just an old man looking for a ride off this planet."

"Yeah, you keep trying that story, Gramps." Mission rolls her eyes. "He's the saboteur we were sent after," she explains. "We made a deal to fly him off this rock after we do him a little favor."
Crossing his arms, Canderous stares darkly at the Twi'lek. "And this favor would be…?"

Laughing weakly, Bastila forces a smile. "Oh, nothing major."

"No, nothing major at all." Still grinning, Jolee chuckles as he idly adds, "They just agreed to start a little rebellion is all…"

"A little… what?" Staring in disbelief, Canderous studies each crewmember in turn, searching for signs of a joke. There are none.

Mission rocks back on her heels, thumbs hooked into her belt. "It's gonna be fun," she assures the Mandalorian. "The Wookiees are gonna rise up and boom!" She claps her hands together. "Take back their planet from that Czerka slime!"

"They're going to what?" Feeling like a broken holovid, Canderous levels his glare at Bastila. He's beginning to regret defending her earlier.

The Jedi merely sighs. "Oh, don't give me that look," she chides. "It's not as though Czerka won't deserve it."

"Yeah, that's right," Vann is muttering, mostly to Carth. "We're starting a kriffing Wookiee uprising. Because…"

Canderous finishes the statement for him. "You're all kriffing idiots."

Chapter End Notes

1. Sorry for the lack of updates – Real Life got incredibly busy. Unfortunately, it's looking like the rest of this month might be more of the same, so apologies in advance!

2. The purple produce described is not supposed to be anything specific. Though I imagine it tastes a little like a persimmon mixed with an Asian pear.

3. I apologize if I got some aspects of Mandalorian culture wrong. Most of the information here comes directly from the game, or from wiki sources. Just assume any mistakes are due to the alternate timeline.

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Chapter Summary

In which our heroes use a ladder, get captured, and eventually start a rebellion. Of course, life would be uninteresting if everything always went to plan...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

14.

"Are, uh, you sure Bastila can pull this off?" Carth blinks lazily from his place beside Vann, the pair of humans leaning casually against the railing of the Great Walkway as they keep tabs on the Czerka guards posted outside of Rwookrrorro Village. They've both been loitering in the area for the better part of half an hour, playing the part of mercenaries relaxing after their latest job. Which, to be honest, isn't entirely false.

Glancing down the walkway with a bored expression, Vann gives his head a casual shake. "Nope." In the distance, he can see four figures slowly striding towards the village. Even without looking he knows that it's Bastila, flanked by Zaalbar, Mission, and Canderous. A Czerka employee, her native guide, a translator, and a body guard.

"Then why is she doing this?" Jerking his head rather overtly towards the quartet, Carth sighs heavily. "Shouldn't you be the one up there talking to those guards?"

Shaking his head again, Vann pretends to stare idly into the canopy as he mutters another, "Nope."

Nails digging into the wood of the railing, Carth hisses, "Come on! Is that all you're going to say?"

"Nope." Swallowing the grin that threatens to consume his face, Vann hisses, "I'm definitely going to add that I could be over there with Bastila if somebody didn't forget to have the droid shut off the security feed at the military base."

"For the last time, I'm sorry!" Carth's voice is getting suspiciously loud, threatening to draw attention to the pair.

Or, it would be drawing attention to them if the guards weren't already sufficiently distracted by Bastila. She's currently holding out a datapad with information forged by Mission and T3-M4 while arguing with all the false self-importance that Czerka employees seem to possess. To help with the charade she's wearing one of the Czerka uniforms Juhani stripped from the corpses left back in Tatooine, the shoulders a tad too bulky despite some quick modifications. And really, the more Vann thinks about this plan, the more awful it seems.

Up above, one of the wroshyr boughs shakes. Presumably, it's either Juhani or Jolee, who are providing additional backup while remaining hidden amongst Kashyyyk's rich foliage. The older Force user is utilizing his decades of experience on the planet, while the Cathar is relying on the naturally dappled coat of her species, augmented by her Force powers. Learning that someone so deadly can also become nearly invisible at will had been… less than comforting.
Noting that the Czerka guards aren't quite believing Bastila's story, which isn't necessarily surprising, Vann turns his attention to the potential altercation. "Heads-up," he warns under his breath. "Things might get messy in a second."

Carth nods in acknowledgment, dominant hand moving to rest on his blaster. "So, this is already going well," he grumbles.

Just as Vann is ready to step in, or at least create some type of distraction, he sees Bastila slowly wave her hand in front of one of the guard's eyes. It's hard to tell exactly what she's saying from this distance, but the power of her persuasion ripples through the Force like a breath of wind across a still pond. Whatever suggestion she's implanting seems to take root, if the guard's somewhat lax expression and dutiful nodding are anything to go by. He turns to his partner, snapping some orders to the other bewildered Human. A few more persuasive words and another hand-wave later, the second guard is quickly opening the gate without further questions.

A smug sense of satisfaction sings through the mental link Vann shares with the Jedi, and he can't help but chuckle softly as he watches his companions stride confidently through the village gates, Bastila's head held high as she strolls impassively past the guards. "Ah," he murmurs amusedly, "The mysteries of the Force."

"I'm pretty sure that your Council wouldn't approve of that little trick," Carth replies, though his voice is audibly impressed.

"They're not really *my* Council," Vann corrects the pilot. "And I'm pretty sure that trick isn't going into her official report." Congenially patting the other man's shoulder, he leans in as he whispers, "Give them another couple of minutes, and then we should move into position."

Head pressed close, Carth's breath is hot on his companion's cheek as he sighs. "Yeah, great. Really looking forward to that part." Swallowing his visible trepidation, he forces a weak laugh. "Have I mentioned that this plan is terrible?"

Grinning, Vann nods. "Repeatedly."

* * *

"Who decided this was a good idea?" Clinging precariously to the weathered rope ladder currently dangling between walkway levels, Carth slowly descends the unsteady rungs. His legs wobble with each move he makes.

From his place guarding the ladder where it's affixed to the walkway's upper level, Vann softly calls down, "You and me. In those happy, carefree times about six hours ago when this didn't seem so kriffing terrifying."

"Yeah, well," Carth sucks in a sharp breath as the ladder catches in the breeze, swinging dangerously to the left. "We were wrong."

Glancing over his shoulder, Vann checks for any signs of Czerka guards. Their path still appears clear, being well away from the main walkway and the corporate offices, but there's no telling what type of trouble the rest of the crew is getting into. "Less yakking, more climbing," he warns.

Knuckles white as he slowly makes his way down the thick fiber cords Carth snarls, "You know, I can't wait to see you do this."

"I have the Force to guide me," Vann sniffs with false haughtiness.
"You're a kriiffing cheater is what you are!" Pressing his body against the swaying ladder, Carth shouts in alarm as another breeze catches him, sending him swaying and bobbing through the air. It's hard to tell if it's better or worse that he's already climbed down ten meters, leaving him dangling another ten above the nearest solid surface.

Probably worse, Vann decides. At least if the colorful stream of curses is anything to go by. Strategically, at least, they're lucky that Mission came across this mostly unused section of walkways, featuring an almost straight line between the upper and lower levels. And they're even more fortunate that Zaalbar managed to procure one of the rope ladders that the Wookiees utilize to climb between levels in an emergency. But right now, it feels less like luck and more like some type of sadistically creative punishment.

Grunting and cursing, Carth manages to climb the rest of the way down the ladder. By the time he's reached the lower walkway, he's little more than a speck against the wooden surface. A speck who, Vann can only imagine, is currently grinning with the anticipation of watching the mercenary complete the same climb without the benefit of someone keeping a lookout for trouble.

Drawing a deep breath Vann clenches his teeth as he swiftly lowers himself onto the ladder. The rungs immediately sag under his weight, causing the rope to sway gently from left to right. It's temporarily disorienting, and he can feel the rough fibers digging into his palms as he clings on for dear life. After a moment, his equilibrium returns and he's able to begin the twenty-meter descent to the lower walkway. Hand over hand he carefully moves down the rungs, heart jumping each time there's even the slightest hint of give to his foothold. His pulse hammers in his ears, a rhythmic tattoo that keeps time with the harsh breaths that escape his lungs.

When he's about halfway down Vann sees two shadows pass along the upper walkway, pausing right next to where the rope ladder is anchored. They appear to converse for a moment, examining the foreign object. Pressing close to the ladder's rungs, the mercenary quietly hopes that his body blends into the dappled shadows. The rope sways violently in the wind, and a series of curses catches in his throat as he's tossed from side to side with the ladder's momentum. Even with part of his brain panicking uncontrollably, he's able to strain his ears to catch snippets of the conversation going on above him.

"What's this?" One of the figures asks, hand gesturing to the ladder.

It's hard to tell, but the second figure seems to shrug. "…leftover by… those animals," they seem to reply.

The rest of the words are obscured by the breeze, though Vann manages to hear the first figure saying, "…get rid of it," right before their partner retrieves a vibroknife and begins to slice through the rope's thick fibers.

No longer caring if he's noticed Vann scrambles down the rungs, movements uncoordinated in his haste. An instant later one side of the ladder goes slack, the fibers embedding into his palm as he futilely tries to cling to his handhold. Foot slipping, his body immediately slides down at least a meter, both hands scrabbling for purchase against the coarse rope. He manages to grasp the remaining side of the ladder, but only finds security for a moment before the entire length goes completely limp beneath him. Stomach dropping from the sudden pull of gravity, he's free falling with close to ten meters between himself and the nearest solid surface.

Eyes staring down at the walkway in panic, he feels his Force connection instinctively reach out, wrapping around his body and helping to slow his fall. Limbs flailing inelegantly, his drop to the surface below lacks any precision and he can only hope that whoever's above him doesn't notice that he was on the ladder when it was cut. Right now, he's open to any blaster fire that they decide
to rain down. However, one glance upward reveals that both figures are walking away, apparently oblivious to the plummeting man beneath them. Despite his slowed descent, Vann still hits the walkway hard, one ankle twisting painfully as he stumbles into an awkward crouch.

"Bantha shit!" he curses, hissing in pain.

Not bothering to give the other man a moment to catch his breath, Carth immediately hauls the mercenary up by one arm, complaining, "Can't you do anything without showing off?"

"That wasn't showing off!" Vann quips back, wincing as he puts weight on his injured ankle.

“No, that was you almost getting killed. Again.” There’s a note of concern interlaced with Carth’s sarcasm, but it quickly fades as he adds, “Which is basically showing off for you.”

Swallowing back a scathing retort, Vann continues to test his injury. Luckily, it’s not enough to slow him down, and the pair is soon racing along the lower walkway towards a smaller gate that serves as a back entrance to the heavily fortified village. Despite being more modest than the main entrance, the doorway is still twice the height of a Wookiee, the thick wood reinforced with durasteel bands and held closed by an intricate latch that can only be opened from the inside.

The moment he reaches the gate, Vann presses his face close to the wooden planks and hisses, "Mission, are you there?" He waits for a moment, but there's no answer.

"So... do we have a backup plan?" Carth arches a brow, shrugging doubtfully.

Raising his voice just a little louder, Vann repeats, "Mission! Open up!"

There's another moment of silence before a small voice squeaks out, "Uh, I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?" Staring suspiciously at the gate, Vann's hand inches closer to the blaster holstered at his hip.

"It's, uh..." Mission's voice is sheepish as she admits, "It's too heavy."

Rolling his eyes, Vann sighs as his hand drops away from his weapon. "What's too heavy? I thought Zaalbar said children can open this thing!"

"Wookiee children are super-strong, I guess," Mission's tone is audibly puzzled. "Cause the bar holding the latch closed is way too heavy for me to lift."

Brow furrowing, Carth studies the gate like he can somehow puzzle out a solution by staring at the wood's grain. "Well, is there any way we can help?"

"Not unless you can lift something from the other side of this kriffing gate..."

Vann doesn't have to see his companion's faces to know that they're both looking at him. "What?" he snaps. "I can't move it if I can't see it! Or at least, you know, sense it..."

"Honestly, I don't know," Carth admits. "But considering you just floated yourself through the air in lieu of using a ladder..."

"What? Really?" Mission's tone is both impressed and frustrated as she grumbles, "I miss all the fun stuff!"

Clenching his jaw, Vann grits out, "You didn't miss anything!" He sighs softly, tone slightly less terse as he adds, "Now, help us figure out a way to get in there."
"Umm…” There's the audible sound of pacing on the other side of the gate. "Wait! I just found a little hole between the boards. Maybe you can look through and see this giant wooden bar?"

Peering closer at the thick wooden boards that compose the gate, Vann can't see anything even remotely resembling a hole. If anything, the construction is practically watertight. "I don't see a hole," he replies. "At least, not from this side."

"Oh, come on V-Man," Mission whines, her finger tapping against the gate. "It's right here!"

Carth barely muffles his chuckle as he waits for the Twi'lek to remember that neither Human can see her pointing. Vann, however, just sighs.

There's a moment of awkward silence before Mission slowly drawls, "Riiiiight. Uh, well…” She scrapes at something for a moment before announcing, "I'm sticking my knife through the hole so that you can find it. I mean, you gotta be able to see that!"

Vann does, in fact, see the knife. Mainly because it comes through the gate less than a centimeter away from his face. Jerking his head back, he yelps in surprise before practically shouting, "Geeze! A little more warning next time, okay!"

"Sorry!" Mission offers, not sounding particularly apologetic. "But can you see what's I'm talking about?"

At this point, Carth isn't attempting to hide his laughter. "Oh, he definitely sees it."

"Shut up, Carth," Vann growls, moving to peer at the spot where the knife is still poking through. "And Mission, I can't see krif-all if you don't move your damn blade!"

An instant later the knife is withdrawn, and the mercenary can press his eye directly against the small imperfection in the wood. It's wider on the village side, which has the benefit of giving him a broader angle to peer at the other side of the gate. It takes some awkward craning of his neck, but he's finally able to see just enough of the bar holding the latch in place that he can extend his Force connection and wrap it around the object.

"Alright Mission, stand back," Vann orders, already focusing on lifting the beam out of its cradle. There's a soft creaking sound as the heavy piece of wood rubs against the metal holding it in place, though it quiets as it rises into the air, hovering suspended for a moment before flipping end-over-end and dropping to the ground beside the fence that surrounds this part of the village. It thuds loudly as it hits the wooden walkway, the thick slats vibrating from the force.

"That's still so cool…” Mission coos in admiration, even as she quickly works to unfasten the rest of the latch. There's a click, followed by clanking as the gate is finally unlocked.

Ignoring the praise Vann pushes at the gate, though the heavy door barely moves from the effort. Huffing in irritation he glares at Carth, grumbling, "This is not a spectator sport…"

"What? I was keeping a lookout for guards!" The pilot quickly stands beside the mercenary, throwing his weight against the wooden boards. Together the pair manages to push the gate open just wide enough for them to squeeze through one at a time, the space so narrow that it forces them to slip in sideways.

"Oooofff," Vann wheezes as he makes it past the entrance, eyes darting around to take in his new surroundings. Rwookrroro Village is an impressive sight, the wooden huts built directly into the strong boughs of the wroshyr trees that grow on all sides. Walkways zigzag through the village, built at various levels and connected by a series of ramps and stairs that lead higher into the
canopy. From what he can tell, they're currently on the lowest level.

"So," Carth begins, also looking around, "Any complications so far?"

Mission shrugs, jogging towards the nearest ramp. "Bastila did that cool mind-trick thing on some of those Czerka creeps. She managed to get everyone a tour of the place so they can get the layout, but I dunno what happened from there."

"Why not?" Vann frowns, glancing around for any signs of Czerka employees before quickly rushing after the teen.

"Uh, cause I had to go let you in. Obviously." Mission rolls her eyes at this, footfalls almost silent against the wooden surface. "But I'm gonna have to get back. They think I'm looking for the 'fresher."

Arching a curious brow, Carth asks, "Do Wookiees… even have a refresher that you can use?"

"Probably not, but the Czerka slime built lots of new facilities all over the place." Mission scowls at this. "Either way, I'm gonna have to lie my ass off to make them believe that it took me this long to find the thing. So, I better get back before they send someone out looking for me."

"Right." Vann nods in agreement. "Where should we head?"

Pointing towards one particularly large hut two levels up, Mission explains, "There. That's the chieftain's hut. Or, at least it was." Nose wrinkling in distaste, she continues, "Right now they're using it as a kriffing jail for the important Wookiees who they're making an example of. It's pretty heavily guarded, but…" She grins a little, nodding to the blasters both Humans are wearing. "Nothing you can't handle."

A cold chill of excitement hums beneath Vann's skin at the prospect of violence, though he pointedly tries to ignore the sensation. "Sounds like fun," he deadpans.

"So, all we have to do is get inside and talk to the captured Wookiees?" Carth verifies.

"That'd be the plan." Mission nods, glancing around. Her lekku swing behind her. "Now, if you don't mind, I should get back to Big Z. He's pretty upset about what Czerka's done with the place."

"Go, go." Vann waves his hand, shooing the teen away. She grins one last time, offering a mock salute before scurrying up the ramp and towards another building a level below the chieftain's hut. A moment later she disappears through the door.

Watching Mission until she's out of sight, Carth whispers, "So, you ready to start a rebellion?"

"You sound way too excited about this," Vann notes, quickly striding up the ramp. There's still a bit of ache to his ankle, but it's starting to fade. "It's unnerving."

Blinking in surprise, Carth stalls mid-stride. "What? What is that supposed to mean?"

Shrugging, Vann rounds a corner and pressed his back against a hut when he spots three Czerka employees moving along the level above. "Nothing." When this earns him a glare from the pilot, he sighs. "It's just that, since Taris, you've been acting like this entire experience is one creative torture after another."

"I do not…"
"Yeah, you do," Vann shoots the other man a pointed look, one brow arched for emphasis. "But this? You seem, Force-forbid, almost excited."

Scoffing softly, Carth peers up at the passing patrol, eyeing them until they've walked out of view. "What is it with everyone thinking that I'm incapable of enjoying anything?"

Creeping up another ramp, Vann chuckles dryly. "Oh, you know. Might be your unbridled enthusiasm for pessimism."

Following close behind the mercenary, one hand hovering over his blaster, Carth scowls. "I'm not a pessimist!" he insists. "It's just… Look, I don't have to explain myself!"

"Well, can you at least explain why inciting a Wookiee rebellion has you so uncharacteristically eager?" Vann crouches down as he rounds another hut, keeping to the shadows. "Because I'm beginning to think Czerka kidnapped the real Carth and replaced him with a creepy clone."

" Seriously?" Turning to stare at the mercenary, the pilot gapes for a moment before he catches the smirk playing on the other man's lips. "Of course you're not serious," he grumbles below his breath.

"I'm serious enough," Van reassures his companion, tone rich with mock-insult.

Lowering his voice as the pair creeps towards the hut across from the chieftain's, Carth finally explains, "It's just… I always disagreed with what Czerka is doing here." He blinks, eyes following the movements of the guards outside of the hut. "I heard about them, and their slaving and their poaching, a while back. It never sat right with me."

"The amount of do-gooder in you is practically nauseating." Vann quips, though there's no malice in his voice. "But, I guess it's comforting to know that there are genuinely good-hearted people like you and Bastila in this galaxy." His gaze is also tracking the movement of the guards and he mentally counts at least three of them outside the hut, all armed with blaster rifles and wearing Czerka security uniforms.

Sighing heavily, Carth turns to study the mercenary. "For the last time, you're not…" He swallows hard. "There's a lot of good in you."

"I'm good at some things." Brushing off the pilot's insistence with a flippant grin, he draws his blaster. Nodding towards the guards, he quickly announces, "I'm definitely good at this." Legs tensing, he calls over his shoulder, "Cover me, will you?"

"Vann!" Releasing a growl of frustration, Carth draws both blasters as the mercenary darts across the walkway. "You have to stop doing this…"

"But it's what I'm good at!" Grinning sardonically, Vann dashes towards the nearest guard, noting the surprised look on the woman's face as he fires two shots at her left thigh. The blaster feels odd in his hands, the weight somehow all wrong even as the bolts hit their mark. Yelping in pain, the guard collapses clutching at her wounds. Before she can make another sound, Vann leans down and slams the grip of his blaster against her temple, knocking her out cold. As he moves, he can feel his lightsaber hilt pressing against his chest. For a moment he considers drawing it, but the urge passes as three shots from a blaster rifle are fired at him from behind. A warning prickle along the back of his neck is just enough to make him dodge to the left, boots skidding across the wooden boards.

Several bolts soar past Vann's right shoulder from across the walkway, and he turns his head just in
time to see Carth aiming directly for the guard's chest. The shots find their mark and the man drops his blaster rifle, coughing as he falls to his knees. Quickly rising to his full height, the mercenary lunges forward and kicks the guard in the side, knocking the other man prone. Dropping back into a crouch he delivers a sharp blow to the man's forehead, rendering him unconscious. Whirling around, he delivers two more shots to the shoulder of a third guard attempting to sneak up on him before striking the man in the chin with a hard uppercut. It's enough to daze the other man, leaving him open to a swift smack upside the head with the pistol's grip. He doesn't go down like his compatriots, swaying on his feet for a moment before a sweeping kick to the back of the knees drops him hard.

Looking around, Vann doesn't see any signs of further guards. Knocking weapons away from the unconscious Czerka employees, he signals across the walkway for Carth. The pilot immediately jogs over to the chieftain's hut, both pistols still drawn and ready.

"Was that all of them?" Carth asks.

Nodding, Vann also continues to wield his blaster. "I only counted three," he confirms. "But there's probably more inside."

"Yeah, I thought this felt too easy." Lips twisting into a contemplative grimace, Carth studies the door to the hut. "You know, this could be a trap…"

 Shrugging, Vann lifts up one foot. "Only one way to find out." With a grunt he kicks the door, the heavy wood swinging open with a bang. Crouched and ready he slips inside, eyes alert and weapon ready to fire with a twitch of his finger.

Common sense, however, tells him that firing his pistol is a terrible idea. Mainly because there are a dozen Czerka employees in the hut, all armed and aiming at the door with military precision. Most of the individuals are wearing security uniforms and wielding blaster rifles, though three seem to be dressed in more formal attire. While most of the guards in the room are currently watching him, Vann notes that two are focused on a set of three heavy, durasteel cages in the corner. Peering closer he notes that a total of six Wookiees are crammed inside, the tight quarters forcing them to practically sit on top of each other.

"So," he mutters, forcing a weak grin as he lowers his blaster, "I, uh, I think it's a trap."

Carth is right behind, a disgusted sigh escaping him as he also surveys the scene. "You don't say," he grumbles.

Suddenly, Vann feels his Force bond with Bastila flare to life, a sense of distress flooding the mental link from somewhere in the distance. They're not close enough for anything more than residual emotions to pass between them, but it's enough to make him suspect that things are going equally poorly for the rest of the crew. Briefly, he wonders why they even bothered with subtlety. They should have just come in, guns and 'sabers blazing just like Canderous suggested in the first place. Extending his awareness, he can feel the faint echo of Jolee and Juhani's Force signatures. Without an accompanying bond he can't tell what condition they're in, but at least they're close.

"Gentlemen." One of the more formally-dressed Czerka employees steps forward, wearing an oily smile. "I apologize, but I'll have to ask you to hand over your blasters and then put your hands behind your back." She nods to six of the individuals wearing security uniforms, and they move to apprehend their prisoners.

Holding out his pistols, Carth scowls as the Czerka guard roughly yanks the weapons out of his grasp. "Hey Vann," he hisses beneath his breath, "You know how I sometimes say that you can be
a little terrifying?"

Growling as his own weapon is taken from him, Vann stares darkly at the guard even as he replies to the pilot, "Yeah, you really know how to compliment a guy."

Two of the guards adjust their blasters as they listen to this exchange, one digging the muzzle of his weapon sharply into the mercenary's side. "Hey," he snarls, "You be quiet unless you're spoken too!"

Doing his best to ignore the guard currently manhandling his arms behind his back, Carth glances at the rifle pointed at his companion and swallows hard. However, it doesn't stop him from hesitantly whispering, "As much as I hate to say this, now would be a really good time to..."

Another guard cuts the pilot off with a well-placed jab from the butt of her rifle. "We said that's enough!" she snaps, balancing her weapon on her hip as she draws a pair of binders from her belt.

Wincing as one of the guards purposely wrenches his shoulder at an awkward angle, Vann glares darkly. "Sorry," he mutters, even as a smirk plays on his lips. "I was just trying to listen to what my friend here was saying before you cut him off." He shakes his head amusedly, even as the rifle digs harder into his side. "But it's probably not important."

"Just shut your mouths!" The guard with the binders immediately snaps them onto Carth's wrists, the durasteel clicking into place with a resounding snap. A moment later she gives the pilot a harsh shove in the back, driving him towards the center of the room.

"Sorry, sorry," Vann apologizes again, still clearly not meaning it. The rifle presses between his ribs causing a dull burst of pain and he focuses on the sensation, drawing upon the cold rush of emotion that flares within his chest. "Oh wait!" he chirps brightly, "I think I figured it out."

Still smiling smugly, the lead Czerka employee sneers at the mercenary. "You think you're clever, don't you? Well, we'll see what the Republic has to say about that." She glances out the nearby window, expression almost bored as she adds, "The rest of your companions will be here any moment now, and then you'll all be turned over."

As the cool durasteel of another set of binders touches his wrist, Vann feels the Force bond pulse again, this time with a flash of excitement. Straining his ears, he thinks he can hear the screech of blaster fire in the distance. "No, it's okay!" he reassures the Czerka employees, even as the coldness of his emotions spreads through his arms. "My friend? He just wanted me to do this." His hands tingle even before the purple sparks of electricity arc out of his fingertips, the sizzle of Force lightning causing the guard to drop the binders before they're clicked into place. A scream of pain fills the air.

"Impossible!" One of the other Czerka leaders breathes, running to duck down near the cages. "The Jedi would never send one of their own after us!"

Grinning, Vann flips over two guards, landing in front of a third and slashing the woman's rifle in
half in a single hit. "Hey," he chides, "All things are possible through the Force."

"He's not a Jedi," Carth remarks sarcastically, ducking down to avoid the blaster fire. Arms still cuffed behind his back, his movements are awkward and uncoordinated.

Glaring up from her place hidden behind a heavy wooden table, the Czerka leader growls, "If he's not with the Jedi, then kill him!"

The blaster fire becomes more furious, and Vann struggles to block as many shots as he can. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he wishes that he had a second lightsaber, his defense somehow feels incomplete without one. Noting Carth's blasters laying on the floor, he kicks both over to the pilot, momentarily forgetting that the other man is still restrained by the binders.

Frowning at the offered weapon, Carth rolls his eyes. Jerking his head towards the durasteel cuffs, he shouts, "How about a little help, here?"

Diving beneath the bolts, Vann uses the Force to propel himself forward as he slides along the wooden floor of the hut. Coming to an awkward stop just behind the pilot, he raises his lightsaber to slice through the binders, only to be stopped short.

"Woah! Wait a second!" Spinning around in place, Carth rapidly shakes his head. "You are not using your lightsaber to cut these off me!"

Heaving an exasperated sigh, Vann moves to deflect more blaster fire. "Why not?" he asks. "It's not like I have time to go searching for the keys!"

"Because you're going to chop my hand off!" Carth is now scuttling backward, away from the incoming bolts, arms carefully pointed away from the Force user.

Gritting his teeth, Vann snarls back, "I will not chop your hand off!"

Still maneuvering himself towards the back of the room, Carth continues to shake his head. "Uh-uh. No way!" He's almost backed himself comfortably against a wall when he rams directly into one of the cages occupying that particular corner. The metal of the binders clangs as it makes contact with the thick bars, and the pilot jerks back at the sound. However, he doesn't get to move very far before a pair of large, hairy hands is grasping him by the shoulders and hauling him to his feet, a trilling growl accompanying the action. Blinking in shock, Carth struggles for a moment before realizing that resisting is pointless. Looking desperately at his companion, he shouts, "Umm, what did the Wookiee just say?"

Vann can't decipher the Shyriiwook over the screech of blaster fire and the hum of his lightsaber. Still focused on deflecting shots from all directions, he slowly begins to back towards the cages. "Sorry, didn't catch that."

"Great." Carth shudders slightly as he's held in place, the Wookiee's much larger hands now grasping him by the forearms. "I, uh, I hope you realize that we're not on their side, right?" he asks hopefully.

The Wookiee trills again. "I understand," he replies, hands grasping the Human's arms for a moment before he pulls them apart with a rough, inhumanly powerful tug. There's a sharp snapping sound as the binders break at their joints, freeing the pilot's arms. Drawing his hands back the Wookiee nods in satisfaction, watching as the Human stands in mute shock for a moment before slowly moving his arms around to examine them.

Staring at the remains of the cuffs around his wrists, Carth mutters a rough, "Umm, thank you!"
An instant later, he dives to the floor, managing a semi-controlled slide as he stops where his pistols are lying. Retrieving his weapons, he immediately begins to open fire on the Czerka guards.

Still pressed close to the front of the cage, the Wookiee watches the pair of humans for another moment before demanding, "What are you doing here?"

With added cover fire, Vann can move more freely around the room. Creeping towards the cage, he replies, "We're, um…" The answer suddenly feels monumentally foolish. His voice is fairly flat as he admits, "We're here to save you. And encourage you to fight against Czerka."

Until this moment, the mercenary did not know it was possible for a Wookiee to look this monumentally unimpressed.

"Look, it's not just us," Vann hurriedly adds. "We have friends. One of your people. And he has a sword…"

The Wookiee sighs sadly, head hanging. The rest of the captured individuals look similarly dejected. "So, you've brought a slave to help you…?"

"No!" Whirling around, Vann slices into the rifle of another Czerka guard, the barrel of the weapon clanging to the floor. A moment later his lightsaber pierces the man's gut, dropping him beside his broken weapon. "He's not a slave! Look, his name is Zaalbar and…"

"Zaalbar?" A grey-furred Wookiee towards the back of one cage lifts his head. "Did you say...?" He shakes his head, wide shoulders slumping. "But that's impossible. My son is dead."

"Son?!" Blinking in disbelief, Vann almost misses blocking a shot from a Czerka leader. Turning to lunge at the woman, he's a moment too late as she dives out of the way, once again hiding behind a table as she calls for help via her portable commlink. Growling in frustration, the mercenary turns back to the Wookiees. "Did you say that Zaalbar… is your son?"

Nodding solemnly, the graying Wookiee slowly pushes himself towards the front of the cage. "My son's name was Zaalbar. But he is dead now. Exiled from this very village for a crime that he did not commit, only to die in the Shadowlands."

"Look," Vann studies the cages for a moment, periodically pausing to deflect blaster bolts using his lightsaber. "If we're talking about the same Wookiee, he's not dead. In fact, he's…" From nearby there's a loud roar, followed by a series of Human screaming. Grinning, he continues, "If I'm right, he's probably just outside."

"No…" The graying Wookiee's head droops. "My son is dead. Betrayed by the same Wookiee who betrayed us all. Who now travels with Czerka, selling his own people into bondage."

Giving the cage lock one more glance, Vann draws back his lightsaber before thrusting it into the durasteel. The build quality is even heavier than he expected, and it takes several moments for the plasma of the blade to melt the metal. However, after the sizzling stops, the door slowly swings open. "Can you tell me the whole story later?" He turns to check on Carth, who's ducked behind a large basket, still firing on the Czerka employees. "Right now, we could use a little help!" Before the Wookiees can reply, he's moving to unlock another cage.

"We can't," one Wookiee trills plaintively. "If we attack them, our villages will suffer."

"Guess what? Your villages are already suffering," Vann informs them. "Your people are enslaved, and your home world is controlled by Czerka." He gestures to the chaos all around them. "It's not like things can get much worse!"
At that moment, there's a crash as something heavy comes barreling through one of the hut's windows.

Trailing bits of shattered wood, Canderous grins as he looks up, repeating blaster clutched in both hands. Glancing around the room he arches a brow, commenting, "I see the fun started without me." With a sadistic little chuckle, he hefts his weapon and immediately opens fire.

"So, things not quite going as planned?" Carth peers out from his partial cover, watching as Canderous sprays the Czerka troops with a round of fire from his blaster.

Still grinning, the Mandalorian shrugs. "This is pretty much what I was hoping for!"

Taking careful aim at the Czerka guards, Carth takes two down with powerful blasts to their chests. "That's not comforting!" he snaps back.

Amidst this fresh outbreak of chaos, Vann's lightsaber is burning through the last layers of durasteel composing the second cage lock. Suddenly the Force bond flares to life again, a sense of worry flooding the connection. The emotions are stronger than before, less an inkling and more a myriad of feelings that threaten to overtake his own consciousness. This means that Bastila is close. As though to confirm this, he hears the distinct whir of multiple lightsabers engaging in combat, the Force rippling as various powers are unleashed against the Czerka employees.

"Come on, are you helping or not?" Glaring at the Wookiees, Vann throws the second door open. The captives steadfastly remain inside of their cage. "Well, I'm still setting you free anyway!"

Plunging the blade of his lightsaber into the third and final lock, he feels sweat drip down his brow from the heat generated. Focused on task, he almost doesn't notice the loud bang as more Czerka troops come flooding into the hut.

The lock is still glowing, molten metal oozing down the destroyed mechanism as Vann rips open the final door. The Wookiees are still watching him warily, and make no move to exit their cages. "Kriffing hells!" he snarls. "If you want to stay there, fine. I can't make you do anything." He furrows his brow, moving his saber into a defensive position as he eyes the fresh wave of troops. "But this might be your last chance to take back your planet."

A thick plume of smoke drifts from the thatched roof of the hut, the glowing red blade of a lightsaber cutting a hole through the fibrous material. Moments later the still-smoldering piece of thatching crashes to the floor, surprising several Czerka employees who leap out of the way just in time to avoid being slammed beneath the charred mess. Flipping backward through the newly-created hole, Juhani twirls through the air before landing in a neat crouch in the center of the hut. Golden eyes surveying the scene, her gaze settles on her fellow Force user. "Vann!" she exclaims, "You are alright!"

Racing along the wall of the hut, he lunges at one of the Czerka leaders, "Was there any doubt?" he asks with a grin.

"Bastila, she sensed that you were... distressed." Juhani's eyes narrow for a moment, and she studies the mercenary critically.

From across the wide space of the hut, Carth quickly reassures the Cathar, "We, uh, we got captured for a minute. But Vann... fixed it."

Forcing a few sparks to dance across his fingers, Vann arches a brow. "Yep."

"Well then," grinning wolfishly, Juhani twirls her 'saber, deflecting two blaster bolts in the process.
Using her free hand, she draws something metallic from her belt. Tossing it to the mercenary she calls, "Try not to be captured again," before flipping into the thick of the battle.

Instinctively reaching for the item with the Force, Vann draws it to his hand before he fully realizes what he's looking at. As the metal catches his eye he physically recoils, fighting the urge to throw the hilt from his grasp. Revan's lightsaber sits warm and oddly familiar in his palm, the surface scuffed from use in hundreds of battles. It's a surprisingly elegant tool of destruction that's taken countless lives, many of them innocent. Something that Vann learned last time he touched this 'saber, visions of Revan cutting down his enemies forced into his mind. Somehow, the weapon feels too light for the gravity of what it's done.

Several bolts come flying at Vann, and he instinctively powers up the second lightsaber in his off-hand, using it to block the shots coming in lower. He's expecting the blade to be wide and crimson, a close match to Juhani's. So, the almost-friendly violet glow that bursts forth is a surprise, though he doesn't have time to think about the implications. While the hilt he's wielding is definitely Revan's, someone has obviously replaced the crystal. Glancing to his left, he notes that Juhani's own weapon is sporting a wider, brighter blade than before. Which, honestly, raises more questions than answers.

Blocking several more shots, Vann manages to overhear wisps of conversation coming from the captive Wookiees. It's almost impossible to make out exactly what they're saying, but they seem to be in deep discussion. "Where the hells is Zaalbar?" he demands.

"Damned if I know." Canderous is currently releasing a spray of blaster bolts on the fresh wave of Czerka employees, the sheer volume of shots compensating for his imprecise aim. Several individuals let out groans of pain, clutching wounds that, while not fatal, are still incapacitating. "Last I saw, he was saving the Twi'lek kid's ass."

"Krffing hells, Mission!" Propelling himself forward using the Force, Vann bypasses several stunned guards as he charges towards the door, both lightsabers swinging in perfect harmony. He has to admit that Revan's weapon is beautifully balanced. "Do I have to do everything myself?"

"No," Carth comments dryly, providing cover fire as Juhani bounces acrobatically between Czerka employees, her lightsaber a crimson blur as it sinks into the gut of one man, and the thigh of a woman. "You just like being the center of attention."

Glaring at the pilot, Vann retorts, "Not always!" As he reaches the front of the hut, reaches out an arm and prepares to Force push the door off the hinges. But before he can summon the power, two short yellow blades are burning their way past the doorframe, leaving blackened scorch marks in their wake. An instant later the doorway has been significantly widened, the wood splintering and falling away to reveal Bastila, her hair mussed and an expression of grim determination etched across her features.

"Just what is going on in…" The Jedi stops mid-sentence, jaw dropping slightly at the chaos.

"Beep-beep! Coming through!" The reason for the widened entryway is immediately made clear, as Zaalbar comes barreling past the Jedi with Mission balanced precariously against his back. There's blood staining the thigh of the teen's pants, but she's wearing a wide smile as she clings to the Wookiee's shoulders with one arm, the other pointing a blaster pistol at anyone within range. "Sorry we're late!" she announces, just as her companion lets out a loud roar.

Spotting the cages Wookiees, Zaalbar lets out a loud roar. "Freyyr, Father!" Without warning he charges into the fray, Mission now hanging on for dear life. Raising the hefty sword he's wielding, he brings it down on the nearest Czerka employee. There's a spray of blood as the blade slices into
the woman's skull, her body falling to the ground in a lifeless heap. "Father, what have they done to you?"

"Zaalbar?" The graying Wookiee rushes out of his cage, teeth bared as he examines his son. Letting out a furious roar, he shakes his head. "No, impossible! You are dead. Chuundar brought your possessions back from the Shadowlands. No Wookiee who lives would willingly give up his weapons."

"Chuundar stole from me!" Zaalbar roars back. "He did not take me to the Shadowlands after I was banished. He tried to sell me to slavers. But I escaped!" Rapping his hand against his chest, he declares, "And now I have returned. I have returned to…" Glancing helplessly at the Twi'lek on his back, he gives her a questioning look.

"He's back here to save all of your hairy asses!" Mission eloquently finishes. "Look, he's got Bacca's Blade and everything! Pulled it right out of that crazy space machine."

"Mission!" Expression disapproving, Zaalbar shakes his head at the teen. "Do not say that…"

"Be gone, dark spirit!" With a roar, Freyyr swipes at his son's shoulder with the flat of his hand. It's a blow hard enough to knock a weaker creature out cold and is sufficient to send the other Wookiee stumbling backward several steps. It also loosens the Twi'lek's grasp on her friend, and she tumbles to the ground in an inelegant heap.

Clutching her injured leg, Mission groans, "Oww! What was that for?"

When he makes contact with something solid, Freyyr's expression shifts from anger to shock. He stares at his hand for a moment, and then back to his son. "You… you are not a spirit!" His eyes gradually move to look at the blade. "And you have returned with the ancient sword of our people. The blade of a true leader. But how?"

"It is a long story, Father," Zaalbar explains, obviously avoiding exactly how he came into possession of Bacca's Blade. "What matters is that I am real, and I am here. And I wish to free our people from their bondage."

From the corner, one of the Czerka leaders is desperately shouting into a commlink. "Send all available troops! I repeat, send all available troops!"

"Oh, shut up!" Almost without thinking, Vann extends his hand as a few forks of electricity shoot from his fingertips. The lightning hits the woman squarely, causing her to shake uncontrollably for a moment before she slumps limply to the floor. Unfortunately, a voice on the other end of the comm is already responding that reinforcements headed out.

Looking around, Vann assesses his companions. All of them are sweating and panting from more than just the oppressive humidity of the planet. Canderous is bleeding from multiple wounds, and Juhani is carefully favoring her left side. Bastila and Carth seem to be in better shape, but he doubts that will last long. Especially with a fresh wave of Czerka's finest on their way. "Shit," he mutters under his breath, attempting to ignore the sting in his bicep or the throb of his ankle. "Zaalbar, can you convince them that we're trying to help?" Her jerks his head towards the captured Wookiees, most of whom are still inside the cages.

Peeking out of the destroyed entrance, Bastila calls, "By any chance are the Wookiees going to participate in the rebellion that we're starting for them?" Worry creases her brow, as she casts another glance towards the village.
"They're, uh, they're working on it," Vann assures the Jedi. He swings one of his blades, the hot plasma easily slicing into the chest of the one guards.

"Well, could you perhaps encourage them to work a bit faster?" Lowering her stance, Bastila is visibly preparing to defend herself against something beyond the hut.

Sighing heavily, Vann shifts his grip on the lightsaber in his dominant hand, enabling him to drive it into the gut of a guard attempting to sneak up on him from behind. The man gurgles as the blade stabs straight through his body. "Aren't the Jedi all about patience?"

Wincing, Bastila shakes her head. "Only when there aren't two dozen heavily armed soldier bearing down on us!"

Nodding once, Vann speeds over to where Zaalbar and Freyyr are standing. Powering down one lightsaber, he helps the still-injured Mission to her feet as he shouts, "If you're going to help, now would really be the time!"

For a moment, the graying Wookiee looks torn, gaze shifting between his son and his fellow captives. Finally, he lets out a mighty howl as he declares, "My son has returned from the dead with Bacca's blade. It is a sign that he is to lead us all!" Clapping a large hand upon the younger Wookiee's shoulder, he nods. "If you wish to fight for our freedom, I will stand by your side."

"Great," Vann says, trying to keep the sarcasm from his voice as he deflects three blaster bolts from the Twi'lek. "What about the rest of you?"

"Come on!" Mission shouts. "You gotta fight these creeps!"

The other captives are staring intently at Freyyr, expressions still unsure even as they climb to their feet. After a tense moment of silence, all of them return the older Wookiee's roar, their shoulders straightening as the deafening sound fills the large hut. "We will fight beside you and your son, Chief Freyyr," one announces. "Tell us your command."

Gesturing a clawed hand at two of the Wookiees, the chief orders, "Go to the other villages. Spread word that we will not be made slaves any longer. We have tried to be peaceful, and yet we still suffered beneath Czerka's rule. No more." He clenches his fist. "From now on, we fight."

Not needing to be told twice, the pair of Wookiees immediately rush from their cages, pausing only to retrieve fallen blaster rifles which they proceed to use as makeshift clubs against any Czerka guards who attempt to stop them. The metal crunches loudly as it impacts the Humans, batting them aside as though they're made of flimsiplast. Vann considers pointing out that the blasters aren't designed for that, but he seriously doubts it's a good idea to tell a Wookiee how to use a weapon. Once they reach the ruined doorway, both Wookiees leap into the wroshyr trees and vanish from sight.

Growling worriedly, Zaalbar says, "Father, we need to help these outsiders to reclaim Rwookrrorro. I know they are not our people, but they fight for us!" He nods to Vann. "I have pledged a life debt to this man. He is honorable, and can be trusted."

Still supporting Mission with one arm, Vann gestures towards where the rest of the crew is taking down the last of the Czerka employees. Panting, bleeding, and visibly exhausted, they're all refusing to back down. "We can all be trusted," he assures the chief. "Hells, it's not like we're doing this for our health!"

Freyyr blinks impassively before finally growling in acquiescence. "If you trust this man enough to
pledge a life debt to him, then we will fight beside him as well." He turns to the remaining three Wookiees. "We will reclaim this village as our own!"

Heaving a sigh of relief, Vann powers down his other lightsaber, tucking it into his belt before retrieving a medpac from the inside of his jacket. Handing it to Mission, he carefully sets the teen on the floor. "Use that while you have time," he instructs. "Cause things are about to get really messy."

"Because that was just for fun, right?" Carth is also jabbing a medpac into his thigh as he uses his forearm to wipe sweat from his brow.

"What type of warrior doesn't find joy in battle?" Canderous casts the pilot a doubtful look.

Checking the settings on one of his pistols, Carth snarls, "I already told you, I'm not…"

"It does not matter!" Clearly tired of the bickering, Juhani bares her teeth at both Humans. "Warrior or soldier, now is not the time to argue." She stretches, giving her lightsaber a twirl. "Now is the time to fight."

Bastila is still staring into the distance, pale eyes wide. "And what a fight it will be," she acknowledges, even as the screech of blaster fire once again fills the air.

Vann closes his eyes for a moment, focusing on the anger and frustration that's still seething just below the surface. A cold wave of raw emotion surges through him, and he feels the telltale tingle in his hands as a surge of Force lightning builds. He's not sure how many individuals he can take out before he runs out of energy, but he's determined to find out. Checking to ensure that Mission is back on her feet, he draws his other lightsaber and charges towards the hut's entrance to stand beside Bastila.

The bond is full of trepidation as the Jedi stares down the incoming troops, her own 'sabers flashing as she deflects bolts with practiced efficiency. "Well," she breathes, "Nobody said that starting a rebellion would be easy."

"It would be easier if the locals were more willing to, you know, rebel." Vann rolls his eyes, thumbing on Revan's blade. Its unique hum is strangely comforting.

Taking a moment to glance at the blade, Bastila whispers, "And before you ask, I'm the one who put the second half of your crystal into the hilt."

"You… what?"

"Juhani took out Bandon's crystal, and yes it was Bandon's and not Revan's." Her gaze is now solely focused on the incoming troops as she takes a few steps to her right to provide a wider range of coverage. "Apparently, its optical properties were far superior to her own. Either way, it left the hilt free, and…"

Frowning, Vann focuses his current displeasure into deflecting bolts directly back at their shooters. However, he knows that some of his irritation flows into the Force bond. "And you went through my stuff, took the second half of the crystal… which you didn't approve of in the first place… and shoved it into Revan's blade for me to use?"

"I didn't shove it, I placed it," Bastila replies smugly. "And I apologize for going through your things. In all fairness, I knew where you put the crystal. I am in your head, after all…"

"Yeah, that's not an excuse." Gritting his teeth, Vann takes a step away from the Jedi. It's partially
to give Carth and Canderous room to fire out of the hut, and partially because he sorely tempted to just start yelling obscenities at the invasion of privacy. "And I don't want Revan's lightsaber!"

"But it wants you!" Voice pleading, Bastila takes a few smooth steps towards her nearest opponent. "Revan chose you to receive visions of his life," she explains, "Thus, you should be the one to wield his weapon. It's only proper."

Shifting into an offensive position, Vann prepares to charge at the incoming Czerka troops. "Krif proper!" he snaps.

Letting out an irate huff of breath, Bastila retorts, "Then why don't you look at it strategically? You fight better with two weapons. Or, at least you guard better. But we don't exactly have access to lightsaber parts on the ship, so you might as well use what we have!"

"We'll talk about this later!" Vann finally growls, funneling his current anger into the emotions already building inside of him. The tingling in his hands grows stronger, and he can see the sparks arcing between his fingertips. Extending his arm, he shoots out several brilliant forks of lightning, the purple electricity stunning multiple Czerka employees on contact and dropping them where they stand. "And yeah," he continues, "We're definitely going to talk."

The sudden show of Force power seems to surprise many of the Czerka troops, and they momentarily pause in their march to trying and figure out exactly what just happened. Unfortunately, their commander doesn't seem phased and he immediately orders them to continue moving forward, his grizzled face pulling into a scowl. The expression only grows more disgusted when he spots Zaalbar and Freyyr leading the three other Wookiees out of the hut.

"I should have known it would be you," the commander snorts. "Always a troublemaker. We should have killed you off early. Made an example out of you."

With an indignant roar, Zaalbar charges forward, swinging Bacca's Blade as he goes. It chops roughly into one Cerka trooper, carving a deep gash into the woman's side. "You will not insult my father!" he growls.

"Save your breath," the commander grumbles. "It's not like I can understand your damn language." Raising his blaster rifle he takes aim at Zaalbar, only for the Wookiee to dive out of the way with surprising swiftness. Sighing, the man jerks the weapon to the left, finger squeezing the trigger twice as he sends two bolts directly at his new target.

Freyyr howls as the shots both dig deeply into the right side of his torso, blood staining his hair. One hand moves to clutch the wound, even as he begins to run towards the fight, roaring his outrage. Seeing their leader injured is all it takes to spur the other three Wookiees into action. Though they lack any real weapons, they're currently wielding chunks of the broken table and other heavy bits of wood as makeshift clubs, which they swing at anything that dares to come within arm's reach. Zaalbar is also attacking any Czerka employee he sees, growling and shouting as he does so. With the Wookiees on the frontlines, both Carth and Canderous begin to lay down cover fire, their blaster bolts helping to occupy the mass of troopers descending on the chieftain's hut.

With a shout Juhani bursts forth, flipping forward and diving directly into the troopers. Her blade sizzles as it cuts down three Czerka employees simultaneously, arms swinging the deadly red plasma in an arc around her body. From the doorway of the hut Canderous whistles, audibly impressed.

"Gotta admit," the Mandalorian comments, "That kitten has claws."
"Really?" Carth scoffs, "Really?"

Vann doesn't hear much more banter as he's also charging ahead, both lightsabers moving in deadly tandem. It feels right, even more than when he was using vibroblades, or when he temporarily borrowed Jolee's 'saber. Speaking of which…

Using his off-hand to deflect blaster bolts, Vann plunges his dominant weapon into the chest of the nearest trooper. "Where the hells is Jolee?" he demands.

"He rushed off to do something shortly before I came to find you," Juhani replies, shrugging as best she can while still swinging her weapon with deadly precision. "But I do not know what he is planning."

"Well, that's not helpful," Vann mutters, lunging forward and slashing at the arm of one Czerka trooper. While he doesn't sever the limb, he's positive that it will never heal the same.

Pausing in her more careful defensive maneuvers, Bastila turns her head upwards. "Actually," she drawls, "I think he's about to be very helpful."

Also looking towards the vast canopy, Vann notices that the bough and leaves are shaking violently, something that he's never seen before. Reaching out his Force connection, he brushes against Jolee's unique signature, also sensing the presence of over a dozen other sentient lifeforms. "What the hells?"

Overhead, the trees erupt into a series of ear-splitting roars and howls as Wookiees descend from above, brandishing bowcasters and swords so massive that Vann's not entirely sure he could lift some of them. Crashing down to the walkway hard enough to shake the wooden planks, the newcomers glare angrily at the Czerka troops for a moment, their anger and hatred sending ice-cold waves through the Force. The Humans don't have a chance to retreat before the Wookiees are descending upon them, roars of outrage drowning out the screams.

"I'm sorry we're late," Jolee calls out, "You have no idea how hard it is to get an entire village of Wookiees to believe that a bunch of outsiders are saving their carpeted asses from slavers."

"Oh, I think we have some idea." Vann points the blade of his lightsaber towards Freyyr and Zaalbar.

Jolee nods. "Well, good! Because it's really damned difficult, and you ought to appreciate my hard work!" He powers on his own 'saber, taking a hard swing at the first Czerka trooper who dares to try and fire on him.

"I'm impressed!" Bastila comments, in between slashes and blocks from her pair of shotos. "Earning the trust of a Wookiee village is no easy feat, even for someone familiar with their planet."

"Huh! I just said that it was hard. Weren't you listening?" Moving with surprising swiftness for his age, Jolee extends his arm and uses the Force to knock back two troopers who were getting too close. "Though, I'm surprised that you're this supportive of the Wookiees taking back their planet with anything less than diplomatic hearings."

Digging both of her blades into the thigh of the nearest trooper, Bastila shakes her head. "Violence should always be a last resort." Seeing the eye roll that the older man gives her, she scowls. "But the Wookiees have been let down by the Republic, and by the Jedi Council. And, honestly, by anyone else who knew this was happening and had the power to stop it."
"So, you're honestly okay with all this hate, anger, and violence?" Whirling both blades in opposite directions, Vann slices into the rifles of two troopers. Shifting slightly, he carves deep gashes into both of their sides, sending to them the ground in agony.

Looking around with a grim expression, Bastila finally nods. "The Wookiees were failed by those who should have protected them," she admits. "They deserve to be angry. And they deserve to take their planet back by whatever means necessary."

"Well," Jolee chuckles, pushing back another two troopers. "That's one of the first things you've said that I've agreed with. Congratulations!"

"Hm!" Bastila fumes silently, taking out her frustration in the form of several swift strikes at the trooper to her left. She carves straight through the man's armor and then kicks him to the ground.

From that point on, it's chaos. Vann finds it easier to let the fog of battle take over his mind, limbs going cold and loose as he moves through the Czerka troopers with preternatural speed thanks to the Force. As much as he hates to admit it, Bastila's right. He does fight better with two weapons. Not that he'll ever say that to her. The lightsaber in his off-hand, Revan's weapon, slices through the thin armor of a trooper, melting the fiber weave in the process. He's switched his dominant blade into a reverse grip, using it to drive back any attempt to attack him from behind. There's a sharp sizzle as the violet 'saber sinks deep into the shoulder of someone trying to tackle him, and he jerks down to carve a deep gash into the person's arm. There's a shriek of pain, and then the distinct thud of someone collapsing against the wooden walkway.

Spinning on his heel, Vann brings his dominate blade up in a forward slash, the weapon's angle enabling him to catch two troopers off guard and knock their arms back in a single motion. His off-hand switches to blocking blaster bolts, the blade humming as it deflects a good portion of the shots back on the shooters. Panting, he carefully maneuvers himself towards the chieftain's hut as he makes another forward strike on an opponent, catching her elbow in an upward sweep and slicing a vicious wound into her forearm. Taking advantage of her lowered defenses, he stabs forward, his lightsaber sinking easily into her breastbone and straight out her back. Kicking her off his blade, he doesn't bother to watch her fall as he continues to move towards the hut. Glancing at the entrance, he spots three armored troopers desperately trying to take out whoever's laying down cover fire.

A flurry of well-aimed shots is enough to drop one of the troopers, though the other two continue to advance on their target. Vann thinks he hears someone yell, "Mission, get back!" though it's mostly drowned out by the squeal of blaster fire. Carth suddenly appears in the ruined doorway, using himself to presumably shield the teen from the incoming troopers, both of his pistols firing rapidly to try and drive back the attackers. It's enough to distract them, the multitude of bolts peppering their chest plates, but it's not enough to take them out.

One of the troopers manages to dodge behind the other, remaining low to the ground. From a certain angle, it probably looks like he's gone down. That's the only explanation for why Carth shifts his entire focus onto the standing trooper, giving the partially-concealed man time to line up his shot. Mission must spot the ruse from inside and she shouts a warning, though it's more of a high-pitched squeal of panic than any real words. Unfortunately, this only makes the pilot turn to check on her, further dividing his attention.

Vann sees the trooper about to pull the trigger, the barrel of his rifle aimed directly at Carth's head, and reacts. Cold fury floods his body, and his vision goes red around the edges. He can feel himself powering down one of his lightsabers as he extends his arm, but it's a distant and hazy sensation. What he's more acutely aware of is the cold wave of Force power that he wraps around the
trooper's neck, squeezing and constricting as he curls his fingers towards his palm. The man sputters and chokes, dropping his rifle as he claws at his neck, lips already starting to turn faintly purple.

There's a certain irony to the fact that Vann knows exactly what this feels like, having been on the receiving end of Lang's tender mercies. But in this moment, he has no sympathy. His mind is surprisingly calm, nothing but bitterly cold rage consuming his every thought. Striding slowly forward, he continues to choke the life out of the trooper, practically feeding on the fear and pain that radiates off the man and into the Force. The raw, frigid emotion is like a soothing balm to his own anger and frustration. 'Yes,' he thinks. 'You should fear me.'

The trooper stops struggling a moment later, chest still and neck inflamed from where he tried to pry off the invisible hand restricting his airway and choking the life from his body. The second trooper is looking on in mute horror, mouth open and a thin whine of fear escaping her lungs. She only makes the sound for a second before Vann leaps forward, his still-ignited lightsaber slashing through the air and severing her head from her body in a single fluid motion. The corpse collapses as her head tumbles gruesomely to the ground an instant before the mercenary lands beside it, 'saber still held mid-swing.

"What the krif was that?" Carth's pistols are still aimed at where the now-lifeless troopers were standing only moments before, his eyes wide as he stares disbelieving at his companion. "Vann, what the kriffing hells did you just do?!!"

Still surging with cold fury, Vann lowers his lightsaber slightly as he snarls, "Oh, no big deal. All I did was save your life. Again."

Poking her head out from behind the pilot, Mission's expression is equally shocked, and she has to force herself to swallow before she manages to squeak out, "Uh, thanks?"

Gesturing emphatically at the two corpses, Carth shakes his head. "You just Force-choked that man to death! And then you beheaded that woman!"

"To… save you?" Vann offers blandly.

"Yes, and I appreciate it," Carth grumbles. "But you didn't see your face. You looked… completely at peace with what you were doing. Almost like you enjoyed it."

Powering down his second lightsaber, Vann scowls. He can feel the almost-numb sense of anger flowing away, replaced by a mere feeling of prickly irritation. "I did what I had to."

"No, you didn't." Voice barely a murmur, Carth adds, "You did what you wanted. And it was kriffing scary to watch."

"Yeah. I wanted to save you and Mission!" Peering at the teen, Vann studies her startled expression. All her bravado has drained away, replaced with a startling amount of innocence. And a noticeable note of fear.

Clearing her throat, the Twi'lek murmurs, "And I appreciate it, V-Man. I… I do. And I'm sure Carth does too. Don't you?" She elbows the Human between the ribs.

Jutting his chin our defiantly, the pilot merely states, "You didn't see your eyes."

Reaching up to brush his fingers just above his cheekbone, Vann frowns. "My eyes? What about them?"
"For a second, a split second, they turned yellow."

Memories of Lang's gaze shifting to an eerie shade of glowing gold flash through Vann's mind and the last of the residual anger leaves him. His limbs feel heavy in the aftermath, and he barely resists collapsing to the wooden walkway. Instead, he takes a stumbling step back, blinking rapidly as though it will somehow erase that momentary change in his appearance. "I... I didn't mean..."

"No, you never mean it!" Carth replies, voice terse. "But this shit keeps happening." Holstering his pistol, he scrubs one palm over his forehead. "Look, I don't know what's going on, but it's dark. Even I know that." He thrusts his hand out in frustration. "And what the hell did the Jedi even teach you, anyway? Isn't Bastila supposed..."

"Isn't Bastila supposed to what?" The Jedi's prim tone cuts through the argument as she strides towards the hut, powered down shoto hilts still clutched in her hands.

Gesturing to the bodies, Carth exclaims, "Keep Vann from strangling people to death with the Force!"

"I was protecting you, asshole!"

"He actually was." Mission's voice gains some of its usual sass as she adds, "I mean, in one of the scariest ways possible. But... it's almost flattering?"

Staring at the teen in disbelief, Carth practically shouts, "No, it's not!"

"Wait, please slow down." Bastila looks between her assembled crewmates. "Vann did what?"

"Stopped someone from shooting Carth in the head!" The mercenary crosses his arms, jaw clenched. A withering glare from the Jedi causes him to quickly add, "...Possibly by choking him. With the Force."

Wearing the same shocked expression that Mission and Carth sported only moments before, Bastila opens her mouth to say something, only to snap her jaw shut with a click. Drawing a sharp breath through her nose, she finally manages to stutter out, "That is... most certainly... not something we'll be sharing with the Council."

"Oh, come on!" Glaring at both Force users, Carth fumes, "You cannot just brush this one aside like the lightning. His eyes turned yellow, Bastila. Yellow."

"And we will discuss this. All of this." Gesturing between herself, the pilot, and the mercenary, the Jedi nods decisively. "But for now, we have more important things to worry about. Like helping the Wookiees to clean-up their village."

For the first time, Vann realizes that the sound of blaster fire has completely stopped, replaced by the gentle rustle of leaves as the wind blows through the wroshyr branches. Looking around, he sees the Wookiees gathered around Freyyr, who's clutching the blaster wounds in his side as he stands proudly before his people. Zaalbar is by his father's side, Bacca's Blade still held in one hand. They seem to be discussing something, though surprisingly it's too quiet to overhear.

"We won," Vann finally breathes. Suddenly, a thought crosses his mind and he winces. "...Which means that we're not getting paid for this kriffing job! Dammit!"

"But we've set a revolution into motion. As we speak, messengers are traveling between the villages, telling the other Wookiees of this victory and encouraging them to rise up against their oppressors." Bastila smiles softly, the Force bond pulsing with a sense of warmth and joy. "And
really, that's far more satisfying than any credits."

Rolling her eyes, Mission groans. "Ugh, that is such a Jedi thing to say."

Jerking his thumb towards Bastila, Vann arches a brow at his companions. "And I'm the one you complain about?"

Carth just shakes his head. "You're both horrible, okay?"

Nodding in agreement, Vann shrugs. "Yeah, okay. I can live with that."

* * *

Leaning against the Ebon Hawk's entrance, Vann watches as Freyyr and Zaalbar speak quietly with each other, their expressions somber as they exchange parting words. He's curious what the Wookiees are discussing, but he doesn't want to intrude. He's already learned more about Zaalbar's banishment, his brother Chuundar's betrayal, and Freyyr's own doubts about both of his sons than the Wookiees seemed comfortable sharing with an outsider. But it's hard not to learn these things when one of the Wookiees involved pledged a life debt to you.

Brushing his hands against his pants, Carth pauses beside the mercenary. "We're loaded up," he announces.

Despite Czerka being too busy fleeing Kashyyyk to pay them, the corporation left enough goods and supplies behind for the Ebon Hawk's crew to resupply for free. Freyyr had been more than willing to allow them to take what they needed and had even provided a few extra items from Rwookrrorro's supply house to round out their cargo holds. He also encouraged Zaalbar to keep Bacca's Blade.

"I'm actually surprised you're still standing," Carth quips. "I figured that Bastila was going to lecture you to death."

Rolling his eyes, Vann pushes up from the entryway. "Well, you know, using one's powers to take a life is not the Jedi way."

"No, it's not."

Forcing a smirk, even in the face of the pilot's deadpan expression, Vann idly explains, "She thinks I need to meditate more. To work on 'releasing my emotions.'"

Blinking once, Carth gives his companion a skeptical look. "You're not going to do it, are you?"

"I might try." Vann shrugs. "You never know."

Placing his hand on the other man's shoulder, Carth gives it an affectionate squeeze. It lingers for an extra moment as he leans in closer. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Crunching through a piece of fruit, Mission sidles by. "So," she drawls, "Where are we headed next?"

The warmth of the pilot's hand still infusing the shoulder of his jacket, Vann takes his time reaching for his datapad. "Manaan," he declares. "And for once it's a job that even Carth here can't complain about."

"Oh really?" Crossing his arms, the pilot arches a brow. "Try me."
"You like complaining that much, huh?" Taking another bite of fruit, Mission grins cheekily. "Such an old-guy thing to enjoy."

Sputtering, Carth glares at the teen. "That's... that's not what I meant!"

"Anyway," Vann says, just a little louder than necessary. "There's a group of rebels who are trying to sabotage the Republic's kolto mining operation." He scrolls through the information. "They want a team to make a dive and destroy some equipment."

"Huh." Blinking in surprise, Carth grins faintly. "That is pretty admirable."

"We get to blow stuff up?" Mission rubs her hands together. "Alright!"

Looking between his companions, Vann frowns. "See, if you're both excited for this, it's bound to go wrong. You know that, right?"

Offering the mercenary another pat on the shoulder, Carth's smile widens. "Relax. In your own words, that's not how the Force works."

Chapter End Notes

1. I know that Kashyyyk and Rwookrrorro Village are a single level in the game, but other images I've seen present them with multiple walkway levels. This makes more sense to me, so I used that design. I have no proof that Wookiees use portable ladders, but portable fire escape ladders do exist.

2. I subscribe to the theory that the yellowing of a Sith/dark Force user's eyes can vary from moment to moment, depending on how close the individual is to the dark side. Of course, there are multiple Sith whose eyes are not canonically yellow (Malak and Dooku being two prime examples), because why not make things more confusing?

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**Planet - Manaan Part I**

Chapter Summary

In which our heroes reluctantly acquire a new job, decide to take a scenic tour of Manaan's ocean, and discover that underwater stations are terrifying places.

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: This chapter contains some content involving mental illness that some readers may find disturbing. Go to the notes at the bottom for a complete warning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

15.

"Vann, kindly keep in mind that the Selkath have very strict laws regarding personal conduct on their planet." Bastila's tone is clipped as she strolls through the gleaming open air walkways of Ahto City, her footfalls sharp against the polished floors.

Hands stuffed casually in his jacket pockets, pinning his lightsabers against his chest, Vann merely nods. "Yeah, you mentioned that one or ten times."

"I'm serious!" Shooting the mercenary a pointed glare, Bastila continues, "Not adhering to those laws is enough to get someone permanently banned from Manaan."

"I know." Vann blinks to avoid rolling his eyes. "Because you already told me this."

"But it bears repeating! There's a good chance that the…" Bastila pauses, carefully choosing her next words. "The object we're interested in… is underwater. And searching for it may take a significant amount of time." She draws a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. "So, we need to stay on the right side of the law for as long as it takes…"

Slowly turning to stare at the Jedi, Vann narrows his eyes. "Look," he says, teeth clenched, "Are you trying to *imply* something about me?"

Mouth forming a small 'o,' Bastila quickly shakes her head. "No! Of course not. I'm simply being cautious…"

Carth's tone is dry as he cuts into the conversation. "She's saying that you're the type of individual who's prone to choking and electrocuting people when he loses his temper."

Pausing mid-stride, Vann snaps at the pilot, "Will you let it go already?!"

"What?" Carth challenges, brow furrowed, "Are you going to choke me?"

"Why?" Vann arches a brow. "Would you enjoy it?"
Letting out an exasperated sigh, Carth sputters, "Oh, I am not going there!"

"Will both of you stop it? You've been bickering like younglings since we landed, and frankly, I'm tired of it." Bastila's fists are balled at her sides, and she appears to barely resist stamping her foot in protest. "You're adults! Start acting like it!"

"Aw," Vann gives the pilot a less-than-friendly shove to the shoulder, "Carth's just on edge because there're so many Republic soldiers around."

"I am not…"

"Carth, you could have remained on the ship." Bastila's tone is a bit haughty as she adds, "Vann and I are more than capable of handling this meeting on our own."

"Staying on the ship was not an option." Pinching the bridge of his nose, Carth sighs as he begins to tick points off on his fingers. "Canderous is teaching Mission how to throw knives in exchange for lessons on cheating at Pazaak. Juhani has been having nonstop philosophical debates with Jolee." He pauses, voice rising in volume. "And don't get me started on Vann's sociopathic droid!"

"Hey, leave H-Kay out of this!" Vann digs his elbow into the other man's side, applying more pressure than strictly necessary. "And do you really need to take your frustrations out on me?"

"Yes! Er, I mean… no. It's just…" Chagrined, Carth sighs heavily as he turns to watch the mercenary. "Look, I'm sorry. I know I've been irritable of late."

Vann nods, a sly smile playing on his lips. "An understatement."

"And I know that it's not fair to take things out on you, even if I am still a little disturbed about what happened on Kashyyyk." He ignores the other man's exasperated snort, continuing, "It's just… I didn't realize the Republic had such a presence on Manaan." He lowers his voice as the trio passes by a group of soldiers, ducking his head as they quickly stroll by. "It's hard. And I know that's not an excuse…"

Cutting the pilot off, Vann slings an arm around the other man's shoulders. "Apology mostly accepted," he offers, before airily adding, "And look at that, I didn't even have to choke it out of you! Unless you do like that sort of thing…?"

"Vann!" Carth glares as he shrugs off his companion's arm, though there's no malice in his expression.

"Alright, alright." Vann innocently holds up both hands. "We'll revisit this later."

Raising her voice above her companion's squabbling, Bastila declares, "So, this is the Mercenary Enclave of Ahto City!" She smiles, the gesture visibly forced. "It's where our potential employer wants to meet us, if I read their correspondence correctly." Casting a warning glare at the two men, her narrowed eyes silently add 'so you better behave.'

Staring at the clusters of mercenaries around the bar and speaking quietly in booths, Carth frowns. "The more I think about this job, the more I feel like it's some type of Republic trap."

"Honestly? I've had the same fear." Bastila nods in agreement, lowering her voice to the barest of whispers. "Which is why I'm glad that you came with us. You're more familiar with the Republic military than anyone else on the crew. If something seems off, you're far more likely to notice it."

"And if it's a trap, what do we do?" Carth arches a questioning brow.
"Well, they can't capture or attack us on Manaan." Biting her lip thoughtfully, Bastila explains, "The Selkath won't allow violence on their planet. It risks their neutrality among the various organizations who purchase their kolto."

"So, if things look bad, we just run like all hells." Vann's lips quirk into a sardonic grin. "Good plan."

Sighing deeply, Carth looks between his companions. "I think we should sit down and make an actual contingency plan."

"Because of how well our planning usually works?" Vann chuckles darkly.

Shrugging helplessly, Carth mutters, "…True."

"Vann and I may be able to sense deception through the Force," Bastila reassures the pilot, even though her voice wavers slightly. "If you keep your eye out for any signs of Republic interference, we should be fairly safe. At least at this initial meeting."

Gaze traveling around the Mercenary Enclave, Vann quickly scans the various booths for any signs of a potential Republic ambush. Most of the occupants are human, or at least near-human, with their weapons and armor immediately identifying them as either Mandalorian, Echani, or Iridonian. While any one of them could potentially be employed by the Republic, they're just as likely to be working against the harsh governing body. They're all individuals to keep an eye on, but not overtly troubling. There's also a cluster of Rodians at the bar, along with one lone Selkath. The latter is probably their contact, according to the messages they've been exchanging via coded transmissions.

Mentally running through the script that he's supposed to use on the bartender to get their contact's attention, Vann can't help thinking that it feels overly-complicated. But this "Mister Bwaas" isn't the first paranoid informant that he's dealt with in the past three years, and is far from the most demanding. Gaining others' trust has always come fairly naturally to the mercenary, though now that he thinks about it, he might've accidentally mind-tricked one or two individuals over the years.

"Whelp, it's my time to shine." Vann rolls his shoulders, releasing a satisfying crack.

Carth studies the mercenary, eyes narrowing. "Why does that not inspire me with confidence?"

"Contrary to popular belief, I do possess some degree of self-control," Vann snaps, tone vaguely insulted. Staring directly at Bastila, he adds, "And, for the record, I've been to Manaan before. And I'm aware of the laws." Glancing between his companions he narrows his eyes. "I case you forgot, I was doing this professionally long before either of you came along."

With a sigh and a nod, Carth stands back, muttering, "Yes, right. Just… do your thing."

A bright burst of apology flows through the Force bond, though Vann barely takes the time to acknowledge it. Instead, he merely nods to both of his companions before striding casually towards the bar. Positioning himself less than a meter away from the Selkath, who appears to be nursing some type of drink, he leans one hip against the side of the counter and raises a hand to flag down the bartender. It takes a moment thanks to the Rodians' complex order, but the uniformed server eventually hurries over, distinctive tendrils flowing behind her.

"What would you Humans like?" the bartender asks in her native, gurgling Selkatha. She's attempting to be friendly but she seems nervous, making a distinct point of ignoring the other Selkath at the bar.
Vann offers a nonchalant shrug. "I'm not thirsty, just looking for a game of pazaak," he recites as per the instructions sent to his datapad a few days prior. "Do you know where I can find one?"

The bartender's shiny black eyes narrow slightly at this, her tone growing curious. "You should look for Jaacque," she recommends. "You'll recognize his long facial lobes."

"I'll definitely keep my eye out," Vann smiles softly at this, the expression a mere façade but one that he's perfected into something believably trustworthy. "But is he a fair player once all of the cards are on the table?"

Nodding in affirmation the bartender takes a step back, reaching for a bottle of something from the shelf. "He's plenty fair," she reassures the mercenary with the faintest hint of an alien smirk. "Just be patient, and I'm sure you'll find him." A moment later she disappears to the other side of the bar, leaving the Humans alone with the only other visible Selkath.

It's another few minutes of awkward silence, during which Bastila repeatedly sends flashes of worry through the mental link, before the Selkath finally inclines his head and nods. "I might know this Jaacque," he gurgles.

"Really?" Vann arches a brow in a mock show of surprise. "Are you also a pazaak player?"

"No, but I do want to lay all of my cards on the table." Slowly turning on his stool, the Selkath studies the Humans for a moment as speaks the final phrase in the coded exchange.

Sending out tendrils of Force connection, Vann carefully tests the other sentient's words "Well then, cards on the table, should I call you Jaacque? Or would you prefer Mister Bwaas?"

"Mister Bwaas will do for now." There's a thoughtful smile on the Selkath's lips, as much as his piscine features will allow. "And what would you prefer that I call you?"

"Vann Chis," he states, reaffirming that he's the same individual from their coded communications. Gesturing to his companions, he offhandedly remarks, "And these are my partners Helena and Carth."

A note of relief floods the bond, though it's hard to tell if it's because they've successfully met their contact, or simply because the mercenary remembered to use Bastila's false name.

"I've heard of your, Mister Chis." Bwaas nods again, this time more appreciatively. "You're quite skilled, but you prefer to sell your services to the highest bidder. This work doesn't pay well… so it makes me wonder." He leans forward, eyes narrowing. "How can I trust that you're not seeking to betray me for a better payday?"

Vann continues to lean casually against the bar as he uses the Force to analyze his contact. There's genuine apprehension flowing from the Selkath, though no signs of an outright lie. "Funny thing. We were wondering the same about you." He makes a general gesture around the room, which is surprisingly free of Republic soldiers. "Seems to me that, with the heavy Republic presence on Manaan, it would be pretty profitable for you to be on their payroll."

Bwaas jerks at this, seeming genuinely taken aback by the accusation. Irritation ripples around him, but no deception. "I can assure you that I am not working for the Republic."

"And we can make the same exact claim." Vann nods to his companions, who have miraculously managed to get through this exchange without voicing their opinions. "So, why should we trust each other, Mr. Bwaas?"
"The simple answer is that we can continue to be distrustful and part ways here. Or we can agree to work together." Leaning forward, the Selkath's black eyes go wide. "The choice is yours, Humans."

The mental connection briefly opens further, Bastila sending through a burst of approval. *I don't sense any deception,* she adds.

Ever-subtle, Carth merely nods his approval before stating, "I trust him. Don't see anything that makes me think otherwise."

Barely resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Vann smiles at the Selkath. He knows it's a more strained expression this time, though he manages to bite back the worst of his irritation. "Alright, Mister Bwaas. We'll trust you for now. So, what's the job?"

"Please, call me Nilko." The Selkath relaxes slightly in his seat, head tilting curiously to the side. "And I do want to know why someone with your reputation would be interested in working for me. My allies and I can't afford to pay well." He frowns at the mercenary, admitting, "I was honestly surprised to hear from an individual of your reputation."

Swallowing hard, Vann surprises himself with his candid tone as he explains, "I've done some things in my past that I'm not proud of. Figured it was time to try and do some good to balance things out." Though he only intended to offer a feasible excuse, his statement feels awkwardly genuine.

Seeming to take the mercenary's words at their value, Bwaas's rubbery lips curl into an approximation of a mischievous grin. "But not too good, I hope?"

"No," Vann reassures the Selkath, smirk decidedly sharp. "Never too good."

"Excellent." Bwaas folds his long fingers together. "Well then, the job is simple Mister Chis."

"It's just Vann."

"Vann, then." Nodding in acknowledgment, Bwaas continues, "The Republic somehow convinced my government to allow them to build an additional kolto harvesting facility beneath our ocean in the Hrakert Rift. They're acquiring this kolto for a fraction of the normal price."

Carth's eyebrows shoot up in alarm as he interrupts, "So, what, this is just about profit and bottom lines?"

"Please, do not misunderstand me." Holding up one placating hand, Bwaas quickly explains, "While my planet's economy is a factor, my main concern is that this additional kolto is being used to heal and power their troops. It's what enables their military to keep growing."

"And what is your objection to the increase in the Republic military, if you don't mind my asking?" Bastila is studying the Selkath carefully, her Force presence subtly monitoring his emotions.

"I am no fool." Anger laces the Bwaas's gurgling voice. "I know that, once the Republic conquers everyone who stands in their way, they will come back and conquer any planet valuable to them, no matter how helpful that planet has been in the past."

"You're right about that much."

"If their army cannot grow, Manaan may remain safe." Sighing, Bwaas slowly adds, "As will many other planets."
"A noble effort, Nilko." Bastila's voice is audibly impressed. "But I'm afraid it will take more than limiting their supply of kolto to stop the Republic's forces."

"I am aware of that. But I cannot control the rest of the galaxy." Bwaas gestures to the duracrete ground. "My influence is here, on my home planet."

"Alright." Vann sighs, almost afraid of the answer to his next question. "So, you want us to what? Destroy this secret facility?"

"Yes. But you need to do it without harming the kolto. It's my planet's main source of income." Bwaas's tone is forlorn as he carefully admits, "Without it, we're ruined."

Arching a brow, Vann asks, "And how do you propose we do that?"

"The mining machines can be harmlessly destroyed if certain storage tanks are over-pressurized." Reaching into a pocket in his suit, Bwaas retrieves a datapad. Tapping a few codes, he murmurs, "I can provide you with codes to do this, as well as a submarine to reach Hrakert Station. For an individual of your skill, it should take no more than a day to complete this task..."

"Well, that seems remarkably simple," Vann can't keep the sarcasm from his voice as he adds, "So, what's the catch?"

"Catch, Vann?" Head once again canting curiously to the side, Bwaas's emotions ripple in alarm as he stutters, "I... I'm afraid I don't understand..."

"Like you said, I've been doing this for a while. I know when a job is easy money." Teeth clenched, Vann narrows his eyes. "And I know when an employer is hiding something from me." Leaning forward, his words are clipped as he demands, "If you have all the necessary tools and codes, you can just destroy this station yourself. No need to spend the credits to hire 'someone of my skill.' So, I'll ask again," his face is centimeters from the Selkath's as he asks, "What's the catch?"

"There is no catch." Bwaas shrugs awkwardly. "I simply do not want to implicate myself, should a problem arise."

For the first time, true deception shimmers around the Selkath, the emotion a cold breeze through the Force. Vann suppresses a shiver. "Sorry if I don't believe that answer."

Bastila also seems to sense the lie, her shoulders jerking back in response. She stares at Bwaas for several long moments, as though daring him to tell the truth. When nothing is forthcoming, she draws a deep breath before raising one hand and passing it in front of his face while saying, "You want to tell us all of the information pertaining to this mission." The persuasive energy of her words ripples through the Force, quickly sinking into the Selkath's mind.

"Yes, I want to tell you all of the information about this mission." Bwaas nods, eyes glazed for a moment before he gradually admits, "You are not the first mercenaries that I've hired to go down and destroy Hrakert Station. There were two other teams. But..." He draws a soft breath. "They never returned from the bottom of the ocean."

Words still laced with Force energy, Bastila urges, "Please, continue."

"The most recent team manage to comm me." A look of concern crosses Bwaas's piscine face. "But what they said made no sense. It was almost as though they had gone insane..."

"Insane?" Carth's voice raises in pitch. "How so?"
"They were babbling and muttering incoherently." At this, Bwaas sighs heavily. "One of them said something about her mind being ripped apart. Someone else was screaming in terror. I tried to learn more, but their commlink cut out. Despite my best efforts, I couldn't reach them again."

"So, you want us to go down to the bottom of the ocean where something is causing people to go insane?" Vann scoffs at the notion.

Brow furrowing, Bastila quietly asks, "Were your previous teams all Selkath? Is it possible that whatever's down there only affects your people?"

Heaving a sigh, Bwaas's head droops slightly. "The first team was four Selkath. I lost contact with those individuals about a month ago, and have not heard from them since." He nods to the Jedi. "I was worried that the team was captured because they seemed out of place in a Republic facility. None of my people officially work for the Republic, after all. So, the second team I hired was more diverse. A Rodian, a Twi'lek, and a Human like yourselves."

"And they were the ones who managed to comm you?" Carth frowns, his tone critical. "The ones babbling and screaming?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Bwaas sighs again, shiny black eyes staring at the Humans. "After I spoke with them, or at least tried to, I realized that the first team may not have been captured. That they may also have succumbed to whatever danger is in that harvesting facility."

"And what might that danger be?" Bastila's voice ripples through the Force as she verbally pushes for more information.

Gaze temporarily unfocused, Bwaas shrugs his shoulders as he stutters, "I… I do not know. I heard that the Republic was having difficulty with the harvesting facility, which is why I targeted it. But I assumed the issues were mechanical in nature." He swallows hard. "I cannot say what's down there. I… I cannot…"

Bastila forces a soft smile. "That's quite alright, Mr. Bwaas," she assures the Selkath. "I believe we have the information we need."

"We sure as hells do." Pushing away from the bar in a single, smooth motion, Vann shakes his head. "Sorry, but I'm suddenly not interested in this job. But good luck with your rebellion against the Republic…"

Before the mercenary can walk away, Bastila grabs his bicep. Even though the bulk of his coat he can feel her slender fingers digging into his flesh with surprising strength. "Vann," she whispers, "We need to explore the ocean floor without attracting undue attention." Casting a worried glance at the Selkath, she frowns. "As much as I dislike the details of this situation, we require access to a submarine owned by someone who won't ask a lot of questions."

Leaning towards his companions, Carth hisses, "Sorry Helena, but I also think this sounds like a bad idea. There's got to be another way…"

Without waiting for the pilot to finish speaking, Bastila turns to face the Selkath, lips curling into a charming smile. "Mister Bwaas. Nilko." She takes a step towards him, bowing her head. "Thank you for disclosing the full details of this job to us. And I apologize for my companions' apparent reluctance." Her thin smile blooms into a full grin. "I, however, would be more than happy to accept your offer."

"What?!" Vann scowls at the Jedi. "You can't just…"
"Really?" Hissing through her teeth, Bastila casts the mercenary a challenging glare. "Because I just did."

Sighing heavily, Carth rubs his palm over his face. "And here we go..."

"Oh, no we don't." Prying the Jedi's fingers from his arm, Vann meets her gaze with narrowed eyes. "Helena, I don't think you're listening. There is something at the bottom of the ocean that's causing insanity. I don't even have words for how dangerous..."

"As though we haven't faced danger before?" Squaring her shoulders, Bastila juts her chin out defiantly. "Besides, I'm quite sure that we have the mental fortitude to handle whatever is down there."

"Mister Chis," Bwaas's gurgling tone hesitantly interrupts the argument. "If you are willing to lend your experience and join your associate, I'm willing to pay you fifty percent more upon the destruction of the harvesting facility."

Vann's brows rise as he mentally calculates the potential offer. It's still a relatively paltry sum when compared to some past jobs, but it's more than enough to fuel and supply the Ebon Hawk for Korriban. As it is they're running low on credits, and it's not like they've been getting paid for their past work. Pursing his lips thoughtfully he quickly counters, "Double it, and you have yourself a deal." Extending his hand to shake on the agreement, he clarifies, "Half up front, and half upon completion."

"Vann, you cannot be serious!" Carth looks between both Force users, jaw hanging open as he pleads, "This is not worth the credits!"

"Yeah, it is." Chuckling darkly, Vann's not sure who he's trying to convince when he says, "And besides, Helena is right. We can handle whatever's down there."

"You're both insane." Gesturing between his companions, Carth shakes his head in disbelief. "Actually, no. I take that back. You're both going to be insane. And at the bottom of the ocean. Which should be really fun." Throwing up his hands in defeat, he can do nothing but stare.

"Double the original deal? Half now and half upon completion?" Bwaas accepts the mercenary's hand, palm oddly cool against the Human's warmer skin. "That is acceptable. You have yourself a deal."

Giving the Selkath's hand a firm shake, Vann's lips curl into an apprehensive smirk. "Sounds good, Nilko." Raising his fingers to his brow, he offers a mock salute as he adds, "And I'll see you in a day to collect the rest of our money."

"Good luck, Vann." Bwaas nods, even as trepidation passes through his shining eyes. His tone is almost inaudible when he murmurs, "I hope, for your sake, that you are as good as your reputation suggests."

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"Just when I think your ideas can't get any worse..." Canderous glares from his seat in the Ebon Hawk's hold, both arms crossed over his broad chest. "And before you ask, there's no way in hells that I'm going down there with you idiots."

"Well, it's not as though I was going to ask you!" Hands on her hips, Bastila scoffs at the Mandalorian.
Fiddling with several small bits of wire, Mission looks up from the security spike that she's assembling. "Am… I going down there?" Despite her smile, her voice wavers with alarm.

"Nobody should be going down there!" Leaning against one of the instrument panels, Carth has been glaring between Vann and Bastila since they arrived back at the ship and explained Bwaas's job to the rest of the crew. "It's a death trap."

"That's the funny thing. See, what people should do and what people actually do are almost always two separate things." Jolee nods sagely at his own words, even as he grins devilishly at the pilot. "Keeps life interesting."

"Glad you feel that way, Jolee." Vann offers the other man a predatory smile all his own. "Because guess who's on the shortlist for this job?"

Scowling deeply, the former Jedi shakes his head. "I'm an old man!" he complains. "I should be the last one backing you kids up inside a metal tube at the bottom of the ocean."

"Oh, don't give me that 'I'm old' crap!" Vann jerks an accusing finger towards his companion. "I saw you flip over three Czerka guards right before stabbing a fourth during the battle on Kashyyyk."

Chuckling, Jolee shrugs one shoulder. "I said I'm old. Never said anything about being out of shape." Stamping one foot against the ship's floor, he adds, "And because I'm old, I've earned the right to ignore an inane order from some know-it-all kid!"

Boots propped up on the table, Vann swings one leg down as he warns, "I'm not a kid, old man…"

"Oh, I wasn't talking about you." Waving a dismissive hand, Jolee turns to look at Bastila. "I was talking about her. I know this was somehow her idea!"

"Well, you do have experience in sabotaging machinery." The Jedi states defensively. "Extensive experience, might I add!"

"Damaging a few Czerka sonic emitters in the middle of a forest is a little different than sabotaging an entire station at the bottom of the ocean." Jolee arches a brow as he speaks. "The main difference being that those sonic emitters weren't at the bottom of the ocean."

Mission grins as she carefully wires the spike in her hands. "Sounds to me like you're just scared to go underwater, old man."

"Damn right I don't want to go down there!" Jolee snorts at the very implication. "And from what I can see, nobody else does either."

Until now, Juhani has been lurking towards the back of the hold. At hearing the older Force user's words, she suddenly holds her head up and takes a step forward. "I am willing to assist on this mission," she announces, tone steady and expression somber. "It will be… enjoyable… to disrupt the flow of kolto to Malak and his soldiers."

Still sprawled casually in his seat, Vann nods to the Cathar. "Good to know, since you were also volunteered."

"Wait a second…" Carth's eyes narrow as he glances between Jolee and Juhani. "Is there a reason that you want Jed, er, Force users, down there with you?"

Nodding in affirmation, Bastila draws a slow breath. "Regardless of current allegiances or views,
both Jolee and Juhani were at one point trained by the Jedi Order." She pointedly ignores the glare that the Cathar shoots her. "Anyone trained by the Order is taught from an early age to resist mental attacks and tampering."

"So, you think that Jedi training is somehow going to what? Make you immune to whatever's down there making people go insane?" Casting an incredulous look at the Jedi, Carth scoffs.

"I honestly can't say for certain, as we have no real idea what's down there." Thoughtfully tapping her index finger against her chin, Bastila frowns when she notices the pilot's skeptical flare. "Oh, don't look at me like that," she snaps. "This part was Vann's idea, after all!"

Groaning, Vann rubs a palm over his brow. "Thanks for throwing me under the speeder, Bastila."

Clearly unimpressed with the entire situation Jolee rocks back in his seat. "Do the Force users in question, oh, I don't know, get a say in whether or not they want to be dragged to the bottom of the ocean?"

"Is that fear I sense?" Juhani watches the older Human, an amused grin playing on her lips. "I thought your code forbid fear. That there is no emotion, only peace."

"Hey now, I haven't been a Jedi in a long time!" Tone defensive, Jolee's gaze is distant as he adds, "I parted ways with the Order a lifetime ago, and for a damned good reason."

Bastila turns to study the older Force user, tone pleading as she says, "Jolee, as much as you disagree with some of the Order's philosophies, I truly believe that you would be an asset…"

"Stop! Stop with that!" Turning to glare at the Jedi, Jolee waves his hands as though to brush aside her words. "Nothing you say will make me want to rejoin the Order. Just like nothing you say will make me want to visit the bottom of Manaan's ocean!"

Arching a brow, Vann asks, "So then, you're not coming with us?"

"Never said that!" Crossing his arms over his chest, Jolee mutters, "See, that's the problem with you kids. You don't listen."

Blinking, Vann ignores the 'kid' comment. "But you just…"

"I'm coming with you!" Sighing dramatically, Jolee gestures to the other Force users as he asserts, "Can't let myself be shown-up by Little Miss Know-It-All and the cat."

Gasping, Bastila blurs out, "And just what do you mean…?"

Ignoring the Jedi's indignation, Jolee looks at the mercenary as he explains, "I just would have appreciated being asked before I was volunteered for this crazy little adventure." He jerks his chin. "That's just common courtesy, you know."

"Alright fine. Sorry." Vann draws a slow breath, finally admitting, "But, if it makes you feel better, I'm glad you're coming."

"Of course you are!" Chuckling dryly, Jolee taps his temple with one finger. "You're going to need someone with some common sense while you're down there."

Bowing slightly at the waist, Juhani's gaze remains trained on the mercenary as she announces, "And I, of course, am happy to accompany you on your quest."
"Great. Fantastic. Glad that's settled." With a sigh, Carth straightens his jacket before turning to head for the ship's supply room. "Alright, let's get some gear together so we can get this whole thing over with as quickly as possible."

Quickly catching up to the pilot just before the doorway, Vann murmurs, "Uh, Carth?"

"What?"

Swallowing, Vann rocks back on his heels as he asks, "Would you mind… staying with the ship?"

Whirling around, the pilot's jaw drops slightly as he repeats, "What?"

"Hah!" Still fiddling with her tunnelers, Mission teases, "Now you know what it feels like."

"Look, I already know from experience that Mission isn't going to be sticking around to watch the ship just because I ask her to." Casting an accusatory glare at the teen, Vann arches a knowing brow as he adds, "And I'm willing to bet that she's going to drag Zaalbar with her."

"Hey, we've never been to a planet with this much water before! I wanna see the sights..." Trailing off, Mission's voice goes deadpan when she notes the mercenary's reproachful stare. "And, you know, do whatever duties I'm assigned and stuff..."

"See?" Jerking a thumb towards the teen, Vann eyes the pilot before calling out, "And, by the way, Mission, those duties involve helping Canderous to get supplies and make sure the ship is loaded for Korriban before we get back. I don't want to stick around here any longer than we have to."

Frowning, the Twi'lek tucks the completed tunneler into her pocket. "Aw, really?"

Vann mimics the teen's whine as he retorts, "Yeah, really. You and Zaalbar weren't caught on camera, so none of the Republic soldiers creeping around will recognize you."

Collecting her tools, Mission grumbles, "I still can't believe you nerf-brains got caught on camera..."

"Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up, kid." Canderous claps a large hand over the teen's slender shoulder. "But just remember, you're here with me, and you're not sneaking away this time."

Grinning at the challenge, Mission looks up at the Mandalorian as he leads her into the supply room. "Oh yeah, says who?"

"Says the fact that I'm pretty damn sure not even you can sneak unnoticed onto one of the tiny submersible ships they use around here." Canderous's tone is stern, but an amused little smirk plays at the corners of his lips as the pair exits the room.

Even as she disappears from sight, Mission can be heard complaining, "Fine, fine. Whatever..."

Carth merely sighs at the pair's antics, expression grim as he asks, "So, not meaning to bring up the admittedly stupid krif-up that was us getting caught on that security feed, but, well, how do you expect me to be useful here?" He glances around before leaning in closer. "I hate to say it, but on this planet, I'm probably more of a liability."

Glancing towards the console where the Jedi is briefing the other Force users on the current mission plans, Vann lowers his voice as he explains, "You're the only one, besides Bastila, who knows the Republic military. You know how their patrols work, how they communicate... You can keep everyone else out of trouble." A loud bang from the supply room causes him to wince.
"Theoretically speaking."

Groaning, even as Mission calls out an apology, Carth hisses, "That's a load of bantha shit, and you know it."

"You want to feel useful?" Vann nods towards the cockpit. "We need someone to stay on the ship and monitor the comms while we're down there. We don't know what we'll be facing and…"

Cutting the mercenary off, Carth's voice rises in volume as he asserts, "Which is why I'd be more useful down there with you! You don't need me to stay up here and watch a button blink." He draws a breath. "Look, just because I don't have Force powers doesn't mean that I'm not equipped to go down there and deal with whatever it is that you'll be facing."

"But you have no training in…"

"Oh, and you do? You spent what, three weeks on Dantooine with the Jedi? Was three weeks really enough time to…" Trailing off, Carth's gaze momentarily darts to the side as he presses his lips into a thin line. Quickly shaking his head, he hurriedly says, "Never mind, that's not the point."

Vann's eyes narrow at the pilot's words, confusion lacing his voice as he demands, "And what's that supposed to mean?"

Scrubbing his palm across his face, Carth closes his eyes for a moment before slowly explaining, "I know that you… have powers that I don't understand. And maybe for you, three weeks is enough to learn whatever lessons the Jedi wanted to teach you." He clenches his teeth. "But like I said, that's not the point. The point is that a soldier is more useful down on the battlefield than waiting around…"

Briefly glancing at Bastila, Vann mentally shuts off his end of the Force bond. "You're right," he quietly admits. "Wait, what?" Carth blinks in surprise, looking around to make sure the words aren't directed towards someone else. "Say that again, I want to record it."

Rolling his eyes, Vann's voice is barely a whisper as he clarifies, "Three weeks wasn't enough training."

Carth's expression falls a little. "Oh, I thought you meant…"

"Shut up and let me talk, okay?" Huffing out an exasperated sigh, Vann hesitantly confesses, "I don't know what I'm doing half the time. I just… I go with what my instincts tell me. And you said it yourself. Sometimes my instincts, they're… they're dark."

Expression somber, Carth nods. "Well, at least you admit it."

Shrugging one shoulder, Vann's focus shifts to a random point on the far wall. He feels a warm prickle of embarrassment along the back of his neck as he adds, "And, for some reason, those instincts come out more around you."

Hands balling into fists by his side, Carth coughs out a disbelieving laugh. "…Okay, now it's my turn to ask what the hells that's supposed to mean!"

"I don't know, okay!" Vann shoves his hands deep into his pockets. "It's just, for whatever reason, you always seem to be around when my instincts come out."
Tone growing defensive, Carth mutters, "You cannot be blaming me…"

"I'm not blaming you!" Shifting his gaze to stare directly at the pilot, Vann meets the other man’s eye. "I'm just telling you what keeps happening."

"Yeah…" Carth drawls, "That's not how I remember things."

"What about when we crash-landed on Taris?" Van prompts.

"That wasn't dark." Voice softening, Carth admits, "That was you saving both of our lives."

"The battle with Lang in the military base?"

"Well, he did try to kill you." A faint chuckle dies in Carth's throat as he suddenly remembers, "...Right before you dismembered him."

Fingers tingling at the memory, Vann's voice is growing louder. "The lightning on Tatooine?"

"We were all about to fight for our lives." Carth's expression twists into a grimace. "And by the way, we didn't ask you to save us!"

Swallowing his guilt, Vann grits out, "Kashyyyk?"

"Was you doing whatever the hells you wanted!" Jabbing a finger at the other man, Carth clenches his teeth. "All of it was! None of this is my fault, so you can't blame me for your murderous tendencies!"

"I already said that I'm not blaming you!" Realizing that he's almost shouting, Vann glances towards Bastila. He catches a flicker of worry cross her face, and he quickly lowers his voice. "I just… when you're in trouble, I seem to rely on my instincts. And then people end up dying. Usually horribly."

Carth glares. "I personally think that has more to do with your occasional lack of impulse control."

Hands still stuffed into his pockets, Vann can feel his fingernails digging into his palms. "And who knows how much worse that could get if I go insane at the bottom of the ocean?" He lets the question hang in the air, along with the implications.

The realization seems to hit Carth all at once, and his expression goes slack with shock as he breathes out, "…Kriffing hells."

"Yeah. Exactly." Vann focuses on keeping his voice perfectly steady. "We don't know what's down there. And we don't know what effect, if any, it could have on us. The last thing I want is to lose control because you're in danger. Or to lose control and hurt you…"

Gaze shifting to watch the still-conversing Force users, Carth counters, "What if you lose control and go after Bastila? Or Juhani?"

"I've sparred with both of them. They can hold me back, especially if they work together." Vann nods grimly. "Bastila, Juhani, Jolee… they know how to defend against Force powers and a lightsaber."

"You don't want them down there to fight whatever's under the ocean, do you?" Carth's tone is almost curious as he surmises, "You want them down there to fight you."

"Partially," Vann quickly clarifies. "But I still think they're the best equipped to handle whatever it
is we're up against."

Shaking his head, Carth stares up at the hold's ceiling for a moment, breaths uneven. "I can't believe I'm even saying this, but why don't you just steal the submarine? Avoid this entire mess and go looking for that map?"

"Because we need the credits." Vann snorts as he points out, "In case you didn't notice, we haven't exactly been getting paid for our work."

"So, what?" Carth throws up his hands. "You destroy the harvesting facility, assuming you don't all go insane in the process, and then 'borrow' Bwaas's ship for weeks? Don't you think he'll get suspicious?"

"We might not need weeks. From what we know, the Selkath have sensors across the seabed to monitor the kolto." Vann hums thoughtfully. "While we're in Hrakert Station we can access the computers, and use the sensor array to check for anything unusual on the ocean floor."

Still looking doubtful, Carth asks, "And how do you even know what you're looking for?"

With a smirk, Vann quips, "Anything non-organic that's not Selkath technology is probably the map. It's not like there's a bunch of trash littering the seabed."


"Well, if we do the job and do it well, we might be able to barter for use of the ship for added time." Forcing a grin, Vann offers an airy shrug. "Or we can just lie and claim that we got stuck in the facility for a few days while we borrow the submarine."

"Okay, so you actually have a plan." The defensiveness has left Carth's voice, though there's a new note of concern to his words. "But that doesn't make this sound any safer. You're literally just hoping that you don't lose your mind and kill everyone. You know that's just asking for trouble, right?"

"Yeah, I do." Vann sighs at the admission. "Which is why you'll do better up here, watching the comms."

Arching a brow, Carth challenges, "You think I wouldn't be able to knock you out if you tried to kill me down there?"

"I think you'll be the most rational one if we comm you with a problem." Vann glances towards the supply room, noting the audible argument over supplies. "I won't lie. Canderous will just steal a submarine and come charging down. Mission will panic. And Zaalbar will probably ask someone else what to do." He turns to look directly at the pilot, moving his hands to rest on the other man's shoulders. Squeezing affectionately, he pleads, "I need you to get our asses out of there if something goes wrong."

"Alright! Fine!" Carth meets the mercenary's gaze. "I'll stay up here and wait for everything to go to hell, as usual."

Relief flowing through his body, Vann must accidentally project it into the Force because there's an insistent push at the Force bond. He ignores it. "Thank you, Carth," he whispers, a genuine smile playing on his lips. "I appreciate this. I do. I don't think you realize…"

"I, uh. I get it." The corner of Carth's mouth quirks into a thin smirk. He glances over his shoulder for a moment before sighing heavily. "Look, just try to stay safe? Maybe don't do anything brash
and impulsive for once?"

Vann scoffs in mock affront. "I can't make any promises like that!"

"Of course not." Carth reaches up and gives one of the hands on his shoulder a sarcastic pat. "Of course not."

* * *

"Fish should not be that big." Still peering suspiciously out the submarine's back viewport, Vann shakes his head.

"Almost all of Manaan is covered in water," Bastila remarks. "It shouldn't be surprising that the aquatic fauna is a bit larger than on other planets."

Shifting uncomfortably in the submarine's small seat, Vann frowns. "That wasn't 'a bit larger.'" he insists.

"Well, it's not as though you're being asked to swim with them." Bastila smiles, a note of amusement flowing through the Force bond.

Sighing from his place monitoring the submarine's autopilot, Jolee taps one of the glowing screens. "Is everyone done sightseeing?" Not waiting for a response, he points to something on the most recent readout. "Because it looks like Hrakert Station is right up ahead."

Studying a few of the instrument panels around the copilot's seat, Bastila nods in confirmation. "Yes. We just passed into Hrakert Rift, which is the Republic is using to hide this particular harvesting facility."

"Coming up on it now," Jolee announces as the submarine cruises smoothly into the yawning darkness of the rift. The sensation is momentarily disorienting, like the artificial gravity of a ship kicking in just a moment too late. As the autopilot swings the craft in a graceful arc around the jagged rock formations that jut out of the seafloor, a durasteel structure quickly comes into view. Low and long, the harvesting facility is actually composed of several buildings connected using a series of large tubes. Some of these tubes contain portholes and are obviously used by sentients to travel between buildings. Others connect the various roofs, probably to transport kolto or whatever chemicals the harvesting process requires.

"Does it even look like the facility is functional?" Rising from his seat, Vann moves to stand beside Bastila so that he can also take advantage of the large front window.

Leaning closer to the transparisteel, Jolee grunts. "I can see some movement from some of those machines off to the left. A few bubbles coming from them, too."

Bastila continues to look at the instrument readouts. "The whole facility is probably automated, requiring a skeleton crew at most."

"A smart decision, if the Republic is attempting to be subtle," Juhani nods her approval. "And fewer guards for us to fight our way through."

"There might not be any guards left," Vann clarifies. "Or, at least nobody who's sane."

Pressing a few buttons, Jolee lets the autopilot guide the ship into the docking bay of the station. "Well, we're about to find out," he announces. "According to the readout, we'll be docked in five minutes."
"Well, let's be ready." Drawing his blaster from its place at his hip, Vann checks the weapon one last time. It's in perfect working condition, as are both the lightsabers tucked into his jacket and the grenades that hang on his belt. Looking up, a chill runs across the back of his neck before racing down his spine. Shuddering, he thinks that he sees a huge shape pass through the rift just beyond the submarine's starboard side. But when he moves to look closer, the ominous shadows part beneath the bright headlights. He shakes his head, trying to dismiss the sensation. "Did, uh, did anyone else see that?"

Concern washes over Bastila's features. "See what?"

Rubbing the back of his neck, Vann shakes his head. "I'm not sure..." he murmurs. "I thought that I saw something out there, but it might have just been my imagination."

"I did not see anything," Juhani admits. "But do not dismiss any warnings given to you by the Force. Your connection is not to be ignored."

Snorting, Vann clutches his blaster as the ship gently pulls into the docking bay, engine humming beneath his feet. "If I jumped at every creepy sensation this place is giving me, we wouldn't get anything done." He nods towards the submarine's single door. "Now come help me say hello to any potential welcoming committees."

Drawing her lightsaber from her belt, Juhani grins. "Of course."

Positioning themselves on either side of the door, Vann and the Cathar carefully aim at the entrance of the submarine as it completes the docking process. The engine lurches once as the ship glides into place, surfacing with a sudden burst of speed that sends sprays of seawater up, around the windows. Even through the splattered transparisteel, the darkness of the bay is jarring, only interrupted by the occasional flicker of overhead lights. The entire craft rocks as it regains equilibrium, sailing into the port and attaching to the landing with a click that shakes the floor.

There's a sharp hiss as the airtight seal releases and the door slowly lifts, opening into the gloom of the bay. The flashing overhead lights do nothing to improve the eerie atmosphere, the air cold and damp this far beneath the ocean. Both crouched and ready, Vann and Juhani peer into the darkness, ready to fight their way through the room and into the station proper. But no attack comes. The cavernous docking bay is strangely quiet, aside from the distant crackle of electricity and the steady lap of water against the landings.

Sending his Force awareness out into the unknown, Vann searches for signs of another living creature in the bay. The further out his tendrils creep, the more the hairs rise on the back of his neck. He can't suppress the shiver that runs down his spine, even though he can't quite pinpoint the source of his discomfort. It's a disturbance that's foreign to him, and one that seems to encompass the entire station. He glances at Juhani, searching her face for any signs of similar distress. But her expression remains impassive, shoulders squared as she grasps the hilt of her lightsaber. Within Vann's mind the connection with Bastila flares with a hint of worry, but he quickly sends a wave of reassurance before tamping down on the connection.

"I do not sense anyone in this room," Juhani hisses just loudly enough for everyone within the submarine to hear. "Though, of course, that does not guarantee our safety."

"Nope," Vann agrees. "But I think it means that we can get out and explore a little." Blaster still clutched at the ready, he steps out of the submarine door and onto the durasteel landing. It takes a moment for his equilibrium to adjust, and even longer for his eyesight to compensate for the encompassing gloom.
Slowly creeping forward, Vann moves towards the electrical crackle that's coming from the other side of the cavernous docking bay. Even though he tries to remain stealthy, his footfalls echo in the relative silence. Glancing over his shoulder, he notes that Juhani is covering his back, while Bastila and Jolee are heading to examine the other side of the room. Turning his focus to what's up ahead the crackling grows closer, and Vann can see faint sparks illuminating the darkness, flashing out of sync with the malfunctioning lights. His pace quickens, weapon ready to fire at a moment's notice.

However, his blaster wavers when he spots the source of the sparks, subconsciously wincing at what he sees. "Well, I think we found one of Bwaas's other submarines," he mutters.

"It would appear so." Juhani strides up to the mercenary's side, still clutching her 'saber hilt as she studies the submersible craft that crashed into the landing. The force of the impact has crushed the durasteel walkway and shattered the craft's transparisteel windows. The entire nose of the submarine has been smashed inward, the metal bent and warped. The back end is similarly ruined and has partially sunk from the water leaking into the cabin through the various holes that have been ripped into the hull.

Moving as far onto the damaged walkway as he dares, Vann examines the wreck. "Do you think it's worth trying to get inside?"

"Perhaps..." Juhani's voice is thoughtful, though her lips pull into a worried frown. "Though I am not sure if it can still support our weight without fully sinking."

"There could be information in their computer system." As Vann takes another step forward the walkway groans in protest, shuddering slightly beneath his feet.

Juhani instinctively shifts her weight back, attempting to balance the crushed metal floor. "Or it could be nothing more than a watery grave."

Jaw clenching, Vann is still considering the merits of trying to enter the destroyed submarine when the Force bond surges with alarm. A moment later Bastila's voice rings out from across the large room.

"Vann, come quickly!" The Jedi is waving frantically. "We need your assistance."

Abandoning his plans for the submersible Vann sprints across the walkway, weaving between the unused docks as he heads towards what appears to be the main entrance to the station. As he approaches, he can see Bastila and Jolee pressed against a set of sealed doors, conversing quietly with each other. "What's the matter?" he asks as he skids to a stop beside the two Force users.

Eyes squinting at the doors, Bastila's voice is worried as she explains, "I believe there's someone alive on the other side." Gesturing to a blinking control panel, she adds, "But we can't figure out how to unseal the door so that we can help them. I was hoping that you would be able to rewire it..."

Chuckling, Vann quickly holsters his blaster so that he can retrieve the multitool stored in his jacket. As he unscrews the security panel with practiced ease he comments, "You know, it's almost nice to be useful without using the Force."

"Also nice to know that breaking and entering are in your repertoire," Jolee notes.

Panel removed, Vann casts it aside as he sets to the delicate work of rewiring the circuits. "Save it, old man," he retorts. "If I wasn't here, you'd be stuck in this bay."

"What, you think that I couldn't find my way in on my own?" Shaking his head, Jolee picks at the
sleeve of his borrowed shirt. Most of his clothing is still piecemeal, cobbled together from spare items on the Ebon Hawk and whatever the group could salvage from the Czerka headquarters on Kashyyyk. But it's still better than the leaves he was previously clothed in.

"I think," Vann breathes, carefully clipping one of the wires, "That it would take you far longer than it's taking me." Twisting two of the wires together, he holds his breath and watches the doors. They're silent for a moment, and then suddenly expel a pneumatic hiss of air as the locks disengage and the seal releases. "See?" He arches an expectant brow.

Jolee merely snorts. "I'm not going to congratulate you for opening a door."

"Well then," Bastila draws a deep breath, palm hovering over the door's entry mechanism. "Shall we go inside?"

Blaster raised and aimed at the door, Vann nods. "Ladies first."

Pressing her hand to the release button, Bastila angles her body so that she's not in a direct line of fire should anyone be on the other side. However, she's not prepared for the rush of stale, sour air that greets her when the door swings open. Coughing, she lowers her head to cover her mouth against the stench. It's a lucky move because it maneuvers her out of the way of the blaster bolts that are fired directly at the assembled group.

There's a hum as Juhani powers up her lightsaber, the crimson blade illuminating the area with a sinister glow. She easily deflects the bolts, flipping forward towards the assailant as Vann draws his blaster and moves to provide cover to both her and Bastila. At least one of his shots finds its target, as there's a shout of pain just as the Cathar lands, the tip of her 'saber pointed at the throat of a visibly frightened Twi'lek.

"See!" Bastila announces triumphantly, peeking around the mercenary's shoulder. "I told you there was someone alive behind the door!"

"Who are you?" Juhani demands, blade steady in her hands. "Why did you fire on us?"

"Well, I'm just going to take a guess, but I'm betting it's because we broke into this station." Jolee stares at the Cathar, grimacing in bemusement.

The Twi'lek's eyes are wide as he stares at the four Force users. He quickly raises both of his hands, blaster falling from his grasp and clattering to the duracrete ground. "You...you're not Republic!"

"Are you expecting the Republic anytime soon?" Vann stares evenly at the Twi'lek, trying to sense any trace of deception.

Head shaking rapidly, the Twi'lek quickly replies, "No! Er, yes? I don't know! I don't know anymore!" One of his hands reaches to grasp his forehead, both eyes squeezing shut. "All I know is that they're dead. All of them! Dead..." His nails begin to dig into the skin just above his right brow, leaving crescent-shaped marks.

"Hey now, calm down. No need to get yourself wound up." Jolee glares at Juhani, waving one hand to shoo her away. "Get that thing out of his face!" he snaps. "Can't you tell he's no real threat to us?"

Frowning, the Cathar takes a step back and lowers her lightsaber, though she doesn't power down the blade. "It is wise to never underestimate an opponent," she counters.

"Pfft, children." Jolee turns to focus on the Twi'lek, tone surprisingly gentle as he speaks. "We're
not Republic. Not connected to anyone, really. We're just here to check on some individuals who went missing. Trying to make sure they're alright." He quirks a brow. "Perhaps you're one of them?"

"Oh, no. No, no…" The Twi'lek trails off, head still shaking. "We're not alright. None of us. None of them either!" He laughs at this, tone uneven and warbling. "Tried to get away… tried to be safe. But we couldn't. Dead… like I said, they're all dead now…"

Frowning, Bastila moves to stand beside the Twi'lek, though she leaves a comfortable amount of space so as not to crowd him. "Oh dear," she murmurs comfortingly. "That sounds horrible. Perhaps you can tell me what happened…?"

"We tried, we did!" Looking around frantically, the Twi'lek nods as he speaks, nails still digging into the skin of his forehead. "Tried to get away using the ship. But we couldn't… We crashed."

Gesturing towards the far end of the bay, Vann confirms, "There's a crashed submarine in one of the other docks. It's almost identical to the one Bwaas lent us."

"Yes, yes! We crashed and they died. All dead… dead. All of them!" Eyes growing impossibly wide the Twi'lek drags his hand downward, carving a bloody set of scratches into his skin. Even as everyone stares at the self-inflicted wounds in mild horror, he seems not to notice. "We crashed and the water came in and they fell… All fell, all into the sea. The sharks, they took it from there."

"Er, sharks?" The thought of Manaan's sharks triggers a faint memory in the back of Vann's mind, but it's too vague to be of any real use.

Bastila merely hums knowingly. "Yes, firaxan sharks are the main predators on this planet. At least, that's what my research has told me."

"Yes, yes! The firaxan sharks!" The Twi'lek smiles at this, the expression all teeth and no actual mirth. "They eat the weak."

"Ah." Not knowing what else to say, Vann casts a pleading glance towards the Jedi.

Clearing her throat, Bastila forces a thin smile. "I… I'm deeply sorry for your loss. And for whatever else you've suffered while down in this station. Though still comforting, her tone grows a bit more serious. "I apologize, but I must ask you a few more questions about what happened inside."

"Inside? Inside!" Jerking a shaking finger towards another set of sealed door, the Twi'lek shakes his head frantically. "No… We didn't know! None of us knew! How could we know? How could we…?"

"Nobody is blaming you for whatever happened in there." Jolee's words are firm, cutting through the quiet babbling. "But we need to know what went on so that we can help you. And so that we know what to expect if we open those doors."

Jaw dropping in shock, the Twi'lek chuckles. "Those doors? Those doors?" His subtle laughter grows in volume, and his eyes dart wildly between the sealed entrance to the station and the assembled group. "Don't open those door!"

Brows furrowing, there's a faint note of frustration in Bastila's otherwise patient voice. "Why? What will we find if we do?"

"There's nothing in there for anyone. Nothing… not anymore!" Leaning closer to the Jedi, the
Twi'lek's face hovers mere centimeters away. A burst of alarm rings through the Force bond, but it vanishes almost as quickly as it appears. "Nothing for any sane person lies through those doors. It's only madness." One hand moves to clutch at his forehead, fingers digging into the scratches that he's already carved into his flesh. "Madness… only madness and death."

"Death?" Tone growing alarmed, Bastila attempts to gently move the man's hand away from his forehead to prevent him from doing any further damage to himself. However, he quickly jerks his hand from her grasp. "Who's dead?" the Jedi asks. "The Selkath who were sent before you? The Republic employees?"

"Dead? All of them. All. Of. Them." Words pouring out at a frantic pace, the Twi'lek backs away from the humans. "We should have known. Should have left. Should have run… They were all dead. Before us. Before we entered those doors." He nods at this, head bobbing jerkily and lekku swinging behind him. "They were dead before us, and now we're all dead. Nothing but death…"

Frowning deeply, Jolee furrows his brows. "Stop that, now! You're not dead, after all." Though his tone is stern, it's still somehow gentle. "We can get you out of here. I'll bet that you'll feel a lot better once you're not trapped in some dank hole hundreds of meters below the sea."

Blinking slowly, the Twi'lek stops his incoherent muttering as he turns to stare at the station's sealed doors. "There's only death," he states, voice growing monotone. His gaze shifts to study the assembled group, eyes passing over each face with a wild, frantic expression.

Vann feels the sensation before the Twi'lek even moves, like an icy gust blown directly down his spine. An involuntary shudder passes through his body, making him slow to act as the unnamed stranger suddenly collapses to the floor. The movement causes the Human to start, and he aims his pistol at the figure now pressed against the duracrete ground, fingers grasping the blaster that was dropped only moments before. "Hey!" Vann has time to shout, even as Bastila dives after the Twi'lek, and Jolee extends his hand to Force push the weapon away. But they're all too late.

With a wide, haunting smile the stranger murmurs, "Death is the only answer." In one smooth motion, he lifts the blaster to his temple and pulls the trigger, a thin whine of laughter escaping his throat even as the bolt shoots through his skull. Blood paints the floor in a thick spray, the body slumping into the gore still wearing an unsettling grin.

"Oh Force!" Crouched on the ground beside the Twi'lek, a few drops of blood now paint Bastila's pale cheek. Both of her hands are covering her mouth in horror, her grey eyes wide at the scene that's just played out. "No!"

"Geeze!" Yanking the blaster out of the deceased Twi'lek's hand, Jolee flips the safety on before quickly tossing the weapon across the floor and away from the group. "Why did you have to go and do that?" he asks, voice catching in his throat. "What in the hells would make you do that?"

"What. The kriffing. Hells." Pistol still held at the ready, Vann can feel his hand tremble slightly as he looks down at the Twi'lek's remains.

Blinking in disbelief, Juhani's eyes flick between the body and the sealed doors, head shaking. "There is darkness beyond those doors," she whispers. "A different type of darkness. Something far more sinister than anything I have ever encountered."

Turning to stare at the Cathar, Vann slowly lowers his weapon. "No shit," he mumbles. "Whatever's beyond those doors is more than just 'sinister.' It's…"

"Deadly," Bastila finishes. "And, perhaps more frightening, it could be practically anything. A
chemical agent, an illness, a biological weapon…”

"And whatever it is, we've been exposed." Vann looks between his companions, expression somber. "I mean, I think we can all agree that he was affected. And we were all close enough to touch him. Actually, Bastila did touch him…”

"Geeze!" Jolee repeats, shaking his head. Rubbing one hand across his face, he draws a shaky breath. "Like she said, it could be anything. At least a chemical we can wash off if it hasn't already soaked in. There were a few plants on Kashyyyk like that. The sap would cause a mean rash if it made contact with your skin…”

Scoffing at the older man, Vann uses his blaster to gesture to the corpse at their feet. "This isn't a rash we're talking about, old man! This way worse than some rash!"

Using the very tips of her fingers to wipe away the blood droplets, Bastila stares down at the crimson smear on her skin. "Oh dear," she whispers. "This is definitely not good."

"Calm yourselves!" Juhani's eyes narrow as she looks at the Humans. "It is not wise to jump to conclusions about the nature of this… problem. You will only make things worse with your paranoia and suspicions."

"I'm not paranoid!" Vann snaps. "I'm… Look, someone just shot himself in front of us. I think we're entitled to be upset."

"Upset? Perhaps." Arching a brow, Juhani studies the mercenary carefully. "But I have also seen you accept far more disturbing experiences far more readily."

Jaw clenched, Bastila quickly wipes the blood from her fingers onto the edge of her jacket. "I'm fine! We're all fine," she insists. "Perhaps just a bit disturbed by what we've witnessed. But certainly not paranoid." She chuckles mirthlessly at the idea.

"I'm not suspicious," Jolee grouses. "Just old. Let an old man accuse and complain a little." He shoots the Cathar a glare. "Hells, it's not like we're already being affected by whatever madness drove that poor Twi'lek to desperation…”

Before the older Force user can finish everyone suddenly falls silent, the implication hitting them like a blaster bolt to the chest. Vann exhales at the realization, closing his eyes as he mutters, "Kriffing hells, this cannot be happening."

"It can, and I think it is." Jolee scowls deeply, crossing his arms over his chest.

Bastila wrings her hands nervously, drawing slow breaths through her nose. "Perhaps we should all head back to the submarine? To be perfectly honest, this is far more complicated than I anticipated."

Juhani sighs heavily, golden eyes staring at the sealed doors of the station. "If we go back to the surface, Bwaas will send another team. Or the Republic will send workers down to check on production. Either way, this insanity will continue to spread. And, possibly, to take more lives."

Holstering his blaster, Vann rakes one hand through his hair. "As much as I hate to say this, we still might be more resistant to whatever's causing this than anyone else. If we can destroy this station, we might also destroy the source of this craziness."

Nodding slowly, Bastila smooths her hands over her jacket. "For all we know, this could spread and become a threat to more than just Hrakert Station. All of Manaan may be in danger…” She
shakes her head, gently pressing a palm to her forehead. "I don't know what I was thinking a moment ago. I can't in good conscience just leave without trying to fix this. It's not merely a moral imperative, it's my duty as a Jedi."

"If Bastila's going in, so am I." Vann looks between his companions. "Besides, we still need to try and use the facility's equipment to find the map, at least if we don't want to be stuck searching thousands of meters of ocean floor for the damn thing."

"You seem to be doing better now that you're aware of the threat," Juhani notes thoughtfully.

"And you seem to be more resistant than the rest of us." Jolee rubs his chin. "I'd say it's all that training in the dark side, but let's be honest. Vann is more in touch with the dark than you are." Casting the mercenary a pointed glance, and ignoring the scowl that he receives in return, he continues, "I'd hazard a guess that if anything, it's your biology."

Shrugging, the Cathar grips the powered down hilt of her lightsaber. "Perhaps," she muses. "Either way, we can only hope that I remain less susceptible to this threat."

"Maybe Juhani should stay out here, in the bay," Vann suggests. "We'll keep our comms open, and if she hears anything wrong, she can come in and..."

"Oh sure. Just send us weakling Humans into the unknown to go insane. And leave the only one who seems to be resistant outside to watch it happen." Jolee snorts. "Brilliant idea."

Pursing her lips, Bastila slowly murmurs, "To be fair, it's not a terrible idea." She looks at the Cathar for a moment. "I agree that Juhani should go inside to monitor us, if possible. But it may also be wise to leave someone at the docks. Perhaps inside of the submarine, where it may be safer?"

"Well, by the process of elimination, I wonder who that 'someone' might be." Vann arches a brow at the older Force user.

Sighing dramatically Jolee waves a hand at the younger man. "Fine. Just leave the old man to rot alone in a submarine at the bottom of the ocean." He taps a finger to his temple. "But what did I tell you earlier? I knew you'd need someone with common sense in this whole mess."

"Thank you, Jolee," Bastila casts the man a grateful smile. "We'll leave our comms open. You should be able to hear what we're saying, provided that there's no interference once we're inside."

Reaching into his jacket, Vann retrieves a smaller commlink and offers it to the other man. "This is a distress signal direct to the Ebon Hawk," he explains. "If things go wrong, really wrong, turn it on. You don't even have to talk. Carth will know that we're in trouble, and try to figure something out."

Accepting the item, Jolee examines it for a moment before carefully tucking it into a pocket. "Got it." He looks at the others. "Any more instructions before you charge into that pit of insanity?"

"Perhaps you should go to the submarine before we unseal those doors?" Bastila casts a nervous glance towards the entrance to the station.

Nodding, Jolee straightens and quickly strides back into the docking bay. He pauses in the doorway. "I'm sure it's a waste of my breath, but try not to get yourselves killed." He nods sharply. "And if you do die, don't you dare take me with you!"

"Wouldn't dream of it, old man." Vann chuckles. "You're too young to die."
"Exactly!" With a forced grin, Jolee gives one final wave before he disappears back into the
darkness of the bay, taking their emergency line to the Hawk with him. Vann feels a cold ball of
dread coil in the pit of his stomach. Closing his eyes, he draws on that fear, letting it wash over his
in an icy wave of pure power. It's almost refreshing, cleansing in a dark way.

"Ready?" Still wearing a thin smile, Bastila gestures to the panel beside the sealed entrance.

Once again wielding his multitool, Vann sets to work overriding the station's doors. It's easy
enough work, and it's only a few moments before a sharp hiss lets him know that he's wired things
correctly.

Even before the doors open, the sour odor of decomposition wafts out from the other side.
Covering his face with his sleeve, Vann gags at the stench. The bitter scent of rotting fish joins
with the mineral harshness of decaying flesh, all of it stale and acrid from being trapped in a sealed
building. Eyes watering, he glances back at the others, who are similarly guarding against the
smell. "Well," he gasps, quickly switching on his comm with his free hand, "Everyone ready?"

Juhani's lightsaber hums as she powers it up, nodding to the pair of Humans. "Of course."

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be," Bastila announces, voice partially muffled by the scarf that she's
draped over her nose and mouth.

"Well then, let's finally get this over with." Still covering the bottom half of his face with the
sleeve of his jacket, Vann slams his other hand against the release button for the doors. They
instantly slide open, revealing a new wave of sour, acrid stench. Holding his breath, he turns his
face away in an attempt to let the worst of the odor pass.

After a few minutes, the scent of decay has either lessened, or Vann has finally adjusted to it.
Either way, he cautiously peers into the dimly lit station, lowering his arm in the process. The
initial source of the smell is obvious, a dead-and-rotting Selkath corpse lying just beyond the
entrance. It's too decomposed to tell the cause of death without careful examination, and he has no
desire get any closer to the body. "Come on," he hisses, quickly stepping over the threshold and
into the station beyond.

Bastila and Juhani are close behind as they enter a long hallway, the crimson glow of the lightsaber
casting eerie shapes along the durasteel walls. Dark shadows pass by the transparisteel viewports,
the ominous outlines of firaxan sharks gliding in and out of sight. Another shudder passes down
Vann's spine, and a sense of anxiety grips his chest. His feels short of breath in the stale air, mind
awash in a sudden sense of panic.

A firm hand grasps the mercenary's bicep, giving it a rough shake. "Are you alright?" Juhani
demands.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine!" Vann growls, shaking his head to clear the sensation. Some of the knots of
worry clenching between his ribs seem to loosen but his thoughts continue to race, laced with a
million unidentified doubts. Footfalls heavy on the ground, he continues to make his way down the
hallway. "Hurry up!" he commands. "Let's do what we came here for so that we can get back to the
surface."

Bastila is walking beside him, eyes darting from side to side in the darkness. She scowls, the
expression dour on her normally optimistic features. "I would have thought that the Republic
would be able to build something more impressive than this," she mutters.

"And what do you mean by that?" Vann asks, still staring straight ahead.
Blinking, Bastila gasps sharply before admitting, "I don't quite know…" Trailing off, fear flickers in her pale eyes.

"Just keep walking," Juhani orders sharply. "It appears that there is a larger control room up ahead. Perhaps we can find out more information about this station."

"I'm walking, I'm walking," Vann grumbles. His breath comes in sharp, uneven pants, each inhale laced with the stench of decay. As they walk down the long hallway, they pass another corpse. This one is Human and dressed in the uniform of a Republic soldier. He doesn't spare the body a second glance, shoulders tense as he strides past.

As he enters the control room, Vann thinks he spots a larger shadow gliding by the viewport. Head whipping around to look at whatever's swimming past, he catches a flash of black leather from the corner of his eye. It's a glove that covers his hand, hiding his skin and disappearing beneath the loose sleeve of a long black robe…

"No," Vann whispers. "Not here, not now…"

Juhani turns to look at the Human, concern in her eyes. "What's wrong?"

Looking away from his hands, Vann thinks that he spots Bastila moving to one of the computer terminals to check the layout of the station. Except that's wrong. It's Malak who he sent to collect the data that they need to search Manaan's ocean floor for the Star Map. They're here because…

Glancing down at himself, Vann sees his familiar clothing flicker in and out of existence, replaced by flowing black robes that he prefers… He's rarely been out of the robes of a Jedi since childhood when he began to train… No, he began to train on Dantooine a few short months ago…

Panic seizes Vann's throat and he gasps for breath, mind vacillating between thoughts and times and places and people. Images flash before his eyes, even as his mind is gripped by uncertainties and fears and absolute, unadulterated terror. He clings to that terror, wrapping the cold sensation around himself as it flows cool and familiar just beneath his skin. But his mind continues to race, ideas doubling back onto themselves and redoubling into doubts and anxieties that make his fingers twitch and his flesh seem to crawl from the inside out.

"Juhani," he gasps, own image fading within his mind's eye. The Cathar's hand is a foreign presence against his shoulder. She seems to be saying something, lips moving as the sound swallowed by the frantic pounding of his own heart. "I'm definitely not alright…"

Chapter End Notes

Content Warning: The characters encounter someone suffering from mental illness caused by mysterious circumstances. Despite their attempts to comfort the individual, the characters witness this stranger commit suicide. The characters later experience anxiety, paranoia, and memory issues due to the same mysterious circumstances.

1. This chapter was cursed from the moment I started writing it. Murphy's Law kicked in, and everything that could prevent me from writing and editing happened all at once. Apologies!

2. The code Vann uses to get Bwaas's attention is a reference to the coded messages
that the French Resistance broadcast over Radio London during WWII. "John has a long mustache" and "The dice are on the table" were two of the phrases broadcast.

3. Minor content warning for this chapter and the next. The characters will be experiencing paranoia, anxiety, memory loss, and general mental distress. You can theoretically skip these chapters, though you will miss some minor plot.

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Chapter Summary

In which Juhani makes some rather shocking discoveries about one of her companions, and everyone learns that everything is worse under the sea. Also, fish should NOT be that big.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

16.

_Interlude – Juhani_

"Vann, please try to concentrate! We need to get to the… the…” Scrubbing her palm against her forehead, Juhani growls in frustration as her focus escapes her yet again. She's supposed to be more disciplined than this, more capable of processing her emotions and centering her mind against mental attacks.

Those were Quatra's lessons. _Think beyond the limited beliefs of the Jedi_, she used to say. But then, Quatra also betrayed her, sending her to Dantooine where she would have been killed if Vann hadn't shown mercy. Vann, who claims to have so much darkness within him, but also so much mercy…

_No! Focus!_ Shaking her head, Juhani bangs one fist against the nearby wall. The durasteel clatters from the hit, the sound echoing down the abandoned hallway in a series of eerie clanks. "Vann," she finally breathes, gritting her teeth as she clings to her mental fortitude. "We need to get to the secondary control room. It's where we can find the schematics for the kolto harvesting machinery."

The Human turns to look at Juhani, recognition flickering across his face one moment only to fade into something colder and harder and _angrier_. He studies her closely, the sense of familiarity gradually returning to his deep brown eyes. "The control room. Right." He's breathing heavily, nearly panting, and a fine sheen of sweat dots his brow. "We need the schematics to destroy the machines."

"Yes! Exactly." Clutching Bastila's datapad in her hand, Juhani checks the station map that the Jedi downloaded earlier. Unfortunately, that was the last useful thing the other woman managed to accomplish.

"I need… I need to send a message. A report…” Bastila is staring at the nearest control panel, which activates one of the doors.

Gritting her teeth so hard that she's sure they'll crack, Juhani grasps the woman's forearm and drags her away from the door. "You do not need to send any reports to your precious Council!" she snaps angrily.

"It's not the Council!" Bastila wails, fighting the hold with surprising strength. "It's the… it's… I can't remember. I'm supposed to remember… something?" Drawing a deep breath, she suddenly
falls still, eyes drifting closed. The animalistic panic slides from her face and lucidity seems to momentarily return. "I just need to remember the Code," she whispers.

"Kriff peace, and kriff the Jedi Code!" Dropping the other woman's arm, Juhani throws up her hands in frustration. "You can help, or you can stand here!"

"Let her stand there if she wants." The recognition has once again fallen away from Vann's expression, his features schooled into something more detached. He's watching Bastila with indifference, though his voice isn't unkind as he says, "She can't help us like this, and someone's going to get hurt if you keep fighting her." Oddly enough, he seems more lucid when he regards both of his companions as strangers.

Huffing a sigh of irritation, Juhani snaps, "Fine! I will leave her! But if she harms herself while left to her own devices, do not hold me accountable."

Vann nods once, the gesture wooden. Carefully striding down the dim hallway, he pauses beside Bastila and murmurs, "Come with us if you can, stay if you want. Either way, we have to get to the… the…" Eyes squeezing shut, he sounds more like himself as he curses, "Bantha shit! I kriffing hate this!"

"The secondary control room!" Juhani finishes. "Which is down the hall and to the left."

"Right! Let's go before I forget again." Vann quickens his pace as he half walks and half stumbles down the hallway, repeatedly shaking his head as he moves. Juhani falls into step close behind, double-checking the map to make sure that they're headed in the right direction.

A moment later Bastila dashes up, breathing hard. "I'm so sorry!" she apologizes. "I'm trying my best, I really am. If I'm capable of using the computer once we reach the next room, I'll try to download the schematics, but…" She squeezes her eyes shut. "I can't… I just…"

"We'll figure it out," Vann finally manages to breathe.

For the next few minutes, the trio makes their way down the hall in comparable silence. Bastila seems to be muttering to herself, but whatever she's saying is too quiet to be overheard even in the station's eerie calm. Vann, however, has fallen silent. There's a set to his shoulders that's oddly foreign, and yet familiar at the same time. It's not the mercenary's usual easy posture, but something rigid and formal. Something more akin to how a Jedi would carry themself…

And wasn't Vann a Jedi once? A young, smiling Jedi in the brown robes of a Padawan learner, his arm draped around a fellow trainee in companionable affection. Vann is a Jedi, and he was trained by the Order. And somehow the set of his shoulders is so familiar…

Focus, Juhani scolds herself again, clenching her jaw even harder. You can attain this victory. Through it, the Force will set you free. She can feel her own chest heaving with every breath she takes, thoughts once again attempting to race out of control. Anxiety is a cold prickle along the back of her neck, and a tight ball in the very center of her chest. She feels like she has to move. Like if she stops, the entire world will come crashing down around her. Gripping the datapad so tightly that her knuckles turn white, Juhani sighs. They're almost to the end of the hall, even at their remarkably slow pace. At least they're making progress.

Chasing her own thoughts in seemingly endless circles, Juhani feels her shoulder dig into the wall as she stumbles, mind preoccupied with a swirl of innumerable worries and unidentified fears. Forcing those thoughts to the periphery of her consciousness she looks around, focusing on assessing her surroundings. She sees that the hallway forks here, both Humans pausing at the split
to assess their options. "Left," she orders. "The control room is to the left."

Vann rushes on ahead, temporarily pushing past the worst of the mind-altering effects. As he jogs in front of Juhani, there's something about his movements that tugs at memories long buried within her mind. But then, he's intrigued her since the moment they met. The way he fights, the way he speaks, the natural tone of command that sometimes enters his voice and makes people pause and listen no matter how inane his words are. All of this is so familiar, even though he's a virtual stranger who she's only known for a matter of months…

*Focus, damn you!* Drawing several deep breaths through her nose, Juhani blinks to clear her vision and surges on ahead. She can hear Bastila falling into step beside her, footfalls steady if not somewhat uneven.

"I think I might be doing a bit… just a touch improved." The Jedi forces a faint smile, though her eyes remain trouble and unfocused. She rubs at one forearm, her nails digging into the material of her jacket. "Though, I will be glad when this is all over."

With a sharp nod of her head, Juhani mutters, "The sooner this task is completed, the better." She doesn't wait to receive a response, breaking into a jog as she covers the last few meters to the control room. It's not that she dislikes the Jedi, though Bastila's attachment to her Council's dogma is irritating at the best of times, it's simply that she can't afford the distraction. Not when her current goal is so close… *Keep moving, always keep moving.* The words of her first Ataru instructor echo through her mind, repeating the basic tenet of Form IV. She must keep moving. If she doesn't, she'll remember that they're all encased in a harvesting facility at the bottom of the ocean. Or that at any moment the pressure of the water could shatter the transparisteel and…

Throat constricting in panic, Juhani gasps as she rushes into the control room. Her heart is hammering in her chest, which seems to clench tighter by the moment. It's as though an invisible hand is squeezing her ribs, sending prickles of anxiety up and down her spine. Her every nerve is on edge, skin growing hypersensitive to every breeze of stale air that swirls around her. The gentle touch to her forearm is enough to make her jump, and she almost calls her lightsaber to her hand in defense.

"Juhani…?" Vann is staring at her strangely, his expression remarkably lucid. "Are you okay?"

Swallowing, the Cathar sighs deeply. She can feel her chest relaxing, the tension in her spine slowly melting away. "Yes, thank you." She nods to the mercenary. "For a moment, I was overcome by fear, but it seems to have passed."

Vann slowly draws his hand back, expression still wary. "Good," he slowly remarks. "I, uh, I think I'm doing a little better too. Still don't feel quite right but…" he shakes his arms, shuddering a little. "At least I remember why we're in here. We need to compare Bwaas's notes on the harvester to the station's schematics."

Panting slightly, Bastila cautiously walks into the room. Glancing around, she draws a few deep breaths as she tucks a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "So," she drawls, "We made it."

"Indeed, we have." Juhani finally manages to look around the room, noting the variety of computer terminals lining the walls. The entire space is dimly-lit, as is the rest of the station, presumably to preserve power and avoid drawing any undue attention. She has no idea where to start looking for the information they need and turns questioningly towards the Jedi.

"Right. Well then." Wiping her palms against her thighs, Bastila glances over a few of the computer monitors before selecting one specific terminal. Her lips twist thoughtfully as she studies the
screen, features calmer and more collected than they've been since entering Hrakert Station. "Here's to hoping that this station uses the Republic operating system that I'm familiar with."

"You're uh, not using your personal passcodes or anything, right?" Vann clarifies.

With a terse chuckle, Bastila types a few commands into the computer. "No, of course not. If this interface is the same as those used on most Republic ships, basic information should be accessible without a password." She continues typing, musing out loud, "Very little would get done if mechanics needed to input a code just to check fuel levels or engine temperatures."

Letting out a contemplative grunt, Vann mutters, "I feel like I should have known that."

The unsettling sense of familiarity creeps into Juhani's mind again but she brushes it away, instead keeping close tabs on the Jedi. However, she can't resist asking, "Why would you have known, Vann? You are not part of the Republic."

"I don't know," the mercenary shrugs, hands jammed into his pockets. "It's just… weird. The whole time I've been down here, I feel like I'm on the verge of remembering something... But those memories stay just out of reach." He growls in frustration. "Argh, I hate this! Whatever it is."

Watching as various diagrams appear on the computer screen, Juhani admits, "I do not believe any of us are enjoying this."

"Here it is!" Smiling proudly, Bastila holds out her hand for her datapad. "While I don't have access to the complete schematics for the kolto harvester, I do have a very nice diagram, along with the location of the… Oh." Biting her bottom lip, she frowns. "Oh dear…"

"Kriffing hells, what is it now?" Vann throws up his hands in exasperation.

Accepting the datapad when Juhani hands it to her, Bastila types in a few more commands. A map appears, displaying several buildings along with a pathway beyond them. "Well," she explains carefully, "It would appear that the harvesting equipment has been upgraded since Mr. Bwaas got his information."

"Fantastic," Vann quips sarcastically. "And?"

"And the sequence required to overload and destroy the machinery can no longer be entered remotely. A wise idea, as it prevents tampering…” Noting the mercenary's murderous expression, Bastila hurriedly adds, "Unfortunately for us, we're the ones doing the tampering in this situation. But I digress."

A sinking sensation enters Juhani's gut as she looks at the image on the computer monitor. From what she can see, the area highlighted on the diagram lies beyond the enclosed station, in an open area of the rift. "The machine, it is out in the open? Away from the buildings?"

"Precisely." Bastila taps in a few more commands as she connects her pad to the computer and begins downloading the new information. "And the only way to override the harvester's current programming is to manually input new commands directly into the machine's interface. Which means…"

"Oh Force!" Vann grumbles, rubbing his hand over his brow. "We have to go stand out in the middle of the kriffing ocean to reprogram this damn thing, don't we?"

Forcing a terse smile, Bastila offers the mercenary an apologetic nod. "Unfortunately, yes. The only way to destroy this machine is to don an enviro-suit and go walking on the seafloor."
"With the sharks. And the other giant fish." Rolling his eyes, Vann growls, "As though this situation couldn't get any worse…"

Completing the data transfer, Bastila's voice wavers a bit as she reassures her companion. "Well, at least it's not a terribly far walk. Less than fifty meters, actually." She swipes through the information now on her pad. "From what I can tell, this station has several enviro-suits available, all equipped with sonic emitters to scare away the sharks."

Nodding, Juhani shifts uncomfortably from foot to foot. She's beginning to feel uneasy again, the Force feeling cold and unsteady around her. "I suppose that's the best we can ask for, given the situation."

"And, Vann, if it makes you feel any better, I have the name of the engineer who designed and authorized this new system." She holds up the datapad. "It's a Mister Shaelas, so feel free to send him a strongly-worded letter when we're done here."

"Shaelas…" The mercenary's brows furrow in thought. "That's a Selkath name. But I didn't think any Selkath were officially working for the Republic."

"Actually, there seem to be multiple Selkath names attached to this project," Frowning, Bastila continues to skim through the information on her pad. "I suppose this is just another thing Bwaas was wrong about…"

Juhani is about to voice her suspicions about Bwaas, but she's suddenly overwhelmed by a burst of dark Force energy that pulses in a way that can only come from a sentient creature. Only sentient can fully harness the dark side, Quatra once said. For, only we can understand true passion. The sudden sensation washes over her like a blast of icy water, almost causing her to overlook the being lurking just outside of the control room. She opens her mouth to shout a warning, but an unseen force throws her backward, slamming her into one of the computer terminals. As she lands in a burst of singeing sparks, an invisible hand closes around her throat, squeezing hard enough to cut off her airflow. Her fingers instinctively rake across her neck, attempting to loosen the grip denying her breath.

Even as Juhani struggles to breathe, she can see Bastila clutching her head in both hands. The Jedi appears to be muttering something, eyes squeezed shut and shoulders hunched. Vann is staring ahead with a blank expression, his body still and his eyes dazed. Still clawing at her throat in panic, the Cathar collapses to the floor as she writhes in a desperate attempt to escape the Force choke before she falls unconscious. The dark atmosphere and knowledge that she's underwater don't help and fear rises in her chest, blooming through her body in chilling waves of terror. But her mind is too unfocused to harness these feelings and too frightened to release them into the Force. All she can do is turn her head and gasp at nothing, vision growing dim as she stares mutely at the doorway.

A slim shape darts past, the dark Force energy moving with it, washing past the room before vanishing into the gloom of the station. The dark side is everywhere, Quatra's voice whispers seductively, even as the words warp and twist until they transform into the more somber tone of Master Dorak. Even in the darkest places, he promises, You can always find light. Black spots dance before the Cathar's eyes but she fights the pull of unconsciousness, focusing her mind and continuously repeating, I am stronger than my enemy. My chains are broken! Just as her vision fades completely, the pressure around her throat releases and she gasps in relief, her lungs aching as they fill with air. She continues to gulp down oxygen as she rolls to her feet, glancing hopefully up at her companions. Unfortunately, they're still in the clutches of whatever effect passed through the control room.
"I need… I need to send this message." Bastila is frantically typing at the keyboard of a different computer terminal, fingers flying over the keys.

Throat still raw from being choked, Juhani croaks out, "No, you do not!" Stumbling towards the Jedi, she coughs harshly as she glances at the computer screen. It's open to a comm system interface. "Stop that!"

Twisting a knob on the comm, Bastila frantically shakes her head. "No, you can't stop me!" she declares. "I need to get this message through. They need to know!"

Batting the other woman's hand away from the keyboard, Juhani growls. "You have no need to contact your precious Jedi Council."

"It's not the Council," Bastila hisses, jerking her hand away from the Cathar. "Not this time. Not this report." With shocking speed, she resumes typing, pulling up a new interface.

Eyes scanning the screen, Juhani gasps in horror. "You are trying to contact the Republic? Are you mad?" Mentally chastising herself for asking that question in this situation, she dives at the Jedi, wrapping her arms around the other woman's shoulders and physically dragging her away from the computer.

Bastila struggles against the hold, managing to drive a sharp elbow into the Cathar's ribs before slamming her foot down onto the toe of the other's boot. She grins triumphantly at the resulting howl of pain, using the other woman's loosened grip to her advantage and twisting free of her captor. "I need to get this information through!" she yells.

"No… you don't!" Lunging forward, Juhani barely manages to grab the Jedi's forearm in both of her hands, yanking with all her might. It's enough to throw the other woman off balance, and they both stumble backward in an awkward sprawl of limbs.

There's a distinct hum as a pair of lightsabers ignites, the blades arcing dangerously through the air before one comes to rest mere centimeters from Juhani's throat. She swallows hard, body instantly going lax at the threat as she cautiously shifts her gaze to study's Vann's confused countenance. Her only comfort is the fact that his second 'saber is currently aimed at Bastila's neck, so at least he isn't taking sides. Not yet, anyway.

"Who the hells are you?" Vann growls, his voice ringing with authority. "And while you're at it, where exactly are we?"

For a moment Juhani's heart sinks into her gut. Vann without a memory is almost as dangerous as Bastila contacting the Republic. But the fact that he doesn't seem to recognize either of his companions gives her a sliver of hope, and she clings to that. But hope doesn't make the situation any less difficult.

"My name is Bastila Shan," the Jedi promptly responds. "I'm a Jedi with the Order."

Eyes narrowing, Vann studies the other Human for several moments. "Where's your lightsaber?"

"It's…" Bastila's eyes flick towards her belt, only to go wide when she realizes that her weapons aren't clipped into place. "I'm not sure," she admits, panic rising in her voice. Her fear flows into the Force around her, an oily stream of coldness.

Carefully choosing her words, Juhani focuses on keeping her voice even. "She has two shoto lightsabers in her jacket," she explains. "And my own weapon is on my belt."
Running her hands over the outside of her jacket, Bastila sighs in relief when she feels the bulges of the lightsaber hilts. "Yes, they're here!" she exclaims.

"Keep your hands away from those 'sabers," Vann warns as he glances at the Cathar's own weapon. "So, you're also a Jedi?"

"I am Juhani, and I am… a Force user," the Cathar cautiously provides. "The three of us are in a station at the bottom of Manaan's ocean."

"And why the _hells_ are we down here?" Vann's voice sounds somewhat more familiar, though it's more clipped and formal than usual.

Swallowing again, Juhani quickly explains, "We were sent on a mission to destroy some harvesting equipment. Suffice to say that there have been… complications."

"She's preventing me from sending a message to my superiors!" Bastila blurts out. "They need to know… I have information…” She stumbles over her words, confusion audible. Her negative emotions continue to trickle out, surrounding her in darkness. "I need to contact them," she finally pleads. "They need to know!"

Arching a brow, Vann's gaze shifts between both women. "Who are you trying to contact? What are you going to tell them?"

"I doubt she remembers," Juhani hurriedly replies. "She is being affected by a mind-altering Force ability. We all are." As she pauses to choose her next words, she hears the Jedi begin to speak. Cutting off the other woman, she shouts, "She was attempting to contact our enemies!"

"I am not! I'm contacting my superiors and…"

"Shut up! Both of you!" Vann's own anger flows around him like a torrent, but unlike the Jedi, he seems capable of harnessing the power. It crackles almost palpably as he presses his lightsabers closer to both women's throats. "Neither of you is making any sense."

It's out of sheer desperation that Juhani asks, "You are a Force user as well, no?"

Frowning, Vann jerks his chin upwards in affirmation. "So?"

"So, a Force user can sense an individual's emotions through their Force connection." She draws a slow breath, trying to ignore the heat of the lightsaber's blade against her skin. "Often, they can sense a lie."

"Yes!" Bastila chimes in. "That's right! You can sense that I am merely trying to contact my superiors to give them information…"

"Use your connection," Juhani urges. "Sense which one of us is telling the truth."

Vann stares at the women, carefully studying each of them in turn. His own Force presence ebbs and flows around his being, a bright point of raw power even amongst all the Force energy swirling through the room. Juhani knows that this tactic is a gamble. It's possible that, like Bastila, the mercenary's judgment is completely clouded. Or that he'll view Bastila's darker emotions as a threat and kill her. Or that he'll decide _both_ women are dangerous and will end _both_ of their lives. Quatra's voice rises to the forefront of her mind. _You are weak, Juhani. A true disciple of the dark side will never allow a threat to live._ Sealing herself for the possibility, she attempts to quiet her mind and keep her negative emotions to the periphery of her consciousness. Judging by Vann's doubtful expression, it's not working.
There's an abrupt hum as a lightsaber swings through the air, and for a moment Juhani knows that she's about to meet her doom. The violet blade arcs closer, as she fights the urge to close her eyes and accept her fate. Peace, even in death, is a lie. It's a lucky choice because she witnesses the moment the blade powers down. An instant later, Vann slams the metal hilt of the weapon directly into Bastila's temple, the blow hard enough to give her a decent concussion. The Jedi doesn't have time to register her surprise before she's slumping to the ground, landing on the durasteel floor with a dull smack. She'll need at least one medpac when she wakes up, but that's not important right now. What's important is that Bastila is unconscious, and Vann is staring at Juhani expectantly.

Relief floods the Cathar's system, her assured fear a bright point in the darkness that's overtaken the station. "Thank you," she breathes, the words feeling like a repetition of her first meeting with Vann. He spared her life then, as well.

"No need to thank me," the mercenary mutters, powering down his second lightsaber. "You were honest. She wasn't."

Leaning down to ensure that Bastila is still breathing, Juhani smiles sadly. "I do not think she was truly lying," she admits. "I merely think that she was confused by her own mind."

"Either way, you're being honest." Vann shrugs, gesturing to the unconscious Jedi. "What should we do with her?"

Juhani briefly considers contacting Jolee to see if he can watch Bastila on the submarine. But that would require traveling back to the station's entrance, which is on the opposite side of the rather long building. "There's a supply closet nearby," she finally states. "It's possible to keep her there. We can leave medpacs, perhaps a ration bar. Though I doubt she'll be there long enough to become hungry."

"Fine then," Bending down, Vann lifts one of the Jedi's limp arms across his shoulders. "You can explain why we're down here on the way."

Grasping the other arm, Juhani carefully retrieves the woman's datapad in the process. "I'll explain what I can."

The supply closet is only a few meters away from the control room, though it's slow going thanks to Bastila's unconscious form. Still, it provides time for Juhani to explain that they're under Manaan's ocean to destroy an unsanctioned kolto harvesting operation being used to heal and equip the troops of an enemy army. She's careful not to mention anyone or anything by name, figuring that the simpler she keeps the story the more believable it will seem. For his part, Vann appears to accept her explanation, though it doesn't stop him from watching her suspiciously. His perceptive demeanor and demand for answers puts her in mind of a few of the Jedi Knights she encountered during her youth with the Order.

Once they reach the closet, Vann rewire it to open. Ironically, the air is fresher inside, only smelling of a few cleaning chemicals and a bit of mustiness.

"You put her inside, I'll keep watch," Vann orders.

Juhani nods, too tired to argue. It's not worth her energy. Ration your strength, her Ataru instructor once cautioned. Know when to resist, and when to move with the flow. She half carries and half drags Bastila inside of the closet, tucking the Jedi into a corner behind a few bottles of cleanser. Reaching into her robes she retrieves a medpac which she places beside the prone form. "For when you wake-up," she explains with a snort.
With a crackle of static her comm comes to life on her belt, Jolee's distorted voice startling her. "Sounds like you kids are having a lot of fun," he jokes.

Frowning at the device, Juhani lowers her voice to a quiet hiss as she responds, "If fun is what you want to call it? I assume you heard what happened."

"Enough of it," Jolee sighs. "The reception's a little sporadic on my end. Anyway, sounds like Bastila had to be knocked out?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Juhani confirms.

"I'd offer to come and get her, but... well..." Trailing off, Jolee finally says, "Last thing you want is for me to go crazy, too. You need me good and sane."

Chuckling dryly, Juhani murmurs, "For once, we are in agreement."

There's a brief pause, and then Jolee tentatively asks, "How's Vann? Do you need me to send the distress signal to Carth?"

"No need for such drastic action just yet." Juhani crouches down, attempting to reposition Bastila so that she's lying more comfortably on the hard floor. "As for Vann... he is lucid, at least. But he does not remember anything about our mission. Or about me. And he is acting strangely..."


"None of that. He merely... is not himself." Pausing to think of a way to describe the man's behavior, Juhani manages to shove Bastila's scarf beneath her head. "He reminds me a bit of my past at the Jedi Temple. Of the war veterans who would train us. He is... bossier. Less jovial. More rigid and demanding."

"So, that means less lightning, then." Jolee laughs at his own joke. "But I think I can give you a little advice."

Frowning, Juhani climbs to her feet. "Oh? And what is this sage knowledge?"

"Don't sass me, kid! I know what I'm talking about!" Grumbling under his breath, Jolee finally explains, "If Vann is acting like some Jedi General, just treat him like one. You can do that, right? Follow orders and give reports? Be a little less argumentative for once?"

"Do you think I am a fool? That I cannot follow commands?" Scoffing at this, Juhani takes one last look at the still-unconscious Bastila. "That is simple enough to do. But I do not understand what you believe it will accomplish."

"It'll accomplish you getting the job done is what it'll do," Jolee snaps. "And I think you'll be surprised at how suited Vann is to the role of a commander."

"And what does that mean? Another piece of cryptic wisdom? Or just more babbling?"

There's a heavy sigh from the other end of the comm. "It means that you should shut your mouth and stop asking questions," Jolee counters. "See, I knew that you couldn't be a decent soldier even if you tried."

"I can play the part of a soldier," Juhani growls. "Do not underestimate me!"
"I would never," Jolee's sarcasm is audible, though there's no malice to it. "In fact, I believe in you so much that I'm going to stop talking and let you get back to work."

"Good, I am already tired of your voice." Despite her cutting words, there's a faint note of fondness to Juhani's tone. "I will contact you if we need anything else."

"Fine. And I'll keep sitting here, wasting my golden years in this submarine." Jolee grumbles one last time. "Now get this job done so that we can get back to the surface!"

With those parting word, the commlink clicks off as Jolee closes his end of the line. Juhani keeps her end open so that the older Human can hear any potential trouble. Double-checking to ensure that Bastila is as comfortable as possible, she finally strides out of the closet, only to be met by Vann's scowling face.

"Were you talking to someone?" he demands.

"Yes," Juhani carefully admits. "I was speaking to Bastila. She is not awake, of course, but I felt the need to… say a few things."

The excuse must come across as truthful enough because Vann finally nods in acceptance. "Alright, then. I'm not going to say that's not weird, but…" He sighs a little, running his fingers through his hair. "We have more important things to worry about. Do you have a plan for destroying this kolto harvester?"

"No," Juhani says, keeping her own demeanor professional. "But I thought that we could work together and formulate a plan of action."

With a curt nod of agreement, Vann watches the Cathar curiously. "Alright. What are your ideas?"

The strategy they develop is almost deceptively simple, though the lack of complexities is probably a bonus given the situation. Juhani remembers a lesson from a former Jedi Battlemaster, the old Nautolan's features placid as she carefully explained, *Simplicity is an art. Simplify.* It takes longer than it should, but they manage to break their mission down into steps. They both know that they need to get out of the station to destroy the kolto harvester. To do that, they need enviro-suits. Using Bastila's datapad, they manage to narrow down the location of the suits to a few supply rooms two buildings over. Once they find the suits, they can access the sealed hatch that leads to the ocean floor.

Searching the station's underwater buildings also serves a secondary purpose. One that sends shivers of trepidation down Juhani's spine.

"You're positive that you saw a… something? A shadow?" Vann is kneading one temple with his fingertips, once again struggling to focus.

Juhani nods, her own mind only marginally clearer than the Human's. "Yes," she confirms. "I do not know who, or what I saw, but I clearly felt their presence in the Force."

"Well," Vann breathes, drawing the hilts of his lightsabers from his belt, "Hopefully we can find… whatever it was."

Expression grim, Juhani checks the datapad in her hand. Gesturing to the hallway leading right she states, "This way. The supply rooms are this way."

The pair continues through the darkened tunnels in silence, their boots echoing eerily through the sour air. Both have adapted to the pervasive odor of decaying flesh, but it's still an unpleasant
stench to be surrounded by. Pausing for a moment to try and clear her thoughts, Juhani presses one palm against the wall as she draws a few shallow breaths through her mouth. As she focuses her mind her senses sharpen, and she thinks she hears the soft patter of footsteps a few meters away. *Don't listen with your ears, Master Dorak's voice scolds. Listen with the Force. Let it guide you.*

Closing her eyes Juhani lets her Force awareness spread out into the station, her mind drifting along the Force currents that ebb and pulse through the buildings. Suddenly her thoughts brush against a patch of dark energy so thick that she mentally recoils, subconsciously drawing her awareness back into herself. But as her mind retreats, a chill pricks the hairs on the back of her neck. It's an indication from the Force, a sign that another is aware of her presence.

"We are being watched," Juhani warns softly.

"How do you know?" Without waiting for an answer, Vann immediately powers up the lightsaber in his dominant hand, shifting into a defensive position. *The Jedi ready stance,* Juhani thinks bemusedly.

Straightening to her full height, Juhani scans the area. She thinks that a dark shadow passes over the viewport a meter or so ahead, but it's hard to tell in the gloom. "I can sense it," she explains. "You probably can as well."

Eyes narrowing, Vann's own Force presence flares brightly as realization slowly filters across his features. "You're right… they're nearby," he announces, nodding his head to the left. The opposite direction of the supply rooms. His jaw clenches, lips twisting thoughtfully. An instant later he takes off in a sprint, headed straight for whatever threat is lurking in the darkness.

"Do not try and attack them alone!" Juhani shouts as she runs after the Human. "We do not know what we are facing!"

Close on Vann's heels, the Cathar races down the hallway as she tucks Bastila's datapad into her robes. The further she gets the colder the atmosphere seems to become, a bone-chilling dampness imbued with a sense of looming horror. She stumbles over some minute crack in the durasteel, mind reeling and thoughts racing incoherently through her mind. They're trapped, and they're at the bottom of the ocean, and the water could come in at any moment and drown them… The ocean, where her people were all drowned…

Images of shadowy tides cloud the Cathar's mind, and she coughs around a hallucinatory lungful of water. Her vision fades out as the imagined undertow pulls her down, head bobbing beneath the surf and throat filling with gritty mouthfuls of brine. She's drowning, pressed beneath the waves, hundreds of meters down…

*Focus, damn you!* Screaming within her own mind, Juhani gasps as she draws in heaving breaths of rank air. *You are more powerful than this. You can achieve victory!* As her eyes clear, she realizes that she's crouched in the middle of what appears to be a crew barrack, hands pressed against her thighs and heart pounding in her ears. She blinks, cautiously searching the room for signs of her attacker. But there's nothing. Even her Force awareness fails to sense anything living, aside from Vann's still form perched at the edge of one neatly-made bed.

He's staring at the hilts of his lightsabers, turning them over in his palms. Images of the dead Twi'lek flash through Juhani's mind and panic grips her chest, a tight ball of anxiety that drives her to the Human's side. "What are you doing?" she demands. "What is troubling you?"

"Something happened here," Vann explains, tone distant. "I can sense it. I don't know what, but…" He blinks, shaking his head as though to clear it. "I followed it… whatever it is, in here. But it
disappeared. I don't know where…"

The dark shapes of firaxan sharks glide past the barrack's viewports, their figures distorted by the low light so that they appear unnaturally large. "We are facing a dark entity," Juhani explains slowly, "We cannot be sure how it's tainted this place, or what it is capable of."

"We should…" Using one 'saber hilt to gesture towards the entrance to the barracks, Vann sighs. "The enviro-suits. We need those to… to…" Letting out a frustrated groan, he squeezes his eyes shut.

"Yes, of course." Still lingering beside the Human, Juhani takes a tentative step towards the bed. As her boot touches the ground it crunches against something, causing her to jerk in surprise.

Eyes going wide, Vann's on his feet in an instant. "What was that?" he asks.

"I… I am not sure." Moving her foot partially beneath the bed, Juhani manages to catch the edge of whatever object cracked beneath her weight. With a jerk of her ankle, she kicks the item into the open, a wave of relief passing through her when she sees that it's only a datapad. The screen is shattered in one corner, the damage made worse by the force of her boot. But the device appears to be otherwise functional. Bending down she carefully retrieves the pad, tapping the undamaged portion of the screen to power it up.

"What the hells…?" Vann peers cautiously over the Cathar's shoulder.

It takes a moment, but the datapad eventually turns on. The images displayed are somewhat warped, something Juhani would contribute to the damaged screen if she had never seen the sliced pads that Mission produces for fun. Tapping through the still-readable contents, she frowns. "Most of the information stored on this seems to be intentionally corrupted," she explains.

"Huh." Vann glances towards the barrack's doorway, then back to the datapad. "Is there anything salvageable?"

"Perhaps…" Trail off, Juhani quickly flips through what information is left. Most of it seems to be mundane logs like supply manifests and bunk assignments. Nothing of consequence to their goals. However, one partial memo catches her attention. "This seems to be a note of some sort… It refers to a group of five Selkath engineers hired to work in this station."

Nodding, Vann furrows his brow thoughtfully. "The Selkath are… Manaan's native species? So that shouldn't be too surprising."

"Normally, perhaps. But… Our enemies do not usually employ them." She chooses her words carefully, still unsure if mentioning the Republic will only cause more confusion in the already disoriented Human. "Though these engineers were merely hired to make improvements. It seems to be a job of necessity for all parties involved, nothing more."

The next several notes are horribly corrupted, displaying as little more than squares and dots on the datapad's screen. A few recognizable words are scattered throughout, but they're hardly enough to string together a sentence. Juhani growls in annoyance. Patience, Quatra's voice chides. Passion is of no use if it is not focused accordingly. Clenching her jaw, the Cathar continues to search the corrupted documents, finally discovering the remains of a crew manifest amidst the otherwise unreadable information.

"The lead engineer was named Shaelas," Juhani murmurs, partially to herself. "And he brought his… daughter? Yes, his daughter with him onto this station. Her name was Shasa and she was
an... engineering student? There seem to be several notes referencing her, though they are hard to read."

Vann's expression is once again unfocused, and he's pacing back and forth along the center aisle between the beds. His footfalls are heavy and erratic, head shaking every few moments. "Why is this girl so important?"

Quickly scanning past more corrupted data, Juhani almost misses the partially intact memo from what appears to be some sort of commander. It's hard to decipher, and even the Republic insignia is warped and distorted. However, what she can read causes her blood to surge with rage, the sensation cold and familiar as it courses through her system. Yes, Quatra approves. Use your anger. "Someone wanted her," Juhani hisses between clenched teeth. "She was Force-sensitive, and they wished to train her at their private academy." While no name is mentioned in the message, she can guess who this 'someone' is. Malak.

"Not the Jedi, then?" Vann ceases his pacing, expression turning somber. "They would have openly asked the girl to be turned over for training on Coruscant. Though she sounds like she's older than the usual Initiate..." Trailing off, he appears to be surprised by his own knowledge.

"No," Juhani confirms. "Not the Jedi." The rest of the message, along with the rest of the data, is too corrupted to read. Not that it matters since she's too incensed to pay any real attention. One sentence keeps replaying in her mind, the words seared into her retinas. Collect the girl by any means necessary. She feels the low growl rumbling in her throat, her fingers digging into the datapad. The cracked transparisteel cuts into her thumb but she doesn't notice the pain, only realizing her injury when blood drips onto the screen.

Tossing the pad aside with a roar of fury, Juhani feels a faint sense of satisfaction as the object shatters against the nearby wall. The sound causes Vann to jump in alarm, and he powers up one of his lightsabers in response. However, he quickly settles when no threat becomes apparent, though his muscles still twitch with tension.

"What the hells was that for?" he asks, tone reproachful. He truly sounds like a Jedi when he adds, "Control your anger, Juhani. Before it controls you."

Drawing a shaking breath, Juhani grits out, "I... I apologize. But there was a girl here who may have been captured or perhaps killed. Either way, she was taken from her family." Her eyes watch the Human's face, cataloging the alarm that flickers over his features at this news. "I am sorry for my outburst, but the situation is upsetting on a personal level."

"It's alright," though his words are still clipped, there's a hint of understanding in Vann's eyes. "I... I'm aware of what happened to the Cathar. I can't imagine... I just... I'm sorry." He swallows hard before quickly clearing his throat. "Just try to control your outbursts, alright?"

Bowing her head respectfully, Juhani replies, "I will do my best." Something about the Human's reassurance tugs at her mind and she arches a brow. Frowning softly, she studies her companion for a moment before hesitantly asking, "How do you know what happened to the Cathar? I thought..."

The swell of dark Force energy returns in a tidal wave of cold, raw fury that rips through the room with tangible power. Before she can finish her sentence, Juhani feels herself being lifted up and flung across the room by a powerful Force push. She howls with rage as her body sails through the air, limbs flailing as she attempts to resist the attack. But everything happens too suddenly, and she's unable to prevent being slammed into the wall. The hit rattles her head and knocks the air from her lungs, leaving her stunned and breathless. Her body leaves a dent in the durasteel, and she winces in pain as she slides limply down the surface and collapses onto the floor.
Both of Vann's lightsabers power up before Juhani even lands, and the mercenary twirls them in a wide arc as he searches the room for any signs of their attacker. Anger flashing through his Force presence, he snarls, "Show yourself!" Raising one lightsaber, he adds, "If you want a fight, come and get one!"

It's only by instinct that Juhani manages to land on the ground and not sprawled painfully across the metal bedframes. Desperately, she tries to call her lightsaber into her hands, but her mind is too dazed to focus. She knows that she's slumped on the floor, but everything seems hazy and indistinct. The ground is cool beneath her cheek, though not as cold as the darkness that continues to flow through the room. As her eyes struggle to focus, she thinks she sees a huge shadow looming just outside one of the viewports. But it vanishes like a mirage, and a moment later the smothering darkness dissipates as suddenly as it arrived.

"Dammit!" Vann rushes over to the Cathar, powering off one lightsaber and tucking it into his belt. "I think I saw something rush past the door. We should go after it." Extending his free hand, he looks down at the Cathar. "Come on," he encourages. "Let's get you on your feet."

And suddenly the memories fall into place. The gloom of the station surrounds Vann, obscuring his face and shrouding his body in shadow. The only thing that illuminates him is the glow of his lightsaber, the violet blade looking almost blue in the low light. From this angle his posture, his stance, and even his voice all suddenly have context. Laying on the floor Juhani stares up at the Human, feeling rather small and child-like. The last time she felt this helpless was many years ago when she was nothing more than an orphaned girl on Taris, about to be sold into a life of slavery. But her fate changed when she was rescued by a Jedi. At the time his face was hidden by a mask but his words were so clear and bright. *Let's get you on your feet.*

That masked man was Revan, Jedi Knight, and hero of the Republic. Even in her youth, she could tell that he wasn't a tall man, but his very presence exuded command and crackled with the raw Force power that he wielded. It was Revan who infiltrated the dingy Lower City, raiding the slave ring and discovering the young Cathar crouched and terrified in a windowless room. After he checked that she was unharmed, he extended his hand, face hidden but intentions clear. *Come on,* he'd said. He wanted Juhani to follow him. And for many years she did just that. Or, tried to.

And now he stands before her again, or at least his ghost does, hand extended in the same gesture while he speaks the same words. His pose is indistinguishable from that day on Taris, the change in wardrobe doing little to disguise his familiar frame. The tone and cadence of his words are identical, down to every inflection. Suddenly struck mute with awe, Juhani accepts the offered hand and finds herself being pulled upright with surprising strength. The Force pulses around the man, just as it did all those years ago, and she can't help the word that escapes her lips. "Revan."

A flicker of surprise passes over the Human's features, though he quirks a brow in amusement. "Huh?" he asks, not missing a beat.

The breath catches in Juhani's throat and she staggers to her feet. This is impossible. It's all impossible. Revan is dead, shot down over three years ago by Mandalorian rebels. Everyone knows that. *Don't listen with your ears,* Dorak repeats. *Listen with the Force.* The Cathar closes her eyes and focuses inward, searching her feelings. The shock and disbelief quickly burn away, leaving nothing but certainty. The moment of her rescue is etched so deeply into her memory that she could never doubt it. The figure beside her is Revan, the lost Jedi Knight.

Or is it? Eyes fluttering open, Juhani tilts her head to the side as she takes a tentative step forward. Revan, or perhaps just Vann, is already striding ahead, steps confident and self-assured. From what she's heard, Vann is capable of 'channeling' Revan through the Force. Perhaps he's under the sway
of that spirit now, the ghost of Revan temporarily overtaking his body...

Pausing mid-stride, the Human turns around and peers over his shoulder. Once again, his countenance is shrouded in shadow, though his outline is still clear even in the dim lighting. "Coming?" He asks, tone vaguely jovial. And there it is again. It's no pantomime of Revan in another's skin but him, in the flesh, his frame and voice identical to the Jedi from the most pivotal moment in her life.

Revan lives.

And just like that day so long ago, she commits her very being to follow him anywhere, no matter how foolish or dangerous the situation may seem. "I'm coming," she reassures the Human. "I just... need to get my bearings."

The Jedi nods, "Right. I'll scout ahead and see if I can sense our mystery attacker." After a final glance back, he takes off down the hallway, footfalls echoing through the station.

Thoughts still reeling from her revelation, Juhani feels lightheaded. Her personal equilibrium is completely unbalanced by what she’s discovered. She needs a moment to process everything she’s learned, but she doesn’t have that luxury. Before she can even draw a breath her commlink crackles and hisses, Jolee's voice sputtering as he says, "I lost you two for a minute there. What happened? Is everything okay?"

"Yes... No." Juhani swallows hard, the adrenaline gradually fading from her system and leaving behind a multitude of aches deep in her muscles. She violently yanks the comm from her belt, holding it close to her mouth as she speaks. "I... I believe we are fine."

"You don't sound fine," the older man snaps. "I've got my finger on this damned panic button. Don't make me press it!"

Scowling at the comm, Juhani rubs the back of her head. She can feel a lump beginning to form. "Don't press the button," she grumbles irritably. "We are not in any need of assistance. Not yet, anyway."

"Well, that sounds promising!" Chuckling darkly, Jolee adds, "I just checked in on Bastila. She came to a little while ago but seems to be content muttering the Jedi Code to herself. Even when completely insane that one's got to pay lip service to the Order. They ought to give her a commendation or something..." He trails off, grumbling under his breath for a moment before observing, "Took her a while to wake-up. That must have been one hell of a whack on the head you gave her."

Frowning, Juhani feels her temper flare and she's unable to hold back her tongue as she snarls, "Of course you assume I am nothing but anger and violence!" She snorts, attempting to release some of her irritation. "It was not even me who hit her. It was... Vann."

The older Force user mutters something below his breath about cranky children before explaining, "I thought it was you who hit her because I can't see a damned thing that's going on! And you were the one struggling with her from the sound of it. I'm not making any accusations, just observations, so calm those Cathar sensibilities of yours!"

"Bah!" Unappeased by this explanation, Juhani seethes silently.

Jolee either doesn't notice or simply doesn't acknowledge the Cathar's continuing irritation. "Anyway, I was wondering if you found out anything important while you were down there."
The cryptic remark drains away some of Juhani's anger, and she finds herself staring awkwardly at the commlink as she ponders exactly how to answer that question. It's impossible for Jolee to know anything... unless the comms didn't actually cut out. But wouldn't he have questions if he overheard the name Revan? Is it even necessary to tell him about her revelation? She shakes her head, finally settling for explaining, "We know that there was a young Selkath down here at one point. She was a Force-sensitive, and may have been taken from her father by the Republic."

"Hmmph. What a disgusting state of affairs." Jolee scoffs at the information, tone admonishing. "Indeed it is. I cannot say for certain that this is connected to the disturbances in this station, but there is no denying that dark Force energy permeates this place..." Before Juhani can say anything else, the older Force user interrupts her.

"So, I assume Vann is taking charge if you're dawdling behind and talking pleasantries with me?" Jolee chuckles at this.

"I am not dawdling!" Juhani feels her frustration mounting when she hears the older man's laughter ringing from the other end of the commlink. Sighing heavily, she growls, "Yes, continue to taunt me, old man. That is certainly a productive use of our time."

With a dramatic sigh, Jolee mutters, "Kids these days. You've got no sense of humor."

Teeth clenched, Juhani hisses, "Any other critiques you'd like to make?"

"Critiques? No. But I do have a little advice to give you." He clears his throat, adding, "What with me being older, more experienced, and smarter than the lot of you."

"Smarter? Hah! You can only wish." Juhani can't help the small smirk that plays at the corners of her lips. "But what is this advice, old man?"

There's a pause, Jolee's tone growing serious as he says, "My advice is to trust your instincts and to trust what the Force tells you. Your mind might go to shit down in that station, but the Force will always guide you right if you really listen to it."

"You sound like a true Jedi." Juhani hears the affection that leaks into her voice. "Are you sure that you left the Order?"

"Left it, and I'm never going back." Jolee sighs wistfully, before carefully adding, "But while you're trusting in the Force, put a little trust into Vann, too."

"Of course I trust Vann! Why would I…"

"Trust him, because he is exactly who and what you think he is." There's no mistaking the gravity in Jolee's words, each one spoken carefully so that there's no mishearing what he says even over the comms' static.

Juhani gasps, blinking rapidly as she tries to process the Human's words. "What do you mean…?"

"Did I stutter? No!" Jolee lets out a grunt of disapproval. "You heard me! I'm not going to waste my time and repeat myself."

"Yes," Juhani says hesitantly. "I heard you."

"Good. Now go and take care of that damned harvester. Or whatever the hells you two are dallying around and doing." Letting out a sharp laugh, he finishes, "I'm going to go back to monitoring
Bastila. At least she doesn't keep asking me to repeat myself!"

The shadow of a smile returning to her lips, Juhani sighs. "Of course. We will contact you if we require assistance." As she finishes speaking her comm clicks as the older man switches his end off, the room once again falling silent.

Despite the quiet of the station, Juhani almost doesn't hear the soft skidding of boots against the smooth durasteel of the floor. It's only thanks to the faint prickle of Force energy against the back of her neck that she notices Revan's arrival in the room just as she's clipping the commlink back to her belt. He hovers silently in the doorway, one lightsaber ignited and held defensively across his chest.

After a few moments of terse silence, the Human asks, "Were you talking to someone again?"

"No," Juhani assures him, perhaps just a bit too quickly. "Myself," she hurriedly amends. "I was merely talking to myself." She's not sure why she's hiding the fact that she's communicating with Jolee, though she has the feeling that mentioning the other Force user will only cause Revan to be more suspicious. After all, he doesn't seem to remember any of his crewmates.

The Human stares at the Cathar for a moment, eyes narrowing as though he doesn't quite believe her words. Still, he doesn't press the issue as he points his lightsaber towards the door. "I sensed something in one of the connected buildings," he explains. "I think it's whoever attacked us earlier."

With a nod, Juhani straightens and draws her own weapon. Igniting the brilliant red blade, she falls into place beside the Jedi. "I am ready," she announces. "Lead the way."

Revan spares a final glance over his shoulder before jogging back into the hallway, not slowing for an instant as he moves through the corridor and past the row of barracks that once housed the facility's crew. Making a wide turn right, the pair moves into one of the long tunnels that connects the various buildings of Hrakert Station. The air is less fetid here, though it's far from fresh. There's a faint chemical odor that permeates the area, the scent acrid and sour at the back of Juhani's throat. She winces slightly at the smell, extending her Force awareness as she and Revan move into the building proper. The cold power of the dark side greets her, causing a shiver to run down her spine as they slip through an entryway, the door left open by whatever creature passed through last.

Holding his hand up in a signal to stop, Revan's gaze is trained on a set of double doors just across the hallway. One of the doors has been battered open, the durasteel bent and dented where it was forced along its track to create an opening just large enough for a Human to pass through. The dim lighting makes it hard to glimpse what lies inside, but there is a table visible just beyond the doors, its surface littered with broken glass. With a nod, the Human mouths, 'Through there.'

Nodding, Juhani lowers herself into a partial crouch, slowly creeping towards the door. She keeps her awareness extended, despite the miasma of dark Force energy that seems to encapsulate the entire building. Its power chills her to the bone, darker and more primal than anything she's ever experienced, even under Quatra's tutelage. *We do not give ourselves to the dark side, her former master once said. We merely do not reject it as the Jedi do.* Looking over to her companion, she notices that Revan does not seem disturbed by the encompassing dark energy, his body steady and his attention focused entirely on the room that's now only a meter away.

*Perhaps he hides his discomfort well,* Juhani thinks to herself. But deep down she doubts her own words.

Turning sideways, Revan slips through the battered door with near-silent steps, both lightsabers
now ignited and held ready for battle. The Cathar follows close behind, stalking into the room only a moment after her companion. As she enters, she's stunned by the sheer blast of icy-cold darkness that surrounds her, the breath catching in her throat as her eyes dart frantically around.

The first thing she sees is the huge, transparisteel window that composes an entire wall of the room. It casts eerie blue light over the space, reflecting oddly off the glass beakers and flasks that lay scattered over the various workbenches pushed into disorderly rows. At one point, they probably stood in neat lines, turning the room into an efficient laboratory for the station. But the space has fallen into disarray, though it hasn't been completely abandoned.

Floating just beyond the window is a massive firaxan shark, easily five times the size of the monstrosities that have been circling the station their entire visit. Its body is a brilliant shade of golden-orange, silhouette only broken by the deep umber stripes that run vertically along its humongous form. Large amber eyes peer into the remains of the lab, holding a sense of feral wisdom in their depths. The close presence of the massive animal almost makes Juhani miss the Selkath standing inside of the building, body shadowed by the shark as she stares out at the ocean beyond.

Her flowing head tendrils mark her as female, though they're shorter than those of other Selkath that Juhani saw around Ahto City. Upon closer inspection, she notices that everything about this individual seems smaller, from her stature to her build. She could just be a petite example of her species, though that somehow feels unlikely. No, Juhani thinks. Not smaller, just younger… And the possibility of that revelation knocks the air from her lungs.

"Shasa?" The Cathar blurts out, abandoning her attempt at subtlety. As she speaks, the Force ripples around the girl in confirmation.

The Selkath turns around slowly, black eyes studying the strangers with unbridled suspicion. She gurgles something in Selkatha, and Juhani looks helplessly at Revan. He frowns in response, voice low as he translates, "Apparently, the shark's name is the Progenitor. The Selkath believe that she's the ancestor of their species."

Tendrils of Force energy flow between the massive shark and the much smaller girl, the transparisteel posing no barrier to their connection. Nodding, Juhani turns to focus on the girl, powering down her lightsaber as she takes a step forward. "Shasa, I read some of the documents left behind on this station. I know what happened to you. That they tried to take…"

Without warning, a blast of Force power pushes the Cathar backward, off her feet. She lands on her back a meter away, wincing as she connects painfully with the floor yet again. The Selkath says something else, expression growing stormy.

"She, Shasa, says that you don't know anything," Revan explains. "That they took everything from her..." He trails off, frowning as a look of disgust passes over his features. "She says that they, whoever they are, killed her father and the rest of the engineers."

Eyes narrowing, Shasa takes a step forward. The Force surges around her as she moves, dark currents of rage and grief that swirl about her body in pure, primal fury. She continues to speak, voice growing louder and angrier with each word she says.

Pausing in his translation, Revan plants his feet against the growing tide of Force energy. "Shasa claims that they tried to take her. But that the Progenitor was awakened when it happened and came to her rescue." He pauses, looking pensive. "I, uh, I think she believes that the shark is the source of her Force powers."
"I can see why she believes such a thing," Juhani admits, cautiously climbing to her feet. Her attention remains trained on the Selkath. "I sense that she has some form of a connection to the creature."

Expression still thoughtful, Revan frowns as he continues to translate the girl's words. "She says that the Progenitor gave her powers to drive away her captors. And that she's been using those powers to keep everyone else away from this station." His frown deepens. "Apparently, anyone who didn't flee has been destroyed."

"The bodies," Juhani concludes. "She's either killed them or drove them to kill themselves. A very impressive show of dark powers… Quite disturbing as well."

"To put it mildly." Revan looks unimpressed by the revelation, though his own Force presence flares at the thought. "Shasa says that she drove out the Jedi who tried to take her, and will do the same… Oh. Oh shit."

"What?" Turning away from the Selkath, Juhani looks questioningly at the Human. She can already feel panic rising in her mind, her heartbeat a mad tattoo in her ears as she awaits an answer. "She thinks we were sent here to capture her," Revan explains, his voice tight with stress. "And she refuses to be captured at any cost…" Trailing off, his eyes go wide. "Brace yourself!" he shouts, just as another crippling wave of Force energy moves through the room, shattering glass and knocking the tables aside.

It's only thanks to the warning that Juhani's able to dive out of the way, using the Force to propel herself into a forward flip that takes her safely out of the blast radius. Revan utilizes a similar maneuver, body sliding easily under two tables as he barely manages to slip past the Selkath's attack. Unfortunately, dodging the Force assault leaves the pair open to physical attacks, and they both yelp in surprise as the screech of blaster fire fills the room. One bolt digs into Juhani's shoulder, while another grazes Revan in the side.

Seething with frustration Shasa re-aims the pistol that she's holding, produced from a partially concealed holster on her hip. She lunges right, letting loose a fresh round of fire on both Force users. They each continue to dive past the attack, narrowly staying ahead of the bolts as they use overturned lab tables to provide temporary cover. Juhani pants as she crouches behind a half-shattered workbench, doing her best to avoid the glass shards that litters the floor around her. Powering up her lightsaber, she draws a breath as she readies the blade to deflect any further shots. However, she's stopped mid-motion when anxiety clutches her mind, replaying the details of her current situation.

She's trapped. Underwater. The only thing separating her from the deadly might of the ocean is a layer of transparisteel that could shatter at any moment, bringing in liters upon liters of water and drowning her while her bones are crushed into dust. She gasps, chest feeling tight as a cold chill pinches the back of her neck. She can almost feel the water in her lungs, making her choke and wheeze as she tries to suck in air even as her breaths come too fast to be truly effective. Chest heaving, she collapses to the ground, the lightsaber clattering from her hand as she lands among the slivers of broken glass. They slice into her knees and palms, though the pain is secondary to the terror that's overtaken her brain. Her skull feels too tight as her mind races with too many thoughts to focus on any single one.

She's going to die. Here. At the bottom of the ocean, crushed by a massive wave of water, cold and wet and alone and forgotten…

"Juhani!" A voice barely manages to cut through the panic, strong and clear and oh-so-familiar.
"You can fight this! I know you can!"

Despite hearing her companion, the Cathar wants to yell back that she can't fight this, that this is not something either of them can win against. That this is a force of nature, swift death flooding in from all sides. But her voice catches, the fear causing her throat to constrict and choke on her words.

Still shouting over the sheer swell of dark Force power, the Human calls, "Get on your feet, Juhani! Who are you going to listen to? Her, or me?"

*Let's get you on your feet... And suddenly, Juhani remembers.* This is Revan, who she's sworn to follow anywhere. Who manages to be a leader even when he forgets his own name and face. This is Revan, and she is going to *listen* to him, Force damn it!

With a growl, the Cathar surges to her feet, extending her hand and calling her lightsaber into her palm. Swinging the weapon around her head, she deflects two blaster bolts into the nearby wall before leaping forward and lunging viciously at the Selkath who's firing the pistol. This is all the go-ahead that Revan needs, as he immediately flips forward through the air, landing beside the girl to flank her. He easily deflects the few stray bolts aimed his way with his off-hand, aiming the tip of his dominant saber at the Selkath's head. Now surrounded by her targets, Shasa's eyes go wide, her command of the Force dwindling as she succumbs to her own panic. She turns from side to side, pistol pointed at her adversaries but no longer firing.

Still threatening with his lightsaber, Revan eyes the girl. "We're not here to fight you," he states, voice calm despite the chaos around him.

"I am not a Jedi," Juhani elaborates. "Nor do I have any interest in capturing you."

Shasa's eyes narrow, and she takes a slow step back towards the large viewing window. All the while she gurgles something in Selkatha, her tone accusatory.

Not bothering to translate her words, Revan instead replies, "We're here to destroy the kolto harvester. Nothing more..." His tone grows a bit harsher as he adds, "But we'll settle for nothing less."

For a moment, Juhani considers arguing against this position. She could insist that they leave and let this Selkath remain in the station. Shasa is clearly intent on preventing anyone else from entering, and it's doubtful that the Republic is collecting much kolto with all the issues that this facility has been experiencing. It's possible to walk away right now, leaving this girl to rage deep within her cold, dark ocean.

But then a whiff of decomposition reaches Juhani's nose, causing her to grimace. She glances around at the shattered lab equipment, some of the glass shards now smeared with her own blood. She thinks that she sees a bright rivulet of crimson dripping down Revan's wrist, overly brilliant in the gloom. The humongous firaxan shark continues to loom just past the window, primal dark energy flowing from her massive form and into the much smaller Selkath nearby. It bolsters the girl's connection to the Force, which blooms cold and vicious once more.

*No,* Juhani thinks to herself, *Leaving Shasa here will solve nothing. It will only lead to more bloodshed and death.*

Growling something in Selkatha, Shasa turns to look at the Progenitor. Her expression fades into something akin to fondness as she watches the massive beast, though her eyes glint with malicious intent. She laughs at whatever was said, the sound tinged with the unmistakable notes of madness.

"No!" Revan shouts in response. "Don't do it!" He turns to look at Juhani, eyes wide with panic.
"Shasa says that, if we want the harvester destroyed, she'll do it herself… and that we'll die with it."

Just as the words leave the Human's lips, the humongous Firaxan shark rears back, her massive head swinging from side to side as she charges the viewing window. Careening her broad body into the transparisteel, the creature's bulk shakes the entire building, causing walls to rumble in their foundations. The window shivers with the blow but remains intact, though Juhani wonders how long that will last. Hysteria floods her mind again, this time brought on by nothing but the rapidly deteriorating situation around her.

"Stop it!" Revan snarls. "Call that thing off! Killing us won't bring your father back. And it sure as hells won't solve any other problems since we're the only ones trying to help you!"

But Shasa only laughs again, pressing her webbed hand to the transparisteel pane as the shark moves in for a second charge. She says something else in Selkatha, the dark Force energy gathering around her as she extends her free hand towards her opponents. The blast of raw power builds for a moment before she releases it, giving Revan and Juhani just enough time to tumble out of the way. They both roll over broken glass and shattered bits of table as the concussive power of the Selkath's Force push shoots through the laboratory for the second time.

"Can you knock her unconscious?" Juhani hisses to her companion from across the room. "Perhaps we can take her back to the surface, where they can help her."

In the dim light, she's barely able to see Revan shake his head just before he dives away from another powerful Force push from Shasa. His movements are hindered as the station shakes again, the Progenitor continuing to ram the window with all her considerable might. "The shark will just follow her," he explains breathlessly as he dives for cover beneath the remains of a table. "She just said that she wants to make everyone suffer… Just like she has."

The last words cause Juhani's gut to sink, and she almost misses an opportunity to flip forward, moving over the Selkath's blast radius and closer to striking distance. She's becoming slightly winded from the constant motion, but it's a familiar sensation. Something that she finds grounding amidst the chaos. The coldness of the dark side continues to swell around her, but she's unable to harness its power. This is something more primal than she's ever encountered, something beyond mere fear or anger.

With another powerful charge, the firaxan shark rattles the window with her might. The water around her is churning with bubbles, her fins moving in a surprisingly elegant display as she backs up and prepares for another hit. Despite the thickness of the transparisteel, the slightest web of hair-thin cracks is beginning to form in the very outer layer. A stab of horror plunges through Juhani's heart when she sees proof of the structure's imminent demise.

"Shasa," Juhani calls out desperately, holding her lightsaber defensively as she creeps towards the girl. "We wish you no harm. If you allow us, we will help you…"

The words are cut off as an invisible force once again closes around Juhani's throat. She slashes at the air attempting to cut down the entity strangling her, but it's a futile effort. Her lungs are already beginning to burn from the lack of oxygen, her chest heaving ineffectively as she tries to draw a breath despite the pressure closing off her windpipe. Sinking to her knees she can feel the building shake again, the window practically bowing from the sheer force of the shark's strength. The faint web of cracks begins to grow, still only affecting the outer layer of the transparisteel but already spreading across the surface.

Barely keeping on his feet in the wake of the tremor that passes through the entire building, Revan
charges at the Selkath, taking advantage of her momentary distraction. With a slash from his dominant hand, he knocks the blaster from her grip, using the lightsaber in his off-hand to point threateningly at her chest. "I don't want to hurt you," he says, voice raw with a multitude of emotions. "But I will. If it protects the others, if it protects Manaan, you better believe that I will."

_The Jedi do not believe in executing prisoners_, Master Dorak's voice recites in Juhani's head. Her chest is still heaving as she attempts to breathe, Shasa's invisible grip around her throat still strong despite the Human's threat. _Nobody deserves execution_. As the words play through her quickly-deteriorating mind, the Cathar watches as Revan aims his lightsaber at the Selkath's heart. His words could be a bluff, but somehow, they don't feel like one. He sounded more Vann in that instant, though the exact line of where Revan-the-Jedi ends and Vann-the-Mercenary begins is too complicated for her brain to process right now.

In this moment, all she's aware of is the burning in her lungs as they struggle to draw in air, and the dark spots dancing before her eyes as she loses her fight to remain upright. Her lightsaber slips from her fingers, the hilt rolling across the durasteel floor as she collapses to her side. The floor shakes beneath her, and she thinks she sees the dark shadow of the Progenitor slamming her tail into the gradually-cracking window. The Cathar tries to crane her neck to peer at Shasa, to see if Revan's carrying out his threat. But her limbs are leaden and she can't turn her head that far. It doesn't matter because blackness is already consuming her vision as she slips in and out of consciousness.

The building shudders again as the shark continues to pound at the window, though the vibrations feel distant and faint. The hum of lightsabers feels equally surreal, though the sound is the last thing Juhani is aware of as she passes out, lungs aching as darkness finally claims her.

Chapter End Notes

1. The mantra that Juhani keeps reciting to herself is a reference to the Sith Code. While neither Juhani nor Quatra is a Sith, I thought the Sith beliefs would be more appropriate for Force users who embrace the dark side (or at least don't reject it).

2. There's a little hand-waving regarding how Shasa's Force powers work. Obviously, what she's doing is based on the dark Force power "Insanity" (the third tier of "Fear"), and is partially inspired by the fact that the Progenitor can make Selkath go insane/feral. Let's just assume that Shasa can channel the Progenitor's powers and project that insanity into others.

3. Not sorry for the cliffhanger.

Want updates as I write? Follow me on Twitter: Ergo_Maria!
In which our heroes regain their senses, interact with the local wildlife, make new friends, and discover that things are about to get extremely interesting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

17.

Coherent thoughts slowly filter back into Vann's mind, each one trickling through the haze until they feel clear, and bright, and real once again. Uncertainty gives way to conviction, and he rapidly gains clarity about who he is and exactly what he's doing. He's a Human mercenary on a mission from the Jedi Council. He's Force-sensitive. He's currently in Hrakert Station at the bottom of Manaan's ocean. He just fought in a life-or-death struggle. There is a body lying in his arms.

And that last piece of information is where his thoughts screech to a halt, panic seizing his brain as the sour taste of bile rises in the back of his throat. There is a body in his arms. Hands shaking, Vann powers down both of his lightsabers, the blades retracting from where they pierce the corpse through the neck and chest. Draped inertly over his right arm, the lifeless form of the Selkath feels surprisingly light. 'That's because she was just a kid,' he reminds himself. 'Her name was Shasa, and her father was killed by the Republic.' This information floods unbidden to the forefront of his mind, even though his memories leading up to this moment are hazy at best. He takes a moment to examine the body cradled in his arms, noting the way her black eyes stare lifelessly back at him, piscine features slack and vapid in death.

Drawing a shaky breath, Vann looks up, and then immediately regrets the decision. A massive firaxan shark stare back at him through several centimeters of transparisteel, the huge window marred by a network of hair-thin cracks that fracture its entire outer layer. 'The Progenitor,' his brain supplies. 'She was trying to shatter the window.'

The gigantic shark levels her amber gaze at the Human, raw Force energy radiating from every fiber of her being. The power flows around the room, cold and seeped in darkness, yet not wholly unwelcoming. The Progenitor rears her massive body back, churning the dark waves as her fins lash angrily through the water. Bracing himself, Vann holds his breath as he waits for the shark to charge and deliver the final blow to the window. His skin tingles as he anticipates the icy rush of brine that sentences him and his companions to a watery grave.

But the transparisteel remains intact, the Progenitor still hovering ominously on the other side of the window. Heart pounding in his ears, Vann draws a shaky breath as he forces himself to look up and meet the massive shark's gaze. She regards him for a moment, amber eyes shining with ancient secrets, and the Force rumbles with a wave of raw emotion. The only thing the Human can recognize in that primal burst of sensation is a distance sense of familiarity, as though somehow this ancient creature knows him. Before he has time to consider the possibilities, the Progenitor sends out another pulse of dark energy and it floods Vann's being with a surge of feral power. The sentiments contained in the sending are surprisingly complex, but at their core is a singular sense
of acceptance.

A moment later, the humongous firaxan shark backs her massive body away from the window, fins stirring up a mass of bubbles. Slowly and deliberately she moves away from building, giving a final thrash of her powerful tail as she turns completely around. Her form casts dark shadows over multiple viewports as she gracefully glides through the water, swimming further and further away from Hrakert Station. It's several minutes before she completely vanishes into the darkness of the ocean's depths and even then, her body still seems to loom in the distance just beyond the range of sight.

"What… what was that?" Juhani's boots scrape against the floor as she stumbles to her feet. When she speaks, her voice is hoarse, and she uses one hand to gently rub her throat.

Vann glances at the Cathar over his shoulder, noting the way she favors her right leg. Shaking his head, he slowly admits, "I'm not sure… I'm not sure what _any_ of this is." Shasa's body still lies limp across his arm and he carefully moves to lower it to the ground. "She… she was just a kid, wasn't she?"

"So, you remember what happened?" Juhani's gaze is curious as she regards the Human, even though her voice is little more than a croak. Brilliant flashes of hope spark within her Force signature, warm and golden in the station's gloomy atmosphere.

Shrugging noncommittally, Vann lays the body to rest on the ground. "Some," he quietly replies. "The important parts, I guess."

Swallowing dryly, Juhani lowers her voice to a whisper as she asks, "Do you… remember any of our earlier conversation? In the barracks?"

The tiny sparks of hope flare into brighter flashes and Vann almost feels bad crushing the Cathar's spirits when he confesses, "Nope, sorry. I don't remember any conversations beyond the docks. And even that's a little foggy." Gesturing to the corpse on the ground, he adds, "All I know is that her name was Shasa and that we fought." His tone grows harder as he grits out, "And that I had to kill her."

"Yes," Juhani agrees. "You had to." There's a note of disappointment to her words, the brightness around her immediately fading. It's hard to tell if the source of her displeasure is Shasa's death, or simply her companion's incomplete memories. "If you did not kill her, she would have destroyed this entire station. I would have died, as would Jolee and Bastila…"

"Oh shit, Bastila!" Wincing at the vague memory, Vann guiltily mutters, "We… locked her somewhere, didn't we?" He immediately opens his side of their Force bond, surprised to find both ends of the connection almost completely closed. He instinctively sends a trickle of apology through the link but is greeted by nothing but mental static.

"She is in a storage closet." There's a bit of sardonic amusement to Juhani's words. "From what I'm aware of, she's fine. And, before you ask, that was also something you _had_ to do."

Turning away from the dead Selkath, Vann sighs as he scrubs one palm over his face. "Yeah," he admits, "I know that I did what I had to. Bastila was dangerous… and so was Shasa. She and the Progenitor would have destroyed everything in their path, including the rest of the crew…" He trails off, muttering, "So now she's dead, and they're still alive."

"She fell," Juhani carefully explains. "The dark side claimed her. She was lost to her rage and grief, and there was nothing that could pull her back. The only thing she was living for was to make
others feel her pain." A cloud of sadness seems to swirl around her, mingling darkly with her presence in the Force.

"We should go get Bastila," Vann states, voice tired. It's a moment before the Cathar nods in tentative agreement, her expression remaining wary. He tries to ignore her palpable apprehension towards him as he jogs out of the lab, boots crunching over the broken glass that litters the floor. He can hear his companion limping after him, her worry seeping into the Force around her.

It's not until they're in the tunnel between buildings that Juhani speaks again. "You should not feel guilty," she reassures the Human, voice still hoarse from the earlier battle. "Sad, perhaps. But not guilty for doing what needed to be done."

"But I didn't hesitate." Pausing mid-stride, Vann turns to look at his companion. "I was facing down a child, and I didn't even pause to wonder if I was doing the right thing. I just ran her straight through."

"You were not in a position to hesitate. Nor was your mind… your own." Juhani winces slightly, rubbing her throat again. "None of us were completely rational. Even now, it may take time and meditation to fully process your emotions…"

"I don't need to process what happened!" Vann fumes, throwing his hands up. "I stabbed a kid who was, what, Mission's age? No hesitation made, no mercy given. Just bam!" He claps, "Straight through the heart! I don't need to meditate to know that's not exactly a call to the light."

"What is dark, and what is evil, are two very different things…"

Whirling around, Vann points to his face as he demands, "What color are my eyes? And what color were they earlier?"

"From where I'm standing, they appear to be brown." Bastila smiles as she leans one shoulder against a durasteel wall, arms crossed over her chest. As she speaks the Force bond flares to life, flooded with a warm mixture of relief and comfort. "And from what Jolee tells me, you saved us all, Vann. And possibly an entire city besides. If anything, you should feel proud."

Baring her teeth at the Jedi, Juhani growls, "How did you get out?"

Laughing weakly, Bastila slowly makes her way over to her companions. "Well, funny enough, you didn't actually lock me inside of that closet. You just… kind of closed the door."

"Oh, for Force sake…" Vann winces at this information.

"But then, I wasn't even in the condition to press a simple button and let myself out, so I suppose that it all balanced out in the end." Sighing, Bastila pushes several stray locks of hair from her face. "I do appreciate you leaving this with me." She produces a medpac from her pocket and then tosses it to the Cathar. "Though I, fortunately, had one of my own."

Catching the item in midair, Juhani accepts it without further question. Not wasting a moment, she injects the contents into her thigh, sighing in relief as the healing substance flows through her veins. "I am glad that you were not permanently harmed," she informs the Jedi.

"Hardly!" Bastila waves dismissively. "It will take more than a hit to the head to keep me down."

"I'm sure it will," Juhani muses. "Though I do have one more question for you."

Head tilting curiously to the side, Bastila quirks a brow. "Oh?"
Eyes narrowing, Juhani calmly asks, "Why were you attempting to contact the Republic fleet?"

"What? I did what?" Confusion etched across her features, Bastila stutters, "Well… Honestly now… I'm not quite sure. I don't even remember doing it!" Her Force signature flickers uncertainly, its bright presence dulling under the scrutiny.

"Yet, you did." Juhani jerks her chin upward, challenging the Jedi to argue.

Sighing softly, Bastila rubs her palm over her brow. "Well," she begins carefully, "In case you've forgotten, I *was* part of the Republic military until very recently. So perhaps I merely reverted back to the part of the dutiful Padawan."

"And who, exactly, would that 'dutiful Padawan' be attempting to contact?" Juhani's eyes narrow as she asks the question, distrust flowing around her in cold tendrils.

"I suppose my commanding officer…" Bastila trails off, lips twisting thoughtfully.

"Vann blinks in surprise, scowling deeply as he hisses, "Wait, wouldn't that commanding officer be Malak?"

Laughing softly, Bastila quickly shakes her head. "No, of course not! While I did report to Malak for training purposes, I was far below him in the military hierarchy. As a Padawan, I had no official military rank, though I suppose the equivalent would be a commander? Perhaps a general? Either way, neither of those ranks report to the Supreme Commander of the entire Republic Military. I reported to various admirals, depending on the situation."

"Oh, okay, no big deal." Vann glares. "You only tried to contact some Republic admirals."

"It's possible that I did," Bastila replies, tone vaguely insulted. "As I said, I don't really remember much about my intentions." She peers curiously at the mercenary, "Vann, what were you thinking throughout all of this? Perhaps knowing your state of mind will help to decipher my own."

"I, er, well…" Wincing slightly, Vann sighs heavily as he admits, "I don't remember. Not specifics anyway. I think I was just acting on instinct."

"Well, that's a start," Bastila hums quietly to herself. "Anything else? Do you remember anything about your emotional state?"

Gritting his teeth, Vann closes his eyes for a moment, trying to recall the blurry series of events that compose his time in Hrakert Station. "I… I know I protected Juhani a few times," he states. "And that it was all in the name of… duty? I dunno, it's all pretty foggy." Eyes snapping open, he arches a brow, "Hey! Maybe I was a soldier. You know, before…" trailing off, he makes a vague gesture towards his head.

"Yes," Juhani quickly adds, "Acting as a soldier would is an accurate description of Vann's actions in this station."

"Hmm, I don't suppose that explains much at all." Frowning, Bastila studies the mercenary for a moment before cheerily adding, "But it might help to unlock part of Vann's past. So, I suppose there is a bright side to this entire experience."

"I may have remembered something about my past, I definitely killed a kid… All in all, a successful day." Vann grumbles sarcastically.

Bastila gives the man a weak smile. "Taking one life fallen to darkness to protect thousands of
innocents is not a crime," she reassures him, the consolation flowing through their connection. "It is a tragedy, and a loss, but still necessary for the galaxy as a whole."

"I thought that the exalted Jedi do not believe in executing prisoners," Juhani snaps irritably.

"No, we don't," Bastila admits. "We don't believe that anyone deserves to die. But we also believe that there is no death, only the Force. And so, if someone falls in battle, we do not mourn their passing. Rather, we celebrate that they are finally part of a greater whole."

"Sorry if I have trouble celebrating the death of a child," Vann hisses sharply.

Nodding sympathetically, Bastila places a gentle hand on the mercenary's shoulder. "I'm not asking you to celebrate her death," she whispers, flooding the bond with hope. "Merely to be glad that she has finally found peace."

Grunting in acknowledgment Vann doesn't say any more on the subject, instead striding through the empty corridors of the station in stony silence. He does peek over at Juhani for a moment when he feels the Cathar's eyes on him, and she quickly turns her face away. Contemplation settles across her features, her eyes darting back towards him for another moment before she resumes staring straight ahead.

The trio walks on in silence for several more meters before Bastila pauses, arching a slim brow. "Forgive my ignorance, but what exactly are we doing right about now?"

Vann stops sharply, blinking. "Well, we were. Ah. See, we're just…" He finally shakes his head. "Apparently, I don't kriffing remember."

"We need to find enviro-suits," Juhani clarifies, retrieving a datapad from the inside of her robes. "So that we can override the kolto harvester just beyond the station."

"Just… beyond the station?" Bastila's expression remains puzzled.

Wincing, Vann grits his teeth in frustration. "I wish I could keep forgetting that part… The harvester has to be manually shut down, right?"

"Precisely."

"So, we have to go strolling along the ocean floor. Great. Fantastic." Vann glares at his companions as he digests this information.

An amused smirk plays on Juhani's lips. "You know," she comments, "You had an almost identical reaction earlier when you learned the same information."

"Well," Vann snarls, "At least I'm kriffing consistent!"

* * *

Lumbering along in his bright yellow enviro-suit, Vann's finger hovers just above the sonic emitter that's connected to the wrist. He feels vulnerable without his lightsabers and blaster, all of which are currently back inside the station with Juhani. The Cathar agreed to guard the gear that he and Bastila couldn't wear or use underwater, along with monitoring their vitals via the computer console inside of the station.

When asked if she wanted to help destroy the harvester, Juhani had merely shaken her head, her fear flowing icy-cold around her as she cryptically responded, "My people and water? We do not
mix well."

So, she gets to stay inside where it's dry and relatively safe, while the Humans slowly trek along the bottom of Manaan's ocean. The darkness of the water is smothering, only made more ominous by the sleek outlines of firaxan sharks gliding smoothly past. They're seemingly indifferent to the intruders in their territory, though their apathy doesn't make Vann feel any safer. "I hope these emitters actually work," he grumbles, voice modulated by the suit's comm system.

"Well, perhaps convincing the larger shark to leave also encouraged the smaller sharks to stay out of the way," Bastila chirps hopefully, her voice equally distorted by her suit. But her mental presence is still bright and clear, brimming with positivity. "Like a mother and her children."

"That's charmingly optimistic," Vann grumbles, eyes rolling.

"I try." The Jedi's voice is saccharine-sweet as she peers around the seafloor, the helmet of her suit bobbing up and down as she consults the waterproof datapad clutched in her glove. "Hmm, it appears that the harvester should be just up ahead."

Nodding as best he can Vann pushes forward, boots mired down by the thick silt that covers the bottom of the ocean. Peering into the distance, he spots a large piece of machinery that he assumes must be the kolto harvester. "I see it," he reports. "Moving towards it at, ugh, top speed." With a sigh that's swallowed by the suit's respiration system, he continues to plod across the sandy terrain.

The journey to the harvester is long, boring, and blissfully uneventful. Bastila punctuates some of the silence with cheerful chatter, remarking on the dim, weedy view along the rift or the small crabs scuttling along underfoot. Vann is tempted to turn off his communicator, but the urge is tempered by the very real possibility that they could be attacked by sharks at any moment. He keeps his eyes trained on the dark shapes that loom in the shadowy water, but they never seem to get any closer.

Up close, the kolto harvester is much larger than Vann expected, its blades slowly churning the waves, pushing at the gentle current but otherwise having no effect on the surrounding environment. He assumes that's the goal, and almost feels bad about the amount of wanton destruction they're about to cause. Almost.

"Alright," Bastila announces, once again studying the datapad. "In order to destroy the harvester, we need to unbalance its fuel supply."

"Sounds easy enough," Vann states, walking up to the control panel. It's a basic interface, obviously designed with simplicity in mind.

"Yes, well..." Trailing off, Bastila falls silent for a moment before explaining. "Apparently, the harvester has two fuel tanks. One main tank plus an injector pod. The main tank can contain up to five liters of liquid, while the injector pod can only contain three liters."

Vann frowns as he locates the controls for both tanks on the interface. "Okay..." he trails off, waiting for further instructions.

Voice somewhat stilted as she reads, Bastila continues, "The fuel tanks need to maintain a certain ratio in order to function properly, as this balances the machinery."

"Um, right."

"However, if the ratio is unbalanced, the fuel tanks will cease to function until that ratio is corrected." Bastila pauses here, drawing a quick breath. A hint of trepidation leaks into the bond.
"The best way to create this imbalance is to fill the main tank with exactly four liters of fuel. The injector should also be completely full."

Head swimming with numbers, Vann taps the control panel until the fuel tank interface appears. He quickly begins to cycle through his options.

"So, it would seem that all we need to do is program the main tank to fill with four liters of fuel." Bastila nods in affirmation, sounding pleased with herself.

"Yeah, one problem with that." Checking the menu on more time just to be sure, Vann irritably grumbles, "There's no option to fill the main tank with exactly four liters."

There's a long pause before Bastila snaps back, "What do you mean by that?" Shouldering the mercenary out of the way, she also studies the screen. "Well, what options do we have?"

"We can fill the tanks from the main fuel reservoir, we can transfer fuel between the tanks, or we can dump the tanks back into the reservoir." Vann glares at the limited options. "Any more explanations in that pad?"

"…No." Expression terse, even though the transparisteel visor of her enviro-suit, Bastila clenches her jaw for a moment before exclaiming, "Well, this is just a simple math problem, right? I'm sure that I did something quite similar to this, using buckets of water, when I was just an Initiate."

Blinking, Vann's tone is deadpan as he asks, "And how long ago was that?"

Irritation flows through their mental connection. "We're both intelligent individuals! We can figure this out." Bastila quickly begins to tap a few commands into the screen. "I'll start by filling the three-liter tank. And then I'll empty it into the five-liter tank."

"So, that leaves two liters of space in the five-liter tank," Vann eyes the tank readouts, which are perfectly stable. "Now what?"

"Well, two is half of four, right? So, I'll just empty…" Bastila pauses, frowning. "No, never mind. That won't work." Scoffing in disgust, she empties the tank back into the main reservoir.

Vann studies the diagram on the screen, swatting the Jedi's hand out of the way as he taps in a new command. "Let's try filling the five-liter tank first."

"Alright…” Bastila sounds unnecessarily apprehensive, considering that they literally have two options when it comes to filling the fuel tanks.

"And now I'm going to transfer the contents into the three-liter tank." Vann quickly does that, checking the tank readouts to confirm what he already knows. "So, now we have exactly two liters of fuel left in the five-liter tank."

"Well, that's a good start I suppose." Bastila is back to studying the datapad. "Do you have a way to get two more liters into that tank?"

Drawing a deep breath, Vann's voice is all false bravado as he states, "Sure. All I have to do is move these two liters into the. Um. The uh…"

"The what?" Bastila demands. "See, this is no better than my idea!"

"It is better!" Vann growls defensively, letting his anger flow cold and swift between them. "At least I have two kriffing liters in the five-liter tank. So, I'm halfway there!"
An equal amount of frustration swirls back from Bastila, filling their connection with a constant loop of chilling negativity. "Halfway there isn't helping!"

"Are you alright?" Juhani's accented voice breaks into the suits' comm systems, distorted by the distance but still audibly worried. "You are both displaying elevated heart rates."

Hissing between his teeth, Vann grumbles, "We're fine!"

"Not according to these readouts." The Cathar's tone is hesitant as she asks, "Do you require assistance?"

"No, Juhani," Bastila reassures the other Force user. "We're just a bit flustered by some arithmetic."

The comm is silent for a moment before the Cathar slowly replies, "Ah. Well, I'm not sure how much assistance I can provide. What is the problem?"

"Whoever designed this system was a kriffing idiot is the damned problem," Vann complains.

Bastila is a bit more eloquent as she explains, "We need to unbalance a fuel tank that holds up to five liters of fuel by ensuring that it contains exactly four liters. Unfortunately, we're limited to either filling this tank or a three-liter injector tank, transferring the contents between the tanks, or dumping both tanks entirely."

"I believe I did a problem like this when I was an Initiate," Juhani muses.

"That seems to be a theme," Vann mutters. "I'm betting you also don't remember the answer?"

"I'm sorry, but I do not." Sounding genuinely apologetic, Juhani quickly adds, "However, I will help as best I can. What have you figured out so far?"

Checking over the tank readout, Vann describes, "Well, we were able to transfer fuel between the two tanks so that the three-liter tank is full, and the five-liter tank has two liters in it. We just need to get two more liters in there, but we're not sure how."

"Unfortunately, there's no extra tank to store the two liters we currently have," Bastila laments. "And transferring the contents of the three-liter tank will only fill the five-liter tank again."

"Huh." Even across the comm system, Juhani manages to sound completely stumped. "I… do not know what to suggest."

"That's what I thought." Sniffing a bit haughtily, Bastila turns her attention back to the harvester controls. "Now, perhaps if I…"

The static of the comm interrupts the Jedi's musings, Juhani's voice timid as she proposes, "Perhaps… you need to look at things backward?"

"Uh, care to clarify that one?" Vann asks curiously.

"Well, rather than trying to fill the tank to acquire four liters, perhaps you should empty it instead?" Juhani hurriedly adds, "I am not certain that will work. I was simply taught to look at a situation from all angles…"

Sighing dramatically, Bastila states, "Well, we already emptied the tank, which is how we acquired the two liters that we currently have. We can't empty it again…"

"Wait a second!" Shoving the Jedi aside, Vann smirks a bit at the indignant huff she makes as she
hops awkwardly out of his way. There's a flash of annoyance in his mind, but he ignores it. "We can empty the tank again! We just have to…" Quickly tapping in a series of commands, Vann murmurs, "Juhani, you're a genius!"

The Cather stutters ineloquently for a moment before stammering out, "I… well… thank you, Re… err… Vann."

Bastila's tone is markedly confused as she asks, "What was that?"

"What was… what?" Juhani's words are halting as she clarifies, "I'm not sure what you said. There was… there was static."

"No, I heard you quite clearly," Bastila insists. "It sounded a bit like you said 'Revan.'"

"Why would I say 'Revan?'" the Cathar counters. "I said 'Vann.' Though I was a bit flustered, as I am certainly no genius…"

Vann is only paying partial attention to the conversation going on around him, most of the chatter flowing over his head as he focuses on completing a series of fuel transfers. First, he empties the three-liter tank, and then he transfers the two liters from the five-liter tank. After refilling the five-liter tank, all he has to do is transfer one final liter into the three-liter tank to fill it up and leave…

"Four liters exactly!" the mercenary announces as he inputs the final command. "Ha! Take that… basic childhood arithmetic problem…" Feeling vaguely humbled by his own statement, he grimaces slightly, watching the readout as the fuel levels finalize. The console immediately blinks red, several warnings appearing across the screen. The system suggests that both tanks be emptied to avoid critical failure, but it can't override the manual settings that were entered. Several pieces of machinery begin to shudder, the fuel tanks wobbling dangerously.

"Well, apparently it worked…" Bastila remarks, alarm flashing through her mind.

"Yeah," Vann drawls, taking a long step back. "So, I would suggest that we run."

"And I am very much agreed." Without waiting for a response Bastila takes off in a sprint, her movements clumsy and hindered by the enviro-suit. Unfortunately, this means that her getaway is less hasty than anticipated.

Stumbling along almost directly behind the Jedi, Vann is close enough to the harvester to feel the water pulse around him as the machine begins to break down. Several parts shudder violently before separating at critical stress points, most likely designed to detach in the safest way possible. Both fuel tanks break away from the main body of the device, sending up clouds of bubbles and silt as they fall to the ocean floor. Support beams topple over and blades break on their mounts as the harvester comes undone, the area around it frothing so violently that the ocean seems to temporarily become effervescent.

Still awkwardly galloping away from the wreck, Vann struggles to stay on his feet as he asks, "So, uh, think they might have noticed something at the surface?"

"While I'm hoping that they don't, I rather suspect that they'll notice this commotion." Bastila turns to glance at the cloud of bubbles, shrugging helplessly.

"Well, hopefully, we'll be far away by the time…" The rest of the words die in Vann's throat as a cold shudder runs down his back, a powerful wave of dark Force energy slamming into him with such impact that he's almost forced to his knees. He only manages to remain standing by stumbling forward, breath catching painfully in his chest.
A dark shadow passes overhead, and all Vann can do is crane his neck upward as the massive form of the Progenitor glides a few short meters above him. Terror courses through his system and he hears Bastila gasp in astonishment, her own fear thick and cold in his mind. Without the layer of transparisteel between them, the gigantic firaxan shark seems even larger, her powerful jaws capable of swallowing him whole without bothering to crush his flesh and bones. He can't decide if that's a blessing or a curse as she swims closer, fins cutting easily through the dark water. Steeling himself against an inevitable attack, the mercenary briefly debates using the sonic emitter against the beast. But somehow that feels like it would only be an insult.

"Oh Force…" Bastila breathes, body frozen in place as the shark moves ever closer.

Vann tries to speak, but the words stick in his throat. Instead, he merely watches in silence as the gigantic shark pauses less than a meter away, fins barely moving as she easily hovers in place. An all-encompassing burst of dark Force energy erupts from her, flowing around the Human and seeping into his very being. It's the same flood of feral emotions that he experienced in the station, though this time it feels more demanding. The Progenitor is not merely acknowledging him, but speaking to him.

It takes several moments to decipher the creature's orders, and the whole while Vann is forced to stare directly into one of her large amber eyes. They watch him in return, ancient and unblinking. Finally, a single thought surfaces in his mind, resonating with crystal clarity. "She… wants me to follow her," he whispers.

"How can you possibly know that?" Bastila demands, shuddering in her suit.

"Because," Vann explains, "She told me so."

The shark seems to recognize that her command has been understood and slowly turns her massive body, its sheer bulk churning the water. With a flick of her powerful tail, she surges forward, gliding effortlessly through the ocean. Vann feels almost embarrassed as he trails after her, his terrestrial body made all the more awkward by the clunky yellow enviro-suit.

He's only walking a short while, Bastila following nervously beside him, before he feels it. The same magnetic pull that urged him forward on Dantooine and that called him into the dragon's lair on Tatooine. The same powerful urging through the Force that overtook him on Kashyyyk, guiding him even when he was at a loss for ideas. The Progenitor seems to sense his recognition, and another wave of dark energy swirls from her. This message is easier to decipher, and Vann can't help but smile as he translates, "She approves."

"Approves of what?" Bastila sounds somewhat breathless as she trudges along, eyes darting wildly from behind her transparisteel visor.

"The Star Map," Vann tells her, "It's close by. I, uh, I think she's taking me to it."

Tone dubious, Bastila asks, "Why would she do that?"

"I don't know," Vann snarls, jerking one hand towards the massive shark. "Why don't you ask her yourself?"

This seems to mollify the Jedi, as she doesn't say anything else until the spidery arms of the Star Map materialize out of the ocean's gloom. Only then does she pause midstride, murmuring, "Extraordinary! She really was leading the way…"

Surging forward the Progenitor swims up to the map, circling idly above the object as she waits for
the Humans to catch up. It takes several more moments for Vann to cover the distance. During the walk he breathes deeply, steeling himself as he prepares for the inevitable moment when Revan's visions overtake him.

But even when he finds himself standing an arm's length away from the ancient device, he's still in complete control of his body. It's an odd sensation, as the mercenary has become accustomed to slipping into a fugue when approaching a map. He doesn't have time to ponder the difference before a sharp jolt of dark energy flows between him and the firaxan shark, the emotion it carries best described as impatience, combined with a singular command. *Use it.*

"She wants to see me access the map." Blinking back his disbelief, Vann stares at the metallic arms for another moment.

"Well, I must admit that I'm in agreement with her," Bastila quips bemusedly. "As odd as that may sound."

"This entire experience has been 'odd,'" Vann complains, attempting to settle into his knees. The bulk of the suit makes it difficult, and he doesn't so much kneel as collapses awkwardly forward, barely managing to prevent himself from falling over. His fingers dig into the fine sand, gloves churning up the grains as he fights to keep his balance. "Alright," he mutters to himself. "Let's get this done."

Managing to wedge himself into a precarious kneeling position, Vann moves his palms to rest at the base of the Star Map. Closing his eyes, he summons his Force connection, feeling the sheer power rise up within him before flowing directly into the map. The arms of the device swiftly swing down, sending up a cloud of bubbles. A glowing orb forms in the center of the arms, illuminating the dim seafloor as it grows larger, floating through the water as it increases in size. Eventually, the glow clarifies to form a complex series of lines and dots, interspersed with the names of constellations and planets.

Bastila is frantically entering the map data into her pad, lips curling into a pleased smile as she records the new information. "Excellent," she shouts, the Force bond flooded with unbridled excitement. "This is the second-to-last piece, the map is almost complete!"

For his part, Vann can only stare up at the glowing coordinates as they gradually begin to shrink back down in size. However, the sight is secondary to the looming shape of the Progenitor as she glides along just above the mechanical structure. "Um, thank you," he calls up, torn between awe and embarrassment as he addresses the creature.

A final, chilling burst of Force energy flows through the mercenary, and he shudders under its power. The best he can comprehend, the message seems to be one of acceptance. Huge amber eyes regard both Humans for one final time before the massive shark turns away, tail pumping powerfully as she slinks off into the deep. Vann watches her depart until even her shadow is no more than a memory, nothing physically left to prove that she was ever present in the first place. Only when he is absolutely positive that the shark is gone does he release a sigh that he didn't realize he was holding.

"Do you think," Bastila's voice is hushed as she speaks, "That the presence of the Star Map drew that shark to Hrakert Station? Or that she had anything to do with the madness that was spreading? I felt a great deal of dark Force energy flowing through her…"

"I have no kriffing clue," Vann admits, still somewhat breathless from the experience. "But I sure as hells am glad it's over."
"Is something wrong?" Juhani's voice crackles over the comm, tinged with panic. "I felt a dark presence in the Force, and then your comm systems turned to static! What happened out there?"

Exchanging glances, a thin trickle of amusement travels through the mental link as both Humans search for a way to put their surreal experience with the Progenitor into words. Bastila is the first to find her voice, tone enigmatic as she states, "Oh, nothing much. We just had an encounter with a… rather large shark."

"A shark?" There's an alarmed pause before Juhani asks, "Was it the Progenitor? I thought she swam away!"

"Apparently not," Vann remarks dryly. "She was out here, waiting for me."

There's a sharp intake of breath, the Cathar's words strained as she all-but shouts, "Waiting for you? To do what? Attack? Was she seeking revenge?"

"No," Bastila chuckles softly. "Actually, she was rather helpful."

"…Helpful?" Voice turning doubtful, Juhani cautiously asks, "How is it possible for a shark to be helpful."

"Well, she, did uh… kind of lead us to the Star Map." Vann swallows hard. "So… I consider that helpful."

"You found the Star Map?" There's a long pause, a burst of static overtaking the comm as Juhani hisses, "Wait, the shark did what? How is that possible?"

"First, she talked to me, and then…"

"Have you both gone mad again?" Concern now laces the Cathar's words, suspicion creeping into her tone. "No, wait, do not answer that question. If you require assistance, I can… I can send Jolee to find you."

Sighing heavily, Vann snorts, "Oh hells, don't do that! Do you know how smug he'll be if you send him to come get us?" Still grumbling under his breath, he cranes his neck to peer into the distance. The distinct shapes of Hrakert Station lurk surprisingly close by, and he feels a swell of irritation at the coincidence of it all. The Jedi Council would probably call this the Will of the Force or something equally vague, but he thinks it's a reminder that his life has become the galaxy's favorite punchline.

"We're both of perfectly sound mind, thank-you-very-much," Bastila scoffs. "And if I'm correct, we're only about fifteen minutes away from the station. No need to fetch Jolee, as we'll be back before he can even don an enviro-suit."

Beginning the long trudge back to the buildings, Vann quips, "Look at that, we're even capable of telling time!"

Juhani's silent for another moment, her tone little more than a whisper when she asks, "But what happened?"

"I have a long walk through a boring ocean ahead of me," Vann comments wearily. "I'll try to explain on the way."

* * *

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"You found the Star Map?" There's a long pause, a burst of static overtaking the comm as Juhani hisses, "Wait, the shark did what? How is that possible?"

"First, she talked to me, and then…"

"Have you both gone mad again?" Concern now laces the Cathar's words, suspicion creeping into her tone. "No, wait, do not answer that question. If you require assistance, I can… I can send Jolee to find you."

Sighing heavily, Vann snorts, "Oh hells, don't do that! Do you know how smug he'll be if you send him to come get us?" Still grumbling under his breath, he cranes his neck to peer into the distance. The distinct shapes of Hrakert Station lurk surprisingly close by, and he feels a swell of irritation at the coincidence of it all. The Jedi Council would probably call this the Will of the Force or something equally vague, but he thinks it's a reminder that his life has become the galaxy's favorite punchline.

"We're both of perfectly sound mind, thank-you-very-much," Bastila scoffs. "And if I'm correct, we're only about fifteen minutes away from the station. No need to fetch Jolee, as we'll be back before he can even don an enviro-suit."

Beginning the long trudge back to the buildings, Vann quips, "Look at that, we're even capable of telling time!"

Juhani's silent for another moment, her tone little more than a whisper when she asks, "But what happened?"

"I have a long walk through a boring ocean ahead of me," Vann comments wearily. "I'll try to explain on the way."

* * *
"Early in my training, Quatra told me that some animals are extremely sensitive to the Force." Juhani's lips twist thoughtfully as she strides down the final corridor before Hrakert Station's docking bay. "I believed her, but it was hard to comprehend what she was describing. I had never seen such a thing with my own eyes."

"Technically, you didn't see the damn shark leading me around. We just told you about it." Vann grins as he watches the annoyance flicker over the Cathar's features.

Turning the Human, Juhani snarls, "Silence! Do you think that I did not see the Progenitor through the window with my own eyes? That I did not feel her power within the Force?"

"He's joking with you," Bastila chides amusedly. "Unfortunately for us, Vann happens to have an atrocious sense of humor."

"My sense of humor is fantastic," Vann counters. "It's not my fault that it's underappreciated."

The journey back to the docks has been far more lighthearted than the initial trip into the heart of the station. The discovery of the Star Map has lifted the mood substantially, as has the rediscovery of their sanity. It's also a remarkably shorter trip now that everyone is capable of walking in a straight line for several minutes at a time.

Just as they're a few meters from the door, the commlink on Vann's hip releases a burst of static, Jolee's voice hushed as it crackles over the speaker. "You three said that you're almost to the docking bay, right?"

"Yeah," Vann confirms cautiously. "Something wrong?"

"Eh, it depends on what you define as 'wrong.'" There's a rustling sound on the other end of the comm, and when Jolee speaks again his voice is even more muted. "For instance, do you find the fact that there's another submarine docking down here to be 'wrong'?"

"Shit!" Breaking into a sprint, Vann rushes towards the final set of doors into the bay, all while shouting, "How long have we been down here?!!"

Pulling out her datapad, Bastila flips through some files as she replies, "It's hard to say for certain, what with all of us losing some time here and there. But it can't be much more than a day. It can't have been long enough for Bwaas to send another team!"

"Why would he send another team without attempting to contact you?" Juhani asks, easily keeping pace with the Humans. "You said that you had a deal!"

"We did!" Vann assures the Cathar. "I don't know why he would…"

Jolee's voice cuts in, "Fun fact, kids. This doesn't look like one of Bwaas's submarines."

"Son of a kath hound!" Less than a meter from the doors, Vann pauses. "Does the ship have any other markings? Insignia? Numbers? Anything to identify the owner?"

"Well, you know that eight-spoked cog that the Republic uses as a symbol?" Without waiting for affirmation, Jolee states, "This submarine is sporting one of those, big and red right along its side."

Rubbing a palm across his forehead, Vann grumbles, "Of course it does."

"You know," Bastila muses, "The Republic might not know that we're down here. As you mentioned earlier, we did cause a bit of a commotion when the harvester broke. It's possible that's
what drew their attention."

"True," Vann grins, arching a brow. "Though, what exactly are you suggesting?"

Waving her hand dismissively, Bastila shrugs airily. "Oh, you know, just a bit of misdirection."

"You want to lie to them," Juhani smirks a little at this.

"I want to convince them that we're supposed to be here so that we can get a head start in getting away." Bastila frowns thoughtfully. "If we can make them believe that we're just doing our job, same as them, we can be back to the surface before they can even figure out what went wrong."

Cracking his knuckles, Vann nods. "I think we can make that happen."

"And I can think of many reasons why this plan is a poor one." Narrowing her eyes, Juhani finally sighs dejectedly. "But I suppose it is the best that we can do. Even if we hide ourselves, they are sure to find our submersible." Bowing her head, she states, "I will trust your judgement, Vann."

"Smart move," Jolee whispers, voice muffled by the comm. "Now look sharp, they're disembarking their ship as we speak."

Nodding once, Vann straightens his jacket. "On it," he remarks, hand hovering over the door release. "You two ready?" he calls to his companions.

"As we'll ever be, I suppose." Bastila squares her shoulders, plastering on her most diplomatic smile.

Slamming his palm against the release plate, Vann catches the first traces of conversation as he makes his way out into the docking bay. It only takes a moment to spot the trio of Republic soldiers, their bright red-and-gold uniforms a stark contrast against the gloom of the station.

"...Priority is the girl," one soldier is saying. "You heard what the commander said, she must still be down here."

Anger bubbles up on Vann's gut, cold and familiar. He considers tamping it down, but the burst of emotion is too sudden for him to fully contain. Instead he embraces it, letting the outrage flow through his body, an almost soothing balm against his recent frustrations. "Are you talking about the Selkath girl?" The words leave his lips before he realizes that he's saying them, and he can feel both Bastila and Juhani glaring at him, their combined irritation a ripple through the Force.

Ignoring his companions, he strides confidently forward.

All three soldiers jump in alarm, drawing their pistols for their holsters and aiming the weapons at the trio of Force users. "Who are you?" one demands. "State your purpose for being down here."

Holding up both hands, Vann forces a friendly smile, keeping his voice as calm as he can manage with three enemy weapons pointed directly at him. "Relax," he assures the soldiers, "We're here for the same reason as you."

"Oh yeah?" One soldier, a woman, scowls doubtfully as she sizes-up the three unexpected strangers. "And what reason is that?"

"The Selkath," Vann replies easily. "The commander wants her captured and taken to the academy." He's not quite sure where he's getting this information from, but his subconscious seems to be readily supplying what he needs.
All three soldiers exchange knowing glances, though none of them lower their blasters. "What do you know about the academy?" one man demands.

"Same as you," Vann fights to keep his tone full of bravado, the easy smirk on his lips nothing more than a façade. He must have learned this information inside the station, but he's not sure where or how. And he's rapidly running out of answers. Sending a burst of panic through the Force, he casts what he hopes is an easy glance over his shoulder towards Juhani.

With a sharp intake of breath, the Cathar suddenly blurts out, "The academy. It is… where Force-sensitives are… personally trained by the Republic. Separate from the Jedi." She clears her throat awkwardly. "It is… a secret, no?"

Despite the awkward delivery, the information must be correct because all three soldiers shift into a more relaxed position. They study the three Force users more intently, seeming to note their durable clothing and modified blasters. "Let's just say that information is given out on a need-to-know basis," the female soldier states. "So, where'd you hear about it?"

"Like I said," Vann remarks, "Same as you. This information is a need-to-know? Well guess who needed to know?" He raises his chin in challenge as he calmly continues, "We're just doing what we were paid to do."

Two of the soldier exchange frustrated looks, one openly scoffing at the Force users. "I should have known they'd hire a bunch of nerf-brained mercenaries to make us look bad." He eyes them for a moment, lips spreading into a smug grin. "But I see you don't have the girl with you. So, I guess it's a job for us real soldiers after all."

"It would appear that way." Bastila gives an exasperated shrug as she takes a few steps towards the submarine where Jolee is currently eyeing both group warily. "Unfortunately, we didn't achieve our objective. A shame for us, but at least you get the chance to appear almost competent." With a smug little smirk, she reaches out and grasps Vann's forearm, giving it a rough tug.

Jerking her head towards the waiting submersible, the female soldier snorts derisively. "Hey, don't patronize us! The Republic shouldn't have trusted you lot to do a soldier's job. After all, we were part of the original team sent down to capture that girl." She frowns, glancing at her compatriots as she adds, "Almost had her too, at least until those other fish-faced freaks got in the way. Things got messy after that. Made us look bad in front of the commander."

Realization sits heavy in Vann's gut, and he lets the building fury spread out into his limbs, a powerful rush just beneath his skin. He feels Bastila's grasp on his arm loosen, and he easily twists away from her with a single jerk of his shoulders. "You were the original team?" he asks, tone low and eerily calm. It's unsettling enough to make all three soldier turn to look at him, confusion furrowing their brows. "You were the team who killed those scientists?"

"Our main objective was the girl," one soldier snaps defensively. "We did what we had to. Even you lot should know it's a bad idea to disappoint the Republic."

As he takes a step forward, Vann hears Juhani hiss low and deep in her throat. It's a feral sound that makes at least one of the soldiers shudder. "So, you're the ones who killed the girl's father?"

All three soldiers exchange worried glances, one of the men immediately shaking his head. Apprehension rolls off him, cold and slick in the Force. "How… did you know about that?" He clenches his teeth. "That's classified information."

Vann feels his Force connection flare out around him, radiating enough raw power that even the
Force-blind humans in front of him seem to sense his presence. They're clustering together now, attempting to square their shoulders even as their combined fear spreads like oil on water. "I have my ways," the mercenary replies, taking two more deliberate steps.

"Vann…" Juhani cautions, her hiss dying in her throat as she turns to glance at the waiting submersible. "We should get going. Let them handle what's inside."

"Yeah," the female soldier says, lip curling in distaste. "Let the real soldiers clean up your mess." She gives her compatriots a sly smirk. "And besides, you can't call us out for what happened before. Like you said earlier, we were just doing what they pay us to."

"Funny thing is," Vann admits darkly, "We're all just doing our jobs here." Juhani's shout of warning is drowned out by the sharp crackle of lightning as it erupts from Vann's fingertips, the brilliant purple forks of electricity arcing directly towards the cluster of soldiers. They scream as the bolts enter their flesh, bodies shaking uncontrollably as they're electrocuted by the sheer power of the Force.

Flipping through the air, Vann calls both of his lightsabers into his hands, igniting the blades before he even lands. Crouching low, both lengths of violet plasma carve a vicious path through the soldiers, his dominant hand jabbing forward just as his off-hand slashes to the side. Both sabers pierce their intended targets, one digging into a man's gut while the other sinks just below its victim's heart. Both soldiers are unable to do more than release a final gasp as they slump to the ground, bodies landing hard against the durasteel walkway. Lunging forward, Vann brings one blade up to the final soldier's throat, her unadulterated terror bleeding out in icy-cold tendrils. He stares the woman in the eyes, watching as her pupils dilate in realization, something almost akin to recognition dawning in her gaze.

"Re…" the soldier gasps out, but the rest of the words are silence by the blade that stabs through her throat in the same place that it pierced Shasa, both lives ended in a single, violent thrust.

Distantly, Vann notes that both times he utilized the weapon in his off-hand. Revan's lightsaber.

Powering down both blades, the mercenary takes a step back as the final body hits the floor, landing in a heap with her former comrades in arms. After surveying the scene one last time, he closes his eyes, fully aware of the color his irises have most likely faded to. He can still see the disbelief, and the disgust, written on Carth's face at seeing them flash yellow for that brief instant. The last thing Vann needs is for that expression to be repeated three more times across the features of three more trusted companions.

"Force dammit, kid! Was that really necessary?" Jolee's voice booms across the docking bay, the older man's footsteps echoing across the metal walkway and through the unnaturally silent room.

Eyes still closed, Vann grits out, "I had to kill a girl in that station, old man. Don't talk to me about what's necessary."

"So, what, you figured that if you killed one child, offing three adults ought to even the score?" barking out a harsh laugh, Jolee's footsteps draw closer. "Raw deal if I ever heard one."

Drawing a deep breath, Vann turns around, slowing opening his eyes in the process. Staring at the older Force user, he snarls, "Those soldiers killed her father! She saw it happen, and she fell to the dark side then and there. The insanity? The resulting deaths? That was all because she fell." Jerking the hilt of one lightsaber towards the corpses, he shouts, "And she fell because of these pieces of bantha shit!"
"They were not good people," Juhani states coldly, both of her arms crossed tightly over her chest. "But Shasa was also not an innocent child. She took lives, indirectly perhaps, but destroyed those individuals just the same." Drawing a slow breath, she whispers, "The ruination of one life does not instantly justify the taking of another."

"Oh, you're one to talk," Vann charges forward, shouldering past Jolee as he glares accusingly at the Cathar. "A minute ago, you were just as willing to rip their throats out! Probably with your teeth."

"But I resisted!" Voice raised in indignation, Juhani snarls back at the Human. "I took my passion and I focused it inward, using it to bolster my resolve and self-control!"

Vann doesn't back down, shouting right back, "And I took all of my negativity from earlier and used it to get some kriffing justice."

"Oh shut-up! Both of you!" Jolee shakes his head sadly, lips pulled into a disappointed frown. "Neither of you has the moral high ground here." He waves a dismissive hand, quickly noting, "Not that I have much ground to stand on either, not after everything I've seen and done in my lifetime. Come to think of it, Bastila's the only one with any moral superiority around here." He pauses, giving the Jedi a pointed look as he emphatically adds, "And you won't catch me saying this twice, but now might be the time to whip out one of those morally-superior lectures."

"I, er, well..." Stumbling over her own tongue, Bastila gives the older man a weak shrug.

Sighing, Jolee mutters, "Yeah. Atta girl. You tell 'em."

"So, then, you see..." the Jedi trails off again before exaggeratedly clearing her throat. "I do not condone anything that just happened here. After all, the Jedi believe that nobody, no matter how deplorable, deserves to die." She nods once, watching as the older Force users offers her a sarcastic nod of encouragement. "But then," she mutters a little more quietly, "There are some people in this galaxy whose presence won't exactly be missed. And, admittedly, many of those individuals do take orders from Malak. And, um..." A note of apprehension seeps into the Force bond, laced with a fair amount of anger.

"Way to show Vann here how to take the high road." With a final roll of his eyes, Jolee begins to trudge back towards the submarine, still shaking his head.

"Well excuse me!" Hands on her hips, Bastila turns to scowl at the older Human. "You know, I am trying my hardest to approach everyone and everything with the peace and serenity of a true Jedi Knight, and to release any negative emotions into the Force." She huffs out a breath through her nose. "But I am still a Padawan, and try as I might, sometimes there are certain individuals who I have trouble viewing with unconditional compassion and understanding. And I have a lot of difficulty feeling mercy and good will towards the type of people who kill a child's father just so they can capture her!" The usual warmth that she exudes fades to something colder and more sinister.

Shoulders slumping Jolee turns around, offering the Jedi a weak smile. "It's hard, isn't it?"

"It's exceedingly hard at times!" Bastila nods vigorously, tone still pitched as she continues, "And I truly am doing my best, but it's not as though my training has prepared me for any of this." She continues to glare at the older man, and for a moment all the arrogance and other negative emotions that normally lurk in the corners of her mind come rushing forward in a chilling surge. "So, Jolee, if you have something to say, perhaps you should say it yourself! And perhaps you should stop placing the burden of everyone's moral fortitude solely on my shoulders! Just because
you chose to leave the Order doesn't mean that you can foist-off the lectures that you don't want to give onto those who chose a different path!"

"Gee Bastila," Vann's eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "Tell us more about how you really feel."

"Argh!" Balling her hands into fists, the Jedi lets out a muffled screech of frustration before drawing two exceedingly slow breaths. Exhaling sharply, she finally manages to choke out, "I feel… that there is no emotion. That there is only peace. And there is no passion. Only serenity."

The darkness that was creeping around her begins to ebb away, though it does not completely fade.

Rolling her eyes, Juhani offers a doubtful nod. "Yes, of course," she agrees sarcastically. "That is exactly what you just demonstrated."

"And, in summation," Jolee announces, "You are all going to be excommunicated by the Jedi Council for your complete and utter failure to adhere to their pointlessly rigid moral code."

"Which is why we are not going to be telling them about this." Vann waves one of his 'saber hilts towards the three dead Republic soldiers. Pausing he also nods towards the station doors. "Or, possibly, any of that."

Arching an unimpressed brow, Jolee chuckles bemusedly. "Just out of curiosity, is there anything that you have been able to share with the sanctified eyes of the Council?"

"Yes, of course!" Bastila hurriedly assures the older man. "I've been able to tell them everything… Perhaps with a few creative edits here and there. But the heart of the story still remains true."

"Excommunication. Got it." Vann nods curtly to Jolee before sighing heavily. "It's not like I was really a Jedi anyway."

Some unidentifiable emotion flickers across Juhani's face, and she quickly hurries after the mercenary. "You are a Jedi," she insists. "I… I apologize if my earlier words have caused you to doubt yourself. You cannot walk the path of a Jedi in a single day. There are many twists and turns…"

"You don't have to make me feel better," Vann insists, offering the Cathar a thin smile as they both make their way towards Bwaas's submarine. "I'm fine. I just…"

As they approach the craft, Bastila and Jolee close behind, the crackle of the comm system cuts into their conversation. Carth's voice is garbled by the distance, but the mercenary can still catch the note of panic in his tone. "Come in, come in! Are you there? Dammit, Vann, don't make me come down there and get you…"

Running the rest of the way down the durasteel walkway, Vann practically dives through the submarine's door as he scrambles to reach the submersible's small comm terminal. Smacking his palm against the flashing red button, his voice is somewhat breathless as he answers. "Yes! We're here! Just, uh… just had some things to take care of."

"Oh, thank the Force…" Relief floods Carth's voice for an instant, though it's quickly overshadowed by suspicion. "Wait, what type of 'things'? What are you four up to down there? Do I even want to know?"

"Huh. Probably not," Vann states candidly. "Just a lot of 'funny stories' that you're not going to find funny."

There's a crackle of static before Carth sarcastically mutters, "Oh, well, fantastic."
"Get to the point already!" Jolee snaps. "You comm'd us for a reason, didn't you?"

"I did," Carth admits, voice distorted by the speaker. "And, I hate to say it, but it's not good news."

"So, then, spit it out!" Sighing heavily, Jolee grumbles, "It's not like any of us are getting any younger."

Another pause causes a fresh burst of static that almost drown out Carth's next words. "The Republic found out where we are, and they're trying to prevent us from leaving the planet," he explains quickly, words rushed and running together. Even from this distance, the fear is almost palpable when he speaks. "I don't know how they figured it out, but…"

"Vann! This is why killing those soldiers was an unwise decision," Juhani bares her teeth as she adds, "It may have been satisfying, but…"

Carth sputters as he yelps, "Wait a second, Vann did what?"

"Nothing that has anything to do with the current problem," the mercenary snaps in response. "Since that only happened about five minutes ago. Not enough time for the Republic to track us down."

"…No," Carth still sounds doubtful, even as he admits, "We've been monitoring this situation for about six hours now. I didn't want to contact you until it was completely necessary, since I wanted to give you as much time as possible to complete Bwaas's mission."

"But now it's necessary," Vann finishes. "And we need to get our asses back to the surface."

"Yeah, that about sums it up." There's terse silence on the other end of the comm, and all four Force users can practically hear the pilot's teeth grinding in agitation. "I've already contacted Bwaas, and he's going to meet you at the docks. Negotiate your pay, and then get to the Hawk. We need to fly."

"On it!" Gesturing to the autopilot, Vann shoots Jolee a pointed look before calling out orders to the others. "Get the door closed and the submarine prepared to dive. The pressurization sequence takes a few minutes so start it now. Come on, hurry up!"

"Of course!" Juhani replies, jerking the craft's door shut as the rest of the crew take their places.

There's another burst of static, and a few voices can be heard from the other end of the comm. Carth returns a moment later. "Sorry about that, I'm just getting the last of the gear loaded onto the Hawk. Take as much time as you need to make sure you're safe, but be as fast as possible. It seems like the Republic is trying to convince the Selkath to detain us. It will take a while, but…"

"The Selkath will give in eventually." Sighing, Vann hovers near the copilot's seat, studying the auto navigation. "We should be up in about an hour."

"Good enough. I'll see you topside." Carth's voice is still strained, though it's partially drowned out by the noise of the submersible's engine. "Just… be careful, okay?"

"Aren't we always?" Vann chuckles, the joke falling flat.

"Of course, Carth," Bastila reassures the pilot. "And thank you for keeping us apprised of the situation, and for handling our affairs in Ahto City."

"Now sit down and strap in," Jolee orders. "Because things are about to get real interesting."
Chapter End Notes

1. I debated showing Shasa's death "on screen," but really wanted to return to Vann's 
POV after he was back to being an amnesiac mercenary. Sorry if this feels a bit cheap.

2. Has anyone else watched Die Hard with a Vengeance? I was reminded of that movie 
while writing the scene where the characters overload the harvester. (FYI – There's a 
scene where the Die Hard heroes have to solve the same riddle.)

3. And that finishes Manaan! Gee, I can't remember, what part of the game usually 
comes after the fourth Star Map is discovered?

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Chapter Summary

In which our heroes discover that you can't outrun your problems no matter how hard you gun the engines. Quick thinking may save some lives, but sometime even the worst laid plans don't work out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

18.

"Kriffing hells, can't this hunk of garbage go any faster?" Vann's knuckles are white with tension as he digs his fingers into the back of Carth's seat. His eyes are glued to the monitor that's tracking the movement of the six Republic fighters aggressively tailing the Ebon Hawk.

"We're going as fast as we can!" Teeth clenched, the pilot pulls up on the ship's controls, attempting to steer the freighter into a sharp, banking turn. As he flips several switches to adjust power between the engines, he hisses, "And the Ebon Hawk is not garbage!"

"The hyperdrive takes too long to warm up, the plating can barely stand up to a set of barricades, and the engines aren't going fast enough." The screech of cannon fire echoes across the Hawk's hull, one hit rocking the entire vessel. Vann is thrown to the side, barely managing to remain standing as he tightens his grip on the headrest. Glaring at Carth, he snaps, "So, as far as I'm concerned, this ship is garbage!"

Another direct hit shakes the freighter as Bastila frantically checks readouts from her place in the copilot's seat. "Unfortunately, things are looking rather bleak right now!"

"No! We're going to get out of this," Vann shouts over the shriek of the Hawk's cannons returning fire. An explosion flashes off the ship's starboard side, and he thinks he hears Canderous let out a whoop of victory from over in the turrets. Glancing back at the monitor, he sees that three fighters are still close behind. "We just... need to fly faster. Dammit, Carth!"

Jerking the controls hard to port, the pilot flips another switch as he grits out, "How many ways can I tell you, we can't go any faster!"

"Clearly, I'm not listening!" It's a half-truth, since part of Vann's hearing is currently consumed by the rapid pounding of his own heart. Dozens of scenarios race through his head including capture, torture, execution, and unutterable looming horrors that lurk in the darkest depths of his mind. He closes his eyes, trying to clear those thoughts and release his fears into the Force.

It doesn't work. But that seems to be the theme for this particular series of increasingly frustrating events. While Vann and the other Force users managed to make it up from Manaan's ocean and onto dry land without incident, that was where their luck ended. Bwaas was late meeting them at the docks, which delayed them just long enough for the Republic to convince the Selkath government that the Ebon Hawk needed to be detained. Unwilling to be captured without a fight, the crew agreed that illegally leaving Manaan was their only option. Which lead to the ship taking
off amidst the adamant protests of several Selkath officials, and then careening through not one but two durasteel barricades designed to keep them in port.

This resulted in the Hawk trailing debris as it screamed through Manaan's atmosphere at a speed that Carth described as "a really bad idea," all while desperately trying to prepare for an emergency jump to hyperspace. That jump never happened, since they immediately discovered a Republic ambush waiting for the freighter the moment they exited atmosphere. This was set to the tune of the ship's systems blaring warnings that the hull plating was damaged in the initial escape and that the hyperdrive was still too cold to propel the ship to light speed. All of which placed the Ebon Hawk and her crew in this current pile of bantha shit.

"Hold on tight, this might get a little rough!" Pressing the ship's controls as far down as they'll physically go, Carth sends the freighter into a stomach-churning dive. Anything not bolted down immediately lurches forward, including Vann.

"Ow!" the mercenary yelps as his nose is crushed against the headrest he was clutching. Not taking his eyes off the monitors, Carth shouts back, "Would you sit down and put on a seatbelt or something?!"

Vann has a biting retort on the tip of his tongue, but it's cut off by the shriek of the Hawk's cannons as Canderous fires another round at the fighters that are momentarily swerving haphazardly right about them. A shower of sparks erupts overhead as one of their pursuers is hit, the wing of the craft exploding and sending it plummeting through space. There's another roar of appreciation from the turrets, this one peppered with several Mando'a expletives.

"Hey, we might make it out of this," Vann hisses under his breath, still pressed close to the pilot's seat as the ship gradually pulls back into a level position.

Slim hand white-knuckled on one of the levers, Bastila manages a weak smile. "According to your logic, you just jinxed us," she remarks. "I did not…" Vann's next words are drowned out by a klaxon blaring through the bridge. Several monitors begin blinking in tandem, their strobing red lights only adding to the surrounding chaos. Leaning in closer, his voice is edged with panic as he asks, "That's the hyperdrive coming online, right?"

"Nope, definitely not the hyperdrive!" Carth's tone is strained as he stares at one monitor, a huge shape suddenly visible against the black expanse of space.

Drawing a sharp breath, Bastila's voice is strained as she announces, "An Interdictor-class ship just appeared out of hyperspace."

"Kriffing hells!" Carth switches the view on one screen to a real-time shot of the ship's port side. "That's got to be one of the Republic's flagships. Are they broadcasting a call sign?"

Bastila is silent for a moment, pale eyes wide as she stares at the comm system display. Meekly, she nods her head. "It's certainly a flagship," she responds. "One associated with… two very specific Republic figures."

Turning to watch the Jedi, Vann feels a surge of anxiety flood their Force bond. "And those two figures would be…?"

"That ship is the Leviathan," Bastila breathes, slowly facing her companions. "It's the command vessel of Admiral Saul Karath." She swallows hard before continuing, "And when the occasion
arises, Supreme Commander Malak."

All the breath leaves Vann's lungs as he stares at the Jedi in disbelief. "Shit," he finally manages to eloquently surmise.

"We can't outrun them!" Carth announces, tone thick with dread as his hands grip the Ebon Hawk's controls.

"We can sure as hells try!" Glaring at the pilot, Vann wedges himself between the seats and begins to adjust several levers. "Maybe you can shift power between…"

The freighter rocks violently, its hull shuddering as something powerful halts the craft in mid-flight. The engines whine as they try to fight the pull, but it's of little use. Carth sighs heavily as he meets the mercenary's gaze, slowly stating, "We can't outrun them because they have us trapped in their gravity wells, and there's a kriffing tractor beam locked on us!"

"Oh." Realization settles cold and hard in the pit of Vann's stomach, and he can feel his own fear seeping into the mental link he shares with Bastila. Unlike usual, she doesn't send any comfort or reassurance back to him. Acceptance is bitter on his tongue as he softly asks, "How long until they pull us in?"

Carth taps a few commands into a screen before grimly reporting, "Ten minutes if we don't fight this, twenty if we do? I can gun the engines and push against the beam, but with that interdiction field around us, we can't enter hyperspace. All it'll do is buy us time…"

"Time? I can use time!" Pushing away from the Hawk's console, Vann yanks the commlink from his belt, adjusting its frequency to send an alert to the rest of his companions. "Attention Ebon Hawk crew members," he shouts, "This is a kriffing emergency, so get your asses to the main hold! I have an idea, but it's not going to be pretty…"

"I can't decide if that's better or worse than being captured," Carth grumbles as he shifts most of the freighter's energy into her engines. The ship lurches from the increased power, though the struggle does little against the inevitable pull of the Leviathan's tractor beam.

Already racing through the bridge, Vann barely slows down as he calls over his shoulder, "Hurry up. We don't have much time!" He doesn't pause to see if his companions follow, but a moment later he can hear their footsteps echoing over the durasteel floor behind him. The hallways of the ship are a blur as he barrels through them, panting heavily by the time he skids to a halt in the main hold. Mission and Zaalbar are already there, staring at each other with unabashed concern. Juhani appears a moment later, slipping through the corridors like a ghost.

"Canderous is on his way," the Cathar announces. "And Jolee…"

"Is here, dammit." The older Force user rubs his lower back as he wanders in from the medical bay. "Can't expect an old man to just jump up and run at a moment's notice, you know!"

The heavy thudding of boots and clank of armor announces the Mandalorian's arrival, a murderous expression etched across his face. "What's so kriffing important that you made me leave the turrets?! I don't know about you, but I'm not going down without a fight!"

Vann bites his lower lip, fingers combing through his hair as he looks around at the assembled crew. Eyes lingering on Carth for an extra moment, he sighs softly as he explains, "So, the bad news is that there's an Interdictor-class ship called the Leviathan just off our port side. It's got the Hawk in its tractor beam, trapped in a gravity well." He pauses for a moment to let the implication
of his words sink it. "We're gunning the engines to buy time, but… They're going to capture us. It's not an 'if' anymore. It's a 'when'."

Dark eyes panning the room, Vann watches the mixture of fear and anger that alights on the faces of the crew. For their parts, Carth and Bastila remain surprisingly stoic, though the Jedi keeps wringing her hands together, notes of trepidation leaking into the Force bond. However, it's the pilot who speaks up first. "Force help me for even mentioning this, but you said that you have a plan?"

"Yes." The mercenary nods once, drawing a deep breath. "The Republic doesn't know how many of us are on this ship, or what type of shape we're in. They also don't know who is and isn't Force-sensitive, aside from me and Bastila."

Frowning, Mission presses closer to Zaalbar. "So, what, you're going to trick them or something?"

"Actually, you're going to trick them." Vann forces a grin. "All of you. As a crew."

A murmur of disbelief passes through the motley little group as everyone begins speaking at once, simultaneously asking questions while demanding further details and explanations. It's Bastila's surprisingly calm voice that finally breaks through the din. "While that sounds like a clever plan, do you really think it will work?"

"No idea," Vann replies candidly. "But it's the best I could come up with in the time we have. And if we're screwed either way, we might as well make the most of it." He turns to look at the stealth specialists. "Mission and Juhani, you're both good at evading detection. Hide yourselves before the Republic boards, and then sneak out behind them. Once you're on the Leviathan, stay hidden and try to help the rest of us."

Plastering on a smile that's all false bravado, Mission nods. "No problem, V-Man. Nobody sees me unless I want 'em to!"

"Of course." Juhani bows her head. "I will do whatever I can to assist you."

"Zaalbar," Vann begins, tone chagrined, "You're probably going to be captured. I don't think they're going to be able to ignore you, buddy. But, if you can leave a trail, I'm sure Mission can free you pretty quickly once she's inside. Plus, you'll know where the brig is and can slice into its computer system."

There's a trill of acknowledgment from the Wookiee. "I trust you and Mission," he states.

Humming in satisfaction, Vann continues, "Jolee, they don't know you're Force-sensitive. They'll probably think you're just some old man, so they might not put you under heavy security."

"I am an old man," Jolee snaps, a smirk forming on his lips. "But I think I know where you're going with this. I assume that, once they lock me up, I should… convince them to let me out?"

"Exactly." Nodding, Vann gestures to the Wookiee. "Plus, if you're taken to the same containment area, you can help Zaalbar out if Mission can't."


Frowning, Canderous's tone is terse as he asks, "And what about me? When do I start taking out some of these Republic sons of kath hounds?"

"Initially, you don't," Vann admits with an apologetic smile. "But I do have a question. How good
"is your healing mod?"

"It's pretty damn good." Tapping his chest, Canderous adds, "It's kept me alive through more than a few battles where I should have been dead twice over."

"Excellent news." Arching a brow, Vann carefully asks, "How badly injured can you appear before it kicks in? Maybe… bad enough to make someone think you need a sick bay and not a prison cell?"

Tapping one of the many grenades that he has clipped to his belt, Canderous chuckles darkly as he confirms, "Oh, I think I can make that happen." He pauses, staring at the mercenary. "But once I'm there…?"

"Once you're inside the ship, help the others however you can, using…” Trailing off, Vann puts extra emphasis on his next words. "Whatever methods you deem necessary."

A pleased grin spreads over Canderous's face, and his rubs his hands together. "Oh, this is going to be fun."

"Yeah, fun…” Carth scowls. "That's not the word I'd use. And anyway, what about the droids? Tee-Three has some pretty sensitive information stored in his memory."

Vann gestures towards the workshop. "H-Kay is already powered down since I was making some repairs and upgrades on him before we landed on Manaan." He rolls his eyes a little as he adds, "And I didn't power him back up because, apparently, nobody likes being left on the ship with him…"

"He's threatened to kill all of us!" Carth shouts defensively. "Repeatedly!"

"Aw, he's just joking," Vann reassures the pilot. "But anyway, I figure I can keep H-Kay powered down. I doubt they'll take what appears to be a disassembled droid." He casts an imploring glance at the Twi'lek. "Hey Mission, can you hide Tee-Three's core memory behind some sort of firewall? Maybe make it harder to wipe him or access his main drives?" He pauses for a moment before quickly adding, "And while you're at it, do you think that you can make him look like he's powered down? You know, remove some plating or something?"

Pursing her lips thoughtfully, the teen finally nods in agreement. "Yeah, sure. All of that should be easy enough. But he won't be much use on that Republic ship without some armor and weapons."

"I want him to stay here," Vann explains. "Once the Republic is gone, he can run the Hawk's systems from almost anywhere on the ship. Patch into comms, start the engines, you get the idea…"

"Oh, hey, that's some smart thinking V-Man!" Mission nods approvingly. "Droids are pretty clever when it comes to that sort of thing."

Nodding, Vann looks around at the crew. "Alright, you have less than fifteen minutes to make any last-minute preparations. Conceal your weapons, slice your comms, do whatever you need to survive on that ship. Because I expect to see everyone back here when this is all over." He makes a shooing motion with his hands as he orders, "Now go! Get to work!"

For a moment, the hold is a flurry of noise and activity as the various members of the Ebon Hawk's crew rush to make plans and gather supplies. Mission has her arms wrapped tightly around Zaalbar, giving him a final hug as he gently pats the top of her head with his massive hand. Jolee and Juhani are both more somber, breaking away from the group to go their own ways. And for his part,
Canderous is grinning with glee as he rushes into the workshop. Seconds later the hold is eerily quiet, only three Humans left staring awkwardly at each other.

"And, for the rest of us..." Vann sighs again as he looks at his remaining companions.

Carth interrupts the mercenary before he can say more. "I don't care what type of plan you have for me. Karath is on that ship, and... I owe him. For what he did to my family."

"I was afraid you'd say that." Offering the pilot a terse smile, Vann attempts a nonchalant shrug, though the gesture just feels weary. "Look, go and do whatever you think you need to." The façade of composure quickly falls away, his voice growing solemn as he adds, "But don't... don't get yourself killed. Or, you know, get any of us killed while you're at it."

"I would never..." Carth's tone is vaguely insulted as he sputters, "You know that I wouldn't put anyone else at risk. But this is... it's just something I have to do."

"I can help you get onto the ship." Bastila's voice is timid, but it does help ease the tension that's building. "I've been on the Leviathan before. While I haven't exactly memorized its layout, I'm at least familiar with some of the levels."

"You are the last person who should be running around on one of the Republic's kriiffing flagships!" Scoffing in disbelief, Vann shakes his head at his companion. "If anyone recognizes your face, or if Malak sees you..."

Squaring her shoulders, Bastila's tone strengthens as she argues, "If Malak is on that ship, he'll be able to sense me no matter what. Attempting to hide from him will be futile, and will only lead to more problems for everyone else."

"So, what are you going to do?" Brows furrowed, Vann glares at the Jedi challengingly. "Just walk onto the ship and announce that you're back?"

A faint grin plays at Bastila's lips as she drawls, "Actually..."

Balking at the very idea, Carth quickly shakes his head. "I just... I can't let you do that, Bastila. Like I said, I don't want anyone else to get hurt because of me."

Chuckling softly, the Jedi regards the pilot with a half-smile. "Oh, I doubt that anyone is going to hurt me." She primly arches one brow. "They might even give me a commendation. After all, I'll have escaped rebel custody with a Republic deserter as my prisoner."

"What?!" Vann gapes in astonishment. "No way! Do you know how insane that sounds?"

"Any more insane than the idea that one man with a pair of blaster pistols can somehow make his way through one of the Republic's flagships, past all the guards and the security measures, to face down the ship's commanding officer?" Pointedly watching both men, Bastila patiently waits for a response.

"And you're just going to what?" Vann gestures frantically between his companions. "Mind-trick your way through the entire kriiffing security staff and take Carth straight to the admiral?"

Turning to face the Jedi, Carth's tone is almost pleading as he asks, "Can you do that? Can you get me directly to Karath?"

"It will be a bit tricky," Bastila admits. "But I can be quite persuasive when I want."
"This entire plan is a nightmare." Vann is deadpan as he looks between his companions. "There is no possible way that this will work."

"Perhaps not." Shrugging weakly, Bastila sends a flare of bright hope through the Force bond. It feels oddly warm amongst the cold doubts and fears that swirl through the mercenary's mind. "But then, what other choice do we have? We can't run, and if we try to hide, Malak will find us. Or Karath will torture one of the other crewmembers until we reveal ourselves. Either way, the result won't be pleasant."

Glancing at the mercenary, Carth winces slightly. "It's not a great plan. But we've somehow gotten by on worse." He clenches his jaw, jutting his chin out defiantly. "And if there's a chance, even a slim one, that this will get me to Karath, I have to take it."

"I'll do my best to get you there. And if we make it, I'll hand you my blaster to do with what you will." Placing a hand over her heart, Bastila bows her head. "You have my word as a Jedi."

"So, you idiots are really going to do this?" Vann is still staring at the other Humans, shoulders slowly slumping in defeat. As they both nod their heads, he turns towards the workshop with a dramatic sigh. "Fine. Let me just get some gear…"

Bastila cants her head curiously to the side. "What's your plan, then?"

"Well," Vann begins, pausing mid-stride. "First I'm going to grab that spare stealth unit that Mission has been tinkering with."

"Do you… really think that you'll be able to avoid detection on a Republic flagship?" Carth's tone is doubtful. "I mean, I know you can be sneaky when you need to be, but there's going to be a lot of eyes watching the crew."

"And then," Vann continues, as though the pilot never spoke, "I'm going to trail the two of you onto the Leviathan."

Eyes snapping open in surprise, Carth rushes to try and stand in the mercenary's way. "Uh-uh! No!" Attempting to physically block the corridor between the main hold and the workshop, he holds out both arms. "It's bad enough Bastila is putting herself in danger for this. But you…"

"I made you a promise." Vann crosses his arms over his chest, waiting for the other man to move. Pushing his face closer to his companion's, Carth snaps back, "And I told you that there was no way in hells that I'm holding you to that!"

Exhaling in frustration, Vann doesn't budge. "Like the Jedi Council said, I'm not very good at doing what I'm told."

"You do realize that he's a stubborn ass, don't you?" Bastila glances at the pilot from the corner of her eye. "He'll find a way to follow us. Best to accept his help now than to fight it later."

Amusement flowing through their mental connection, Vann casts the Jedi a thankful smirk. "I'll take that as a compliment," he states, moving to duck beneath the pilot's left arm.

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Finally giving in and taking a step away from the corridor, Carth frowns. "Fine, so I can't stop you." Tone softening, he implores, "But at least tell me what you're planning."

Unfastening his own belt to make room for the stealth unit, Vann replies, "Mostly I'll just be following you in case you need help." He arches a brow. "Or a distraction." Patting one of his
lightsabers he airily adds, "Because, as you both know, I can be really distracting when I need to be."

With a final sigh, Carth manages to roll his eyes. "Yes, we're aware." Glancing between his crewmates he swallows hard, muttering, "Well, let's hope this is just another terrible idea that we live to regret."

* * *

'Don't see me, don't see me,' Vann thinks to himself as he approaches another set of guards, feeling remarkably clumsy as he attempts to move past them without making a sound. While he possesses some basic stealth skills, he rarely relies on them. Charm and martial talent have always been his best weapons, and sneaking around is usually reserved for emergencies. But then, his life has recently become one unending crisis.

Miraculously, the guards seem to completely ignore Vann as he cautiously slinks past them, his body pressed against the durasteel wall as he tries to remain concealed by the almost non-existent shadows. The belt around his waist emits a soft sputtering noise, something it's been doing intermittently for the last several minutes. Once again, he wonders if the unit is still functioning. When Mission uses her stealth field generator sentients still subconsciously notice her, but their eyes can't quite pierce the illusionary field created by her belt. But Vann's experience has been completely different. The guards seem to completely ignore him, never looking his way and instinctively stepping around the spaces he occupies. It's as though they're being kept at bay by some other power… Whatever it is, he's just grateful that it's working.

One hand moves to instinctively touch his commlink, but Vann pauses, remembering that the device is turned off. He's had to go dark from the rest of the crew out of fear that any transmissions could ruin his cover. At least he was able to stay on the Ebon Hawk long enough to see the Republic soldiers board and drag Jolee and Zaalbar away in binders, quickly followed by Canderous draped sloppily over a stretcher. As far as he knows things are going to plan, with Mission and Juhani hidden and doing their jobs from the shadows. At least, he hopes that's what's going on.

Unfortunately, Vann hasn't been able to keep tabs on the rest of the crew. He's been occupied with trailing Carth and Bastila, watching as the latter bluffs and mind-tricks her way past the various guards aboard the Leviathan. Most of the Republic soldiers seem to be more interested in her 'prisoner' and less worried about the details of why she's back, though he doubts that luck will last. Apparently, the guards on this level are less skilled than those who work closer to the bridge and thus closer to Karath. At least, that seems to be the message the Jedi has been coding into her carefully-disguised running commentary to her 'captive.'

"We're just going to head right onto this elevator," Bastila orders, jerking Carth by the modified binders that restrain his arms behind his back. While they look convincing enough, one quick twist of his wrists and he'll be free. "Two floors up is the bridge, where Karath is sure to be."

The pilot remains silent, his features schooled into a neutral expression, though there's visible tension to the set of his shoulders. A mixture of excitement and fear radiate off him and into the Force, combining with the seething anger that's been roiling around him since they boarded the Leviathan.

The elevator opens a few moments after Bastila hits the button to summon the car, revealing a wide durasteel space obviously designed to transport cargo or a large number of troops. Thankfully it's empty right now, enabling all three humans to board without further questions. With a quick shove, the Jedi guides her charge into the car with Vann following close behind. "Of course, we're not
going to head straight to the bridge," she explains. "With any luck, Karath will want to interrogate you personally in one of the prison chambers." Trepidation flows through the Force bond as she breathes, "So it will be just you, me, and him. Alone in a room."

Vann tries to send a note of comfort through the mental connection, but he can feel his own anxieties creeping in. Still sneaking along, he presses his back against the smooth metal of the car's wall as the elevator lurches upwards. Just as he positions himself behind his companions the belt sputters again, slightly louder this time.

"I'll be taking you to a solitary cell," Bastila states, the words sounding surprisingly menacing despite her crisp accent. Vann sends a quick note of curiosity to her, trying to inquire why she's keeping up their ruse despite the elevator being otherwise unoccupied. In response, her eyes flick towards a point in the upper corner of the car where a single pinprick of green light blinks at a steady interval.

Ah, so there's a camera. Vann nods at first, forgetting that he's theoretically invisible even to his crewmates. Remembering himself, he directs a burst of understanding towards the Jedi. She merely lowers her eyes back down until she's staring straight ahead, expression pinched but otherwise calm. While they could open the Force bond farther to communicate more efficiently, Bastila was adamant about keeping their Force presence to a minimum. Though they'd quickly learned that Malak wasn't aboard the Leviathan, the Jedi warned that her former master monitors the ship via several Force users loyal to him. Any one of them could be alerted to trouble if they sense strong Force powers being used.

So, Vann has been keeping his Force awareness pulled close to him, the energy surging just beneath his skin and prevented from traveling past his body. His mental shields are also in place, wrapped tightly around his thoughts to protect them from anyone attempting to sense his presence. He assumes that's why he doesn't feel the shiver of warning that shoots down his spine until just as the elevator car is shuddering into place at its intended floor. Sensing the impending danger through the Force, Vann sends a burst of warning to Bastila as he reaches for his lightsabers. Both hilts are grasped in his hands, though not powered up, as the elevator doors slide open with a pneumatic hiss.

Standing directly in front of the doors is a Human man dressed in a Republic officer's uniform. What hair is visible from beneath his cap is completely gray, though his blue eyes are sharp and clear for his age. Wearing a smirk, he greets the elevator's occupants with a dark chuckle as he uses one hand to gesture towards the no-less-than twenty soldiers flanking him. They're all carrying rifles and clothed in the black plastoid armor of the Republic's elite forces. Every single one of them has their weapon trained inside the elevator, fingers hovering on the triggers.

"Hello Bastila," the officer growls at the Jedi. "What a pleasant surprise."

Vann sees both of his companions stiffen at the appearance of the troops, recognition flashing in their eyes. Unbridled rage flows from Carth, flooding the Force with icy coldness. Bastila's hands grip her binders, her arms flexing as she visibly moves to hold him back should the need arise. Despite the terse situation, her voice is calm as she speaks. "Admiral Karath," she greets the man politely, tone smooth even as she floods the bond with trepidation. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Some of my men reported that you were on board," Karath explains, sounding amused.

Nodding to the pilot, Bastila hurriedly explains, "Yes, I'm here to deliver a prisoner to you, admiral. This is Carth Onasi, a wanted..."
"How stupid do you think I am?" Stepping forward, Karath frowns at the man formerly under his command. "I know exactly who Carth Onasi is, just like I know that you're working with him to betray the Republic." Practically rolling his eyes in contempt, he sighs softly. "As soon as I heard you were here, I contacted your master. The Supreme Commander was very interested to hear that you'd been captured, and is on his way here as we speak."

Smiling beatifically at the admiral, Bastila's tone is surprisingly unperturbed as she recites her prepared excuse. "The rebels did, in fact, capture me on Taris. I was only recently able to escape by taking Onasi hostage and..."

Sneering, Karath tuts disapprovingly as he meets the Jedi's gaze. "An unlikely story."

"It's true! Everything she says!" Carth's tone is rough with anger as he grits out, "I captured her on Taris. I wanted to ransom her to get to you, but she used those mind-tricks of hers to fool the rest of the crew into letting her escape."

The resounding smack of knuckles connecting with flesh and bone echoes through the cavernous elevator car. Shoulders still turned from the force of his punch, Karath remains unruffled as he examines the blood smeared across his fist. "Oh Carth," he chides, "You never were a very good liar." Retrieving a handkerchief from his pocket he wipes away the streak of gore, smiling grimly as he watches the blood flow freely from the pilot's freshly-split lip. "No matter, the Supreme Commander will uncover the truth once he arrives. But until then, I'm to learn what I can from you." He pauses, turning to stare at where Vann is crouched and ready to attack. "All three of you."

Vann was halfway across the car the moment the admiral's fist made contact with Carth's face, rage flowing cold and familiar through his limbs and his mind already fading into the fog of battle. He knows that he can cut down several of the soldiers before they realize what's happening, and there's a chance that he can keep his promise and take down Karath before things get really dangerous. If nothing else, he can give the others time to run and regroup. But the Republic officer's cold stare leveled directly at his face causes him to pause, even as his legs tense in anticipation as the Force crackles cold and raw around him.

Eyes narrowing in warning, the admiral cautions, "Don't try anything. Your little Jedi tricks may fool the weak-minded into not noticing you, but you can't fool me. The Supreme Commander has personally trained me to resist such tactics. And besides," he smirks cruelly as he explains, "I doubt you can stop us all before my men put quite a few bolts into the heads of your friends."

It takes a moment for the words to sink in, but when they do Vann reels with the realization. The implication that he's been mind-tricking others into ignoring him explains a lot, including the rope ladder incident on Kashyyyk. He briefly wonders how the admiral can see through the stealth unit, but then he remembers the sputtering noise the belt's been making. It must have stopped functioning at some point, hopefully after he entered the elevator. Choking down his frustration, he glares defiantly at the Republic officer as he demands, "What do you want from us, Karath?"

"Come with me and answer a few questions truthfully," the admiral replies evenly, his tone a mockery of amiable conversation.

"Like we have a choice in the matter?" Defeat is sour on Vann's tongue as he cranes his neck around to spot the multitude of red dots leveled at both Carth and Bastila's foreheads. As much as he hates to admit it, Karath is right. Nothing he can do will stop every single one of those bolts, and a single shot is all it will take to kill one or both of his companions. He's willing to be reckless with his own life, but he has enough integrity not to risk the others.
Sensing his victory, the admiral gestures his men forward as he feigns modesty. "Oh, you always have a choice. After all, I'm not a Jedi. I can't bend your minds to my will." Watching as the soldiers move to apprehend his trio of prisoners, he warns, "Though, making the wrong choice will still have devastating consequences."

Vann can't help the growl that escapes his throat as two of the soldiers yank the lightsaber hilts from his fists. Passing the weapons to Karath, they manhandle his arms behind his back before securing binders around his wrists. He sees Carth and Bastila receiving the same treatment, and for a moment he feels sparks dancing at his fingertips. Anger surges icy-cold in his gut and he's ready to unleash Force lightning, consequences be damned. But then a soldier snaps something heavy and metallic around his neck. For a moment, the object rests inertly against his skin before suddenly powering up and sending a jolt of pain racing through down his spine and through his body. It's as though a thousand needles are digging directly into his nerves, setting them on fire as agony burns through every inch of muscle and skin, searing straight down to his bones. Barely able to swallow his scream, the lightning fizzles against his palms.

It takes several moments for the pain to subside, but when it does it leaves behind a yawning void. Vann's entire being feels oddly disconnected, as though something's missing from the very core of his existence. He attempts to send his Force awareness out to determine what's wrong, only to find that his connection has dimmed to little more than a muted hum at the back of his mind. The Force is still there but it's somehow dulled, leaving a gaping hole where its presence should be. Panic seizes him at this realization, his eyes going wide before shifting to stare accusingly at the admiral. Even before Vann's time on Dantooine the Force was always a part of him, subconscious as it was. Now he feels stripped of something as integral to his being as a second skin, leaving him bared and vulnerable.

"I see you like our neural collars." Karath jerks the mercenary up by the metal ring locked tightly around his neck, a small remote clutched in the other hand. Holding the device up, he makes a show of examining the series of white buttons that adorn one side. "They're designed to deliver a shock straight to the nervous system. A quick and effective way to get answers from stubborn individuals such as yourself. Fortunately, these collars have the unintended side effect of suppressing a Force user's powers. Quite the useful discovery."

Without thinking, Vann lunges for the admiral, only for a second jolt of agony to shoot through his body through the collar. This time he can't hold back his howl of pain as he collapses to his knees, vision temporarily going white from the sheer neural overload. Even after the shocks subside his body continues to twitch and burn, his chest heaving as he tries to catch his breath. "Kriffing bastard!" he finally manages to pant out, even as he's hauled to his feet by a set of guards. He can't even summon the energy to fight them as they drag him past their commanding officer.

"Get these three comfortable," Karath orders. "Our conversation is just getting started."

* * *

Vann's not sure how long he's left alone in his small, durasteel prison cell. It's long enough for his shoulders to ache from the pressure of having his arms tightly bound behind his back, and then for the joints to go numb from holding the position for too long. At first, he tries to remain standing, pacing the small room as he yells obscenities into the silence. But after a while his voice grows hoarse, the muscles in his thighs cramping from the sheer exhaustion that he's been fighting off since coming to his senses in Hrakert Station. Eventually, he collapses onto the floor of the tiny room, wedging himself into one corner and keeping his eyes trained on the firmly locked door.

The silence that surrounds Vann is maddening, the muted sound of his own breathing seeming to
echo off the sterile walls. Trapped with nothing but his own thoughts, his disconnect from the Force is even more of a void within his mind, reminding him that an intrinsic part of his being has been stripped away. He tries probing his bond with Bastila, but with their Force-sensitivity suppressed to almost nothing, the mental connection is nearly impossible to detect. He grits his teeth, jaw aching from how had he's been clenching it.

The cell itself is a stark little box and consists of nothing but durasteel panels from floor to ceiling. It's almost exactly ten paces wide and long, something that Vann discovered from prowling back and forth repeatedly while shouting a number of colorful things about Karath's mother. The entire room smells strongly of disinfectant, though there's an underlying coppery odor that could be from the metal components. Or it could be lingering traces of blood from whoever occupied this space previously. Unlike the communal cells that the group was lead past, this one contains no bed or toilet. He suspects that the Republic has no plans to keep him alive long enough to need them.

Growling in frustration, Vann presses his head against the cold metal of the wall. The frigid surface chills his too-cool skin, and he shivers as he draws his knees to his chest to preserve heat. Before tossing him roughly into this cell, Karath's men made sure to strip him of any clothing and weapons, leaving him with nothing but his undergarments to guard against the cold of deep space. As if being left alone to suffer isn't bad enough, he also suspects that he's being watched. A perfunctory examination of the cell revealed a blinking pinprick of light in the corner above the door, identical to the camera in the elevator. Part of one wall is also suspiciously slick in texture, a feature common to many one-way viewing screens.

"I'm going to get out of here," Vann snarls at the suspected camera. "And then I'm going to find you, Karath. And I'm going to hurt you." He feels the faintest jolt of coldness just beneath his skin, something beyond the chill of the room. "And I'm going to kriffing enjoy it."

"All the more reason to ensure that you don't leave that cell until you're in the Supreme Commander's personal custody." Karath's voice is amused as it crackles through an unseen speaker, the sound surprisingly crisp. There's a dull flash of light from the unusually smooth portion of the wall, and a screen flickers to life. The admiral's face stares out dispassionately, aside from a twisted little smirk that curls at the corners of his lips.

Trying to recline against the wall in a show of false comfort, Vann grins unevenly back. "Good to see you," he quips sarcastically. "I was worried that I was talking to myself in here."

"Oh, I've heard everything that you've said." Karath narrows his eyes. "And by the way, I'll have you know that my mother was a wonderful woman. And I don't appreciate the comments that you made intimating otherwise." Holding up one hand, he reveals the same small remote that he was clutching earlier. Without further comment, he presses a button.

Pain once again lances down Vann's spine, causing white-hot sparks to shred through every muscle. Even though this jolt is shorter than the incapacitating shocks Karath used to subdue him earlier, it's still an agonizing experience. He tries to scream but his jaw spasms shut, teeth grinding together from the pressure. Even when the initial shock ceases, his body continues to throb with discomfort.

"Now that we've established that fact, why don't we try to have a civil discussion, hmm?" Karath arches a brow, still holding the remote in view of whatever camera is aimed at him.

"Hey," Vann manages to wheeze out, now slumped against the wall, "I was just trying to make polite conversation."

Looking supremely unamused, Karath blinks blandly. "Oh, I'm sure. But I believe that I'll be
leading this discussion from here on." Waving the remote, he explains, "I will be asking you questions, and you will be answering them honestly and completely. If you give me an answer that I suspect is a lie, or merely one that displeases me, I will be forced to utilize this remote."

"But you're such a hard man to please." Vann forces a chuckle. "And I've got to say, this is a pretty kriffing biased method. I mean, I could give you nothing but truthful answers and you might just keep shocking me out of spite." He forces his numb shoulders to shrug.

Frowning, Karath sighs as he states, "I think you'll find that I'm far more fair that you give me credit for."

"Yeah," Vann drawls in mock consideration. "But you're also an asshole. So, I might as well keep pissing you off for my own amusement, you piece of bantha shit!"

"I can't say I approve of that plan." Pressing his thumb against a button on the remote, Karath continues to look bored as he drawls, "Perhaps I can change your mind."

Bracing himself for the coming pain, Vann closes his eyes and tries to let his muscles go lax. It doesn't particularly work, but he quickly finds that it doesn't matter. Even after several seconds of tense anticipation, his breath caught in his throat, no pain comes. "Huh," he finally coughs out. "Looks like your remote is broken."

"Oh, I apologize. It seems that your display screen and audio system aren't completely functional." Karath's smirk spreads as he magnanimously offers, "Allow me to fix that for you."

An instant later, Vann's cell is filled with screaming. At first, it's hard to tell who or what is making the sound, though after a horrifying moment it's obvious that the shouts of pain are coming from two separate individuals. The screen on the wall blinks, Karath's face shrinking as two more video feeds are broadcast. It takes a moment for the new cameras to focus, but when they do the images cause rage to simmer deep in the pit of the mercenary's stomach.

Both Carth and Bastila are now visible, their arms bound behind their backs and all their gear stripped away. They seem to be in the same position as Vann, save for the fact that both of their neural collars are currently glowing a pale blue. The activated collars are causing them to scream in agony as they're repeatedly shocked by the admiral. Simultaneously incensed and horrified by the sight the mercenary strains at his bonds, unable to keep the desperation from his voice as he shouts, "Kriffing stop it! Stop torturing them!"

Karath's expression is impassive as he smoothly asks, "I assume this means you'll cooperate?"

Swallowing his anger, Vann snarls, "Fine!"

With a satisfied nod, Karath lifts his finger from the remote. An instant later the neural collars cease to glow, fading back to the dull gleam of polished metal. The screams take a bit longer to die down, as both Carth and Bastila's bodies shudder with aftershocks of pain in the wake of the torture session. They slump in their cells, eyes struggling to regain focus. Still appearing completely impassive towards his captives, the admiral asks, "Now that we seem to be in agreement, let's begin. Mister… Vann Chis is it? That's the name you're going by, these days?"

There's a certain note of familiarity, and even amusement, in Karath's tone that sends a shiver of discomfort though Vann's entire being. He's not sure how to respond to that question, never mind that any answer deemed undesirable will cause the others more pain. What does the latter comment even mean? Was he a Republic soldier at some point? Shaking his head, the mercenary tries to keep his tone casual as he finally responds, "Only name I remember going by."
A voice crackles out of the speaker, sounding weak and somewhat garbled. "Vann, is that you?" Bastila's image flickers as she shifts position, turning to stare directly into the camera.

"Vann? Bastila?" Carth is still panting as he speaks, and he struggles to his feet so that he's closer to eye level with whatever device is being used to film him. "Don't tell them anything!" he shouts. "It's not worth it!"

An instant later, Vann's entire body is alight with fresh agony as his neural collar sends pulses of pain straight through his nervous system. He bites back the screams that are caught in his throat, his body sagging listlessly the second the torment ends. "Dammit, Carth!" he growls. "Just shut up for a minute, would you?"

"I would listen to your friend here," Karath murmurs disapprovingly, the remote resting in his palm. "Though, if you do insist on making your point heard, it could be quite interesting to find out just how long it takes Vann here to pass out. He seems to possess a remarkable pain tolerance."

This shuts Carth up, though he continues to glare at the camera, hatred seething from every fiber of his being. Bastila also grows silent at the admiral's warning, though she straightens her shoulders as much as her bound wrists will allow. With a final glance at his companions' images on the screen, Vann sighs. "So, you know my name. Any other obvious questions I can confirm?"

Karath's finger hovers over the remote buttons and he clucks chidingly. "Careful with your flippancy," he warns. When the mercenary snorts in aggravation but refrains from snapping a comeback, he nods. "Two of you were caught on video breaking into a Republic military base. What were you hoping to gain from your exploits?"

"Supplies," Vann states, which is partially true. "Your blockade ruined the job I was supposed to do on Taris, and I had to make up my profits somehow." He shrugs weakly. "You'd be surprised what those swoop gangs will pay for military-grade stimulants."

It's Bastila's turn to scream as Karath shocks her, his expression almost bored as he watches the Jedi writhe in pain. "You are a rather talented liar, Vann," he comments, sounding impressed. "Unfortunately for the Padawan, I already knew the answer to my question. The Republic is well aware that you broke in and stole the blockade codes. And you can stop playing the part of the irreverent mercenary."

"I am a mercenary, asshole," Vann hisses. The bond with Bastila is only a faint hum in his mind, but he can still feel the very edges of her agony. "And a damned good one."

Eyes narrowing, Karath peers at what must be the mercenary's video feed. "You really believe that, don't you?" he asks, though the question feels rhetorical. "That is rather… unexpected. But it changes nothing."

"What's that supposed to mean, Karath?" Jerking his chin up in challenge, Carth's tone is icy as he speaks.

"It means that you should be more careful of the company you keep," the admiral responds. "A mercenary working in the Outer Rim could have been anyone before he fell into his current profession." An amused smirk graces his lips as he adds, "But then, you're fashioning yourself as a smuggler these days, aren't you? Quite the pair..."

"Hey, are you going to ask a question, or is the entire point of this interrogation to bore us to death?" Despite the haze that's descended over his mind from being partially cut off from the Force, Vann can feel his lost memories being jarred by Karath's words. The other man clearly
knows something about his past, and if he can just learn a little more…

Carth yelps in pain as his neural collar sparks to life, the power of the shock forcing him to his knees. Sweat beads on his brow, his chest heaving as he struggles to catch his breath. His former commander seems amused by this new round of torment, tutting, "And what did I say about flippancy?"

 Barely suppressing his own urge to scream, Vann grits out, "Maybe if you'd ask a damned question..."

"You and your crew are obviously on some type of mission," Karath continues. "We've been able to track you for the past few weeks, as you've left quite the trail of death and destruction in your wake." Picking up a datapad just off to his left side, he glances down at the screen as he reads off, "The bodies of two Czerka employees found dumped on Tatooine, multiple fatalities caused by a slave rebellion on Kashyyyk, three dead Republic soldiers just discovered on Manaan… Need I go on?"

"Things got messy," Vann admits, hands balling into fists behind his back. "Your point?"

"Someone clearly sent you on this mission, whatever it is." Placing the pad down, Karath levels his gaze with the camera that's trained on him. "Who is it?"

Staring straight ahead, Vann doesn't bat an eye as he says, "Like we've established, I'm a mercenary. We were on those planets to take some jobs and unfortunately, complications arose. It happens."

"Complications? Is that what you're calling your killing sprees now?" Karath actually chuckles at this. "And I thought that you couldn't get any colder. Calling the murders that you perpetrate mere 'complications,' and getting your friend shocked yet again. Pressing the button, he sneers, "I know you're lying."

More screaming fills the speakers, Carth's body now shaking with pain as his neural collar is activated yet again. The sweat is dripping down his face, his muscles visibly tensed from the onslaught of electrical shocks racing through his nervous system. Vann looks on in horror, guilt heavy in his gut as he shouts, "Stop it, I was telling the truth! We were hired to do all of those jobs, you kripping son of a kath hound!"

Even as the mercenary's words are muffled by his friend's screams, Bastila's voice is surprisingly steady as she yells, "The Jedi sent us!"

Lifting his finger from the button, Karath frowns grimly. "And now you're not being fully honest, are you Bastila?"

Vann's own screams almost drown out the rest of Karath's words, his mind fizzling to white as pain rips through every cell of his being. It's as though he's being cut apart by a million tiny lightsaber blades, each one burning into him without ever leaving a mark. His thoughts race in circles focused solely on the agony he's experiencing even after the collar deactivates. As his limbs continue to tremble his mind gradually filters back, still muddled from the torture. 'Was I always a killer?' he wonders. 'Maybe I deserve this…' More distantly he asks himself, 'Who was I?'

"Destroyed?" Bastila is whispering, her tone disbelieving.

"Yes, I just said that." Karath sighs with mock exasperation as he continues, "Supreme Command Malak found that little enclave of rebels on Dantooine. I'm sure they thought they were well
hidden, but they couldn't escape his notice." Smiling with dark satisfaction, he explains, "Though, they will be hard to find now. As I said, after he questioned those present, the Supreme Commander destroyed the enclave for their insubordination."

”What?!" Lunging forward on shaky legs, Vann barely manages to catch himself before he collapses, knees slamming hard against the durasteel floor. "He didn't destroy it!" Glaring defiantly at where he suspects the camera is, he hisses, "You're lying, Karath. I would have felt something if that entire enclave was destroyed."

Barking out a harsh laugh, Karath mocks, "Perhaps you're not as strong with the Force as you believe yourself to be."

Staring straight ahead, her expression blank and unreadable, Bastila quietly asks, "Are they all dead?" What can be felt of her side of the Force bond is nothing but static.

"Mostly." Karath shrugs at this. "The few who escaped are being chased down as we speak. They're as good as dead. That's the price they've paid for abandoning their Order and betraying the Republic they swore to serve."

"They swore to serve a fair and just Republic," Vann growls from his place on the floor. He feels the sudden urge to defend the enclave's choices, after everything they did for him and the crew. "They never agreed to uphold whatever farce Malak is running! If anyone betrayed the Republic's ideals, it's him!"

"A bit ironic, coming from you." An odd, knowing smile flits across Karath's lips. However, it vanishes a moment later as he presses a button on the remote, drawing cries of pain from Bastila. Her muscles spasm from the electrical onslaught, face contorting with pain as the screams are ripped from her lungs. "And commentary that I don't require."

Vann wants to say more and even opens his mouth to do so. But then he sees the Jedi's expression, her face damp with sweat as tears pour out of her eyes. Even with the grainy quality of the video feed, he can see the crystalline trails that line her cheeks. He immediately snaps his jaw shut, teeth clicking audibly as he anxiously waits for her collar to deactivate.

"Clearly, my two Jedi can't be trusted to tell the truth. And here I expected better from those who swore loyalty to their Order." If the admiral notices the vague grunt of protest that the mercenary makes, he doesn't acknowledge it. "I suppose I'll have to turn to the one individual who has always been dependably honest."

"You won't get anything out of me, Karath." Jaw clenching stubbornly, Carth's expression is livid as he stares into the camera.

Clearly amused, Karath challenges, "Oh, I think I can loosen your tongue."

Jaw dropping in astonishment, Carth's dark eyes burn with indignation as he shouts, "You razed my home and murdered my family!" His voice is raw with emotion as he demands, "Why should I tell you anything?"

"Your companions' pain isn't enough of an incentive?" Arching a brow, Karath's tone drips with sarcasm as he says, "And here I thought you were a compassionate man."

Eyeing the pilot warily, Vann calls out, "Don't listen to him, Carth!"

"I already said that's enough out of you." Karath sighs in contempt as he presses the remote.
Despite knowing the rules of this game, Vann is still surprised when Bastila shouts out in pain. Her body is still reeling from the last shock when another floods her system, forcibly tensing every muscle. Despite the agony she's experiencing her expression remains blank, and what's perceivable of the mental link stays silent. The destruction of the enclave on Dantooine must have hit her hard, and Vann has to swallow down a fresh wave of guilt as he tries to think of a way to fight Karath's emotional manipulation. He suspects that the admiral won't risk activating Carth's neural collar right now, which might work to their advantage.

"Carth, what happened on Telos was an unfortunate accident," Karath begins, an actual note of remorse slipping into his words. "But you must believe me when I say that it was an accident. No civilians were supposed to die. We simply failed to account for the dry summer. Regrettably, miscalculations were made..."

Snarling at his former commander's words, the pilot seethes, "You calling the destruction of an entire planet a 'mistake' is right up there with Vann using the term 'complications' every time he kills someone!"

Vann can't help blurting out, "Oh, come on!"

"It doesn't matter what you meant, or what mistakes you made." Shakily drawing himself to his feet, Carth's anger bleeds into sorrow. "Millions of people died, including my wife and my son." Drawing a shallow breath, he whispers, "Dustil, he was just a kriffing kid!"

"Yes, your wife sadly perished in the fire." Lips pressed into a thin line, Karath's tone is carefully measured as he asks, "But what if I were to tell you that your son did not?"

The silence that fills the speakers is palpable, and even Vann is at a loss for words. It feels like an eternity before Carth finally stutters, "...What?"

"Don't listen to him, Carth!" Without access to the full awareness granted by the Force, Vann can't feel if Karath is lying. But right now, it doesn't really matter. What matters is getting the pilot to ignore the bait and to shut his damned mouth. "Do you really think that Karath's not above lying to get the information he wants?"

As expected, Bastila yelps in pain. This shock is particularly vicious, and she slumps to her side as she pants, "No! Please, stop!"

A fresh twinge of guilt gnaws at Vann, even before Karath sneers, "You really are a cold one, aren't you? Allowing this lovely young lady to be shocked again and again." Returning his focus to the pilot, his expression grows more subdued as he states, "Carth, you've known me a long time. You can tell when I'm being honest."

Choking out a harsh snort, the pilot confirms, "I thought I could."

"Listen to me, then." Karath's voice is crisp, almost clipped as he states, "Your son, Dustil, is alive. He was taken off Telos less than a week before the orbital bombardment."

"And now I know you're lying!" Shaking his head at his own gullibility, Carth sighs. "Why would anyone take my son off his home planet...?"

"Because he was Force-sensitive." This new piece of information hangs heavy in the air, even as Karath rushes to explain, "The Supreme Commander did a sweep for Force-sensitives before he ordered the attack on Telos. Your son was discovered, and was taken off the planet for his own protection during the bombing."
Desperation and grief fill the pilot's voice as he murmurs, "But Morgana?"

"Shut-up, Carth!" Vann growls in warning, even as he tries to send a burst of apology to Bastila. "Ignore him! He's trying to trick you…"

The Jedi's cries are barely more than whimpers now, her voice audibly hoarse as she begs, "It hurts! Please!"

"You know, she can't take much more of this. I would highly suggest that you stop interrupting," Karath chides the mercenary tauntingly. Lifting his finger off the remote button, he leaves the Jedi to shake and whimper on the floor of her cell as he addresses the pilot. "I'm sorry, Carth. There was limited room on the ship that took the Force-sensitives off Telos, though it wasn't anticipated to be a problem. As I said, no civilians were supposed to be injured…"

Scoffing at the admiral's words, Vann spits, "That's a whole load of bantha shit and you know it!" Silently, he pleads with Bastila to stop fighting against the torture. If she would just let go and black out, he'll become the admiral's focus. And that might be enough to shut Carth the hells up.

As the fresh wave of agony races through her system, the Jedi's body arcs off the ground for an instant, limbs quivering from the electricity. "Ahh!" she screams, the sound tapering off into a faint moan. It's hard to tell if she can sense any of the mercenary's pleas through their depleted bond, though she does gasp, "I... I can't..." Her eyes fall shut as her head lolls to the side, her form continuing to spasm even as her face grows slack as awareness slips from her grasp. But at least her cries of pain stop, momentarily silenced by the grip of unconsciousness.

"And now you've caused her to pass out from the pain. Though, I'm honestly surprised she lasted this long," Karath muses. His lips twist into a vicious smirk. "Admittedly, it is rather cruel of you to let it come to this."

Eyes flicking to what must be Bastila's portion of his screen, Carth shakes his head. "Vann, stop! I know you think that you're helping, but..." When the mercenary stares back unapologetically he frowns, and then tentatively asks his captor, "Dustil, he's alive?"

Nodding in confirmation, Karath states, "Alive and well at the Supreme Commander's private academy on Korriban."

"Carth, you can't believe this shit!" A faint glow of triumph runs through Vann when he sees the admiral move to shock Bastila again, only to pause and frown. Knowing that there's one option left, he steels himself before adding, "The kriffing bastard is... Ahh! He's... enjoying this!" The pain is worse than before as it roars down his spine, radiation through his body like simultaneous fire and ice. It feels like every nerve is being yanked from beneath his skin, flaying him alive.

"Ironically, your collar wasn't even on the highest setting previously." Karath keeps his finger on the remote button just a little longer than before.

For a moment, the only sound is Vann's screaming, his voice growing hoarser with each new cry and sob wrenched from his throat. It's only when the yelling dies down, the mercenary collapsing to the ground in a whimpering heap, that Carth dares to speak. "I... I don't believe you." His tone is conflicted, gaze shifting between his companion and the admiral on his screen. Hesitantly he asks, "Can you even prove that Dustil's alive? Show me a holo, or a picture!"

Once again retrieving his datapad, Karath flicks his fingers across the screen before holding it up to the camera. The image displayed is somewhat distorted, but it's a clear enough view of a portrait portraying a dark-haired young man dressed in a Republic uniform. He looks a lot like Carth.
around the eyes. Swiftly lowering the pad, the admiral waits a moment for the effect to sink in before offering, "If you give me the information I want, I can take you to him today."

"He wants to… ah!" Vann's not sure when the collar turns back on, his body still wracked with aftershocks from the previous bout of torment. "Wants us to… arrrrgh! Turn on… each other!" His words sound rough even to his own ears, interspersed with shouts of agony.

"Wait, stop!" Carth's voice wavers as he watches the mercenary writhe, limbs quivering as one series of electrical jolts flows into the next. "Stop shocking him!"

"Just agree to answer my questions, and I'll stop tormenting your loud-mouthed friend." Karath's tone is harsh, leaving no room for argument. "Once you answer, you can see your son."

"The Republic… ahhhh! Lies…" Liquid pools in Vann's mouth, sharp and coppery. He can't tell if he bit his tongue, or if he's coughing up blood. "I'm… arrrrgh! I'm an asshole… but I'm… ahhh! Honest with you!" Distantly, he's aware that the admiral's finger hasn't lifted from the remote button for several agonizing seconds.

"I doubt he can take much more, Carth. What will it be?"

"I want to see my son," the pilot breathes, tone growing hard. "But I will never trust you. And while I don't know anything about Vann's past, at least he's always been honest with me, unlike the Republic. And he has a conscience, which is a lot more than you can say, Karath!"

"A pity." The admiral's voice sounds garbled to the mercenary, his words blending together. "Well, I hope you're watching Carth… Look what you've done… Causing pain and death to everyone you care about…"

'It's not true,' Vann tries to reassure his companion as consciousness slips away. But the words die in his throat, buried beneath the last of his screams as blood dribbles out from between his lips. 'Mission? Juhani? Canderous?' he wonders, 'I hope you're doing better than us…'

**Chapter End Notes**

1. Vann's "ignore me" ability does exist in the EU/Legends (sometimes called "Force Stealth" or "Force Camouflage"). He's used it once before, and it will come up again.

2. From what I could find, "neural collars" that suppress Force sensitivity and the use of Force powers don't exist canonically. But then, neither does the entire KotOR game.

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The Leviathan Part II

Chapter Summary

In which the rest of the crew try to work together before everything falls apart, and Jolee decides that he is way too old for this nonsense. Meanwhile, plans are made that can't possibly go wrong.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

19.

(Interlude – Jolee)

"A Wookiee who can slice!" Jolee chuckles to himself. "And I thought I'd seen everything."

"I'm not very good," Zaalbar insists, tone desperate as his large fingers nervously tap commands into the brig's control terminal. "And I beg you, please be quiet! I need to concentrate."

"Oh, there's no way in Sith hells that I'm louder than that siren!" Glaring up at the speaker blaring a warning Jolee scowls, narrowly managing to duck two blaster bolts fired by one of the alerted guards. "And for Force sake, figure out where they hid my lightsaber!"

Inserting yet another spike into the computer terminal, Zaalbar shakes his head. "I'm working as fast as I can." His hand pauses above the keyboard as a stray bolt whizzes just past his left shoulder, causing him to growl in alarm. "Please, just keep these soldiers away from me while I work!"

"A Wookiee asking a Human to protect him," Jolee grumbles. "Now I really have seen everything." Summoning a blast of Force energy, he aims it at the pair of incoming guards before releasing a push powerful enough to sweep both Humans to the ground. As he rushes to the downed guards with a burst of Force-fueled speed he prepares another blast, hoping that it will be enough to knock both opponents out. They appear winded by the time he reaches them, though they're already struggling to their feet. With a heavy sigh, the Force user launches the second blast at point blank range, the explosive wave enough to throw both guards back a meter. They're airborne for an instant before hitting the ground headfirst and are immediately knocked out cold from the impact.

Sprinting to the unconscious guards, Jolee kicks both of their blasters away before moving to peer around the corner of the hallway. He winces when he spots a trio of Republic soldiers marching at a quick clip, all armed with blaster rifles. "Damnit," he grumbles. "There's at least three more coming so unless you can find my 'saber, you better hurry your furry ass up!"

Still frantically typing at the console, Zaalbar finally trills in satisfaction as he announces, "I think I have it!" After loading in one final computer spike, he enters a command. An instant later the siren falls silent, leaving the cell block in blissful silence.

"About damned time!" Jolee snaps, pressing his back against the wall and panting. He can now hear the soldiers' footsteps in the distance, slower than before thanks to the halted alarm.
Crouching down, he begins searching the stunned guards for a comm.

"I said I could slice," Zaalbar states defensively. "I didn't say I was very good at it."

"Yeah, yeah." Waving a dismissive hand, Jolee grunts as he finds a commlink and an ID chip in one guard's pocket. Hurriedly scanning the provided identification, he actives the comm and announces, "This is security clearance, uh, four-seven-bravo-nine. Reporting from cell block…"

He scans the walls for a sector number, finally spotting one just above the cell Zaalbar escaped from moments before. "Four-Dee."

A few seconds later the comm crackles back, a confused voice asking, "Confirmed, four-seven-bravo-nine. We heard an alarm in your sector. Report?"

Sharing a mischievous grin with Zaalbar, Jolee clears his throat before responding, "False alarm. The Wookiee got a little… excited. But we handled it."

"Acknowledged," the voice on the other end states, still sounding mildly skeptical. "We'll come in and do a precautionary sweep, but if things are fine we'll be out of your section in no time."

"Uh, a full sweep is unnecessary." Frowning at the comm in his hand, Jolee quickly searches for the discarded blasters. "Repeat, we have things under control. No need to waste your time."

There's a long pause before the other end of the comm hisses a response. "Three hostiles were recently apprehended. Precautionary measures are currently in place." The voice grows more aggressive as he adds, "I'd suggest not arguing protocol. These orders come from above you."

"Roger that," Jolee bites out, rolling his eyes in frustration. "See you momentarily." After pausing to glare at the Wookiee, Jolee peers around

"What should we do?" Looking around in controlled panic, Zaalbar creeps to the Force user's side. "I can help you to hold them off, but if they send more soldiers…"

"This is going to get real old, real fast," Jolee finishes. With a sigh, he bends down and snatches the blaster pistols from the ground, keeping one for himself and handing the other to the Wookiee. "And trust me, I know old."

Arming themselves the pair falls into position around the entrance to the brig, with Zaalbar hastily kicking the stunned guards out of immediate eyesight. "Can we wait here and ambush the incoming soldiers?" he asks hopefully.

It's not even remotely a plan, but it's the best they have. "Sure," Jolee drawls. "I'm positive that escaped prisoners with blaster pistols can take out a team of trained Republic soldiers."

Zaalbar seems to ignore the sarcasm in his crewmate's voice, nodding grimly as he aims the pistol out into the hallway. It looks comically small in his massive, furry hand. "We must do what we can," he growls. "To help Vann and the others."

"I'm pretty sure Vann can take care of his own damned self," Jolee snorts amusedly. If his intuition is right, and Force bless him it almost always is, the kid is probably the closest thing they have to a one-man army.

Still seeming unconvinced, Zaalbar asks, "But what if…?"

"Shoot now, worry about Vann later!" After pausing to glare at the Wookiee, Jolee peers around
the hallway corner. Narrowing his eyes, he notes that the soldiers are coming towards them at a rapid clip, boots thudding rhythmically against the floor. "These pistols don't have much range, so we're going to have to wait until those goons are right on top of us. Think you can handle that big guy?"

"Of course! I just…"

The ear-shattering boom that echoes down the hallway drowns out any of the Wookiee's objections and pushes both him and Jolee back half a meter from the sheer concussive force. While Zaalbar manages to stay on his feet the Human isn't so lucky, landing in an uncoordinated heap right on his backside. Uttering a long string of curses from his decidedly undignified position, he uses one finger to probe at his now-ringing left ear as he slowly climbs to his feet. While there's no visible blood on his digit as he pulls it away, the high-pitched squeal he's hearing doesn't seem to be subsiding anytime soon. Frustrated, he shouts, "Dammit to all hells! What was that?"

Already looking down the hallway, Zaalbar roars worriedly as he states, "It would appear that one of the power conduits was overloaded."

Scrambling to catch-up to the Wookiee, Jolee cranes his head around the much larger body to observe the smoke-filled corridor. Coughing softly, he waves his hand to try and clear some of the black exhaust billowing up from the destroyed conduit. Sparks fly from its snapped wires, fizzing in the air before dispersing. As the smoke clears, he finally spots the three bodies lying prone around the conduit, apparently electrocuted by the overload. "What the…"

There's a faint giggle from about a meter behind the pair, and they both whirl around simultaneously to look for the source of the sound. The laughter only grows louder as their eyes dart around, expressions puzzled and blasters held at the ready. A moment later a slender, blue-skinned figure materializes out of the shadows, body doubled over in hysterics.

"Oh Gramps," the Twi'lek gasps, "You should have seen your face when that conduit exploded!" She wrinkles her features into a rough approximation of surprise and terror, eyes wide and jaw slack. "And you got knocked right on your ass!"

"Mission!" Zaalbar bellows in excitement, hurrying over to his friend and wrapping her in his huge arms. "You're alright!"

"Of course I'm alright, Big Z! Why wouldn't I be?" The Twi'lek grins as she awkwardly tries to hug the Wookiee back. "And I see that you and Gramps managed to escape without me."

"You took too damned long getting here!" Jolee complains, crossing his arms over his chest. But he can't help the shadow of a smile that tugs at his mouth. "It's about time you showed up!"

Stepping back, Mission puts her hands on her hips. "I showed up just in time to toast those Republic goons, is what I did!" Cocking her head to the side, she nods to the computer terminal in the center of the brig. "If I'd left it up to you, there'd be alarms going off all over this ship!"

"Hrmph," Jolee grumps. "We had it handled."

Rolling her eyes, Mission nods sarcastically. "Sure you did." Rushing over to the terminal, she begins typing in a few commands. "Anyway, the good news is that we're all safe. The bad news is that Vann, Bastila, and Carth might be idiots who got their asses captured."

Frowning, Jolee moves to join the Twi'lek, looking at the screen over her shoulder. "I did hear something about three hostiles being captured. I figured it was someone from the crew, but I was
hoping it wasn't *those* three."

"See?" Zaalbar insists, "Vann *does* require our assistance!"

"Ha!" Barking out a harsh laugh, Jolee waves a dismissive hand. "That kid'll be fine. Trust an old man to recognize another survivor."

"Normally I'd agree with you Gramps," Mission says with a frown as she types in a few more commands. The screen changes several times, pulling up different lists and manifests. "But I overheard something on my way here. It sounded like Vann and the others got taken to a special holding facility." Front teeth worrying her bottom lip, she murmurs, "One that's controlled directly by Karath."


Nodding grimly, Mission moves aside when she reaches a specific list. "There's not a lot of information here, which seems pretty suspicious even for the Republic, but it looks like three prisoners, two of them Force-sensitive, were detained and transferred to the ship's third level."

"At least that's only one floor up?" Zaalbar asks hopefully.

"Yeah, but they were taken here." The screen changes again, this time to a diagram of the ship's layout. "Right to this big blacked-out area. Because that's not evil or ominous at all."

Brows furrowing, Jolee studies the map for a moment before slowly asking, "Do you think you can get to that restricted area?"

Smirking, Mission hooks a thumb into her stealth unit. "Well-of-course I can!"

"And do you think you could slice the computers up there and orchestrate a little prison break?" Arching a brow, Jolee feels himself grinning back.

"If Big Z helps me out, we should be able to slice into the system pretty quickly." She nods to the Wookiee. "We always worked better as a team."

"Well then, why are you wasting time?" Pointing the pair towards the hallway, Jolee scolds, "Go and get those idiots out of Karath's custody. And maybe find my damned lightsaber while you're at it!"

Pausing halfway to the hallway, Mission snaps her fingers. "Oh right! I almost forgot!" Reaching into her vest, she retrieves a scuffed metal hilt. Tossing it to the Force user, she explains, "I found where they stashed your stuff. I would have grabbed more, but Bacca's blade is kinda heavy for me to carry…"

Reaching out with the Force, Jolee calls his weapon into his palm. The lightsaber falls easily into his grasp, the familiar weight and texture instantly soothing. "Well, good work kid."

"Can you take me to retrieve my weapons on the way to the fourth level?" Zaalbar asks his companion.

"You got it, Big Z." Offering the Wookiee a mock-salute, Mission pauses to cast a final glance at the older Human. "Um, what about you, Gramps? Coming with us?"

"Hrmph. You said it yourself, you and the carpet here work best as a pair." Clipping his lightsaber to his belt, Jolee explains, "I'm going to see if I can find some of the others. Maybe try and learn
Nodding, Mission smiles at the Human. "Got it!" Frowning, her tone is a bit more somber as she adds, "But be careful, okay? I don't want you to break a hip or something."

"Oh, I'm going to break something on you if you keep making jokes like that…" With a wave of his hand, Jolee shoos the pair away. "Now get out of here and get back to work! My time is valuable, you know."

"Good luck to you, friend!" Zaalbar howls in farewell as he and Mission dash down the hallway, only pausing to step over the incapacitated Republic soldiers laying in their path.

With a sigh, Jolee closes his eyes for a moment before carefully extending his Force awareness out beyond his body. He knows that the crew is supposed to be careful about revealing their presence, even through the Force, but if Vann and the others were foolish enough to be captured there's a good chance that the entire ship already knows they're here. As his consciousness races through the rest of the ship, the sensory input from the sheer amount of living creatures aboard the Leviathan is almost overwhelming. It's only years of practice that allows his mind to quickly settle into a search for three specific Force signatures.

Despite their power, Vann and Bastila have become little more than whispers in the Force, which is an unsettling new development. Whatever is suppressing their Force presence is strong, and probably quite dangerous, but that's not something Jolee can waste time worrying about at this moment. For now, he resolves to leave that issue in Mission and Zaalbar's surprisingly capable hands. With a sigh, he presses onward until he feels a familiar Force signature close by, its presence oscillating between light and darkness.

"Found you, kitty cat," the older Force user murmurs, opening his eyes. Rolling his shoulders, he stretches his back a bit before turning to sprint down the hallway. "As good a place to start as any, I suppose."

As Jolee moves through the Leviathan's corridors, he notices that the soldiers seem to be on high alert. Probably due to whatever antics the rest of the crew are up to. Smiling to himself, he mind tricks a guard into looking the other way, silently noting that the Jedi Council would probably not approve of this particular technique. But screw the damned Council. Those damned fools never knew when to utilize the Force to save more lives. And they have more sins to account for than a lack of forethought if he's right in his suspicions about what happened to Revan and Malak. And his suspicions are almost always right…

It's easy to get lost in a cycle of bitterness and resentment towards the Order that he formerly pledged his life to. That, Jolee swears, is the reason that he doesn't sense Juhani's camouflaged form until he collides with her back, causing her to drop the Force-produced stealth field that surrounds her. The moment she feels her camouflage fade she whirls around, drawing her weapon as she turns to face her potential assailant. It's the hiss of a lightsaber igniting that alerts Jolee to the Cathar's presence, the sound causing him to instinctively reach for his own 'saber as he also summons a blast of Force energy.

"Careful, old man!" Juhani hisses when she spots the older Force user. She's crouched low to the ground, lightsaber held defensively and legs ready to pounce. "I could have cut you down for your carelessness."

"You could have tried," Jolee corrects, one hand still hovering over the hilt of his lightsaber. The other is pulled back, ready to deliver a powerful Force push that he doubts even feline reflexes could avoid. "Age has nothing to do with skill, kid."
"Free and clear, and helping Mission to get Vann's foolish ass out of some secure, private brig." Scoffing, Jolee shakes his head.

"Vann was… captured?" Alarm immediately flits across Juhani’s features before quickly turning to anger that seeps cold and harsh into the Force around her. "We must go rescue him."

"Now hold on just a minute! Are you not listening?" Jolee taps his ear with one finger. "I got my eardrums damn near blown out earlier, and I can still hear just fine!" He waits until the Cathar glares at him, crossing her arms impatiently over her chest as she waits for further explanation. "Sure Vann, Bastila, and Carth went and got themselves captured. But I trust the Twi'lek kid and the walking carpet to break them out, no problem."

Juhani remains hesitant for several moments, body tense and expression still pinched with worry. Finally, she sighs, head dropping slightly in acquiescence. "Mission is… quite talented," she admits. "And there is no denying the strength of a Wookiee."

"Exactly my point!" Clucking his approval, Jolee glances up and down the narrow corridor where they're currently located. He doesn't spot any signs of Republic soldiers, but he doubts it will be long before some arrive. Muttering to himself, he quickly searches for a more secure location. "But of course, nobody listens to the old man. It's not like I have more life experience than half of you combined…"

"You talk too much, old man," Juhani chides. "I assume you sought me out because you have a plan?"

Finally spotting what looks like an unoccupied supply room, Jolee rushes towards the open door. "Something like that," he mutters as he jogs, gesturing for the Cathar to follow. It's a few terse moments before they duck inside amongst the plastisteel crates and durasteel lockers, with Jolee swiftly slapping the panel to shut the door behind them. Breathing a sigh, he squeezes himself behind a stack of barrels and then turns to the Cathar expectantly.

"So, tell me your plan," Juhani demands, also cramming her body into the tight space.

"The plan," Jolee begins, "is for you to tell me what you've learned. You're the one who's been sneaking around this whole time! I was stuck in a prison cell across from a Wookiee until a few minutes ago."

Snorting in frustration Juhani stares at the Human for a long moment, golden eyes studying him carefully. Finally, she says, "I have not learned much. Most of my time has been spent avoiding the Republic soldiers."

"Well then, what good are you?"

"But, I did learn one important piece of information." A smug smirk tugs at her lips.

"Spit it out already!" Waving his hands to encourage the Cathar to speak faster, Jolee complains, "We're not all in the prime of our life!"

Glancing around, Juhani lowers her voice conspiratorially. "I found out where they're holding the Ebon Hawk. It is on the fourth floor, on the opposite side of the bridge."

"Finally, some good news in all this mess." Rubbing his hands together, Jolee grins. "But, I'm
assuming there's a reason that you didn't just storm up there and take control of our ship?"

Nodding, Juhani explains, "The Hawk is obviously under heavy guard. I saw at least six soldiers moving up to that level, ordered to watch over it." She frowns a bit as she adds, "And, from what I could see, I believe we'll need a passcard or a code to utilize the elevators."

"Well, at least we know what we need to do." Straightening, Jolee clears his throat. "First, we find ourselves a passcard. And then we storm the hanger where they're keeping the Hawk…"

"Do you truly believe that two former Jedi will be enough to recapture the ship?" Doubt sits heavy between Juhani's brows.

"It's going to have to be." Jolee shrugs. "Mission and Zaalbar have a more important job, and I don't see anyone else helping us. Maybe the little astromech droid can lend a hand once we're in the hanger, but unless you know a soldier or ten I don't think…"

Jolee is cut off by a loud bang that rocks the door to the supply room, rattling crates and nearly unbalancing the stack of barrels. Both Force users share a look of panic that quickly shifts to one of determination, and they simultaneously creep towards the door as they draw their weapons. There are several more heavy thuds just outside the door, joined by the muffled sound of voices and the unmistakable screech of blaster fire. Moving to the door's control panel, Jolee hovers one hand over the release as he uses the other to ignite his lightsaber. Glancing at Juhani, he sees that she also has her weapon powered up, her body crouched and ready to spring past the door the moment it opens.

Pressing his palm against the release panel, Jolee lets the Cathar leap into the fray first. Let the young, spry bodies handle the close-quarter melee. He's still skilled in that regard, but he's at his best when commanding the Force from afar. Gathering the energy to send a shockwave through the Force, he listens for any signs that the commotion outside is taking a turn for the worse. Straining his ears, he searches for the familiar hiss of blaster bolts being deflected off a lightsaber blade. Or even the grunts of men collapsing from a well-placed stab or slash. But the longer he waits, the more he realizes that all he's hearing is eerie silence.

Drawing a breath to steel himself, Jolee exhales heavily as he leaps out from the cover of the doorway and into what he assumes will be a battle. His lightsaber is held defensively across his chest, his body pressed low to the ground to strengthen his center of gravity. Eyes darting around, he takes in the scene around him. The surprisingly placid scene.

Juhani is crouched and ready a meter or so away, her lightsaber also held at the ready. But the weapon is unnecessary, a fact made clear by the confused expression she's currently wearing. Surrounding her are four Republic soldiers, sprawled unconscious on the ground, their plastoid armor sporting numerous cuts and blaster burns. The walls display similar defects, scratched and dented in places from bodies being bashed against their surfaces. And in the center of it all is the scared-and-muscled figure of Canderous, his chest heaving as he pants from exertion, his body clothed in nothing but his undergarments. He has a blaster rifle in his hands, and a vibrosword strapped to his naked back.

"So," Jolee states carefully, "Recall how I was just wishing for a good soldier to help us out?"

"I believe he will need a bit more armor before he's ready to tackle the guards assigned to the Ebon Hawk." The corner of Juhani's lips curl into an amused smirk.

Still panting, Canderous turns to look at his crewmates, a scowl creasing his features. "Well look who finally decided to show up to the party."
"Hey now!" Jolee snaps defensively, "It's not like we haven't been busy. I had to help a Wookiee break out of his cell, and Juhani here found out where they're keeping the Ebon Hawk."

"Hanger on the fourth level, right?" Lowering the rifle, Canderous falls back into a more relaxed position, seeming unperturbed by his near-nudity.

"That's right," Jolee confirms. "How'd you know?"

"I was able to... convince... a couple of guards to tell me where they're keeping the ship." He says, smirking maliciously. "They were kind enough to give me their passcards, too."

Staring doubtfully at the Mandalorian, Juhani demands, "And just where are you keeping those cards?"

"Oh, wouldn't you like to know sweetheart?" Canderous asks playfully.

The Cathar only scoffs at the implication, rolling her eyes as she powers down her lightsaber. Sensing that this train of conversation isn't getting them anywhere, Jolee interjects, "Well, so long as you have them somewhere on your person, I don't think it matters where."

"They're in the damned sword sheath!" Still clutching the blaster rifle, Canderous moves to peer into the room that his crewmates just exited. "I was keeping them there until I could find my gear. Which is why I'm here. The guy I convinced to... help me said that there was a supply room nearby."

Jerking a thumb towards the room full of crates and lockers, Jolee nods in affirmation. "Right that way."

"Find your things quickly." Juhani cautions as she tracks the Mandalorian, watching closely as he enters the supply room. "We have most likely lost the element of surprise, but if we move fast enough, the crew may be too occupied with Vann's capture and potential escape to realize that we are on our way to the Hawk."

There's a loud clatter as Canderous tosses crates and footlockers aside, contents spilling onto the floor as he searches for his gear. "Vann got his ass captured?"

"Apparently." Jolee shrugs helplessly. "Though who knows? Maybe this is part of a bigger and better plan. Though my intuition says that it's not..."

"I also have a bad feeling through the Force." Juhani's eyes narrow as she extends her own awareness. "He is too... quiet."

A barrel topples over as Canderous rummages through its contents before pushing it to the side and moving on to the next container. "I assume there's a plan to get him, and probably Bastila and Carth because they're also idiots, out of this?"

Nodding somberly, Jolee confirms, "I've got a Twi'lek and Wookiee on it as we speak."

"Good," is all Canderous says in response, though there's a deep sense of approval lacing that single word. He continues to search, finally shouting, "Here it is!" when he reaches a plastisteel crate towards the back of the room. There's some brief grunting as he retrieves his armor and pulls it on, the vibrosword and rifle clattering to the ground in the process. A few minutes later he reappears, fully dressed in his normal attire and wearing his impressively large beskad on his back. His equally-heavy repeating blaster rifle is clutched in both hands.
"Why would they bring your weapons aboard this ship?" Juhani asks curiously as she studies the Mandalorian's bulky armaments.

"I had 'em strapped to me when I blasted myself with a grenade just before the Republic boarded the Hawk," Canderous explains. "I figured they wouldn't take the time to remove my gear until we were on the Leviathan, and I knew I might need the extra power." Patting the blaster affectionately, he smirks. "And it looks like I was right."

"They sure will come in handy," Jolee agrees. "So, let's put those to use and go get our ship back."

The grim look of determination on Juhani's face, combined with the thinly-veiled expression of glee from Canderous, is all the encouragement that Jolee needs to get back to the task at hand. Touching the worn lightsaber hanging at his hip, he begins to slowly make his way through the Leviathan's long corridors.

Very, exceedingly slowly, thanks to the abundance of heavily armed and armored guards patrolling the halls.

"How is there this many kriffing guards around?" Canderous hisses below his breath, back pressed against a wall as he peers around a corner.

"I don't know," Jolee replies with mock puzzlement. "Could it have something to do with the fact that they've just captured a valuable ship and three of the Republic's most wanted?"

"We could fight our way past this group." Despite her confident words, Juhani's tone wavers a bit. "There are less soldiers in this patrol. And we will not have to take yet another detour that carries us farther from our goal."

"Ha!" Snorting at the Cathar, Canderous narrows his eyes at the six-man security detail that's marching down the hall, boots clicking against the floor with rhythmic precision. "We could have taken out the last group."

Sighing, Jolee scowls deeply. "Sure we could have," he quips, rolling his eyes. "The three of us pinned down in a hallway against a dozen heavily armed soldiers? No problem at all."

"Quite!" Juhani scolds. "We must make a decision. Do we fight, or do we find another way around?"

Eyes scanning the guards, Jolee frowns as he carefully reaches for his lightsaber. This situation isn't much of an improvement, but it doesn't seem like they can get to the elevator without at least one confrontation. And these are apparently the best odds they're going to get. "Might as well take the direct route," he finally states, voice strained.

Grinning deviously, Canderous hoists his blaster into place. "Now you're talking my language!"

Drawing her own lightsaber, Juhani nods solemnly. "Fine. We fight."

"Alright then. When they get close enough, well..." he glances at his crewmates. "You know what to do."

The only response is the creaking of Canderous's armor and the light tap of Juhani's boots as they both fall into position, muscles tensing and bodies ready to lunge at the guards. Jolee manages to lower himself into a crouch despite the slight protest of his right knee, an old injury leftover from the last war he was dragged into. He's a heartbeat away from leaping into the air and igniting his lightsaber when he sees the lead guard pause, holding up one hand to the rest of his troops. He taps
"What's the problem?" the soldier asks, blaster rifle still held at the ready. He pauses for a moment, listening to the voice on the other end before replying, "Are you sure it's a security breach? That's the high-security brig…" There's another pause as, presumably, whoever's giving the orders takes a moment to remind the soldier just who's in charge. Even through the helmet's voice modulator, he sounds chagrined when he speaks again. "Understood! We'll be right there."

One of the troops turns to her leader, asking, "What's wrong?"

"Seems that there was a breach in the high-security brig." The lead guard turns as he gives this explanation, gesturing in the direction that the group came from. "We've been asked to go up one level and provide back-up."

"Roger that," the second soldier responds, also turning on her heel. "Any idea what's going on up there?"

"I'm not sure…" There's a note of trepidation in the lead guard's words. "They think the computer system was sliced into. With the prisoners contained on that level, they're not taking any chances."

The rest of the soldiers' conversation fades out as they march swiftly towards the elevator, footsteps growing further away. It's only when all the guards are out of sight that Jolee sighs, lightsaber hilt still clutched in his hand. "Well, that takes care of that problem."

Juhani nods, though her tone is uneasy. "I hope this means Mission and Zaalbar have been successful."

"Either way, at least they're causing one hell of a distraction." Canderous grins, adjusting his grip on his blaster. "Though, I still think we could have taken those Republic goons down without breaking a sweat."

"I guess we'll never know," Jolee replies sardonically. Stepping cautiously down the hallway, he keeps to the shadows as he creeps along, eyes alert and ears straining to hear any signs of incoming footsteps.

But apparently, the kid and the Wookiee did cause one hell of a distraction because the rest of the corridors leading to the elevator are virtually abandoned. There's a security droid lurking down one hall, but it's easy enough to avoid by ducking just out of range of its cameras. While Jolee's lower back aches slightly from the odd angle he's forced to walk at, the twinge of pain isn't enough to slow him down that much.

It's not until they reach the elevator doors that there are any signs of further guards.

"Two of them," Juhani reports as she fades back into view, her Force signature shimmering brightly around her as she drops her camouflage ability.

Hoisting his heavy blaster, Canderous announces, "Easy enough to take care of."

Holding out one arm, Jolee blocks the Mandalorian from charging forward. It's a token gesture since the larger man could easily barrel past without a second thought, probably breaking the Force user's ulna in the process. But it's still enough to stave off any immediate violence. "Hold on just a second," he cautions. "I think I can handle this one."

"Be my guest," Canderous offers with mock graciousness. "But I'll be here when you need this done right."
Waving off the other man's jab, Jolee draws a deep breath as he hooks his lightsaber back onto his belt. He can feel the Force flowing through him, its presence unusually cold throughout the ship. The dark side is strong here, though right now that might work to his benefit. Drawing his Force power around himself he steps forward with confident strides, walking directly up to the soldiers guarding the elevator.

"Halt!" One guard immediately calls out. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Slowly moving his hand through the air, Jolee laces his words with Force energy as he says, "I'm a Jedi working under Supreme Commander Malak."

The second guard nods in agreement. "Right," she says. "He's working under Supreme Commander Malak."

"You're going to let me and my two crewmates access this elevator," he orders, voice still empowered with the persuasive strength of the Force.

Glancing over to where Juhani and Canderous are waiting a few meters away, the first guard waves them over. "We're going to let the three of them access the elevator," he says, stepping aside to let the intruders through.

Grinning, Jolee carefully adds, "And you're not going to tell anyone else that we were here." As he speaks, he lets the Force infuse this last command.

Both soldiers look at each other for a moment before simultaneously stating, "We are not going to tell anyone else that you were here."

"Very good." Jolee nods in satisfaction as his crewmates hurry to his side, Canderous swiftly using the passcard to open the elevator doors. There's a pneumatic hiss as the seal unlocks, revealing the spacious durasteel car.

Wordlessly, the three of them enter the elevator, Juhani hurriedly pushing the button to close the doors once they're all inside. It's a long moment before the elevator whooshes shut, the guards looking on placidly the entire time. It's only after the doors are firmly sealed and the car is moving, the stolen passcard used to program their fourth-floor destination, that they let out a collective sigh of relief.

"I was not sure that was going to work," Juhani admits, keeping her voice hushed. "Some minds are too strong to be persuaded by the Force."

"Shockingly, a lot of people who blindly follow fascist dictators don't have the strongest wills," Jolee whispers smugly.

Juhani hums thoughtfully at this response, but any further conversation is interrupted when the comm at her hip releases a sharp burst of static. A moment later, both Jolee and Canderous's comms make the same sound as they suddenly burst to life.

"What the…?" Jolee quickly snatches the comm from his belt, holding it up to his mouth as he quietly hisses, "What is it? Now's not the time!"

There's another crackle, followed by a series of Binary beeps and whistles as T3-M4 presumably makes some sort of important announcement. It'd better be damn important if he's activating all their comms like this.

Frowning at the continuing beeps and whoops, Jolee glances around as he asks, "Do either of you
speak Binary?"

Both of his crewmates shake their heads, Juhani seeming abashed at the confession while Canderous shoots the Force user a look that clearly says, 'Do I seem like the kind of guy who speaks Binary?'

Sighing, Jolee presses the comm to his mouth as he mutters, "Look, can you tell this to someone else? We're busy. And none of us have any clue what you're saying."

Something clatters on the other end of the comm, followed by a mechanical voice bemoaning, "Observation: You meatbags really are useless, aren't you?"

There's a shared look of shock as HK-47's acerbic tone crackles over the handheld device, Jolee's eyes narrowing as he growls out, "You! You're supposed to be deactivated!"

"Mocking Query: How does it feel to be wrong?"

Eyes darting around, Juhani murmurs, "Get him to be quiet. You do not know who is listening!"

"Hey, I'm glad you're not rotting in Republic junkyard somewhere," Jolee says with what he hopes sounds like sincerity. "But right now…"

"Translation," HK-47 cuts in. "The beeping trash compactor would like you to know that we have reclaimed possession of the Ebon Hawk. Statement: It was all because of me."

"Fantastic," Jolee snarls through clenched teeth. "But can you just shut…"

"Observation: We have control of the ship, but not the hanger around it. That area is still full of weak Republic meatbags." HK-47 sounds distinctly disappointed by this situation, though he perks up as he adds, "However, I anticipate that they will be butchered very soon."

Noting that the car is arriving at the fourth floor, Jolee draws his lightsaber as he prepares for whatever welcoming committee the droids have alerted to their presence. "Well then start butchering already," he responds. "You might as well save us the damned trouble."

With a mechanical sigh, HK-47 replies, "Explanation: Regrettably, the Master only programmed me to reclaim and defend the ship, which I have already accomplished. At least I was able to kill several meatbags in carrying out those orders. They made extremely satisfying sounds as they died."

As the doors of the elevator slide open, Jolee slinks around the side and carefully peers into the attached corridor. Less than a second later he yanks his head back inside the elevator when he spies at least eight Republic soldiers, all aiming their blasters directly at the newly-arrived car and its occupants. Pressing his back against the wall, he barely manages to dodge the barrage of blaster fire that's unleashed at him and his crewmates. Igniting his lightsaber, he huffs as he hurriedly clips the comm back onto his belt. "Damned droid!" he complains as he watches both Juhani and Canderous raise their weapons. "You went and got us caught!"

HK-47's condescending voice drifts up from the Force user's waist. "My interference was not necessary to get you bulbous, slushy forms noticed. Observation: Though, perhaps I should have warned you pathetic meatbags that there were soldiers anticipating the arrival of our back-up."

"You think?" Jolee shouts, using the glowing green blade of his weapon to deflect several blaster bolts. "You and I are going to have a talk when I get back to that ship!"
"Mockery: Oh, I am deeply looking forward to it." HK-47's voice fades out as the droids turn off their end of the comm system. There's a final crackle of static upon disconnect, and then the comm goes silent.

Which is just as well, because Jolee is suddenly occupied with trying to stay alive. Crouching low, he summons a blast of Force energy just as he sees Juhani go flipping directly into the cluster of guards. Aiming the wave of power away from the Cathar, he releases the energy and manages to knock down three soldiers. They hit the ground hard, momentarily stunned from the impact. That's all the opening that Canderous needs as he goes barreling out of the elevator, heavy blaster sweeping through the air and sending out sprays of blaster bolts. He's wearing a maniacal grin as he mows down multiple Republic soldiers, grunting in aggravation as a volley of return fire manages to slip past his armor and sink into his flesh.

Still staying low, Jolee rushes to engage the nearest soldier, swinging his lightsaber and aiming the blow directly at the man's thigh. There's a scream as the blade hits its mark, the plasma melting through the plastoid armor and burning the skin and muscle beneath. The soldier immediately falls to one knee, giving the Force user an opening to sink his blade directly into the other man's chest. It takes a hard jab to drive the 'saber all the way in, but a moment later there's a wet gurgle as the soldier gasps a final breath before slumping lifelessly. Drawing out his blade, Jolee straightens and deflects several blaster shots before turning to the closest figure standing between him and the hanger.

Using the Force Jolee throws his lightsaber through the air, the blade slicing into the chest armor of another soldier. As his weapon returns to him, he gathers another burst of Force energy and holds out his hand, using the power to hold two soldiers in place. As the hilt of his 'saber returns to his palm he charges forward, making two quick slashes at the restrained figures. One strike carves into a soldier's side, while the next cuts open an arm from wrist to bicep. Both opponents howl in pain as they struggle against the Force power pinning them in place. Less than a moment later, Juhani flips elegantly through the air, landing in front of both men. With a single, powerful swing of her lightsaber, she slices through both of their guts, ending their cries in an instant.

Breathing hard, Canderous is using one hand to jab a medpac into his thigh while the other is still firing his blaster, the deadly sweep of bolts forming clustered shots in their intended targets. The repeating fire is so swift that some soldiers don't realize they've been hit before they suddenly collapse, their armor rattling against the durasteel floor of the Leviathan. Those that are left standing are easy targets for the Force users, who make quick work of the stragglers with a few swift swings of their lightsabers. Even with his injuries the Mandalorian never slows down, making steady progress through the field of opponents as he blasts his way to the hanger bay door. "Come on," he shouts, "We're almost there!"

Rushing past Canderous in a burst of Force-fueled speed, Juhani holds out her hand. "Give me the passcard!" she orders. Still panting, he nods once before reaching into his pocket and retrieving the card, offering it to the Cathar.

Snatching the passcard as she whizzes by, Juhani takes a flying leap over the heads of three soldiers who are being held in place by Jolee's Force powers. Landing in a neat crouch, she charges the final meter forward and slams the card against the console that controls the hanger's door lock. "I hope they did not have time to change the codes!" she shouts.

It's a tense moment before the lock flashes green and the hanger opens, the Ebon Hawk visible even before the doors slide completely apart. Also visible are the dozen guards who are surrounding the ship, their rifles aimed and already firing at the intruders.
"Dammit to all hells!" Jolee yelps as two blaster bolts sink into his left side. The wounds sting, temporarily throwing him off balance. Pressing the button on his comm, he yells, "You want to kill meatbags, you bucket of bolts? Now's your chance!"

"Query," HK-47 asks, "Will doing this help to reclaim or defend the Ebon Hawk and her incompetent, organic crew?"

Deflecting several bolts, Jolee flattens himself against the hallway wall as he growls, "Of course it will, you useless machine!"

"Conclusion: That is the answer that my programming requires. Though on a personal level I will greatly enjoy destroying these particular meatbags, as they have been annoyingly adamant about trying to break onto the ship." There's a low hiss from up ahead as the entrance of the Hawk folds down, followed by the metallic clack of metal feet on the ramp. The arrival of the scuffed red droid is further heralded by the shriek of a powerful assault rifle being fired at the Republic soldiers, catching them momentarily unaware.

Jolee smiles in grim satisfaction as the droid manages to catch several of the soldiers in a pincer position, trapped between his rifle and Canderous's repeating blaster. Prowling along the edges of the firefight, Juhani quickly herds any stragglers into the fray with a few precise sweeps of her lightsaber. Seeing that the battle is at least contained, the older Force user slips into the hanger behind his companions. Ducking and weaving, he barely manages to deflect a few stray bolts as he forces his tired body to sprint towards the hanger's inner control panel. When he reaches the panel, he slaps the button to close the bay doors, fingers flying over the keypad as he locks the entrance against further intrusion.

Doors secure, Jolee whirls around just in time to witness Juhani acrobatically twirl over the heads of three soldiers, digging the blade of her lightsaber into their shoulders as she moves. The Humans yelp as their flesh is seared, the sudden pain forcing two of them to drop their blaster rifles. Taking advantage of these injuries, Canderous and HK-47 pick off the wounded with a few clean shots, using their flanking positions to cover most angles. What nobody else notices is the small cluster of soldiers who have regrouped and are sneaking around to attack from the crew's blind side.

"Behind you!" Jolee yells, summoning Force energy and then releasing it at the group who's threatening his crewmates. The blast knocks the soldiers back, two of them falling to the ground while the others struggle to remain on their feet. Instinctively, Jolee throws his lightsaber into the fray, using the Force to guide its trajectory so that the whirling blade cuts into three of his adversaries before spinning back into his grip.

Glaring at the soldiers who were attempting to sneak up on her, Juhani scowls. "That was unwise," she states, raising her lightsaber above her head in a two-handed grip before bringing the blade down on the nearest opponent. It burns through his helmet and armor, carving a deadly slice down his left side. "I would have shown you mercy, had you not tried to shoot me in the back."

"They're pieces of Republic bantha shit," Canderous shouts over the shriek of his repeating blaster. "They don't deserve mercy."

"Observation: Mercy is a pathetic meatbag trait," HK-47 soundly declares. "One that I am fortunate enough not to possess." As though to prove his point, he fires two rounds into the closest soldier's head, killing him instantly.

Wincing at the overt show of violence, Jolee crouches low as he holds his lightsaber defensively across his chest. Performing a quick scan of the hanger, he notes that the brutal efficiency of his crewmates has incapacitated a majority of the guards who were attacking them. However, his keen
eyes spot a figure crouched in the nearby shadows, hurriedly whispering into a commlink. "Not so fast!" he hisses, throwing a burst of Force power at the soldier. The field of raw energy encapsulates his foe, freezing the woman in place.

Firing a burst of blaster bolts at one of the soldiers who was attempting to shoot Juhani from behind, Canderous turns to face the older Force user. "I can finish that one off," he offers.

"No!" Jolee shouts back, wincing at the alarm in his voice. Clearing his throat, he manages to school his tone into something more reasonable. "We need to leave at least one alive for questioning."

Whirling her lightsaber above her head, the Cathar delivers a devastating blow to one soldier's neck before she spins lightly on her heel and stabs another foe straight through the abdomen. There's a wet gurgle and the odor of burning plastoid armor as the woman sinks to the floor. "I have no questions," she snarls.

"Well, I do!" Rushing somewhat protectively towards the immobilized soldier, Jolee glances towards the retractable wall on the other side of the hanger. While it presumably leads into open space, he notes that there's no visible control panel to open this exit. "For one thing, how the hells are we supposed to get the ship out of here?"

The rest of the crew offers no response as they focus on clearing the room of its final opponents. Canderous lets out an annoyed snarl as he takes a few blaster shots from a soldier who managed to find cover behind the Hawk's landing gear. Retribution is swift as HK-47 picks the man off with the type of detached indifference only a droid can manage. Meanwhile, Juhani is breathing hard as she makes a final twirling dive over two remaining soldiers, slicing at them from midair before landing behind them and delivering a vicious stab that guts both foes simultaneously.

Reaching the remaining immobilized soldier, Jolee quietly hisses, "Look, you tried to run for cover and call for help. I assume that means you have a bit more common sense than some of your friends here." He knows that she can't reply while trapped in stasis, so he keeps talking at her. "Answer our questions, and answer them honestly, and my crewmates might not kill you on sight."

Footsteps clang loudly against the durasteel floor as the rest of the crew hurries over, only HK-47 appearing relatively unharmed. "Observation: It's doubtful that this inferior fleshsack knows anything that can help us. Allow me to crush her neck so that her death can at least be entertaining."

Even Canderous has the decency to look mildly appalled by the droid's suggestion, and he arches a brow as he asks, "Remind me again why Vann keeps this thing around?"

"Correction: This meatbag appears to be more gravely injured." HK-47 turns so that his rifle is aimed equally at the soldier and the Mandalorian. "Perhaps I should kill him instead. To put him out of his misery, of course."

"Nobody is shooting anyone else right now!" Jolee shouts, powering down his lightsaber. Reaching out both hands, he grabs the soldier roughly by the collar of her armor, yanking her closer as he lowers the field of Force energy holding her in place. "We're going to ask her some questions, and she's going to answer them honestly. Like civilized individuals. Do the rest of you think you can manage that?"

"Of course," Juhani huffs, powering down her own weapon. "Ask your questions, old man. We will guard her to ensure that she speaks the truth."
Sighing heavily, HK-47 lowers his rifle a few centimeters. "Observation: Mercy killing is the mark of a civilized society. At least according to your illogical meatbag standards."

The soldier is trembling in Jolee's grasp, her breath coming in panicked gasps as she glances around at the assembled group. Shifting his grip so that he can look directly at the visor of the woman's helmet, the Force user attempts to meet her gaze as he asks, "How do we get our freighter back into open space? I don't see a control panel for anything but the doors leading into your main ship."

"You... you can't," the soldier stutters, voice somewhat garbled by her vocalizer. "This is a detention hanger. There's no internal release."

"As I suspected, this particular meatbag is even more useless than most." HK-47 raises his rifle back up, aiming it at the soldier's head. "Suggestion: Allow me to kill her so that the body count for this assignment will reach its maximum number."

Narrowing his eyes, Canderous grimaces as he admits, "Weirdly enough, I agree with Vann's little murder machine. If we kill her, there won't be any witnesses to report that we've got the Hawk back."

Shaking her head in desperation, the soldier practically shouts, "Wait! No!" Holding up both hands, she quickly adds, "There's no release in here, but I can tell you what I do know."

Juhani leans in closer, sharp teeth glinting in bright lights. "We're listening."

"The only release for this hanger is on the bridge!" Wincing, the soldier shrinks down in the older Force user's grasp. "I can try and get there for you... Or at least guide you there."

"Or lead us into a trap." Canderous shakes his head, heavy blaster still clutched in both hands. "Sorry sister, I can't let that happen."

"Well, someone has to try and get to the bridge," Jolee argues. "And I don't know about the two of you, but I sure as hells have no clue how to get there."

For a moment, it looks like Canderous and Juhani are going to argue, as they both open their mouths simultaneously to say something. However, any objections are muffled by the crackle of their commlinks, the cacophonous static quickly giving way to Mission's hopeful voice.

"Hey guys!" the Twi'lek greets them merrily. "I've got some good news and some bad news."

Unwilling to release his grip on the Republic soldier in order to reach his commlink, Jolee nods to his crewmates. Juhani immediately removes the comm on her belt, holding it just below her mouth. "Are you safe?" she asks. "Were you successful?"

"Geez, not even going to ask for the bad news first or something?" Mission scoffs. "Well, I'll give you the good news first then. Big Z and I figured out where they were keeping Vann and the others. It took a little bit of work, but we got 'em out."

Brows furrowing in confusion, Juhani demands, "So then what is the bad news? You were not captured, were you?" She pauses before cautiously asking, "Did everyone get out alive?"

"One question at a time! Sheesh!" Zaalbar's trill can be heard in the background, though it's too indistinct to overhear exactly what he's saying. "Yeah, I know Big Z," Mission agrees. "They're being really impatient."
"Get to the point, kid!" Jolee shouts.

"Okay, okay!" Mission's eye roll is practically audible even over the commlink. "Well, to answer your questions, everyone's alive, and nobody's been captured. Or recaptured."

There's a collective sigh of relief at this piece of information, though the joy is short lived as the Twi'lek continues to speak.

"The bad news is that V-Man is still pretty out of it. Apparently, Karath used some type of shock collar on him, and it fried his brain a little." Mission forces a laugh, though it's terse. "Bastila says he'll be okay, but I dunno how useful he'll be."

There's a faint, indistinct muttering from the other end of the comm that sounds like a groggy male voice. A few more voices join in, though their words are lost in fizzes of static as they discuss something softly amongst themselves. Glancing up at the other organic crewmembers in the hanger, Jolee notes the expressions of concern that line their faces. It's astonishing how much loyalty the man who's become their reluctant leader seems to command. But then, he always knew how to inspire a following...

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, Jolee raises his voice loud enough to be picked-up by Juhani's commlink. "Mission, are you anywhere near the bridge?"

"Umm, maybe?" The Twi'lek whispers something imperceptible, which is followed by a loud rustling as the comm seems to change hands.

A male voice crackles over the link. "Carth here," the pilot says, voice sounding strained but surprisingly strong despite his earlier ordeal. "I can confirm that we're almost directly below the bridge. I can make it up one floor, no problem. Do you need something?"

Voice still raised, Jolee replies, "We need the damn ship released from this hanger! And maybe shut down that interdictor field so that we can jump to hyperspace once we're free."

There's a pause, following by a somewhat louder series of whispers and rustling before a posh, accented female voice comes through. "Is there any way to get the Ebon Hawk out of the hanger without utilizing the bridge? Going there could be a rather dangerous prospect."

Sharply prodding the captive Republic soldier, Jolee gives her shoulder a harsh shake before ordering, "Well? Go on and explain things to the nice lady, and make it quick! I'm an old man, I don't have a lot of spare time."

"Uh, no..." the soldier stammers awkwardly. "Like I told the others, this is a detention hanger. The only way to release the doors is via a console on the bridge."

Bastila's voice is bewildered as she asks, "And who is that?"

"My new friend," Jolee responds sardonically. "It's a long story. I'll explain it to you later... though not much later. After all, it's not like we're getting any younger waiting for this door to open."

"Well then, I guess I'm heading to the bridge." Carth's voice is somewhat muffled as he speaks, suggesting that Bastila is still holding the commlink.

Frowning at the comm, Canderous barks out a harsh laugh. "You sure you can handle that?" he asks. "If Vann's still down for the count, I can't imagine you're doing much better."

"I'll be fine. Believe it or not, Vann got the worst of it." Carth sighs, voice a mixture of bemused
and exasperated.

A moment later, Bastila declares, "And besides, I'll be going with him!"

"You're not…!" Carth argues.

Sounding insulted, Bastila counters, "I most certainly am!"

"Well, you kids hurry up and figure things out. We'll be here, keeping an eye on the Hawk."

Looking at the other crewmembers, Jolee winces as HK-47 immediately responds.

"Statement: We have secured the ship, just as I was programmed, Master." His automated voice grows increasingly enthusiastic as he adds, "It was quite enjoyable to end the life of so many organic meatbags who deserved death."

There's a moment of stunned silence on the other end of the comm, and then Carth hesitantly wonders, "Wait. Was that…?"

"I told you," Jolee snaps, "It's a long story."

"Well, you can tell it to me when I see you in the hanger, Gramps," Mission chirps, followed by a growl of agreement from Zaalbar. "We're headed to you now… Maybe after a few quick stops to create a distraction for Carth and Bastila."

"Good plan," Canderous grunts in approval.

Lips pressed into a thin line, Juhani asks, "Is Vann coming with you?"

"No," a voice groans from the other end. "I'm going with the idiots who are storming the bridge."

"Observation: Master, you sound terrible," HK-47 almost manages to sound perturbed. "Would you like me to kill someone for you? That always improves my mood."

"Just keep defending the ship," Vann orders weakly. "Just like I told you earlier. And the rest of you…" he groans again, voice fading as he says, "Just, uh, keep doing whatever it is that you're doing. This, umm, it's all going to plan."

Canderous chuckles darkly. "Of course it is."

"Well, you kids hurry your asses back here. I don't feel like waiting all day!" Listening closely to the comm, Jolee can hear the general murmurs of agreement made by the rest of the crew.

"We'll do what we can," Carth offers, sounding mildly amused. "Everyone heading to the bridge will be going dark, so contact Mission if you need anything else. Over and out!"

"Aye-aye and whatever else," Jolee responds with a snort as the other end of the commlink goes silent, even the static cutting off. Looking between the other crewmembers, he tries to keep his tone light. "About time we had some damned good news."

Eyeing the older Force user doubtfully, Juhani uses the hilt of her lightsaber to gesture to the silent Republic soldier. "What do you plan to do with her?"

"Well," Jolee begins, eyeing the armored woman who's still trembling slightly in his grasp. "I thought that…"

The shriek of blaster fire fills the large hanger, two bolts whizzing just past the older Force user's
face and into the temple of the woman he's restraining. She immediately goes limp beneath his hands, body slumping out of his grasp and collapsing to the floor in a lifeless heap. Both Canderous and Juhani immediately raise their weapons as they search for the source of the shots, the Cathar's crimson blade humming as it ignites. But the mystery is solved a second later when they notice the faint trail of smoke swirling up from the muzzle of HK-47's rifle.

"Dammit!" Jolee shouts at the droid. "I said not to kill her!"

Somehow, the droid manages to look even more unperturbed than usual. "Explanation: You heard the Master's order to keep defending the ship. That meatbag was an enemy, and blasting her prevented any further trouble."

Glaring at the droid, Jolee jerks an accusatory finger at his scuffed red head. "You know damn well that you shot her because you wanted to! You and your 'master' are both alike, I swear."

"Clarification: If you are asking if I enjoyed splattering that organic's brain matter across this floor, I did." HK-47's eyes momentarily glow brighter as he adds, "Very much so."

Opening his mouth to ask his crewmates to back him up, Jolee can't help but notice the amused smirk playing on Canderous's lips and the more stoic expression of acceptance that Juhani wears. He finally sighs, looking mournfully down at the dead soldier as he acknowledges that arguing with the bucket of bolts is a waste of time and energy. Shaking his head, he mutters, "Dammit to Sith hell, Vann. You're not even here, and you're still causing me all sorts of problems!"

* * *

"Are you sure you're alright?" Carth pauses midway through buckling his belt, worry creasing his brow as he peers at his companion.

"Sure," Vann lies. He's currently sprawled on the floor, pulling on his boots as he tries to ignore the fact that his entire body feels like he went five rounds in the dueling ring with a particularly angry rancor.

"Perhaps you should have gone back to the ship with Mission and Zaalbar…" Bastila muses as she adjusts her vest, unable to prevent the longer hilt of her double-bladed lightsaber from poking out the back of her collar. Despite being impossible to conceal properly, it's probably a good thing that she opted for the more powerful weapon.

Weakly waving a dismissive hand, Vann finishes securing his boots before tackling the challenge of donning his jacket. "What, and miss all the fun?"

Straightening her ponytail, Bastila draws a deep breath before leveling a cool gaze at the mercenary. "We're only going to the bridge to release the Ebon Hawk from the hanger and disable the gravity well projectors. It should be a simple enough task with only two people…" Trailing off, she casts a pointed glare at the pilot. "Isn't that right, Carth?"

"Oh, he's not fooling anyone." Wincing as he climbs to his feet, Vann snorts derisively. "He's going to the bridge to confront Karath. Again. Because that worked so well the first time."

Holstering his blasters, Carth clenches his jaw. "Look, I'm sorry that I got everyone caught. And I'm especially sorry that you got the worst of it, Vann…" His lips twist into a wry grin. "But you really managed to piss Karath off."

"I have that effect on people." Rubbing the tender spot where the neural collar sat before being torn off by Zaalbar, Vann attempts a nonchalant shrug. It comes off more like a full-body grimace.
"And I'll take your avoidance of my question as proof that you're going to be an idiot and face
down Karath again. Which is why I'm coming with you."

"You were barely conscious when Mission found us!" Bastila shakes her head in disapproval. "And
you were unconscious for an alarmingly long time before that."

"Hey, you passed out first!" Vann counters snidely.

Jaw dropping, Bastila stares at the mercenary for a moment before practically shouting, "Only for a
moment!" Reeling back, her voice is more hushed as she continues. "I was only unconscious for a
brief period. According to Carth, you were out for far longer than that." Concern flickers across her
face. "For a time, I was worried that you weren't going to wake-up."

"Both of us were." Carth nods grimly. "At one point, Karath started shocking you even though
you'd already passed out. I think he was angry that we wouldn't turn on each other like he wanted."

"I believe you're right," Bastila agrees glumly. "He became frustrated and left soon after that."

Forcing his shoulders back, Vann throws both hands up in exasperation. "Well, I didn't die. And
I'm not a gibbering mess, so I think my brain's fine. Or at least no more damaged than it was
before."

"That's not the point!" Stalking towards the door, Carth shakes his head angrily. "Karath… he's
turned into some type of sadist. He tortures people for fun, and supports all of the death and
destruction that Malak's causing." Pausing, he looks over his shoulder. "He has to be stopped."

Vann nods sarcastically, struggling to fall into step behind his companion. "And of course this has
nothing to do with the fact that he claims your son is alive."

Hands balling into fists, Carth exhales heavily through his nose. "Trust me, I think he's just as full
of shit as you do. But…" Blinking heavily, he tries to meet the mercenary's eyes. "This is my son.
If there's a chance, even a slight one, that Dustil is alive I have to know."

"I understand." Vann offers a weak smile.

"You… do?" Surprises laces Carth's words, and some of the tension leaves his shoulders.

"Yeah," Vann clarifies. "It's how I felt about Dantooine. About getting my memory back." His
expression turns dark as he mutters, "And we all saw how well that went."

"Dantooine…" Carth's gaze shifts to the Jedi, his voice growing soft and almost pleading. "I'm…
I'm so sorry about that. But maybe Karath was lying…"

Brushing past both men, Bastila's expression is stony as she announces. "We should get to the
bridge." Cold emotion radiates off her and into the Force, swirling around her in tendrils of
darkness.

Probing the Force bond, Vann isn't surprised to find the Jedi's end tightly sealed against his
presence. Their mental link has been closed off since Zaalbar removed their collars, though the
mercenary's not sure if it's to prevent his pain from leaking through or to keep hers in. Maybe it's a
little of both. Sighing, he swallows a wince as he strides towards the door of the storage room,
muscles still twitching a burning from the residual effects of the collar. "Oh, I really have a good
feeling that getting to the bridge will absolutely solve everything," he deadpans, rolling his eyes.

Apparently noting his companion's continued discomfort, Carth quietly asks, "Vann, are you sure
"You're okay?"

"Is she okay?" Quirking a brow Vann nods towards Bastila, who is marching down the hallway with her body tense and face almost completely devoid of emotion. Noting the flickers of anxiety that crosses the pilot's face, he adds, "Are you?"

Mouth forming a small 'o,' resignation settles across Carth's shoulders as he admits, "You may have a point there."

"So, stop asking." Clapping the pilot on the shoulder, Vann gives the other man an affectionate squeeze before trudging wearily after the Jedi. Thankfully, both of his companions seem content to lapse into silence as they carefully make their way through the long, featureless corridors.

The journey to the Leviathan's fourth floor is suspiciously easy, thanks in part to the passcard that Mission handed over with a mischievous wink. How she acquired it is anyone's guess. There are surprisingly few soldiers out on patrol, but Vann can't help but suspect that's also Mission's doing. Or maybe the result of the Ebon Hawk's crew wresting back control of the ship. Either way, he can't help but smirk at the thought and he's immensely grateful that he reactivated HK-47 with specific orders not to act unless the ship was directly threatened. Which apparently, it was.

Just like before, their luck only lasts until the elevator doors open. Once they reach the fourth floor they're swarmed with guards, and getting to the bridge becomes a whole new challenge.

"Remind me again how this would have been a simple task with only two people?" Vann asks sarcastically, deflecting a series of blaster bolts with the lightsaber in his off-hand.

"I thought it would be!" Bastila responds as she disables a pair of battle droids with a blast of Force energy.

"Yeah," Carth drawls, firing on a squadron of guards with both pistols. "You thought wrong."

Spotting the doors to the bridge just up ahead and noting that they're blocked by a small wave of elite Republic guards, Vann growls, "Oh, kriff this!" Still reveling in once again being fully connected to the Force, it's almost a rush as he lets the energy flow through his arms in cold waves. Sparks are hot against his fingertips before exploding outward from both hands, the purple forks of electricity racing towards the soldiers with deadly precision.

The short hallway they're crowded in is filled with shrieks of pain as the guards are electrocuted, their forms shaking uncontrollably as the Force lightning tears through them. An instant later the screaming stops and the space is oddly silent, aside from the clatter of blaster rifles and armored bodies falling to the durasteel floor. A few of the soldiers continue to moan once they're on the ground, signaling that they're not dead. At least not yet.

"Was that really necessary?" Carth asks from his position a meter further down the hall.

"Because shooting them full of blaster bolts is so much kinder?" Vann snorts, marching purposefully towards the panel controlling the bridge doors. The residual pain from Karath's torture is finally fading, though his limbs still feel achy and weak.

"They weren't going to back down without a fight," Bastila argues, carefully stepping over two downed soldiers as she also approaches the doors. "If nothing else, this was… efficient."

Swiping the passcard across the sensor, Vann waits for the door lock to click open. But it remains firmly shut. He tries again, with the same result. After the card causes the indicator light to flash red for the third time, he exasperatedly announces, "The card's not working. My guess is that the
doors are locked from the inside."

"Great," Carth gripes. "So, what now? Can you override the security system?"

Studying the panel, Vann examines what he can see of the interface without prying the protective faceplate from the wall. "Possibly," he responds. "Or I could accidentally fry the system and permanently jam the door. Honestly, this is a little beyond my skill set."

"Admitting that something is beyond you, wow. Karath really did fry your brain." Chuckling humorlessly Carth begins to scan the area, obviously looking for alternate routes. "Do you think we can get to the bridge from outside...?"

Without waiting for the pilot to finish, Bastila strides up to the set of doors. She swings her lightsaber in a wide arc before jamming one blade directly through the sealed, reinforced entrance. The durasteel hisses as it melts, glowing neon orange as molten metal drips down the deep gouge that the Jedi is slicing into its surface. Arms visibly tensing, she drags the plasma blade through the door in a rough, Human-sized circle, slowly carving a hole into the unyielding doors. The metal sizzles and bubbles, hot sparks flying through the air and singing the sleeves of the Jedi's shirt. She doesn't seem to notice.

It takes a few minutes for Bastila to burn a complete circle into the door, her expression grimly determined the entire time. Only when the newly-carved entryway is complete does she look around, finally noticing the expression of shock on Carth's face and the entertained grin that Vann is sporting. "What?" she snaps irritably. "I didn't feel like walking around this ridiculous ship from the outside!"

Holding up his hands, lightsaber hilts still firmly clutched, the mercenary shrugs innocently. "I didn't say a word."

Exhaling in irritation, Bastila mutters, "Well, at least I'm taking my aggression out on inanimate objects."

"Oh yeah," Vann agrees. "You really showed that door what peace and serenity look like." Ignoring the indignant gasp from the Jedi, he glances over his shoulder at the still-stunned pilot. "So, do you want to do the honors and kick down the door, or should I?"

Squaring his shoulders as he sober his expression, Carth carefully steps in front of his companions and studies the still-glowing circle of metal that's been carved into the bridge doors. "Karath is my fight," he finally declares. "I should go in first."

Still too ragged around the edges to argue, Vann watches as the pilot raises one foot and slams the sole of his boot into the circle of metal, knocking it into the bridge with a good amount of force. He can't help but smirk as the heavy metal disk clangs loudly, the sound echoing ominously and heralding their arrival. He can't see too far into the bridge, but his Force awareness can sense multiple beings, all of them seething with cold waves of anger and fear. Raising both of his lightsabers into a defensive position, Vann ignites the violet blades in anticipation. "And here we go..."

Chapter End Notes

1. It always bothered me that KotOR hand-waved the rest of the crew regaining
control of the Ebon Hawk. I apologize if this chapter feels like filler, but I thought the rest of the crew deserved some time to shine.

2. Were you worried that HK-47 was only a cameo? Worry no more.

3. Cliffhanger! (Sorry-not-sorry…)

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Chapter Summary

In which our heroes learn new things, make new friends, and discover that some things are best left in the past. Also, things go terribly, horribly wrong.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You know, most individuals consider it polite to knock." Backlit by the large viewport that takes up an entire wall of the bridge, Karath looks eerily pale as he mans the Leviathan's helm. Ten elite troopers stand guard around him, all of them armed with high-powered repeating blasters and heavy vibroswords. Their weapons are carefully trained on the three figures who have just charged into the room.

"You know, most individuals don't find it fun to shock people into unconsciousness," Vann snarls back accusingly.

Craning his neck to peer at the electrocuted soldiers littering the corridor leading up to the bridge, Karath arches a brow. "Always the hypocrite, aren't you?"

"Give it up, Karath." Blaster pistols aimed squarely at the admiral, Carth glares at his former commander. "You're not getting out of this."

"Considering Supreme Commander Malak is on his way here as we speak, neither are you." Dark satisfaction glints in Karath's blue eyes, and he smirks.

Bastila stiffens slightly upon hearing her former Master's name but she doesn't waver from where she's standing, slender form illuminated by the yellow glow of her lightsaber. Her fear leaks cold and bright into the Force, but she quickly tamps down on the emotion.

"Guards," Karath orders. "Take them alive if you can. Kill them if you must."

All ten guards open fire simultaneously, sending a barrage of blaster bolts raining down on the intruders who broke onto the bridge. It's impossible to dodge or deflect all the shots, and Vann shouts in pain as multiple bolts streak through the air and dig directly into his flesh. The fierce sting of these fresh wounds only adds to the persistent ache throughout his body, and he quickly finds himself diving for cover behind one of the computer terminals stationed throughout the room. Using both lightsabers to deflect as many shots as possible he slides across the slick floor, ducking his head as he tumbles to safety beneath a terminal.

Surveying what little he can see, Vann spots Bastila and Carth splitting up as they dodge the soldiers' shots, using the control stations and display panels as protection from the onslaught. Through some blessing of the Force, the trio manages to duck into separate parts of the bridge, forcing the troopers to break their formation in order to efficiently lay down cover fire on all three intruders. With their adversaries now divided across the spacious bridge, the mercenary senses that
the odds have just shifted in their favor.

Legs tensing beneath him, Vann waves one lightsaber tauntingly as he leans partially out from beneath the terminal. The movement is just enough to draw the attention of the three closest soldiers, and they immediately begin blasting at him. Despite the heavy fire he's under, the mercenary manages to parry some of the bolts back at their shooters. One or two are aimed well enough to pierce the plastoid armor, causing the soldiers to hiss in pain as they angrily descend on him. Luckily, that's exactly what he wants. "Come on, assholes," he mutters under his breath as he feeds on their outrage, letting the cold power of their emotions rush through his arms. "Just a little closer..."

As they close in, one of the soldiers drops his blaster and draws a dual-bladed vibrosword from his back, relying on his allies to provide suppressive fire as he moves into melee range. In theory, the troopers have Vann cornered, their approach blocking any potential escape routes. But they've also arranged themselves into a near-perfect half circle. Just as the sword-wielding soldier is within range Vann releases his gathered Force power in the form of twin lightning bolts, the purple electricity briefly bathing the bridge in an eerie glow. The neat line of soldiers forms a circuit, enabling the mercenary to channel electricity back and forth between them. Trapped within the storm, the soldiers howl in agony, two of them dropping their weapons as their knees buckle. Vann only has enough energy to channel the lightning for a few moments, but even as the electricity fades he can feel a fresh surge of raw Force energy flowing through him. The icy current is overwhelming, washing over his mind and overriding the pain that was overtaking his body. As he abandons the concealment of the terminal, he notes that two of his adversaries are already recovering from his attack. Unfortunately, one of them is the sword-wielding trooper who's standing centimeters away. As he shakes off the last of the lightning strike the soldier attacks, twirling his sword through the air and taking two quick stabs at the mercenary. They're both blocked before they can land, twin violet lightsabers humming aggressively as they bat away the metal blades. Vann immediately retaliates with two slashes of his own. The first is parried, but the second slips through the soldier's guard, sinking deep into his right shoulder.

Carving the blade upwards, Vann uses the Force to propel himself into a flip that carries him over his opponent's head. His lightsabers swirl around him as he spins through the air, one weapon slicing into the soldier's arm while the other cuts into the man's neck. The blades are still humming as he lands and reverses his grip on the weapon in his dominant hand so that he can deliver a final stab straight through the soldier's back and abdomen. There's a wheeze of agony as the other man stumbles forward, and then crumples to the floor.

Whirling around, Vann feels the haze of battle completely overtake his mind, his limbs cool and loose with the energy flowing through them. Using the Force, he yanks one of the blaster-wielding soldiers towards him. The woman lets out a sharp yelp, boots scrabbling helplessly across the floor as an invisible hand drags her forward. She releases a burst of bolts in response, two of them sinking into the mercenary's side even as he deflects the rest away. With a growl of irritation, he lunges forward and slashes through the soldier's chest, carving a deep gash from shoulder to sternum. An instant later his second blade jabs upward, burning a fatal wound through his opponent's heart.

Glancing to his left Vann spots the third attacker still laying prone, limbs sporadically twitching from the effects of the Force lightning. As he dives forward, the soldier grips his blaster and fires a flurry of bolts. Most of the shots are knocked away with efficient sweeps of the mercenary's lightsabers but a few find their mark, digging sharply into his hip and thigh. The cumulating severity of his injuries is beginning to break through the haze of battle, but it's not enough to overpower the cold fury that builds in his gut. He embraces the sensation, using it to guide his arm
as he slices the barrel of the blaster in half with his off-hand, swinging his dominant blade in an upwards arc to carve a deadly incision across the soldier's throat. With a gasp, the dying man reflexively squeezes the trigger before he slumps to his side. Vann barely manages to dodge the shot, still taking a few bolts to the shin. He grunts in pain, stumbling backward as his leg trembles beneath his weight.

"Vann!" a voice shouts in alarm from across the room. "Hey Bastila, I think he needs this more than I do!"

Still struggling to regain his footing, the mercenary shifts his lightsabers into a defensive position as he deflects the blaster fire aimed at him. Eyes surveying the bridge, he spots Carth temporarily holstering one blaster as he retrieves something from inside his jacket. With a flick of his wrist, he tosses the item halfway across the room, where it's caught in midair by Bastila as she pivots elegantly, the dual blades of her lightsaber a singular blur as they hum through the air. She eyes the object in her palm, lips tugging into a thin smirk just as she throws it towards the mercenary.

"Do try to be more careful!" the Jedi chides, adjusting her grip on her weapon.

Clipping one saber to his belt, Vann reaches up and grabs the item as it soars towards him. His fingers wrap around a smooth cylinder, the surface still warm from being stored inside of Cath's jacket. He instantly recognizes the elongated tube of a medpac's hypospray and maneuvers the tip to press against his thigh. There's a faint pinch of discomfort as the needle injects the kolto mixture into his skin, followed by a healing warmth that floods his body. Sighing, he can already feel the worst of his blaster injuries sealing up, the pierced flesh knitting back together.

Tossing aside the empty medpac, Vann retrieves his second lightsaber as he tests his weight on his injured leg. There's a faint ache, but nothing more serious. Poised to head back into the fray, he catches sight of Bastila just as she whirs around, lightsaber spinning to defensively block a series of shots from two nearby soldiers. Carth is providing cover fire from beneath a control panel a few meters away, harrying soldiers with an unending wave of blaster bolts.

"Thanks!" Vann shouts to his companion as he twirls both lightsabers, using the movement of the weapons to deflect any shots fired at him as he stalks closer to the front of the bridge.

Bastila inclines her head in acknowledgment even as she throws herself into the battle, her lightsaber humming violently as she engages two soldiers simultaneously. For an instant, the Force bond flares to life and a thin trickle of warm relief flows through it before the link shuts once more. Seeing that the Jedi has her opponents handled, Vann turns back around in time to see Carth rise-up and pick off a soldier who was coming in from Bastila's blind spot. The unsuspecting trooper drops instantaneously, but taking the shot forces the pilot to abandon his cover, opening him to a fresh wave of attacks. From his position at the front of the bridge, Karath immediately spots his opportunity. Taking aim through the scope of his customized pistol, the admiral's lips curl into a cruel smirk as his finger twitches on the trigger. But before he can take the shot, Vann extends his off-hand and sends out a burst of Force energy, wrapping it around the other man's throat and squeezing hard enough to instantly cut off his airflow.

Eyes going wide, Karath's mouth gapes as he desperately fights for breath. He lowers his blasters as his fingers reach up to claw at his neck, futilely attempting to pry off the invisible force intent on squeezing the life out of him. Vann sprints forward, his off-hand outstretched to maintain the powerful Force choke while his other arm swings his lightsaber up to protect his torso. Peripherally he's aware of a soldier opening fire on him, but the danger is lost in the haze of red that's clouding his vision. He instinctively deflects most of the bolts before they reach his body, and he barely feels the sting of the rounds that makes it past his guard. His focus has narrowed down to a single
target, the man's very existence fueling the pure, ice-cold fury that floods through his system.

"Karath," Vann snarls, tightening the clench of his fingers. He can feel the unadulterated fear that's pouring off the general, the emotion slick and cold in the Force. Even as the lack of oxygen forces the man to his knees he doesn't release the pistol, his knuckles turning white with the pressure required to maintain his grip.

With a growl, Vann continues to channel the Force, letting the power flow through both hands as he focuses his might and uses his power to rip the pistol from the admiral's grasp. The weapon soars through the air and across the bridge, clattering loudly as it lands on the other side of the durasteel floor. All Karath can do is watch as he's disarmed, his fingers battered when the pistol was pried free. Losing his weapon seems to drain the last dregs of defiance from the man and he slumps down weakly.

"How does it feel?" Vann calls as he closes the final meter to his target. "To be completely at someone else's mercy?"

Lips turning a pale shade of blue, Karath glares up with bloodshot eyes as terror seeps off him like a frigid oil slick. His throat bobs, gasping at nothing as he attempts to form words that he can't utter.

Loosening the Force choke, Vann moves to stare down at the admiral as he points the tip of one lightsaber directly at the man's left eye. "You don't get to die yet," he warns. "You haven't earned that right."

Blinking balefully at the Force user, Karath gasps for what little breath he's afforded as his eyes water profusely. With his voice reduced to a raspy hiss, he manages to spit, "There you are."
Disgust taints every syllable, even as panic continues to swirl around him.

"Here I am," Vann agrees with an arrogant cock of his head. He refuses to take the bait, currently satisfied to see his target kneeling defenseless at his feet. Pressing the blade just a hair closer to the admiral's eye, he lets the violet plasma sizzle mere centimeters away from the delicate orb. "And it's my turn to ask questions."

Wheezing against the constant pressure still being applied to his throat, Karath flinches back from the lightsaber. Yet he still manages a wicked smile as he stares up at his captor. "So, you want to know about your past?" he sneers.

'Yes!' Vann screams mentally, the word dancing on the very tip of his tongue. But before he can speak, his Force awareness senses a familiar presence approaching cautiously from behind, one hand hovering tentatively over his right shoulder.

"Vann?" Carth breathes softly.

Adjusting the Force-grip around the admiral's neck, the mercenary yanks the other man forward, dragging his prone body across the polished floor. There's an indignant yelp as his captive skids awkwardly, finally landing in an unglorified heap right at the pilot's feet. "No, asshole," Vann growls, biting back his personal desire to regain his lost memories. Jerking his head towards his companion, he clarifies. "We're going to talk about his past."

Karath's eyes narrow in contempt as he looks up at his former subordinate, and he slowly draws his legs beneath him as he attempts to climb to his feet. However, another Force push shoves him back down, ramming his face into the ground. Hissing in pain he turns to glower at his captor, blood dripping from his nose. "And just what do you want to know?" he snarls.
"The truth," Vann warns, tone uncharacteristically calm despite its implied threat.

Swallowing his surprise, Carth stares awkwardly down at his now-helpless former commander. His hand lands heavily on his companion's shoulder, fingers clenching hard as he takes in the scene. Jaw tightening, he cautiously asks, "Dustil… is he really alive?"

Narrowly avoiding the lightsaber still aimed at his eye, Karath manages a curt nod. "Everything I told you earlier is true."

"I don't sense any deception coming from him." Bastila's voice is guarded as she approaches her companions, eyes narrowing when she looks down at the admiral. "But then, he's always been a talented liar."

"Why would I lie now?" Coughing out a harsh laugh, Karath's gaze flicks between the trio gathered around him. "I'm not going to survive this."

Crossing her arms over her chest, Bastila's tone is hesitant. "We still might let you live."

A sardonic smirk tugs at the corners of Karath's mouth. "Maybe," he says, glancing up at Vann with a doubtful expression. "But you know as well as anyone that Supreme Commander Malak won't. So, I might as well tell you what I know."

Disbelief briefly flashes across Carth's features, the breath catching in his throat as he stares mutely down at the admiral. His mouth opens and closes a few times, a myriad of emotions swirling around him until one grows to dominate the rest. His hope forms a brilliant halo that shines in the darkness. The words suddenly pour out all at once, a rare note of optimism entering his voice. "So, you were telling the truth when you said that Dustil is alive? Alive and on Korriban?"

"Trust never was your strong suit, Onasi," Karath mutters scathingly.

"Can you blame me?" Arching a brow, Carth eyes the admiral warily. "Half of my career was built on lies! I was lied to about the Jedi, about Malak, about my assignments…" He throws his hands up in frustration. "And what was my reward? My home was destroyed, my wife was killed, and my son was taken." He rubs his face in aggravation, shouting, "So forgive me if trust doesn't exactly come easy for me."

Frowning, Vann considers the pilot's words for a moment before applying another hint of pressure to the admiral's throat. "Carth's wife… did she really die in the fire on Telos?" He demands. "And was it really an accident?"

Snorting derisively, Karath glares hatefully at the mercenary. "We're soldiers, not ecologists. We didn't plan for the high winds and dry conditions when we started our orbital bombardment. By the time we realized what was happening, it was too late." He scoffs, though there's a note of remorse in his voice when he says, "So, yes, the fire on Telos was an accident."

"Now answer the rest of the question," Vann urges with a jerk of his lightsaber.

Turning his head slightly so that he can catch the pilot's gaze, Karath lowers his tone to an almost conversational pitch. "Did you know Dustil was Force-sensitive?"

"I, well… no..." Carth stammers.

"Hmm." Pretending to ponder this answer, Karath casually drawls, "Your wife certainly did. She tried to hide it, too. The Supreme Commander eventually discovered the truth, of course, but your son was probably the last child on Telos to be tested for Force-sensitivity."
"We could have found room on the transport that took Dustil off the planet," Karath finally explains. "Plenty of other parents were allowed to stay with their children, at least temporarily. But the Republic doesn't like individuals who defy their commander. And Malak, well…" Staring at the pilot with a steely gaze, he asserts, "We never meant for your wife to die, Onasi. But that's not to say that her death couldn't have been prevented, had she made different choices. The will of the Force is a mysterious thing…"

Before the admiral can even finish speaking Carth whips out a pistol, disengaging the safety with a jerk of his thumb. His eyes are wide, pupils dilated with anger as he glares down at his former commander with unrepressed fury, pressing the muzzle of the blaster directly against the other man's forehead. "Don't tell me it was the kriffing will of the Force, Karath!" he roars, the anger and sorrow spilling forth from every fiber of his being. "It wasn't the Force that killed Morgana, it was the Republic." His finger twitches on the trigger, body quivering with unadulterated rage. "You murdered my wife!"

Wincing at the turn of events, Bastila's tone is chastising as she says, "No matter what, the Force cannot be blamed for the actions of men." Watching the pilot pointedly, she stares at the pistol in his hand as she adds, "The Force can only provide us with guidance regarding what is right at any given moment."

"You're more than welcome to paint us as the villains," Karath snaps back, his own outrage temporarily overriding his fear. "But in reality, we're nothing more than pragmatists building a better world. One that your wife, unfortunately, did not live to be part of." He presses his forehead against the pistol, mindless of the lightsaber still hovering dangerously close to his eye. His gaze never leaves the pilot, daring the other man to put a blaster bolt through his skull.

Vann draws his weapon back, powering down the blade even as he keeps hold of the admiral through the Force. "Is that supposed to be a nice way of admitting that you're a bunch of murderous assholes?"

"Her death was an accident," Karath hisses through the pressure around his neck. "One that could have been prevented had she not angered the wrong people."

"The wrong person," Bastila corrects.

"One person is all it takes." Karath shifts his focus to the mercenary, pale eyes full of accusations. "Isn't that right, Vann? One person, and their actions, can make all the difference." He glances at his former subordinate, voice lowering once more. "How much do you really know about this one, Onasi? How much do you truly trust him?"

Almost instantly Carth responds, "I trust Vann with my life!" But he can't hide the hint of doubt that creeps into his tone.

"You shouldn't," Karath states, the surety in his voice brokering no room for argument. "If you knew the truth… Oh, if you knew."

Curiosity is tugging at Vann's mind as he listens to the admiral speak, though it's joined by a sense of lurking dread. He wants the truth, but he doesn't necessarily want this version of it. Still, he can't stop himself from asking, "So why don't you enlighten us?"

"No." Expression blank aside from the knowing smile that tugs at his lips, Karath shakes his head against the pistol's muzzle. "I think I'll leave that task up to the Supreme Commander. He should
be here any moment now, and it's sure to be a touching reunion." Meeting the mercenary's gaze, he elaborates, "You and he are old friends, after all."

Chills tingle down Vann's spine when he hears those words, the dread that was lingering at the very back of his mind blooming full and terrible. His thoughts racing in circles, he probes the useless void of his scattered memories for some sign, any sign, that he once knew Malak. But his past remains elusive, the truth of his life before the crash hovering just beyond his grasp. He thinks he gasps in shock, though a moment later he realizes that it's Bastila who made the sound.

"You're not saying..." the Jedi stutters, unable to finish her sentence.

"Liar," Carth accuses, finger once again tense on the trigger.

"I told you, I have no reason to lie." Karath's voice is deceptively calm for the amount of fear and anger that he's exuding. "My life is forfeit, whether you do the deed or leave me here to my fate."

Eyes narrowing, Carth hisses, "It should be me. I owe you, after all. For my home, and my wife... And my son."

"Then do it!" Leaning harder against the blaster, Karath grins darkly at the pilot. "End me here, get you petty little revenge! Even after I die the Republic will live on, a glorious dream that goes beyond the reach of any one man."

Carth sneers in disgust. "What Malak's created is a nightmare."

"What the Supreme Commander created is a tribute. One that you won't live to see completed." Gaze darting to the ruined door of the bridge, Karath's voice is verging on manic as he declares, "Supreme Commander Malak will be here any moment now, and he'll probably kill you first Onasi. You know that you'll never actually see your son, right? You'll never lay eyes on him, just like you'll never see your wife again..."

The screech of a single blaster shot reverberates through the room, immediately putting an end to Karath's babbling. His eyes go wide with surprise as he stares at his captors, jaw slightly slack as he wobbles for a moment before slumping lifelessly to the floor. The wound that mars his pale forehead is a neat circle, the scorch mark around the hole a perfect match to the muzzle of Carth's pistol.

As a thin wisp of smoke curls out of his weapon and rises languidly towards the ceiling, Carth stammers, "I... I can't believe I just did that." His voice sounds oddly small considering the magnitude of his deed.

Vann can feel the anger slowly leaching out of his companion, and he subconsciously draws the last dregs into himself. It feeds his own frustration, the darkness keeping his body's pains at bay. "Feel better?" he cautiously asks.

Blinking, Carth stares wordlessly at the pistol in his hand for several long moments before finally admitting, "No... not really."

"Revenge is like that," Bastila agrees. "It solves very little, and yet it feeds almost every negative emotion that we as sentient beings are capable of."

"Then why didn't you stop me?" Turning to look imploringly at the Jedi, Carth hurriedly flips the safety back into place.

Frowning softly, Bastila draws a slow breath through her nose. "The same reason that you believed
that killing Karath would somehow solve all of your pain and hardship," she answers cryptically.

"Either way, he's dead." Fighting the urge to kick the admiral's corpse, Vann spits out, "Good kriffing riddance."

"I... I just can't believe it," Carth's voice shakes with astonishment as he looks down at the lifeless corpse at his feet. "All of that time imagining this moment, all those years of hatred... And suddenly it's all over. Just like that."

"How was it supposed to end?" Brow furrowing with concern, Vann turns to watch the pilot. "No matter what, one of you was going to die. And I definitely prefer this outcome."

Before anything else can be said on the subject Bastila's whole body suddenly jerks, her eyes going wide as a shudder passes through her form. Sucking in a sharp breath, she rapidly shakes her head. "I'm afraid our challenges are far from over," she whispers, reaching out to urgently tug at the mercenary's elbow. "In fact, I believe that our ordeal is only getting started."

As the Jedi shudders, Vann feels a frigid wave blast through the Force. It unbalances the delicate equilibrium of the ship's energy and momentarily overwhelms him with a rush of pure, malicious power. It's unlike anything he can ever recall experiencing, and yet it's somehow intimately familiar. The words come unbidden to his tongue as he subconsciously murmurs, "I think Malak's here."

"What?" Turning to face his companions, Carth flinches in surprise at the announcement. "How do you know?"

"We can feel him," Bastila explains. "His presence in the Force is like a tidal wave. You can almost drown in the dark power that he commands."

Without hesitation, Vann clips his lightsabers to his belt and then reaches out to grab both of his companions by the arm. Tugging harshly, his voice is verging on panic as he urges, "We need to get to the ship. Now!"

"I'm not arguing with that!" Carth exclaims, quickly falling into step beside his companion.

Wrenching her arm free with a sharp twist of her shoulder, Bastila shouts, "Wait! We still haven't accomplished the tasks we came to the bridge for."

Pausing mid-stride, Vann frowns thoughtfully. The worst of his battled-fueled haze is clearing, and his higher brain functions are quickly filtering back into his head. But the constant undercurrent of dark Force energy from Malak's presence is a new distraction, the menacing thrum of power keeping his adrenaline high. "And those tasks would be...?"

"Opening the detention hanger and disabling the gravity wells?" Staring pointedly, Bastila gives the mercenary an exasperated sigh.

"Right. That." Mentally chiding himself for losing track of their goals, Vann nods woodenly.

Already rushing towards the nearest computer terminal, Bastila begins rapidly typing in codes. "I should be able to access the Leviathan's command system," she affirms. "But I might need the access permissions from, umm..." Wincing, she makes a vague gesture towards Karath's recently slain corpse. "From his datachip."

"I'll see if I can find it," Vann quickly volunteers, hurrying over to the dead admiral. "But while I'm, errrm, searching around over here... Can someone else contact the Hawk to make sure they're
prepped and ready to launch the second we reach them?"

"On it!" Carth confirms as he retrieves his commlink from a pocket. There's a note of relief in his voice when the mercenary offers to tackle the task of searching the remains. With a press of his finger, he activates the comm, causing a series of pings as he pages the rest of the crew. "Ebon Hawk," he reports, "This is Carth. Come in!"

Vann hears a burst of static as one of the crew accepts the message, though most of his concentration is focused on rummaging through Karath's belongings. It's a harder task than anticipated, since maneuvering the literal dead weight is an awkward undertaking and Republic uniforms contain more damn pockets than any sentient could ever need. Glancing towards Bastila, he snaps, "Any idea where this datachip would be?"

"There may be a hidden flap on the inside of his jacket," the Jedi quickly responds, still typing frantically.

There's a sharp crackle as Jolee's voice filters through, sounding distinctly strained. "Good to hear from you," he begins apprehensively. "Is... everyone else alright?"

"We're all okay," Carth reassures his crewmate. "Just busy! But we need you to do us a favor."

"Hmm." Jolee pretends to consider his options for a moment before amiably replying, "What do you need, kids? And will it get this damned hanger open any faster?"

"We're working on it, okay?" Rolling his eyes at the older Force user's curmudgeonly attitude, Carth quickly explains, "We'll get the hanger open, but we need you to have the Hawk ready to fly the moment our boots hit the hold."

Only half-listening to the pilot's conversation, Vann works on searching the inner lining of Karath's jacket. The thick material is cumbersome and keeps slipping out of his grasp, causing his frustration to mount. He's ready to give up when one finger catches on a small slit in the fabric, his skin brushing against something flat and smooth. Grasping the mysterious object, he yanks it out of the hidden pocket, letting out a triumphant whoop when he sees that he's now clutching a small datachip. "I found it!" he announces, examining the object in the dull light. An instant later he's on his feet, rushing towards the Jedi.

"Fantastic!" Holding out her hand, Bastila accepts the chip when the mercenary offers it, quickly inserting it into the computer terminal. The new information takes a few tense moments to load, the status bar moving painfully slowly. But after what feels like an eternity, the words 'Access Granted' finally flash across the screen in bold, bright letters.

"We can have the Hawk ready," Jolee confirms, his tone tentative. "While I don't want to stay on this Force-damned ship any longer than you do, I have to ask. What's the rush?"

Jogging up behind the pilot, Vann snatches the commlink out of the other man's grasp. He gets a few sputtered curses in response, though it's only a token protest. Speaking into the comm he teases, "I thought you were always in a rush, old man."

"There's a difference between rushing around because my joints aren't getting any younger, and rushing around because there's a legitimate emergency," Jolee grumbles. There's a burst of static as he presses the comm closer to his lips, whispering, "So, how about you tell me the truth? What's going on?"

Letting out a sigh of relief, Bastila shouts, "The gravity wells are offline! I was able to add in a
command override to prevent them from being turned back on without a senior officer's authorization." Lips twisting into a frown, she resumes typing. "Now, to get the hanger door open…"

"Good work!" Hurrying over to the Jedi, Carth peers over her shoulder. "Maybe I can help a little with the last part."

"What do you want me to say?" Vann asks into the commlink, his voice dropping to a low hiss.

"Juhani and I sensed something just before you contacted us." There's a long pause, nervous breaths audible from the other end of the comm. Finally, Jolee asks, "Is Malak on this ship?"

Vann considers lying if only to prevent the rest of the crew from flying into a panic. But he can't deny that the hairs on the back of his neck are prickling from the dark Force user's presence. "Yes," he admits. "He's here."

"Kriff it all," Jolee growls before moving the commlink away and shouting, "Get those engines warmed up now!" It sounds like someone yells back an affirmative response, though it's hardly clear.

"It's open!" Carth shouts in triumph, accompanied by Bastila clapping her hands excitedly. Both Humans take a final look at the computer screen before shifting their attention to the ruined bridge doors. "Hey Vann," the pilot calls, "I think it's time to get out of here."

"Well, that took you kids long enough!" Jolee complains, an audible grinding in the background of the transmission as the hanger door releases. "It looks like there are two separate airlocks leading out," he narrates. "You opened the first one, and I see a sensor that I assume will open the second once the Hawk gets close enough."

Nodding to his companions, Vann meets them at the hole that Bastila carved into the bridge doors. "Well, we'll find out real soon." Smirking faintly, he muses, "And if that second airlock doesn't open, I guess we'll have to ram it."

There's a disbelieving gasp from Carth at this suggestion, but he's mostly drowned out by Jolee's response. "Sounds like a terrible plan, kid. But, it seems that's all we have of late." He chuckles humorlessly, his voice growing more somber as he adds, "Now hurry up and get your asses over here before we decide to take off without you!"

"Will do!" Vann replies with a snort. "Over and out."

"Yeah, yeah…" With that, the older Force user's voice cuts out as his end of the communication system shuts off.

Pitching the commlink back to Carth, Vann draws both of his lightsabers as he prepares to exit the bridge. "Alright, the hanger is on the other side of this floor," he assesses. "I'm guessing it's a fairly straight shot from here to there?"

Bastila nods. "Once we're in the main corridor it should be. There will probably be some guards who try to stop us, but I doubt we'll encounter anything that we can't handle."

"Alright." Carth draws a deep breath through his nose. "Let's do this!"

In unison, the trio surges out of the bridge and into the adjoining hallway, weapons ready and eyes searching every corner of the durasteel corridor. When no immediate threats are revealed, Bastila uses the hilt of her lightsaber to gesture past the incapacitated guards that Vann electrocuted
earlier. "That way," she orders. "Into the main hallway and past the elevator!"

Without another word, the mercenary takes point and sprints down the corridor, swiftly rounding the corner into the wider hallway that serves as an access point to several sections of the ship. The larger area is harder to efficiently scout at a rapid clip so he slows his pace, using his lightsabers to illuminate his path. The bright violet glow creates eerie shadows around him, temporarily making the open elevator doors seem like a trick of light. But the image doesn't change even after his blinks, and he pauses to reassess the situation. Before he can regain his bearings, a cold blast of Force energy washes over him, flooding his mind and draining the breath from his lungs.

Mind bogged down from the oppressive wave of dark power, Vann narrows his eyes as he scans the area. There are no signs of any guards, but a single dark figure is looming just past the elevator, standing casually as his broad form blocks the only path to the detention hangers. Most of his pale face is hidden by shadows, though what is visible has an unhealthy pallor. His appearance is made more menacing by the prosthetic jaw that encompasses the bottom portion of his face. The looming form takes a leisurely step forward, his black cape flowing behind him.

"Malak…" Bastila gasps from just over Vann's left shoulder, her footfalls ceasing.

"Kriffing hells!" As Carth skids to a halt, he levels both of his blasters at the Republic commander, though stops short of pulling the triggers. "Any ideas?" he pleads, tone verging on desperation.

"We can…" Vann begins, but his voice catches in his throat as his mouth goes dry, his surroundings suddenly beginning to shimmer in and out of focus. 'Not now,' he thinks to himself. 'Please not now!' But the ghost residing in his head doesn't listen, and the hallway of the Leviathan soon fades into a darker and more sinister building. Black walls rise up on all sides, featuring soaring archways and towering pillars adorned with complex carvings that stretch their talon-like edges towards all who pass. It's as though the building itself is beckoning, luring those who tread its halls to walk further into its shadows.

Looking down at his hands, Vann watches as black gloves materialize over his flesh, his normal clothing fading into a thick black cloak that flutters with every movement. It's not Revan's normal robes, but the flowing fabric still fits the Knight's preference for keeping his movements disguised. Staring back up, he sees that although Malak has not changed positions, the Supreme Commander is now blocking a foreboding corridor with floors of polished obsidian. In this vision, his skin warms to a less pallid tone and his eyes brighten to a crystalline gray that lacks any sickly yellow undertones. The hilt of his lightsaber rests easily in the palm of his hand, ready to be ignited with a twitch of his fingers.

Apparently, Revan is no stranger to confrontations with Malak, his hands curling around his own weapons as his body tenses in preparation for a duel. Fleetingly, Vann wonders why the Jedi Knight was forced to face down his friend and trusted ally, with their fated meeting set against a backdrop of flickering shadows. "We can only end this one way…" he hears himself saying, the words feeling foreign and familiar all at once.

"As you said at our least meeting," Malak replies. Despite his vocabulator's mechanical tone, there's a hint of amusement in his voice. Inclining his head towards his former Padawan he remarks, "It's good to see you alive, Bastila. Karath told me that you've been… busy."

Ducking her head, the Jedi lowers her gaze to the floor even as she retains her firm grip on her lightsaber. "I suppose I have," she murmurs, a cold blast of fear billowing around her.

"Just so you know, Karath is dead," Carth warns, his voice surprisingly confident despite the slight shake of his hands. "I killed him myself."
"And saved me the trouble." The amusement in Malak's tone remains, and he arches a brow at the pilot. "How helpful of you."

Vann's mind is only partially his own as he strides forward, whirling both of his lightsabers around his body to emphasize his mastery of Juyo. Yet even as his body moves, his thoughts race in a different direction. Malak's words indicate that they've met before, but how? Why? Even if he was once a Republic soldier, what business would he have with the Supreme Commander? Nothing he knows seems to add up and it all feels so surreal, as though everything is happening to someone else.

Eyes narrowing, Malak ignites the brilliant blue blade of his own lightsaber, bringing it to rest defensively across his chest. "Now, is that the way to greet an old friend?"

Disbelief audible in his voice, Carth turns to the mercenary. "Vann, what is he talking about? Do you actually know him?" Shaking his head, he quickly amends his words. "I remember what Karath said but… Is that even possible?"

"I have no kriffing clue. I don't remember!" Vann spits out, but the words feel like a lie the moment they're spoken. In his mind, Revan is pushing at the walls of his memory, trying to shatter the barrier between the mercenary and his past.

"You don't remember me? Really?" Malak takes a step forward, his boots thudding heavily against the ship's floor. The dull echo reverberates through time, dredging up more visions of Revan's past. Reality blurs, and suddenly Malak is once again guarding the long, black hallway, his stance aggressive and his sense of outrage pouring out into the Force. It's a cold emotion but lacks the full impact of the dark side that he commands in the present. His lips are moving, shouting, but Vann can't hear what's being said. All he knows is the icy-tinged fury of Revan's own anger, the emotion raw and powerful as it surges through the Knight. The sensation doesn't fade, even as the scene switches back to the present. "I don't remember a thing about you," he blurts out indignantly. "But that doesn't mean I won't kill you if you don't let us past."

A fleeting note of shock crosses what's left of Malak's face, the barest twinge of sorrow flashing through his discolored eyes. "I can't say that I'm not disappointed to hear that. Though, perhaps I shouldn't be surprised. How you even survived is a miracle of the Force." A faint note of amusement laces his mechanical tone as he admits, "Of course, you've always been remarkably hard to kill."

Refusing to back down, even as his perception is distorted with images from Revan's past confrontation, Vann narrows his eyes. The solid thud of his own footfalls merges with the ghostly echo of the Knight's swift charge, and the glow of their lightsabers twines together until blue and violet merge as one. "I don't know what you're talking about, Malak. Or what game you're trying to play." Using Revan's weapon, he points the tip at the dark figure blocking his path. "But we're coming past, whether or not you let us past."

"You truly don't remember?" A flicker of genuine regret dances across Malak's pallid features. "All of the things we've achieved? The victories we've won? The progress we've accomplished?" He studies the shorter Human walking confidently towards him, the glow of his own lightsaber illuminating his face in an oddly tranquil shade of blue. "Even if you have lost your memories, at your core you're still the same person. And as arrogant and stubborn as you've ever been."

"He said he's not playing your games, Malak." Blasters still aimed at the Republic's Supreme Commander, Carth's fingers twitch against the triggers.
Remaining perfectly still, Bastila's voice is hardly a whisper as she admits, "I don't believe this is a game."

"And just who do you think I am, Malak?" Vann challenges, jerking his chin upwards. "What makes you so sure that you know me?"

There's a metallic chuckle, deep and tinny, as Malak regards the mercenary. "I think you're a man with a great deal of integrity but limited respect for authority, including that of a Supreme Commander." His gaze shifts to study the pilot and his former apprentice. "And you naturally command the loyalty of those who follow you. Just as you once commanded mine." He blinks, and the cold coils of dark power that flow around him seem to thicken. "You may go by a different name, but you're still the same man I've known since childhood."

Icy rage surges beneath Vann's skin, and he's not sure if the emotion is his or Revan's. "And what man is that?" he demands, one lightsaber still pointed threateningly at the commander.

"You really haven't figured it out yet?" Malak laughs again, more mocking and cruel than before. "I thought you were smarter than that… Revan."

"I'm not…" Vann begins, but the setting around him once again shifts to the shadowy hallway, with its elaborately decorated walls and polished floors. He's racing forward now, the weight of his lightsabers a familiar comfort as his cloak swirls around him. For once he is not wearing his mask, and as he charges he catches a glimpse of his own features reflected in the shining obsidian underfoot. It's not a perfect mirror, but it's enough to recognize the sharp cheekbones and brown, shoulder-length hair. He also notes the dark eyes that momentarily flash golden-yellow in the dim light.

Vann knows that face, as he's seen it in every reflective surface that he's passed for the past three years. For all that he's a stranger to himself, he knows his own countenance and has memorized the faint lines of worry in his brow and the way that dark stubble peppers his chin after a day or so. He's familiar with the way his hair falls, and its penchant for landing haphazardly in his eyes unless he combs it back. Though his memories are scattered and faulty, he can recognize the face reflected in the floor. It's his own face, except that it's supposed to be Revan's face. Because this is Revan's vision. None of these images belong to him unless…

Unless these aren't visions. Unless these are memories, inklings of his forgotten past trying to reach him through whatever mental barriers are blocking his conscious mind from remembering his life before the crash. Can he be Revan? It seems impossible, and yet… All things are possible through the Force. His own words suddenly haunt him, the sentiment both familiar and strange, as though it's something he said repeatedly in another lifetime. All the air leaves his lungs in a single exhale, his hands instinctively powering down his lightsabers as he sinks to his knees in shock. The realization hits harder than any physical blow, his head suddenly throbbing as he mentally fights to accept this information while simultaneously rejecting anything Malak says as truth. "I'm not…" he repeats disbelievingly.

"Search your feelings," the Supreme Commander offers. "You'll find it to be true."

The various 'visions' Vann has experienced all flood into his mind simultaneously, providing an overwhelming cacophony of sensory experiences. From his vivid dreams, to his premonitions on Dantooine, to the moment when 'Revan' took over his body on Tatooine and Kashyyyk. All those experiences were so vivid, more than misty hallucinations granted by a disembodied presence in the Force. All of those 'visions' must have been recollections of his past deeds. There's no other explanation for the intricate details he encountered or the sensation that he was reliving moments that he'd already experienced. With this comprehension comes a trickle of memories, incomplete
but still crystal clear. He *remembers* learning of a map leading to an ancient weapon in unknown space. And he *remembers* the fervent desire to find that map at all costs. And *yes*, he *remembers* the figure who stood by his side through all of this. Though fragmentary, he *remembers* Malak.

"I'm Revan," Vann finally gasps, chest heaving as his head aches uncontrollably.

"*What*?" Carth shouts, sounding simultaneously shocked and vaguely horrified. "Vann, you can't believe him! This is some type of Force trick, or…"

"Vann!" Bastila calls out, tone concerned. "Are you alright? Stand-up, please!" A flare of encouragement flows through the Force bond, one of the first signs of the Jedi's presence since their rescue from the interrogation cells.

A cold wave of Force energy cascades down the hallway, flowing over Vann before colliding with his companions. They're both thrown back several meters, and he turns around just in time to see them land hard on their backs. There's a piercing clatter as their weapons are knocked free upon impact. He hears twin grunts of pain as they land, bodies thumping heavily against the unyielding durasteel. There's another blast of Force power and both Humans cease their movements, instantly trapped in stasis by Malak. "Hush now," he scolds the unmoving figures. "Revan and I need to speak privately."

"You…" Vann growls, gritting his teeth as he climbs to his feet. His head is still pounding at the temples and behind his eyes, his memories remaining hazy at best. But what he can recall sends a fresh surge of anger through his system. "You were supposed to follow his… *my* example! You were supposed to help me defend the Republic!"

"Liar!" Vann screams, his own fury cold and fierce as it courses through his veins. He still can't remember most of what transpired between him and the Supreme Commander, but there's a distinct sense of wrongness to this current situation. He taps into his swell of emotions, channeling the energy down his arm as he shoots a bolt of Force lightning directly at his former friend. "You abandoned everything we were supposed to stand for!"

Though he manages to dodge one fork of electricity, Malak is still impacted by the strike. He hisses in pain as the purple energy sizzles through his body, causing his limbs to shudder as he works to counter the mercenary's more aggressive fighting style. "Is that how you remember it?"

He taunts weakly, reaching out and using the Force to open a wide door leading into another room. Sprinting inside, he calls back, "Think *hard*, Revan. Is that really what happened?"

Using another burst of Force-fueled speed Vann remains at the commander's heels, swinging both sabers in tight arcs as he slashes first at his opponent's torso, and then at his legs. The first hit is blocked with expert precision, but the second cuts through the careful guard, burning a gash into his adversary's thigh. The scent of singed flesh ignites a fresh thrum of primal rage within him and he embraces the emotion, feeding off its icy power. "*You fell*, Malak! You gave in to the dark side."

Making no effort to do more than defend himself, the commander uses a Force push to slam the door shut behind them. "No, Revan, not quite…" he teases, his free hand moving to clutch the wound in his thigh. "With your arrogance, your flippancy towards the Jedi Council, and your anger, *do you really* believe that I was the first to fall?"
Vann can feel the strength of the dark side pulsing through him, empowering him as he moves through the empty hanger with a flurry of twin lightsaber strikes. Against anyone else his attacks would easily be fatal, but Malak is a more skilled duelist than any opponent he's faced in recent history. Most of his blows are deflected, though just barely, their 'sabers hissing and humming each time they clash. "I… I…" he stutters, struggling to form words through the red haze of bloodlust that's clouding his mind.

And suddenly that bloodlust has far more context. He remembers it singing through his system as he viciously cut down any Mandalorians he encountered. It's the same raw anger that fueled him as he sliced through the Sand People on Tatooine to reach the Star Map and the same cold fury that he experienced the last time he faced down his former friend. Yes, he is intimately familiar with this anger, this path to the dark side…

"You fell, Revan. Long before I did. Perhaps even before we completed our quest for the Star Map." Malak's tone is pensive, almost amused as he makes this statement. "Just as you're so very close to falling now."

"I'm not…" The words die in Vann's throat as he remembers the horror in his companions' eyes as he electrocuted the GenoHaradan agents on Tatooine. *(This is not alright! This is the opposite of alright!)* Or the borderline terror that Carth expressed when the other man saw his eyes. *(For a second, a split second, they turned yellow.)* Or Jolee's disgust when the Republic soldiers were slaughtered on Manaan. *(Force dammit, kid! Was that really necessary?)* Or Bastila's shock at Revan's words on Kashyyyk. *(You told me to tap into my negative emotions. To utilize darkness.)* He can feel the call of the dark side now, roaring through his very being. Glancing down at the durasteel floor, he feels the echo of his past when he catches a glimpse of his own reflection. And when he sees the pair of yellow eyes that stare back at him. "No…" he gasps.

"Yes," Malak confirms, a note of unrestrained glee in his voice. "You fell to your arrogance and your anger, while I fought the call to the dark side. I clung to the light far longer than you did, old friend." His head drops slightly, eyes momentarily downcast as he admits, "And in my naivety, I fought you. I tried to kill you, and for years I believed that I succeeded."

The setting once again shifts and warps, smooth durasteel fading back into soaring black archways and glossy obsidian floors. It feels like a dream as he watches ghostly images of himself and Malak locked in combat, sweat beading on their brows as their lightsabers clash and hum, sending off sparks each time the plasma blades meet. He can feel his sense of outrage and betrayal, the dark emotions empowering his every strike and parry. Lost in the haze of battle, his thoughts narrow to a singular and terrifying goal. His only desire is to destroy his most loyal friend, the only person willing to follow him into the depths of unknown space and beyond.

He feels a thrill of triumph when one of his glowing blue blades slices into Malak's jaw, all but severing it completely. There's a scream of pain as his friend-turned-adversary suffers the debilitating injury, forced to stumble back as he fights through the pain and attempts to regain his bearings. Revan dives in for the kill, victory racing through his mind, but his coup de grace is blocked at the very last moment. His former friend stares back with sadness and hatred in his clear gray eyes, arms tense as he fends off the blow meant to end his life.

"I ruined your jaw," Vann states as the scene shimmers back to the present. Still holding his weapons aloft, he stares at the metal vocabulator that now composes the lower portion of the other man's face. "I was determined to ruin you."

Tapping the prosthetic with his one finger, Malak nods solemnly. "And you nearly did." He moves to hold his lightsaber protectively across his face. "But in the end, you failed."
There's another flash of memory, these images confined to Vann's head. He feels himself stumbling down the shadowy hallway, boots sliding on the floor as he struggles to maintain his grip on his remaining lightsaber. He's nearly doubled over in pain, his free hand desperately holding in what he's trying to deny are his own internal organs, which are threatening to spill out from the lethal cut that's carved into his abdomen. He's attempting to make his way to a ship. It's small, but it has medpacs and it should be enough to fly him to safety. One knee buckles and he falters, but fear and seething hatred keep him on his feet.

"You cut me open," Vann abruptly accuses, blinking back the visceral reminder of that moment. Powering down the lightsaber in his offhand, he idly traces the scar that he knows runs from beneath his ribcage to the opposite hip. "But I made it to my ship." The memories from that point on are foggier, a mixture of pain and animalistic desperation as he tried to find some way to survive.

"And then I shot you down," Malak finishes. "I even checked the crash site, but all that was left was smoldering wreckage. In the condition you were in, I thought there was no possible way for you to survive. Even your presence disappeared from the Force."

Straining to recall anything beyond crawling away from the remains of his ship before it exploded, Vann murmurs, "I protected myself. Somehow."

"Like I said, you've always been remarkably hard to kill." There's a note of humor to this admission, Malak's mechanical voice clearly amused at the situation.

Turning to stare into his former friend's eyes, Vann flinches at the yellow undertones that have stained them. "You tried to kill me to protect your ideals, but you still fell." Brows furrowing, he barks, "How the kriff did that happen?"

The amusement doesn't fade from Malak's tone. "I returned to the Core Planets, the hero of the Jedi Order who possessed such integrity that he killed his own best friend to uphold his beliefs." A new, bitter note enters his voice. "Of course, I told the Council everything that transpired. But they informed me that I was to keep that information to myself. They claimed that the Republic needed heroes, and the Order required public support to rebuild after the war. Exposing your fall would have put both the war effort and the Jedi's participation into question."

"And that's how I became Revan, the war hero and martyr." Vann can feel himself trembling, a chill running down his back as he attempts to reconcile the tales of the heroic Jedi Knight with his own petty existence.

"I made you a hero, Revan. The hero that the Republic desperately needed. An individual whose example the rest of the Republic could strive to emulate." He shakes his head, a fresh jolt of anger seeping fiercely into the Force. "But they only wanted to honor your memory, not follow your lead. They were prepared to be lax on the remaining cells of Mandalorians, and to ignore the other threats attempting to take advantage of their recovery."

Distantly, Vann recalls Canderous's stories of his humiliated people, scattered to the winds and forced to sell their skills to the highest bidders. From this angle, it doesn't seem like the Republic offered any leniency. "So, what? You returned home, got lied to and kicked around, and suddenly decided that the dark side was the better option?"

"I returned home and saw the truth in everything that we fought for," Malak explains, voice growing rougher as he speaks. "And I realize that you were right. That the Council's wisdom was flawed, and that the Republic's policies were weak. I came to see that, to improve the Republic, I had to embrace all of the emotions that Jedi are traditionally taught to reject."
"So, you fell," Vann surmises, continuing to hold his dominate lightsaber in an attack position.

"I suppose that's what the Council might call it," Malak speculates. "But I prefer to see it as an awakening. I finally realized the truth in your teachings, Revan. And I regretted my decision to kill you in a moment of idealistic blindness. But it seemed like it was too late…"

"Not quite," Vann quips sardonically.

"Still, I built the Republic back up in your image. I took your beliefs, your teachings, and your faith in the Star Map and I turned it into something glorious." Gesturing his free hand all around him, Malak declares, "Everything I have built has been in honor of you, Revan. After all, I was your closest friend." He pauses, a faint smile in his eyes as he adds, "And your best pupil."

There's a sinking feeling in the pit of Vann's stomach, and he feels faintly nauseous even as the blind rage begins to creep back into his mind. Igniting his second lightsaber, he points both weapons at the Republic commander. "This? This fascist nightmare was all built in my image?" he demands, almost choking on his doubt.

"Perhaps it's not perfect," Malak says with a mechanized sigh. "But in time it could be. I have the Star Forge in my possession, one of the most powerful weapons in the galaxy." Drawing himself up to his full, impressive height, he powers down his lightsaber and extends his hand. "Allow me to make amends for my past mistakes. To atone for my betrayal."

Vann refuses to lower his own weapons, though he resists the bloodthirsty urge to attack his temporarily defenseless foe. "You tried to kill me," he reiterates.

"But I can make it all up to you," Malak offers. "Join me. Lead by my side, just as you always intended. Use the Star Forge and build the Republic you've always dreamed of."

"I'm pretty kriffing sure I left those dreams in the flaming wreckage that I crawled away from while holding in my own guts." Taking satisfaction from the way Malak flinches back at the ire in his voice, Vann continues, "I'm just a mercenary now. Not a Jedi, or a general, or a damn politician."

"Oh Revan, that's where you're wrong." Malak keeps his hand extended as an offering. "I've watched what you've accomplished these past few months, managing to retrace the work we did in a matter of weeks." His sickly gaze seems to dance with delight. "You are still a powerful Force user and a born leader with the potential to guide the Republic into a glorious new age."

"You're full of bantha shit," Vann retorts, though even he can hear the lack of malice in the insult. He doesn't want to join Malak or the fascist regime he's built. But at the same time… Working from the inside to repair the disaster that the Republic has become is suddenly within his grasp. Accepting the Supreme Commander's offer could prevent another Taris, or another Telos.

"Please," Malak nods in approval, visibly sensing the notes of indecision that flare around his former friend. "Consider my offer. You know deep down that you're meant to rule. Give in to those beliefs, Revan. Let go of those last traces of dogma that the Jedi tried to drive back into your head. You and I, along with the apprentice that you handpicked, could be an unstoppable force for change in the galaxy."

Head jerking back with surprise, Vann blinks back his shock as he asks, "Apprentice?" Scoffing, he reveals, "Bandon is dead. Juhani killed him back on Kashyyyk."

"Bandon was never a true apprentice," Malak sneers. "He was a useful operative for complicated
jobs, but nothing more." Gesturing to the lightsaber in his former friend's off-hand, he can't hide
the pleasure in his voice as he says, "Though, I'm glad he served some purpose and returned your
lightsaber. I disarmed it during our last duel and kept the weapon as a reminder of everything you
stood for. But ultimately, it belongs to you."

"I never took an apprentice," Vann insists, while searching his scattered memories for anything to
support that claim.

"Not officially, no." Malak's gaze turns towards the closed door, watching the indicator lights flash
green as someone accesses the control panel from outside the hanger. "But you did make a promise
to a young woman right before we left for unknown space. You offered to take her as your
Padawan upon our return. She was crushed when she was told that you died, but I did what I could
to uphold your promise. I even took it upon myself to train her in your place."

The door slides open with a pneumatic hiss, and a slender figure strides through with hurried steps.
Her dual-bladed lightsaber is ignited as she rushes into the hanger, and she's attempting to catch her
breath. Upon seeing the stand-off taking place in the center of the room she sprints over, powering
down the yellow blades as she moves to kneel at Malak's feet. "I apologize for my tardiness,
Master," she offers. "But I encountered some… resistance in answering your call."

"Oh Bastila," the Supreme Commander murmurs fondly as he places a surprisingly gentle hand on
the woman's shoulder. "You never fail to disappoint."

"Bastila, what happened out there?" Vann shouts, stepping forward with his weapons still held at
the ready. "Talk to me! You don't have to play along with Malak." He can hear the note of
pleading in his tone as he begs, "Come on, get up! If we work together we can take him down, and
then go get the rest of the crew…"

"I'm not 'playing along,' Revan." Raising her head, the Padawan regards her companion with a cool
gaze as she slowly climbs to her feet. "I've always been loyal to Master Malak and his vision for
the Republic. And I was truly hoping that you would also see the light." She smiles faintly. "Or,
perhaps the darkness, as it were."

Freezing in place, Vann feels his body go lax in temporary horror as he listens to his companion's
words. "My name's not Revan," he warns. "And this isn't kriffing funny. Power up your damn
'saber, and let's get this fight started!"

"I don't want to fight you, Vann," Bastila replies evenly. "But I will defend my Master if I must."

"Stop it," Vann replies weakly, finding himself taking a step back from the woman he called a
friend. "He's not your Master. You said so yourself on Taris." Desperate for an explanation, and to
deny the scene playing out before him, the mercenary summons his Force awareness and hammers
it into the mental connection he shares with the Padawan, attempting to break down the barrier
that's been keeping her a silent presence within his own mind.

Vann can't tell if he manages to knock down Bastila's walls or if she releases them, but he soon
feels his awareness tumbling through the Force bond that stretches between them. This time he's
able to halt the freefall before being swept up in the current of her thoughts, but he travels deep
enough to get a sense of her true intentions. And that's when reality settles cold and hard in his
chest. The arrogance and pride that were always at the fringes of Bastila's mind are now her
dominant emotion, the warmth that she emanated replaced with a slick coldness that flows
smoothly and naturally through her being. It's entwined into her presence, an intrinsic part of her
very existence. The darkness that always seemed like it was attempting to overtake her was never a
threat. It's her true self, held carefully at bay to keep others from suspecting her allegiances. But
that façade must have been slipping since entering the Leviathan, forcing her to close the bond to keep her intentions hidden.

"So, now you know," Bastila acknowledges, her own Force awareness brushing against the mental connection. "I was lying back on Taris, at least in regards to defecting from my Master's side. Though, many of the other things that I've said have been quite true."

"Sorry," Vann grunts in anger, "But I'm having some trouble believing anything you say."

"I apologize for my deception, but it was the only way for me to safely observe you and determine just how much of your true self was left." She bows her head slightly. "And I am happy to report that you, Revan, are the same man who I have always admired and respected."

"Somehow I don't find that comforting." Glaring at the two dark Force users in front of him, he shifts his body so that he can better fend off an attack from either one. "What am I, some sort of experiment? How did you even track me down to Taris, anyway?"

Shrugging helplessly, Bastila sighs. "Finding you on Taris was a happy accident, actually. I was originally sent to meet with Canderous in an attempt to fully gain his trust and convince him to lead me to the remaining cells of Mandalorian loyalists."

Realization is bitter on Vann's tongue as he finishes, "Hence the story about defecting from the Republic."

"Exactly," Malak confirms. "It was the only way we could think of to eliminate that threat before it became a second war."

"How noble," Vann sneers sarcastically as he rolls his eyes. "But how did you know I was alive if everyone else thought I was dead?"

Carefully meeting the mercenary's gaze, Bastila simply states, "I sensed you." Noting the confusion etched across his face, she elaborates, "For the first time in over three years, I felt a stirring in the training bond that we established right before you left for the unknown regions of space. Of course, at the time I wasn't sure what I was sensing, so I did what I could to hide your Force presence from everyone else." Smiling sheepishly, she adds, "Including my Master."

Disappointment is swirling through Vann's mind, making his headache so much worse as he continues to listen disbelievingly to the Jedi's words. "And when I found you on Taris…?"

"Briefly shielding your remarkable presence in the Force is what drained my own powers, and caused me to fall unconscious. Unfortunately, it made my landing a bit rocky." Bastila smiles up at her companion, expression warm and open despite the coldness radiating from her. "Imagine my surprise when I woke up to a dead hero by my bedside, healing me."

"Once your presence was confirmed, our plans shifted." Malak regards his former friend critically, eyes taking in the worn jacket and scuffed boots as though just noticing them.

Shifting into a more casual, though no less alert stance, Vann scoffs. "You decided to turn me to the dark side," he concludes. Suddenly, Bastila's encouragement of his darker tendencies makes more sense, as does her lack of admonishment every time he lost control. She was never trying to guide him towards the light but was always leading him into darkness.

"I tried to encourage you to view your own darkness as necessary and powerful," the woman replies defensively. "You've always had darkness in you, Revan. I felt it the first time we ever spoke, on the day that you agreed to take me as your Padawan. The darkness in you called out to
my own darker urgings. The ones that the Council tried to drive out of me in their blindness and naivety."

Straining to remember his first meeting with Bastila, Vann allows himself to dive back into their mental connection. He doesn't press into his companion's mind this time, instead utilizing their link as a lifeline as he dives into his own damaged memories. His recollection is murky at first, though it quickly clarifies, and he suddenly sees the image of a slightly younger Bastila still dressed in the traditional brown robes of a Padawan and staring up at him with naked awe and reverence. Her expression is far more innocent than anything he's witnessed on her since, and a bolt of guilt shoots through his heart. "I was your hero," he breathes. "I was…"

"Everything I wanted to be," she concludes. "Yes. It's all true."

The memory continues, and Vann recalls his surprise when the training bond formed almost instantly between them, their Force signatures melding together with natural ease as their minds became open to one another. "We didn't expect the bond to take so quickly," he recalls. "I… I didn't mean for it to form before I left."

"But it did! We took it as a sign," Bastila insists. "The Force wanted me to be your Padawan."

"I wouldn't have done this to you if I'd known…" Vann swears, meeting his companion's gaze. "I never mean to drag you into the dark with me."

"You didn't guide me anywhere that I didn't want to go!" Anger lashes out around Bastila, her Force presence flaring with a torrent of chilled emotion. "When Malak returned and took me as his apprentice, I embraced all of his lessons. Lessons that he says came directly from your own philosophy."

Vann stammers, "But you fell…"

"I embraced my own darkness, just as you should!" Furrowing her brow in defiance, Bastila proclaims, "Revan, by accepting the dark side your power was unmatched during the war, just as it can be today."

"There will always be darkness in you, Revan. The Council recognized it long before you or me did. Why do you think they were so reluctant to let you join the war?" Malak nods solemnly. "You can either spend your life fighting it and denying your true power, or you can embrace it and reach your ultimate potential."

"Accept who you truly are, Vann," Bastila pleads, lips curling into a hopeful smile. "Join us, and perhaps we can unlock your memories together."

And in that offer, there is temptation. Vann swallows hard as he stares at the two dark Force users, the cold power radiating off them a close mirror to his own unique signature. He knows that he's been straddling a chasm this entire journey, and it would be so easy to let go and simply fall. Maybe, when he lands, he'll be able to find all the pieces that he dropped the first time. Falling might be so simple. After all, he did it once before…

There's a scrabbling sound as a figure stumbles through the hanger door that Bastila left open, breaths ragged and footsteps uneven. The individual utters an audible gasp of pain as he leans precariously against the door frame, the sound worryingly wet and hoarse. "Vann, be careful! Bastila is…" Carth's eyes go wide as he surveys the scene, voice weak as he coughs out, "Oh kriffing hells, she's already here!"
Eyes darting over his shoulder, the mercenary quickly scans the injured form of his companion, noting the way that the other man is clutching what appears to be a wound in his side. "What happened?" he shouts.

"I did say that I encountered some resistance in getting here," Bastila replies airily. "Though, I am impressed that he's still standing."

"You tried to kill Carth?" Vann cries in outrage, the temptation he felt giving way to nothing but unbridled fury. He doesn't fight the sensation, instead welcoming the surge of emotion.

"Much like his wife, he would have been fine if he didn't try to stand in the way." Bastila's eyes narrow as she ignites her lightsaber. "Though apparently, that lesson didn't sink in the first time."

Rising his blaster with the arm not holding his side together, Carth snarls, "I'm not afraid to die, but I plan on taking you with me."

"You're half dead already," Bastila mocks, taking a step towards the pilot. "And you're a fool if you think I won't deflect almost every shot you send my way."

"All it takes it one to the head," Carth replies pointedly, taking aim at his former crewmate.

In the blink of an eye, Bastila charges forward just as the pilot opens fire. Sensing his opportunity, Vann summons as much Force energy as he can before launching himself into a somersault. He hovers in the air for an instant, both lightsabers raised and aimed directly at Malak's head. The Supreme Commander manages to ignite his own weapon just in time to block the blow, though he reels back from the sheer might of the hit, his frame jarred by the impact. This distraction is all Vann needs, and he releases the storm of Force lightning that he gathered, the purple forks of electricity flowing freely from both hands and erupting in a cluster focused directly on Malak.

The dark Force user grunts in agony as the sheer power of the strikes temporarily drives him to one knee, body unprepared to absorb such a violent attack. Vann can only maintain so much lightning for a few moments, and he can feel his already taxed body being pushed to its limits. "Time to choose, Bastila!" he calls out. "You can kill Carth, or you can save your Master!"

It's only thanks to the Force bond that Vann senses the attack aimed at his back, a tingle of warning flowing across his neck and down his spine. Calling off the lightning, he dives out of range from Bastila's dual lightsaber, sliding across the floor of the hanger as he summons the last of his Force power to push the Jedi away from him and off her feet. She lets out a howl of shock as she's knocked on her back, unable to resist the brute power of the blow that levels her.

Skidding to an awkward stop, Vann leaps to his feet less than a meter away from where Carth is still supporting his weight against the doorframe. "Now it's really time to go!" he informs his companion.

Wincing in pain, the pilot does his best to straighten. "I'm still not arguing with that!"

Rolling back to her feet with practiced grace, Bastila's gaze shifts between her escaping former crewmates and her prone Master. When Malak lets out another grunt of discomfort her decision is made, and she rushes to his side. "Master, are you alright?"

Not caring about the Supreme Commander's response, Vann clips both lightsabers to his belt when he reaches Carth, slinging the man's arm over his shoulder. "I don't mean to be an asshole, but we have to hurry!"

"This is me hurrying!" the pilot hisses back, doing his best to limp along beside his companion. His
movement is badly hampered by whatever wounds Bastila delivered, but he grits his teeth against the pain and increases his speed.

Reaching out with the Force, Vann does his best to support his friend as they hurry towards the detention hanger. He uses his awareness to search for Jolee and Juhani's presence, using their unique Force signatures to guide his fumbling journey through the remainder of the Leviathan's corridors. Carth's breath is coming in sporadic pants, his footfalls stumbling and his skin growing paler by the second. "Don't you dare die on me!" Vann shouts. "I'll kill you!"

"Doing… my best…" Carth gasps, barely managing to catch himself as he stumbles yet again.

As they approach the detention hanger, Vann breathes a sigh of relief when he sees that the door is already open, the Hawk's engine audibly rumbling within the vast space. "We're almost there," he reassures the other man. "Just hang on."

"Mmmrph," is the only response that Carth can manage.

Panic seizing his chest, the dash across the hanger is a blur as he half carries and half drags the pilot beside him. He's only distantly aware of Juhani and Zaalbar meeting him halfway up the ramp, concern evident on both of their faces as they lift Carth's limp form from his arms. "What happened?" the Cathar asks. "And where is Bastila?"

"She turned on us!" Vann all but screams, unable to keep the rising wave of emotions from his voice. "Or she was against us the entire time! Either way, she did this…"

"I cannot believe that Bastila would betray you like that!" Zaalbar exclaims, gently cradling Carth in his massive arms as he jogs towards the Ebon Hawk's modest medical bay. "She seemed to have the utmost respect for you."

"It wasn't me that she respected," Vann replies bitterly. "Now are we taking off or what?"

Over the ship-wide speaker system, Jolee's voice announces, "Better hold on to your pants, kids. This is going to be pretty bumpy…"

Vann barely has time to brace himself against the nearest wall before the ship's thrusters roar to life, shooting the vessel forward at breakneck speed. Zaalbar manages to wedge himself into a corner, using his own body to cushion the impact on Carth. Meanwhile, Juhani clings to one of the medical bay's cabinets, pulling out several medpacs and rolls of bandages in the process.

As the ship careens forward Vann silently hopes that Jolee was right and that the final airlock opens automatically when the ship passes by. Glancing over at Carth, he's not sure if the pilot can take much more turbulence. His skin has grown paler in the passing seconds, and Vann has to focus more than usual to sense a sign of life. "Dammit," he shouts at his crewmates, "Do something!"

The ship rocks again, though the shaking is less severe this time and is quickly followed by the stomach-churning sensation of the engines adjusting to flight in open space. Despite the slight sense of nausea this causes, Vann rushes over to where Zaalbar is currently attempting to place Carth on the room's singular examination table. A moment later, Juhani jams a hypospray into each of the pilot's thighs, only to frown and curse at the visible lack of results.

"I don't know what else I can do!" the Cathar laments. "This wound is quite severe, more than a medpac can cure. Carth needs a kolto tank, but we do not have one on this ship."

Nodding in acknowledgment, Vann could have guessed this outcome from his own similar
experience. Wracking his brain, he barely recalls the steps he took to survive the life-threatening wound that Malak carved into his abdomen. A series of medpacs was enough to temporarily hold everything together, but it wasn't medicine that kept him alive. It was his connection to the Force. And maybe that's something he can give to Carth.

"Step back," he orders as a desperate idea comes to mind, and he carefully lowers his hands over the gruesome wound in the pilot's side. Both Juhani and Zaalbar obey, sharing a nervous glance as they take simultaneous steps back. Drawing a deep breath, Vann summons his final reserves of Force power, opening his mind and conjuring as many positive emotions as he can physically manage amidst his panic. All of them seem to focus on Carth, little affections blooming into energy that takes root in his chest before radiating through his entire body. A moment later his awareness unexpectedly increases, and he instantly knows that Canderous is currently in the turret fending off a wave of Republic fighters. He can also sense Jolee and Mission working together in a moment of precarious unity to keep up evasive maneuvers long enough to make the jump into hyperspace. And distantly, though the fragile remains of the Force bond, he thinks that he hears Bastila's voice whispering, Go to Korriban...

Suddenly, the gathered Force energy surges through his body with a scorching intensity, as though a white-hot light is encapsulating every fiber of his being. It feels like the brilliant energy is beaming out of his eyes as he looks down at Carth, channeling the radiant power through himself and into the pilot. The longer he does this the more intense the energy seems to become, scorching him down to the core even as it bathes him in a warmth that soothes his very essence. But exhaustion is quickly creeping up on him, his legs shaking and sweat beading on his brow from sheer exertion. He draws upon the last of his strength, trying to will a miracle even as he feels his own body buckling under the sheer magnitude of the power that he's summoned. As the warmth wanes from his system, he hears a gasp.

And then Carth opens his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

1. I'm completely making up technology regarding the airlocks. But I assume there needs to be a pair of airlock doors to prevent people from constantly being sucked into space, and I also assume that an automated system for opening and closing said airlocks must exist. So, there you go.

2. Yes, Malak quoted Obi Wan (3,000+ years before Obi Wan is even born).

3. Some people predicted that Bastila had her own agenda this entire time, which is partially true. In all fairness, it's Malak's agenda. She just happens to agree with it. Surprise?

4. I'm aware that Jedi did not take on individual Padawans during this period. But Revan and Malak received personal training from Zhar Lestin when they were Padawans, much as Juhani studied directly under Quatra. So, it stands to reason that Revan would be willing to take on Bastila for similar training.

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The Ebon Hawk Part II

Chapter Summary

In which revelations have emotional fallout, the crew decides where their loyalties lie, and absolutely atrocious plans are made. Things get awkward, but that seems to be par for the course.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

21.

"What in Sith hells is going on in here?" Jolee stands in the entrance to the medical bay, eyes wild and mouth hanging partially open. "I just felt a huge surge of energy pass through the Force, something I haven't sensed since… Well, let's just say it's been a while."

Eyes still trained on Carth, Vann barely notices the older Force user's presence. The pilot only regained consciousness for a fraction of a second, just as the last of the healing energy flowed into his body and sealed the worst of his wounds. When the Force power dissipated, he slipped back into unconsciousness, though this sleep seems more serene than the deathly stillness that overtook him during the Ebon Hawk's chaotic takeoff.

"If you are here, who is flying the ship?" Juhani asks accusingly, head whipping around to stare at the figure in the doorway.

Taking a step into the bay, Jolee shrugs innocently. "Oh, just Mission."

"What!?!" Growling in horror Zaalbar leaps towards the entryway, poised to run to the bridge and assist his friend.

"...With a good deal of help from the autopilot and Canderous. What kind of fool do you think I am?" Crossing his arms over his chest, Jolee shakes his head as the Wookiee skids to a sheepish halt in the middle of the room. "Now, can someone please tell me what's going on before I drop dead from old age?"

"I, uh, I think I just saved Carth's life." Briefly shifting his gaze away from his unconscious companion, Vann stares down at his hands. They don't appear any different from earlier, even as they tingle with the white-hot energy that was streaming through them only moments before. It's unlike the cold fizzle that Force lightning leaves behind, though it's no more pleasant.

Brusquely pushing past the rest of his crewmates, Jolee hurries over to where the pilot is lying. His eyes instantly notice to the burn mark marring the other man's shirt, and he quickly lifts the material and begins examining the wound with practiced efficiency. Occasionally he makes a soft humming sound, the noise equal parts fascinated and disbelieving. "Looks like he took quite a hit," he muses.

Vann nods weakly. "It was at least two lightsaber wounds… Really bad ones."

Completing his cursory examination, Jolee lets out a low whistle as he turns to look at the
mercenary. "Well, he's going to be sore for a while, and this wound will take some time to heal completely. But if that surge of energy was from you sealing his organs back inside… We can both agree that Carth is one lucky man."

"Kriffing hells, I still can't believe that it actually worked." A sigh of relief passes through Vann, and his entire body sags as his worst fears are alleviated. At the same time, he begins to feel the aches and pains in his own body, combined with a bone-deep weariness that he's been fighting for what feels like days.

"How did you do that? How are you capable of that type of healing?" Juhani's brow furrows as she turns to stare at the mercenary, wonder etched across her features. "Even the most skilled healers in the Jedi Order would struggle to heal a wound of that magnitude."

Eyes acknowledging the younger man's exhausted expression, Jolee mutters, "Looks to me like he struggled quite a bit."

Drawing a ragged breath, Vann forces out, "I'm fine..."

"No, you're not," Jolee counters with a snort.

"I'll be fine after I get some sleep," Vann amends, though even that still feels like a lie. Struggling to keep the fatigue from his voice, he informs the Cathar, "And just so you know, I've healed someone before. I revived Bastila, back on Taris..." The rest of the words trail off, catching painfully in his throat as he's forced to remember exactly whose lightsaber almost killed Carth.

"Speaking of Bastila, what happened on the Leviathan?" Eyes narrowing, Jolee stares at the younger man for several moments, realization beginning to settle around him before he even receives an answer. "Where is she now?"

"While they were boarding, Vann said that Bastila turned on him and Carth," Juhani summarizes before quickly pressing her lips into a thin line.

"She betrayed all of us and tried to kill Carth," the mercenary spits out, anger suddenly flaring in his gut before fizzling out just as quickly. "Actually, is it even a betrayal if she was working against us the entire time? Either way, she made her choice and stayed on the Leviathan with her kriffing 'master.'"

"I still do not believe that Bastila would turn on you like that, Vann." Zaalbar shakes his shaggy head, eyes full of confusion as he looks at his friend. "She seemed genuinely dedicated to your cause."

"Hate to tell you this buddy, but she lied." The mercenary feels a slight pang of regret when he sees the look of hurt that passes over the Wookiee's face. His voice softens as he adds, "She lied to all of us."

With a desperate trill, Zaalbar pleads, "But she helped to free my people..."

"Liars like her and Malak are good at convincing everyone else that they're honest." Visions of Revan's innumerable deceptions flash through Vann's mind, and he can't help the shudder that runs down his spine. The feeling of guilt is magnified as he practically whispers, "I should know. I'm a damn talented liar myself."

Jolee's tone is remarkably flat as he asks, "So, does that mean you're planning to betray us next?"

Malak's words echo forebodingly within Vann's head. You fell, Revan. Long before I did.
Accompanying this confession are the threads of memory that he's managed to regain, most of them illuminated by the flash of lightsabers and set to the dying screams of his multitude of victims. You fell to your arrogance and your anger. His increasingly frequent bouts of rage-fueled violence now flash before his eyes, and he suddenly begins to wonder just how close he's come to turning on his crew, just like Revan turned on the Republic. Just as you're so very close to falling now. The warning screams through his brain and he feels the blood drain from his face, his chest tightening with anxiety.

"Vann, what is wrong?" Juhani's voice is laced with concern as she steps towards him, reaching out to offer her forearm as support. "You look quite pale. Come, sit down."

"I'd say it looks like he saw a ghost while he was on the Leviathan." A grim, knowing smirk plays on Jolee's lips. He arches an accusatory brow at the mercenary. "Any truth to that suspicion?"

Scoffing at the older Force user's words, Juhani scolds, "Don't be cryptic, old man. If you have a question about what transpired, simply ask it!"

Waving off the Cathar's assistance, Vann swallows hard before wearily stammering, "I... I'm really tired, and I have a lot to think about. I'll explain everything, I promise." Looking up at his companions, he can feel the desperation in his gaze as he begs them, "I just... I need some rest."

Nodding swiftly, Juhani moves to usher the rest of the crew out of the medical bay as she offers the mercenary a tense smile. "Of course. We will..."

A groan cuts the Cathar off before she can begin shooing the others out of the room. "Ugh. What... What happened?" Carth's dark eyes blink blearily as he speaks, his voice weak and slightly hoarse.

"Carth! Shit, you're awake!" Eyes once again fixed on the pilot, Vann feels some of the exhaustion leave his body as his friend returns to consciousness. "I didn't expect... Hells, I'm not sure what I expected."

"From the way Vann here tells it, Bastila tried to find out if you're resistant to plasma." Jolee chuckles darkly at his own humor. "Turns out you're not."

"I remember that part. What I mean is... ow!" Attempting to shift into a sitting position, Carth yelps as he aggravates the deep red scar that now marks his side. "Er, I mean, how? How am I here? How am I..."

"Still alive?" Juhani finishes. Gesturing to the mercenary, her tone is awed as she explains, "Vann used the Force to heal you. It was one of the most incredible displays of Force mastery I have ever seen."

Turning to stare at his friend, Carth's gaze is still foggy as he breathes, "Vann, is it true...?"

"Yeah. I healed you." Forcing what he hopes is an easy shrug, the mercenary quickly adds, "I'm not even sure how I did it, but..."

"That's not... I mean, is it true, what Malak said..." Shaking his head, Carth's voice is thick with disbelief as he asks, "Are you really Revan?"

For a moment, all Vann can do is stare in abject horror. He feels his jaw go slack in surprise, throat clicking dryly as he attempts, and then fails, to formulate anything resembling an intelligent response. But shock renders him mute, and all he can think about is the fact that he's vaguely regretting saving his friend's life.
Apparently ignoring the lack of response, Carth continues, "It's just, if you are... We deserve to know."

Still blinking back his astonishment, Vann jerks his head up and braces himself for the onslaught of questions from the rest of the crew. But all three remain silent. "What?" he demands, "Aren't you going to ask if he's hallucinating or something?"

Juhani swallows audibly, eyes instantly dropping to the floor as she balls her hands into fists at her sides. Her gaze briefly darts to Jolee, who is only doing a marginally better job at faking his own nonchalance. Exhaling loudly, the older man quickly shuffles towards the medical bay entryway while announcing, "Maybe I should go and check on Mission..."

Grasping the older Force user by the forearm, Juhani squeezes hard as she hauls him back towards the examining table. "Don't you dare!" she hisses. Turning to Vann, her expression vacillates between shame and sorrows as she stutters, "You see I... We knew..."

"You're joking, right?" Body growing slightly numb from the furious swirl of emotions that's currently coursing through his system, the mercenary reaches out his Force awareness to examine his companions' signatures. Their guilt is notably bright around them, though the chill of regret belongs to the Cathar alone. He can feel his outrage mounting as he shouts, "You both knew?"

"Of course I knew! I practically told you as much back on Kashyyyk." Jolee rolls his eyes, grumbling under his breath, "It's not my fault if nobody listens to an old man."

"So, it's true." Carth slowly closes his eyes, letting out a strained breath. "I didn't want to believe it..."

Narrowing his eyes, Vann jabs an accusing finger at the older Force user. "You said that you knew me better than I thought. You never said anything about Revan or my life before I lost my memories!"

Waggling his eyebrows, Jolee drawls, "Didn't I?"

Obviously sensing the mercenary's mounting frustrations, Juhani's voice raises an octave as she quickly states, "I personally did not know who you were until Manaan!" Her eyes dart between the other Force users as she explains, "While under the sway of Shasa's powers you were, well, you were answering to the name Revan."

"Wait, I did what?" Groaning, Vann scrubs both hands across his face. "So, you both knew? And you didn't tell me?"

"It wasn't our place to say, kid." Jolee offers the younger man a half-smile. "And, to be honest, I was hoping that you'd rediscover your identity on your own terms."

Growling low in her throat, Juhani snarls, "I would have told you if I had known it would spare you the pain of learning the truth from Malak."

Turning to study the mercenary, Carth's tone is surprisingly gentle as he says, "Vann, you... you need to tell everyone else. You know that, right?"

"Yeah." Exhaling heavily, the mercenary leans one hip against the medical bay table as he moves to rub the scar that bisects his abdomen. Arching a brow at the silent Wookiee, he asks, "What about you, Zaalbar? How do you feel about all of this? Or did you also know that I'm actually Revan?"
Shaking his head, the Wookiee growls thoughtfully. "I do not know anything about your past, Vann. Nor do I care." Inclining his head towards the smaller figure, he continues, "It does not matter to me what name you went by previously. I only judge you by the strength of your deeds."

Biting back another groan, the mercenary winces as a fresh stab of guilt sits heavy in his gut. "Yeah, well, you might want to hold off on that judgment…"

"So, you'll tell the rest of the crew?" Carth's gaze is surprisingly intense for someone who was recently on the brink of death.

"Yes!" Vann can hear the strain in his own voice, his legs shaking slightly from sheer exhaustion. "Just… just let me get a few hours of sleep first. Please?"

A faint smile plays on the pilot's lips as he leans his head back. "Sure. I guess you've earned that much."

"Go and get some sleep in the crew quarters," Juhani orders. "We'll make sure Carth is alright."

Nodding to the Cathar in gratitude, Vann stumbles exhaustedly towards the medical bay's entrance. When he reaches the doorway, he pauses, peering over his shoulder to catch the pilot's gaze. With a thin smirk, he quips, "Can you at least try not to get yourself killed while I'm asleep?"

Chuckling softly, Carth murmurs, "Sorry, I can't make any promises like that."

* * *

"So, what's with the big meeting, V-Man?" Mission is perched at the edge of the table in the main hold, legs kicking through the air.

"Is this about Bastila?" Canderous's expression is thunderous as he glares around the room. "Because nobody will give me a straight answer about why she's not on this ship."

"This is about… a lot of things." Drawing a deep breath, Vann glares at the empty mug of caf clutched in his hands. He supposedly slept for 12 straight hours, though he's convinced that the crew set all the clocks forward while he was asleep. Because it sure as hells feels like he laid down about ten minutes ago.

With a sympathetic sigh, Carth holds out his own mug of steaming liquid. He's currently slouched in one of the hold's seats, a blanket over his lap and his jacket slung unevenly across his shoulders. A series of bandages is wrapped around his torso, though whether they're necessary or precautionary has yet to be explained. "I'm still not sure why the droids need to be here," he mutters, casting a suspicious glance towards HK-47.

Snatching the mug up, Vann immediately discovers that it contains some form of tea that is significantly less caffeinated than his body requires. He gulps it down anyway. "They're here," he says between swallows, "Because they're also part of the crew."

"Mockery: Oh master, it delights me to be counted among the inadequate meatbags that compose the crew of this vessel." The droid sighs dramatically before adding, "If you should decide not to count me among their number, I would be most appreciative."

Beeping merrily, T3-M4 rolls to a stop a meter away, head tilting from side to side. A moment later Mission grins. "Well, at least Tee-Three is happy to be included in this. Whatever this is."

"Yeah," Canderous snaps irritably. "Cut the crap and tell us why we're here."
"You're here," Vann begins, setting both empty mugs on the table, "Because a few things happened on the Leviathan."

Expression grim, Carth glares at the Mandalorian as he gestures to his bandages. "For one thing, your best friend Bastila tried to kill me. Which would be the main reason she is not currently on the Hawk."

"Well, what did you do to deserve it?" Snorting derisively, Canderous glares down at the pilot as he crosses both arms over his broad chest.

Scoffing at the other man's anger, Carth's tone is defensive as he insists, "I didn't do anything!"

"Technically, you tried to prevent her from running in and pledging her undying allegiance to Malak," Vann comments dryly. "So, you did something."

"She was probably mind-tricked! You know how the Jedi work." Glancing angrily between the pilot and the mercenary, Canderous growls in frustration.

Shaking his head vehemently, Carth winces when the action pulls at his side. "She wasn't mind-tricked. But she did try to pull one of those on me. And when it didn't work…" He mimes a stabbing motion. "Bam! Straight in my gut."

"I fought side-by-side with Bastila in one of the messiest battles I've ever experienced. You get to know a person after a fight like that." Jerking his chin defiantly upwards, Canderous states, "She has honor. She wouldn't turn on her allies like that, not without a good reason."

"I said the same thing!" Zaalbar trills worriedly, even though the Mandalorian doesn't speak Shyriiwook. "I had trouble believing that she would turn on her companions. But Vann swears…"

"I swear that she had a good reason," the mercenary finishes with a sigh. "The reason is that she was loyal to Malak the entire time. Unquestioningly so." Watching the Mandalorian closely, he explains, "She was using you, Canderous. To get to the rest of your people. That story about defecting from the Republic? All a lie."

Narrowing his eyes at the mercenary, the Mandalorian glares accusingly at the other man. "I like you Vann, but that doesn't mean I trust you. I've seen you talk your way out of more than one situation, and I bet you've got the same Force tricks that Malak does." His nostrils flare challengingly. "Who's to say that you're not the one who's lying? After all, you're the only one who came back from that ship fully conscious. Maybe you just didn't like Bastila trying to keep you in line…"

Biting back the desire to scream incoherently, Vann draws a steady breath as he meets Canderous's gaze. "Bastila. Betrayed. Us," he grits out. "And that's the truth."

"He is not lying," Juhani states solemnly. "I can sense his emotions in the Force, and they do not indicate deception." Bowing her head, she places one palm over her heart. "From one warrior to another, you have my word that I speak the truth. I swear it upon my honor."

Sucking in a sharp breath at the Cathar's vow, Canderous takes a slow step back. His shoulders are tense as he eyes the rest of the crew, his arms dropping reflexively to his sides as though to reach for one of his many concealed knives. But he doesn't draw a weapon. "But why?" he finally demands, voice tense with rage. "Why would she be on that psychopath's side? Why would she lie to us all this time?"

"The dark side of the Force is pretty damn tempting. Why else would falling be such a risk?" Jolee
offers. "And I'm sure Malak made a really good offer. Something that someone with Bastila's pride and arrogance wasn't able to refuse."

"The Jedi tried to change her, to force her into a mold." Vann rakes his fingers through his hair. "But Malak accepted her for what she was. He fed her darkness rather than fighting it."

"I get it! You think Malak made the better offer," Canderous growls. "That doesn't mean I have to like this. And honestly, I'm not even kriffing sure I believe all of this!" He clenches his jaw, exhaling heavily as anger swells and roils around him. "But you still haven't answered my damn questions! Why did she lie all this time? Why us?"

With a sardonic smile, Vann points at the Mandalorian. "Originally, she wanted to trick you. She claimed that if she earned your trust, you'd lead her to the remaining groups of Mandalorians. Her and Malak were planning to wipe out your people once and for all."

"Ha!" Barking out a humorless laugh, Canderous straightens. "Shows how little the Republic knows. No single Mandalorian has the locations of all the remaining loyalists. It's a tactical measure to ensure that my people will always survive."

Lips tugging into a thoughtful frown, Mission looks between the adults. "But it's not like we've been looking for Mandalorians! From what you've told me, we're trying to find some old map."

"Yeah, Vann," Carth taunts, his tone caught between threatening and playful. "Why don't you explain that part?"

Rubbing his palm over his eyes, the mercenary tries to ignore the ire in his friend's voice. "Let's just say that they discovered something more important than the Mandalorians."

"And that something would be…" Carth prompts impatiently.

"Me!" Vann snaps. "The found me, and decided that I was their new project, okay?"

"You?" Coughing out a harsh laugh, Canderous's brows knit in contemplation. "I knew the fact that you were a kriffing Jedi would come back to bite us in the ass!"

At least this time Vann manages to keep his jaw shut. However, he can't stop himself from blinking in disbelief as he peers at the Mandalorian, and then at the rest of the crew. Both Force users are observing the scene with feigned disinterest, while Carth continues to watch him with a sharp look of accusation. Mission, however, seems to be doing her best to seem interested in everything but the current proceedings. Throwing his hands up in sheer frustration, he asks, "How the hells does everyone know more about my past than I do?!"

Wincing at the mercenary's exasperated tone, the Twi'lek forces a faint smile. "I'm so sorry V-Man, but Juhani told me not to say anything! You see, I found this picture and, well…" Wrinkling her nose at the Cathar, she declares, "She's scary when she wants to be! So, I didn't tell you, even though I really wanted to."

"Some of that little escapade came out on Kashyyyk while you were still in the Shadowlands," Canderous describes. "And honestly, that's about all I know. You were a Jedi, and now you're not. Seems to describe half the people in this damn room."

"Oh, there's more to it," Carth assures the crew, his tone managing to be simultaneously dry and scathing. "Why don't you tell them which Jedi you were?"

"Wait, were you some big-name hero during the war or something?" Mission's eyes grow wide and
she leans forward, hand resting on her knees. "Man, this is something from a holodrama! A war hero who loses his memory…"

Letting out a sigh that sounds more like a growl, Canderous eyes the mercenary suspiciously. "Were you at least a true disciple of Revan?" He levels his gaze, expression cool even as irritation simmers around him. "Or were you just another pawn of that damned Council?"

"I, well…" Vann stutters awkwardly.

"Tell them, Vann," Carth urges, words growing steadily more annoyed.

"It is not a truth to be ashamed of," Juhani reassures him, the attempt at comfort a bright point of warmth all around her.

Still harboring obvious suspicion, Canderous snarls, "Yeah, Vann. Tell us the truth already."

"V-Man, what's wrong?" Mission's gaze is imploring as she turns to watch the Human.

"The truth'll set you free, kid," Jolee mutters.

The voices of the crew meld into one overwhelming wave of emotion that washes over Vann, nearly drowning him with its sheer intensity. He can feel the anger and apprehension, the pride and the worry. But none of it compares to the cold, sharp fear that's settled over his own mind, surging like a frigid tempest beneath his skin. Images of his past flash across his vision, dark and foreboding. An ominous reminder that he fell, and a warning that it could happen again at any moment. He was a failed Jedi, and the ruin of the Republic. He was…

Slamming his palm against his chest, Vann blurts out, "I was… I am… I'm Revan, okay? I'm Revan!" The confession seems to break some type of dam, and he doesn't wait to witness the astonishment and anger of the rest of the crew before continuing, "I'm Revan. But I'm not the man that you thought I was. I'm… I've killed people, a lot of people. Some of them innocent. I've burned cities and sacked towns without regard to lives. I've destroyed families…" At this he turns to look at Carth, sorrow heavy in his voice. "I'm not a Republic hero or a courageous Knight. I… I fell, okay? It wasn't Malak who fell first, it was me. And I dragged him and Bastila down in my wake." The words are pouring out now, and with each syllable spoken a new load of guilt lands heavy upon his shoulders. He feels like he's going to fall over from the burden of it.

Pointing angrily towards the space beyond the ship's hull, Vann's voice wavers as he admits, "The Republic turning into complete bantha shit? That's all me. Malak built everything out there according to Revan… according to my vision. I'm responsible for the nightmare that the galaxy has become." He turns to look at his crew, voice cracking from emotion. "I'm the reason that your people were humiliated, Canderous. And Carth? I'm the reason that your home was destroyed. Yours too, Mission. Zaalbar? My dream for the Republic has enabled Czerka to flourish." He pauses as his eyes fall on Juhani, a new memory flashing through his mind. He sees a bloodied beach on a distant planet, waves lapping around his legs as he holds up a familiar metal mask and receives a vision of devastation. Hanging his head, he quietly admits, "I couldn't save the Cathar from being decimated. I was too late… Just like I'm too late to save the Republic.

"And do you know the funniest part?" As Vann looks back up he can feel the hysteria creeping into his words, manic laughter bubbling in his chest and threatening to spill forth as he speaks. "I don't remember most of it! I know I was a killer, and I know that I didn't feel a whole lot of remorse about it. But I don't remember setting the groundwork for Malak's fascist regime. Or laying out the plans for orbital bombardments. Or even stripping my defeated enemies of their last shreds of dignity." He jabs his thumb into his solar plexus. "But that sounds like something
Revan… that I would do, right? You know me. You've seen what I’m capable of with a crew and a ship and a couple of lightsabers. Imagine how bad it would be if I had an entire kiffing navy at my disposal!"

"Revan humiliated us because he won." Canderous's tone is forceful as he interrupts the mercenary's self-deprecating tirade, brokering no room for argument. "Yeah, it hurt to watch our beskad, beskar'gam, and bes'uliik destroyed. But we understood. The Revanchists earned the right to burn our weapons and armor because they beat us. Revan was the better tactician and the better warrior. He earned his victory."

"He… I… didn't earn anything." Vann can feel himself staring back at the Mandalorian, even as his mind loops in circles of remorse and rage. "All I did, all I do is ruin everything in my path. I didn't fix anything during the war, and I sure as hells can't fix things now." His head drops. "I'm sorry, but I can't stop Malak." His fingers trace the scar again. "Apparently, I never could."

Carth's tone lacks its former irritation as he cautiously asks, "So, what's your plan?"

Shrugging, Vann sighs heavily. "Drop me at the nearest inhabited planet, I guess. I can get myself to where I need to go, and you can all go back to yo…"

The punch to the left side of his jaw is a complete surprise, and he has no opportunity to dodge out of the way. Forced to take the full might of the blow, his head jerks violently to the side as his entire skull rings from the impact. Stumbling backward, it's his survival instinct that makes him put his fists up, body ready for a fight that his mind has yet to register. The metallic taste of blood fills his mouth, salty and bitter, and he spits a stream of crimson onto the durasteel floor. The hand that claps him hard on his shoulder almost causes him to lash out in retaliation, but the firm, constant pressure temporarily unbalances him. He looks up, blood dribbling down his chin.

"Shut the hells up and listen for one kriffing minute, would you?" Canderous glares down at the shorter man, using his additional height to his advantage. "Revan was one of the greatest warriors the Mandalorians ever faced. And he gave us exactly what we were promised, a war that would go down in history and be talked about for ages to come."

"But you lost…" Vann mumbles.

Shaking his head, Canderous smiles grimly. "It's not about winning and losing. It's about fighting. You have to fight for what you believe in! Revan knew that, and I respected Revan with every bone in my body."

"So did Bastila," Vann remarks, voice dripping with irony.

"As she should." Juhani takes a step closer, head canting thoughtfully to the side. "Revan may not have been the perfect Jedi, but he was a good man. Perhaps he could not save my people from the sea, but he did rescue me from a fate worse than death." She bows deeply at the waist, her long ponytail falling in a curtain about her face. "You saved my life, Revan. More than once. For that, you have earned my gratitude, and my loyalty."

Slipping off the table, Mission takes a few tentative strides towards the mercenary. "You didn't destroy Taris," she whispers, her voice wobbling slightly. "That was all Malak. You tried to save us. I saw it!" A mixture of emotions bubbles up around her, and unshed tears shine in her eyes. "So what if you did some bad stuff during the war? That's what war does to people! It brings out the worst in everyone!" Sniffling loudly, she angrily swipes the top of her glove across her face. "V-Man, you've always done right by me. And in my book, that's what matters!"
"Mission speaks with a great deal of wisdom for one so young," Zaalbar declares. "Vann, you saved my people from slavery. And you helped us to fight back against our oppressors. Without you, Kashyyyk would still be overrun by slavers," he trills, tone earnest. "Even if you supported Czerka in the past, you fought them in the present. And in my eyes, that deed is far more important than anything you did previously. To me, you are a hero."

"If I were you, I'd listen to those four," Jolee warns with a smug grin. "They seem to know what they're talking about, and at least one of them packs one hells of a punch." He leans in a little closer, lowering his voice to a false conspiratorial whisper. "And take it from an old man who's seen too much. There's always two sides to every story. If you can find the rest of your scattered mind, you might realize that, too."

Juhani sucks in a sharp breath. "Do you know something else, then? Perhaps you should say it now, while we are all making our confessions."

"It's nothing that I'm sure of, and certainly nothing that I want to be putting into the kid's head!" He scowls deeply. "He's got enough nonsense floating around in there untethered." There's a secretive note to his voice when he adds, "But if he can get his memories back, he might just find something useful buried in there."

"Query: Master, are these meatbag sentiments really providing you with any comfort? Back when you first built me, killing threats to the Republic brought you a great deal of joy." HK-47's eyes glow just a bit brighter as he speaks. "Observation: Perhaps you will fully return to your former self if you utilize my original assassination protocols. You did design them, after all."

Reaching up to wipe the blood from his lips, Vann struggles to process the words of his crewmates. Each profession of loyalty seems more surreal than the last, though they provide him with a sense of warmth and acceptance that he hasn't experienced since crawling from the crash site over three years ago. For a fleeting moment, he believes that he's actually redeemable. At least, until the droid's words cut through the swell of positive emotions. "Wait… what did you say H-Kay?"

Moving closer to the red metal figure, he furrows his brows. "Did you say that I built you?"

"Explanation: Indeed, Master. It seems that my backup memory was programmed to be restored upon receiving verbal clarification from my original builder that I am back in his possession. Namely, by using the words 'I am Revan,' spoken in his unique vocal pattern." HK-47 nods almost magnanimously to the mercenary. "Your neural patterns are also a match for my records, though with some understandable differences. Statement: You are the Jedi Knight Revan and my original creator."

"Wow, this really is like a holodrama!" Mission exclaims excitedly. "I mean, what are the chances of that happening?"

"It's the will of the Force," Jolee intones mysteriously.

Grunting, Canderous insists, "Oh come on! You can't tell me that's not a little creepy."

"Revan… you… built that thing?" Carth sputters, apparently regaining his voice after several minutes of silence. "Now I really know that you were dark."

"Yeah, but at least it explains why he likes the damn droid so much." With a chuckle, Canderous turns to study HK-47.

Staring right back with his unblinking gaze, the assassin droid asks, "Query: Master, would you like me to shoot these meatbags for mocking you? I know that killing always greatly improves my
"Nobody's killing anybody!" Shaking off the pain in his jaw, Vann gives the droid a stern stare. He swears that the fixed mechanical features somehow manage to pout in response. "And, uh, Carth? I know that you probably feel like I've been lying to you this whole time. It's not like I did it on purpose, but..." With a frustrated growl, he rubs his palm across his forehead. "What I'm trying to say is that, if you want to leave, I understand."

Carth holds up a hand, instantly hushing his companion. "I'm not going anywhere." He pauses, gesturing to the bandages around his abdomen. "At least, not for a while."

"Right." Vann nods in acknowledgment, even as he swallows his own disappointment. He's still stunned that more of the crew don't want to flee as fast as the hyperdrive will carry them. "So, once you're healed..."

Shaking his head, Carth waves off the rest of the mercenary's words. "I just... I need time to think about all of this, okay? It's a lot to take in."

"Really?" Vann quips sarcastically. "I hadn't noticed."

"Just so you know, the sarcasm is not helping me to process all of this." Noting that the rest of the crew is listening to him curiously, Carth clarifies, "I always thought of Revan as a larger-than-life hero. The Jedi who convinced his entire Order to join the good fight. The soldier who won the war. The man who gave his life defending the Republic."

"And I'm exactly none of those things," Vann surmises with a disappointed snort. "I never have been, and I never will be." He tries to give the pilot an apologetic smile, but he can feel that the expression is more of a grimace. "You thought of Revan as a good person, and I'm... me."

Sighing heavily, Carth slowly shakes his head. "You're not a bad person, Vann. Some questionable tendencies? Sure. But... You're not a heartless monster. Not like Karath and Malak." His lips twist into a wistful frown. "You're fallible, just like the rest of us. You make mistakes, show some remarkably poor judgment, and have the ability to be incredibly annoying at times."

"What can I say, I do what I can for the greater good." Vann shrugs weakly, even as he tries to tamp down on the spark of hope fluttering in his chest. Casting an imploring glance at the pilot, he hesitantly asks, "So, are you sticking around?"

It's a long, tense moment before Carth finally responds. "I might as well. I get the feeling that we're both headed to the same place."

Bastila's voice echoes through Vann's mind. Her words reverberate off the raw, tattered remains of their bond, causing him to subconsciously wince as he mutters, "...Korriban."

"Yeah," Carth responds with an equal lack of enthusiasm. "Korriban."

"Why the hells would anybody want to go to that barren rock of a planet? Dreshdae is the only place worth visiting, and it's nothing but scoundrels and smugglers." Canderous shakes his head at the thought, though his expression is vaguely amused. "I'll have a good time there, but I don't know about the rest of you."

Juhani flinches with concern. "Quatra told me about Korriban once. It is... deeply connected to the dark side of the Force."

"That it is," Jolee agrees, tone neither pleased nor perturbed.
"Oh. Great." Carth rolls his eyes, sinking further back into his seat. "This is already going so much worse than I imagined."

"Carth's son is on Korriban, at Malak's personal academy," Vann quickly explains to the rest of the crew, his voice lowering as he cautiously adds, "It's also the location of the last piece of the Star Map."

Chuckling humorlessly Jolee concludes, "Somehow, I don't think that's a coincidence."

"Nothing is ever a kriffing coincidence with us!" Pinching the bridge of his nose, Vann closes his eyes as he groans, "And I'm betting that finding what we need is going to be a bigger pain in the ass than usual."

"We can keep posing as mercenaries and claim that we're looking for work. There're enough blasters for hire on Korriban that nobody'll give us a second look." Canderous's expression is pensive, and he nods slowly as he speaks. "I might even be able to shake down a few contacts for information while we're there."

"Yeah, but that won't help us with getting into the academy." Despite his obvious pain that laces his tone, there's a note of steel to Carth's words. "And that's the only place on Korriban that I want to be."

Juhani shakes her head, jaw clenching as she exhales heavily through her nose. "Trying to sneak into that academy is madness. From what we know, it is full of Force-sensitives who are loyal to Malak. You will only get yourself killed."

"Hey, I didn't say you have to come with me! But you also can't stop me from looking for Dustil." Carth glares defiantly at the Cathar.

"Carth, come on!" Scowling at the pilot, Mission gestures to the bandages around his abdomen. "You barely managed to survive one Force user. There's no way you can take on an entire school full of 'em!"

Staring at his crewmates in visible disbelief, Carth slowly shakes his head as he admonishes, "I can't believe all of you! This is my son we're talking about!"

Vann listens to the argument for a few more moments, feeling the words trickle and weave through the crew's myriad of emotions. His attention quickly drifts to Mission, and he watches as she fearlessly confronts the rest of her companions, gesturing emphatically with each point she makes. A few scattered ideas begin to form in the mercenary's mind, vague notions at first but quickly solidifying into the rough outlines of a plan. He chuckles to himself as one thought keeps circling around in his mind, ingenious in its absurdity.

"I uh, might have an idea," Vann calls out, momentarily silencing the debate raging around him "But it's pretty terrible." He's forced to swallow a laugh when he remembers that Revan is lauded as a master strategist.

"Ha!" Jolee coughs out. "Like we've had any other kind of idea recently?"

Heaving another sigh, Carth watches the mercenary curiously. "Alright. I'll bite. What's this plan of yours? But just so you know, I'm going into that academy with or without your help."

Shaking his head at the pilot's stubbornness, Vann chuckles to himself. "I'm going to help you, alright? It's just… You have to trust me." Casting an imploring gaze at the other man, he awaits a response.
With an aggravated grunt, Carth finally offers a curt nod of approval. "Just say what you're thinking. It can't be any worse than what happened on the Leviathan."

Confidence temporarily bolstered Vann turns to look at the Twi'lek, a faint smirk playing on his lips. "Hey Mission, how good are your acting skills?"

* * *

"A lightsaber is not like a vibroblade!" Juhani chides while nimbly stepping away from a strike aimed at her torso. "You do not have the weight of the blade to guide your hand. You must use the Force!"

"Which might be a problem, since the kid is about as Force-sensitive as a durasteel cube." Jolee chuckles a little as he looks on from the sidelines. "The real problem is that she's trying to let her arm do the work and not the burning hot plasma."

"Argh!" Angrily dropping both hands to her sides, Mission scowls at the Force users as she powers down the borrowed lightsaber she's clutching. "I'm never going to get this!"

"Not if you give up!" Lunging towards the younger woman, Juhani grasps the Twi'lek's wrist in her fist and tugs the lightsaber hilt back into an offensive position. "A true Jedi does not give up hope at the first sign of adversity."

Yanking her arm from the Cathar's grip, Mission powers the blade back up. "We've been at this for days, and I'm not getting any better." Awkwardly twirling her weapon, she adds, "And it's not like Vann wants me to pretend to be a Jedi. He wants me to be a, uh... Whatever the hells type of Force users Malak is training at his creepy academy!"

"A Sith," Jolee finishes, tone dark. At hearing a surprised gasp from the other Force user, he frowns as he explains, "Malak and his followers might not be calling themselves Sith, but they sure bear a lot of resemblance to Exar Kun and his lot."

Studying the Human curiously, Juhani asks, "You fought in that war?"

"Of course I did!" Squaring his shoulders, Jolee raises his head with a hint of pride. "At the time, we thought it was the war that would finally drive the Sith to extinction." He instantly deflates as a look of dejection passes over his features. "Shows how much we knew..."

Juhani seems poised to ask more questions, though the words die in her throat as she sees the defeat that sits heavy on the older Force user's shoulders. Instead, she merely says, "Quatra taught me some things about the Sith. Their ideals were different from her own, but she respected some of their beliefs."

Eyes narrowing, Jolee vehemently shakes his head. "There's nothing to respect about the Sith."

"Spoken like a true Jedi." A thin smile ghosts across Juhani's lips, and then quickly passes as she raises her lightsaber into a defensive stance. With a grim nod, she announces, "So, it is a Sith they want? Fine! A Sith I shall make you." Beckoning the Twi'lek closer using her free hand, she encourages, "Try the same exercise again but this time fight with passion, not logic."

"What, no worrying about defensive maneuvers and foot positioning?" Mission taunts back, even as she smirks in delight.

Juhani takes a step back, sending a small burst of energy through the Force. It's just enough to give the Twi'lek a mild shove to her left shoulder. The push isn't enough to unbalance her, but it's still an
irritating gesture. "It was a mistake to listen to the old man and try to teach you Soresu. After all, that form encompasses the beliefs of the Jedi."

Scoffing defensively, Jolee grumbles, "It's a good form! It won't do the kid any disservice, anyway."

"But she is right. She is not pretending to be a Jedi." Juhani doesn't have time to say anything else before Mission is charging her, borrowed lightsaber flashing bright violet as she makes a powerful, two-handed swing at her opponent.

The attack is blocked easily enough, but the sheer ferocity obviously jars the Cathar's arms in the process. The next two slashes are parried with similar ease, the lightsabers humming and sizzling each time they make contact despite their low power settings. Mission's face twists into an expression of determination as she continues to hack away at the space around Juhani, grunting and growling each time she swings her borrowed blade.

Despite deflecting her opponent's attacks with relative ease, Juhani looks pleased. "Good work," she hisses as she diverts a stab driven towards her chest. "Use your emotions to fuel your attacks!" Parrying a slash to her face, she uses the momentum of the blow to push the Twi'lek back as she adopts a more offensive stance. "And when you block my attacks, use the force of my movements against me, as I just did. Turn your defense into offense. Drive me back!"

As Juhani dives forward with a series of simple, yet powerful strikes aimed at her opponent's midsection, Mission flinches and freezes for a moment. She barely manages to block the first slash, wincing as the blades clash only centimeters from her face. "I still don't think I get this," she admits, using both hands to hold her lightsaber as she diverts two more hits in quick succession. Adjusting her footing, she manages to catch another strike with the middle of her blade, grunting as she turns the simple maneuver into a true parry, managing to push the Cathar back for the first time in four days of training.

"I think you might be understanding more than you realize," Jolee states with a grin. "Listen to your instincts, kid. You already knew to keep your footwork defensive. Now just let her come to you. And let the blade do some of the work for you."

Brow furrowing in concentration, Mission carefully tracks the Cathar's continued assault, the crimson lightsaber whirling and hissing with increased speed. The smaller Twi'lek keeps standing her ground, feet planted and arms moving in smooth arcs as she blocks each blow aimed at her. It's only every third or fourth strike that she manages a true parry, but it's more progress than she's made in at least a day. One particularly brutal hit is driven back with such efficiency that Juhani stumbles a bit, surprise and delight evident on her face.

"Excellent!" Jolee calls excitedly. "Don't let up, kid! You have her on the ropes.

Eyes shining with resolve, Mission adjusts her footwork into a more aggressive stance, remaining in place as she begins to combine her blocking with secondary attacks. It's not the most graceful technique, but what she lacks in finesse she compensates for with her sheer ferocity. Having dueled Juhani in the past, Vann feels safe in assessing that the Cathar could wipe the floor with her students if she chose. But it's still a remarkably good showing for the Twi'lek, who's only had half a week of real training. He smirks a little from his hiding place in the corner of the workshop, the spacious room recently converted into an impromptu training ring. Well, he thinks to himself, Time to practice my part in this whole mess. Reaching into his pocket, he retrieves his commlink and glances over at where HK-47 is resting in low power mode.

"I think I'm finally getting it!" Mission shouts as she manages to parry two attacks in a row. Using
her smaller stature to her advantage, she goes in low and delivers a quick slash towards Juhani's side. The unexpected strike isn't blocked in time, and the slight burn that the blade causes is enough to make the Cathar jump back with a start. On such a low power setting the lightsabers won't cause any permanent damage, but a hit definitely stings.

Seeing the Cathar's guard momentary drop, Vann presses a button on his communicator and sends a message directly to HK-47. The droid's eyes light up as he receives the communication and he lets out a word in Shyriiwook, the singular growl low enough to be mistaken for any number of creaks or groans. But it's sufficient for Mission's delicate lekku to detect, and she immediately extends her off-hand in a pantomime of a Force user pushing their opponent down with a blast of energy. An instant later a wave of Force power flows forth, knocking Juhani flat on her back as she gasps in shock.

Drawing his own arm back towards his body, Vann chuckles as he drops the Force camouflage that was wrapped around his form while simultaneously turning off his stealth field generator. As he fades back into view he announces, "I'd say that looked pretty realistic."

"Vann!" Juhani shouts as she leaps back to her feet, powering down her lightsaber as she regains her footing. "I did not know you were in here."

"That would be the point of this entire exercise," he comments dryly.

Nodding approvingly, Jolee steps towards the younger man. "Not bad, kid. Not bad at all." He points towards the nearest wall. "I have to admit, I did sense your presence a bit, but it was so faint that I assumed you were on the other side of the ship."

"And I did not sense you at all. Not until the end, at least." She smiles sheepishly, rubbing one hip as she clips her lightsaber back onto her belt.

"I don't know what the hells you're all talking about, but that was pretty kriffing awesome!" Mission beams as she looks down at her hand, as though marveling at the Force power that she didn't actually produce. Straightening, she quickly powers down her lightsaber before offering the hilt to the mercenary. "Uh, did you want this back?"

Shaking his head, Vann tells the Twi'lek, "Hold onto it for now. You'll need it on Korriban. And besides, I still have my, err…" He taps the scuffed hilt hanging at his hip. "My old 'saber," he finally finishes, refusing to acknowledge that the weapon was originally made by Revan.

Fumbling a bit as she attaches the borrowed lightsaber to her belt, Mission looks up at the assembled Force users. "So," she asks, "Do you think that was believable enough? Do you think those assholes on Korriban will believe that I have the Force?" She wiggles her fingers a little for emphasis.

"Not if you keep saying it like that…" Jolee rolls his eyes good-naturedly at the Twi'lek before humming softly in consideration. "But you know, I think this might just work. To nobody's surprise, Vann's pretty good at hiding himself in the Force."

"Any lingering traces of his Force signature will seem to be coming from Mission, or so we can hope." Looking thoughtful, Juhani studies the younger woman for a long moment. "Though, aside from when he uses his powers, his signature is quite faint."

"That's a good thing," Vann corrects. "We don't want her to seem too powerful. This all falls apart if someone sees her as a threat, or starts asking too many questions."
Putting her hands on her hips, Mission looks at the adults. "Lemme just see if I have this plan correct?" she asks them. "I go into this academy pretending to be a Jedi reject looking for more training. Like, I wasn't good enough to be a Jedi, but I'm hoping Malak'll accept me?"

"This is one of those situations where repeating the plan out loud is going to sound really awful, isn't it?" Vann winces as the Twi'lek begins to run through their current tactics.

Waving a dismissive hand, Mission grins with false bravado. "Don't worry V-Man, I've got this!" She glances at the other Force users as she confirms, "So, assuming they let me in along with H-Kay, who's posing as my personal droid, I look for Carth's son?"

"Yes, you are to look for Dustil," Juhani nods in affirmation. "Once you find him, you should assess his situation and see if there is a way to get him out of the academy relatively safely."

"Don't worry," Vann offers, giving the Twi'lek a weak smile. "I'll be with you the entire time. You just, uh, won't be able to see me."

"Hopefully nobody will be able to see you," Jolee corrects.

"Yep," Vann says with a sigh as he pats the stealth unit he's wearing. "That's also what I'm hoping." Glancing over at the droid still standing in uncharacteristic silence towards the back of the room, he continues, "Anything I need to tell you will be passed through H-Kay. He'll use Shyriiwook since there's a good chance nobody else will speak it."

"Confirmation: Yes, Master. I am positive that a superior combat-enabled assassin droid such as myself is best used as a walking translator and comm system." Red eyes dimming, HK-47 shakes his head. "Do you have any other menial tasks for me that do not utilize my primary functions?"

Sighing at the droid's words, Vann gives him a half-smile. "Cheer-up, H-Kay. Your other assignment is to protect Mission against anyone who tries to hurt her. So, that should be fun for you, right?"

Tone becoming more sinister, the droid agrees, "Assessment: Yes, Master. I do hope that there are multiple attempts made to harm this small meatbag, as I will greatly enjoy eliminating any threats to her."

"Uh, thanks, buddy?" Mission manages to squeak, looking equal parts pleased and disturbed. "Glad to have you at my back."

"Statement: I am not looking forward to protecting your life. I am merely anticipating the joy of killing many incompetent meatbags." HK-47 shrugs a little. "If it weren't for my programming, you would just be another target to me."

"Thank the Force for that programming," Jolee grumbles as he glares at the droid from the corner of his eye.

"Anyway," Vann says loudly, attempting to curtail any further comments about his droid, "Mission, if you need to 'demonstrate' any Force powers, I'll perform them for you. You just need to listen for a command from H-Kay, and then hold your arms out like we practiced earlier, okay?"

Nodding, Mission glances between the droid and the mercenary. "Yup. I got it, V-Man."

"Alright." Vann briefly studies the commlink still resting in his palm, eventually nodding to himself as he presses a button. An instant later, HK-47 growls out another word in Shyriiwook. In response, the Twi'lek moves both arms upwards, as though lifting an object through the Force.
"Good," the mercenary approves. "Try this one." Inputting a different preprogrammed command, he listens for the telltale roar.

Mission's eyes go a little wide when she hears this word but she dutifully lifts up one hand, clenching her fingers in a choking motion as her expression turns more serious. "Is this okay?" she asks.

"You're going to make it look like she can choke people?" Jolee arches a concerned brow. "You sure that's a good idea?"

"It's Malak's academy," Vann explains. "They might not think she's worthy of training unless she has some connection to the dark side of the Force."

Rubbing her hands together excitedly, Mission grins. "So, what else can you make it look like I can do? Can you make me run really fast or something?"

Frowning amusedly, Vann shakes his head. "Nope, sorry. The only things I can make it seem like you're doing are the three I already taught you. Push, lift, and choke."

"Aw, no lightning?" Mission pouts.

Vann shrugs apologetically. "No lightning."

"That's probably a good thing," Jolee grumbles.

With a solemn nod, Juhani turns an assessing gaze onto the Twi'lek. "If she is only supposed to be a failed Initiate, those three techniques should be enough. After all, not every Jedi is as gifted in the Force as Rev… as Vann is."

Biting his tongue upon hearing the slip, the mercenary grits out, "Yeah, let's hope it's enough."

"So, just to make sure I've got this straight," Mission says, ticking off points on her fingers, "H-Kay and I go in, with me pretending to be a Jedi reject. Once I'm inside, I look for Carth's son. She looks around the room, only continuing after she notes some nods of confirmation. "If they ask me what I can do, Vann'll help me fake it. And if I have to fight someone off…"

"Statement: I am always glad to shoot an inferior specimen," HK-47 offers.

"Or I can use this." With a flourish, Mission draws the lightsaber from her belt, thumbing the blade on and brandishing the weapon with a twirl.

"Not without more practice," Juhani chides, calling her own lightsaber into her palm and igniting the blade with a mere flick of her finger. With both weapons humming in the air, she beckons the Twi'lek closer. "Now try again. But this time, hold you ground the entire fight."

Sighing heavily, Mission complies as she falls into a defensive stance. "Okay," she states, voice steady with determination. "Let's do this."

As the pair come together in their sparring session, Vann smirks to himself. A moment later he takes a step back, drawing the Force around his body as he slips into the shadows.

* * *

"I thought I'd find you sulking in here." Carth arches a brow as he pauses in the doorway of one of the Ebon Hawk's smaller cargo holds.
Vann looks up from where he's sitting on the floor of the hold, knees curled up to his chest. "What are you talking about? I don't sulk."

Chuckling softly, Carth slowly strides into the room. "You definitely sulk, especially when you're worried."

"I'm not worried!" Frowning at the pilot, Vann does his best not to sound petulant as he lists the current state of their plans. "Mission is as trained as we can hope for, Canderous is already contacting people in Dreshdae, and H-Kay is as compliant as I can convince him to be."

Sitting down beside the mercenary, Carth forces a thin smile. Playfully nudging the other man with his shoulder, his tone is strained as he admits, "It's okay to be worried. I'm worried."

"Why?" Vann snaps, only to wince apologetically. Swallowing, he tries to keep his voice light as he points out, "I mean, you should be pretty safe walking around the colony with Juhani and Zaalbar, trying to see what you can find out about the Star Map."

"And can I just mention, yet again, that I'm pissed none of you will let me anywhere near that academy?" Scowling, Carth presses his back against the wall of the hold, exhaling a deep sigh as he glares irritably at his companion."

"And can I say, yet again, that this is for your own damned good?" Vann stares pointedly at the pilot. As an afterthought, he adds, "And to keep Mission as safe as possible."

Sighing, Carth leans his head back as he scrubs one hand over his face. "I know this is for the best, okay? But that still doesn't mean I have to like it!" He falls silent for several long moments, eyes fixed on a nondescript point on the opposite wall. After a while, some of the tension seems to leach out of his shoulders. When he does speak again, his words are so soft they're barely audible. "I know I don't say this enough, but thank you."

Blinking in confusion, Vann cants his head towards the pilot. "Huh? For what?"

"For saving my life on more than one occasion." Expression solemn, Carth turns to meet his companion's gaze. However, a small grin tugs at one side of his mouth. "And for coming up with this ridiculous plan to go in and rescue my son."

"Oh. Well..." Shrugging one shoulder, Vann only holds the pilot's eyes for a moment before turning to stare at the floor. "I do the right thing every now and then."

"I, uh, I think you do the right thing more often than you give yourself credit for." Carth sighs sadly, head dropping a little. "And it's definitely more often than I give your credit for."

Unable to keep the scathing sarcasm from his voice, Vann turns to glare at the pilot. He can feel the anger and frustration simmering just beneath his skin, the emotions focused inward as he chastises his own actions. "Yeah, I did an excellent job fighting for a better world during the war."

He makes a vague gesture towards the expanse beyond the ship's hull. "I think we all see how well my decision making went."

Carth shakes his head. "There's no way you could have predicted..."

"Apparently, I did!" Vann shouts back, eyes wide as he tracks his companion's reaction. "Everything that Malak built is based on my ideas for an ideal Republic."

"And you really think that Malak told you the whole truth?" Carth scoffs at the idea, brows furrowing as he demands, "Do you actually trust that psychopath?"
"I trust everyone in this entire kripping galaxy more than I trust myself!" Vann admits before he can stop the confession from pouring forth. An instant later he snaps his mouth shut with an audible click, but it's too late.

Sucking in a sharp breath, Carth's expression grows deeply concerned as he tentatively asks, "Is this a new development? Or…?"

"I woke up after the crash with almost no memory. I didn't even know my own name." Vann stares at his hands as he recalls the incident, fingers slowly curling into fists. "I fumbled around trying to survive, and I made a life for myself… if you can call it that. But never really trusted my own thoughts or actions." He scoffs sardonically. "And it turns out that was the best decision I ever made."

Reaching out to place a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder, Carth's voice is gentle as he says, "Your instincts aren't all bad."

Shrugging off the gesture of support, Vann narrows his eyes. "My instincts are dark. I fell, Carth." Teeth clenched, he hisses out, "I fell, and I dragged two other Force users and the entire kripping Republic down with me!"

"Yeah, and now you're trying to fix it!" Carth exclaims, throwing up his hands in frustration. "You didn't even know you had a hand in ruining the Republic when you volunteered to go on this inane mission for the Jedi."

"If I'd known…"

"Shut up for a second, would you?" Frowning at the other man, Carth waits until he sees his companion's lips press into a thin line. "You made some bad decisions, both as Revan and as Vann. We can all agree on that. But you're not all bad."

Casting an accusatory stare at his companion, Vann counters, "That's not what you were saying back on Tatooine. Or Kashyyyk."

Sighing heavily, Carth rubs the heel of his palm against one eye. "Maybe almost dying has given me a new perspective."

Vann snorts. "Ha! Now who sounds like a holodrama?"

"No, really!" Holding his hands up innocently, Carth explains, "Look, I don't pretend to know how the Force works. But from what I do understand, you can't even heal a scraped knee if you don't have some good in you. And from what Juhani told me, you practically brought me back from the dead."

Voice little more than a whisper, Vann murmurs, "I honestly wasn't sure it would even work."

Carth gestures to his side, pointing to the spot where the fresh scar lays beneath his clothing. "But it did work. Which means you did something good, right?"

Biting the inside of his cheek, Vann feels the answer to his companion's question catch in his throat. It's an admission that he's been repeatedly turning over in his mind and something that's embarrassing in its brutal honesty. Mainly because it says a few things that he's not entirely ready to give voice to. Letting out a sigh that's more of a growl, he begrudgingly explains, "All I did was, well… I thought about you."

Visibly puzzled, Carth lets out an eloquent, "Huh?"
"Yeah, that's right," Vann continues, jerking his chin upwards in a challenge. He can feel his heart hammering in his chest, though the embarrassment is beginning to burn away. "I thought about you, and your stupid coat, and your kriffing preachiness, and all of your complaining…"

With a sigh, Carth gestures for the other man to wrap-up this train of thought. "Please, flatter me some more."

"And I thought about your smile, and the way you laugh at the stupid jokes Mission makes even though you pretend not to. And the way that you try to look nonchalant when you're uncomfortable, just like you're doing right now." Noting the hint of pink creeping into the other man's cheeks Vann smirks, though his expression quickly sober. "I thought about all of that. And then I thought about how I didn't want to lose you to Malak and Bastila. And then, well, you know the rest."

"Oh," Carth breathes out.

"Yeah, 'oh.' I healed you because you're, well, you." Vann gestures to the pilot's entire body, trying to remain casual even as doubt seeps into his tone. "I'm not sure I could do that again if I tried."

Lips twisting thoughtfully, Carth's words are a bit rushed as he recalls, "You healed Bastila back on Taris, and that was before you knew much about her."

"But there was a bond…" Vann begins, only to cut himself short a moment later. Realization rolls through him, cold and vicious, and he nearly yells, "Kriffing hells, the bond!"

"What?" Carth starts in alarm, watching the other man cautiously. "Is something the matter?"

Hurriedly shaking his head to dismiss the thought, Vann grumbles, "…No. It's nothing."

"How about telling the truth for once, Revan?" Carth says the last word with a fresh note of bitterness, casting an accusing glare at his companion.

Guilt sits heavy in Vann's gut as he grimaces at his former name. "Okay, fine!" he agrees, leaning in closer. The Padawan's words echo through his mind as he begins to speak, the silence of their mental connection still a yawning void within his head. "Back when we were fleeing the Leviathan, I thought I felt Bastila contact me through our Force bond."

"Shit. Well, what did she say?" Carth pauses here, looking both confused and worried. "If she can even say anything through… whatever it is that you have.

Vann draws a deep breath before stating, "She told me to go to Korriban."

"Bantha shit!" Carth actually recoils back a few centimeters, eyes growing wide with the implication. "Do you realize what this means? Going to Korriban is probably a trap! Knowing them, Bastila and Malak probably have some bigger plan…"

"Yeah," Vann drawls sarcastically. "That thought only crossed my mind a few dozen times."

"Why didn't you tell anyone else about this? We would have found a way for you to at least stay on the ship. I mean, they could be waiting to kill you!" Carth's voice rises in pitch as he yells over his friend, expression suddenly growing more concerned. "Or they could be planning something even worse."

"Like turning me completely to the dark side? Yeah, I thought of that too." Vann nods with exaggerated enthusiasm, rolling his eyes. "And then I realized that I still have to go to that kriffing
planet, trap or no trap."

Shaking his head, Carth repeats, "Vann, you can't…"

"The Star Map may be the only way to stop Malak and the mess that I apparently created." Vann's jerks a thumb towards his own chest. "And I'm the only one who can sense the damn thing, so everyone needs me down there."

"This could be really bad…"

Expression deadpan, Vann asks, "Because everything has gone so well until now?"

"Alright, you may have a point." Carth arches a brow in amusement, though it quickly fades. "No matter what, you need someone to watch your back down there. Especially if Malak and Bastila are trying to lure you to their side."

"I'll have Mission and H-Kay with me," Vann points out, even as he feels eminently foolish for implying that a teenager and a homicidal droid are all the protection that he needs. He quickly clarifies, "Jolee, Juhani, and Zaalbar will all be on the surface too."

"And I'll be there." Carth nods grimly, meeting his companion's gaze once more. "Look, I'll do whatever I can to protect you. From Malak and from, well…" He trails off for a moment, swallowing hard before continuing, "From yourself. And whatever darkness caused you to fall the first time."

"I don't want to fall again, but it's not like you can single-handedly prevent it." Attempting to brush off the potential danger that he's placing himself in, Vann uses his elbow to give the pilot a playful nudge in the ribs. "Just watch your own ass, and try to keep from doing anything stupid while we save your son."

Visibly frustrated, Carth scowls at the mercenary. "I told you, I want to do more than wander around looking for the damn Star Map!"

"And I told you that we can't let your desperation to find Dustil cloud your judgment!" Vann struggles to keep his temper in check as he repeats this explanation for what feels like the millionth time. "If you go in there, guns blazing…"

"It's not just about Dustil, okay?" Carth interrupts, leaning towards his companion. Their breaths mingle, noses almost touching as he blurts out, "It's also about you. You're going to be surrounded by Force-sensitive enemies personally picked and trained by Malak. That's dangerous on a lot of fronts."

Vann snorts in exasperation before exclaiming, "Everything I do is dangerous!"

"I know!" Carth agrees, placing a hand on each of his companion's shoulders. "Which is why I kriiffing worry about you so much!"

"You honestly worry about me?" Head jerking back in surprise, Vann blinks in disbelief even as a hint of delight spreads warm and soothing through his chest. "Me?"

"Yes, I honestly do!" For a moment, Carth seems confused by the other man's shock, though he recovers quickly. Genuine affection blooms around him, a bright spot within the Force. "I care about you, Vann…"

"You care about the whole crew," the mercenary points out, all while trying to tamp down the
dangerous flare of hope within him. Despite being thrown together by chance, he and Carth have found a certain unity in working together throughout this entire adventure. He'd hoped that they'd achieved something beyond mere comradery, but after the pilot's disastrous reactions to his darker tendencies and true identity, that hope was dashed. Sure, he knows what he wants, but if he's gleaned anything from the Jedi's teachings it's that want is a dangerous emotion, especially for a Force user. So, he's settled for this tumultuous thing that passes for friendship.

But Carth is still looking into the mercenary's eyes, hands warm against the other man's shoulders as he softly states, "I care about you. You, and your flippancy, and your passion, and your bad kriffing habit of running into stupid situations like an academy full of dark Force use… ummph!"

Admittedly, Vann has never been very good at listening to Jedi teachings. It's an impulsive decision to close the last few centimeters between them, silencing the pilot with a firm press of his lips. He can feel the rough, chapped patches of the other man's skin, and the sharp inhale of breath that blows cool against his cheek. Carth's surprise flows like electricity across his body, and Vann can practically taste it through the Force. For a moment he wants more, greedily leaning closer to the pilot, at least until he realizes that the other man has fallen still beneath his touch. This sobers him and his impulsivity gives way to regret, the sensation piling atop the rest of his remorse. He pulls away like he's been burned, backing up as his eyes attempt to focus on anything but Carth, his gaze darting awkwardly around the cargo hold.

Gulping down a guilty breath, Vann mutters, "That was a really bad idea, wasn't it?"

There are several moments of tense silence as Carth's emotions flicker and change around him. The surprise gradually fades, replaced by something warmer and lighter that could almost be called amusement. Or maybe even happiness. It colors his words as he asks, "Do you mean because of the person, or because of the circumstance?"

"Both. Either. Yes." Vann closes his eyes against his own fumbling response, suddenly positive that he must be Revan. Only someone raised in amongst the Jedi's dissuasion of personal attachments could manage to be this blisteringly awkward. "Please," he finally begs, turning helplessly towards the pilot. "Tell me to shut up."

Smiling softly, Carth reaches over to place a hand on his companion's shoulder, the warmth and weight providing a note of comfort within this increasingly humiliating situation. He brings his other hand up to gently cup the mercenary's cheek. Touch light, he trails his thumb along the high line of the other man's cheekbone before carefully leaning close to press their foreheads together. "Shut up, Vann," he offers with a warm chuckle before pressing their lips together once more.

This time the kiss is longer and less tentative, their breaths mingling as Vann reaches up to wrap his arms around Carth's shoulders to pull him closer. The pilot is warm and solid beneath his touch, lips soft and slightly damp as they move against his own. And around them, the Force shimmers with a warmth and brightness that's almost enough to outshine the dread that's been seeping through his system since the moment that they made their narrow escape from the Leviathan. He wraps the tingling energy around himself like a cloak as he pulls away from Carth, momentarily left breathless.

Blinking up at the other man, Vann winces as he tightens his arms. The upcoming mission suddenly rushes to the forefront of his mind, an ominous shadow over his thoughts. "We have some kriffing terrible timing, don't we?"

Carth tilts his head to the side, raising his brows as he sarcastically asks, "You mean the fact that we land in Korriban in less than a day?"
"Yes. Shit!" Dropping his arms, Vann backpedals a bit as he sighs heavily, groaning, "I still have a lot to do. Mission needs to run through a few more drills, and H-Kay needs a final tune-up, and…"

With an understanding nod, Carth waves his companion away. "It's fine," he states, though there's a hint of disappointment in his voice. "Go, do what you need to."

Climbing to his feet, Vann pauses to study the pilot. "Are you sure?"

"Yes!" Carth forces out a laugh, though the sound is somewhat strained. "Just, before you go, can you answer something for me?" His tone becomes more pointed. "And answer it truthfully?"

Nodding, Vann's voice is hesitant as he agrees, "Yeah, of course."

Eyes narrowing, Carth watches his companion closely as he asks, "How long have you wanted to do that? To kiss me?"

Memories race through Vann's mind, from the moment that he met the pilot on a dusty little planet towards the edges of the Outer Rim, to the moment that he was sure the other man was going to die right in front of him. The various images and emotions all begin to blur into one, infused with less raw anger than most of his other recollections. But try as he might, he can't pinpoint a single moment when comradery became a deeper affection. "I'm not really sure," he admits candidly. "A while, maybe? Why? It's not like you were complaining…"

"I'm not!" Carth hurriedly assures the other man. "I was just… wondering." He blinks and then sighs wistfully, expression growing distracted. "We can talk more once you get Dustil back and we find that map."

Gradually moving towards the doorway, Vann arches a brow at his companion. "That's remarkably optimistic of you."

Carth shrugs a little, a half-smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "Up until now, my life's been about survival and vengeance. It kept me going, but it wasn't really living. But now I know my son is alive. And that you…" He trails off, waving the mercenary towards the doorway. "Well, I'm just glad that I can finally imagine having a future."

"Yeah. The future…" Unable to summon much positivity towards what tomorrow might bring, Vann forces a grin. "Well, at least your life won't be boring."

"I can honestly say that I haven't been bored since the moment I met you," Carth admits. "Now go help Mission."

"I'm going, I'm going!" Vann grumbles good-naturedly.

As the mercenary begins to slip through the doorway, Carth calls out, "I, uh, don't know if this is appropriate for me to say, but… May the Force be with you?"

"Oh, I'm strong with the Force," Vann shoots back over his shoulder as he exits the cargo hold. "It's everything else that's apparently out to get me."

Chapter End Notes

1. I'm not sure that Vann's plan to make Mission seem Force-sensitive while
simultaneously hiding himself is 100% possible. But Luke was able to orchestrate a

crazy escape plan from Jabba and Obi-Wan was able to hide from Vader for 19 years,
so I'd argue this strategy isn't too far outside the realm of possibilities.

2. As an order of ascetic battle monks, I don't imagine Jedi (or former Jedi) are very

suave in romantic situations. Anakin's fumbling flirtations with Padme and Obi-Wan's

"I debate with you because I love you" interactions with Satine are the two canonical

examples. Also, let's be honest, the canon KOTOR dialogue options aren't much

better.

3. I REALLY debated how to handle the last conversation since it sets the mood for

part of the Korriban arc. This was the result of writing out multiple dialogue options

and then choosing the one that flowed the best. If it's not the option you would have

chosen, feel free to read a different story.

4. Happy Pride Month! To those in the LGBTQIA community - Please remember that

you are valid, you are worthy, and you are loved.

Want updates as I write? Follow me on Twitter: ergo_maria

Asks are now open on Tumblr via username: ergomaria
"I'm gonna be okay. I'm smart and I've got a kick-ass lightsaber. I've got this!" Mission mutters to herself as she strides confidently along the dusty path between Dreshdae and what the crew presumes is Malak's academy. The various smugglers and merchants they spoke with were reluctant to give much information about the enormous, pyramid-like structure jutting out of the jagged rock formations. But from what little information could be gleaned, they gathered that most individuals who enter the building are older children or teenagers accompanied by Republic officials.

Vann briefly considers telling the Twi'lek to stop talking to herself, but he doesn't want to compromise his cover. Barely able to tuck himself into the shadows cast by the various rocky outcroppings, he's relying heavily on his camouflage through the Force to keep him hidden from prying eyes. Glancing over at HK-47 he notes that the droid is on high alert, glowing eyes methodically scanning the area as he clutches a blaster rifle to his scuffed chest.

As the tall, stone roof of the academy looms closer, Mission clears her throat and adjusts the hood of her black cloak to cast a deeper shadow over her face. While it creates a more ominous appearance, Vann suspects that the teen is merely attempting to keep the harsh sun out of her eyes. Though the noonday heat is relatively mild, it feels more brutal thanks to the arid landscape.

"Query," HK-47 announces suddenly. "When we arrive at this building, should I kill as many meatbags as I can find? I'm sure this will create an intimidating first impression."

"No!" Mission squeals in horror, blinking at the droid in astonishment. "You're not killing anyone! What if one of the first people we see is Carth's son?"

"Statement: If this son were to die, it would save us the trouble of having to rescue him," HK-47 poses hopefully.

With a warning glare, Mission shakes her head. "No. No killing anyone unless there's absolutely, positively are no other options. Got it? Geeze H-Kay, remember your orders!"

"Acknowledgement: Of course, small meatbag." The droid sighs mechanically. "Whatever you say."

Nodding in satisfaction, Mission continues her trek into the shadow of the towering building. But the closer she gets to the massive front door, the more her steps begin to slow with obvious trepidation. Fear swirls cold and thick around her, though it's not enough to obfuscate her sense of
awe. When she's only a meter or so away from the imposing entrance she pauses, craning her neck back as she takes in the scope of the enormous stone structure. "Wow," she finally breathes. "That's, uh, that's pretty big."

Trying to focus on whatever positive emotions he can muster, Vann prepares to send a burst of encouragement to the teen, only to remember that she's not Force-sensitive enough to feel it. Unable to do anything to help the Twi'lek, he feels impotent as he lurks behind a nearby rock formation. The remains of his bond with Bastila are still a raw wound in his mind, though he's simultaneously relieved that he can't sense the Padawan's presence anywhere in the vicinity. He's still expecting a trap to spring at any moment, but if the Supreme Commander and his loyal apprentice aren't directly involved there might be a chance for an escape.

"Statement," HK-47 says with obvious frustration when Mission remains rooted in place for several more moments. "You need to approach the door in order to enter the building."

"I know!" the Twi'lek snaps back. "I'm just…"

The rest of Mission's words are muffled as the massive entryway grinds open with a thunderous groan, the heavy stone sliding across the well-worn tracks carved into the rocky ground. The teen immediately covers her ears, wincing even as the sound begins to fade. Eventually, the door slides out of sight, revealing a corridor obscured by shadows and darkness. The sheer scope of the space makes it easy to miss the lone figure skulking in the doorway, her blonde hair and pale skin the only visible points of color. She appears to be a Human teenager, not much older than the Twi'lek, clothed in black robes that are almost identical to those of a Jedi Padawan. However, the dark color makes her seem far more sinister, an effect emphasized by the dark Force energy that flows cold and threatening around her body.

"Who are you?" the woman sneers. "And why are you here? I should kill you right now for trespassing."

"My name is Mission," the Twi'lek offers as she stares down the Human. "And I'm here for training." They agreed early on that fake names would only unnecessarily complicate matters, and the last thing this plan needed was more complications.

The woman laughs at this response, a cruel sound. "And just what makes you think that we train anyone here?"

"Query: Would you like me to shoot this meatbag for her mockery?" HK-47 asks, eyes shining just a little brighter.

"No, H-Kay," Mission orders the droid. "I can handle this myself." Turning back to the Human, she narrows her eyes. "I'm not an idiot, you know. Word gets around about a place like this! I know this is an academy for people with Force powers. But it's not controlled by the Jedi."

Snorting in contempt, the Human points accusingly at the Twi'lek. "Don't tell me that you're another Jedi defector," she warns while rolling her eyes. "You wouldn't be the first former Jedi who thinks they have what it takes. And you'll be wrong, just like the rest of them."

"I was never a Jedi," Mission admits, which is the ironic truth. She sweeps back the side of her cloak with a dramatic flourish, revealing the gleaming hilt of Vann's lightsaber resting against her hip. "Even so, I'm pretty sure I can handle whatever you throw at me."

"Huh." The Human scoffs at this, canting her head to the side. "We'll see about that." An instant later she jerks her hand to the side, calling forth the hilt of her own lightsaber from within the folds
of her robes. She thumbs on the blade as she flips forward, illuminating the academy's entryway with a brilliant crimson glow. Raising her weapon, the woman prepares to land a deadly strike directly on the Twi'lek's head.

Spotting the attack before it hits, Mission drops into a crouch and rolls out of the way. It's a move that's more efficient at avoiding blaster bolts than a plasma blade, but it's still effective. Remaining pressed close to the ground, she draws her borrowed lightsaber with a swiftness honed from hours of practice. Igniting the violet blade, she inhales deeply as she moves into a defensive stance.

'Good,' Vann thinks as he watches the teen block and parry three successive slashes, all while remaining rooted in place. 'Let her get tired from attacking. You've got this.'

Teeth clenched in determination, Mission is patient as she maintains her defense, using her opponent's offensive momentum to drive the other woman back. Their blades hum and spark as she carefully deflects each strike, forcing the Human to remain in constant motion while she steadfastly holds her ground. It doesn't take long before the black-robed figure is panting hard, sweat beading on her brow beneath the harsh sun.

Sensing her advantage, Mission shifts her footwork into an offensive position, beginning to pepper her parries with additional feints and slashes. Her breathing is slightly labored, but her endurance has improved after two weeks of intensive sparring with Juhani and Jolee. A particularly brutal two handed cleave almost shatters the other woman's guard, and the violet blade burns a hole in the shoulder of her robe. Noting how close the attack came to slicing through her opponent's shoulder, Mission pauses. "I don't want to hurt you," she warns.

"Ha!" The Human barks out, lunging forward. "I knew you couldn't stomach real bloodshed!"

As she bats away the sloppily-aimed stab, Mission's gaze tracks the increasing flaws in her adversary's technique. Exhaustion and frustration are making the other woman reckless, her guard faltering and leaving large portions of her body open to attack. With a twirl of her lightsaber Mission drops her stance to lower her center of gravity, using the new position to lash out and deliver a shallow slash to the woman's unprotected right thigh. The hot plasma burns through cloth and flesh, immediately eliciting a howl of pain. Rising back up, the Twi'lek holds her blade defensively across her chest. "I said I didn't want to hurt you," she shouts. "But that doesn't mean I won't slice you apart if I have to!"

Still reeling in pain the Human stumbles backward, one hand clutching her injured leg. "So, you can use a lightsaber," she taunts. "That doesn't make you worthy of training here." For a moment, her brown eyes flash yellow and the Force energy surrounding her grows frigidly cold as she calls upon the dark side. Vann has to bite his cheek to keep from yelling out a warning to the Twi'lek, who's unable to sense the attack through the Force.

Luckily, weeks of practice have honed Mission's alertness, and she immediately realizes that a Force attack is being aimed at her. Dozens of drills have prepared her for this eventuality, and she dives to the ground just as a spark of yellowish electricity leaves the Human's fingertips. It's a weak blast, especially compared to what Vann is capable of, but it still would have stunned the Twi'lek if it hit. As the forks of energy dissipate harmlessly in the air the Human growls in frustration, her eyes once again flashing yellow as she prepares another attack.

Reaching into his pocket, Vann doesn't have to look at his commlink to know exactly which button to push. Still hidden behind a small pillar of rock jutting out of the dusty ground, he strains his ears to hear the telltale rumble from HK-47. They've perfected the volume of the Shyriiwook orders, tuning them low enough to pass for a mechanical rumble to Human ears, but loud enough to be detected by a Twi'lek's sensitive lekku, provided they know what to listen for. Mission's head-tails
twitch faintly as the command is growled out, and she automatically raises one hand towards her opponent.

On cue, Vann sends out a strong Force push, flinging the blonde woman back a meter before knocking her to the ground with a resounding crack. She utters a groan as she slams against the stone surface, her lightsaber powering down as it tumbles from her hand. Gasping in a mixture of discomfort and astonishment she looks up at the Twi'lek, eyes going wide.

"I could barely sense you in the Force," the Human admits. "I didn't think that you'd have that type of power."

"Well, I sensed you," Mission sasses back, her own lightsaber still held at the ready. "And I could tell that you're just an arrogant piece of bantha shit!"

A low, rumbling laugh comes from the entrance to the academy, followed by the sound of slow clapping. Heavy footfalls echo across the stone floor as a tall Human man steps into view, his heavily tattooed face wearing an amused grin. Custom black fiber armor clothes his impressive form, its reinforced panels only adding bulk to his muscular frame. The Force swirls around him in icy tendrils, a testament to his obvious connection to the dark side. Pausing by the teen still sprawled across the entryway, he growls, "Get up, Lashowe. And go back inside. I'm done looking at you for the rest of the day."

Wincing as she climbs to her feet, the blonde bows her head as she replies, "Yes Master Wynn. I apologize for my defea…"

"Empty promises mean nothing," a female voice purrs. "Either you prove yourself worthy next time, or you acknowledge that you are not meant to be a student here." A second figure moves into view, clothed in almost identical armor and possessing the same unsettling connection to the dark side. Her steps are light as she slips into place beside Wynn, a smirk gracing her purple lips as she tosses the tattooed end of one lekku smugly across her shoulder.

Still clutching her injured thigh, Lashowe bows her head even lower. "Of course, Master Ban. I will work harder to prove myself worthy." With a final grimace, the Human turns and limps back into the building, only pausing to snatch her lightsaber from the ground.

"That was very impressive," Wynn states, turning his attention to Mission. "I did not expect such a show of Force aptitude from one so young."

Mission tries to shrug nonchalantly as she powers down her lightsaber. "Oh, you know, some of us are just naturals."

"I doubt she can control her power," Ban scowls. "I only sensed her true potential for an instant." Leaning in closer to the younger Twi'lek, she adds, "And I could also sense her fear."

Clearly noting the unease that's steadily surrounding Mission, Wynn murmurs, "Even uncontrolled power can be harnessed in time." Turning to the tattooed Twi'lek, he smiles darkly. "After all, just look at your own training, Yuthura."

Humming in considering, Ban finally inclines her head towards the Human. "And I supposed that you find her interesting enough to take in for training?"

"I must admit, I'm intrigued." Leaning down so that his face is close to Mission's, he studies the teen for several long moments. "Tell me, child. Why have you come here? What makes you believe that you're worth our time?"
"Well," Mission begins, "I came here because the Jedi sure as hells don't want me. I've got too many 'unnecessary' emotions for them to handle." She grins at the Human, the expression helping to hide the worry that's creasing her brow. "And as for why I'm worthy, well…"

"What is that?" Raising her hand to shield her eyes, Ban peers off into the distance as a frown tugs at her lips. "It looks like we have another visitor…. Or another intruder."

Gaze shifting away from Mission, Wynn smirks cruelly. "Well, perhaps our newest potential student can handle this unexpected guest. It could be a good test of her skills."

Vann winces inwardly at the proposed plan, silently hoping that the teen will be able to incapacitate a potentially innocent person. He's watched her take down guards and swoop gang members with relative ease, but those were all situations where she or the crew were in serious danger. Being the aggressor is a role that she's unfamiliar with. He fights the urge to reach out his Force awareness and examine whoever's approaching. Wynn and Ban are stronger than their student and have a better chance of realizing that his Force presence is not coming from Mission. Without the cover of more Force signatures to help disguise their ruse, he can't risk revealing himself and putting them both in danger.

"Statement: I would be more than willing to exterminate any incoming threats," HK-47 helpfully offers. "Or at least, threats to you inferior meatbags. As a superior mechanical being, I'm unlikely to be harmed by whatever's approaching."

"Is that… yours?" Ban asks, arching a brow as she stares distastefully at the droid.

Offering the other Twi'lek an airy smile, Mission nods. "Yep, he's my bodyguard. He watches my back." Still grinning, she turns and peers over her shoulder to get a better look at whoever's moving towards the academy. Her eyes go just a little wider when she spots the approaching figure, and she subconsciously mutters, "Oh, kriffing hells, I think that's…" Catching herself just in time, she manages to smoothly finish, "My slave."

Startled by Mission's response, Vann peels his gaze away from the Force users assessing the teen and shifts his gaze into the distance. Despite the haze of the afternoon sun, he's able to spot the lone figure jogging along the trail, kicking up a cloud of dust in the process. A ripped robe and tattered tan poncho cover the individual's body, while his head and face are mostly hidden by a long gray scarf that was apparently left behind by Bastila. Even with the disguise, Vann recognizes the figure's characteristic gait and bites his cheek to suppress his groan of frustration.

"Your… slave?" Wynn asked, curiosity lacing his tone.

"Well, yeah," Mission counters, putting her hands on her hips. "I can't rely on a droid like H-Kay to do everything for me, now can I?"

"Mockery: No, of course not. Obviously, a superbly constructed droid such as myself is fully unsuited for any number of tasks designed by your slushy, organic mind," HK-47 complains.

Jerking a thumb towards the droid, Mission lowers her voice to a conspiratorial whisper as she hisses, "See what I mean?"

Both Wynn and Ban share a look of begrudging agreement just as the 'slave' skids to a graceless halt a few meters away. It's fairly obvious that his plan didn't go much beyond this point, and he lingers awkwardly at the very edge of the gathered group.

Thinking fast, Mission snaps her fingers and scolds, "You, slave! You're late!"
"Uh..." Carth stammers eloquently, "I'm sorry. I mean... I'm sorry Master."

Vann is almost positive that his teeth are audibly grinding at this point, and it takes all his willpower not to reveal himself for the sole purpose of slapping the pilot upside his head for his stupidity.

"You better apologize!" Mission continues, falling into this new ruse with visible glee. "Now get over here and be quiet. I'm having a conversation."

Somehow, Carth manages not to roll his eyes or laugh at the absurdity of the situation. It's most likely because he's still winded from the long jog from Dreshdae, assuming he broke away from the crew while they were performing their assigned task of canvassing the colony. Ducking his head in a good approximation of meekness, he shuffles over to Mission and stands just behind her right shoulder, eyes downcast as he murmurs, "Sorry, Master. It, uh, won't happen again."

"It better not." Nodding haughtily, Mission pauses for a moment before driving her elbow sharply back, managing to catch the pilot in the gut. He yelps in response, more from surprise than any real discomfort, but he still doubles partially over while clutching his stomach. Wynn and Ban nod to each other as they watch the teen 'discipline' her slave, something akin to approval passing between them.

"Perhaps it would be best if we continue this conversation inside," Wynn offers magnanimously. "Unless you have any other individuals that you have to wait for?"

"Nah." Mission shakes her head, smiling sweetly. "So... does this mean that you'll train me?"

"It means that we'll continue the conversation," Ban explains, tone harsh. "That's more than we usually do for those who show up unannounced at our doorstep."

"Right. Well... okay then!" Mission swallows down a smile, gesturing to the entryway. "After you!" As the dark Force users slip back into the gloomy hallway of the academy, she reaches out and grasps Carth by the front of his poncho, dragging him along as she scolds, "Come on, before you get in more trouble."

"Yes Master," the pilot responds dutifully, allowing himself to be pulled along behind the teen. Less than a meter away, HK-47 brings up the rear of their little party, his blaster rifle still held at the ready.

As his companions disappear into the dark corridors of Malak's academy Vann cautiously follows in their wake, doing his best to remain hidden in the shadows. The moment he manages to slink past the entryway he sighs in relief, even as a deluge of dark Force energy crests over him like a tidal wave. Its coldness is overwhelming, temporarily knocking the breath from his lungs, and for an instant, he's convinced that Malak is waiting for him just around the next corner. Tensing, his hand hovers over the hilt of his lightsaber, ready to draw the weapon at a moment's notice. But as he regains his bearings, he realizes that the darkness within the building lacks the sheer force of Malak's presence. This is a power older and more primal than what his former friend commands.

When the group reaches the middle of the long hallway, he hears the thunderous groan of the door sliding ominously shut, sealing Vann and his allies within the academy walls.

* * *

"You really just showed up here with a slave and a 'saber, and Master Wynn accepted you as a pupil?" One of the academy students, whose name is something like Nickel or Mekel, is watching
Mission incredulously. There's a small cluster of curious onlookers gathered around the newest recruit, their reactions equal parts fascination and suspicion.

"Oh, well, that's the simplified version of what happened." Mission preens at the attention, even as her shrewd gaze scans the faces of the gathered students. They're almost all Human and most are roughly her age, which will make finding Dustil a bit of a challenge. Grinning at a blonde figure lurking towards the back of the crowd, the Twi'lek adds, "I also kicked Lashowe's ass while I was at it."

"A slave?" another student asks, sounding both intrigued and horrified. "Really?"

Shrugging one shoulder, Mission brushes off the mild disgust. "Plenty of slimy Human men across the galaxy keep Twi'lek women as slaves. I figured I'd return the favor, you know?" She arches a brow, daring anyone to challenge this decision. "He's preparing my quarters right now, so I wouldn't go bothering him or anything."

Technically, Carth was banished to Mission's tiny dorm along with HK-47 in a desperate, though risky, attempt to ingratiate the teen to the rest of the student population without drawing more unwanted attention. If Vann recalls the conversation correctly, the Twi'lek's actual order was, 'For Force's sake, stay here and make sure H-Kay doesn't kill anyone while I figure out what to do!' At least the pilot had the good sense to look mildly apologetic about the entire situation. The droid, of course, did not.

One twitchy individual whose name might be Kel is frowning at Mission. "I think I saw your, uh, slave when you entered the academy. But his face was covered…"

"Oh right, that!" The Twi'lek chuckles weakly before hurriedly explaining, "His, you know, his face was damaged. In the war. And it disturbs some people… I mean, it's pretty nasty stuff."

Kel immediately gulps apologetically, ducking his head as he murmurs, "Oh, that's really awful." He offers the Twi'lek a small smile, though the expression quickly fades when a few other students scoff at his sympathy.

"So, you have a lightsaber but you're… not a Jedi?" Confusion is visible on her face, a student named Thalia eyes Mission cautiously.

Gently patting the lightsaber hilt that hangs from her belt, the Twi'lek nods proudly. "Well, I was raised by the Jedi Order when I was a kid, but I never made it past the Initiate stage. They said I have too much anger for them. That I needed to control my passion." She snorts dramatically, rolling her eyes. "A bunch of old sons-of-kath-hounds if you ask me."

Curiosity still unsatisfied, Thalia's gaze now falls to the weapon resting on the other teen's hip. "So, how'd you get a 'saber, then? The Jedi don't allow you to build a weapon until you're at the last phase of your Initiate training."

Biting his bottom lip in contemplation, Vann studies the young woman for a moment. From the way that she speaks and carries herself, he'd guess that she was actually trained by the Jedi for a time. It might be something to be wary of… or the sign of a potential ally. He makes a mental note to keep an eye on the student.

"Funny story about this," Mission begins, tone somewhat more lackadaisical now that she's back to utilizing stories that were repeatedly practiced back on the Hawk. "I won it in a game of Pazaak over on Tatooine. There was a cantina fly who claimed to have killed one of the Revanchists back during the war. I always thought he was full of bantha shit, but he did have this lightsaber."
clicks her tongue, eyes growing almost nostalgic. "He used to say it was his 'last trophy from the
singular greatest battle he ever had the honor to participate in.'"

"That sounds like something a Mandalorian would say," Kel notes with a nod. "Maybe he was
telling the truth?"

Pressing a fist to his mouth to stifle a laugh, Vann struggles to steady his breathing. That last line
was coined by Canderous in one of the man's rare moments of poetic rambling. So, it literally is
something that a Mandalorian would say, at least when plied with enough ale to encourage him to
participate in 'The most idiotic plan you idiots have ever dreamed up, and that's saying something.'
With the crew's assistance, Vann and Jolee helped Mission to craft a backstory for herself and the
lightsaber. They knew she'd need to explain how a failed Jedi Initiate came to possess such a
unique and remarkable weapon. And, after trading quips and ideas for an entire afternoon, this is
what they came up with.

Heaving a wistful sigh, Mission turns to her fellow student. "I honestly don't know. He offered to
play me at Pazaak one night to win a few credits for another drink, and ended up losing pretty
badly. He gave me the 'saber to cover his debt." She frowns upon noting Kel's disapproving gasp.
"Hey, I thought about giving it back! But the moment I held it, something just felt right. I can't
explain it, but it's like the Force wanted me to have this 'saber."

"The crystal resonated with your Force signature," Thalia breaths. "That makes sense. Lashowe
told me that it's a violet blade, and those crystals tend to resonate with Force users who have strong
passions..." She must realize that she's rambling, as her eyes go wide and she presses her mouth
closed with an embarrassed grunt.

"Yeah, it resonated with me! It vibrated with my Force signature. That's exactly it!" Mission grins
at the other teen, nodding enthusiastically.

Scanning the collected group of academy residents, Vann notes that most of them seem to be
enthralled by the Twi'lek's storytelling. The few who remain uncharmed are more worrisome,
though their Force signatures don't give off any signs of true suspicion towards her carefully
executed tales. He notes that he may have created a monster when he coached the teen on how to
fib convincingly enough to seem truthful to most Force-users. While he can still feel slight traces
of dishonestly lacing her words, it comes off as an embellished story rather than an outright lie.

Tentatively, Vann reaches out the faintest tendrils of his Force awareness and examines the other
students. Darkness flows around all of them, mingling with the cold energy that fills the building.
But none of the teens are truly lost to the dark side in the same way that Malak was, their combined
presence in the Force feeling more like warm sunlight dappled across an icy field. It's an odd
contrast that reminds him a bit of Juhani's Force signature, which makes him more curious about
exactly what this academy of Malak's is teaching.

"Thalia, don't listen to a word she says." A portion of the crowd begins murmuring as a new
student enters the room, giving the mentioned classmate a gentle pat on the shoulder. "I bet she's
lying to impress the instructors." His dark hair is neatly combed out of his face, making it easier to
spot the resemblances around his eyes and jawline.

Even without an introduction, Vann would recognize this kid. His mind temporarily flashes back to
Karath's torture session, the admiral's cruel laughter ringing through his cell as the picture of a
teenager appeared on the transparisteel screen. Drawing a deep breath, he shifts his focus to the
young man, taking a moment to thank the Force that Carth is currently ensconced on a different
floor of the towering building.
"Dustil," probably-Mekel greets the other teen, clapping him on the bicep, "I see you heard about
the newest 'student.'"

"I heard some things," the young man admits with a shrug, "But I wanted to meet her for myself." His eyes narrow, and Vann can feel a cold wisp of Force awareness seep out from his body. "She doesn't feel very Force-sensitive," he says, tone doubtful.

"Search your feelings, asshole," Mission taunts, possibly emulating Jolee or Juhani. "If you're so
smart, you're probably aware that not all Force users have a strong presence. Especially if they're not currently channeling the power of the Force."

Nodding in agreement, Thalia glances nervously between the Twi'lek and the other Human. "She's right, you know," she remarks. "I've met Knights who can disguise their presence, making them almost untraceable. It's not a common ability, but…"

"But she's not purposely disguising herself," Dustil replies, his tone exasperated. "From what I heard, she just got a lucky shot against Lashowe. And let's be honest, who hasn't slipped past her guard during a duel?"

"She didn't get a lucky shot!" the blonde teen counters, taking a step forward. "She may have knocked me down, but that's because she used a Force push that was more powerful than anything you've got, Dustil!"

The two teens glare at each other for a moment, eyes narrowed as their gazes meet challengingly. Surprisingly, it's Carth's son who's the first to look away, his expression growing pensive as he turns back to Mission. "Fine," he grumbles irritably. "But I still think that some kid who shows up on the academy doorstep has a lot to prove."

"Kid?" the Twi'lek shrieks, marching up to the other teen and intruding into his personal space. "You ain't that much older than me! What makes you think that you're such a kriffing hotshot?"

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Closing his eyes, Vann barely manages to stifle a series of frustrated curses. He can feel his carefully concealed Force presence beginning to slip loose, and he hopes that it will seem as though Mission's own irritation is seeping into the Force. Clenching his teeth, he swallows the urge to berate the teen for immediately antagonizing the one person in the entire academy who she's supposed to befriend.

Obviously not expecting the Twi'lek to challenge him directly, Dustil jumps slightly as she approaches. But he quickly regains his composure as he meets the smaller figure's gaze. "For your information, I was hand-selected by Supreme Commander Malak because of my potential," he brags, though his voice falters slightly.

"Oh, big deal." Refusing to back down, Mission rolls her eyes. "Some head military muckity-muck thinks you have potential. But isn't that everyone here? We all have the potential to impress the instructors. But we also have the potential to be big kriffing disappointments."

Mekel snorts at this, side-eyeing the Twi'lek. "Well, I bet I know which one you're going to be."

For his part, Dustil seems intrigued by the other teen's words, his head tilting curiously to the side as he studies Mission for several long moments. "So, you don't think that the opinion of the Supreme Commander of the entire Republic Military means anything?"

Shrugging lightly, the Twi'lek meets the Human's gaze. "It obviously carries weight if you're here," she replies thoughtfully before casting a knowing glance towards Lashowe. "But according to
Master Ban, empty promises don't mean shit at this academy. It's your actions that count. So, you've still gotta prove yourself, same as me."

"And that thought doesn't scare you? That you'll be competing for prestige and accolades against someone who the Supreme Commander hand-selected for training?" Dustil arches a disbelieving brow, though there's a note of genuine awe in his voice. "After all, we're competing to join an elite unit directly under his command."

'Huh,' Vann thinks to himself. 'That doesn't sound good.' It seems like Malak is building a unit of Force users conditioned to be loyal to his Republic and trained in the use of the dark side. It's almost identical to what he did to... 'Oh no.' Realization gradually dawns on Vann with mounting horror. It's possible that this entire academy is designed to recreate the techniques Malak used on Bastila, but on a much larger scale. If the program is successful, the Republic will gain a supply of remarkably versatile and deceptive Force users. If one dark apprentice was enough to trick an entire crew for months, imagine what an entire unit can accomplish. "Well, shit," the mercenary mouths silently.

Mission obviously doesn't grasp the implications of the Supreme Leader's plans, as she's still looking at Dustil with a mixture of curiosity and a natural air of arrogance. "Well, sure I'm scared. But plenty of things scare me," she admits. "Like not getting enough to eat, or being harassed while I'm walking alone at night."

Leaning in closer, Carth's son stares at the Twi'lek for another few seconds. Vann feels the teen's Force awareness flow out from his body, once again sensing his fellow student's emotions. Finally, he draws a sharp breath. "You're actually telling the truth! This isn't some game you're playing..."

"There's nothing wrong with being scared," Mission explains, some of her haughtiness falling away. "But I guess I've lived a different life than most of you. I'm not ashamed to admit when I'm frightened. I've always thought that's its own kind of bravery, you know?"

"You should be afraid of us," Mekel warns. "We've learned how to use the Force in ways that scare even the Jedi!"


Almost ignoring the other students at this point, Carth's son continues to keep his focus trained on Mission. A faint smile plays at the corners of his lips, and Vann recognizes the expression as inherited from his father. "I guess that is kind of brave," he agrees. "And it's nice to finally meet someone who thinks that way." There's a faint note of fondness to his voice, free of the suspicion that he was expressing earlier.

"Yeah, I'm pretty cool like that." Mission grins proudly as she nods to the other students, chest puffing out as she hooks her thumbs into her belt.

Heaving a sigh that he didn't realize he was holding, Vann continues to watch the small cluster of teenagers. Some of the open hostility is melting away, though more than a few of the teens are still eyeing the Twi'lek cautiously. As he extends his awareness, the mercenary allows himself to be immersed in the Force currents that flow through the academy. Most of the energy is tainted with the cold malice of the dark side, though there are distinct ripples of warmth produced by each student. Dustil's presence is growing notably brighter as he watches Mission, a twinkle of admiration alighting in his eyes. Apparently 'drawn to troublemakers' is a genetic trait, and right now it's working in their favor.

"You said you were on Tatooine?" Thalia asks. "What was it like?"
"Oh, it was kri... boring!" Mission exclaims with a dismissive wave of her hand. "If there's a bright center to the galaxy, Tatooine is the planet furthest from it."

A few of the students cluster closer, listening raptly as the Twi'lek begins to regale them with an extremely exaggerated version of the trouble that she and Juhani encountered on the desert planet. Dustil remains towards the middle of the crowd, but he chuckles the hardest at each one of her jokes. It's surreal to see these teenagers chatting and laughing like normal children, and for a moment Vann almost forgets that they're being trained to follow in Bastila's footsteps.

'Was this what it was like for you?' Vann wonders, sending his thoughts into the frayed remains of the Force bond. 'Or were you all alone? Is that why you fell so easily?' Closing his eyes, he releases two final words into the Force. 'I'm sorry…'

*  *  *

The gloom within Malak's academy is an ever-present feature thanks to the complete lack of windows and the fact that most of the occupied space is underground. But at night the ominous shadows become oppressive, looming like a tangible presence and smothering even the faintest traces of lingering light. They meld with the frigid atmosphere created by the profusion of dark energy that infuses the building, making the air feel even colder and more malicious. The sensation sinks into Vann's body, seeping through his flesh and soaking through to his very marrow. He knows that he should find the constant darkness disquieting, but the sensation has quickly become rather soothing. A fact that's worrisome in its own way.

Vann has time to consider all of this as he sits silently in Mission's tiny dormitory room, seemingly the only being awake in the entire massive building. The Twi'lek is currently asleep in the room's only bed, sprawled across the thin mattress with her limbs askew. She's snoring softly, apparently unaffected by her new environment and its strong connection to the dark side. Watching over her slumber is HK-47, his yellow eyes dimmed to the barest minimum of light he can emit as he rests in low power mode between the foot of the bed and the door. Despite his seeming inattentiveness, he has his rifle aimed at the entrance should any unwanted visitors make an appearance.

Still playing the part of the dutiful slave, Carth is curled up on the floor beside the bed, bundled in a spare blanket that he was 'graciously' allowed. His sleep is less peaceful than the teen's, punctuated by tossing and incoherent muttering. While Vann would like to attribute the pilot's restlessness to the emotional turmoil of recent events or his proximity to his long-lost son, the mercenary has a feeling that the poor night's rest is actually caused by the remarkably uncomfortable floor.

Slotted into the corner furthest from the door, Vann has spent the last few hours slipping in and out of something that passes for meditation. While he should be reflecting on his emotions and current place in the galaxy, he's chosen to obsessively stew over the multitude of ways that this careful plan can go horribly wrong, thanks in part to Carth's inability to follow simple instructions. Unfortunately, even the frigid edge of his familiar irritation isn't enough to fend off the exhaustion that's threatening to overtake him. His head begins to dip, eyes drifting shut despite his best efforts. It's only through sheer tenacity that he manages to jerk himself from the clutches of sleep, silently mouthing 'dammit!' as he blinks awake.

Sighing, Vann sits straighter as he reaches down and rotates his belt, enabling him to access a small pouch that was previously hidden against the small of his back just beneath the hem of his jacket. The contents were prepared by Canderous before the Hawk landed on Korriban, and while they aren't illicit, the Mandalorian was warned not to tell the rest of the crew about this cache. Opening the pouch, the mercenary retrieves one of the many small hyposprays contained within.
He maneuvers the item until the tip is held against one of the large veins in his arm, applying pressure until the needle depresses into his flesh and injects a dose of adrenal stimulants directly into his bloodstream.

It takes a moment for the effects of the drug to hit, but when they do it's like a freighter slamming into Vann's chest. His heart immediately starts to hammer dangerously fast beneath his sternum, the tattoo of the beat pounding in his ears and reverberating through his entire body. As his breath comes in short, panicked gasps, he feels like he can't suck in enough oxygen to fill his lungs. Every muscle in his body spasms and twitches, none of them in unison, and for a terrifying instant, it feels like he's lost all control of his limbs.

It takes a relative eternity for the initial effects of the stimulant to run their course, leaving Vann gasping and shaking in their wake. Even though it no longer feels like his heart is going to explode through his ribcage, it's still beating unnaturally fast. The tachycardia combined with the surge of adrenaline flooding his system guarantees that he won't be falling asleep anytime soon, which is precisely the point. He needs to be awake to maintain his Force camouflage, something he realized during the early planning stages of this mission. Since he can't sleep without leaving himself and his companions utterly exposed while surrounded by enemies, he had to work with Canderous to devise this ineloquent solution.

Granted, this self-destructive course of action is entirely reliant on getting everyone out of Malak's academy before his body shuts down from either the lack of sleep or the chemical cocktail coursing through his veins. He's fairly sure that he's going to permanently harm something before this is all over, but that feels like a small price to pay. Or maybe it's an appropriate penance. Either way, he knows that a good portion of the crew would object to this plan for a variety of reasons, hence the need for secrecy.

Once Vann adjusts to the synthetic boost to his adrenal system, he begins to feel restless sitting still. His hands twitch as he shoves the expended hypospray into a pocket of his jacket, and one leg jiggles anxiously as he struggles to remain in place. Images of the various rooms within the academy suddenly flash through his mind, and he's struck with the urge to move through the building and explore it further. He now knows the layout after shadowing Mission on a tour earlier in the day, and he thinks he can safely traverse the hallways and be back before whatever passes for sunrise. But doing so would also leave the teen unattended for a few hours.

Glancing at HK-47's still form, Vann thoughtfully rakes his fingers through his hair. Thanks to his programming, the droid will remain in place and protect Mission, no matter how much he complains about the assignment. That should be enough to keep the teen safe while she sleeps. 'It's a risk worth taking,' he thinks to himself as he rises jerkily to his feet. Still trembling from the adrenal stimulant, he makes his way over to the droid and prepares to whisper a few additional commands, mainly to prevent being shot when he tries to reenter the room. Just as he's opening his mouth, there's a rustling sound from the floor.

Startling himself awake, Carth shifts awkwardly beneath his blanket before rolling over and slowly sitting up. He blearily rubs his knuckles across his eyes, clearing his throat and then muzzily whispering, "Hey Vann, are you in here?" He squints as he peers around the darkened room.

The mercenary doesn't respond, partially to preserve his cover and partially because he's still furious at the other man for potentially ruining weeks of planning.

"Alright, I'm going to assume that you're in here," Carth continues, voice hushed. "Or hells, maybe I'm just talking to myself. But if you are in here, please listen to me…"

Vann briefly considers leaving the room just to spite the pilot, but the other man's imploring tone
causes him to pause. Rolling his eyes, he shifts restlessly.

"Look, I feel a little stupid sitting here and talking to the air," Carth admits, expression sheepish. "So, if you could become visible for a minute, that would make things a lot easier…"

Scoffing silently, Vann crosses his arms over his chest.

Frowning, Carth turns in place as he searches for any signs of the mercenary. When he doesn't spot any, he sighs. "Alright, I assume that you're staying hidden because you're angry. And, for once, that's completely justified. I definitely owe you an apology for almost ruining everything today. But just let me explain!"

Body growing impatient, Vann clasps his hands together as he stares at the pilot, anxiously awaiting what had better be one hells of an amazing explanation.

"Here it goes… And I really hope that you're in here." Gaze shifting towards the bed, Carth studies Mission's sleeping form as he gives her an apologetic smile. "I know this might be hard to believe, but I only planned to look around and try to catch a glimpse of Dustil." His voice catches in his throat as he says his son's name, but he presses on. "I didn't realize that you'd still be outside the academy by the time I got here. I honestly thought that I could just run over, look around, and get back to Dreshdae before anyone noticed I was gone."

Biting his tongue to hold back a scathing retort, Vann tastes blood as he fights the urge to scream at the pilot for his lack of forethought. The situation is still infuriating, even if the other man's idiotic decisions were made with the best of intentions.

Sitting up straighter, Carth rubs a tired hand over his face. "I'm sorry, okay? I admit that I made a stupid decision that almost got you caught. There's nothing else I can say," He pauses, struggling to keep his voice hushed. "I never meant to put you and Mission in danger. You know that I wouldn't willingly do that to either of you. And I meant everything that I said back on the Hawk, and everything that I did…"

Mission makes an annoyed smacking sound as she tosses restlessly on the bed, her snores momentarily ceasing as she burrows her head further into the pillow. While she's not awake, it looks like the situation could change at any moment. And Vann does not want to have the rest of this conversation in front of the teen. Gritting his teeth, he slinks over to where the pilot is curled up on the hard stone floor and drops into a crouch right at eye level. Reaching out, he clamps his hand over his companion's mouth, simultaneously silencing the other man and causing the stealth field and his camouflage to fail. Instantly shimmering back into view, Vann holds back the pilot's surprised yelp with his palm as he raises an index finger to his lips, glaring darkly.

Swallowing hard Carth exhales slowly, his breath hot against the mercenary's skin. Recognizing the gesture for quiet, he nods once in acknowledgment and then patiently waits for the hand to drop away from his mouth. Once he's free to speak, he murmurs, "Oh thank the Force that you're actually in here." His shoulders sag with visible relief. "I was beginning to think that I really was talking to myself, and I was starting to feel really stupid…"

"You are really stupid," Vann clarifies. "Just for different reasons."

Expression remorseful, Carth asks, "You heard my apology, right?"

"Yeah," Vann confirms. "But I'm still trying to decide if I'm going to accept it." Climbing back to his feet, he jams his twitching hands into his pockets and nods towards the door. "I was going to take a look around. We can finish this discussion out there."
Brows furrowing with worry, Carth frowns at the entryway. "Do you really think it's a good idea for me to leave the room?"

"Has anything you've done today been a good idea?" Vann snaps irritably.

Wilting slightly at the admonishment, Carth mutters, "Fine, I get the point!" He draws a deep breath, studying the mercenary closely. "I assume you have a plan so that I don't get caught and somehow make this situation even worse?"

Pursing his lips, Vann tries to focus his racing mind for a few moments as he formulates a hasty solution. "Yeah, sure," he finally says, reaching down to unfasten the stealth unit from his waist. He removes it with a flick of his wrist before offering it to the pilot. "Put that on," he orders, not waiting for a response before he moves to retrieve Mission's long black cloak from where it's folded on top of a small footlocker. Shaking out the wrinkles, he tosses the dark material over his shoulders and secures the clasp at his throat before yanking the hood low over his face so that his features are cast in shadow. Without a word Carth clips the stealth field generator into place, stepping into the shadows to help him disappear from sight.

Realizing that they're as prepared as possible, Vann walks up to HK-47 and whispers a new set of commands. "Don't respond, but we're going to scout the building. It's your job to protect Mission until we return. If we're not back by the time everyone else is up, get Mission out of here and send word to the Hawk asking for assistance." The droid's eyes glow just a little brighter in acknowledgment. As an afterthought, the mercenary adds, "I'll comm you before we enter the room, so for the love of the Force please don't shoot us."

There's no response to this final order, though Vann didn't expect one. With a sigh, he moves to the door and presses the access panel. Most of the academy uses antiquated locking mechanisms that rely on analog gears and levers rather than anything electronic. He hopes this means the instructors can't monitor the comings and goings of every room in the building, though he has his doubts. As the door slides open with a faint grinding sound, he wraps the cloak tighter around his body. Drawing a breath to steel himself he steps out into the corridor, extending his Force awareness just enough to sense Carth right behind him. Once they're both in the hallway he depresses the opposite door panel, shutting Mission safely inside her room.

Barely taking the time to get his bearings, Vann speeds down the corridor that leads away from the dormitories, hoping that he looks like just another student on his way to the communal 'fresher in the middle of the night. Even though he keeps his head down, every muscle in his body is tense and ready for a fight, prepared for the ambush that he's expecting at any moment. But no attack comes, even as he moves past the modest residential quarters and into the academy proper. As he moves down another long hallway he tries to recall the layout of the building, including which areas are least likely to be occupied after school hours.

Inspiration strikes and he whips around a corner, reaction time temporarily improved by the stimulants still coursing through his system. His pace doesn't slow as he descends the spiraling ramp that leads to a lower level, practically jogging up to a set of stone doors that leads into one of the academy's training arenas. During the day, the room is alive with activity as students spar with each other and instructors shout advice and corrections to their pupils. But classes have long since dismissed for the evening, and this wing of the building has grown eerily silent.

Without missing a beat, Vann's hand darts out and slaps the stone panel that controls the doors, causing gears to whir and rasp as the entrance is revealed. He pauses for a moment, extending his Force awareness to probe within the darkened room in search of any other living creatures who might be out past curfew. When nothing resonates through the Force he slips into the room,
keeping his back pressed against the closest wall as his eyes struggle to pierce the cloying
darkness. After a moment of failing to make out any distinct shapes within the gloom, he
reluctantly draws his lightsaber and ignites the blade, using the violet glow to illuminate his
immediate vicinity.

The second the weapon sizzles to life the inner entryway panel is depressed, causing the doors to
scrape shut with surprising swiftness. Vann immediately whirls towards the panel, teeth bared as
he thrusts the tip of his lightsaber towards his unseen enemy. The white-hot plasma hums as it
whizzes through the air, coming to rest a few centimeters from Carth's nose. The pilot gasps as he
moves closer to the wall, awkwardly holding up both hands to show that he's unarmed. "Uh," he
breathes, "Do you really think it's a good idea to be flashing that thing around?"

Sighing in exasperation, Vann feels a fresh rush of adrenaline flow through his veins as he lowers
his 'saber. "Well, I don't have a flashlight on me," he finally hisses. "Do you?" His companion's
chagrined grimace is enough of an answer. Still holding his weapon between them, he snaps, "This
is what we've got, so I'm going to use it."

"Okay, fine!" Carth continues to hover near the doors, exhaling in relief when the lightsaber moves
away from his face. After taking a moment to adjust to the pitch-blackness atmosphere he
cautiously peers around, brows furrowing in confusion. "Um, where exactly are we?"

"A training arena," Vann explains. "And one of the few rooms with a computer terminal that has
administrative access. I heard about it earlier when I was on a tour with Mission." Slowly moving
his lightsaber from side to side in front of him, he begins to make his way across the open floor.

Nodding, Carth cautiously follows his companion's path. "It seems like you have a goal in mind.
Care to share it with me?"

The violet glow catches the metallic edge of the computer's durasteel frame, and Vann hurries
towards it. "Dustil's records..." he mutters, trailing off as he hears a gasp from behind. Glancing
over his shoulder, he explains. "I have some questions after seeing him today."

A wave of emotions flows forth from Carth, surrounding him in a mixture of bright hope and ice-
cold fear. "You... saw Dustil?" he asks, voice quivering with anticipation. "Was he okay? Did he
look hurt? What did he say?"

Holding up his free hand, Vann pauses in front of the terminal. "Slow down," he insists, sighing
amusedly. "Mission met him while she was trying to get a feel for the other students. He seemed
fine, all things considered. I mean, he's physically whole." Blinking, he offers his lightsaber to the
other man. "Hold this over the keyboard while I type. And try not to cut off any limbs while you're
at it."

Visibly befuddled, Carth gingerly accepts the plasma weapon and proceeds to hold it at arm's
length. Turning away from the glowing blade, his tone is hesitant as he asks, "But mentally? Is
Dustil a wreck? Is he scared, or..."

"He's a teenager," Vann summarizes with a wry grin, rolling his eyes at the pilot's delicate handling
of the lightsaber. "He's a little too arrogant and sure of himself, but he's not as much of an asshole
as some of these kids. Which is why I'm curious." Turning to the computer, he quickly types in a
few basic commands to access the interface. Earlier he learned that the instructors can use the
system to update student records, encouragement for Mission to impress any potential onlookers
during training sessions. Luckily, that means that information on all the academy's students should
be accessible from this terminal.
"Curious about what?" Carth demands. "Is something wrong? If it is, I deserve to know!"

Still typing in commands, Vann frowns as he realizes how poor his slicing skills are. He'd need at least two dozen computer spikes to access the administrative portions of this system and even then, he's not sure he'd be able to bypass all the security measures. "Nothing is wrong," he hastily informs his companion. "I'm just curious about how well he's doing in here. I sensed some darkness in him, but there's also a lot of good right along with it. And that makes me wonder…"

"See, this is how I know you really are Revan," Carth grumbles. "Sometimes you're as cryptic as the rest of the Jedi. So how about a straight answer for…"

"Carth, shut up for a second." Vann feels his mouth go dry as a new message appears on the screen, reading, 'VOICE COMMAND FOR ACCOUNT 'REVAN' DOES NOT MATCH RECORDS. PLEASE TRY AGAIN.'

Fingers frozen on the keyboard, Vann stares at the administrative login screen for several long seconds as a cold chill of realization runs down his spine. Carth is also watching in surprise, mouth open as his gaze shifts between the mercenary and the terminal. Both men slowly turn and share a disbelieving look, tension hovering between them as they simultaneously shift their focus back to the computer. It's another moment before Vann tentatively clears his throat, voice sounding weaker than expected as he blurts out, "Revan!"

The computer hangs a bit before the message changes again, this time reading, 'VOICE COMMAND CONFIRMED. WELCOME, REVAN. PLEASE ENTER YOUR THUMBPRINT TO ACCESS RESTRICTED FILES.'

Body feeling numb from shock, Vann woodenly presses his thumb to the small pad on the lower right corner of the keyboard. There's a small burst of light as the system reads his print, and then a new set of options appears on the screen. He quickly scans them, immediately locating the choice to access student records. "Huh," he mutters as he resumes typing.

"So, you were here before?" Carth's tone is hushed as he speaks, as though he's afraid of being overheard by the computer.

Turning to glare at his companion, Vann hisses, "I don't remember. But somehow I am in this kriffing system with full administrative privileges."

"That's…"

"Lucky," Vann finishes, unwilling to acknowledge any other possibilities. "Because I wouldn't have access to this information otherwise." Despite the temptation to access Mission's records, he enters Dustil's name into the system. This produces years' worth of reports and other files, all organized by date but still unwieldy due to their sheer volume. He grits his teeth in frustration. "Well, this could take a while."

Peering over the mercenary's shoulder, Carth scans the documents as they appear. "What are you looking for? And what did you mean when you said that you sensed darkness in my son?"

"Malak is training the students here to use the dark side of the Force, so all of them have at least a little darkness. Just like billions of other sentient creatures throughout the galaxy." Scrolling past the older files, Vann slows down when he comes to a series of reports made within the last few months. "The fact that any of these kids still have some light left is a good sign. The dark side… it's seductive."
"You would know," Carth accuses irritably.

"Yeah, I would." Turning to give the other man a pointed look, Vann feels a fresh stab of guilt with this admission.

Carth must notice the remorse in his companion's expression because his ire quickly melts away, his voice growing apologetic. "I'm sorry, that was a dumb thing to say. It's just... there's a lot going on right now and..." His gaze darts downward, noting the way the mercenary's hands are trembling. "Geeze, I didn't mean it like that!"

Unwilling to admit that the shaking is actually caused by the chemicals still flooding his system, Vann shrugs lightly. "It's not you," he reassures the other man. "It's just... shock. Another thing from my past that's coming back when I least expect it."

"I guess both of our pasts are catching up to us," Carth states, exhaling heavily. His attention turns back to the screen, eyes scanning the displayed documents without seeming to see them.

The pair lapses into companionable silence as Vann resumes reading through Dustil's records, mentally noting anything of interest. It's several long minutes before he's gathered enough information to make any comments. "I don't know if this is good news or bad news, but your son's a top student. He's strong with the Force, takes instruction well, and is a skilled duelist. Seems he favors Form Two, which is impressive."

"What does any of that mean?" Carth asks, obviously bewildered. "I mean, besides 'takes instruction well.' Which is kind of a family trait."

"Really? Could have fooled me," Vann chuckles, arching a brow. "And Form Two is Makashi, which focuses on dueling other opponents with a lightsaber. It's elegant, though not always practical." He frowns a little, mentally replaying what he's just said. "And before you ask how I know that, I have no kriffing clue."

"So, Dustil is good at... whatever Malak is teaching him? I don't know if I should be proud or horrified." Carth shudders, shaking his head.

"I think you're going to be proud..." Vann's frown deepens as he rereads the file he has open, quickly summarizing its contents. "His instructors are all pleased with his skill, but they're worried about his emotional development. Apparently, he's showing a little too much empathy for their liking."

Eyes going wide, Carth begins to nod enthusiastically. "That's great! Right?"

"Dustil is popular with some of the other promising students because he's talented. Which is something I noticed earlier." Vann scrolls through the document, silently comparing what he's reading to what he witnessed previously in the day. "But he also shows compassion for his less talented peers, which is a big no-no around here."

"I'm actually relieved," Carth breathes, lips curling into a thin smile. "We tried to raise him to treat everyone with respect, and I guess that sunk in."

"It's great that Dustil's a decent person," Vann agrees, even as his voice grows concerned. "But it's also bad because some of his instructors want to push him. They want to make him, umm..." Scanning through the last of the records, he hums quietly as he searches for the information he needs. "Here it is. They want him to take his final test in the next few weeks."

Reading the files for himself, a note of panic enters Carth's tone. "And what is this final test? I
"Hold on, let me see if I can find some more information." Elbowing the pilot out of his way while being careful to avoid the lightsaber still being used for illumination, Vann closes out of Dustil's records and goes back to the main menu. After a few minutes of searching, he manages to uncover a rough outline of the academy's curriculum. It doesn't get into specifics for most topics, though it does list a series of challenges that students must undergo. Some of them are physical, while others are clearly designed to test the students' mental fortitude. The last item on the list simply reads 'Sith Trial.'

"What the kriffing hells is a 'Sith Trial'?" Carth wonders angrily, though his words sound muted and far away as the mercenary's perception begins to shift and warp. His current surroundings quickly fade away, only to be replaced by scenes from his previous life.

The long, shadowy corridor flickers back into existence, its massive pillars soaring upwards as the dark archways loom on all sides. Vann once again finds himself facing down Malak, forced to relive those final, painful moments as Revan. But this time his perception shifts, gaze focusing not on his adversary but on a hooded figure seated at the very end of the hallway, his unmoving form perched upon a towering throne. Cold, malicious energy radiates from this seat of dominance, unlike anything Revan has felt before or since. It captivates him with its whispers of power as the dark side washes over him in a frigid tidal wave of unrepentant fury. 'Sith,' the memory hisses, low and menacing, the word seeming to come from the ominous figure even though no sounds are uttered. Suddenly, he *knows* that this battle is his final test, and will determine his future worth. In this moment, his very fate hangs in the balance…

Gasping, Vann snaps out of his memories and back into reality, his heart hammering impossibly fast within his chest and his throat constricting as he struggles to breathe. The stimulants in his systems are only compounding the issue, and he feels his eyes grow wide with shock as tremors race through his entire body. He barely notices the hand gripping his bicep, strong fingers holding him steady as he sways on his feet.

"What the hells was that?" Carth is carefully studying his companion, using the violet glow of the lightsaber to note the other man's shaking limbs and dilated pupils. "I've seen you zone out before, but nothing like this. You look like you're about a second away from a heart attack!"

"Vision…" Vann stammers almost incoherently. "I had… I saw…"

"Woah, slow down. Take a breath." Carth's tone remains impressively calm as he continues to watch his friend, drawing a few slow breaths of his own to try and set the pace. "Calm down before you try to talk."

The pilot's words are surprisingly soothing, and Vann leans into the other man's touch as he finally manages to draw a few sufficient gulps of air. He still refuses to explain that this reaction is chemically-induced, settling for blaming it all on the trauma of his past mistakes. "I saw the same vision I had back on the Leviathan," he gasps. "But this time, there was more."

"More? Okay, that's good." Lips twisting into a faint frown, Carth asks, "That's got to help us, right?"

"Maybe? I'm not sure." Swallowing the dryness in his throat, Vann licks his lips as he continues. "Revan… I… There was a Sith. Not this type of Sith." He makes a broad gesture to the walls of the academy. "A *true* Sith… Their leader? Anyway…"

"You're not making sense." Carth struggles to meet the other man's eyes, fingers tightening their
grip. "Just breathe."

"I wouldn't be able to talk if I wasn't breathing!" Vann snarls, growing increasingly frustrated with his own muddled thoughts and memories. "I just…" Nostrils flaring as he draws a breath, he exhales slowly before speaking. "I think the Sith I found gave Revan, err… me some sort of test."

Blinking back his surprise, Carth's hand drops away from the mercenary's arm. "You… what?"

Shaking his head to gather his composure, he moves the lightsaber a little closer so that it illuminates both men with a bright violet cast. "What type of test? How bad was it?"

"I had to fight against my one last positive attachment. To let my affection turn to hatred."

Memories of the primal fury Vann felt towards Malak resurface, sending a chill of darkness straight to his core. "That's what I did when I fell. I turned against my best friend and tried to kill him, all while that Sith watched."

There's a long pause as Carth absorbs this new piece of information, his mouth opening on several occasions even as no sound comes out. When he finally finds his voice, his words are flat. "And that's what they want to do to my son?"

"I assume so? Malak studied the same dark philosophies that I did, and he met the same Force-forsaken creature out in unknown space." Vann points to the curriculum still displayed on the screen. "He probably designed his teaching methods around all of that. I mean, it worked well the first time, so why not try it again on a larger scale?"

"The first time?" Confusion laces Carth's words.

"Bastila. I think he perfected his technique on Bastila, and now he's trying to extend it to this entire academy." Panic temporarily seizes Vann and he reaches out, grasping the scarf still draped around the pilot's neck. Pulling the other man closer he presses their faces together as he hisses, "I can't let everything I put Malak through be the reason more Force users fall!"

"We'll stop him," Carth promises impulsively. "I don't know how, but we'll find a way."

Nodding once, Vann draws a shaky breath. "We have to. We just… we have to." The rush of adrenalin is finally burning out of his system, leaving him feeling drained and empty. The exhaustion is quickly creeping back, and all he wants to do is curl up and sleep. Or inject another dose of stimulants. Untangling his fingers from his companion's scarf, he takes a few unsteady steps towards the door, only to pause and stumble back toward the computer.

"What's wrong now?" Still clutching the lightsaber, Carth shines the glow over the terminal.

"I need to erase this user history log," Vann explains as he hurriedly types in a fresh set of commands. "If they see that Revan accessed student files, they're going to get suspicious."

Glancing at the screen, Carth worringly asks, "Can you… do that?"

"I think so. I feel like I may have done this a lot while I was investigating the Star Maps and needed to hide my research from the Jedi." Vann's lips purse in concentration as he locates the various tracks that he needs to purge. "Which, uh, would explain where the skill set came from."

Grimacing slightly, Carth mumbles, "You're constantly full of weird surprises, aren't you?"

"Be glad that it's working in our favor, for once." Eyes glued to the screen, Vann deletes files from several registry folders as he clears any traces of his activities. His final act is to erase his account's login credentials, causing him to be automatically booted from the system. "And I'm clear," he
sighs with relief.

"Good." It's obvious from Carth's puzzled expression that he's not entirely sure what he's looking at. But he still nods in approval, offering the lightsaber back to its owner.

Accepting the weapon, Vann holds it confidently in front of him. His hand is steadier than it was earlier, but his eyelids feel heavy and his limbs are leaden. "We should get back. Maybe we can get a little more sleep before Mission has to wake-up."

"Sounds good," Carth agrees. "Oh, and don't forget to comm H-Kay before we go into the room."

"Right." Retrieving the commlink from his pocket, Vann clutches it in his free hand as he gradually makes his way towards the door. Pausing by the release panel, he nods towards the pilot's stealth field generator as he moves to adjusts his own hood. "Ready?" he asks, attempting to keep his voice steady.

Hand hovering over the stealth unit, Carth takes a step towards the mercenary, moving his lips close to the other man's ear. "We're going to save Dustil," he announces, voice strong with resolve. "And the rest of the students. We won't let Malak drag anyone else down with him." Before he disappears back into the shadows, he presses a kiss against his companion's temple.

The warmth of the gesture doesn't escape Vann, but it also doesn't chase away the doubt clouding his mind. "Time to fix yet another horrible mistake from my past," he mutters as he powers down his lightsaber, plunging the room into darkness. Swallowing hard, he slams his fist against the door panel in frustration. Back pressed against the wall, he peers out into the hallway as he extends his awareness, searching for any potential threats. But there's nothing dwelling in the expansive darkness, and he has no excuse not to make the trek back to the dorms.

The walk back is slower, punctuated by silence and the sound of his own breathing. It gives Vann plenty of time to ponder how, exactly, he's going to save Carth's son and an entire academy full of other students. But by the time he reaches Mission's room, only one thought runs through his mind on a constant loop. 'I don't know, I don't know, I don't know…'

Chapter End Notes

1. Yes, Mission references Luke's famous quote about Tatooine. It was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

2. I do have a basic knowledge of how computers work, and I realize that I'm vastly oversimplifying how to purge a user's complete history (including files accessed). However, this is also a universe where almost anyone can slice a computer with enough "spikes," so hopefully you can suspend disbelief.

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Rubbing the heel of his palm against his left eye, Vann blinks wearily as he checks his datapad for any new encrypted messages from the Ebon Hawk's crew. When he spots Jolee's latest missive, he bites back a smile as he hurriedly scans the contents for good news.

*We spoke with another contact today, but she didn't have anything new to tell us. Same as yesterday.*

*Apparently, everyone knows the same two things about the artifacts we're searching for. The first is that the valley where the items are buried is the sole property of the academy. And the second is that only a handful of instructors and students are legally allowed to excavate the tombs located there. We could dig illegally, but I wouldn't recommend it. The sites are under heavy guard day and night.*

*We'll see what else we can find. But don't hold your breath for anything better.*

- J.

Swallowing his snort of disgust Vann leans back, narrowly avoiding knocking his head against the nearby wall. This is the second message he's received in as many days reporting the same useless information. From what the crew has discovered under the guise of illicit antique dealers, the Star Map is hidden somewhere in the Valley of the Dark Lords. Which, unfortunately, is firmly within the jurisdiction of Malak's academy. While Mission has managed to ingratiate herself as a student over the past few days, she hasn't earned enough prestige to gain access to the heavily guarded tombs. And this puts the search for the map at an impasse.

Frowning, Vann studies his datapad for another moment before tucking it safely back within his jacket. He knows that it's risky to check messages from the crew in broad daylight, but he's certain that everyone else around him is too preoccupied to notice his cloaked and shielded presence. Even as he begins to mentally compose a response to Jolee, his thoughts are interrupted by the shouts of teenagers and the sharp hum of multiple lightsabers clashing in mid-air. The din is occasionally punctuated by an instructor yelling a stance correction or a note of encouragement, but the teens are mostly left to their own devices in a state of controlled chaos. At least the noise is keeping Vann awake.

Blinking back a yawn, the mercenary looks over to where Mission and Dustil are facing off, their lightsabers whirring softly even on the lowest power setting. A few of their classmates have formed
a loose ring around them, and are shouting encouragements that mostly consist of 'You show her, Dustil!' or 'Hit him where it hurts, Mission!' From the corner of his eye, Vann can see one of the instructors keeping tabs on the duel, though the curly-haired Human seems content to merely observe, an amused smirk playing on her lips.

Vann would also be smirking if he wasn't so damned tired. Three days into this convoluted situation and he hasn't gotten a moment of sleep. The stimulants from Canderous are doing their job and keeping him functional, but not without some side effects. His hands are shaking constantly and his skin is clammy to the touch, while his heart rate has become something best described as 'definitely unhealthy.' No matter how deeply he breathes he can't quite seem to catch his breath, causing him to constantly feel lightheaded. Or maybe that's just a side-effect of his drug-addled mind, which is struggling to focus on even the simplest tasks. The symptoms are becoming harder to hide, and Carth is growing increasingly suspicious.

At least the pilot is easily distracted with news of Dustil's latest escapades.

"Pay careful attention to her body language!" the instructor chides as Mission manages to score a hit on her opponent's forearm. At this setting, it's only enough to sting, but Dustil still recoils in pain as the lightsaber makes contact.

"Nice one, Mission!" Thalia calls out encouragingly. "But keep your guard up!"

Scoffing, Mekel crosses his arms over his chest. "That was a lucky hit! Dustil, you've got this."

The pair of teens squares off again, each one stepping back as they carefully size each other up. Dustil's blade work is distinctly better, evident by the way he lightly twirls the hilt of his crimson lightsaber with one hand. "Is that all you've got?" he teases, tone jovial and slightly playful.

"Oh, there's plenty more where that came from!" Mission may not be as skilled with her weapon, but her practical experience is reflected in her discipline when she doesn't allow her opponent's complex footwork and sophisticated blade twirling to break her guard.

The Twi'lek's defensive tactics pay off, as Dustil is the first to run out of patience and charge his adversary, blade humming loudly as he brings it down in a wide arc above the Twi'lek's head. But she anticipates the move, using her own weapon to block the hit and drive back her foe in a single parry. The Human grunts as he's driven backward, blinking in disbelief but not allowing himself to be slowed. Coming in from the side, he makes two powerful swipes at his opponent's torso. The first blow is carefully blocked, but the second slides past Mission's blade and lands a soft strike just beneath her armpit. She yelps at the sting, immediately drawing back warily.

"Good, Dustil," the instructor calls in approval. "Mission, watch those feet! You're tripping yourself up. You're more flexible than him, use it!"

Clapping his hands, Kel's tone is comforting as he shouts, "It's okay, Mission! Shake it off, you'll be alright."

"Get her while she's weak!" Lashowe screams over his classmate's optimism.

Gritting her teeth, Mission rolls her shoulders to loosen them, holding her blade at the ready as her eyes track her opponent's every movement. Dustil seems to mistake her caution as a retreat, and he immediately charges at her with three strong swings of his lightsaber. But the Twi'lek is ready for her opponent and easily blocks all three strikes before delivering a swift stab of her own. It catches Dustil in the left shoulder and he stumbles back, momentarily stunned. His eyes narrow and Vann can feel a thin stream of cold frustration seeping into the Force.
The instructor also notices the emotion, and it causes her to grin. "Use your anger, Dustil," she encourages the teen. "Let it flow through you."

With a growl, the Human lunges at his opponent, utilizing his height advantage to deliver a powerful overhand swing to push her back. There's little finesse to his moves as he harnesses the strength of his irritation and proceeds to hammer at the smaller Twi'lek's defenses, each blow feeding into the whirlwind of anger that swirls harsh and chilled around him. It's all Mission can do to block each successive hit, her lightsaber held defensively as she drops into a crouch. There's genuine fear in her eyes as she notes the Human's sudden ferocity, his pupils blown wide and his lips pulled into a snarl.

"Let your fear turn to strength, Mission," the instructor calls out. "Harness your emotions. Don't let them blind you."

Vann briefly debates sending out a small burst of Force energy to shove Dustil back, but he's not sure if the push will seem genuine with both of Mission's hands desperately grasping her lightsaber hilt. HK-47 is once again banished to her dorm, making it impossible to send any form of subtle signal. Erring on the side of caution he holds back his power, creeping closer to the instructor and preparing to act if needed. He sends out a fine tendril of Force awareness as he attempts to sense if the Human has any intention of interrupting this sparring session if it gets out of hand. But he's immediately distracted by a set of messages visible on the woman's datapad. Peering over her shoulder, he scans the text.

There is a growing attachment between students, one note reads. Do you recommend a course of action?

Use their petty rivalries against them if you can. Report back if that tactic is ineffective. – U. Wynn, a second message responds. This makes Vann's brow furrow, and he fights the urge to lean forward and scroll to the previous thread of the conversation.

Meanwhile, Mission tucks her slender body into a swift forward roll, easily maneuvering herself out of Dustil's range. She springs back to her feet the moment she lands, using her momentum to drive a pair of powerful swings aimed at her opponent's thigh. The first swipe makes contact, though it also alerts the other teen of her new position. He whirls angrily around and blocks the second hit, simultaneously delivering a hard kick to the Twi'lek's ribs. She grunts as the breath is knocked from her lungs, and staggering as Dustil surges forward and strikes her hard on the wrists. The burning jolt forces her fingers open and she loses her grip on her lightsaber.

There's a stunned silence as Mission's weapon powers down, the hilt rattling across the floor just as her opponent's knee drives into her gut, the blow sending her sprawling inelegantly on her backside. The Force flows icy-cold as Dustil flourishes his own weapon, chest heaving with exertion as he bares his teeth and points the tip of his crimson blade at the Twi'lek's throat.

"I give!" Mission yelps, holding up both hands in surrender. Her eyes are wide, gaze darting between the Human and the lightsaber hilt laying a meter away. She's clearly unsure if she should follow the rules of the sparring session and stay down, or if she should dive for the weapon and continue defending herself.

The Twi'lek's voice cuts through Dustil's haze of anger and his frustrations quickly ebb away, leaving him in stunned silence as he notices his classmate looking up at him in alarm. He immediately powers down his weapon, smiling sheepishly even as a flicker of horror alights in his eyes. "Umm…" he stammers awkwardly, "I… I guess I win?"

"Indeed, you do." With a sly smirk, the instructor strides up to the teens. "A bit sloppy towards the
end, Dustil, but you did a good job giving no quarter." She turns to the rest of the students. "Remember, it's important not to ease up when your enemy is at a disadvantage. Many duels have been lost because someone was foolish enough to show mercy."

"Damn," Thalia mutters under her breath, "I thought she had him!"

"Ha, not likely!" Mekel gloats at the other teen, smirking smugly. "Dustil's the best duelist in the academy. Aren't you, buddy?"

But the other Human isn't listening. Quickly clipping his lightsaber to his belt, he extends both hands to Mission with an apologetic grin. "Uh here, let me help you," he offers.

"Thanks." The Twi'lek's voice is strained as she cautiously accepts her classmate's help, her eyes searching his face for any sign of deceit. But the Human merely grasps her palms, yanking her up in one swift motion.

Once he sees that the other teen is back on her feet, Dustil's expression relaxes. Reaching down, he retrieves the fallen lightsaber hilt and offers it to her. "So, good duel?" he asks nervously.

Hurriedly snatching her weapon back, Mission nods. "Yeah," she reluctantly agrees, a thin smile tugging at her lips as she shoves the Human's shoulder. "But I'm gonna win the next one."

Dustil laughs, sounding relieved as he pretends to rub a sore spot left by the Twi'lek's palm. "Hey, careful!" he warns. "You could dislocate my arm or something!"

"Maybe next time I will!" Though she narrows her eyes, Mission's tone is all impishness as she claps a hand on the other teen's back. They both giggle at this and a few of their classmates join in, the mirth a sudden burst of light within the Force.

Vann can feel the temporary glow of warmth wash over him, though it's swiftly enveloped by the frigid demeanor of the instructor. "That was good for now," she barks, "But next time I want to see some better footwork! And tighten-up those swings."

"Yes ma'am!" all the students reply, jumping to attention and training their gaze on the older Human.

"Next you'll be practicing a disarming slash." When none of the students move into position, she shouts, "I meant right now! Twenty katas! Count them!"

Immediately falling into a few disorderly rows, the students stumble over each other as they attempt to organize themselves. Once they've created enough berth to practice without accidentally striking each other in the process, the teens draw their weapons and fall into a basic ready stance. Counting in unison, they each perform the instructed maneuver. "One!"

"Good," the instructor murmurs, looking back down at her datapad. "I want to hear your counting," she warns.

"Two!" the students respond dutifully.

But the instructor isn't really listening. Instead, she's tapping a new message into her pad, coils of worry roiling around her. *The positive attachment is only strengthening*, she types. *Perhaps the new student is to blame?*

A moment later, a response appears. *It was already occurring before her arrival. Attempts to feed into their rivalries were a failure? – Y. Ban*
Correct, Master, the instructor types. Do you have any recommendations?

It's several long moments before a reply comes through, and Vann can hear the instructor gasp as she reads the words. Continue as planned. Do not alert the students that there is a problem. Yuthura, prepare to move the date of the final tests up significantly. If we can't harness the students' anger, perhaps we can utilize their shock and fear just as effectively. – U. Wynn

The next response is almost immediate. How soon should I prepare for the tests, Master? – Y. Ban.

There's another long pause, and then, A few days' time should be appropriate. If nothing else, this new schedule will weed out the weakest students so that we focus all of our efforts on the most promising candidates. – U. Wynn

Vann swallows hard when he reads this message, a cold jolt of anticipation running down his spine. The assumed time frame to both find the map and save the students has just been drastically reduced, and he still doesn't have anything remotely resembling a plan for accomplishing either of these tasks. His heart hammers a panicked staccato, and he has to force himself to keep his attention on the datapad.

Yes, Masters, the instructor responds dutifully. I will do as requested. Please alert me if there are any more changes to be made.

Blinking, Vann peers over to where the students are still counting out their katas. Mission and Dustil are standing side-by-side, stifling their laughter as they playfully swipe at each other while their teacher is otherwise occupied orchestrating their potential deaths. 'They have no idea,' the mercenary thinks to himself. Gradually his gaze shifts to encompass the entire training arena, which is full of raucous students who are equally oblivious to the danger ahead. Clenching his jaw, he eloquently mouths, 'Well, shit.'

* * *

"What the hells is going on?" Carth yelps indignantly as he's shoved into a small meditation room located one floor down from the dorms. Brushing away Vann's hands, he squints his eyes as he attempts to examine the other man by the faint glow of the lightsaber that serves as a light source during their late-night excursions around the academy. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, sure. Why?" The mercenary attempts to shrug off the question, idly swinging weapon as he begins to restlessly pace the room, pausing to kick a small cushion in irritation.

"You're sweating…"

Reach up to swipe a palm across his forehead, Vann snaps, "I'm not sweating!"

Carth blinks, clearly unimpressed. "I am literally standing here, watching you sweat."

"You're sweating…"

Pausing mid-stride, Vann's eyes dart around the small room. "Well, it's pretty hot in here!"

"It is not hot! It's freezing! This whole building is freezing!" Carth gestures wildly to the dark walls and then stamps a boot against the stones underfoot. "I should know, I've been sleeping on the ice-cold floor for the past three nights, same as you…" He takes a step closer, his gaze suspicious as he studies his companion. "You have been sleeping on the floor, right? It's not like you're sneaking off and sleeping somewhere else?"

"Yes, I've been on the floor, same as you." Vann waves away the scrutiny, turning his face towards the wall. "Don't worry, you're not alone in your suffering."
"Okay. Because it's not like I've actually seen you sleep…" The realization visibly dawns across Carth's face, his voice trailing off as several nagging suspicions begin sliding into place. His brows furrow as he mutters, "Come to think of it, you're always up before Mission, which is surprising since we spend half the night sneaking around…"

"What can I say," Vann cuts in a little too quickly. "I'm an early riser."

Carth's gaze sharpens as he marches up to his companion, stopping precariously close to the glowing blade of the 'saber. "You have been sleeping, right?"

"Yeah. Of course," Vann mutters, backing up. "It's not like I can just… not sleep. That's not how the Human body works…"

Reaching out, Carth grabs the mercenary's free wrist, his frown deepening when he feels the limb tremble between his fingers. "Your hand is shaking again."

Yanking his arm from his companion's grasp, Vann continues to move in a circuit around the room. "Is it? Really?" he asks in faux disbelief.

"Get over here!" Carth suddenly snaps, lunging at the other man. But he's too slow, and the other man manages to deftly duck out of his reach.

"Make me!" Vann shouts back, wincing at his petulant tone.

"You are such a child sometimes!" Making another dive towards the mercenary, Carth manages to grab his companion by the shoulder while barely avoiding the burning blade of the lightsaber. Tightening his hold until his fingers dig in hard enough to bruise, he wrenches the struggling figure around until they're facing each other. Using his free hand, he reaches up and grips the other man's chin, forcibly aligning their gazes until their eyes to meet. "Dammit, your pupils are bigger than moons!" he notes irritably. His fingertips quickly glide downward, pressing against a pulse point. "And your heart rate is way too fast…"

"You did just tackle me from behind," Vann points out suggestively, continuing to struggle against the pilot's grasp. While he manages to twist his head free, his companion's hand remains tightly clasped around his shoulder.

Refusing to relinquish his hold, Carth scowls in disapproval. "You're on something, aren't you?"

When the mercenary remains silent, he growls, "Dammit, what is it?"

Moving his lightsaber defensively between them, Vann hisses, "None of your concern!"

Dropping his hand with a snort of disgust, Carth jabs a thumb into his own chest as he presses his face closer to the plasma blade. "Considering that you're the one watching all of our backs, I'd say that this sure as hells is my concern!"

Vann sighs, scrubbing his free hand across the clammy skin of one cheek. "Well, it's nothing that's dangerous in small quantities."

There's a beat of silence before Carth dryly asks, "And how large of a quantity have you consumed?"

"None!" Vann shouts defensively, before lowering his voice and whispering, "It's all been injected."

Jaw falling open in horror, Carth stares for a moment before yelling, "What is wrong with you?!"
"I'm keeping you and Mission safe, okay?" Vann counters, narrowing his eyes in challenge. "I can't use my camouflage if I'm asleep, so I can't sleep without putting both of you in danger!"

Hurt blooms over Carth's features and his tone is genuinely wounded as he asks, "...You don't trust me to watch your back for a few hours while you get some sleep?"

"I don't trust anyone but myself to make sure Mission stays safe inside of a Sith academy!" Vann's gaze is cool as he grips his lightsaber, his words heavy with determination. "I knew the risks when we planned this operation, and I accepted them. I'll be fine."

Carth's tone drips with doubt. "Really?"

"Yeah, sure." Shrugging one shoulder, Vann waves his free hand as he breezily replies, "Once this is all over, I'll just use the Force to purge my system and then sleep for twelve hours straight."

Some of the doubt fade from Carth's voice, though his expression remains critical as he asks, "Is that how it works with Jedi and toxins?"

There's a brief pause before Vann hastily reassures the other man, "As far as you know, yes. Yes, it is."

Clenching his fists in frustration, Carth stares in stunned silence for a moment before blurting out, "Why are you incapable of taking anything seriously for more than..."

"I am taking things seriously!" Vann snaps back, interrupting the other man. He shakes his head, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "And for the record, we have more serious problems than whether I'm a little sleep-deprived!"

"Such as...?"

"Such as the fact that I managed to read some of the messages being sent between the instructors." Vann lowers his voice, jaw clenching as he mutters, "They don't like how close Dustil and Mission are getting."

Carth remains unimpressed, gaze challenging as he tersely replies, "So, tell Mission to step back a little." He pauses thoughtfully for a moment before adding, "I mean, if we're planning to rescue the whole school, does it matter if she has Dustil's trust?"

Swallowing hard, Vann's voice fades a little as he admits, "It's worse than that. So much worse."

Tone still doubtful, Carth breathes, "How much worse?"

"They're worried that a lot of the students are starting to genuinely like each other. Apparently, all the encouragement to lie, cheat, and backstab didn't work too well." Vann exhales slowly, waiting a moment before revealing the piece of information that's been weighing his mind down all evening. "They want to move-up the date of the final test."

There's a sharp intake of breath from Carth, and then he begins swearing colorfully. "Kriffing hells! How soon?"

"From what I could see, it seems like the instructors want to hold it within the next few days." Vann can't stop the rest of the story from spilling forth in a single rush. "Since they can't make the students angry enough, they want to blindside these kids and use their fear against them. The ones strong with the dark side will probably fall. The rest, well..."
"They'll be cut down by whoever falls, won't they?" Worry creases Carth's brow as he considers the implications of the situation.

Vann nods solemnly. "Yup. That's Sith logic for you."

"Shit." There's a note of panic in Carth's voice as he urges, "We have to do something. Before this test happens!"

Barely managing not to roll his eyes, Vann grits out, "Yeah. That's been my thought for the past ten kriffing hours." His words are verging on desperate as he asks, "Do, uh, you have any ideas?"

Sighing wearily, Carth's tone grows terse. "Aren't you the master strategist?"

"I'm also running on three days without sleep, loaded with Mandalorian adrenal stimulants, and feeling a little overwhelmed that, in a past life, I apparently built a Sith academy!" Vann growls back. "So, I'm open to suggestions!"

"Alright, alright. I'm thinking!" In his frustration, it takes Carth a moment to process everything his companion just said. Blinking back his incredulity, he glares at the other man. "Mandalorian adrenal stimulants? Really?"

"Not the time, Carth!"

Shaking his head to calm his thoughts, the pilot lapses into silence for a moment before cautiously murmuring, "Well, if Dustil really is getting close to Mission, maybe we can just... talk to him? Tell him the truth?" Despite the doubt in his tone, his expression slowly blooms with hope. The emotion spreads around him, bright and warm despite the oppressive darkness of the academy. "He was always such a good kid, and he hated being tricked. Once he knows what the Sith are trying to do, he won't trust them anymore. I'm sure he'll be willing to help us."

"If he is willing to help, we can try and sneak a lot of the weaker students out late tomorrow night."

Nodding at this idea, Vann quickly adds to it. "Without the buffer between them and the instructors, the stronger students might realize that they're not safe here and that they never were. That might be enough to convince the rest to abandon this place."

"It's not much of a plan," Carth admits, though his words are laced with determination.

Chuckling darkly, Vann merely grins. "It's more than we had coming in."

"Yeah..." There's a long pause as Carth draws a shaky breath. He closes his eyes for a moment, scrubbing both hands across his face before whispering, "So, uh, I guess it's time for me to talk to my son?"

Nodding, Vann wishes that his voice didn't sound so hesitant as he agrees, "I guess so." Reaching out, he places his free hand on his companion's shoulder and gives it a firm squeeze. He can feel the tension that radiates through the other man's body and he briefly attempts to massage it away with his fingertips before realizing that his efforts are completely futile.

The anxiety hovers between the pair as they sneak back to Mission's room an hour later. Even though Carth makes a show out of bedding down and pretending to rest, Vann is positive that he won't be the only one unable to sleep tonight.

* * *

Back pressed against the doorway of a dorm room, Mission's voice is strained as she calls out,
"Hey Dustil, can we, uh, can we talk?"

Not looking up from where he's sprawled across his bed reading a textbook, the Human teen waves his friend inside with a casual, "Sure, what's up?"

Swallowing hard, Mission continues to hover within the entryway. "Umm, can we talk in, you know, private?"

This gets Dustil's attention, his head jerking up as his awareness flares around him in a bright, cold burst. He clearly senses the Twi'lek's trepidation and his own eyes immediately narrow in suspicion, his words hesitant as he draws, "Alright. Come in and close the door behind you."

Mission quickly hops over the threshold, gesturing behind her as she beckons in the rest of the crew. It's another moment before Carth appears still wearing his disguise, his eyes appropriately downcast as he slowly ambles into the dorm room. Dustil doesn't acknowledge his father's presence, nor does he seem to notice when Vann slips inside, slinking through the shadows as he hides within the omnipresent gloom. He's cloaked from mundane eyes thanks to the stealth unit, and his presence in the Force is currently little more than a whisper.

As HK-47 attempts to enter the crowded space, Mission holds out her hand to stop the droid. "H-Kay," she calls out softly, "Stay outside and guard the door. Make sure nobody's listening or tries to barge in on us, okay?"

"Statement: Of course, meatbag. It will be my pleasure to destroy anyone who comes too close to this room." HK-47's eyes shine with delight at the prospect.

"No, don't kill anyone," Mission stresses, hands balling into fists. "Just… don't let them bother us or overhear what we're saying. And do it nonviolently, if possible."

Sighing with mechanical disgust the droid moves into position, his tone sarcastic as he places his back to the doorway. "Mockery: Oh, I am more than happy to utilize my superior programming for nonviolent guard duty." Shifting the blaster rifle that he's currently clutching, he adds, "I will be sure not to use violence… if at all possible."

Catching the droid's workaround to his current orders, Mission exhales heavily and rolls her eyes, voice strained as she warns, "Just don't kill anyone. Or else!" To emphasize her words, she shakes a disapproving finger at the assassin.

"Acquiescence: I'll be sure not to kill anyone." HK-47's voice is just a little quieter as he reassures the teen, "Shooting out their kneecaps won't be fatal, and will be far more painful."

Sensing that this is the best outcome that she's going to achieve without Vann's direct intervention, Mission grumbles, "Good enough," before turning away from the droid and pressing the panel to close the door between them. As the stone entryway grinds shut with a shudder, HK-47 is left to his own devices out in the hallway while the rest of the crew is secured inside the dorm room. Glancing around the small space, Mission forces an awkward smile as her eyes dart between the estranged father and son. Squaring her shoulders, she draws herself up just a little straighter as she announces, "Alright, so…"

"Is… something wrong?" Dustil immediately asks once the door shuts, turning to examine the 'slave' for a moment before carefully placing his book down beside him. He swings his legs over the side of the bed, perching nervously on the edge of the mattress.

"No, no! Nothing's wrong," Mission hurriedly reassures the other teen. "I just… I got something I
need to show you," she explains, biting her bottom lip. "And I need you to not, you know, freak out."

Brow creasing with genuine worry, Dustil slips off the bed and creeps forward, examining the Twi'lek closely. "What's the matter?" he demands, emotions swirling cold and dangerous around him. "Are you in trouble?" His jaw clenches as he presses, "Is one of those other assholes still giving you a hard time?"

Mission swiftly shakes her head as she hurriedly replies, "No, no… Nothing like that! It's just…" Trailing off guiltily, her eyes land on Carth and she hurries over to where he's hovering stiffly by the door. Reaching out she grabs the Human by the wrist, yanking him forward despite his startled grunt of protest. With a quick shove, she pushes the taller figure in front of her, almost dislodging his disguise in the process. "Here!" she declares. "He, uh, he has something to tell you!"

As the pilot is carelessly manhandled towards his son, Vann sighs to himself. Apparently, they've already abandoned any pretense at subtlety. Having wedged himself into the darkest corner of the tiny room, he's watching the whole scene unfold like a bad holodrama.

Dustil looks on in confusion, one eyebrow arched as he watches both the Twi'lek and the 'slave' expectantly. When nobody says anything, he mutters an awkward, "And that would be…?"

For a moment, all Carth can do is stare in surprise as a choked gasp floats out from beneath the scarf. One hand moves to cover his mouth, though his fingers quickly become entangled in the disguise covering his features. Frustrated, he begins to unwind the fabric, eyes darting between his son and the floor as he hurriedly stammers, "Um, it's uh…" Voice barely a whisper, he finally manages to blurt, "Just, like she said… Don't get upset."

It's another uncomfortable few seconds before the pilot's face is fully revealed, his hands working quickly to free his hair and mouth. He blinks nervously for a moment, watching as realization slowly spreads across Dustil's features. At first, the teen's expression is frozen in shock, his jaw falling open as his eyes widening. However, his countenance quickly shifts to horror, his mouth opening and closing ineffectively before he finally manages to wheeze, "…Dad?"

Ever eloquent Carth replies, "Y…Yeah," as he nods encouragingly.

Whipping around to face the Twi'lek, Dustil's tone is mystified as he asks, "Wait, you're keeping my dad as a slave?"

"No!" Both Carth and Mission shout at once, simultaneously leaping towards the Human teenager in a jumble of limbs as they both wave their hands in protest. The effect would be comical if it weren't for the aghast expression that Dustil is still wearing.

"I'm not really her slave," the pilot quickly adds, gesturing to the Twi'lek. "We're both here, together, to… uh…"

"To… rescue you…" Mission finishes, offering a tense grin. "We're going to get you out of this academy before something really bad happens." She immediately notes the doubt that flickers across the other teen's face, her smile faltering. "You just need to trust us. Even though we've kinda been lying to you… this entire time…"

Grimacing, Vann bites the inside of his cheek to suppress a groan. He's suddenly realizing that this is another instance where stating their plan out loud makes the whole idea sound exponentially worse.
Dustil manages to compose himself with remarkable speed, his shock burning away to reveal nothing but cold, unrepentant fury. "You're here to rescue me?" he snarls, his gaze focused directly on his father. "You?!

"I… I know this feels really sudden," Carth begins, holding up his hands apologetically. "And I know that we have a lot to talk about…"

"Rescue me?" Dustil repeats, snorting in contempt. "You have some nerve to show up here and claim that I need rescuing, you kriffing traitor!" His tone is pure venom, his rage surging around him.

"He's not a traitor!" Mission snaps at the other teen. Stepping forward, she crosses her arms across her chest as her brow furrows. "Malak and Karath lied to him. They lied to everyone, claiming that Telos had to be destroyed when really…"

Teeth grinding, Dustil's voice is pitched threateningly low as he speaks over the Twi'lek. "You want to talk about Telos? Okay, let's talk." Shoudering his way past the smaller teen, he moves within centimeters of his father. Though they're not yet the same height, he still manages to look the older man straight in the eyes. "Hey, Dad, where the hells were you when mom died?" Jerking a finger towards the pilot's chest, he hisses, "Oh, that's right. You ran away. You failed her. And now you think you can just come here and act like some big damn hero?"

It's Carth's turn to look stunned, the alarm at his son's reaction eclipsing any joy he experienced from seeing the teen for the first time in years. "That's not what happened," he begins.

Dustil shakes his head violently, interrupting his father. "Stop! I'm not a stupid kid anymore. I'm not going to be impressed because you suddenly show-up at my school with stories about your exploits." His eyes narrow. "I know who you really are, Dad. You're a kriffing coward."

"No, he's not!" Mission shouts defensively. "He's risked his life for me more than once. I've met a lot of cowards over the years, and your dad ain't one of 'em."

"Look Mission, I don't know what lies my dad told you, but you deserve to know the truth about him." Turning to study the other teen, Dustil's voice is heavy with disappointment as he explains, "He wants everyone to think he's some big hero. That's why he was never around when I was a kid, he was too busy volunteering for 'special assignments' to be home with me and Mom."

The hurt that flows forth from Carth is almost palpable even without Force-sensitivity, and his words are strained as he chokes out, "There were certain missions, important missions, that wouldn't have succeeded without a good pilot." He takes a step towards his son. "The only place in the entire galaxy that I wanted to be was home with you and your mom, but there wasn't anyone else…"

"Yeah, I've heard it all before." Scoffing, Dustil ducks out of his father's reach. "You were busy saving the Republic, I know." His jaw visibly tightens. "But when you had the chance to actually save a member of your own kriffing family, where the hells were you?"

"Karath lied to me," Carth insists. "He sent me on some bogus assignment on the other side of the Outer Rim…"

"The war was kriffing over!" Control slipping, Dustil's voice reverberates through the tiny room as he shouts at his father. The book on the bed levitates a few centimeters, the pages shaking with the power of his anger. "Why were you still taking assignments? You could have been home with us!"
Drawing a shaky breath, Carth's voice almost breaks as he explains, "The war may have been officially over, but the fighting wasn't. I was still enlisted in the Navy, and I had to answer to my superiors…"

"Stop lying!" Dustil shrieks. The book lifts off the thin mattress and flies across the room, hitting the opposite wall with a resounding smack. "Just admit that you cared more about saving the galaxy from the Mandalorians than you did about your own family! Admit that you abandoned us! That Mom died because you weren't there to help her!"

As the textbook goes whizzing by his face, Vann can feel the anger and resentment building to dangerous levels within the teen. He tries to monitor the younger Human but is quickly distracted by a nearby rattling sound. Turning, he sees that the bed is beginning to shake from the sheer force of Dustil's barely-controlled fury. It's only a matter of time before the teen erupts, putting everyone else in danger. Hand hovering over the hilt of his remaining lightsaber, the mercenary crouches down and prepares to stop the other Force user if necessary.

Pausing to watch the bed rattle against the stone floor, Mission swallows nervously as she turns back to her classmate. "Does… it feel like a lie to you?" Lips pursed into a thin line, she stares pointedly as she asks, "You can sense emotions through the Force, right?"

Ignoring the chaos his rage is causing, Dustil barks out a harsh laugh. "Of course!"

"So, tell me," Mission challenges the other teen, jerking her chin up defiantly. "Does it feel like your dad is lying?"

"A good liar can fool anyone, even someone who's Force-sensitive," Dustil seemingly recites, even as doubt creeps into his tone. The bed frame quiets slightly.

"Yeah, but we both know your dad." A faint smile plays at the corners of Mission's lips. "And he's a kriffing terrible liar."

Stubbornly clinging to his personal truth, Dustil balls both hands into fists. "He could have gotten better in the last few years. After all, I heard he was working as a smuggler," he mutters haughtily.

"I have been," Carth admits, his expression open and voice candid. "Though, maybe not a very good one." He offers his son a weak half-smile. "Ask me what you want to know, and I'll answer it as truthfully as I can."

Drawing an uneven breath, Dustil glares darkly at his father as he forces his swell of emotions into a temporarily calm, plunging the room into silence as the bed suddenly falls still. His tone is terse but measured as he sneers, "I don't have any questions. I know what Supreme Commander Malak has said about the events on Telos." He eyes the pilot and the Twi'lek suspiciously as he asks, "What, am I supposed to believe a deserter over the word of the Supreme Commander of the entire Republic Military?"

"What you should do is listen to your heart and not your head," Mission urges the older teen, reaching out to tap her finger against his temple. "Stop worrying about what you've been told, or what you're supposed to think. Look past all of your anger and just…" She fumbles for the words, finally shrugging sheepishly as she states, "Just go with your gut."

"Is that what you do?" Crossing his arms, Dustil studies the other teen carefully as some of the anger begins to seep out of him.

Nodding in confirmation, Mission grins a little. "All the damn time."
Carth opens his mouth to say something but seems to think better of it. Instead, he remains silently in place, hands folded nervously as he cautiously eyes his son, a mixture of worry and hope swirling around him.

Swallowing hard, Dustil's eyes flick between his father and the Twi'lek for several long moments, confusion etched across his brow as he rocks back on his heels. He licks his lips several times, words catching in his throat before he can speak them. Gradually, some of the doubt begins to fade from his eyes, his jaw tensing as his expression grows stony. A cold blast of dark energy flows around him as he draws a sharp breath, nostrils flaring when he growls, "You know what my gut tells me, Mission? It says that you're both traitors."

The Twi'lek takes a step back at the accusation, one hand instinctively reaching for her lightsaber hilt. Her palm comes to rest on the weapon and she keeps her eyes trained on her classmate as she tentatively asks, "So, is that what you're gonna tell Master Wynn?" Her sudden burst of fear is thick and cold in the Force.

Dustil falls silent, some of his dark indignation fading away as he notes the terror surrounding the other teen. He wets his lips once more before slowly shaking his head. "No," he finally admits. "I won't say anything about this. Mainly because I don't want everyone to assume that I'm part of your… Whatever it is that you're doing."

"Okay, well… good." A heavy sigh of relief escapes Mission, her shoulders slumping slightly.

"But this still changes everything. Don't expect me to talk to you outside of classes." Dustil turns away from the younger teen, ducking his head slightly as he trains his gaze on the nearby wall. The anger is gradually ebbing away, some of it replaced by a sense of sour disappointment. "And I'm not helping you stand up to those other assholes. You're on your own. We're… we're not friends. We're not even allies."

Hearing the hurt in his son's words, Carth's tone is desperate as he stammers, "Son, err… Dus…"
He swallows hard, throat clicking with the effort. "Look, I know you're mad at me. But please, don't take it out on…"

The Human teen whips around to face his father, his eyes narrowed into slits as he snarls, "You don't get to talk! Not. One. Word." The bed frame suddenly shudders violently against the floor with a low groan. "I don't want to see you ever again. I don't even want to hear your voice." Jabbing a finger threateningly at the older man, he adds, "And if I so much as feel you breathe, I will go to Master Wynn and tell him about you and Mission! Do you understand?"

Biting back his disappointment, Carth's gaze drops to the floor as he nods in silent acquiescence.

"Good." Stamping the few strides that it takes to cross the room, he bends down and snatches his book from the floor, smoothing out the crumpled pages before slamming it shut. Gripping the spine so hard that his knuckles turn white, he stares intently at the cover as he snarls, "Now get the hells out of my room." His tone is deceptively even as he speaks, though his anger swells even colder than before.

Before Carth can try and protest, Mission reaches out and places a firm hand around his wrist. "Come on," she murmurs softly. "Get your disguise back on so that we can get out of here."

Lapsing into stunned silence, the pilot's movements are wooden as he hastily wraps the scarf around his face, eyes glued to his son the entire time. When his features are once again hidden the Twi'lek tugs firmly at his sleeve, dragging him towards the doorway as she slams her palm against the entry panel in frustration. For a moment, the only sound in the room is the low grind of the
door sliding open. Chilled air instantly rushes into the small space, carrying the low sounds of students talking and the dull echo of their footsteps as they walk by. One or two wave when they spot Mission ducking out of Dustil's room, pulling Carth behind her with a determined yank of her arm.

"Observation: Oh, you're back," HK-47 intones blandly when he sees the Twi'lek reappear. "I regret to inform you that I didn't get to shoot anyone in your absence."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Mission grumbles sarcastically. "Maybe you'll have better luck next time."

"Statement: I know that you're being facetious, but I truly do hope that I get to destroy some of these worthless meatbags before this entire experience is over." The droid nods wistfully. "It would be a much better utilization of my primary function."

Carth pauses in the doorway to glare darkly at HK-47, shaking his head as he twists his arm out of Mission's grasp. He casts one last look towards his son's room as the door closes behind them, waiting until his view is completely blocked before obediently falling into step behind the Twi'lek.

Vann manages to slip out right before the door slides shut, having lingered an extra moment after sensing an unexpected spark of warmth beneath the teen's frigid veneer of ice-cold rage. He can't extend his own awareness too far, not without giving himself away, but if he strains he's able to train his focus on that singular flicker of emotion. It's unexpectedly bright, or at least it seems that way amidst the gloom of the academy, and the glow lingers even as the teen's anger begins to fade. It's hard to identify exactly what Vann's perceiving, especially with only a glimpse, but there's no denying that the teen's buried emotions are bright and warm and distinctly light. Though the mercenary's own connection to that part of the Force is admittedly tenuous at best, he can still recognize the light side when he senses it. 'The fact that Dustil has some light left doesn't mean he won't fall,' he mutters to himself. Scowling, he can't help but remember the brilliance of Bastila's presence in the Force. 'And it's not like she betrayed all of us to Malak… Oh right.'

But at least Vann can sense something in Dustil besides anger, fear, and hatred. 'And we need something.' He suppresses a groan of frustration as he slips down the hallway several paces behind the rest of the crew. 'Because right now we've got less than bantha shit.' Frowning, he notes the dejected way Carth's shoulders slump, and the bob of Mission's throat as she swallows her own disappointment. With no plan, no allies, and no further ideas, the situation has just gone from bad to impossibly bleak. 'Well,' he thinks grimly, 'At least it can't get much worse from here.'

*  *  *

"Alright, listen up!" Yuthra Ban rubs her hands together as she addresses the large group of students currently gathered around her. "You're all here because your instructors gave me glowing reports about your lightsaber progress. And now I want to observe your skills for myself."

From the corner of the training room, Uthar Wynn nods in approval as he silently regards his second-in-command. Vann can sense something dangerous flowing between the two dark Force users, but he can't quite pinpoint exactly what they're planning. His lack of focus might be due to the fact that his mind has been racing uncontrollably for the past hour, thanks to yet another dose of adrenal stimulants.

For their part, the students seem oblivious to any sinister dealings between their instructors, and they continue to look on earnestly as they attempt to curry favor with the Twi'lek. A faint smirk dances upon Ban's lips as she looks out at her pupils, her gaze haughty as it settles on Mission. A
cold chill of warning races down Vann's spine as he notes the malicious gleam in her eyes, and he silently hopes that Carth is done brooding in the dorm room after the previous day's disastrous conversation with his son. Because the mercenary has a feeling that things are about to get dangerous.

"Mission," Ban purrs coolly. "I heard that you and Dustil had an excellent sparring session two days ago. Would you both care to come up and give me a personal demonstration of your abilities?"

Despite sounding like a question, there's no doubt that the older Twi'lek's words are an order that's meant to be obeyed. Without another choice, the teen is forced to nod politely as she slowly slinks towards the center of the circle. "Uh, sure," she murmurs, before quickly adding, "Master Ban."

Dustil seems equally hesitant to come forward, his boots dragging as he marches towards the circle's center. He eyes his instructor with unconcealed bewilderment before quietly asking, "What would you like us to demonstrate, Master?"

"I'd like to see a repeat of your earlier sparring session," Ban explains airily, right before her lips curl into a sinister grin. "Though, this time I want you to make it count. Please turn your lightsabers back to full power."

There's a collective gasp of disbelief from the assembled students, whispers immediately passing through the crowd. Both Mission and Dustil seem equally shocked, their mouths opening in horror as their gazes shift between their instructor and each other. Neither student reaches for the lightsaber hanging from their belt.

"Did I ask for anyone else's opinion on this duel?" Tone sharp with disapproval, a single glare from Ban instantly quiets the rest of the teens and the spacious training room falls eerily silent. For a moment there's virtually no sound, making it all the more foreboding when the Twi'lek trains her glare on the two duelists. "And did I not make myself clear the first time? Draw your 'sabers and turn them up to full power!"

"Yes, Master Ban!" both Mission and Dustil mumble in unison as they quickly fumble to retrieve their weapons and adjust the power settings. The only audible noise is the rough sound of their breathing, though it's soon joined by the sharp hiss of two lightsabers igniting at full power. The red and violet blades glow ominously, casting dark shadows across the faces of their wielders.

Both teens reluctantly take their place in the center of the circle, swinging their weapons into a ready position as they each survey their opponent. The pair shifts uneasily for another moment, footwork sloppy as they shuffle clumsily around each other.

Ban chooses to ignore her students' discomfort, looking on amusedly as she inclines her head. "Ready," she calls out. "And… begin!"

For an instant, neither student seems inclined to follow the instructor's order and Vann briefly wonders if there's a chance to end this whole mess before it even begins. But a second later Dustil breaks through whatever doubt seized him and he lunges forward, lightsaber humming viciously as he aims a direct blow at Mission's shoulder. Luckily, the Twi'lek teen also comes to her senses, and she hastily side-steps the hit by mere millimeters. She instinctively counters with a swipe of her own, the slice directed low at the Human's thigh. He manages to block the blade before it hits, but he's visibly rattled by how close it came.

The pair exchanges two more sets of similar blocks and parries, their bodies tense and expressions grim. The battle lacks the youthful exuberance of their previous sparring match, though whether it's
because of their recent confrontation or merely due to the gravity of dueling with deadly weapons is hard to say. Either way, both teens are exuding fear and doubt as they struggle to find a rhythm, their blade-work precise but overly cautious.

"Good, good." Ban nods in approval, gently tapping her index finger against her chin. "Your form is indeed impressive. But if I wanted to see two recruits do nothing but cross blades, I'd go to the military academy." She bares her teeth as she chides, "You're both Force users, aren't you? Prove it!"

Dread tingles across every inch of Vann's skin, his heart thudding so hard that it's difficult to hear anything over its panicked beat. 'Do they know?' The thought repeats itself in his mind. 'They can't know... can they?' Reaching into his pocket, his thumb glides over the commlink set to send messages directly to HK-47. The droid is currently idling just beyond the training room door, and a few simple commands would be enough to bring him charging through, rifling indiscriminately on everyone gathered. The sheer surprise should create enough of a distraction for the mercenary to grab Mission and flee, though that might leave Carth stranded. And the droid would probably kill more than one innocent student, which goes against their vaguely-defined goals. But at this point, the plan may have shifted from 'save the students' to 'save ourselves.'

Still locked in their duel, Mission and Dustil pause to nod at Ban in acknowledgment. A grim sense of determination settles over the Human teen's features, even as the Twi'lek swallows hard with worry. Her gaze briefly darts through the crowd, as though searching for Vann's invisible form. But her attention is brought back to the duel when her opponent uses the Force to push her back half a meter, causing her to stumble and nearly lose her footing.

"Not bad, Dustil." Ban shrugs a bit at the modest display of Force power. "But I'm fairly certain that Mission can do better." Her grin is predatory as she challenges, "Isn't that right?"

'Play along,' Vann silently mouths, eyes trained on every twitch that the young Twi'lek makes. He carefully shadows her movements from the perimeter of the circle, trying to keep their bodies aligned so that his Force signature feels like it's genuinely coming from her direction.

At first, Mission stubbornly refuses to surrender to her instructor's goading, focusing on her parries and footwork rather than pantomiming any Force use. But a second, more powerful push from Dustil nearly sends her sprawling, and she tumbles into a three-point stance to absorb the blow. In her distraction, she barely manages to deflect a stab directed at her shoulder, both lightsabers hissing angrily as they clash mere centimeters from her flesh. Driving her opponent back with a hard swing, she leaps gracelessly to her feet and thrusts out her off-hand, palm extended and expression determined.

It's the signal Vann has been waiting for, and he immediately sends out a solid Force push of his own. The wave of energy shoots out of his open palm and knocks a stunned Dustil back over a meter, leveling the teen as it sweeps his feet out from under him. The Human lands on his back with a grunt of discomfort, his lightsaber jolted from his grasp and skittering loudly across the hard stone floor. With a shout of triumph, Mission dives forward, jabbing her own weapon forward and bringing the blade to rest a centimeter from the prone Human's throat. Panting with exertion, she gasps, "I told you that I'd win the next one!"

Dustil snarls in frustration, though he immediately holds up his hands in surrender. His voice echoes through the training arena as he growls, "Fine, I give!"

Nodding grimly, Mission draws her blade back as she steps away from her fallen opponent. But before she can power down her own weapon, a black gloved hand clamps down firmly on her shoulder.
"What are you waiting for?" Ban asks with mock sweetness. "You have an enemy lying defenseless at your feet, and a deadly weapon in your hand." Presses her lips closer to the younger Twi'lek's ear, she hisses, "Finish him."

The once-silent room immediately erupts into chaos as the other students gasp in surprise, turning to one another as they whisper in shock and fear. Eyes going wide, Mission mirrors their incredulity as she rapidly shakes her head. "N... no!" she breathes, "I can't! I won't!"

Sighing, Ban releases her grasp on her student, shaking her head sadly. "A pity," she sneers, "And here I thought you showed so much promise." Turning to peer at the Human who's still sprawled across the floor she scoffs, "I supposed you're the winner, Dustil. And to the victor goes the spoils."

"What?" Brow furrowing in confusion, the Human teen hurriedly pushes himself to his feet. The murmurs of his fellow students only grow louder, and his voice is almost eclipsed as he asks, "What are you talking about, Master? What's going on?" Jaw clenching, he all-but whispers, "Did you... did you really expect Mission to...?"

"To kill you?" Ban nods sagely. "Of course. But it seems she lacks initiative." Reaching out her hand she uses the Force to lift the Human teen's fallen lightsaber, levitating the hilt until it hovers in front of its owner. "But you've never lacked gumption, have you Dustil?" Nodding to the weapon she encourages, "Go on, take your 'saber and cut her down. She's weak and unworthy."

Eyeing his lightsaber, Dustil hesitantly reaches out and grasps the weapon in his hand, thumbing on the crimson blade and swinging it into an attack position. Vann immediately reaches for his own 'saber, legs tensing as he prepares to leap in and defend Mission if necessary. But Dustil hesitates rather than delivering a killing strike. A few of the students chatter in surprise, breath bated as they wait for his next move.

Looking on in barely-controlled panic, Mission grits her teeth as she powers down her own lightsaber. "Moron!" she screams at the other teen, "Can't you see what they're trying to do? They ain't making you a stronger Force user, or a better soldier. They're just turning you into a monster who'll carry out whatever shitty orders they give you!"

There's a general gasp of disbelief as the Twi'lek teen levels her accusations. Fear spreads sharp and cold throughout the gathered students as the reality of the situation sinks in, a handful beginning to back away and creep towards the door.

"And so, your true colors are revealed." Ban's eyes narrow as her hand hovers over the lightsaber hilt at her hip. She snarls at the pupils who are attempting to escape, halting them in their tracks before turning back to the younger Twi'lek. "I'd kill you myself," she jeers, "But I don't want to deny Dustil here the pleasure of executing a traitor with his own two hands."

Eyes darting between Mission and his instructor, the Human takes a tentative step towards his classmate, his blade still held at the ready. But he pauses again, expression stricken as his emotion flicker furiously around him.

"Your mother died on Telos, right?" Mission asks. Her voice shakes slightly as she speaks, but she squares her shoulders, scowling at Ban before turning her attention back to her fellow student. "Well, these sons-of-kath hounds wanna make you into the type of person who'll bomb a planet out of existence and not think twice about it." Drawing an uneven breath, she demands, "Is that the type of person you wanna become? Huh?"

This new revelation sends a fresh round of whispers through the gathered students, a few
practically shouting things like, "Is it true?" and "What exactly happened on Telos, anyway?"

Raising her voice above the din of her pupils, Ban orders, "Kill her!" Her tone brokers no argument. "Now."

Vann's lightsaber hilt is in his hand in an instant, thumb twitching and ready to ignite the blade. He keeps his attention split between both the two individuals threatening Mission, and he carefully maneuvers his body so that he can intercept either one.

Hands trembling, the young Twi'lek glances down at the weapon in her grasp and then tosses it to the side where it's lost amongst the crowd. "You wanna become a monster, Dustil? Fine!" Holding her palms up to show that they're empty, she juts her chin out in defiance. "I'm unarmed! Come and get me!"

"Do it," Ban warns. "This is your last chance, Dustil. Kill her, or die with her. It's your choice."

Raising his lightsaber up, the Human lets out a roar of frustration as he brings the weapon down in a strong cleave. The blade hums, slicing nothing but air as it passes through the space between him and his classmate. "No!" he finally screams. "I'm not like you! And I never will be!"

Mission lets out an audible groan of relief, her entire body trembling as she turns to face Dustil with a watery smile. "Oh, thank the Force!" she sighs. "For a second there I thought you were actually gonna do it!" The rest of her words are swallowed by the shouts of disbelief that ring out from the crowd of teenagers.

"Suit yourself," Ban snarls, glowering at the pair of students. "It is a shame to lose two candidates with such promise in one day. But I suppose it will make room for those who are actually worthy. Now, if anyone else would like the chance…"

Before the Twi'lek can finish speaking, Vann sends out a blast of Force energy that sends her flying a meter into the air. She soars for an instant before landing on her back amongst the crowd, the wind knocked from her lungs as her body thuds against the stone floor hard enough to bruise.

Silent and stoic throughout the entire exchange, Wynn's head suddenly snaps around and he turns to look at his fallen apprentice. Eyes narrowing in suspicion, his gaze shifts to Mission as he hisses, "That couldn't have come from you…"

'Shit!' Vann mouths to himself. He realizes his mistake as he also notes the Twi'lek teen's location. In splitting his attention between Ban and Dustil he's accidentally misaligned his position and is now standing far enough from Mission that his Force signature is almost impossible to mistake for her own.

The crowd parts as Wynn makes his way over to the young Twi'lek, his expression livid as he roars, "Who did that?" Gaze carefully surveying the room, his tone is enough to silence most of the students as he demands, "Who's with you, girl?"

"…With you?" Dustil asks, turning to his classmate in surprise. "What does he…?"

"No time to explain!" Mission replies, reaching out and grabbing the Human by the wrist. "We've gotta get out of here!"

By now Ban is back on her feet, lightsaber grasped in both hands as she charges towards the only door to the training arena. "You're not going anywhere." Igniting her crimson blade, she uses it to gesture towards all the gathered students. "None of you are leaving until we say so."
Mission attempts to dodge past a few of her classmates, dragging Dustil in her wake, but she's stopped short when Wynn dives through the air, executing an elegant flip and landing directly in her path. His lightsaber powers on with a malicious hiss, and he swings it at the Twi'lek. "Who's with you? I thought I recognized that Force signature, but it can't possibly…"

Igniting his own blade, Dustil scarcely manages to parry his instructor's strike. Gritting his teeth, he growls, "Hey! You leave her alone!"

Lightning crackles across Wynn's offhand as he warns, "Stay out of this, boy!" Raising one leg, he kicks the younger Human square in the chest, sending the teen stumbling backward with a gasp of pain. Turning his attention back to Mission, he commands, "Now who is it? Tell me!"

Pressing a code into his commlink, Vann charges into the fray without a second thought. He grasps his original lightsaber with his dominant hand, reaching out his other palm to summon the newer hilt that Mission discarded a few minutes prior. The metal whistles as it rises off the floor and flies over the students' heads, landing in his grasp just as he leaps between the academy headmaster and Dustil. Igniting both blades simultaneously, he crosses them as he blocks Wynn's next swing. "Hey there," he quips. "I'm guessing you remember me?"

"Revan?" Ban gasps, taking a step forward as she stares in disbelief at the previously camouflaged Force user. The shock continues to distract her even as the door to the arena slides across its track with a dull moan. The shriek of blaster fire erupts before it's even fully open, two bolts soaring through the air and striking Ban in the shoulder. They would have pierced her heart if she hadn't moved a moment earlier. Despite her armor, she staggers forward from the pain.

Students shout in surprise and fear, many of them ducking down and diving for cover as Carth comes barreling through the entryway wielding both pistols, HK-47 close on his heels. "Did someone call for a rescue?" he asks with grim amusement.

"Statement: I would love the opportunity to open fire in this enclosed space," HK-47 hums happily. "The body count would be most pleasing."

"Not quite what I meant!" Vann replies as he blocks two fierce slashes from Wynn, the other man's rage surging around him with cold, unrepentant fury. "Now take Mission and Dustil and get the hells out of here…"

"Traitor!" Wynn screams as he attacks again, his anger fueling each successive strike with greater strength. "None of you are getting out of here alive!" Lightning once again crackles along his fingers, this time glowing a dangerous purple as he darkly intones, "This is where all of you will meet your doom."

The air sizzles with the scent of ozone and the spark of electricity as the academy's headmaster unleashes a torrent of Force lightning. The deadly purple bolts are aimed directly at Carth, though there's enough power behind them to take out several of the students around him. One of whom happens to be Dustil. It's pure instinct that drives Vann forward, his lean body twirling easily through the air as he moves to intercept the attack before it hits. He lands in a crouch, extending his off-hand as he closes his eyes as he calls the Force energy directly into his own body. Gritting his teeth, he hisses as a burning sensation scorches its way down his arm into his torso. Despite the pain, he can feel the power infusing him, building through his system until he can practically hear the lightning crackling in his voice as he speaks. "Not today," he challenges Wynn with a cold stare. An instant later he discharges the blast, the electricity blazing across his skin as it arcs directly towards the academy headmaster.

Wynn sees the lightning racing towards him and immediately dives out of the way, tucking his
body into a roll as he narrowly avoids the worst of the strike. But the forked edges of the electricity still reach him, hitting his left leg and causing him to cry out in agony. The lightning that misses the headmaster erupts against the floor, charring the stone black and cracking it in several places. Between this and their instructors' obvious injuries, most of the remaining students break into pandemonium, all of them yelling in alarm as they try to cram their way past the injured Ban and through the doorway.

Sensing his opening, Vann powers down one lightsaber and clips it to his belt before reaching out and grabbing Mission with the Force. Yanking the Twi'lek towards him, he ignores her squeaks of protest as he shoves her slight form at Carth. "Make sure she gets out of here!" he yells, before reaching out and physically grasping Dustil by the collar. Practically throwing the teen towards his father, the mercenary adds, "And while you're at it, take him too!"

"He just… he was going to kill me…" Carth's son breathes in disbelief. His body trembles slightly with shock, though he continues to grip his lightsaber. Glancing over at the mercenary, his voice tinged with awe as he asks, "And who are you?"

"Dustil, I swear I'll explain it all later!" Mission shushes the other teen. "But I meant it when I said that we've gotta get out of here!"

Wincing as she moves her injured shoulder, Ban clenches her jaw and moves to block the crew's escape from the training arena. "Revan the traitor," she accuses coldly. "We were warned you might show up in the Valley of the Dark Lords. But we didn't quite expect you…"

The Twi'lek is cut off as Vann uses the Force to shove her out of the way, allowing students to hurry out of the arena in a blind panic. Dodging between fleeing teenagers, he draws his second lightsaber as he meets the instructor head on, using both weapons to prevent her from retaking her guard position. "I'm probably not what you were expecting."

Carth looks mildly stunned as the mercenary clashes with Ban, their blades hissing and humming as they battle. "…Traitor?" he mumbles confusedly. It's only his son's voice that snaps him out of his trance.

"I… I'm still mad at you," Dustil warns, glaring at his father. "But… I think Mission's right. I… we can't stay here… We have to leave." He peers at the wave of students already rushing out of the room, panic rising in his voice as he adds, "Now!"

"Not without V-Man!" the Twi'lek teen protests. "Come on, Vann! Get your ass over here so that we can go!"

Narrowly parrying a slice that was aimed at his throat, Vann ducks backward as he fends Ban off with two quick slashes of his own. Neither makes contact, but it's enough to keep her on the defensive. "Get out of here!" he shouts at his companions, using the Force to push all three towards the arena doorway. "H-Kay, get them back to the Hawk! And if anyone tries to stop you, shoot them!"

"Acknowledgement: Of course, Master!" The droid's eyes flash with glee, and he immediately begins to push students aside as he grasps a struggling Mission by the collar and drags her forward. "I would be more than happy to comply. At least concerning the latter part of that order."

"Vann, what the hells are you planning?" Carth demands, but his voice is already growing fainter as he's shoved towards the doorway by the droid and the rush of students. "Vann, don't do this. Vann!"
"Is that what you're calling yourself now, Revan?" Ban taunts. "Changing your name doesn't change your past." Swinging her blade in a dangerous arc, she takes advantage of her superior flexibility to drive her opponent back as she aims a series of strikes towards his knees.

Utilizing both blades to counter the attacks, Vann finds himself backing further into the arena. Each step carries him farther from his companions, their forms little more than a blur as they're forced across the threshold. For a moment, he considers whether he can sprint for safety, but that plan is foiled as a second crimson blade is jabbed towards his torso. Despite sliding away from the stab, it still catches him in the side, slicing past his thin layer of armor and singeing his skin. Gasping in pain, he struggles to regain his footing as Wynn joins the battle. The other man is limping slightly on his injured leg, but he's being driven forward by the strength of his rage.

Letting his own fear for his friends' safety wash through him like an icy wave, Vann draws a slow breath as he feeds on his negative emotions. Twirling his 'sabers, he backs up as he attempts to put some space between himself and the pair of enemies who are closing in. With a grunt, he uses his off-hand to parry Wynn's slash, turning on his heel just in time to catch Ban's slice before it digs into his bicep. He's skilled enough to take on both dark Force users simultaneously, but battling two opponents is exhausting and his body is already taxed from a lack of sleep, causing his guard to falter. Ban's blade just barely slips past his dominant 'saber, clipping him painfully in the right thigh. He stumbles back, hissing in agony as he forces himself to remain on his feet.

Wynn snarls in frustration as his next attack is parried. "You're good, Revan. Perhaps better than I remember. But you're also tired." There's mock sympathy in his voice as he asks, "Have you slept since you've been here? You look like you haven't."

Smirking triumphantly, Ban inclines her head as she delicately twirls her lightsaber. "You can't keep this up forever," she points out. "You will fall."

"And when you do, your friends will die." Wynn's statement is punctuated by a cruel smile. Exhaustion and pain cloud Vann's mind, and he struggles to bring his weapons up to guard his chest. Swallowing, he does what he can to draw power from his own agony, feeling it bloom cold and welcome just beneath his skin. If he continues to utilize the dark side, he just might have enough strength left to hold Wynn and Ban off long enough for the others to exit the academy. It's a gamble, but it's the best he can do.

"Do you think you're a hero, Revan?" Wynn leaps back just in time to avoid a slash that would have bisected his right forearm. "You're a traitor and a turncoat, but you've never been a hero."

Diving low, Vann uses the Force to propel himself forward as he aims a kick directly at the headmaster's already wounded shin. It lands soundly, causing the other man's leg to buckle. "People can learn new things in three years."

Deflecting both of her opponent's weapon strikes just before they plunge into her master's chest, Ban sneers. "I doubt you've learned loyalty."

For a moment, Vann loses focus as he wonders what, exactly, both dark Force users are talking about. The last he heard, Malak betrayed him, carving his abdomen in half before shooting him out of the sky. But maybe this is just another version of the same story. One where he's not a hero or a fallen friend, but just another…

"Son of a kath hound!" Vann bellows as Wynn manages to catch his bicep, carving another wound through his thin layer of body armor. Forcing himself to embrace the pain, he snarls at the headmaster as he feels another surge of strength flow through him.
"Just because your eyes flash yellow doesn't mean that you've truly embraced the dark side." Wynn tuts disapprovingly as he carefully skirts around his opponent's strike range. "You always liked to dabble in darkness without fully committing yourself."

"And let me guess, you always liked to talk?" Muscles burning with exertion, Vann struggles to deflect a flurry of light strikes from Ban before sending her flying back with a strong Force push. She's prepared for it this time and manages to drop into a crouch and remain on her feet. Shaking off the hit, she surges forward.

"I've always liked to educate," Wynn chuckles, noting the sweat that's pouring down his opponent's face. His blade sizzles and hums as he blocks three consecutive strikes, his final parry pushing the mercenary towards his fellow instructor.

Trying to embrace the pain that's throbbing through his body, Vann is panting hard as he ducks down. Ban's blade hums as it slices through the space that his head occupied a fraction of a second earlier. "So, educate me on this," he challenges, breath coming in wheezing gasps. "If I only dabbled, what do you call what Malak did?"

"He embraced his darkness." Grinning, Wynn wipes his own face as he savors his opponent's exhaustion. Planting his feet, he delivers a ferocious blow that lands hard enough to disarm the mercenary's off-hand thanks to a diminished grip strength. "Unlike you, who lead Lord Malak to the dark side, and then turned on him when he truly embraced your teachings."

"I… that's not…" The words swim in Vann's head as his saber hilt hits the floor with a clang before rolling towards the nearest wall. His addled mind is struggling to process both the battle and the conversation. Malak said that Revan… that Vann fell first. But Wynn is saying…

Taking advantage of her opponent's weakness, Ban lashes out with a fierce kick to the Human's injured thigh. It drives the mercenary to the ground as she stands above him, gloating. "Malak embraced his full potential, while you shied away from true strength out of fear and reverence for your precious Order."

"I… wait. What?" The pain is pushing past even Vann's impressive limits, and he's barely able to roll away from a slice aimed to sever his leg. He hisses in discomfort as he climbs to his knees, desperately trying to catch his breath.

"You're a hypocrite," Ban spits defiantly. "And Malak recognized that. So, he did what any true Sith would do."

Sweat pours into Vann's eyes, momentarily blinding him before he hurriedly wipes it away. But the distraction is enough for Wynn to deliver a sharp kick to his dominant wrist, causing his muscles to spasm and forcing him to drop his remaining lightsaber. "Malak did… what?" he chokes out.

"He tried to kill the Master that he surpassed." The headmaster chuckles darkly as he knocks the mercenary's last weapon out of reach. Shifting his grip on his own lightsaber hilt, he drives the butt down so that it strikes his opponent directly in the jaw. "You should be dead, Revan. Just like your friends will be any moment now."

Mouth filling with blood, Vann fights unconsciousness as he spits the crimson ichor straight back at Wynn, splattering it across the other man's chest. "I doubt it," he taunts, grinning with bloody teeth. "I built a really good droid."

Ban rushes to her Master's side, one brow arching as a scowl crosses her features. "I don't sense
them nearby…” she admits.

Closing his eyes, Vann extends his awareness and lets it flow into the frigid darkness that encompasses the academy. The cold is almost a balm to his exhausted body. Thoughts racing through the Force, he searches for Carth's familiar presence, probing every gloomy corner and hidden passageway he can find. But the pilot is nowhere to be found within the building's shadows. "They're gone," he states, a bubble of hysterical laughter erupting from his bloodied lips.

Roaring out his rage, Wynn drives the butt of his saber into his opponent's cheek, and then his nose with a resounding crack. Skin splits and blood erupts out, coating his knuckles and splattering the floor. "I'll find them," he bellows.

"Don't bother." Bending down, Ban wraps her fingers in the mercenary's sweat-soaked hair, yanking the Human's head upwards so that he's forced to look her in the eyes. "We have Revan. What more do we need?"

"Better body armor, probably." Vann sways in the Twi'lek's grasp, blood flowing from his nose and dribbling out from between his lips. "Cause after I get some sleep, I'm going to kick your asses."

"I look forward to watching you try." Powering down her blade, Ban releases the Human's hair and wipes her palm on the shoulder of his jacket. Drawing her arm back, she hisses, "Sleep well, Revan."

A second later the Twi'lek drives the slender metal hilt of her lightsaber directly into the back of Vann's skull. For an instant pain explodes through his head, and then he's enveloped in the blissful blackness of unconsciousness.

Chapter End Notes

1. I am sorry for disappearing, but my July was ridiculously busy. For reference, this chapter ended-up taking close to two weeks to fully edit because of my sheer lack of free time. Rest assured, this story is not being abandoned!

2. I have no idea if datapads work like tablet PCs/iPads do in our world, but just pretend that they do. This would mean that they can send and receive messages in real time via some type of communication satellite or wireless network.

3. There were three versions of the last section of this chapter written, but this was the version that I felt flowed the best with the rest of this story. The other versions were quite different, so hopefully I made the right choice!

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Chapter Summary

In which our heroes devise a plan, only to have it fall apart just when they need it to work. Important lessons are learned about chemical reactions, and everyone has a horrible time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

24.

(Interlude – Carth)

"So," Carth pants as he braces one arm against the wall of the Ebon Hawk's main hold. "I've got good news, and I've got bad news."

"How about you give us the good news first?" Quirking a brow, Jolee looks up from where he's plotting points on a holographic map of the local terrain. "That way we're in a good mood when you inevitably tell us that everything's falling down around our heads."

"V-Man went and got his dumb ass captured!" Shoving her way past Carth's breathless form, Mission is only slightly less winded as she races into the hold, her eyes wide and her voice tight with panic.

Jolee sighs heavily as his gaze slowly drifts between the Twi'lek and the pilot. "Or you could just send the kid in to blurt out the bad news first."

"What is going on?" Juhani slips out of the ship's workshop and makeshift training ring, the hilt of her lightsaber in one hand and a thin sheen of sweat on her forehead. "Mission, what did you just say?"

"I said…"

Before the Twi'lek can finish her sentence, Zaalbar comes barreling out of the crew quarters in a blur of fur and excited growls. Without breaking stride, he wraps the smaller figure in his massive arms, lifting her up and twirling her around as he trills joyfully.

Laughing despite the seriousness of the current situation, Mission hugs the Wookiee as she's whirled around the hold. "I'm fine, I'm fine," she insists, rolling her eyes. "And I'm happy to see you too, Big-Z! But can you put me down? I ain't a little kid, I've got dignity!"

Letting out a reluctant roar, Zaalbar carefully sets the Twi'lek back on the floor, his head hanging rather sheepishly. An expression that seems almost like concern passes over his hairy features, and he growls out something in a softer, terser tone.

Mission soberes at whatever her friend said, lips pressing into a thin line as she shakes her head. "He's not with us, buddy." She clenches her jaw. "He tried to be a big damn hero or something and got himself caught by those kriffing Sith. I'm tempted to just leave his ass there for being so… so
"So, I heard you correctly." Nodding grimly, Juhani tightens her grip on the lightsaber hilt. "Vann was captured in the academy."

Rubbing his hand over his face, Carth sighs heavily as he studies the assembled crew. "Things got a little… messy," he admits. "Vann tried to create a distraction so that I could get the kids out, but I think he underestimated the instructors." Drawing a shaky breath, he closes his eyes as he recalls the look of stubborn determination on the mercenary's face as he urged the rest of his companions to flee the building while he held off Wynn and Ban. "Or maybe he didn't underestimate them. Maybe he knew they were going to beat him. He may have knowingly sacrificed himself so that we could get out alive. I… honestly don't know."

"…Kids?" Jolee takes a few steps closer, peering at Mission for a moment before giving the pilot a curious look.

Before he can form an answer, Carth finds himself temporarily lightheaded with disbelief. Despite their plan for the academy going to hells, and despite the impossibly dangerous rescue mission the crew is now faced with, something good did come from this entire mess. It's the sliver of happiness that he clung to the entire hectic run back to Dreshdae, and the only thing that's currently holding all of his fears at bay. Right now, at this moment, his son is with them on this ship practically within arm's reach. The boy that he believed he lost so many years ago is alive, and well, and waiting a few meters away. Or, at least he's supposed to be. Turning to glance over his shoulder, Carth expects to see his son's black-clad form standing dutifully at the Hawk's entrance. Dustil has been an odd mixture of wary and bewildered since their narrow escape from the academy, and he didn't want to overwhelm the teen by introducing the entire crew at once. But right now, the pilot can't make any introductions because there's a large, empty space where his son should be. Head whipping around, he looks over at Mission, giving her an expectant glare.

"What?" the Twi'lek asks. "What's the matter?"

"Where's Dustil?" Carth demands, voice clipped.

Brow furrowing, Mission sprints towards the ship's entrance. "I dunno," she calls out. "He was right behind me when I boarded!"

Panic grasps Carth's heart, which hammers furiously in his chest as he runs over to the now-closed door. "What the hells?" he shouts. "Dustil and H-Kay were supposed to follow us on…"

"Not to interrupt the welcoming committee," Canderous's voice booms irritably through the hold. "But does anyone know why Vann's droid is standing outside the ship with a rifle pointed at some kid?"

"Oh no…" Slamming his palm against the door release, Carth curses in frustration as he ducks through the half-opened entryway. The docking bay is uncomfortably hot beyond the ship's hull, and the air is arid enough to make his lungs burn. Scanning the enclosed space, he quickly spots the scuffed red form of HK-47, the droid's eyes glowing merrily as he calmly points his rifle at Dustil's chest. Without wasting a moment, the pilot darts down the ship's gangplank, charging towards the pair with an outraged cry of, "What the hells is going on?"

Not lifting his gaze, HK-47's tone sounds almost bored as he explains, "Answer: He was refusing to comply with orders, so I threatened to shoot him."
"This droid is nuts!" Dustil shouts in alarm, both hands raised as he glares at the mechanical figure before him. "All I said was that I wasn't getting on your ship."

"Correction: You said that you weren't getting on the ship and that you were planning to sneak away into the colony where, and I quote, 'My Dad won't be able to track me down.' Head tilting thoughtfully to the side, HK-47 patiently awaits the teen's response.

Lips pressing into a weak smile, Dustil glances guiltily towards his father. "I, uh, well…"

"Statement: My primary orders, as given to me by my Master, are to ensure that you three meatbags arrive back at the Ebon Hawk." A sinister gleam of delight passes though HK-47's eyes as he cheerfully adds, "Using whatever means are necessary."

"You're supposed to protect Dustil, not shoot him!" Hands on her hips, Mission stands on her tip-toes as she attempts to peer over Carth's shoulder. "So, put the damn rifle down, H-Kay!"

The droid seems unmoved by the Twi'lek's order. "Assessment: This particular meatbag was preventing me from completing my orders by refusing to get on the ship. As such, I am required to use alternate forms of persuasion."

"Oh, for the love of…" Dashing up to HK-47, Carth reaches out and grabs the droid by the shoulder, yanking with all his might. "That's not what Vann meant and you know it! Stop looking for an excuse to shoot people, especially my son!"

Jerking back in surprise, the droid glances at the pilot. "Correction: Oh, I never need an excuse to shoot someone." Sighing in disappointment, he lowers his rifle. "Observation: But it seems that I have carried out my orders and returned the three of you to the Ebon Hawk. Just as a common protocol or utility droid might. Without killing anyone." Eyes dimming in disappointment he stalks towards the gangplank, visibly sulking.

Carth wants to continue scolding HK-47, but he's interrupted just as he opens his mouth.

"Your son?" Juhani murmurs in surprise, her head peeking around the ship's doorway just as the droid disappears inside. "So, you were able to rescue him?"

"I assume this is the good news?" Jolee is also standing by the entryway, along with the rest of the crew. Their expressions are a mixture of surprise and delight, aside from Canderous who merely looks annoyed.

"Okay, great. You got your son back." The Mandalorian crosses his arms over his broad chest. "But that doesn't explain where Vann is…"

Juhani's sigh swallows the Human's next words. "Bah! You were too busy with the comm system to hear what Mission said when she boarded the ship." Sadness creeps into her tone as she explains, "Vann was captured. Carth says that he may have sacrificed himself so that the others could escape."

"So, Malak's got him." There's a sense of grim resignation to Canderous's tone.

"That's not true!" Turning to address the rest of the crew, Mission squares her shoulders. "Malak's not at the academy. Not yet, anyway. So, we've still got time to save V-Man before things get really bad."

"Vann? V-Man?" Dustil frowns as he casts a wary look at the group of strangers. "Are you talking about the same man who was battling Master Wynn at the academy?" His voice grows quieter,
eyes glancing around nervously as he asks, "The one Master Ban called… Revan?"

Chuckling humorlessly, Jolee nods. "They're one in the same."

"But… Revan's a traitor!" Drawing a sharp breath, Dustil rapidly shakes his head as he takes a slow step back. One hand drifts towards his belt, where his lightsaber is clipped. "Look, I don't know what you're all doing, but…"

Jerking her chin up challengingly, Juhani glares at the Human teen as she adjusts her grip on her own saber hilt. "Be careful what you say," she hisses softly. "Especially when you do not know the whole story."

"Vann… Revan… He's a lot of things." Carth scrubs a palm over his forehead as he tries to gather his thoughts. "It's… the situation is complicated. There's a lot you don't know." Blinking, he barks out a weak laugh. "Heels, there's a lot I don't know. But I'll explain what I can." He levels his gaze at his son, tone pointed. "But you have to get on the damn ship."

Sighing angrily, Dustil casts a longling glance towards the docking bay exit. "I guess escaping to Dreshdae isn't an option?"

Carth shakes his head. "Nope."

"And I'm guessing that this is going to be a long story?" Dustil's shoulders slump in defeat.

"It is," Jolee agrees with an amused grin. "And you might even learn something from it."

There's shock in Dustil's voice as he asks, "And you're all friends with Revan?"

Snorting at the accusation, Canderous begins walking deeper inside the Hawk. His words are barely audible as he calls back, "I prefer the term 'comrade in arms."

"Well, I'm friends with V-Man. And I'm not about to let one of my friends get turned over to Malak." Mission shifts impatiently from foot to foot, jabbing a finger towards the rest of the crew. "So, you better tell this whole story fast, 'cause we've got planning to do!"

Carth sighs as he nods in agreement. "And to get any planning done, we need to get back on the ship." He forces a weak smile, voice growing just a bit pleading. "All of us."

It takes a bit more coaxing until Dustil finally boards the Ebon Hawk, his shoulders hunched in obvious reluctance. The rest of the crew mills uneasily around him, visibly unsure how to react to his presence. Mission may have been able to ease the tension if she stuck around for more than five minutes before disappearing into the workshop with Zaalbar. But apparently, the pair has a lot of catching up to do, and Carth is fine letting them go. In his mind, the Twi'lek has earned a respite, no matter how brief it may be. But her absence leaves the rest of the organic crew with the complicated task of explaining Vann's story to Dustil, which is an increasingly awkward experience.

The longer they talk, the more Carth realizes that he knows almost nothing about Vann… or Revan. At least Jolee and Juhani have a personal connection to the former Jedi through their Order, while Canderous's unwavering respect for his 'fellow warrior' compensates for his lack of practical knowledge. But the pilot has little more than sanitized military reports and assorted bits of information scavenged from Vann's own scattered memories. It's not much to go on but he still finds himself stubbornly defending each fact he lays out, unable to deny the flutter of genuine warmth that fills his chest when he thinks about his companion. But he doesn't have time to unpack those sentiments right now, so he tries to push them to the back of his mind.
Then Dustil tells the Sith's version of Revan's story, and Carth's affection shifts into a knot of worry as he considers the amount of trouble that Vann has thrown himself into. Canderous's expression grows surlier the longer he listens, while Juhani cautiously clings to the hope that Vann never truly fell. For his part, the pilot is left wondering how many versions of the same story can possibly exist, and where the legend ends and the truth begins. That thought brings forth a flicker of fierce protectiveness that catches him off guard, and in that moment he knows that his personal truth begins and ends with Vann. It's a frightening realization, but it's enough to banish the last of his uncertainty.

In the end, it doesn't matter if Revan is a hero or a conqueror because nothing changes the fact that the crew is working against the clock to save their leader from an uncertain fate.

"I'm not usually an optimist, but from what I know about the hyperspace routes in this part of the galaxy, it could take days for Malak to reach Korriban." Jolee looks around at the rest of the crew, his lips twisting into a thoughtful frown.

"I've been using my contacts to track the movement of the Republic fleet around the galaxy, and it seems like Malak, or at least the Leviathan, is somewhere to our west. The latest chatter says that he's around Corellia." Canderous narrows his eyes, balling both hands into fists. "Of course, they might just be trying to throw us off the Republic's scent. For all we know, Malak's already here."

"The fact that I'm the idealist should tell you just how bad this situation is." Chuckling, Jolee turns a few dials to adjust the holographic map overlaying most of the table. "But if we assume the best, we have a day or two to try and rescue Vann before he's turned over to the Republic."

Glaring at the older man, Canderous sneers. "And if we're realistic about it, we know that we're already running out of time to save his ass."

Scoffing coldly at the Humans' bickering, Juhani studies each of them in turn. "So, does at least one of you have a plan?"

"I have as few ideas. But we're going to nee..." Jolee begins, before being abruptly interrupted mid-sentence.

"We've got these," Canderous announces, holding up a set of grenades that appear cobbled together from a variety of objects. "I've got over a dozen ready, and the kid and the Wookiee are in the workshop making more from our current supplies." His expression turns hard as he explains, "We go in, start throwing these, and see if we can drag Vann out in the chaos."

"No!" Carth shouts back. "That academy is full of students. Children." Shaking his head in disgust, he turns to glance at the seat where Dustil is slumped and watching the crew's discussion with apparent disinterest. "We're not going in and murdering a bunch of kids!"

"They're weapons," Canderous snaps irritably. "Malak's future elite troops. You said it yourself." He leans forward, pressing his face close to the pilot's. "This is war. We don't get to draw neat, tidy lines in the sand and refuse to cross them."

Unable to bite back his response, Carth's tone is cold as he asks, "And how well did those tactics work for your people during the war?"

Chest puffing out with pride, Canderous's teeth are clenched as he grits out, "Our tactics worked pretty damn well. We had your precious Republic on the run, from what I saw." He tilts his head cockily to the side. "At least, our methods were effective until Revan started employing the same techniques."
"I think you're getting Malak and Revan confused," Carth counters, meeting the Mandalorian's gaze. "It was Revan who saved the Republic. Malak's the one who plunged it into fascism and brutality."

Canderous smirks, spitefully hissing, "Revan killed children, in case you forgot. He knew what it took to win a war." Still holding out the grenades, he turns to face the rest of the crew. "And I'm pretty sure Vann would tell us to do whatever's necessary to keep him from being turned over to Malak."

"There's a difference between being a killer and being a monster. Voice defensive, Carth seethes as he glares at the Mandalorian. But a trickle of doubt creeps into his voice as he quietly mutters, "And Vann hasn't crossed that line."

"Sure," Canderous snorts. "Keep telling yourself that. Whatever helps you sleep at night."

"Enough! Both of you!" Wielding the hilt of her lightsaber, Juhani's thumb threatens to ignite the blade as she chastises both Humans. "Fighting amongst ourselves accomplishes nothing. We have heard one plan of action, but I believe there is another."

Nodding sagely, Jolee smirks softly. "A very Jedi-like assessment. There might be hope for you yet, kid."

With a huff, Juhani turns her face from the older Force user. "Just speak your mind, old man!"

"Before I was so rudely interrupted by someone with no respect for his elders," Jolee casts a weary glance toward the Mandalorian, "I was explaining that I think we can use the terrain around the academy to our advantage. The building is set into the mountainside, and there are caves all around it."

"Alright, that's... good, I guess?" Carth looks over the map display, furrowing his brows. "But what's the plan?"

"The plan is to create a distraction inside of those caves." Gesturing to a series of underground rock formations, Jolee continues. "We can set off some sonic pulses that won't cause much damage, but they'll still make one hells of a commotion."

"So, we make some noise?" Throwing his hands up in frustration, Canderous demands, "Then what?!"

"I was getting to that part! Try having a little patience for once!" Clucking in disapproval, Jolee continues pointing to highlighted portions of his map. "The noise and commotion should force the academy to open the front doors to check for danger or structural damage. When that happens, we can sneak one our own people inside." He winks as he adds, "Someone with a very specific set of camouflage and combat skills..."

Releasing an unamused sigh, Juhani asks, "I assume that you are referring to me?"

"No, I meant the damn Wookie." Snorting, Jolee jabs a finger towards the Cathar. "Of course I meant you!"

"Hmm. That could work." Juhani nods to herself for a moment, though her expression quickly grows concerned. "Or I may be sensed immediately. I am not as skilled as Vann at hiding my presence in the Force."

"When has being subtle actually worked for us?" Canderous doesn't wait for an answer before he
yells, "The answer is never!" His features twist into an intimidating grimace as he snarls, "This is Revan we're trying to save, so follow his example and don't hold back!"

"This is Vann we're trying to save!" Carth immediately corrects the other man. "And he wouldn't want us to kill a bunch of children!"

Eyeing the pilot suspiciously, Canderous's tone is mocking as he says, "Your judgment on this matter is impaired, Carth."

"And yours," the pilot spits back, "Is morally kriffing bankrupt!"

"We're not a bunch of stupid kids!" Dustil glares at the rest of the crew as he lets out a cry of indignation, both hands clenched into fists and his jaw tight with irritation.

The sudden interruption is enough to immediately silence Canderous and Carth, both men quickly turning to watch the teen rapidly marching towards them. The rest of the crew has also noticed the outburst, all of them training their focus on the young Human as hands slowly drift towards their various weapons.

Pausing less than a meter from his father, Dustil draws a calming breath. When he speaks again his voice is smoother, though still tense with emotion. "Most of the students in that academy have had their homes destroyed, or their families killed. Some were sold into slavery. Others..." He swallows hard, heaving a shaky sigh. "Look, what I'm trying to say is that none of us have been 'kids' in a long time."

"Like I said, you're warriors." Canderous takes a step towards the teen, looming over the shorter figure. "You understand the cost of fighting a war."

Dustil rapidly shakes his head at the Mandalorian, though he refuses to step back. "But we didn't! At least, not until Master Ban tried to... until Master Wynn..." Anger flares in his eyes and he exhales sharply through his nose. "I'll admit it. There are a lot of jerks in that school. And a lot of good people, too. And none of them deserve to be blown-up just so that you can save one man."

Still gripping her lightsaber hilt, Juhani growls low and deep in her throat. "He is not merely one man..."

"We're not going to blow up any students," Carth hastily cuts in. He offers his son a weak smile. "Not if I have anything to say about it."

Turning away from the father and son with a scoff of disgust, Canderous stares accusingly at the rest of the crew. "So, who here has a better idea? Because I sure as hells haven't heard one."

"Canderous... may be correct. A direct approach could be our best chance to save Vann." Juhani frowns thoughtfully as she admits this, rubbing her free hand against her chin. "But perhaps there is a way to minimize casualties? To give the students warning?"

Seemingly ignoring the rest of the conversation around him, Dustil studies his father. His tone is soft but stern as he asks, "Is he really Revan?" He shifts awkwardly. "I mean I heard your story, and I saw him fight. But... is he Revan? Are you sure?"

Carth's words are hushed as he speaks, a touch of awe in his tone. "I didn't believe it at first either. But I've seen things, and he's done things." Pausing as he recalls the myriad of seemingly-impossible tasks that the mercenary has managed to accomplish, a fond smile alighting on his lips as he admits, "Vann is really, truly Revan. At least, some part of him is."
Features growing somber, Dustil's voice is cold as he states, "Then they'll probably want to make an example out of him."

"But Malak will want him alive. To turn him." Juhani watches the teenager critically. "They cannot kill…"

"Does Malak need him to have all of his fingers? Or both feet?" Voice raised in challenge, Dustil's gaze sweeps the faces of the crew. "…Or his entire jaw?"

"Kriffing hells… they'd do that?" Carth leans closer to his son. "You know this for a fact?"

"They're Sith. Of course they'll torture and disfigure their enemies to make a point." Jolee waves a dismissive hand, even as his lip curls in distaste. "Probably does a great job of scaring those kids into submission…"

"I've seen it happen. Once." Steeling himself, Dustil squares his shoulders. "It was maybe a year after I entered the academy."

Reaching out to pat his son's shoulder, Carth pauses mid-gesture. Biting his lip, his hand hovers uncertainly as he murmurs, "I… that's… I'm sorry. I'm so sorry you had to see something like that."

"Save it," Dustil hisses through clenched teeth. "Your apologies won't bring Selene back."

"If I may ask, what happened?" Juhani keeps her voice steady as she cautiously explains, "It could help us to formulate a plan."

Nodding at the Cathar, Dustil turns away from his father as he continues the story. "Selene, she was a little older than me. And she was always really kind… too kind for that place. She would never advance, and she knew it." His eyes flick towards the floor, words growing softer. "She decided to run away, and it could have worked. She would have been okay. Maybe."

"What went wrong?" Juhani presses.

"She tried to steal some data from the system. She was pretty good at slicing, so I guess she thought she could get away with it." Dustil's expression becomes blank, his gaze growing distant as though he's replaying a memory from another time and place. "But she didn't. They caught her before she reached Dreshdae."

A grim smirk tugs at the corners of Canderous's mouth. "And then they showed you what they do to traitors, didn't they?"

"Yeah. They… they killed her. But it was slow. Horrible." Dustil's head shakes as he recalls the event, his hands trembling slightly. He immediately jams them beneath his robes. "They said that she betrayed the academy, and that meant she betrayed the Republic. And, in the Republic, traitors must suffer."

Jaw dropping in astonishment, Carth is bewildered as he demands, "And you still stayed there? After all of that?"

"The whole thing was a public spectacle! The entire school had to watch!" Dustil glares accusingly at his father, snarling, "I knew my dad was already branded a deserter and I… I was scared." He tries to shrug nonchalantly, but the gesture is jerky and wooden. "I guess after that I just started to believe that she deserved what she got. I kind of had to."

Juhani's tone is oddly sympathetic as she breathes, "I am sorry you had to experience that. But the
information you gave us may be very helpful." She glances towards Jolee, gesturing to the map as she wonders, "This girl, Selene? You said her execution was public and that the entire academy was forced to watch. That would require a large space, yes?"

"They, the instructors, brought us all down to the Valley of the Dark Lords in the shadow of the tombs of the Four Sleeping Kings." Dustil's eyes are still somewhat foggy with the memory, his voice hushed as he admits, "It was my first time in the valley and it was pretty damn intimidating."

"Oh, we know that valley." Jolee chuckles darkly, pointing to the hologram covering the majority of the large table. "We ought to since we've been studying it for days trying to find a way into the Force-damned place. I've got the terrain map right here."

Carth has to fight to keep the tremor from his voice as he asks, "Do you believe that Vann, that Revan, will be treated in the same way as Selene?"

"According to the instructors, Revan is one of the greatest traitors the Republic has ever known." Dustil's expression clears, his words growing more formal as though he's reciting a well-rehearsed speech. "He tempted Supreme Commander Malak and the other Revanchists to taste the dark side, only to turn on them when they fully embraced their true potential. He tried to sacrifice all of his loyal followers to make his own atrocities look better in the eyes of the Jedi Council."

Head shaking in defiance, Carth immediately interjects, "You already said that. So…"

Whirling to face his father, Dustil raises his voice over the older man's as he yells, "What I'm saying is that Masters Wynn and Ban are definitely going to make an example out of Revan. And it sure as hells is going to be public!"

"If they'll be in the valley, I think I've got some ideas…" Jolee is already adding notations to the terrain map, his grin growing wider. "And Canderous, you'll be happy to know that we're going to need those grenades of yours."

The Mandalorian rubs his hands together in anticipation. "I like this plan already."

Reaching up, Carth worriedly rubs one palm over his eyes. "There's still a risk for heavy casualties if the entire school is present."

"That's my concern." Nodding in agreement, Jolee scans the rest of the crew as he assures them, "I think we can corral the students into the safety of the caves once the fighting starts, but I'm going to need some type of distraction."

"Perhaps we can send Mission in again." Juhani glances towards the workshop where the Twi'lek and the Wookiee are still tinkering at the workbench, lost in their own conversation. "After all, she already has a rapport with several of the students."

"And the instructors all want her dead!" Carth exclaims in alarm. "No! That's not an option."

Running a thumb over one of his mines, Canderous shrugs idly. "Like I said, I'm not hearing any other ideas…"

Awkwardly clearing his throat, Dustil raises one hand as he takes a hesitant step towards the Mandalorian. A thin smile pulls at one corner of his mouth as he announces, "I, uh… I might have a thought…"

* * *
Everything hurts. That's the only thing that Vann is aware of as he kneels on a hard stone platform, his arms cuffed behind his back and Yuthura Ban's fingers yanking at his tangled hair. If he's honest, her hand is the only thing holding him steady as his mind attempts to slip in and out of consciousness, his body swaying slightly from one hells of a concussion. While Karath and his neural collars won points for originality, the Sith take the prize for their sheer brutality. In the beginning, they hid their violence behind the thinly veiled premise of interrogating the mercenary for information. But they eventually devolved to simply beating Vann for the sheer joy of it, drawing power from his pain and misery.

Somewhere between a few minutes and a few hours ago, Ban dragged the mercenary out of the academy's frigid basement, prodding him down a dusty path beneath the blazing afternoon sun, jabbing his injured ribs every time he dared to slow down or falter. Eventually, Vann found himself in a makeshift arena built in the shadows of towering tombs, the entire area bathed in the cold malevolence of the dark side. Several instructors and dozens of students are gathered in the valley, the teens' eyes growing wide as they gawk at him and trade hushed whispers. Uthar Wynn has been droning on for a while now, ranting about the traitor Revan, which can only mean that things are about to get exponentially worse.

"Look alive," Ban commands, the words so distant and hazy that the mercenary isn't sure he's actually hearing them. But her slap to the sluggishly bleeding wound in the back of his head drives the message home.

Blinking back his fatigue, Vann fights the urge to collapse as his vision temporarily whites out. He winces, glaring at the Twi'lek as he grumbles, "Hard to do that if you knock me unconscious again…"

Ban merely scoffs, re-twisting her fingers into the mercenary's blood-matted hair she jerks his head back, pressing the nails of her other hand into the swollen cut in his lip. She chuckles at his hiss of discomfort, sneering, "You always did have a smart tongue, Revan."

The jolt of pain sends a fresh surge of anger through Vann, though his mind is too unfocused for him to harness it in any meaningful way. It's enough of an effort for him to remain upright as his head throbs and his thoughts race in disjointed circles. He knows that acted irrationally when he saved his companions and that he probably jeopardized their entire kriffing trip to Korriban. After all, he's the only member of the crew who can sense the Star Map's presence, and they need that map to stop Malak. Vann is supposed to be a master strategist, and he managed to make the least strategic choice possible when he sacrificed himself to save his friends. But the thought of leaving Carth or the kids behind makes his stomach churn, and he can't bring himself to regret his decision.

A hard shove rattles Vann's bones, drawing him back to the present. It takes a moment for him to realize that Wynn has finished speaking and that Ban is grinning down at him with malicious intent. "So, what will it be, Revan?" She grasps his chin with surprising strength, jerking the Human forward. "Should we cut out your tongue as punishment for your crimes? It might make you more pleasant to deal with." She digs the thumb of her free hand into a bruise that's starting to form around her prisoner's right eye. "Or maybe we'll gouge out your eyeballs. After all, I'm sure you can learn to see using the Force…"

"Hate to say it," Vann rasps, "But neither of those options sounds very appealing." Drawing a rattling breath, he forces a smirk as he steels himself for whatever the Sith are planning. They can certainly try to carve him up before handing him over to Malak, but he won't make it easy. He's just beginning to draw upon what little energy is left in his battered body when his concentration is broken by a disturbance in the crowd.
"Is that…?" one student yells in surprise, soon joined by an equally startled shout of, "Dustil! You're back!"

Both Sith instructors glance warily at each other, with Ban remaining focused on guarding Vann as Wynn moves towards the edge of the platform. "What is going on?" he demands.

Sounding breathless, Dustil shoves his way through the crowd until he's face-to-face with his former headmaster. "Master Wynn," he pants. "I heard that we were punishing traitors today."

With a jerk of his shoulder, he triumphantly pushes a bound-and-gagged figure in front of him. "And I found a Republic deserter for you to deal with."

It takes a moment for Vann's eyes to focus, but when he recognizes the teen's prisoner he can't suppress his groan of horror. 'Dammit, Carth,' he thinks to himself. 'Please tell me that this is part of your plan.'

Wynn must also suspect deception as he stares coolly back at the younger Human, and he quickly summons his lightsaber into his hand. The crimson blade ignites with a low hiss, twirling once before coming to rest with its tip aimed at the teen's throat. "From where I'm standing, I see two traitors who deserve retribution."

To his credit, Dustil barely flinches from the lightsaber's heat as he meets the older man's gaze. "I'm not a traitor," he informs the Sith. "And I'm prepared to kill my own father to prove it."

For a moment, Vann is positive that the entire damn valley will be able to sense the teen's lie. But as he reaches out his awareness, he's startled to feel nothing but the icy chill of the dark side flowing ominously around the younger Human. It's as though the threat isn't a part of a distraction, but rather a promise of things to come. Shuddering at the possibility, he begins searching for any signs of a lie coming from Carth. But the pilot is a confusing swirl of hope and doubt.

The strong presence of the dark side also stays Wynn's hand, and he powers down his blade as he studies his former pupil. "The same father who abandoned your family to chase personal glory?" he inquires, one brow arching curiously. "The man who left your mother to die?"

A fresh surge of anger flares around Dustil, and he nods curtly. "The same man."

Tutting in consideration Wynn approaches the bound pilot, using the other man's gag to jerk his head from side to side. Examining the captive, he idly inquires, "And how do you plan to kill your father?"

Head flinching back in surprise, Dustil stammers for a moment before blurting out, "I'm going to stab him through the kriffing heart!"

"That's a rather quick and merciful death," Wynn notes, meeting the pilot's gaze. "Perhaps… too good for a man who's been the center of your anger and hatred for all these years." Releasing the pilot's gag, he trains his attention on his former pupil. "You've spent many hours meditating on all of the ways that your father has failed you. Don't you remember that? All your anger? All your hatred?"

A jolt of desperation lances through Vann, but he clings to the hope that this is all some type of terrible trick as his eyes scan the area for anything to confirm his suspicions. For an instant, he thinks that he spots the telltale shimmer of a stealth field generation amongst the crowd. But the effect is gone a moment after it appears and he's left unsure if he saw anything at all. The only thing that he's positive of is the cold, harsh way the Force blazes around Dustil.
"I... I remember," the teen murmurs, his jaw tightening as his nostrils flare in irritation. Watching in mute horror as Dustil teeters on the precipice of falling completely to the dark side, Vann searches for any indication that the crew is ready to jump out and end this farce. But the surrounding area remains still and silent aside from the hushed mutterings of a few bold students. Carth's emotions remain a miasma of optimism and trepidation, his lack of Force-sensitivity rendering him ignorant towards just how close he is to losing his son. Determined to stop the teen and save the pilot, the mercenary dives forward with a shout. "Dustil," he calls, scrambling on his knees, "Don't fall for it! They're..."

But Ban anticipates the Human's maneuver, catching him by the collar and throwing him to the ground. She uses the hilt of her lightsaber to strike him in the jaw, splaying his battered form across the platform and filling his mouth with a fresh wash of blood. Her thumb threatens to ignite the plasma blade as she warns, "Don't make me cut off your legs!"

"If I were you, I'd kill your father slowly," Wynn muses as though he was never interrupted. "I'd slice his flesh from his bones to make him pay for everything that he's put you through."

A wave of dark energy pulses around Dustil, his eyes narrowing as he tightens his grip on his father's bicep. "Yeah," he whispers, "I should make him die slowly. I should leave him to suffer alone and afraid..."

"Just like your mother," Wynn finishes, his expression almost sympathetic. "Embrace your anger, Dustil. Let your hate fill you. After all, this is the man who took your mother from you."

Something about the cruel smirk that crawls over his son's lips alerts Carth to the fact that he is in very real danger. He suddenly starts to struggle against the binders cuffing his wrists in front of him, his lips moving ineffectively against the wad of fabric shoved between his teeth. Head shaking in denial, he mumbles something that's completely muffled by his gag, his eyes going wide as he stares at the teen in disbelief.

"Mom is dead because of you!" Dustil's pain explodes through the Force in shards of cold anguish, and he whirls around to level an enraged glare directly at his father. A growl bursts from his throat as he draws his lightsaber hilt, igniting the blade and aiming it directly at the older man's chest. The plasma hums weakly as it's pointed at its target. "You deserve to suffer. Just like she did."

Carth's expression grows sorrowful as he meets his son's gaze, and he renews his struggle against his restraints. But someone apparently thought it was a good idea to use real binders on the pilot, preventing him from escaping his son's wrath.

Rolling onto his stomach, Vann struggles to collect his legs beneath him as he once again studies his surroundings for any sign of the crew's intervention. He thinks that he spots a figure sprinting along the cliffs that tower above, but it may be nothing more than a trick of light and shadow. With the situation growing direr by the second, he swallows his discomfort and calls out, "Carth, run! He's fall..."

A swift kick to his damaged ribs lays the mercenary out flat, knocking the air from his lungs. Ban's lightsaber hums to life as she swings the weapon in a smooth arc, digging the tip into the wound burned into the Human's thigh during their earlier duel. "What did I say?" she mocks as the scent of burning flesh wafts into the air.

Unable to bite back his scream of pain, Vann's throat feels raw as he howls in agony, twisting away from the blade as his vision swims and grows dim around the edges.
Dustil looks up when he hears the mercenary's cry, shrinking back as his blade continues to hover centimeters from his father's abdomen. He swallows hard, eyes momentarily darting between the crowd and his target.

Between bouts of physical anguish, Vann manages to catch the teen's momentary hesitation, and hope flares hot and bright within him. His own gaze is sluggish as he resumes searching for any signs of his allies, even as he struggles to maintain his grip on consciousness. He almost misses the flicker of motion drawing closer to the platform, entwined with the familiar thrum of Juhani's Force presence. It only lasts an instant, and the mercenary is ready to label it a hallucination when he notices Dustil watching the exact same spot.

Unfortunately, Wynn also observes his former pupil's divided attention, suspicion creeping into his tone as he asks, "What are you waiting for?" He leans in closer, voice lowering to a conspiratorial hiss as he insists, "This is the man who abandoned your mother. Because of his arrogance, your home was destroyed and millions of people lost their lives. He deserves to die." He uses the Force to press the young man's hand forward a few millimeters, bringing the blade ever closer to the pilot. "Show him the power of your hatred. Make him suffer."

Knuckle turning white around the hilt of his lightsaber, Dustil snarls in annoyance. With a flick of his wrist, he powers down the blade, which sizzles oddly as the crimson plasma fades away. Tossing the hilt aside, he clenches his teeth as he makes a lunge for his father, reaching one hand into the older man's jacket and drawing a concealed blaster pistol. Thumbing off the safety he presses the muzzle to the pilot's forehead, warning, "Master, it's a trap!"

The fear surrounding Carth spikes into the frigid chill of true terror, and he coughs out a muffled curse around the gag as he tries to duck away from the pistol. He manages to wrench his shoulder free from his son's grasp, only to be dragged back into place by a hard Force push from Wynn. Dustil's finger twitches on the trigger, his expression a mixture of anguish and dark determination as he lines up his shot. But before he can pull the trigger a deafening boom rocks the area, shaking the ground and causing many of the students to instinctively duck for cover as they shield their ears from the reverberating noise. A second explosion follows the first, the cacophony raining down from above the valley. Craning his neck upwards, Vann catches the briefest glimpse of an older Human dressed in piecemeal clothing.

As the aftershocks of the explosions dissipate, Ban lunges forward and grabs her prisoner by the collar of his jacket. Digging her nails into the material, she drags him away from the edge of the platform with a mixture of physical strength and Force energy. But before she gets more than a meter a blurred figure in red robes flips onto the platform, lightsaber humming as she places herself protectively over Vann's prone form. With a growl of defiance, Juhani thrusts out her arm, using the Force to send the surprised Twi'lek stumbling backward. It gives the Cathar extra room to crouch beside the mercenary, her free hand retrieving something from within her robes as she continues to hold her lightsaber defensively across her chest. With a sharp jab of her arm, she drives a medpac hypospray into her companion's thigh, injecting a wash of healing chemicals directly into his bloodstream. "Our plan seems to be falling apart," she admits dryly.

The soothing warmth of the medication is a relief, although it only takes the edge off Vann's pain. "Gee," he quips back. "You think? And what's wrong with the kid's lightsaber?"

Head jerking upwards as Ban lets out a yell of rage, Juhani's golden eyes focus on the other woman's charging form. She swings her arms upwards to block the Twi'lek's attack, words stuttering as she explains, "It was… soldered onto its lowest power setting."

Groaning, Vann climbs to his feet. "And the pistol?"
Snarling in annoyance as she deflects another slash from her opponent, Juhani barely manages to hiss, "That's fully functional!"

"Fantastic," Vann mutters irritably. Holding his cuffed arms farther from his back, he adds, "Hey, can you…?"

But Juhani is too engaged in her duel with Ban to notice him, their lightsabers hissing and whirring as they clash in a blur of red. While the Cathar is skilled enough to hold the Sith instructor back, she can't afford to drop her concentration.

"Fan-kriffing-tastic." Stumbling to his feet, Vann sprints awkwardly across the platform in an effort to reach Carth, only to pull up short when the shriek of a blaster erupts nearby. His head whirs around just in time to spot Canderous laying down cover fire to hold back several of the instructors as a small blue figure who looks distinctly like Mission frantically ushers the crowd of students away from the fray. Zaalbar's hairy form hovers protectively nearby, the sharp edges of Bacca's Blade glinting dangerously in the sunlight.

Seeing that the rest of the crew has the situation covered, Vann continues to limp towards Carth. The explosion apparently knocked the pilot to the ground, where he's held in place by the pistol that Dustil is still aiming at his head. Staring coldly at his father, the teen seems to be pointedly ignoring the muffled words the older man is frantically attempting to spit out. But those sounds are mostly drown out by the seductive whispers of Uthar Wynn.

"Punish him," the headmaster urges. "Embrace the full power of the dark side and help me to take this academy back from these rebels and traitors."

Spinning around awkwardly, Vann peers over his shoulder as he tries to channel the Force through his bound hands. It's a modest effort at best, but he's still able to push Wynn backward, nearly knocking him off the low platform. "Carth, if there's a plan, now would be the time…"

Baring his teeth, Wynn turns to face the mercenary. "Revan," he breathes out, low and menacing. "I don't care what Malak says. Today, you die." In a surge of Force power, he rushes forward, saber whirring as he aims to carve through the mercenary's head.

Immediately dropping to his knees, Vann rolls away from the attack just in time. The hot plasma cuts through the air centimeters from the top of his head, singeing a few hairs in the process. Grimacing as he reopens his various injuries, he tries to focus on the pain and draw power from it, using the burst of strength to propel himself back to his feet as he prepares to dodge another blow. Electricity tingles along his fingertips in anticipation.

"Dustil, listen to me!" Carth gasps, having somehow managed to work the gag out of his mouth. "I don't know how many more ways I can apologize for what happened to your mother…"

Vann doesn't catch the rest of his companion's words, as he's too busy diving to the ground and sliding awkwardly across the stone surface, bruising his flesh on a few sharp rocks in the process. Wynn makes two more fierce slashes, the first hitting nothing but air, and the second burning through the platform in a shower of molten sparks. The mercenary manages to deflect a third hit with an awkwardly aimed bolt of lightning, the purple fork of electricity sizzling loudly as it strikes just over the headmaster's right shoulder.

"…never fix what happened!" Dustil's tone is uneven as he screams at his father, his voice quivering with anger and what might be tears. "You can never make up for losing Mom!"

"And I'm not trying to." Carth's words are also thick with emotion. "I can't fix what you've been
While Vann wants to listen to the tense conversation going on behind him, he's too preoccupied with staying just beyond Wynn's strike range. Every muscle in his body is aching as he aggravates his various injuries, while sweat beads across his forehead and drips down his back. But he *has* to keep Wynn occupied. Distantly, he notes that Juhani and Ban have moved their duel beyond the platform, the pair evenly matched and panting from exertion. A glance into the valley reveals that most of the students have cleared out, leaving the Ebon Hawk's crew to deal with the remaining instructors. Lightsabers and blasters hum and shriek as bolts and blades whizz through the air, but that's all background static. Crawling across the cracked stone platform, the mercenary scrambles to inelegantly tumble away from the headmaster's increasingly-ferocious attacks.

"Kriffing hells!" Vann yelps as the edge of Wynn's weapon burns his shin. The pain momentarily freezes him in place, and it's a miracle of the Force that he manages to roll away from a slash aimed for his throat. The panicked dodge sends him skidding towards Carth and Dustil, and he catches another snippet of their conversation.

"...only way you can make your peace with all of this is to shoot me, then do it!" The words burst forth from the pilot's lips, heavy with determination.

Tightening his jaw, Vann scrambles back to his feet as he attempts to sprint towards his companion. "Carth!" he shouts in alarm. "Kriffing hells, what are you…"

The loud crackle of Force lightning halts the mercenary mid-stride, and he hurriedly backpedals as Wynn sends down a bolt of electricity centimeters from his face. The flash of light temporarily obscures his vision with a burst of white dots, forcing him to blindly dive forward and press himself against the ground in a feeble attempt to become a smaller target. Unable to clearly see anything going on around him, the high-pitched squeal of a nearby blaster shot causes him to yelp in surprise, terror momentarily seizing his heart.

He manages to spin around just as his vision clarifies, in time to see the thin wisp of smoke rising from the pistol in Dustil's hand. Crystalline trails of moisture run down both of the teen's cheeks and his lip wobbles uncertainly as he stares at his father with raw anguish. Carth merely stares back, shock painting his features, and suddenly Vann feels a scream of panic catch in his throat. But before the sound can escape, the pilot dives forward and wraps his son in a crushing hug, voice muffled against the teen's neck as he murmurs, "I knew you couldn't do it. I knew you weren't like them…"

Relief washes through Vann, his shoulders sagging heavily as his shout fades into nothing more than an easy sigh. His muscles feel oddly lax, the pain drifting away for a moment as he watches the tearful embrace between father and son. The pistol tumbles from Dustil's fingers as he drapes his arms around his father's chest, burying his face into the older man's shoulder as his own body shakes with sobs. "I'm sorry," he whimpers, the words a jumbled mess of sniffles and hiccups. "I'm so sorry!"

"Well, I suppose that settles it." Wynn's tone is bitter as he observes the scene before him. The dark side swells around him like a tidal wave of ice, jagged and crushing as it pours forth from his fingertips.

Vann sees the lightning erupt and instinctively reaches his hand up to intercept the blazing purple bolts in an attempt to absorb and redirect the attack. But his arms are still cuffed behind his back, and he's unable to lift his fingers high enough to call the electricity into his own body. Shouting in frustration, he's barely able to compose himself long enough to yell, "Carth, look out!

"I knew you couldn't do it. I knew you weren't like them…"
The pilot and his son both raise their heads up at the same time, their eyes simultaneously growing wide as the headmaster's attack arcs towards them in a deadly storm. Carth initially tries to turn his back to block the lightning, or at least protect Dustil from the worst of its effects. However, it's the teen who acts faster, his hand shooting upwards so that the purple forks of electricity strike his palm and course directly into his own body. It's the same technique that Vann used inside of the academy, but it's executed with far less skill. Instead of redirecting the attack back at Wynn, Dustil merely absorbs the entity of the blow, his body shaking violently as the lightning flows through him. A few sparks manage to leave his fingertips, but it's a futile effort.

Watching as his son is electrocuted in his arms, Carth shouts in horror at the sight. But the sound is distant and ghostly to Vann, whose awareness is suddenly limited to the other man's pain as it surrounds him in the Force. Equally vague is the call of distress that comes from another crew member. It's hard to tell who, as the mercenary's world is folding into a frigid pinpoint of rage, his vision fading to black as he feels his Force power building in his chest and roaring out through his hands. The energy erupts in torrents, his throat growing raw as he howls out his anger and frustration, every fiber of his being tingling with cold, primal fury.

Vann isn't sure exactly what happens after that moment as his mind goes blank, only returning to full consciousness when he hears a voice softly calling his name.

"V-Man? Vann?" Mission's tone is gentle, almost placating as she stands about a meter away from the mercenary, both hands held aloft to reveal that she's unarmed. "Are... are you okay?"

Drawing a gasping breath, Vann blinks rapidly to clear his foggy brain, slowly turning to look at the Twi'lek teen. "...Huh?"

"Alright," another voice says from just over Vann's left shoulder. "I'm going to undo those cuffs. And it's probably going to hurt, so don't go choking me or something else equally ungrateful."

Jolee's touch is light as he carefully unlocks the binders still restraining the mercenary's arms behind his back.

"Ow!" Vann yelps, immediately drawing his hands towards his chest as he attempts to roll the stiffness out of his shoulders. Looking down at his wrists, he sees what appear to be fresh burns marring his flesh, the skin already blistering and puckering where the cuffs were. "What the hells happened?" he asks muzzily.

"You... don't remember?" Juhani eyes the mercenary carefully from her position a few meters away, both of her hands roughly supporting an unconscious, purple-skinned figure.

Shaking his head, Vann swallows hard as he cautiously takes in the concerned faces of the rest of the crew. Slumping abashedly, he mutters, "Aw shit, what did I do this time?"

For a moment, there's nothing but awkward silence as everyone's eyes immediately search for someone else to shoulder the responsibility of explaining the situation. Jolee is the first to find his voice.

"Lightning," the older Force user explains. "And lots of it." Jerking a weathered finger towards a smoking corpse, he adds "I think it's safe to say that Uthar here won't be training any more students."

Chuckling in amusement, Canderous nods. "Same goes for the rest of them." He jerks the muzzle of his heavy blaster towards the remains of the rest of the academy's instructors, who are all collapsed on the ground wearing identically distorted expressions of pain and surprise. "That was even more impressive than Tatooine."
Heaving a groan of disgust, Vann scrubs both palms over his face as he tries to recall everything that lead up to this moment. He knows that something made him inordinately furious and that he temporarily lost control yet again. And this time he can't blame the incident on the 'ghost' of Revan, seeing as how that was never really an excuse to begin with. No, he was in complete control up to and including the moment that Dustil…

"Oh shit," Vann breathes, head jerking violently to the side as he searches for any signs of Carth or his son. "Dustil, he…"

"He's still breathing." The pilot's voice is thin as he gently cradles the teen's head in his lap, fingers carefully carding through his son's dark hair. "But I don't think… I mean he's starting to…” His voice cracks, a swell of emotion pouring out around him. "I don't think he's going to make it.”

Heedless of the dozen aches and pains shooting through his body, Vann sprints over to where the pilot is sitting. Upon reaching the other man he falls to his knees, hurriedly examining the unmoving teen. "Let me see him," he frantically orders. "I can help."

Eyes wet with tears, Carth shakes his head. "Vann," he murmurs, "It's too late. He already absorbed the lightning. It's not like you can…"

"Just kriffing let me try!" The mercenary's words are tinged with hysteria as he presses both palms against Dustil's chest and squeezes his eyes shut. Drawing a shaky breath, he adds, "I… I can heal him. I know I can."

"You're exhausted." Tone defeated, Carth allows fresh tears to fall on his son's brow. "And you said yourself that you've never…"

"I have to try!" Eyes still closed, Vann can feel the pilot's doubt seeping into the Force, but he pushes past that emotion. He pushes past all of the emotions currently swirling around him in a vortex of sadness and anger. He even tamps down on his own fears and annoyances, instead trying to draw upon anything even remotely positive.

For several long moments, nothing comes to mind, and Vann is afraid that any attempts to heal the teen are going to end before he even begins. But then he hears, or maybe he feels, the barest whisper of four words as they float through the Force.

"Dustil… I love you."

It's a faint flicker of warmth that Vann clings to, drawing it within himself and holding it close. The little burst of affection between father and son is like a spark, and he focuses on growing the sensation until it's a blazing well of power sizzling beneath his skin and surging through his limbs. This time the white-hot rush of healing energy is less painful as it cascades forth, soothing his body and mind as it flows from his palms and infuses Dustil's still form.

For an instant, it feels like Vann's mind is floating untethered from his body, and when he returns to himself it takes a few more seconds until he's able to summon enough concentration to open his eyes. As his higher functions filter back into his brain, he realizes that he's gasping for breath and trembling from the exhaustion that he's been fighting off for days. Blinking blearily, he stares down at the teen, barely noticing as Dustil begins to cough and wheeze, awkwardly brushing away his father's hands as he fights to look around.

"…Dad?" he asks weakly.

And suddenly Carth is crying again, though this time it's mixed with genuine laughter as he bends
down and wraps his son in another powerful hug. "You're alive!" he yells. "Oh Force, you're alive. He did it... I'm not sure how, but he did it!"

Crawling away to give the pair some privacy, Vann feels his thighs begin to buckle. Swaying once, he barely notices the fresh burst of pain as he collapses to the ground, his head hitting the hard-packed dirt with a resounding thud. The world swirls oddly around him, and he's ready to surrender to the bliss of unconsciousness when something sharp pinches his thigh. A warm rush of chemicals floods his bloodstream, closing the worst of his wounds and helping to clarify his thoughts.

"I'm sorry," Juhani offers as she discards the expended hypospray. "But you cannot sleep. Not yet."

Groggily turning his head to look at the Cathar, Vann slurs, "I just killed a bunch of people, and then saved a life. I think I've earned a kriffing nap."

"Malak is coming," Jolee warns, his expression grim.

Waving a hand, Vann lets his eyes fall shut. "Let 'im."

"We still need the map."

Vann is unsure who says the last sentence, but it's enough to force his eyelids open in sudden realization. "Oh hells," he curses. "That's right." Struggling to control his shaking limbs, he manages to sit up and look at the rest of the crew. "Do you... even know where it is?"

"It is somewhere in this valley," Juhani offers. "Though more we do not know. For that, we need you."

"Dammit." Rubbing his knuckles against his eyes, Vann draws a few calming breaths. "So. Any chance that the map is in, I don't know, a big empty room with an unlocked door that we can just walk into without any problems?"

"Nope," Jolee responds with mock cheer. "But it's probably in a tomb with lots of traps. The ancient Sith were a paranoid group."

Letting himself fall back to the ground, Vann stares blankly up at the sky. "Oh. Great." Turning to look at the other Force users, he frowns deeply as he admits, "There's no way I can get through a tomb full of traps. Not in the shape I'm in. Maybe tomorrow...?"

Juhani shakes her head. "We have hours, not days."

"But hey," Canderous hoists his repeating blaster with a wide grin. "The good news is that you don't have to get through the tomb. We can do the work for you." Patting the weapon, he adds, "Hells, I think it'll be fun."

"Yeah, it will!" Wiggling her fingers in anticipation, Mission nudges Zaalbar with her shoulder.

"Vann," the Wookiee says somberly, "We have all chosen to follow you because we believe in your cause and wish to help you. So please allow us to do so."

"We merely need you to tell us where the map is, as you are the only one who can sense it." Still supporting Yuthura Ban's unconscious form, Juhani smiles smugly. "You can trust us to get you to the location. After all, I believe we have proven ourselves quite capable."

"So, all I have to do is find the map, and you'll get me there?" Vann looks around at the expectant faces of his companions.
"Well," Jolee says with a snort, "Don't make it sound too easy. But yes, that's the idea."

Nodding weakly to himself, Vann winces as he carefully climbs to his feet. "Okay. I think I can do that."

* * *

"Who the hells thought it was a good idea to leave a bunch of wild animals in a kriffing tomb?" Vann glares at the corpse of one of the beasts that attacked the three Force users before giving it a swift kick.

Gasping as she attempts to catch her breath, Juhani studies the bodies now littering the underground room. "I believe these are terentateks," she muses. "Quatra told me tales of them. That they hunt Force-sensitive individuals..."

"Yeah, I don't care what they are," Vann cuts in. "I'm just glad they're dead."

"Well, don't get too cocky," Canderous shouts from the next room. "It looks like those teren-whatevers are only the beginning of your problems."

Braced against the nearest wall, Vann takes a moment to gather his strength before calling back, "Are there more hidden mines?"

"Nope!" Mission replies sardonically. "I wish that's what I was looking at."

Casting a worried glance at both Jolee and Juhani, Vann sighs deeply as he focuses his mind and extends his awareness, sending tendrils through the Force to test the path ahead. A chill tingles its way down his spine, warning of impending danger. But he also feels a haunting echo that resonates to his very bones, carrying a familiar presence both ancient and dark. The Star Map has been calling to him since the crew entered this tomb, and it feels closer now than ever before. Despite his fatigue, he presses forward, the short jog to the next room making his legs feel even wearier.

The weariness spreads throughout his body when he sees their next obstacle. "Is that...?"

Picking up a pebble, Canderous tosses the small bit of rock into the bubbling green liquid that fills the path ahead. The stone hits with a dull plunk before immediately starting to sizzle and smoke as it rapidly disintegrates in a burst of sulfurous gas.

"It's acid," the Mandalorian confirms.

Biting her bottom lip as she stares at the wide pit of deadly liquid, Mission asks, "Who the hells built this place? Those mines in the front were super hard to disarm." She glances towards the Force users. "And those things with the crazy claws almost tore you apart!"

"Ancient Sith," Jolee answers sagely. "I did warn you that they were paranoid as all hells, but nobody listened to me..."

"We listened, old man," Juhani snaps back. "But your words did not change the challenges that awaited us." Shifting her gaze to study the acid, she hums thoughtfully. "Could we perhaps find a way around? There are many tunnels in this tomb."

"From what I can tell, we've already been inside every other kriffing tunnel this place has to offer."

"We've been mapping the area since we got inside, and from what I can tell every other route dead-ends before this point." He nods towards the obstacle blocking their path. "There's only one way forward, and..."
you're staring at it."

The entire group falls silent for a moment, obviously contemplating the seemingly-impossible situation. Mission is the first to speak, her lips twisting into a thoughtful frown as she asks, "I mean, isn't there some way to make the acid less... acid-y?" Upon seeing the doubtful expressions on the others' faces, she throws up her hands in frustration. "All I'm asking is if you can you burn it away or freeze it or something!"

"Huh." Retrieving two grenades from his pouch, Canderous considers them both for a moment before offering them to Vann. "I do have a plasma and a freeze grenade. I'm not sure which one would be better, but..."

"Can acid be frozen?" Juhani arches a curious brow. "I apologize, I am not knowledgeable about these types of things."

Jerking a thumb towards the grenades, Canderous chuckles. "Anything can be frozen if you throw enough of those at it."

"I don't know if acid can freeze, but I know it can explode." Jolee scowls at the others. "The heat breaks the chemicals down into more flammable components and boom!" Clapping his hands for effect, he lowers his voice ominously. "You've got a great big fireball that will kill us all."

"But if acid can't freeze and we try to walk across it anyway..." Mission flails her arms around and lolls her tongue out in a pantomime of being dissolved alive. "Bam! Dead."

Staring down at the grenades in his hand, Vann fights the urge to sit down on the stone floor and give up. His entire body is throbbing in pain, and his mind is hazy with exhaustion and one hells of a concussion. It's become obvious that medpacs aren't enough to cure his ails, and all he really wants is sleep. Which is the one thing he can't afford at this moment. His free hand drops listlessly to his side, brushing against his commlink. Fingers hovering over the device, his lips press into a faint smile.

"Well, how about another opinion before we all die horribly?" Unclipping the comm from his belt, he presses a button on the side. "Hey Carth?" he calls into the receiver. "We have a question..."

There's a burst of static from the other end, followed by the pilot's apprehensive voice. "Uh, sure..." he responds hesitantly. "Does this mean you have the map?"

"Nope. We've ah... run into a little problem." Vann pauses before slowly drawling, "How much do you know about acid?"

"What are you..." Carth sighs heavily, the sound broadcast over the commlink with surprising clarity. "You know what? Never mind. I probably don't want to know."

"Just answer the damn question," Canderous growls, his voice loud enough to be heard on the other end. "The faster we figure this out, the sooner we can get the hells off this planet."

"Look, I know about ships, star charts, trade routes, blaster pistols..." The pilot can practically be heard wincing as he admits, "But I don't know a lot about acid. Other than the fact that it explodes if you set it on fire."

Jolee's eyebrows arch haughtily as he smiles smugly at the others, nodding as he points to the commlink. Vann can only groan in response, feeling even wearier as he says, "Alright, no fire. That's actually good to know. But what about freezing? Can acid freeze?"
"How the hells…" There's a muffled sound on the other end of the comm as though someone else has suddenly grabbed it. The next moment, a new voice comes over the speaker.

"Umm, what type of acid?"

"Dustil!" Mission's lips quirk into a bright grin, and she presses herself closer to Vann as she leans towards the commlink. "I'm glad that you're, you know, able to talk and stuff!"

"Yeah, uh, my dad and I are almost done clearing out the academy…" The teen trails off awkwardly, his voice lowering to a mumble. "It's pretty empty now. We… we got the rest of students out." He clears his throat, the sound crackling over the comm. "But… the acid?"

Mission jerks her head up, nodding for a moment before remembering that she can't be seen on the other end of the commlink. "Oh, right! The acid." She glances over her shoulder at the pool. "It's… green. And bubbling. And it dissolved a rock."

"That… that sounds like acid," Dustil murmurs in agreement. "How much of it is there?"

After staring at the sizzling pit for several moments, Vann manages to describe, "It's enough to fill a pretty big hallway. We can't tell how deep it goes, but I'm betting that it's at least a meter."

Drawing an audible breath, Dustil asks, "And what are you freezing it with?"

After another tense pause, Vann practically whispers, "…A freeze grenade."

"Huh." There's some muffled yelling from the other end of the commlink, though the words are indistinct and impossible to make out. Surprisingly, Dustil finally responds with, "You know what? That might actually work."

"Are you sure?" Vann can feel his brow furrowing in concern. "How do even you know this?"

"The instructors were teaching us about acids right before…" Trailing off, Dustil falls silent for a few seconds as his breathing becomes tight. He inhales sharply as he hurriedly states, "Anyway, they said that we should know how acids react. That it might be part of a test."

"Might that test be something along the lines of navigating an ancient tomb and getting past a pit of acid?" Voice amused, Jolee shakes his head in disapproval. "Damn Sith…"

Dustil swallows hard. "Uh, maybe?"

"Well, I'll be sure to thank Yuthura when we see her next," Vann quips sarcastically as he remembers the Twi'lek who's currently a prisoner on the Hawk under Zaalbar's careful watch. "Once we figure out what to do with her."

"I'm glad I could help," Dustil replies, tone somewhat sheepish. "But we should get back to checking the building."

Lips tugging into a worried frown, Mission hesitantly asks, "Are the other students okay?"

"Everyone seems to be fine." Dustil's response causes the Twi'lek to sigh in relief. "But most of them don't know where to go. Maybe… Master Ban can help? She might know if any of them have families left."

Recalling the Twi'lek instructor's cruel words and harsh smile, Vann suppresses a shudder. "We'll figure it out later. Because right now, we have some acid to freeze."
"Hey, Vann," Carth's voice crackles over the speaker. "I know this is pointless to say, but be careful. Please?"

"I'll be sure to freeze this giant pool of acid as delicately and gently as possible," the mercenary offers with a roll of his eyes.

Huffing in irritation, Carth mumbles, "That's not what I meant…"

"I know what you meant!" Vann says, voice audibly exasperated. "Look, we've come too far to kriff it all up now. We going to freeze this acid, get the last piece of this damn map, and then meet you back at the ship."

"You better." A trickle of amusement can be heard in Carth's tone. "Because we found your lightsabers and the rest of your gear."

Relief washes over Vann, making his limbs feel temporarily loose and light. "Oh, thank the Force."

"Well, now you have a compelling reason to get your ass back here." Carth laughs a little at this, sounding more at-ease than he has in days. "We'll see you all back at the ship."

"See you there." Turning off his commlink, Vann nods once to himself as he clips it back to his belt. Handing the plasma grenade back to Canderous, he eyes the freeze grenade for a moment before turning to look at the rest of the crew. "So, would anyone else like the honors?"

"Just throw the damn thing," the Mandalorian urges as he packs the spare grenade away.

Drawing a breath to steady himself, Vann pulls the pin to activate the grenade. "I really hope this works," he grumbles as he draws his arm back before lobbing the explosive directly into the deep pool of bubbling acid. The grenade lands with a solid plop, its outer casing immediately beginning to sizzle on contact. It quickly sinks into the corrosive liquid, remaining inert as it disappears from view.

"Well," Vann states, watching as the grenade vanishes. "That was…"

An instant later the entire pit rumbles, shaking the ground and causing small bits of rock to come loose from the ceiling. The tiny pebbles rain down in a hail of rubble, pelting the crew as they move their arms to protect their faces. The long hallway immediately fills with an unnatural chill, the cold air blasting through the stone chamber with such ferocity that Vann actually shivers in discomfort. As he exhales he can see his breath form a thick white fog that quickly dissipates.

Looking up, the mercenary sees that the greenish surface of the acid pool has fallen still, a few bubbles and ripples frozen in place. He takes a cautious step closer, peering carefully at the pit in an attempt to see if it's become solid enough to walk across. Before he can get a good look, a pebble flies past the left side of his face and lands on the chilled surface, skipping along until it comes to a skidding halt on the other side. Head whipping around to glare over his shoulder, Vann sees Canderous preparing to toss a slightly larger rock at the acid.

"What?" the Mandalorian asks. "If it cracks from a rock, it's not going to hold any of us."

There's a general murmur of approval as everyone turns to watch Canderous toss the second rock, which bounces and slides just like the first. "So," Vann announces after the projectile comes to a halt, "It didn't crack."

There's another moment of tension as the group exchanges doubtful glances, everyone muttering simultaneous excuses for why they shouldn't be the first across.
"I'm old," Jolee argues. "And slow."

Tapping his armor, Canderous snorts, "And I'm the heaviest one here. The kid might be able to dart across…"

"Hey!" Hands on her hips, Mission glares balefully at the Mandalorian. "Just because I'm…"

Clipping her lightsaber to her belt, Juhani snarls as she shoulders her way past the rest of her companions. "I'll go," she announces. "Since the rest of you are apparently unwilling to take the risk." Scoffing at the others' reluctance, she lightly presses one foot against the frozen acid, testing its stability before drawing a breath and leaning her full weight on the uneven green surface. The acid makes a low hiss, but it holds firm beneath the Cathar's boot. With a final grunt of determination, she sprints across the obstacle using the Force to augment her speed.

The acid gurgles and fizzes with each step Juhani takes, but the surface remains intact by the time she reaches the other side. Spinning on her heel, she turns and beckons to her companions. "It's safe," she assures them. "Hurry, before it melts."

"So," Vann states, breathing deeply. "One at a time?"

"Quickly and stupidly," Canderous agrees with a smirk. "Just like everything else we do."

"Vann should go first," Jolee decides. "We'll need him once we reach the map."

"Okay." Nodding, Vann tenses his legs, taking a moment to stretch his aching muscles before bolting towards the frozen pit of acid. He can feel the coldness the moment his boots hit the surface, which is surprisingly slick beneath his feet. There are a series of ominous crackles and pops as he hastens across using the Force, but the pool remains firm and unyielding. He still breathes a sigh of relief when he reaches the safety of solid ground.

Before Vann can call out to the next crew member Mission dives past Canderous and Jolee, her petite body still causing the acid to sputter and fizzle beneath her weight. Each new sound causes her to wince and skid, though she still manages to make it to the other side without issue. Once there she falls to her knees, pressing her hands appreciatively against the ground. "Kriffing hells!"

"Yeah, I've noticed." Canderous's expression is dour as he gingerly jogs across the acid, the surface popping and fizzing louder than before. As his heavy boots land in the center of the pool, a loud snapping sound echoes through the stone hallway. An instant later a thin web of cracks begins to appear on the acid's surface, smoke rising up from between the breaks and causing them to widen. "Shit!" the Mandalorian shouts in alarm.

Jolee flips spryly through the air, landing less than a meter from Canderous as he places a hand on the other man's shoulder and uses the Force to create a thin protective shield around them both. New cracks are already appearing beneath both men's feet, the acidic smoke swirling upward and eating holes in their clothing. As the Mandalorian stares in horror at the rapidly melting surface, the older Human pushes him forward, ordering, "Keep moving, you idiot!" The pair sprints towards safety as more cracks appear, the smoke billowing up in a corrosive mist.

Stumbling towards the edge of the pit, Canderous trips when a huge chunk of the acid breaks away, melting into nothingness and causing the entire surface to shudder. He's lucky enough to land on a frozen portion of the pool, though he still roars in pain when the smoke touches his skin. Jolee is close behind, arms waving wildly as he struggles to keep his balance. Without thinking Vann reaches out, harnessing the Force and wrapping it around both of his companions. They yelp
in surprise as they're yanked inelegantly forward, their limbs flailing as they're pulled to safety just as another loud crackle reverberates through the chamber. Less than a second later, a majority of the frozen surface collapses as it dissolves in a cloud of toxic fumes.

Falling to the ground in sheer exhaustion, Vann blinks blearily as he assesses his companions, most of who are now laying on the floor around him. His voice is barely a whisper as he asks, "Is everyone okay?"

It takes a moment for the hesitant, garbled responses to come back confirming that everyone has made it across alive and in one piece. Canderous is muttering curses about some damaged gear, but his voice has less vehemence than normal.

"Great," Vann winces as he slowly staggers to his feet. "Let's never do that again."

"Uh, for once I think we're all in agreement," Mission states with a roll of her eyes.

Wiping a palm across her forehead, Juhaani peers at the mercenary as she asks, "Do… you at least sense the map nearby?"

Teetering on his feet, Vann is about to extend his awareness when he realizes that he doesn't need to. Turning his head, he can see around the corner of the corridor and into the next room, his eyes barely cutting through the gloom. But it doesn't take much effort to spot the large, mechanical structure standing ominously in the cavernous chamber, its presence a spot of cold, powerful energy within the Force. He doesn't say anything as he steps forward on shaky legs, his gaze never leaving the shadowy device as he steadily walks towards it in a haze.

He falls more than couches by the mechanical structure, palms dropping heavily to press against the disc-like base. His mind is cloudy and unfocused as the metal arms swing down and a bright orb of color fills the murkiness of the tomb. He can't tell if he's becoming lost in his own memories, or if he's finally reached a point where he's too tired to function. Nor does he care. Minutes pass, or maybe it's only seconds, as he slumps in front of the map trying to process the displayed coordinates even after the device's arms fold back up and the room is once again plunged into darkness.

"Vann," Juhanis says with surprising gentleness. "We have the map. I've collected the data, and once we get back to the ship we can plot a course to the Star Forge."

"And we can finally figure out where that son-of-a-kath-hound Malak is hiding!" Mission punches her fist through the air with a flourish. "And then we can find him and kick his ass!"

"Oh," is all Vann can utter. He's aware of strong hands, probably Canderous's, hauling him to his feet, but the sensation is oddly distant.

"Come on kid, we've got to get back to the Hawk." Smiling weakly, Jolee gives the mercenary a firm pat on the shoulder. "Before Malak gets here and makes things even more interesting."

Carefully tucking her datapad back into her robes, Juhanis moves to support the Human. "And when we are back on the ship, you can finally get some sleep."

"And you can see Carth," Canderous adds with an amused grin. "And listen to him complain, since that's what he does best."

Vann can't hide the faint smile that plays on his lips at the thought of the pilot. "Yeah, Carth," he replies. "Let's not tell him that acid doesn't stay frozen."
Chapter End Notes

1. I apologize that this chapter took so long to post. It went through an extended writing process and quite a few edits.

2. I'm not 100% positive what the space around Korriban is like, but from my research it seems that there's no direct regularly-traveled route between Corellia and Korriban. If Malak wants to take the easier and safer path, he has to go from Corellia to Coruscant (the Corellian Run), and then Coruscant to Korriban (the Dragon Trail). Since Corellia to Coruscant involves navigating around the Deep Core, that would add extra time.

3. Acids react when heated or exposed to other chemicals, their bonds breaking down and forming explosive hydrogen gas. Long story short, don't put acids near an open flame.

4. Acids do freeze, though at varying temperatures. Some acids freeze at MUCH lower temperatures than water, meaning that they won't stay frozen very long at room temperature. Assume that the acid in the tomb was this type of acid.

5. And that wraps up the search for the Star Maps!

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The Ebon Hawk Part III

Chapter Summary

In which the final plans are made for the Star Forge. The crew attempts to make peace with their decisions, though some are admittedly better at it than others.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

25.

Yawning sleepily, Vann wipes his knuckles against his eyes as he shuffles towards the main hold of the Ebon Hawk, his mind still struggling to regain clarity after multiple days asleep. Or, at least he thinks it was more than one day. While using the sonic to scrub away the residual grime of Korriban, he realized that he's actually unsure how long he's been out. Everything after the retrieval of the Star Map is a blur, only made worse by the nebulous passage of time during hyperspace travel. As he struggles to count his lost days he idly rubs the new scar marring his right thigh, courtesy of Yuthura's tender mercies. Of course, this new blemish looks like a scratch compared to the memento that Malak carved into his abdomen three years ago.

As the mercenary enters the hold, he's accosted by a blue blur that immediately attaches herself to his waist with a squeal of delight.

"V-Man!" Mission yelps excitedly. "I was getting worried. You were asleep for a really long time."

Looking helplessly around the room, Vann finally spots several of his crewmates as he gingerly pats the Twi'lek's shoulder. "It couldn't have been that long… right?"

"Two days," Juhani clarifies. "Though you were in the medical bay for another day and a half before that. However, you weren't necessarily asleep during that time."

"Mainly because you were so full of stimulants that your brain couldn't enter REM sleep," Jolee scolds the younger man. "And Canderous wouldn't tell us what as in those stimulants…"

Irritably shoving a bite of food into his mouth, the Mandalorian growls, "My people are entitled to some secrets."

"So, we had one hells of a time flushing all of that crap out of you," Jolee finishes. Narrowing his eyes, he glares at the mercenary. "You're lucky that you're so strong with the Force, or you could have killed yourself. Not that the Sith didn't try to literally throttle the life out of you."

"Three fractured ribs, to be precise. And a concussion." Juhani ticks the list of injuries off on her fingers. "Not to mention multiple contusions, burns, lacerations…"

"I get it, I get it," Vann shushes the Cathar as he carefully extracts Mission from around his waist. "I'm lucky to be alive. Though, I have survived worse."

An awkward hush descends over the crew, with Jolee and Juhani glancing warily at each other as Mission turns to study the ceiling as she attempts to nonchalantly whistle. Canderous is the only
one who seems unbothered by the mercenary's comment, and he continues to greedily consume his meal.

Sighing heavily, Vann taps a finger over the grisly line of raised tissue that runs from rib cage to hipbone. "So, I take it that you've all seen the scar."

"I... was not going to pry," Juhani replies with a terse smile. "But I was rather curious."

"No," Mission corrects the Cathar. "What you said was 'how the hells is he not dead,' which is basically what we were all thinking at the time."

"I did not say..."

"It was Malak," Vann interjects. "We had a lightsaber duel. It's... a long story. But if it makes you feel better, I took off his lower jaw."

"Heh," Canderous smirks around a spoonful of food. "I always wondered who I had to thank for that. Figures it would be Revan."

Dropping into one of the seats, Vann slings his leg up as he wonders, "So, has the entire crew seen me naked? I just want to know if I have any modesty left to protect."

Lips twisting into a worried frown, Mission plops down beside the mercenary. "Don't you remember, V-Man?"

Vann stares blankly at the Twi'lek. "Remember what?"

"You were having trouble breathing on the way back to Dreshdae." Expression growing distressed at the memory, Juhani carefully watches the Human. "We were unsure of the reason and needed to examine you. Specifically, we needed to check your chest."

Shaking his head, Jolee tuts disapprovingly. "Turns out that three cracked ribs and enough adrenal stimulants to wind-up a rancor make for a bad combination."

"I'll keep that in mind for next time," Vann grumbles. Turning back to the Twi'lek he adds, "And no, I really don't remember getting back to Dreshdae. Or even getting out of the damn tomb. Were we... crawling? Or did I imagine that?"

"I wish you imagined it!" Jolee chuckles mirthlessly at the memory. "To avoid crossing that Force-damned acid again, we had to look for an alternate exit. And we did find one."

Dropping his spoon back into the bowl with a loud clatter, Canderous nods to himself. "Those ancient Sith were smart. They built a hidden passageway into the burial chamber that bypassed the visible corridors."

"Heels, they probably never even used the main tunnels. Hence all of the elaborate traps and dead ends. I bet the entire area we entered through was only there to get rid of tomb robbers looking to desecrate the dead."

Hissing between her teeth, Juhani snaps, "You sound impressed."

"I can admire craftsmanship and clever thinking," Canderous admits. "That doesn't mean that I didn't hate every kriffing second I was in that damn tomb."

"Anyway," Jolee interrupts before an argument can begin, "That passageway we found was free of traps, but it was small. Really small. The kid here fit just fine, but as for the rest of us..." He rubs a gnarled hand over his leg. "Makes my knees ache just thinking about it."
"So, we crawled through a hidden tunnel, ran through an arid wasteland, and all ended-up back here in mostly one piece. Sounds like a normal day for this crew." Vann shrugs as he speaks, though a hint of hesitation creeps into his voice as he asks, "And I assume that now we're on our way to the Star Forge?"

Jolee grins mischievously. "You'd think that, wouldn't you?"

Blinking back his surprise, Vann studies the older man suspiciously. "What the hells is that supposed to mean?"

"Well..." Jolee's tone turns cryptic. "What do you think it means?"

Snorting at the Human's antics, Mission explains, "It means that we ain't headed to the forge! At least, not yet."

"What?!" Vann sits up straight, turning to look at all of his crewmates.

"The forge is in Unknown Space, beyond any maps or charts beside the Star Map," Juhani begins a bit sheepishly. "We do not know how long it will take to get there, or what dangers we may encounter along the way."

Countenance stern, Canderous meets the mercenary's gaze as he barks, "Look, whether or not you want to admit it, you're our leader. You're kriffing Revan, for Force sake!" Jabbing a finger towards the other man, he warns, "And we're not going to undertake something like this without your input. We need supplies, fuel, maps..."

"And maybe some contingency plans just in case some of us don't return." Despite the quietness of his voice, Jolee's words are heavy with the weight of their implication.

"...Oh, right," Vann manages to stammer. "I mean, everyone I know is on this ship. But the rest of you are free to comm anyone you need to speak with. Friends, family, or whoever else." His gaze slowly travels around the room, taking in the faces of the individuals he's come to depend on.

"I have a brother," Mission chirps with surprising aplomb. "He's a real piece of work, you know? But yeah, he's family... all I got left, besides Big Z."

"Family? Not me," Jolee shakes his head that the idea. "But I do have a few old friends who I'd like to contact. They have ties to the Republic and might have some information that could be useful." His countenance shifts from thoughtful to somber. "They can at least make sure certain things get set into motion if none of us come back from this."

Canderous looks down at the table, frowning to himself for a few moments before announcing, "I want my clan to know that they should keep reuniting what's left of our people, even if I'm not there to help them."

There are a few seconds of utter silence as the crew becomes lost in their own thoughts, causing Juhani's hushed words to sounds oddly loud in the stillness. "Much like you, Vann, I do not have family who needs to be alerted to my actions. But perhaps there is one person..." Bitting her lip, she hurriedly waves a dismissive hand. "No, no. It is foolish. Forget that I have said anything."

"You're all agreeing to go on what could be a kriffing suicide mission," Vann points out, hastily adding, "And, by the way, none of you have to go if you don't want to." He swallows hard, continuing his offer before anyone has a chance to do the sane thing and ask to be dropped on the nearest habitable planet. "But if you are going and there's anyone you want to talk to or any place you want to see before we leave, you should do it. One last hurrah before we go into Unknown
Offering the Human a reassuring smile, Mission gives his shoulder a light shove. Her earnestness is a bright spot in the Force. "V-Man, I don't think there's anyone on this ship who doesn't believe that taking out the Star Forge is like, the most important thing in the galaxy."

"The kid is right," Canderous agrees. "None of us are turning back. We've made it this far, and there's no honor in refusing to finish what we've started."

"All of that being said," Jolee remarks with a chuckle, "I don't think any of us would mind a little vacation before we risk our lives yet again..."

"Yeah, of course." Gratefulness swells warm and bright in Vann's chest, and he feels the Force shimmer around him in response. Letting the flood of appreciation wash through him, his voice is tight with emotion as he murmurs, "And... thank you." Quickly scrambling to his feet, he turns towards the nearest corridor, clearing his throat as he gestures towards the bridge. "I should go ask Carth and Zaalbar if there's anything they want to do."

"Well, Big Z'll want to see his family," Mission offers, lips twisting wryly at the thought. "And we should make sure that Czerka scum didn't come back."

Juhani nods in agreement with the Twi'lek before stating, "And Carth will most likely want to see his son..." As the words leave her mouth she winces, her embarrassment only growing worse as the rest of the crew glares at her accusingly.

"...Wait. What?" Vann gasps in disbelief. "Dustil's not on this ship? Kriffing hells! Do we need to put a tracker on that kid or something?"

"He made a decision to stay on Korriban and help the other students. He apparently made some friends there, and he wanted to make sure they found a life beyond the academy." Carth's tone is surprisingly steady as he carefully strides into the hold, both arms held behind his back and expression carefully neutral. His words do waver slightly as he mutters, "I couldn't force him to come with us. Not when we're headed to possible death on an unknown planet."

Staring at the pilot with his mouth slightly agape, Vann finally manages to remark, "So, you found your son and let him go again." He shakes his head. "That's... not what I expected."

"Dustil's not a little kid anymore. He's been through more than I can begin to imagine..." Carth trails off, sighing as he rubs his palm across his forehead. "He has to make his own choices. Even if those choices are really kriffing hard for me to accept."

Humming at the pilot's observation, Jolee cryptically comments, "Birds never learn to fly if they don't learn to fall first." It immediately earns him an exasperated sigh from Juhani.

After nodding in acknowledgment to the oldest Force user, Carth turns back to the mercenary. "Dustil wouldn't have the chance to live his life and make mistakes if it wasn't for you, Vann." His mouth opens and closes a few times as he searches for the right words before finally blurtling out, "I... I can never repay you for saving him."

"I did what was right," the mercenary offers with a dismissive shrug of his shoulders. Arching a brow, he adds, "I am capable of that, you know."

Jolee sits back, quietly musing, "You're capable of more than you think, kid. Remember that. It could be useful when the time comes."
Gritting his teeth Vann glares at the older Human, his brain too tired to decode obtuse lessons. But the sense of frustration quickly fades away as a more pressing realization come to mind. "Wait," he demands. "If Dustil's on Korriban, where's Yuthura?"

Another bout of uncomfortable silence fills the large hold, everyone's attention once more shifting to Juhani, who slumps guiltily against the nearest wall. Hunching her shoulder like a petulant child, she offers the mercenary a half-hearted grin before hesitantly admitting, "She… is also on Korriban."

"WHAT?" Vann shouts, shock painting his features as he studies the Cathar searching for any signs that this is all a bad joke. "You left Yuthura Ban with a bunch of Force-sensitive kids on a Sith planet?!" His voice rises in pitch as he practically shrieks, "What is wrong with you?"

"Relax," Canderous warns, his voice deceptively calm. "She has it even worse than those kids. She can't go back to the Republic since Malak will probably kill her for failing him. If she's smart, she'll go into hiding. If she's dumb, well…" He grunts in dark amusement. "The problem will take care of itself."

"Funny how she almost seemed relieved when she realized that she was a wanted woman…" Jolee murmurs mysteriously.

"Stop with your riddles, old man!" Juhani snarls, her teeth flashing sharp and white. The Force flares around her for an instant, cold and angry, before she draws a deep breath and calms her inner fire. "Yuthura… I spoke with her. She is much like me. The Jedi tried to train her, but there is too much darkness in her past for her to truly follow the light." Calmer now, a flicker of warmth surrounds her as she assures the others, "I truly believe that she does not want the dark side to reign."

"She hit me in the head!" Vann complains with righteous indignation. "She gave me a kripping concussion!"

"Vann, let's be honest," Carth begins with a sardonic laugh. "Almost everyone in this room has wanted to hit you in the head at least once since meeting you."

Bowing deeply at the waist, Juhani extends her arms graciously. "You provided me a second chance upon our first meeting. And you did the same for Dustil." She peers upward, a hot spark of hope alighting in her Force presence. "We felt that it was only fair for us to pass the opportunity on to another."

"Well, you're apparently nicer than I am," Vann finally scoffs. "I would have tied her up and left her to the terentateks."

"Aw." Mission taps her temple in amusement. "That's just the concussion talking."

Juhani seems relieved that the mercenary's ire isn't directed towards her, and she visibly slumps in relief. Offering him a genuine smile of gratitude, she straightens before saying, "I apologize if I overstepped. But I do think that showing Yuthura mercy will prove more useful than doling out punishment."

"You better be right," Vann cautions.

"Well, if it makes anyone feel any better, Dustil just contacted me from Korriban. He and the remaining students are alright." Casting a pointed look at the mercenary, he adds, "Yuthura Ban has not tried to re-recruit any of them. If anything, she's been keeping her head down. But she does
seem to be buying supplies for a long trip."

Snorting in contempt, Vann growls, "Good riddance."

"And what about Dustil and the others? What about Thalia?" Mission gasps, her features growing anxious. "Or Kel? He's real stupid about who he trusts! What if he…"

"They're all okay!" Carth quickly reassures the Twi'lek. "I'm not sure who's who, so you'll have to talk to Dustil yourself, but everyone got out of the academy in one piece. There were a few cuts and bruises, but nothing serious." He places a comforting hand on the teen's shoulder. "You did a good job getting everyone to safety."

A faint blush creeps over Mission's cheeks, though she hides it with a sarcastic roll of her eyes. "Well, yeah," she brags. "Of course I did a good job! Most of those Sith kids loved me." Sobering slightly, she adds, "But, uh, where are they all going to go?"

"Well, some of them do have families. Yuthura told them what she knew before she went her separate way. So, those students are just going to catch a ride home. As for the rest of them…" Carth offers the Twi'lek an apologetic grimace. "From what I heard, they're figuring things out. Some are going home with friends, others are still deciding what they want to do. It will take some time, but I'm betting most of them will be okay."

"Where did you learn optimism?" Vann challenges the pilot.

Having finished his meal, Canderous idly twirls the spoon between his thumb and forefinger. "People tend to get optimistic when they're finally getting laid." He makes a lewd gesture with the utensil while winking suggestively at the mercenary. "Honestly, I feel like I should thank you, on behalf of the crew, for keeping our pilot… happy."

Five pairs of eyes simultaneously shift to stare at the Mandalorian, the rest of the group wearing expressions that range from curiosity to shock to absolute mortification.

"We. I. That is not about…" Carth sputters ineloquently. "I just found my son! I'm happy that he's alive!"

"As a reminder," Vann states, working hard to keep his face deadpan, "I've been asleep for three kriffing days."

"Wait. Wait!" Mission covers her mouth with both hands, eyes going wide as she fails to hold in a squeak of delight. "Are you two…?" The joy suddenly fades as she crinkles her nose. "You didn't do anything in my room at the academy, did you?"

"NO!" both Carth and Vann yell simultaneously.

Pointing to the other crew members, Canderous taunts, "You idiots cannot tell me that I'm the only one who noticed this." When nobody else confirms or denies his suspicions, he chuckles. "Hells, I called it on Taris."

Reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose, Vann blinks once before announcing, "Can we discuss this some other time?"

"Oh," Canderous says with a salacious wink, "You don't need to share the details."

The loud smack of Jolee clapping his hands together echoes through the oddly quiet hold. "So," he calls out in an overly chipper tone. "About that vacation time?"
"Go," Vann orders. "Use the ship, the comms, whatever you need. You don't need to tell me anything. Just let me know when you're each ready to head for the Star Forge. I should probably let Zaalbar know about this..." Practically jogging towards the bridge in an attempt to flee the increasingly awkward situation, he almost doesn't hear the Mandalorian's final words.

"Well," Canderous snickers under his breath, "I bet I know what Carth and Vann will be doing while everyone else is away."

It takes a lot of effort not to send a bolt of lightning directly into the other man's big mouth.

* * *

To: Vann Chis  
From: Jolee Bindo

Subject: Contingency Plan

Vann,

I'm on Manaan and I just made contact with an old friend from my smuggling days. I can already imagine the expression on your face. Yes, I spent some time as a smuggler. I had hair back then, too. Stop laughing! You'll be old and wrinkled soon enough, and then we'll see how funny it is...

Sunry, (my old friend, and I do mean old ) and his wife Elora have maintained ties to the Republic over the years, all while assisting various rebel groups. I keep telling them that they're going to get caught if they're not careful, but it's impossible to talk sense into old, idealistic fools. They're almost as stubborn as young, idealistic fools.

Sunry and Elora have agreed to help us with a contingency plan that will go into effect in the (highly likely) event that none of us make it off the Star Forge alive. I've given a copy of the Star Map to Sunry. Stop complaining, I trust him and you trust me. If Sunry and Elora don't hear from a member of the crew saying 'the rain on Kashyyyk falls loudly through the wroshyr trees' within two weeks of us leaving for the forge, they'll get the map to a trusted group of rebels.

It's cold comfort if we're all dead, but Force willing our efforts won't be in vain.

J. Bindo

"Alright, that should do it." Vann crosses his arms over his chest as he studies the Ebon Hawk's extensive galaxy map, his eyes carefully tracing the route leading from the edges of the Outer Rim into the wide swath of the Unknown Region.

Carth is standing beside the mercenary, nodding in approval as he notes the various coordinates that have been added to the map. "That actually looks pretty good." He smiles, visibly impressed. "Are you sure that you've never plotted a hyperspace route before?"

Casting an incredulous look at the pilot, Vann remains silent for several long seconds.

"Oh. Right." Carth chuckles sheepishly. "Amnesia."

"Yeah," Vann replies, rolling his eyes. "What I said is that I don't remember plotting a route, even though I've probably done this dozens of times before." His voice grows quieter. "In fact, I've probably plotted this exact course."

This thought seems to sober Carth and he turns to stare at the map in silence, gaze flicking between
the marked hyperspace jumps and some additional notes made in his datapad. When he speaks, his tone is hesitant. "So, how are you doing with all of this? Do you need to talk about what happened on…?"

"This better not be a lecture about me electrocuting a bunch of Sith," Vann interrupts irritably. "Because I did it to save you and your kriffing son…"

"It's not a lecture!" Carth whirls to face his companion. "Don't get me wrong, I'm not happy that happened. I don't think any member of the crew enjoys watching you completely lose control and slaughter people."

Arching a brow, Vann points out, "Canderous seems to enjoy it."

"And Canderous should never be a litmus for moral or rational behavior." Scrubbing his palm over his face, Carth sighs. "Like I said, it doesn't exactly thrill me that you can kill a dozen people in the blink of an eye. But I know why you did it. And you did warn me that you tend to lose control when I'm in trouble."

Smiling smugly, Vann leans closer to the pilot until their noses are practically touching. His tone grows sly as he remarks, "You should take it as a compliment."

"I just might," Carth replies, grinning back. But the expression promptly fades as a cold tendril of doubt begins to seep into the Force around him. "But I… I need to know one thing."

Closing his eyes, Vann takes a step back with a reluctant sigh. "Fine, what?"

"Do you feel any remorse for killing those Sith?"

Lifting his chin up in stubborn defiance, Vann meets the pilot's gaze unflinchingly as he challenges, "Do you?"

There's a long period of stammering as Carth fumbles for the right words, his own anger towards the situation chilling the air around him. He mumbles half-formed thoughts and nonsense before finally sputtering, "After what they tried to do to Dustil, Mission, and the rest of those kids? No, not really."

Vann nods. "Well, you answered your own question."

It's another moment before Carth finally shrugs in acceptance, his expression caught between consideration and disappointment as he says, "Yeah, I guess so."

"Leave it to you to feel guilty about not feeling guilty," Vann teases with a snort. Reaching out, he gives his companion's shoulder an affectionate squeeze. "Look at it this way. It was them or us."

As the backs of his knuckles brush against the galaxy map, Vann feels his vision blur and warp, the bridge of the Ebon Hawk fading away as it's replaced with the interior of a much smaller craft designed for two. His black gloved hands are gripping the ship's controls, attempting to wrest the vessel back under his command as the warning lights flash and sirens blare. Turning to his co-pilot, Revan notes the grim expression etched across Malak's pale face as he frantically checks the readouts of the various instrument panels.

"All of our systems are overloading!" the other Jedi shouts. "I'm not sure what's causing the problem, but I believe there's some type of disruptor field…"
The scenery changes again, the blackness of space replaced with the sudden light of a planet's atmosphere, the blue sky and white clouds whizzing by the ship's viewport at dangerous speeds. "We're going down!" Malak warns, his voice barely audible over the klaxon of failing instruments and jammed sensors. "Revan, do you hear me? Revan…"

"Vann!" Carth shouts, snapping his fingers in front of his companion's face. "Vann, are you okay? What's going on?"

The familiar bridge of the Hawk comes back into focus as the mercenary blinks away the last traces of the memory still clouding his mind. As he yanks his hand away from the galaxy map, he can still feel the phantom touch of his gloves against his skin. "I… huh?" he asks, befuddled.

Ducking his head to examine the other man's face, concern quickly settles over Carth's features, flowing into the Force in a brilliant burst of warm light. "I lost you for a minute," he explains worriedly.

"Sorry," Vann offers, wiping his palm across his clammy forehead. "I just had a vision. Er, I guess it was a memory."

"Bad?"

"More like… unusual." Exhaling heavily, Vann carefully moves away from the map. "My memories usually feature me on a killing spree, but this one was different. It actually felt more like a warning."

Lips tugging into a puzzled frown, Carth wonders, "What were you being warned about?"

"I think Malak and Revan… I… we ran into a problem in Unknown Space," he admits. "We crashed somewhere. I'm not sure which planet, but…" He shrugs helplessly. "It definitely happened."

"Well, that's… helpful," Carth grumbles sardonically.

Scoffing in agreement, Vann mutters, "Yeah, not really. It could have happened anywhere between Korriban and the Star Forge."

Sighing, Carth turns back to the galaxy map. "I guess we'll have to prepare for the worst. We can make sure that the ship's plating is repaired, the engines are fully functional, and all of the instrument panels are properly tuned."

"I don't think this is something we can prepare for," Vann states, his brows furrowing as he replays the scene from his past. "I think this was just a warning that history may repeat itself."

"Oh, that's just great." Drawing a frustrated breath through his nose, Carth adamantly declares, "Well, I'm still going to have Tee-Three perform as many repairs as possible." Turning to give the mercenary a mock glare, he adds, "And have I mentioned how much I regret meeting you?"

Slipping closer, Vann notes the warm burst of genuine affection that surrounds pilot as he draws closer and kisses the other man deeply. Their bodies instantly melt together, the Force surging around them hot and bright as the mercenary reaches up and wraps his arms around his companion's shoulders, holding him close even as their lips reluctantly part. "Actually," Vann replies, breath hot against Carth's mouth. "I'm pretty sure that you're really kriiffing glad you met me."

* * *
To: Vann Chis  
From: Mission Vao  
Subject: I found my brother!

Hey V-Man!

Thanks for dropping me off on Tatooine, I know how much you hate it here. I finally tracked down my brother. He's still a total slime, but he's family, you know?

Or maybe you don't know...? I'm sorry V-Man, I didn't mean to be such a nerf herder about it. But now you have Carth, right? So that's pretty great!

The good news is that Lana, my brother's girlfriend, is way better than I remember. She's teaching me how to construct these flash mines that make a ton of light and noise when someone sets them off. They're definitely gonna be useful! If you talk to Big Z before I do, let him know that I have a new project for us to work on.

See you soon!

Mission

"So, remind me again of the ship's weapon configuration?" Vann is sprawled across a seat in the main hold, holographic diagrams of the Ebon Hawk displayed on the large console.

"It's the standard configuration for a Dynamic-class freighter like this," Canderous explains, pointing to the features as he describes them. "Two turbolaser turrets on the dorsal and ventral sides, plus two heavy dual laser cannon turrets off port and starboard."

Eyeing the diagram curiously, Vann frowns. "That's it? I thought Davik customized this ship."

"He did. But the customization isn't in the weaponry." Canderous shifts the diagram so that the engines are prominently displayed. "Davik wanted the ship to be able to outrun just about anything else in the galaxy. So, he replaced the Class 3 hyperdrive with a Class 1 unit, which also doubles the realspace speed."

Nodding in understanding, Vann quickly sifts through the information on display before asking, "But what about the hull plating? Don't tell me that Davik sacrificed armor for speed..."

"From what I understand, the hull is made out of a custom alloy. It's marginally lighter than the plating for a factory model freighter, but it provides roughly the same amount of protection." Canderous waves past a series of numbers describing the changes. "If you want exact calculations, you're going to have to ask one of the droids."

"I might run them past Tee-Three once Carth is done using him to make repairs," Vann considers out loud. "But, off the top of your head, do you think that the ship could withstand, say... a rough landing? Maybe a minor crash?"

"What the kriffing hells are you asking?" Canderous demands with a growl. "Are you planning on using the ship to ram the damn forge or something?" An amused grin slowly spreads over his features. "Cause if you're thinking of doing that, I'm not going to stop you. But I also don't want to be on the ship when it happens."

Snorting, Vann brushes off the suggestion. "No, nothing that suicidal. At least not yet..." He heaves a put-upon sigh, hoping that his deception is believable. "I'm just trying to prepare for any
potential situation. You know, contingency plans and all..."

Scoffing in disgust, Canderous mutters, "This has Jolee's name all over it. He's been going on about contingencies and backups for days." Looking around, he complains, "Of course, the old coot's not even here to help plan any of it."

"He wanted to visit some friends," Vann replies airily. "I gave him the opportunity, and he took it. Just like Mission chose to find her brother, and Zaalbar went to help his father."

"As nice as this is, I think you're going soft," Canderous accuses. "We're wasting time. And giving Malak more chances to prepare for us."

Leveling a cynical glare at the Mandalorian, Vann rebuts, "We destroyed Malak's entire kriiffing academy and killed his headmaster. I'm pretty sure he knows we're coming. Don't forget that he has the Star Forge at his disposal. It's not like the odds were going to suddenly shift in our favor if we rushed there straight from Korriban."

"They might have!" Slamming his fist against the console hard enough to vibrate the floor of the hold, Canderous stares right back at the mercenary. "The way I see it, we only need one plan. We arm ourselves with every weapon we can get our hands on and storm that forge, taking out anything that moves." He grins maliciously. "And that type of attack benefits from the element of surprise."

"Because Malak will certainly not see our ship coming from miles away, just as he did when he captured us with the Leviathan." Juhani chuckles mirthlessly as she enters the hold, a datapad in her hands.

"Hey, I'm speaking from experience here," Canderous states defensively. "My people conquered many words using that tactic. Shock and awe go a long way in war."

"As do subtlety and patience," Juhani counters, bearing her teeth as her natural ferocity blows through the Force like an icy wind. The pair glowers at each other for several moments, neither one willing to back down from their verbal sparring.

Noting the mounting tension in the room, the atmosphere growing colder and more malevolent by the second, Vann gingerly reaches for the Cathar's pad as he asks, "So, what's this?"

"Oh," Juhani says, startling slightly. She reluctantly breaks eye contact with the Mandalorian, sneering with unrestrained animosity as she turns her attention to the mercenary. "That is a list of the weapons and armor currently stored on the ship. Carth was originally compiling it, but I offered to assist him so that he could complete his maintenance on the hull."

Examining the data, Vann hums to himself for a moment. "You didn't have to do this," he reassures the Cathar. "We'll be coming into orbit around Dantooine in less than an hour. You could have taken the time..."

"I wished to keep busy," Juhani hurriedly clarifies, sadness and fear suddenly tainting the space around her. "After all, I do not know what I will find on the planet, or if there is anything left at all."

"There'll be something left," Canderous responds. "It just might not be pretty." As both of his crewmates turn to glare at him, he holds up his hands in mock surrender. "Hey, I'm just telling you the truth," he insists.

"Well, how about you tell me the truth about this list of supplies?" Vann snaps, unable to contain
the flare of anger that swirls around him as he practically throws the pad at the Mandalorian. "Does this look like enough, or do we need to pick anything up?"

Even without Force-sensitivity Canderous notes how unsettled both Force users have become at the very mention of Dantooine, and he moves away from them as he dutifully examines the list. After a minute or so he looks up, nodding in approval. "We have all of the blasters, blades, and 'sabers that we could possibly want," he confirms. "All we really need are a few more mines or grenades." He hands the pad back with a flick of his wrist.

"All of the weapons in the galaxy will not prepare you for one of the most perilous challenges you may face," Juhani warns, her expression growing worried.

"And that's what the grenades are for," Canderous states matter-of-factly. "Geeze, haven't you learned anything?"

Ignoring the Mandalorian, Vann turns to the Cathar. "What are you talking about?"

Juhani utters a single word, hissing it out through her teeth. "Bastila."

And those three syllables are enough to send a shiver down Vann's spine. While he's always been peripherally aware that Malak's apprentice will be present on the Star Forge, he'd been ignoring the thought for the past few days in the hopes that a solution would suddenly come to him through a memory or a moment of uncanny inspiration. Unfortunately, he'd had no such luck. "Yeah," he grumbles. "I know she'll be there."

"So, when you see her just slice her up." Canderous mimes taking a swing with his huge beskad. "You do owe her one for Carth."

"Easy enough for you to say," Juhani mocks. "You who have no comprehension of the Force, or the power of a Force bond."

Sensing that another verbal altercation is about to begin, Vann sits up straighter in his seat as he raises his voice above his companions'. "I'm not going to kill her!" he shouts, striking the console with his palm. "At least not if she's willing to talk."

"What?" Jabbing an accusing finger at the mercenary, Canderous complains, "Now I really know you're going soft on me."

"I'm not going soft, I'm being smart!" Jerking his thumb towards his chest, Vann reminds the Mandalorian, "I'm the tactician here, remember?"

"You… have a suspicion?" Juhani asks, her own Force awareness carefully probing her companion's vivid presence.

"You could say that." Running his fingers through his hair, Vann pushes a few stray strands from his face. "Look, there were times that Bastila could have killed or stranded the crew and still made it look like an accident or an oversight. After all, I was her target and the rest of you were along for the ride." His expression grows thoughtful. "But she didn't."

Snorting at the implication, Canderous shakes his head. "She was playing the part of a Jedi! Just admit that she fooled all of us and accept what you have to do."

"That's the thing," Vann insists. "I don't think she was just playing the part, at least not the entire time. But who knows, maybe she's the best liar in the entire kriffing galaxy, and she really is Malak's most loyal servant."
"But you have reason to believe that she is not fully on her master's side." Juhani is nodding slowly in understanding, a faint smile playing on her lips. "And if that doubt can be used against her as it was with me, then perhaps…"

"Then it's possible to get her back on our side," Vann finishes. "Actually on our side."

Canderous is still watching his crewmates in disbelief. "She's a traitor. How can you even begin to trust her?"

"You trust me, don't you?" Vann arches a questioning brow at the Mandalorian. "According to the Malak, I turned on the entire Jedi Order. And according to the Sith, I turned on Malak…" Irony laces his tone as he admits, "I'm probably the biggest traitor here."

"You don't know what's true," Canderous cautions. "Malak and the Sith lie."

"And they have probably lied to Bastila." Juhani sighs as she considers this, her expression somber.

Throwing himself into a seat, Canderous crosses his arms over his chest. "I wouldn't doubt it. But I still don't think talking is going to convince Bastila to abandon the Supreme Commander of the entire kriffing Republic Military."

"It might not." Vann's jaw clenches as he considers this, both hands balling into fists. "And if it doesn't…"

"Then you will be forced to… how did the Mandalorian say it?" Juhani grimaces as she snarls, "Slice her up."

Fingers moving to tap one of the lightsaber hilts clipped to his belt, Vann nods grimly. "Yeah. Like Jolee said, we need to have contingency plans."

* * *

To: Vann Chis  
From: Juhani  

Subject: Destruction of the Enclave on Dantooine  

Vann,  

Upon arriving on Dantooine I checked on the Jedi residing here. Unfortunately, I can confirm that Malak has destroyed the entire enclave via orbital bombardment. There are survivors among both the colonists and the Jedi, and both groups are already starting to rebuild. Unfortunately, it will take years to repair the damage and devastation that Malak has wrought. The Masters who survived the attack have been moved to safe locations throughout the Outer Rim. There are rumors that the Council received advanced warning of the attack, though I have not been able to verify this.

As odd as it sounds, I wish to thank you for allowing me to come here. I often have difficulty discussing my personal life, so I apologize if I have been cryptic regarding my plans. I originally wished to visit Dantooine to check on a close friend. Someone who has always meant a great deal to me, despite my belief that she was an attachment I could not have. Though Beyla and I have only reconnected because of tragedy, both of our futures already feel brighter. I suppose the Force flows in mysterious ways.

It is good to know that there is someone hoping for my safe return from the Star Forge, and I have
you to thank for this. As always, I am in your debt.

Juhani

Sweat drips down Vann's back as he goes through the same set of Juyo maneuvers that he's been practicing for an indeterminate amount of time, his lightsabers whirling around him in a blur of violet light. The plasma heats the air in the garage, helping to soothe the fierce burn of his muscles as they begin to ache from exertion. He's so engrossed in the hum of the blades and the satisfying stretch of his body as he flips and twirls through the air that he doesn't notice the footfalls announcing the arrival of another person.

"You've been in here practicing for over two hours," Carth states, crossing his arms over his chest as he leans one hip against the workbench. "Which means that you probably got bad news from Juhani."

Vann doesn't break his focus as he swings both lightsabers in a smooth arc around his body, bringing the blades down in what would be a devastating move if used against a living opponent. "The entire enclave was destroyed," he pants, perspiration dotting his forehead and running into his eyes. He wipes it away with his bare forearm as he stretches his legs, preparing to make another series of bold, kinetic sweeps.

Sadness jolts through Carth, fizzling through the Force with unexpected strength. "That's… krif, I'm so sorry," he stammers. "I may not have agreed with the Jedi about a lot of things, but they didn't deserve that."

Offering little more than a nod of agreement, Vann launches himself into a forward dive, bringing both lightsabers out in front of him as he slides smoothly across the floor. They hum and whirl comfortingly, helping to drown out the multitude of negative thoughts racing through his mind.

Refusing to move from his position just outside the marked-off ring, Carth watches his companion for a few more moments before asking, "Do you know if there were any survivors?"

Initially ignoring the question Vann rolls to his feet with an easy kick of his legs, bringing the lightsabers into a guard position as he practices a series of shorter, tighter moves designed to defend against blaster bolts. Though they require less precise footwork, they place more strain on his shoulders. "Yes," he finally answers. "A few."

Continuing to watch the mercenary in silence for several more seconds, Carth finally loses patience with the situation and slams his fist against the top of the workbench, rattling the various tools cluttering the surface. "Dammit, can you act like an adult for once?"

With a growl of frustration Vann powers down both of his lightsabers, though he continues to clutch the hilts in his hands as he stalks over to where the pilot is standing. "What? What do you want?"

"Well, I originally came in here to make sure you were alright, but I think I already have the answer to that question."

"I'm fine," Vann lies, turning away from his companion. "So, you can just go back and…"

Reaching out, Carth grasps the other man by the shoulder, digging his fingertips into sweaty skin as he forces the shorter figure to face him. "How stupid do you think I am?" he demands. "Anyone on this crew can tell that you're anything but fine!"

Rage and sadness swirl around Vann in a miasma of emotion, threatening to crack the neutral
façade that he's been carefully maintaining since receiving Juhani's message. He came into the garage in the hopes of working off some of his negative emotions, though the longer he practices with his lightsabers the more resentment he can feel buzzing beneath his skin. "Well," he finally seethes, "Can you just let me be not-fine in peace?"

"Peace?" Carth asks incredulously. "You think this is peace?" He jerks his hand towards the training ring, voice rising in pitch as he speaks. "You've been in here for two kriffing hours trying to work yourself into some type of frenzy so that you don't have to admit that you're frustrated with this entire kriffing situation."

"That's not what..." But Vann cuts himself off before he can finish because he actually was trying to let his mind slip into the blissful blankness that sometimes accompanies his martial fury. But sorrow keeps seeping into his consciousness, preventing unadulterated wrath from taking over his thoughts.

Still clutching his companion's shoulder, Carth relaxes his fingers minutely. "Stop," he commands. "Just stop with the emotionless mercenary act. It might have worked in the beginning, but we can all see through it now." He sighs heavily, shaking his head. "Maybe try meditating or, Force forbid, talking about something for once in your life."

"Okay, we're talking," Vann snaps. "What the hells do you want to know?"

As some of the tension clears from the room, Carth seems to suddenly realize that his companion is currently shirtless, having discarded the top half of his clothing over an hour ago when it started sticking to his skin and restricting movement. The pilot's eyes immediately fall to the jagged scar bisecting the mercenary's abdomen, the tissue raised and shiny-pink. "You know, ever since I saw that on Taris I've wondered what happened..."

"Really?" Vann asks, brow furrowing in annoyance. "That's what you want to know?"

Shrugging one shoulder, Carth replies, "Well, it's a good place to start."

"Malak." The word is spat out like a poison, dripping with loathing. "I sliced his jaw off, and he tried to gut me."

Carth nods slowly, contemplation crossing his features. "And you're going to be facing him again soon," he finally breathes.

Knuckles turning white around his lightsaber hilts, Vann grits his teeth in acknowledgment. "Yeah, and I owe him a lot of pain for Dantooine. And Taris. And Telos..."

Moving his free hand to rest on his companion's other shoulder, Carth frowns deeply. "You're shaking."

"Well, yeah," Vann manages to growl, trying to keep his voice steady. "I'm angry."

Lapsing into silence for several long moments, Carth moves one palm to press against the old wound marring the other man's flesh. His skin is surprisingly warm against the rapidly cooling sweat that still coats the mercenary's chest. "...It's okay to be scared," the pilot insists softly "He almost killed you."

Denial sits hot and bitter on the tip of Vann's tongue, and he bares his teeth at the pilot as he prepares to refute any possibility that he's afraid of Malak, or that he's feeling anything but anticipation towards their inevitable confrontation. But the words die in his throat as the frigid weight of his own fear settles in the pit of his stomach, weighing down his mind with a myriad of
worries and doubts. He swallows hard, barely able to contain the tremors that course through his body as he subconsciously replays the memory of staggering away from the duel that almost ended his life, slick blood and viscera coating his hand. "I'm not scared," he finally chokes out, his words sounding hollow to his own ears.

Drawing the mercenary in closer, Carth inhales deeply against the other man's neck as he carefully cards his fingers through tangled, sweaty hair. "Yeah, I know," he murmurs soothingly. His other arm shifts to wrap tightly around his companion's waist as he presses a gentle kiss to Vann's temple. "I know."

* * *

To: Vann Chis
From: Zaalbar

Subject: Rwookrrro Village Remains Free

I am contacting you to inform the crew that my people and my planet are still free from Czerka's control. They thank you for saving them, and for acting so honorably.

Though my people still find the ways of outsiders strange and confusing, they are pleased that I am learning more about these odd customs. My father honors me by saying it will improve my skill as a leader. After our experience with Czerka, the Wookiees have come to understand why we must understand the ways of Humans. Now that they understand the dangers the Republic poses, my people wish you luck in your coming fight against Malak.

Zaalbar

P.S. My father is sending me back with a case of fruit for the ship. Apparently, it was a favorite of several crew members during their time on my planet.

"If you keep thinking that hard, you're going to break something," Jolee chides with a chuckle, his footfalls soft as he enters the workshop.

"Huh?" Vann looks up from the disassembled pieces of his lightsabers, the violet crystals resting on the workbench beside a few smaller gems and minerals acquired along their travels. He scowls at the older Force users. "I'm not going to break anything…"

"Well, not right in front of you, but…" Trailing off, Jolee points to a spanner, a hammer, and several stray gears and bolts that are currently floating through the air, shaking and vibrating in their uneven orbits. "If any of these falls on your head, you're going to break something."

Startling slightly when he notices the additional objects floating through the air, Vann curses as he draws a slow breath to calm his racing mind. "Dammit," he mutters as he attempts to guide the items gently back to the ground. While the spanner and hammer manage to settle beside the workbench without incident, the smaller items clatter haphazardly to the floor in a rain of metal.

Narrowly dodging a particularly menacing gear, Jolee tuts in disapproval as he strides towards the mercenary. "You're strong with the Force, kid. Might be stronger than anyone I've ever met." He jabs an accusing finger towards the items scattered across the floor. "And that means you can put someone's damn eye out if you're not careful with those emotions of yours!"

"Yeah, well, I have a lot to think about," Vann grumbles defensively, turning back to the lightsaber parts spread out before him. "So, forgive me if I have some stray emotions that I can't release back into the Force."
"It's not all your emotions that I worry about." Approaching the workbench, Jolee lifts a small, jagged aqua gemstone that seems to shine with an inner light. "It's those dark emotions that bother me. Like your anger."

Snatching the gem from the older Force user, Vann sets it back on the bench with the rest of his assorted materials. "You make it sound like I'm nothing but a ball of uncontrolled rage."

"Well, aren't you?"

Using the Force to carefully lift up the pieces of his original lightsaber, Vann begins slotting the parts back together, setting the violet crystal adjacent to the power cell and adding the small blue gemstone in front of it as a focus. It takes an extra moment to adjust the pieces and mechanisms around the new addition, though there's a satisfying click when they all slide into place. Lifting the hilt, he considers the heft and feel for a moment before turning to face his companion. "Why are you here?" he asks, exasperated.

"Because you need help," Jolee declares. "Whether you want to admit it or not."

Igniting his lightsaber, Vann examines the blade for several moments, gradually swinging the weapon around in short arcs and listening to its familiar hum. The addition of the gem seems to have made the beam clearer and brighter, the plasma heating the air with more intensity than before. "I'm doing fine on my own."

"And see? That's where your problem lies!" Swiftly stepping out of range from the other Force user's practice swings, Jolee glances between the modified lightsaber and the assortment of materials. "Let me guess, you're currently trying to augment your 'sabers because you're got some idea in your head about becoming more powerful?"

With a final twirl, Vann powers his lightsaber down, clipping the hilt to his belt with a flick of his wrist. "It never hurts to be the most powerful being in the middle of a battle."

"Spoken just like Revan." Jolee's eyes narrow suspiciously as he turns to study the younger Force user.

"I am Revan," Vann remarks darkly, turning back to the second lightsaber disassembled on the bench. "In case you somehow managed to forget."

Jolee scoffs at the implication. "As though I'd forget. To be honest, I was hoping that you'd be the one neglecting to remember that little piece of information."

"Seeing as how 'Vann Chis,' the name I thought I picked out of thin air, is just another iteration of 'Revanchist,' even my damn subconscious wants me to remember who I am." Staring down at the collection of gems and minerals, the mercenary can feel a hot blush of embarrassment creep across his cheeks. "And yes, it took me a while to figure that out."

"Well, there goes the theory that you're some sort of genius," Jolee quips amusedly. "But maybe it'll take you less time to learn a lesson from your former self."

Clutching one grayish-white gemstone in his hand, Vann shoots a deadpan look at the other Human. "Oh, and what lesson would that be?"

Catching the younger man's eyes, Jolee stares pointedly as he carefully enunciates, "You're not alone."

"Obviously I'm not alone." Placing the gem back down among the lightsaber parts, Vann smirks to
himself. "After all, you're here talking my ear off while I'm trying to get some work done."

"Work to make you stronger." Jolee pokes the mercenary in the shoulder with a gnarled finger. "So that you can charge in alone and take out Bastila and Malak while the rest of us sit on our thumbs and watch you try and get yourself killed."

"As much as this seems to shock everyone, I don't actively try and get myself killed." Trailing off Vann murmurs, "It just tends to work out that way."

"Because you insist on handling everything yourself!" Shaking his head sadly, Jolee sighs. "Just like before."

Pressing his palm to the scar hidden beneath his clothing, Vann swallows the cold swell of regret that threatens to overtake him. "No. Before I trusted Malak. And we all see how well that worked."

Nodding sagely, Jolee hums softly to himself. "But Malak was corrupted by the power of the dark side. I'm not sure what did it, but it started long before he gave you that scar."

Gaze jerking towards the other man's face, Vann's tone is suspicious as he asks, "And how would you know?"

"I didn't spend my life on Kashyyyk!" Tapping his earlobe, Jolee explains, "Even after I left the Order, I kept an ear to the ground. And it was hard to ignore tales about two of the most promising Jedi the Order had seen in decades."

Vann's eyes narrow. "So, you were watching me."

"No! Don't be so self-absorbed, that's the path to the dark side right there." Jolee waves a dismissive hand towards the younger Force user. "I just said that I heard about you and Malak, and your exploits. And eventually about the inevitable signs of your fall."

"So, I did fall." A chilled ball of disappointment settles in Vann's stomach, coursing outward and settling around him like a shroud.

Noting the other man's embittered emotions, Jolee hurriedly reassures him, "That I couldn't say. But you were both walking a fine line between light and darkness for longer than you probably realized."

Snorting at the suggestion, Vann grits his teeth. "Longer than anyone realized, apparently."

"Oh, I'm pretty sure the Council knew," Jolee casually drawls, his tone growing ominous. "They're not idiots, despite all outward appearances."

The words take a moment to sink into Vann's mind, though when they do he finds himself gripping the edge of the workbench, his heart pounding as a frigid sensation surges just beneath his skin. "...What?"

"Don't look so surprised! It's not flattering." Reaching out, Jolee gives the younger man's jaw a slight push, as though to close it. "The Council had to know you were falling, or at least suspect that you were being seduced by the dark side."

Blinking back his shock, Vann breathes, "And they didn't do anything about it?"

"The Republic needed heroes. And the Jedi needed to save face after the bad name they gave themselves by not entering the war when it began." Expression growing somber as he recalls the
past events, Jolee describes, "In the eyes of the public, you and Malak were those heroes. Even if you were turning into conquerors rather than crusaders."

"So, what? They were going to wait until we fell and then kill us?" Vann can feel the anger slowly mounting within him.

"Oh, Jedi don't execute prisoners," Jolee says mockingly. "They would have waited until the war was over and then brought you in, tried you, and then passed whatever judgment they saw fit." His expression becomes brooding, a brief burst of sour disappointment cresting through his Force presence. "That's what they did to me, anyway. And to any of the Revanchists who didn't continue following Malak."

Disbelief clouds Vann's mind, and he gasps, "...You? You fell?"

"No! Don't you listen?" Jolee scolds. "I was tried for the crime of being youthful and stupid, which is almost as bad."

Arching a curious brow Vann asks, "I'm assuming there's a story behind that?"

"Of course there is! But now's not the time." Brushing off the inquiry, Jolee's features become more serious than before. "Right now, you need to learn from your past mistakes and begin to rely on more than your own abilities, least those abilities lead you down the same path they did the first time."

Vann is torn between sarcasm and genuine interest as he asks, "And what would you recommend?"

Choosing to ignore any cynical notes in the other man's tone Jolee responds, "Well, for one thing, you have an entire crew. And while they're not the most morally upstanding individuals, they're also not under the sway of the dark side." His smile holds a surprising amount of affection. "Misfits and oddballs, perhaps. But their hearts are all in the right place."

Unable to contain the fear and frustration that's churning within him, Vann feels the emotion pour out around him in a torrent. "Which only makes it worse when one of them dies because they were following my orders. Or just following me."

"You think none of the Revanchists died during the war?"

"I thought I was supposed to be learning from my past mistakes," Vann hisses between his teeth.

"So, learn from them already!" Jolee gives the other man's shoulder a shake, ignoring the grunt of protest that he receives in return. "The Revanchists who died gave their lives for something that they believed in. They followed you as their leader because they respected you. They went to war with you because they believed in your cause."

Shrugging off his companion's hand, Vann can't keep the doubt from his voice as he mutters, "And everyone else here..."

"Has already told you that they believe in this cause just as much as you do!" Jolee interrupts unapologetically. "Kid, do you honestly think that any member of this crew doesn't want to see Malak get what he deserves for trying to conquer the entire Force-dammed galaxy?"

Desperation laces Vann's voice, his anger fading away for a fleeting instant as it's replaced by the icy twinge of genuine dread. "And if they die...?"

"They'll die for a cause that means something!" Jolee's tone is pleading as he looks imploringly at
"They'll die creating a better and brighter galaxy, which is something that's worth giving your kriffing life for."

Vann's shoulders slump as he awkwardly attempts to avert his gaze. "I assume you're ready to die?"

Some of the usual grumpiness returns to Jolee's demeanor as he announces, "I'm old! I've been ready to die for a long time."

"Okay, fine. You're old. You've mentioned that once or twice." Vann attempts to offer the other Force user a grin, though the expression is more of a grimace. "But what about the others? What about Mission? She's just a kriffing kid!"

"The others want to help you. So, let them help," Jolee continues to insist. For a moment, the wisdom of his many years shines through his eyes, the Force flowing strong and bright around him. "Trust your crew, kid. 'Cause it's the only way that you're going to get out of this without everything going to hells."

* * *

To: Vann Chis
From: Canderous Ordo

Subject: (no subject)

V,

I've made contact with the rest of my people. I've chosen not to share my location with you or the crew for obvious reasons. Mainly that I'm not an idiot. I trust you, but I also trusted Bastila. The Mandalorians have an old saying about that – Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice and you won't live to see another day. All you need to know is that my people are thriving despite the restrictions placed on them after the war. We will always endure.

As for the information that you asked me to check on:

From everything that I've been able to find, it's entirely possible. She had access to more restricted channels than the rest of us combined and could easily have sent the information while you were there. But without more time, my contacts can't slice or trace data from that secure of a location. So, this is the best I could do with what I have.

Let me know what port the Hawk is departing from and I'll find my way to you. Like I said, I'm not an idiot.

- C

P.S. – Enjoy your time alone on the ship.

"You've got that look in your eyes," Carth observes, a frown creasing his lips.

Reaching up, Vann rubs one eyelid with the heel of his hand. "What look? I don't know what you're talking about."

Sighing, Carth stares pointedly at the mercenary. "The look that says you're planning to do something stupid."

"In the time you've known me, I've never done anything stupid," Vann responds honestly, smirking
as the pilot scoffs in exasperation. "Thoughtless and irresponsible, sure. But not stupid."

"Alright, maybe stupid was the wrong word," Carth acknowledges, his tone tinged with concern. "But that doesn't change the fact that you're planning something for when we're on the Star Forge, or for when you face Malak…" He trails off, wincing as he forces an apologetic smile.

Vann doesn't flinch when he hears his former friend's name. Instead, he turns to study at a point on the opposite wall as he tries to keep his words jovial, even as cold fear sits heavy in his gut. "And just what makes you think I have a plan?"

"It's the same expression you had right before you sacrificed yourself so that Mission, Dustil, and I could escape the academy on Korriban," Carth chides, his voice growing increasingly irritated the longer he speaks, anger briefly sparking around him. "And by the way, I'm still mad at you for that."

"Why?"

Jaw tightening with determination, Carth declares, "Because self-sacrifice isn't going to win against something as ruthless as the Republic."

Scoffing, Vann reaches out and sarcastically pats his companion's shoulder. "Well, if it makes you feel any better, you can rest assured that I'm not going to be handing myself over to the Supreme Commander anytime soon."

"Good," Carth replies with a nod, though he remains hesitant. "But if you think sacrificing yourself in any way…"

"What if my death is the only thing that can save the Republic?" Vann hurriedly interrupts the pilot's warning. "What if I have to die to fix all of my past mistakes?"

"Vann, dammit. Look at me!" Voice thick with alarm, Carth grabs the other man by the chin and forces their eyes to meet. "You don't have to die to fix your mistakes."

Attempting to avert his gaze, Vann swallows the frigid sensation of bitterness that rises in his throat. "Malak is my fault."

"Haven't we gone over this before?" Carth grumbles, tone growing agitated. "You may have set him on the path to the dark side, but he's the one who stayed there even after you 'died."

Refusing to accept this answer, Vann sullenly mutters, "And Bastila?"

"Bastila," Carth retorts, "Is completely Malak's fault."

"What about the destruction of Taris? Of Telos?" Suddenly sitting up straighter, Vann feels his own guilt cascade around him like a tidal wave, the emotion chilling him to the bone. "Those orbital bombardments are based off my tactics during the Mandalorian Wars, aren't they?"

"…From what I know, they are." Carth frowns at this admission. "But I also know that you saved Mission and Zaalbar from Taris. They would probably have died if it weren't for you."

"I killed a teenage girl down in Hrakert Station on Manaan," Vann challenges, a cold shudder running down his spine as Shasta's lifeless face flashes unbidden before his eyes. "Did you know that?"

"Juhani mentioned something about it." Wincing at the memory, Carth quickly adds, "I also know
that you saved an entire planet of Wookiees from Czerka."

Vann can almost feel the sparks dancing in white-hot anger along his fingertips as he points out, "Aren't you the one who said that all of the killing I do is the opposite of 'alright'?"

"And at the time, I meant it. But you know what you've done since then? You saved my kriffing life." Carth grabs his companion's hand and presses it against the rapidly-fading scar that mars his right side as a warm burst of affection alights around him. "And you saved the life of my son. And the lives of dozens of other students."

Fingers gently tracing the scar before moving down to curl around the pilot's hip, Vann squeezes softly as he demands, "So, to you, it balances out?"

"In a way. Look, I know there's always going to be darkness in you. The Jedi obviously couldn't control it…" Carth trails off, smiling weakly as he leans into the touch. "But I'm pretty sure that you're not all dark. And nothing's going to change that, either."

A jolt of hope flares brightly in Vann's chest, flowing out into his limbs. "How do you know?"

Pressing his head forward until their brows touch, Carth's breath is warm against the other man's lips as he explains, "I wouldn't be here if that wasn't true." The sense of genuine endearment is only increasing, practically glowing within the Force.

"Do you mean 'here' as in a metaphorical 'alive and existing'?" Vann asks, his tone playfully teasing. "Or do you mean 'here' as in 'still on the Hawk despite threatening to leave multiple times'?"

Glancing towards the locked door of the crew quarters, Carth lowers his voice to a seductive growl. "I mean 'here' as in 'finally alone together in the dormitory with nobody else on the ship.'"

"And to think, when we first met you could barely stand to be alone with me."

"I never minded being alone with you, which felt weird at the time." Shrugging slightly, the pilot murmurs, "I guess I'd already realized that there was more to you than anger and violence. Not much more, but…"

Rolling his eyes, Vann closes the distance between their mouths and kisses the other man, the touch of their lips wet and hot and more than a little filthy. He presses against his companion, their bodies slotting smoothing together as the Force rushes around them, a rapidly growing point of vibrancy and radiance. The kiss ends with a coy little sigh, and when the mercenary pulls away they're both breathing heavily. "Shut up, Carth."

The pilot draws a deep breath as he grins at his companion. "Make me."

Leaning closer, Vann gently nips at the tender patch of skin along the length of the other man's throat before huskily whispering, "Challenge accepted."

* * *

To: Vann Chis
From: Carth Onasi

Subject: Dustil and I Are Fine (so tell everyone to stop asking)

I just said goodbye to Dustil, since it looks like we're heading in different directions. It was good to
finally sit down and talk with him about everything that happened. He really is a good kid despite what he's been through.

Before you ask, Dustil's headed to Telos... so, I guess he's going home. He heard that the survivors of the fires are rebuilding and that they need help with the effort. He's still trying to sort out everything that happened on Korriban, and he hopes that helping others will bring him some peace. According to him, he thinks "the experience will be cathartic."

Yes, he actually used those exact words. I'm not sure where he gets his smarts from, but I'd like to think it's his mother.

I'll head back to the ship in a couple of hours, and then we can take off for the Unknown Regions. I just need a little time to myself. Let me know if anyone needs anything while I'm in Dreshdae. And this is not permission for the entire crew to give me their grocery lists.

Carth

"Hey V-Man, I thought Unknown Space was supposed to be interesting." Mission slumps against the back of the co-pilot's seat, her cheek pressing against the headrest. "But this is boring."

"Truth me," Carth replies, rechecking the navigation system. "You want it to be boring."

Carefully monitoring the readouts for some of the other systems, Vann distractedly mutters, "Hey, we'll be exploring a mostly unknown planet pretty soon. That's exciting, right?"

"Yeah, but we've been in hyperspace for days," Mission retorts, hanging dramatically off the back of the seat. "My brain is goin' gooey!"

"Well, I have some good news for you," Carth says, his tone a mixture of amusement and exasperation. "We're a couple of minutes out from our target system." He casts a pointed glare at the teen. "So, can you quietly and calmly go and tell the rest of the crew to strap in and prepare to exit hyperspace?"

Jerk ing her thumb towards the ship-wide speakers, Mission groans, "Can't you just make an announcement?"

"I could," Carth admits. "But I think you're better suited for the job."

"Mission, just go and tell everyone to sit down and strap in," Vann orders, chuckling at the situation. "And stop annoying the pilot. Unless you really want to die in a fiery crash."

Seeming to sober at the thought, the teen exhales one final sigh of discontentment as she makes a point of loudly stomping off the bridge. "Fine, fine," she grumbles. "I'm going. I know when I'm not wanted!"

"Much appreciated, Mission!" Vann calls, unable to keep the laughter out of his voice.

It takes a few more seconds for the Twi'lek's angry footfalls to fade into the distance, prompting Carth to sigh in relief once she's out of earshot. "Thank you," he breathes, turning his attention back to the navigation system.

"I did it for me," Vann offers with a shrug. "I want your full attention on flying the kriffing ship. After all, I've been in enough crashes to last two lifetimes."

"Still..." Humming thoughtfully, Carth tightens his grip on the ship's controls. "Mission was right
when she said that this entire trip has been uneventful. Aside from our brush with those patrolling Republic fighters, we've been free and clear."

Turning to glare at the pilot, Vann snorts. "I'm not saying anything," he snaps. "Because you're going to jinx us."

"I'm not jinxing us!" Carth complains. "It's just… Maybe something good came from regaining some more of your memories. It's possible that thanks to you, we prepared enough to prevent whatever caused the first crash."

"Something good can come from my past?" Vann shakes his head disbelievingly, the Force churning in cold waves around him. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Carth glances at the other man, a faint smile playing at the corners of his lips. "Not everything about Revan… about you, is bad. You were a hero…"

"There's a fine line between hero and conqueror, and I'm pretty sure I crossed it."

"Maybe. Or maybe you stopped yourself before you became the villain." Carth shrugs a little as he shifts the controls, tapping a few commands into the systems. The faintest glimmer of hope glows warmly around him. "I'm not sure what you want me to say, Vann. I'm not even sure what you're looking for. But I hope you find it on the Star Forge."

Gaze shifting between the various readouts, Vann snarls, "All I want is Malak's cold, dead body."

"Like I said," Carth responds, tone growing a touch melancholy. "I hope you find whatever you need." He's silent for several seconds, voice tight as he says, "We'll be dropping out of hyperspace in three… two… one…"

Vann feels his fingers tighten against the edge of a console, his body bracing as the Ebon Hawk rockets back into normal space, the stark shades of black and white suddenly shifting into the brilliant colors of a star system. They appear particularly close to a bright blue planet orbited by at least two moons, its cloud-covered atmosphere awakening a sense of recognition deep within the mercenary's mind. The clouds hold a startling resemblance to the ones he and Malak came crashing through years ago, during his first search for the forge. "Shit…" he murmurs under his breath.

"And we're ou…" Before he can finish the sentence, a look of worry creases Carth's brow. He taps one finger against the nearest system readout. "That's not right…"

"It's probably going to get worse."

"Hey, Carth?" Mission's voice is distorted by static as it crackles over the speaker. "We're getting some weird readouts back here!"

"Yeah," the pilot confirms, trying to keep his voice calm even as several alarms start to sound throughout the bridge. "We've, uh, we've got some problems…"

"Now, when you say problems…?" Jolee's tone is also badly garbled by the poor reception.

Distantly, Vann wonders if any of them actually listened to him and strapped into their seats. Because they're about to need it.

Frantically checking the various consoles, Carth slams one palm against the nearest screen as he attempts to wrestle the ship's controls into submission. It does little good as the craft begins a rapid
descent, shaking uncontrollably as it plummets towards the planet's surface. "There's some type of disruptor field!" he shouts. "It's jamming all of my instruments!"

"I'm getting massive systems overloads across the board," Vann offers helpfully, his mind settling into a state of remarkable calm. Possibly because he's experienced all of this before. "Which I may or may not have predicted…"

"Not the time!" Carth yells irritably. Broadcasting over the ship-wide system he announces, "Everyone, I'm going to try and land us on this planet, but it's going to be rough!" He continues jerking the controls, barely managing to steer the ship straight down as it attempts to bob and weave in all directions.

"Seventeen thousand meters and falling!" Vann's gaze darts to the viewport as the ship breaks into the planet's atmosphere, white clouds rushing by at a blinding speed. "Sixteen! Fifteen!"

The entire hull of the ship begins to shake from the sheer force of entering the atmosphere at this speed. Carth's knuckles are white on the controls as he does what he can to guide the freighter in a controlled fall, the various instrument panels blaring warnings and flashing a multitude of lights as the Hawk continues its descent.

"Ten thousand meters, nine thousand!" Vann reads off. "You get the idea!"

"Everyone," Carth warns over the ship's speakers, "Brace for impact! We're going down!"

The clouds fade away, revealing a sparkling blue ocean that Vann has absolutely no time to appreciate as the ship rockets towards it, the water looming closer by the second. There's a sandy patch of shoreline barely visible just off the ship's port side, though he's not sure if they'll reach it in time. "Five thousand meters!" he calls while frantically gesturing. "Dammit, Carth, the beach is that way!"

"Really? I can't tell!" The pilot hisses back through clenched teeth, sweat beading on his brow as he jams the controls to one side in a desperate attempt to steer the ship towards the solid ground below.

With a rattling groan, the Ebon Hawk begins to turn, twisting from side to side as it maneuvers awkwardly through the air. It's closer to the beach, but the landing is still uncertain. "Three thousand… Do you really need me to keep counting?!"

"No!" Carth snaps back, his voice tense with frustration as he does what he can to guide the ship to safety. Terror swirls around him, cold and thick. "But if you can do anything else, now would be the time."

The Hawk still looks like it's going to come up short of the shoreline despite the banking turn that it's being steered into. Instinctively, Vann reaches out his Force powers, extending them beyond the ship's hull and using them to guide the vessel closer to its destination. The effort is draining, like trying to drag a boulder through the mud using only stubborn determination. He can feel his breath coming in gasps, his vision flickering in and out of focus as all of his concentration centers on the singular task of maneuvering the ship. His hands leave the control panels as they carefully move through the air, tracing the path that the Hawk needs to take in order to land safely.

Vann is almost unaware of the sand looming closer in the viewport, rushing up at the freighter at a dangerous speed. But he does feel it as they touch down on the beach, the entire hull of the Hawk shuddering from the same impact that throws him forward in his seat. His safety harness jams painfully against his hips and chest but the discomfort is distant, as are the continued shrieks of the
various instrument panels as their lights illuminate the bridge in a rainbow of colors. The Force is still buzzing through his system, tingling beneath his skin and making his body feel like a live wire.

It's only an afterthought that makes the mercenary glances down at the nearest readout. "Zero meters," he announces breathlessly, slumping in his seat.

"Thanks," Carth gasps, sounding equally exhausted. "Good to know."

Chapter End Notes

1. I'm roughly basing the design of the Sith tomb, complete with hidden tunnels and false passageways, on ancient Egyptian tombs. Granted, this is an extremely exaggerated interpretation.

2. Canderous did (theoretically) predict Vann and Carth's relationship back on Taris. (He states that they sound like an old married couple.) My theory is that Mandalorian culture is more open and accepting of any and all types of romantic relationships, especially since adoption is extremely common (negating pressure to biologically procreate). There's even a gay, married Mandalorian couple with an adopted daughter in the Star Wars EU. TL;DR, I think Canderous has seen fellow warriors develop feelings for each other and knows the signs. He's actually married at this point in his life, though his wife Veela isn't mentioned in the KOTOR game.

3. I couldn't find anything about the hull plating of the Ebon Hawk, but a custom alloy hull would help to explain why the ship is so fast, durable, and valuable.
Chapter Summary

When an unexpected crash landing leaves our heroes stranded, their only escape may be the locals. Unfortunately, the locals have already been deceived by a certain someone once before...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

26.

"So, on a scale of one to Taris, how kriffed are we?" Vann's eyes flick between the gathered crew of the Ebon Hawk and the main hold's central computer. So far, every readout has brought grim news, reporting multiple systems as damaged or completely jammed.

"Well, if that landing was anything to go by, I'd say we're in a pretty big pile of bantha shit."

Mission glances at Carth, poking an elbow into his ribs. "What happened? Didja break into the stash of Tarisian ale or something?"

Sighing heavily, the pilot begins logging the multitude of warnings and alerts that are flashing across all of the screens in the hold. "No," he remarks dryly. "But the stabilizers are fried. Along with several instrument panels and…”

"Beep boop whoo!" T3-M4 whirs as he rushes into the room, having completed his check of the engines. Pausing in front of the pilot he emphatically announces, "Boop boop beeeep!"

"Are you sure about that?" Carth asks incredulously. Upon receiving an affirmative whistle, he groans in annoyance before angrily slamming his palm against the nearest console. "And according to Tee-Three, the hyperdrive is also damaged."

"Fan-kriffing-tastic," Canderous snarls. "So, I take it we're not getting off this rock anytime soon?"

As he irritably turns off a monitor displaying nothing but scrambled graphics Carth grumbles, "Good guess."

Casting a cursory glance at the ship's durasteel walls, a thoughtful expression crosses Jolee's face. "This is a Dynamic-class, right?" He waits for a few members of the crew to nod in confirmation before continuing. "Ships like this are designed to be fixed-up in the middle of nowhere. Their parts are interchangeable with quite a few other vessels."

Mission crosses her arms over her chest. "What are you trying to say, gramps?"

Tapping the nearest bulkhead, Jolee explains, "If we can find some salvage, I'm betting we can get the Hawk airborne again with some creative repairs."

"And just where are we supposed to find salvage trapped on an alien planet in the middle of Unknown Space?" Carth stares critically at the older man, throwing his hands up in exasperation.
"I admittedly do not know much about ship repair, but…" Juhani's lips curl into a half-smile. "During our rather rapid descent, I did notice that we are not the only ship to have crashed on this world."

Snapping her fingers, Mission nods enthusiastically. "Hey, yeah! I saw that too!"

"Pretty damn hard to miss the fact that this planet is a technological graveyard," Canderous snorts.

"Bad news for the other crews, I suppose." Juhani's expression grows contemplative. "But perhaps we can salvage the parts we need for repairs?"

Rubbing his knuckles against the scruff on his jaw, Carth hums in agreement. "That… actually might work." However, his hopeful expression quickly fades. "But you're forgetting one thing."

Scoffing at the pilot's negativity, Mission demands, "And that would be…?"

"There is a reason none of the other ships have been repaired and flown to safety." Growling angrily, Zaalbar shakes his head in frustration. "We may be trapped here!"

"Oh yeah." Realization dawns across Mission's features and some of her optimism fades away. "That's a good point Big Z…"

"At least we know why the crash happened," Carth begins, accessing a report from the moment the Hawk exited hyperspace. "There's some sort of disruptor field somewhere on this planet. I bet that's what took out the other ships you saw."

"And it's probably what caused me to crash the first time I visited here," Vann murmurs to himself, brow furrowing. When he spots the disturbed looks he's receiving from the rest of the crew, he offhandedly comments, "I've apparently been in a surprising number of ship crashes."

"So." There's a hopeful glint in Canderous's eyes as he wonders, "Does that mean you know where the disruptor field is?"

Vann pauses for a moment, hoping to awaken another lost memory. When nothing comes he shrugs apologetically. "Nope. Not consciously, at least."

Tone verging on desperate Mission begs, "But you can turn the field off if we find it, right?"

Wincing, Vann mumbles, "Honestly? No idea."

"Kid, do you know anything about this world?" Jolee's lips twist into a bemused frown.

"I was definitely here before." Vann chuckles weakly as he drops his voice to a whisper before adding, "…Probably."

"Well, that's just great." Grimacing at the realization, Canderous pounds his fist against the nearby table. "The only person who knows anything about this kriffing planet can't remember a damn thing!"

"Sorry my memory loss is inconvenient," Vann quips sarcastically, even as anger chills his tone. "It must be a really frustrating experience…"

"Enough!" Juhani hisses, her gaze challenging as she glares at her crewmates. "Fighting amongst ourselves is getting us nowhere!"

Inclining his head, Jolee jerks a thumb towards the Cathar. "She's got a point."
"Yeah, everyone just… try to calm down," Carth pleads, rubbing his temple as he walks between consoles. "Our first goal should be salvaging repair parts. Which means that at least some of us need to leave the ship to explore the planet."

"Oh!" Mission immediately raises her hand. "I'll go!"

"I think most of us should go." As Vann takes a minute to study the crew, he subconsciously begins formulating a plan. "We can split into two groups to cover more ground. If we move in different directions, we should be able to explore a pretty big area before nightfall."

Catching the gist of the idea, Juhani nods in wholehearted agreement. "And the further we expand our search, the more likely we are to discover the source of the disruptor field."

Vann grins. "Exactly."

"I'll stay behind and watch the ship." Already sounding overwhelmed, Carth doesn't look up from the diagnostics chart he's reading. "Tee-Three and I can start on some preliminary repairs."

Immediately sensing the pilot's stress, Jolee quickly responds, "I can lend a hand. After all, I've fixed more than a few freighters in my day."

"Alright. So…" Vann inwardly winces when he remembers the type of mischief the Twi'lek teen is capable of when left to her own devices. Smiling at her, he keeps his tone light as he suggests, "Mission, how about you come with me?"

Excitedly pumping her fist through the air, the Twi'lek lets out a whoop of delight. "Me, you, and Big Z exploring an unknown world? This is gonna be fun!"

Trilling apologetically the Wookiee hurriedly insists, "Only if you require my assistance, Vann."

"I'm always glad to have your help, big guy." The mercenary turns to give Mission a few more orders, only to realize that she's already racing off to the workshop to gather supplies. With a sigh, he turns to the rest of his companions, grimacing contritely when he realizes which crewmembers comprise the remaining group. "Canderous? Juhani? Can uh, can you…?"

The Cathar is quick to nod, though she glares venomously at the Mandalorian when she speaks. "I am willing to work with him to find salvage." Her voice lowers to an ominous snarl as she cautions, "I trust he will not try anything foolish."

"Hey, at least I'm honest," Canderous counters, slapping his palm against his chest armor. "If anything, you Force users and your mind games are the real…"

"Great!" Vann interrupts, barely restraining himself from rolling his eyes. "Sounds like this will work perfectly."

"So." Pursing his lips, Jolee looks at the rest of the crew expectantly. "Not to ruin your perfect plan with something as silly as logistics, but does anyone know if this planet is inhabited?"

Silence fills the hold as everyone turns to look at Vann, who shifts uncomfortably beneath the weight of their gazes. Clearing his throat, he awkwardly stammers, "Um, possibly?"

Clucking disapprovingly, Jolee waves one hand at the rest of the group. "Well, assuming that it is, does anyone speak the language?"

Raking his fingers through his hair, Vann stares pointedly at the ceiling as he mutters, "Once again,
"Missing memories aside, you'll probably be alright if you run into the locals." Pointing to the Cathar and the Mandalorian, Jolee assesses, "But those two might not fare as well."

"True." Taking a moment to consider his options, Vann tries to bite back a snicker as he admits, "But there is someone else on this ship who knows all of the languages I do."

Carth is the first to realize which crewmember the mercenary is referring to, and he nearly bangs his head on a monitor as his looks up in surprise. "Oh no. You cannot be suggesting…"

"Juhani, Canderous?" Vann calls, wearing an amused smirk. "You should probably take H-Kay with you as a translator…"

From that point on, the rest of their planning dissolves into chaos. Juhani is insistent that the droid will do more harm than good, even as Vann stubbornly reiterates the fact that HK-47 is the only other member of the crew who has any chance of communicating with the locals. It's an argument that he ultimately wins, and he's rewarded with the sight of his companions marching irritably across the alien beach while attempting to ignore a running commentary about their slushy, bulbous bodies and inferior mental capacity. The image continues to entertain him as he heads in the opposite direction with Mission and Zaalbar, the former bounding across the beach with endless enthusiasm.

It's not long before they find a wrecked freighter matching Carth's specifications nestled among the palm trees and wind-worn rocks that jut out from the sand. It takes even less time for them to discover that the entire crash site is surrounded by armed plasma mines.

"Phew, that was a tricky one!" Mission grins as she holds up a disarmed explosive, turning it over in her hands. "But I don't think they make a mine I can't disarm."

"Be careful!" Zaalbar warbles nervously. "There are mines scattered all over. I wouldn't want you to accidentally set one off."

"Just like you almost did?" Hands on her hips, Mission turns to her friend as she huffs indignantly. "I ain't a little kid, Big Z. I know what I'm doing!" With a final snort of displeasure, she nimbly picks her way across the sandy dunes, easily hopping over scattered ship debris. Pausing beside another mine, she crouches down to begin disarming it. "Geeze there's a lot of these… Why do you think that is?"

"Because the Force has a sense of humor," Vann deadpans, looking up from the list of needed parts displayed on his datapad. "Or this ship was transporting them when it crashed."

"Huh." Carefully snipping a tiny wire, Mission exhales heavily as the mine blinks once and then shuts off. "Well, either way, this looks like the last of 'em. It's safe to come through!"

Zaalbar is the first to dash across the former minefield, his hairy feet kicking up clods of moist sand as he jumps over the wreckage strewn across the beach. "Good work!" he tells his friend as he approaches the rusting hull of the older model freighter. "Hopefully we can find the parts needed to repair the Ebon Hawk."

Strolling along in the Wookiee's wake, Vann's attention is once again focused on the pad. "Yeah. So, we need, uh…" Enhancing one of the pictures supplied by Jolee, he shows it to his companions. "We need one of these. Oh, and this. And these too." After flicking through several more images, he finally hands the device to the Twi'lek. "Look, how about you and Zaalbar just
take apart the whole damn hyperdrive, toss the parts into the bag, and we can let Carth figure out the rest?"

Selecting a screwdriver from the tool belt around her waist, Mission giggles as she climbs into the remains of the ship. "That was my plan all along."

Entering the vessel through a broken viewport, Zaalbar pauses to knock away some shattered transparisteel. "Don't worry, we can find the needed parts. Will you be assisting us?"

Carefully drawing one lightsaber, Vann grips the hilt as he replies, "I trust you to handle it. I was planning on scouting around to see if I can find the source of that disruptor field."

"Sounds like a pretty good plan!" Poking her head out of a tear in the hull, Mission waves to the mercenary. "But watch your back, V-Man. We don't know much about this planet."

"Yeah, I've noticed." With a final mock salute to the Twi'lek, Vann casually jogs away from the crashed ship. As he moves down the beach he carefully examines the surrounding area, searching for any signs of technology beyond the decrepit wrecks that litter the shoreline. A few meters inland he notices a narrow trail that passes through the craggy gray cliffs that compose the interior of the island. Slowing to a cautious walk he approaches the path, weapon ready. What he's not prepared for is the wash of memories that overtake him, causing the surrounding scenery to warp and twist as the late morning sun suddenly fades into the brilliant glow of early twilight. The mercenary's clothing also shifts, his well-worn jacket and pants billowing out to become a long black robe that covers his body and cloaks his face in shadow.

Both of Revan's lightsabers glow a brilliant blue as he holds them at the ready, his muscles tense and body poised to strike at any moment. Even without glancing over his shoulder he's aware of the steady, familiar presence at his back, the larger figure chuckling humorlessly as his own 'saber hums dangerously.

"The locals don't seem too friendly," Malak notes dryly.

Behind his mask Revan cracks a thin smile as he twirls the lightsaber in his dominant hand, taunting the stalk-eyed natives to come closer. Two immediately take the bait, charging ahead with their primitive spears held aloft. They scream as they attack, their weapons swinging through the air with surprising swiftness. But their voices are quickly silenced as the Jedi dodges their strikes and counters with his own, the hot plasma of his blades carving through the smooth-skinned bodies with minimal effort. Both beings immediately drop to the ground, gurgling out their final breaths as their opponent stares straight ahead, daring anyone else to challenge his martial might…

Gasping as his mind returns to the present, Vann presses himself against the rough cliff wall as he tries to calm his racing heart. The rock is surprisingly cool despite the blazing sunlight that bathes most of the beach, and he presses his forehead against it as he catches his breath. 'So,' he thinks to himself, 'I've definitely been here.'

Before he can uncover any further memories, a tingle of warning dances across the back of his neck. Eyes growing wide, he instinctively turns back towards the wreck that his crew is scavenging, managing to spot a flicker of movement among the broad ferns that surround the crash site. Immediately drawing his second lightsaber he ignites both weapons as he sprints towards his companions, a growl escaping his throat as he yells, "Mission, Zaalbar, get down! There are locals headed your way, and they aren't exactly friendly!"

Upon hearing the Human's voice, two creatures with greenish-gray skin leap out from a copse of lush, low-growing palm fronds. They're wielding primitive weapons almost identical to the spears
from Vann's vision, the sharp metal edges glinting beneath the sun. The mercenary charges and meets them both head-on, swinging his lightsabers in a wide arc as he pivots gracefully and manages to parry attacks from both opponents simultaneously. It seems like the unexpected glow of his blades momentarily distracted the natives, though they quickly shake off their shock. Remaining close to the ground the mercenary quickly slashes at the leg of one creature using his dominant 'saber, carving a debilitating gash and causing the limb to buckle. With the weapon in his off-hand, he makes a second attack, slicing deep into his opponent's side. There's an alien howl of agony as the creature collapses to the ground from his wounds.

The shriek of blaster fire surprises Vann, especially when two bolts streak over his left shoulder. There's a grunt of pain from right behind him, and he whirls around just in time to see his second opponent stumble back as she's peppered in the stomach with rifle shots. Another louder screech sings through the air as a metal quarrel is fired directly at the remaining creature, striking her in the chest with enough power to knock her prone, forcing her to drop her weapon as she collapses into the sand. Without hesitation Vann dives forward, kicking the double-bladed sword away before aiming the points of his lightsabers at the native's throat. Expression livid he shouts, "Who are you, and why did you attack us?"

Wheezing in discomfort the creature stares up at the Human with bulbous golden eyes, blinking once before choking out, "You... you're a Jedi."

"Not quite." Bristling with suspicion, Vann keeps his blades trained on his attacker. "And I'll ask the questions here."

Boots sending up a spray of coarse sand as she skids to a halt, Mission points her blaster rifle at the injured native. "What the hells is going on?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out." Letting the hot plasma hover minutely closer to his opponent's flesh, Vann again asks, "Who are you?"

"I am a member of... the Black Rakata. And a servant of... of The One," the creature finally explains with a pained wheeze. "I... was sent to see if the One's suspicions are... are true."

Confusion creases Mission's features, and she glances at the mercenary with a puzzled frown. "Hey V-Man, can you understand these bug-eyed weirdos?"

"Apparently," Vann confirms with a half-shrug before turning his attention back to the defeated Rakata. "This... One? What does he suspect?"

The creature stares back, gaze clouded with discomfort. Yet her voice sounds surprisingly steady. "He believes that Revan has returned."

"Shit." Wincing at the implication, Vann struggles to stifle his groan of irritation. "Well, what does he want with m... with Revan?"

Sagging with the severity of her injuries, the Rakata gasps as she continues speaking. "He wishes to speak with... the great... great warrior." Drawing an uneven breath, she adds, "He will not... be denied..."

"Vann!" Zaalbar calls in alarm from his position on the roof of the crashed freighter. "There are more creatures coming this way. I count at least a dozen!"

"You will come with us or... or you will be... destroyed." Smiling in acceptance, the Rakata exhales a final breath as she succumbs to her wounds. But Vann barely registers her death, his
thoughts suddenly preoccupied with tracking the flurry of movement happening all around him. More natives are leaping into view from all sides, their swords and spears drawn and aimed at the Ebon Hawk's crew. At least two of them are holding thick metal chains which are attached to the collars of what appear to be small rancors. Because of course there are rancors.

"We can, uh, we can take 'em," Mission murmurs, still clutching her rifle as she moves closer to the mercenary. "Right, V-Man?"

Zaalbar already has his bowcaster aimed at the nearest Rakata. "I await your orders!" he announces.

Still wielding both of his ignited lightsabers, Vann brings them up to guard him and the Twi'lek as he carefully shifts positions to gain a better view of his opponents. "Hold for now," he tells his companions. "Don't attack unless they do."

"A wise decision, Interloper," one of the Rakata commends, stepping forward as he sheathes his heavy, two-handed sword. "We have not come for bloodshed. We merely wish to extend an offer from the One, Great Champion of the Rakata."

Not lowering his 'sabers, Vann nods sarcastically. "Okay. I'm listening."

"Our scouts have reported that off-worlders have come to our beach, some of who wield the strange weapons of the Jedi." The Rakata points a clawed hand at the mercenary's lightsabers. "Our leader and champion believes this is a sign that Revan has finally returned to fulfill the vow he made many years ago."

"Dammit," Vann swears under his breath, struggling to keep his expression neutral as he continues conversing with the natives. "So, what is this vow? And why does the One want to talk with us?"

Head bowing slightly the Rakata replies, "More I cannot tell you, Interloper. If you wish for an explanation, you must come with me. We are sworn to deliver you to our chieftain, and no harm will come from us or our war beasts so long as you stay your weapons."

Curiosity tugs at Vann's mind as he weighs his options, subtly studying the dozen or so Rakata with their crude weapons and simple armor. While he's fairly sure that he could take them down with a little help from Mission and Zaalbar, he's not sure if he can incapacitate the pair of rancors before the beasts seriously injure whoever they sink their claws into. A Wookiee might be able to handle one in combat, but a slender teenager won't stand much of a chance. Swallowing hard he hopes to the Force that he's making the right decision as he reluctantly sneers, "Fine!" With that, he powers down both lightsabers, clipping the hilts to his belt as he concedes, "Take us to see your chieftain. I have some questions that I want to ask him."

"V-Man, what are you doing?" Mission hisses between her teeth.

"Getting as much information about this kriffing planet as I can," Vann whispers back. His gaze slides to the Rakata and then back to the Twi'lek. "If we're lucky, they know how to disable that disruptor field."

Mouth forming a small 'o,' Mission nods in acknowledgment before turning to wave Zaalbar over. "Vann's right, Big Z. It'll be more useful to ask these guys questions than use 'em for target practice." With that, she swings the rifle over her shoulder.

"I trust Vann to do the right thing," the Wookiee states, leaping down from the freighter and rushing towards his friends.
'That makes one of us,' the mercenary tells himself, though he doesn't voice his inner doubts. Instead, he slaps on a cocky smile and gestures towards the apparent leader of the group. "Alright." he tells the Rakata. "Lead the way."

"A wise choice, Interloper," the native applauds the mercenary before rejoining his people. "I am sure the One will be most pleased to speak with you."

Swallowing a derisive scoff, Vann sighs to himself as he thinks, 'Judging from past experience, I really doubt it.'

* * *

"Look, we've been over all of this already. You found me and Malak after I crashed on this planet the first time. You tried to capture me, and I wiped the beach with your warriors. And after all that, we apparently made an alliance." Hands clenching in frustration, Vann glares balefully at the tall Rakata who calls himself the One. "And I remember almost none of this."

"I sense truth in your words, Revan. There is something different about you. And yet... You carry yourself the same way, and you still wield ancient magic. The Force, you called it." Tightening his grip on the pommels of his sheathed swords, the Rakata chieftain snarls at the Human. "No matter. Nothing that has transpired in these past years that changes the nature of the vow you made."

Sensing that this line of discussion isn't getting him anywhere, Vann draws a slow breath to try and clear the cold chill of irritation that's building up in his gut and streaming through his limbs. He can't tell if the Rakata are too primitive to comprehend his memory loss, or if they're merely too prideful to let him go a second time. "Fine," he spits. "What exactly did this vow involve?"

Nodding in satisfaction at the Human's perceived submission, the One grins. "You swore to destroy the Elders for their crimes against the Black Rakata." He gnashes his jaws in contempt. "For they have stolen the ancient texts and artifacts of our people, hoarding these sacred items in their fortified settlement. The blood of many fierce Rakata warriors has been spilled in an attempt to regain what is rightfully ours!"

"Oh, knifing hells..." Vann rubs one palm over his forehead.

Mission scowls critically at the Rakata chieftain. "I don't like the looks of him," she murmurs. "What's he saying?" As the mercenary translates the conversation into Basic, her eyes grow wide. "He's gonna force you to kill his enemies for him?!"

"That does not seem fair!" Zaalbar agrees with an angry trill.

Merely chuckling at this, the One shakes his head. "Force him? No, child! We were, and are, allies working towards a common goal. After all, Revan is the one who suggested we forge our alliance."

His tone turns darker. "And he seemed excited at the prospect of bathing in the blood of our mutual enemies."

Another roughly-worded translation only seems to increase the Twi'lek's ire. "But that's not who V-Man... who Revan is now!" Elbowing the mercenary in the side, she gestures emphatically to the Rakata chieftain. "Come on, tell him!"

Sighing heavily, Vann closes his eyes for a moment as he attempts to release his mounting resentment towards the situation, or at least push it down just a little deeper. Extending his awareness out, he senses the cold flicker of the dark side flowing around the One. It's not the pure malevolence of Malak or the sinister chill of the Korriban academy, but a far more primal
sensation akin to the power possessed by the Progenitor back on Manaan. The further he searches, the more he realizes that this glimmer of darkness affects more than just the chieftain. It seems to curl up from the ground and pulse through every Rakata, as though the ancient taint is woven into the very core of the planet and its people. The thought sends a shiver down the mercenary's spine as he refocuses his gaze.

Examining the One, Vann inclines his head slightly. "I believe that we had an alliance," he states, ignoring Mission's gasp of shock. "But before I agree to any terms, I need answers to a few questions."

Grunting in dissatisfaction, the tall Rakata bares his teeth. "We may be allies, Revan. But I will still force you to uphold your word if you try to betray me." As he speaks, four of his warriors move in closer, all brandishing weapons at the interlopers despite Zaalbar's roar of protest.

"Careful," Vann says airily, allowing electricity to dance along his fingertips. "I don't react well to threats." He can't hide his grin as the warriors immediately step back, shifting uncomfortably as they mutter about strange magic. "But I think you'll find that my questions are pretty easy to answer."

With an incensed snort, the One growls, "Ask your questions. But be quick Jedi."

"Still not a Jedi…" Vann grumbles under his breath before clearing his throat and inquiring, "Our ship was nearly destroyed because of some sort of disruptor field. Do you know what's creating the field? Or how to disable it?"

"As I explained to you the last time you crashed on my planet, the technology that causes ships to fall from the sky comes from the Temple of the Ancients." The One's words are terse, his patience obviously wearing thin. "The temple has long been locked to my people, and I know nothing of what is contained within."

Disappointment sits heavy in Vann's stomach. "So," he surmises. "You can't help us get off this planet."

Scoffing at the suggestion that there's anything he can't do, the One haughtily assures the Human, "The Elders have the ritual to open the temple barrier hoarded away in their settlement. If you kill them and bring me their texts, my people can grant you access."

"What's he saying?" Mission demands. "Can he help us or not?"

Vann quickly translates the Rakata chieftain's offer, trying to keep the sarcasm from his voice. The Twi'lek seems to have the same doubtful reaction, and she snorts dramatically in response.

Rumbling thoughtfully, Zaalbar suggests, "It may not be honorable, but perhaps we can turn to these Elders for assistance? It might prevent unnecessary bloodshed."

As he listens to the Wookiee's suggestion, Vann stifles a groan when he realizes that he definitely double-crossed the Rakata chieftain during his last visit to this planet. From what he's pieced together, it's obvious that he and Malak got past the disruptor field and reached the Star Forge. It's also becoming increasingly clear that they somehow did so without the One's help. While recognizing his own deception isn't exactly pleasant, he's still vaguely relieved that his duplicity was so successful. After all, if it worked once it might work again. After subtly nodding to his companions, he turns back to his host just in time to notice the Rakata's growing outrage.

"Just what is that creature saying?" the One snaps, challenge evident in the stiffness of his posture.
"You cannot hide anything from us, Revan. We have grown wise to your lies and will not allow
you to abandon your vow twice."

"He's wondering what sounds your warriors would make if he ripped them in half," Vann explains
breezily, sharing a smirk with Mission who's doing a poor job of hiding her snickers behind her
hand.

Frigid anger cascades around the Rakata chieftain, and he begins to draw his swords. "I do not take
kindly to mockery, Revan…"

"Oh, for Force sake," Vann complains, feigning exasperation. "He was asking if you could be
trusted to actually get us inside of that temple."

Hands still hovering over his weapons, the One remains tense. "Unlike others, we always uphold
our vows to our allies." His tone drops to a menacing hiss as he warns, "You would be wise to do
the same."

Offering the leader an easy smile that's all teeth and false promises, Vann assures him, "I know
when to keep my word."

"I hope you speak the truth, as lying to me makes you my enemy and the enemy of all Black
Rakata on this planet. While I may not understand your magic, I am still the Grand Champion of
my people." Gesturing loftily, the One draws himself up to his full, formidable height as he
describes, "I have conquered every island within a month's sailing, and have gained wisdom from
the flesh of the many chieftains who I have feasted upon after they fell beneath my blades. My
army numbers in the thousands and they have all pledged loyalty to me and me alone." He bangs
both palms against his chest, daring anyone to question his claims. "You're welcome to challenge
me, Revan. And when you fall, my warriors and I will feast on your flesh. So, I advise you to
choose your next words wisely."

Visibly disturbed by the way the chieftain licks his teeth as he speaks, Zaalbar's tone is nervous as
he wonders, "What did he just say?"

Attempting to nonchalantly wave off his companion, Vann grumbles, "He's describing his…
unique dietary preferences."

"Uh, what's the plan, V-Man? 'Cause I don't want to stick around this place much longer." Mission
shivers a little, lowering her voice to the barest of whispers. "This guy is giving me the creeps."

Praying to the Force that the Rakata chieftain hasn't grown any smarter since their last encounter,
Vann levels his gaze at the taller figure. "I made a vow," he offers, tone blunt. "And I intend to
uphold it." With a respectful tilt of his head he offers, "The next time I contact you, I'll have what
you want."

"Excellent," the One says with a toothy smile of approval. "You have made the right choice. I only
hope that you are wise enough to uphold your promise this time."

"You'll find out soon enough." Beckoning to his companions, Vann waits until they're at his side
before striding down the open-air walkway that leads away from the chieftain's quarters and into
the Black Rakata's main compound. His pace is smooth and unhurried as he moves through the
crowd of armed warriors who are diligently guarding their settlement, their unrestrained hostility
radiating into the Force. They stare at the strangers, bulbous eyes blazing with an animosity that
promises violence should anyone so much as breath wrong in their presence. Yet, they make no
move to attack or otherwise harass the trio of outsiders.
Vann makes a point of keeping his posture casual as he walks confidently through the settlement and out the door, not bothering to acknowledge the stoic guards who bristle and point their spears at him. The taint of the dark side trails after them even after they've left the One's territory, and he can't shake the feeling of icy fingers sliding across his skin. Despite this disquieting effect he maintains his façade of confidence until the trio loses sight of the compound, the red cloth roofs and sand-colored walls blurring into the landscape until they're fully hidden by the lush palm trees and windblown rock formations that shield the buildings from prying eyes. Only when he's positive he and his crewmates are free and clear does the mercenary let out a sigh of relief, his shoulders visibly slumping.

"Um… V-Man?" Mission's voice is little more than a hushed whimper as she worries her bottom lip with her front teeth.

"What?!" Vann demands in a tone harsher than intended, unable to keep the swirl of fear and stress from entering his voice.

Zaalbar growls at the Human's outburst, but the teen places a restraining hand on the Wookiee's wrist. "I, uh, I was just checking something."

Running both hands through his hair, Vann draws in a lungful of salty sea air. "Alright," he breathes, managing to rein in his temper. "What is it?"

"We're… not actually going back there, right?" A flicker of hope passes over Mission's features.

"Oh, kriff no!" Vann responds with a tense laugh. "We're going to get those Elders to help us, just like Zaalbar suggested. And if 'the One' and his so-called army try to get in our way, I'm going to splatter them across this Force-damned beach!"

Nodding in contentment, a smile of relief spreads across the Twi'lek's face. "Okay, that's what I thought!"

"I am glad that my idea is worthy of consideration," Zaalbar says with a modest bob of his head. "For I did not like the One and his tactics."

Patting the Wookiee on his hairy bicep, Vann quips, "Always glad when we can work together, big guy." He points in the direction that the trio originally came from, the wrecked freighter barely visible in the distance. "Now come on, let's finish salvaging that hyperdrive."

Mission and Zaalbar don't need to be told twice, and they immediately head down the beach. "You got it, V-Mann," the Twi'lek says with renewed cheer.

Remaining a few paces behind his companions, Vann places his dominant hand on the hilt of his lightsaber as he mutters, "And let's hope that the others had better luck with the locals."

As it turns out, salvaging the parts is a three-person job. Mission and Zaalbar are in constant motion as they take apart the crashed freighter's hyperdrive, all while chatting excitedly about each new piece they retrieve. Vann isn't quite as essential, but he quickly discovers that his Force powers are surprisingly useful for suppressing small electrical fires and minor explosions every time the Twi'lek says 'oops.' It still takes hours for them to disassemble all of the necessary components, and the sun is just beginning to dip low in the horizon as they climb out of the wreck with a large bag of assorted parts slung over the Wookiee's shoulder.

The early evening is marginally cooler though no less humid and the trek back to the Ebon Hawk is distinctly uncomfortable, both due to the climate and the morose silence that Vann slips into.
Luckily, his companions seem content to talk to each other, occasionally descending into playful bickering. One a few occasions Mission tries to draw the Human into their conversation, but the offer dies on her lips when she notices his sullen mood. It doesn't lighten as they approach the ship, even when he hears the rest of the crew chattering amiably in the main hold.

"And I looked at the guy, this goggle-eyed freak, and I said, 'Believe it or not pal, I'm the nice one here!'" Canderous slaps his thigh as he describes the scene, both of his feet propped on the table. "And get this, the guy looked at me and…"

"That is not how it happened and you know it!" Prowling across the hold, Juhani jabs an accusing finger towards the Mandalorian. "If you are going to describe our experience with the local population, at least use facts so that others can properly assess the situation."

Sitting up a little straighter, Canderous narrows his eyes at the Cathar. "The only one who needs to 'assess' this kriffing situation is Vann, and he's either going to know what we're talking about or he's not."

"Observation: There is nothing about this situation that needs assessing," HK-47 surmises. "The solution is simple. If we exterminate as much of the local population as possible, they cannot present any further difficulties."

Pausing in the doorway to the main hold, Vann glances between his crewmates as he asks, "Uh, where's Carth?" He hesitates before adding, "And do I even want to know what I missed?"

"Our pilot is still busy making repairs. I wouldn't bother him if you know what's good for you," Jolee warns with a gentle tut. "As for the rest… seems these three discovered this planet is inhabited. Though, I suspect you already knew that."

"We sure as hells found out!" Mission declares, ducking around Vann as she hops into the hold. "The locals are a little weird looking, and they ain't too friendly."

Vann moves completely into the room when he's nudged in the back, immediately stepping to the side so that Zaalbar can bring in his heavy bag of salvaged parts. "Their methods reminded me of my brother," the Wookiee admits. "Prideful and arrogant."

"Odd…" Juhani murmurs. "The group that we met were quite polite. It seems that they were priests or scholars of some sort? They claimed to be the Elders of their people, the Rakata."

After exchanging a surprised look with Mission and Zaalbar, Vann turns to the Cathar. "Did you say… Elders?"

Rolling his eyes, Canderous nods in confirmation. "Yeah. Though for all we know, it might have been a mistranslation by your droid."

"Statement: Oh, I did not mistranslate anything." HK-47 turns his glowing gaze towards the Mandalorian. "It is not my fault if your soft, organic brain cannot process what I say."

"They are called the Elders," Vann quickly clarifies. "And I think they're one of two groups of Rakata living on this island. The other group is…"

"The One and his army," Juhani finishes. "Yes, we heard about them. But how do you know this? Did you recover more memories?"

Collapsing into a seat, Mission shakes her head. "Nah. We ran into a bunch of 'em while we were salvaging these parts." She swings a fist through the air with a grin. "I thought Vann should flatten
them, but he decided to be *diplomatic* and hear what they had to say."

"So, what'd they say?" Before he even receives a response, Canderous waves a dismissive hand. "Judging by the kid's attitude, I'm guessing it was nothing useful."

"Nothing too important," Vann fibs, giving the Mandalorian a half-shrug. "No matter what, I think working with the Elders is our best bet. Though, I am kind of curious how you found them."

"When we could not find any useful salvage, we started searching for the source of the disruptor field. A few kilometers from the ship we discovered a stone building, which we thought might be what we were looking for." Juhani purses her lips into a thin line as she carefully chooses her next words. "Our suspicions only increased when we learned that the door to the building was blocked by some sort of electrical barrier."

Snorting in amusement, Canderous announces, "Yeah, and this is where things got *weird*."

Jolee's brows arch as he comments, "Are you saying that things have been *normal* until now?"

"Silence, both of you! If you have nothing to add, at least allow me to speak." Hissing fiercely at both of her crewmates, Juhani's temper flares in an icy wave around her. Still glowering, she waits for the tide of irritation to ebb before explaining, "Somehow, the residents of the settlement were able to monitor the area around the building. It seems that one of them saw my lightsaber, and decided to permit us access to their property."

Sucking in a sharp breath between his teeth, Vann mumbles, "Your lightsaber? Shit..."

"I'm betting you know where this is going," Canderous states, chuckling mirthlessly. "Apparently two Jedi by the names of Malak and Revan crashed on this planet a few years back. Seems the pair double-crossed these Elders, which made them a little upset."

Turning to glare at the mercenary, Mission's tone grows accusatory. "Geeze, Vann. You were kind of a jerk back when you were Revan."

"Yeah," the Human responds dryly as his renewed resentment towards his past makes his skin tingle with anger. "I've noticed."

Casting a hopeful glance at the rest of the crew, Zaalbar trills, "Maybe if he speaks to these Elders, they'll realize that he's changed?"

"Beats me. All I know is that they're pretty kriffing mad at Vann here," Canderous jerks a thumb towards the mercenary as his lips curl into a sneer. "You see, he and Malak were supposed to *destroy* the Star Forge, not use it to make an armada."

"Okay," Vann quickly clarifies. "To be fair, I had nothing to do with the armada..."

" Either way, the Elders don't exactly trust you." Canderous's voice lowers to a menacing snarl. "And I don't blame them."

"Honestly? Neither do I," Vann admits with a cringe, scrubbing both hands over his face. Shame washes over him, chilled and thick.

Mission's tone is disarmingchipper as she places a comforting hand on the mercenary's forearm. "Well, at least you admit that you were kind of a slime."

"Statement: Do not feel ashamed of your past, Master. You possessed *many* droid-like qualities..."
that I greatly admired. Wherever you went, death and destruction were always assured." HK-47 hums thoughtfully for a moment before continuing. "Additional statement: Speaking of death, Master, I would like to point out that I have already proposed a solution to your problem with the locals." His mechanical voice warbles with glee as he suggests, "If we eliminate their entire population, they cannot cause any further complications. This is a task that I am more than happy to assist with."

Resisting the urge to refute the droid's praise, Vann merely heaves a tired sigh. "As tempting as that offer is, H-Kay, we need the Rakata's help."

The droid's eyes flicker in irritation, his joints whirring as he straightens his posture. "Commentary: But Master, you are one of the most effective and brutal fighters that the Republic has ever known. What could these primitive meatbags offer you that you cannot achieve on your own?"

Grinning smugly, Canderous nods in agreement. "When the droid has a point, he makes it pretty damn well."

Waving off the compliments, Vann clenches his jaw as he explains, "For one thing, we need the Elders to get into the Temple of the Ancients. That's where the disruptor field is located. And getting the field down is the only way to finally get off this kriffing planet."

Crossing his arms over his chest with a disgruntled scoff, Jolee wonders, "Call me overly pessimistic, but what makes you think these Elders can get you into that temple if you don't even remember meeting them in the first place?"

"From everything the One said, I'm pretty sure the Elders got me in the first time." Vann tries to offer the older Force user a reassuring smile, though he feels the gesture fall flat. "I'm just assuming they can do it again."

Holding up her hand to pause the conversation, Juhani's expression is apologetic as she mutters, "While the first part of that assumption seems to be true, the second part... ah... not so much."

"It seems that your buddy the One stole whatever texts the Elders used to open the temple for you and Malak." Sliding his feet off the table, Canderous leans forward in his seat. "So, if you want to get in there a second time, we need to get those texts back."

Zaalbar's roar shakes the entire hold with the force of his indignation. "But that is the opposite of what the One told us!"

"Yeah, you tell 'em, Big Z!" Mission drives one fist into the opposite palm, declaring, "That kriffing slime told us that the Elders were hoarding the sacred texts of his people and that he wanted us to retrieve everything for him."

"Could have been some spin to make his enemies look bad, and to convince you to join his side." Thoughtfully rubbing his palm over his chin, Canderous's tone is resentful as he recalls, "I know the Republic used those types of underhanded smear campaigns during the wars."

"But the Republic did not have to lie about the deeds of the Mandalorians," Juhani seethes, a deep growl rumbling in her throat as cold anger billows around her. "Still, if the One is leading through lies and fear, he is not to be trusted."

Tutting disapprovingly, Jolee interjects, "That's if he's lying. Just because these Elders seem nicer doesn't mean they are nicer."

"Yeah, Gramps," Mission smirks at the older Force user. "You're not always so nice yourself."
Shaking a finger at the teen, Jolee merely grumbles, "I'll take that as a compliment coming from you."

"Suggestion: Perhaps after killing both sides you should search for the texts yourself, Master…"

HK-47's words echo hollowly in Vann's ears, his mind already beginning to drift as visions suddenly surface from his damaged memory, transporting his consciousness to another time and place. A scene unfolds before his eyes, and he unwillingly becomes a spectator to his own past. The controlled environment of the Ebon Hawk fades away, replaced by the dim light and musty air within a cavern set high above a shoreline littered with the rusting husks of crashed ships. The humidity seems to press against Revan's armor, weighing down his every move.

"Are you sure that hiding those texts is the best course of action?" Malak asks from his position as the lookout at the mouth of the cave. His back is pressed against the rough gray rock, enabling him to hide his tall frame within the shadows.

Revan says nothing, instead focusing his Force powers on the back of the cavern, pulling at a mound of stones created long ago by a cave-in. He's been over this plan and has repeatedly explained the need to hide the Rakata texts to prevent others from following their path to the Star Forge. It's a protective measure, designed to prevent their research from falling into the hands of their enemies. And if it keeps the Rakata from following them later… that's just a useful bonus. The Jedi continues using the Force to shift the pile of rubble until one boulder tumbles downward, starting an avalanche that sends plumes of thick, chalky dirt into the air. As the cascade of rocks crashes to the ground it lands atop a small pile of ancient tomes, burying them out of sight and mind.

Coughing as he inadvertently breathes in the dust, Malak frowns. "This could start a war," he cautions, tone stern.

And yes, Revan knows this. Cold energy flows through his skin, tingling like tiny needles of ice. He's well aware that he may start a war. In fact, he's counting on it.

"V-Man, what's the matter?" Mission's amber eyes are wide as she monitors the mercenary, waving her hand in front of his face. "You look like you're on the wrong end of an all-night bender."

Blinking rapidly as his mind snaps back to reality, Vann swears. "Kriffing hells!"

Watching the younger man with a bemused expression, Jolee rubs his forehead and shakes his head sadly. "Oh sure, now you remember something useful."

Still trying to rein in his shock, Vann stares down at his hands for a moment before peering up at the crew. "I… It was me."

Concern laces Juhani's voice, though her words are also tinged with suspicion. "What are you talking about?"

"I… dammit!" Vann rakes both hands through his hair, fingers tangling in the straight brown strands. He tugs at them in frustration. "I was the one who took those texts. Malak and me, we… we hid them so that nobody could follow us to the Star Forge." A groan wells up in his throat. "And we wanted to keep the Rakata busy so that they couldn't stop us from using the forge."

"Hmm." Jolee nods grimly at the revelation. "That does sound like something Revan would do."

Canderous grunts approvingly. "If nothing else, it's tactically advantageous."
Gnashing her teeth at the Humans, Juhani snarls, "But it does not help us now."

"Vann?" Zaalbar's gentle growl is almost soothing compared to the rest of the crew's ire. "Do you at least know where you hid those texts?"

Images of the cave flash through the mercenary's mind, panning out across jagged gray cliffs overlooking a debris-strewn beach. Nestled within the rocky heights is a sun-dappled pass partially obscured by the palm trees and thick ferns growing from the crags. "Yeah, I think I do…"

As she rubs her palms together, Mission's lips twist into a wryly determined grin. "Then let's get those texts and use 'em ourselves!"

"It's not that easy." More stray bits of memory filter into Vann's head and he distantly recalls the sound of chanting, the language complex and foreign to his ears. "There's a ritual that needs to be performed, and only the Rakata know how to do it. I don't think we can open the temple ourselves."

"Well then go say you're sorry, give back the texts, and convince the natives to open that temple," Jolee prompts, making a shooing motion with his hands.

"Apologies alone aren't going to fix things. The One won't help us unless we kill the Elders." A fresh wave of guilt washes over Vann, casing his shoulders to sag wearily. "And once the Elders learn that I'm involved in this whole mess, they're probably going to want to kill me."

"Why can't we just… lie?" Mission forces a weak smile as she searches the others for any signs of encouragement. "The Elders don't have to know you're involved."

The rest of the crew makes a low murmur of agreement as they glance at each other, a few heads nodding at the idea. But Juhani's expression remains unconvincing, her voice hesitant as she objects. "But Vann must be the one to enter their temple. I… I cannot be the only one who senses this!" She stares imploringly at Jolee, her tone lowering to an ominous whisper. "I can feel its presence in the Force. It is a source of ancient power."

"I'm assuming that when you say 'power' you actually mean 'darkness.'" Arching a critical brow at the Cathar, the oldest Force user snorts sarcastically. "Yup, mmm-hmm. Sending Vann in there sounds like a fantastic idea."

"Hush!" Irritation whirls around Juhani at the flippant answer as she warns, "You know as well as I do that he may be the only one powerful enough to face whatever lies inside."

Jolee heaves a deep sigh as a scowl creases his forehead. "I never said that you're not right," he finally acquiesces. "But that doesn't change the fact that sending him in there is a recipe for disaster!"

Jaw dropping slightly, Vann glares at the other Force users. "I'm standing right here you know!"

"Alright, enough with the creepy Force predictions!" Canderous bellows before the discussion can derail further. "None of it matters if those goggle-eyed freaks won't let us inside the damn temple. So, before we stand here arguing all day, does anyone have an actual plan?"

Silence descends over the crew as everyone simultaneously turns to look everywhere but at the Mandalorian. Feet shuffle awkwardly and one or two individuals clear their throat as they desperately wait for someone else to propose an idea.

It's Vann who speaks first, his tone surprisingly calm despite the near-manic smirk that tugs at his
lips. "I… I might have a plan. But it's going to involve a little bit trickery. And some explosives."
He glances Canderous as he says this, noting the other man's barely restrained glee. "With any
luck, it'll convince at least one group of Rakata to help us. And it might let me apologize for
double-crossing them the last time I was here."

"That is a noble goal," Juhani remarks approvingly. Her voice grows more somber as she asks,
"Though, I am curious… what exactly are you planning?"

"Oh, it's pretty simple." A flat, humorless laugh escapes Vann as he admits, "I'm going to threaten
to kill them all."

HK-47's eyes gleam maliciously. "Statement: Oh Master, it's good to have you back."

Chapter End Notes

1. The Ebon Hawk takes more damage in this story than it does in KOTOR. This is
because the game makes the player repair the hyperdrive despite the fact that
stabilizers (at least on an airplane) are located on the outside of the craft. So, in this
story there's damage to both the exterior of the Hawk and its engine.

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Chapter Summary

In which the locals are placated, traditions are respected, and our hero is totally and completely in control of the situation. There is no way that anything can possibly go wrong.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

27.

An early morning breeze billows up to the bluff from the ocean below as the waves break over the rocks and send a fine spray of salt water through the air. Vann pauses to breathe in the scent as he marches along the steep trail that winds through an increasingly narrow pass surrounded by the island's jagged gray cliffs. Just ahead he can see the darkened entrance of a natural cavern, its mouth partially blocked by boulders and tangled with the long, coarse grasses that seem to thrive this close to the sea. Quickening his pace, he closes the short distance between himself and the cave, slipping inside and blinking rapidly as his eyes adjust to the sudden gloom.

It's several moments before he spots the uneven pile of stones and debris that encompasses the back half of the cave, the entire scene identical to his recently recovered memories. A few of the smaller rocks have shifted since the initial collapse that buried the Rakata tomes, but the cavern appears untouched since his last visit. A faint thrum of relief flows through his body, helping to soothe the anxieties that have been simmering since he finalized this plan.

Unclipping his commlink he reports, "Okay, I'm in position."

There's a brief silence before Canderous responds, "Good because I see the first group of bug-eyed locals headed your way."

Drawing a breath to steel himself, Vann moves further back into the cave. "Let them come," he tells the crew. "Is everyone else in place?"

"Sure are!" Mission chirps, her voice crackling over the speaker. "Me and Big-Z are good-to-go."

"As am I." Juhani sounds less enthused by the situation but doesn't complain. "Both Jolee and myself are ready to do our part."

There's a long pause before Carth tentatively grumbles, "So, since nobody else has said this in the past hour, I'm going to say it." He huffs irritably. "This is a terrible idea."

Irritation bubbles to the forefront of Vann's mind as he bites back a retort that this entire mission has been ill-conceived at best. Steadying himself he instead notes, "But, as usual, it's the best we have."

"And, as usual, it's also the best way to get yourself killed." There's a burst of shrill feedback from the commlink as Carth shouts his concerns. "They're going to try and kill you. That's how these things work!"
"The key word there is 'try,'" Vann quips, attempting to keep his voice light.

Carth is audibly tense as he mutters, "There's only so many times you can cheat death before that strategy fails."

"Can you have this argument later?" Canderous sounds exasperated as he adds, "'Cause the first group is headed right to Vann, and the second group is already in the pass."

"Got it." Clipping the commlink back onto his belt, the mercenary keeps the line open as he announces, "I'm ready and my comm is staying on so that you can hear everything that's happening. The rest of you know the code to get me out of here if things get bad."

Swallowing audibly even over the speaker, Carth warns, "And if we can't get you out in time?"

"I have faith in you," Vann tries to reassure the other man even as the comment comes out terser than intended. "All of you. So just… trust that I know what I'm doing?"

"I trust you." Heaving a weary sigh Carth grumbles, "It's everyone else that I worry about."

"Vann, be alert." Canderous whispers, voice suddenly hushed. "The first group should be to you in three… two…"

"Ah, Revan. I see you have decided to keep your word for once." A half-dozen figures suddenly step into the cave's only entrance, their bodies blocking the early morning light and casting long shadows across the uneven ground. Though their faces are mostly obscured by the deep hoods of their long white robes, the gleam of their bulbous eyes is still visible. All six Elder Rakata seem to glide as they walk, their feet shrouded by their clothing. As they move into the cavern they regard the Human.

Crossing his arms over his chest Vann meets their gazes, immediately put on the defensive by the Rakata's judgmental tone. "Like my people told you, I'm a changed man."

"Perhaps." The leader unfolds his hands from the billowing sleeves of his robe and points accusingly at the mercenary. "Or perhaps you are merely using us in an attempt to reach the Star Forge that you previously promised to destroy."

Flinching at the accusation, Vann gives the Rakata a placating smile. "Look, I'm sorry about all of that. I really am."

"Your words mean nothing to us, Revan. But your actions…" Bowing his head slightly, the head Elder refolds his hands as he draws a quiet breath. "You can still prove yourself an honorable man. Now, where are the ancient tomes that you promised us?"

Flinching at the accusation, Vann gives the Rakata a placating smile. "Look, I'm sorry about all of that. I really am."

"They're right back there, under that rockslide." Jerking a thumb towards the pile of rubble, Vann carefully picks his way over to the collapsed back portion of the cave. Thanks to his resurfaced memories, he can actually visualize exactly where the texts are buried.

"And why have you not retrieved them? Why have you brought us here with nothing to give us?" The Elders begin to advance on the Human, forming a semicircle around him as they glare accusingly. "I already sense that it was a mistake to trust you again."

"It's not a mistake." Schooling his features into neutrality, Vann draws himself to his full height and squares his shoulders, looking between the gathered Rakata. "I just wanted you to be here when the texts were retrieved. All of you."
The Elders share a doubtful expression before their leader declares, "And so, here we are."

"Not quite. But you will be." Re-crossing his arms, Vann turns his attention towards the entrance of the cave. "Any second now…"

There's some confused whispering as the sound of distant marching grows steadily closer, causing tension to mount within the enclosed space. The Elders' worry is rapidly shifting to a mixture of fear and anger, both emotions flowing around them in a cold gust. It peaks as six more figures darken the mouth of the cavern, the clank of their weapons echoing across the stone ceiling.

"Ah! Revan! I see that you have brought the Elders here, just as you promised." The One's alien grin stretches across his face, the expression cruel and bloodthirsty. "Excellent! Now we can slaughter them for their arrogance and…"

"I knew you were not to be trusted!" All of the Elders slip their hands from the protection of their sleeves, each clutching a sleek blaster pistol of unfamiliar design. They mostly point the weapons at the approaching warriors, though their leader takes aim at the Human. "Your treachery knows no bounds!"

In response, the second group of Rakata immediately draw their weapons, swords and spears glinting dangerously in the low light. Their primitive armor, made from the hides of the local fauna, is an odd contrast to the elegant robes of their kin. It's modest protection at best and probably offers no resistance against close range blaster fire. That might explain why they hesitate in attacking, eyeing the pistols suspiciously as fear curls around them like smoke.

"No!" Vann immediately thrusts himself between the two groups, extending both his arms in an attempt to hold them back. He stares steadily at the One, narrowing his eyes as aggression flares around him like frozen sparks. "You're not slaughtering the Elders. That's not why I brought you here." There's a haughty grunt of agreement from somewhere to his left, and he thinks he hears the click of a blaster safety being flipped off. Whirling to face the Elders he orders, "And you're not shooting him and his warriors either!"

Baring his teeth, the One steps forward and uses both of his swords to point at the human. Despite their primitive construction, the blades are honed to a wicked edge. "If we are not here to destroy the Elders, then our alliance is severed! And there is no need to keep you alive."

A few of the Elders smirk beneath the shadows of their hoods as their leader poisonously declares, "Perhaps we and the One can agree on a single thing."

"Oh, you don't want to kill me." Vann lets a secretive smile flicker across his face, both of his hands resting calmly against the hilts of his lightsabers. He makes sure to keep his fingers clear of his open commlink.

Still aiming his blaster at the mercenary, the lead Elder's head tilts questioningly to the side. "We see no compelling reason not to…"

Without warning the One lunges forward, swinging both swords in a tight arc towards the human. "Revan, today you will die!"

With a flick of his wrists, Vann draws both of his lightsabers and activates the violet blades, bringing them up to guard his face as he easily deflects the Rakata's hasty attack. Taking a few smooth steps towards the back of the cave, he shouts, "Ebon Hawk? Blow it up!"

Before the final syllable leaves his lips, the entire cavern shakes with the percussive force of
multiple explosions, the shudders that pass through the floor nearly knocking everyone off their feet. Dust and debris rain down from the ceiling, gravel and pebbles bouncing painfully off Vann's skin and getting tangled in his hair. But he refuses to lower his head, instead keeping his gaze trained on the cave's entrance as a cascade of loose rocks and stones fall into place, walling up the cavern in a matter of seconds and blocking almost all traces of light and sound. The Force shimmers slightly, ebbing and flowing as two separate signatures push against nearby boulders, tumbling them down the cliff and depositing them squarely in front of the mouth of the cave to completely seal the current inhabitants inside.

The dust tastes stale and chalky on Vann's tongue as it hangs heavy in the air, illuminated by the glow of his lightsabers. He resists the urge to cough as he addresses both groups of Rakata. "As I was saying… you don't want to kill me."

"What have you done?" The Elders are stumbling to regain their balance, still aiming their blasters as they look at the walled-off entrance in horror. "You've trapped us in here!"

"Yup. We're all trapped in here. Every single one of us." Vann enunciates each syllable to help make his point, gaze traveling around the small area that's now cast in a faint violet glow. "Me and my crew can get us out at any time. But for now, we're going to stay here and talk some things out."

The lead Elder jerks his head up in defiance. "And if we refuse?"

Shrugging with mock innocence, Vann politely explains, "You'll starve or dehydrated, stuck in this cave until your bones are nothing but dust."

"I will not starve," the One roars, gnashing his jaws as he swings both swords to punctuate his words. "I will feast upon the flesh of the weaklings who fall before me. Starting with you, Revan."

"Uh-uh." Vann keeps his tone neutral, brows furrowing in an unimpressed scowl. "See, even if you eat all of us, you're still going to run out of food. There's only one entrance to this cave, and it's currently blocked by boulders too big for you and your warriors to lift." He keeps his lightsabers in a guard position, but his stance is easy and almost relaxed despite the low hum of uneasiness buzzing just beneath his skin. "You can feast on our corpses for months. It won't change the fact that, without someone using heavy machinery or the Force, you're trapped in here."

Sneering with contempt, the One turns to his warriors, summoning them to his side. "Perhaps we would rather die than dishonor ourselves by sitting down with these thieves and liars!"

"We have not stolen anything!" one of the Elders cries, her voice tight with irritation. "It is you and your brutes who have taken our ancient texts…"

"Lies!" One of the warriors growls as she points her spear at the opposing group of Rakata. "You keep the history of our people hoarded away in your settlement, hiding the sacred knowledge of those who came before us…"

"The kriffing texts are in this cave, under that pile of rocks." Using the lightsaber in his off-hand to indicate the debris covering the back of the cavern, Vann watches as both groups of Rakata fall back in confusion. "Malak hide all of your tomes and other ancient writings to trick you into fighting." The lie comes out easy, rolling sweetly off his tongue. While he feels the faintest pang of guilt for misrepresenting the situation, it's a necessary fib to get everyone to trust him again. A tiny bit of darkness to serve a greater good. Shaking off the last of his discomfort, he nods towards the rocks. "I'm willing to retrieve the texts for you and to open this cave back up. But first, you need to work out some type of treaty between your people."
"Never!" The One lets out a howl of indignation as he charges at the Human, both swords raised and ready to sab through flesh. "I will not bow to the likes of you, Revan!"

This attack is fiercer than the first, and Vann struggles to deflect the twin blows aimed at his torso. He has to admit that the Rakata chieftain is stronger than him, making the tactic of directly locking blades a bad one. Diving low, he uses his smaller build to his advantage and parries the next set of strikes, forcing his enemy to crouch in order to reach him. However, the One is surprisingly flexible for his size and quickly adapts to this new position, driving both swords forward in a series of rapid jabs. The Human is fast enough to deflect most of the stabs, but one slips past his guard and slices into his left side, cutting past his light armor and scoring his flesh.

"Kriffing hells!" Vann hisses as pain floods his body. He immediately embraces the feeling, drawing strength from the cold fury that surges through his limbs. The One is smiling down at him, his tongue running over his teeth in anticipation.

"I will enjoy your flesh, Revan," he crows. "And I may even share it with the rest of my warriors. It will make them strong so that they, in turn, can destroy these weak Elders."

Sensing the blood in the air, the warriors draw closer, their weapons held at the ready as they eye the other group of Rakata with hungry anticipation. The anger and fear in the cavern rise to a frigid pitch, swirling around in a miasma of dark emotions. Vann knows that he needs to diffuse the situation quickly and adjusts his stance, moving into a more offensive position.

With a roar of determination, the Human flips forward, using the high ceiling of the cave to his advantage. Bringing both of his lightsabers down in a pair of strong slashes, he aims for the One's swords as he lands, using his momentum to add strength to the blow. With two mighty slices, he pushes the Rakata's blades back, making room for a second attack before his opponent can recover. His sabers hum as he makes a series of smaller, tighter strikes, most aimed at the chieftain's forearms. A few are dodged but the majority hit, the hot plasma of the blades sizzling as they burn through the leather wrapping designed to protect the Rakata's arms.

Howling in pain the One staggers back, stumbling over pebbles and gravel that slide underfoot. Even as he fights to retain his balance he continues to clutch his swords, though they now dangle loosely in his grasp. Noting this, Vann summons the Force and thrusts out his hand, delivering a powerful push that sends the chieftain soaring back. A second surge of power finally yanks the pair of weapons from the Rakata's grasp. They clatter loudly as they hit the ground and slide across the uneven cave floor, skidding away from their owner and drifting to a neat stop at the Human's feet as his fingers guide their movement.

Pinning the One against the wall with the Power of the Force, Vann steps over the pair of primitive swords with disdain as he stalks forward. "Didn't we kriffing establish last time I was here that you can't beat me in a fight?" he snarls, feeling his power crash cold and fierce around him. The wound in his side throbs, a distant pain that only feeds his irritation. He jerks his dominate saber at his beaten foe and briefly envisions the hot plasma slicing smoothly through the now-exposed skin of the Rakata's throat. "I warned you then, didn't I?" His rage builds as pure contempt courses through his body, and he feels electricity spark at his fingertips. Drawing his hand back, he aims the lightning at his fallen opponent and prepares to let the storm loose…

"Hey, uh… Vann?" Carth's tentative voice echoes loudly through the quiet cavern. "Is… is everything alright in there?"

The sparks fizzle into nothingness as the mercenary's anger gradually recedes, the haze of outrage lifting from his mind. He draws a shallow breath. "Yeah," he chokes out. "It's fine. We were just… sitting down to talk."
There's a beat of silence and then, "Good. That's good." He can almost hear Carth nodding rapidly to emphasize the words. "Just remember, you're there to talk."

"Yeah, yeah," Vann grumbles as he powers both lightsabers down, though he continues to clutch the hilts. "I know what I'm doing."

"Alright." Carth sounds thoroughly unconvinced even as he sighs, "I... I trust you." The commlink clicks softly as the pilot ends his transmission.

Drawing his power back into his own being, Vann hears the One gasp as the pressure holding him down is released. With a final glare of warning, the mercenary turns to look at the other Rakata. "Now, you're all going to sit and you're going to kriффing talk things out." He twirls his 'saber hilt for emphasis. "Do I make myself clear?"

"We will talk." The lead Elder nods solemnly, his eyes wide with shock as faint tendrils of fear seep out. Staring balefully at the warriors, he sneers, "Though we cannot promise that we will reach an agreement with individuals as headstrong and impulsive as them."

"Ha!" The One climbs to his feet, clenching both hands into fists despite the wounds on his forearms. "If an agreement can't be reached, it will be because of their arrogance!"

Groaning in frustration, Vann closes his eyes as he searches the Force for strength. "This," he mutters to himself, "Is going to be a long day..."

From that point on time seems to slow to a crawl as the two Rakata factions argue and debate everything from accessing ancient weapons and other artifacts to trading genetic samples for unlocking their genome. Every second that drags by tears another sliver of patience from Vann's limited supply, but he continues to grit his teeth and play the part of mediator. At first, he takes the time to carefully weigh each argument presented, offering both parties an opportunity to voice their ideas and concerns. But as the day wears on and the disagreements grow increasingly petty he resorts to merely tapping the hilt of his lightsaber whenever he needs to reinstate peace.

It's hard to tell time in the cramped, hot space of the cavern. The heat of the blazing afternoon sun bakes the surrounding rocks to an uncomfortable warmth, something that further stokes the icy flames of Vann's temper. The only relief is the slight breeze that blows through the fine cracks between the boulders blocking the entrance, carrying the faintest whiffs of fresh sea air. Sweat drips down the Human's back as he swelters in the cave, his shirt stuck to his skin and his hair clinging to his scalp. He removed his jacket hours ago, sitting on it to pad the uneven stone floor. As time ticks by he can feel his frustration mounting, his shoulders growing sore from the tension he's carrying.

Vann's patience has stretched almost to its breaking point when a loud voice draws him back into the conversation.

"Revan," the leader of the Elders calls. "We have reached an agreement to all the matters that can be decided here and now." His gaze studies the Human, as though searching for more signs of betrayal. "So, where are the texts that you promised us?"

Nodding in response Vann climbs to his feet, wiping his sweaty palms against the thighs of his pants. Exhaling slowly, he attempts to release some of his mounting vexations as he turns to face the rubble that covers the back of the cave. For an instant he recalls how the cavern looked prior to his interference, seeing the walls as they originally stood before he caused a rockslide. Shaking his head to clear the vision he draws a deep breath, summoning his connection to the Force as he stretches both arms towards the formidable pile of debris.
"Be ready to grab the texts when I tell you to," the mercenary orders, not bothering to check if he was heard or acknowledged.

Sending out tendrils of power Vann wraps them around the various stones and pebbles, focusing all of his mental might as he lifts the debris from its resting place. The entire pile of rubble shudders and shakes as he makes it rise, raining down smaller bits of gravel and sending a fresh plume of dust into the air. More sweat beads across his forehead and he winces with exertion as he raises the rocks higher still, until they hover about two meters off the ground. Even in the gloom, several tomes are readily visible, their gilded covers contrasting starkly against the gray rock.

Voice quivering with the strain of his current task, Vann barks out, "If you want the kriffing texts, get them now!"

The Elders don't have to be told twice, the six of them immediately rushing to reclaim the ancient books. They dart beneath the hovering rock pile without a second thought and snatch the precious items off the ground with swift hands. As they scurry back to safer grounds they clutch the tomes to their chests, eyeing each other suspiciously as they guard their prizes.

When the last text is retrieved Vann lets out a grunt of relief and lets the debris fall back to the ground as gently as possible. While the largest of the rocks settle into place with surprising ease, many of the smaller pebbles clatter and bounce as they struggle to find a resting place, ricocheting off the cave's walls and striking a few of the occupants in the process. The dust in the air only grows thicker, and the mercenary doesn't hold back several harsh coughs as it chokes his throat.

The Elders don't seem to notice his plight, already engrossed in reading the recovered volumes. They whisper to each other, pointing excitedly to lines and passages.

"Those are also mine," the One warns with a hiss. "We have agreed…"

"And you will have access to them. All of them," the lead Elder assures the chieftain. "But we have also agreed that we will hold them in our settlement so that we can transcribe them into our computers least someone tries to steal them again."

The One snaps his teeth irritably. "I do not understand your strange magic metal," he responds. "But we will come to your settlement in a week's time to see what is rightfully ours. And if you refuse us…"

"We will not refuse you." There's a gentle chiding in the Elder's tone. "We have made an agreement, and we will abide by our word. After all, we are also Rakata."

This seems to mollify the One, and he nods curtly in approval. "Yes," he agrees. "We are all Rakata."

Humming to himself, the lead Elder pats the tome in his hand before turning to the mercenary. "Speaking of keeping one's vow… Thank you, Revan, for remaining true to your word and returning our texts to us." He pauses thoughtfully. "Though there is still one more thing that you have promised…"

A faint flicker of relief flows through Vann as he remarks, "Yeah, I want to get out of here too." Still panting from the effort of moving the rockslide, he raises his voice and calls, "Hey Ebon Hawk, you still there?"

Several worrying seconds of silence pass before Juhani's voice comes through the commlinks's speaker. "Yes," she answers. "We are just outside the cave entrance."
"Well then get us the hells out of here!" Vann wipes the back of his hand across his brow, grimacing at the caked mixture of dust and sweat that comes free.

"We will obviously need your help for this task." There's a faint rustling sound, suggesting that the Cathar is moving as she speaks.

Shoulder his way past the Rakata beginning to crowd around the cave's entrance Vann turns to stare at the makeshift wall. "Alright, I'm ready when you are."

"Remember," Mission comments, the sound of her footfalls audible as she runs across the rocky ground. "The mines will go off first. Then you Force-sensitive types just need to push all of the rubble away once those boulders are blown to smithereens."

"...Mines?" one of the Elders asks, her alien features creasing with worry.

"Yeah," Vann quips humorlessly. "It might get a little loud in here. I'd suggest covering your ears... if you have them."

There is audible glee in Canderous's voice as he announces, "The mines will detonate in three... two..."

The second round of explosions is less violent than the first though they still rattle the cavern, shaking more gravel loose from the walls and floor. From the corner of his eye, Vann sees a few of the Rakata wince at the noise, even as they struggle to retain their footing. He already had his legs braced in anticipation of the shock, enabling him to focus his attention on summoning the Force.

Two Force signatures shimmer nearby, radiating a mixture of warmth and coldness as they exert their own power on the now-pulverized rubble that's still blocking the exit. Some of it has already fallen away from the sheer force of the explosion, though not enough has cleared to reveal the entrance to the cavern. Sensing Jolee and Juhani's effort Vann applies his own push to the pulverized rocks. It's enough to move most of the pile, sending a wave of debris soaring through the air and over the side of the cliff. The volume is large enough to cause a surprisingly loud splash when the entire mess falls into the ocean below.

Fresh air immediately floods the cave, and Vann fills his lungs with the clean, salty scent. A mild evening breeze blows over his skin and he closes his eyes to savor the feeling, which also helps shield his gaze from the last rays of the setting sun.

Something sharp presses against the mercenary's back, jabbing at the flesh just over his right kidney. Cracking one eye open, he inhales sharply as he peers over his shoulder. Cold, simmering rage rises in his gut as his last shred of patience burns away. "What the hells?"

"I could kill you where you stand, betrayer," one of the warriors assesses, digging her spear in just a little bit harder.

"You can try," Vann replies coolly, even as he feels a fresh wave of anger course through his limbs. The faintest flash of electricity alights on his fingertips, and he does nothing to stop the display. "But it'll be the last thing you ever do."

The warrior snorts, a wet and ugly sound coming from her alien nostrils. "You are arrogant like the Elders. But I can tell that you are tired." She lowers her tone to an ominous snarl. "I bet your magic is waning."

"Oh, I don't have to use the Force to hurt you." Vann feels a grim smile tug at the corners of his mouth, his gaze shifting towards the freshly-revealed cave mouth. "They'll shoot your head off
before I can lift a finger."

The figures of the crew are outlined in brilliant orange by the dying light of the sun, their weapons glinting as they aim directly into the cavern. Carth is at the head of the group, both pistols held aloft as he's flanked by Zaalbar and Canderous, armed with a bowcaster and a heavy repeating blaster respectively. Perched on Zaalbar's shoulders, Mission is grinning mischievously as she clutches a pair of grenades, ready to launch them at any moment. While Juhani and Jolee are nowhere to be seen Vann can sense their presence nearby, both of them tense and ready to spring into battle with just a word.

"I think we can all agree that it's time to go." Carth pointedly jerks his head towards the trail leading back through the narrow pass.

The sharp pressure at Vann's back falls away as the Rakata warrior lowers her spear and steps back, bowing her head in respect. He doesn't bother to acknowledge her as he brushes past, retrieving his jacket from the floor and slinging it over his shoulder before casually picking his way across the last remaining bits of rock scattered in front of the cave. Despite the warrior's show of submission, a chill of fury still crackles just beneath the Human's skin. He lets his frustration taint his words as he turns to look at the lead Elder. "Since I did my part, you'll open the temple tomorrow."

Blinking wildly in surprise, the Rakata glances down at the tome in his hands. "I do not recall all of the items needed for the ritual to lower the temple's shields, but I believe we have them in our settlement." He nods cautiously. "Remember, the ritual can take many hours to complete and it is hard to predict just how long it will take."

Vann's tone grows darker, mirroring his inner fury. "That wasn't a question."

"We can begin opening the temple before the next sunset," the Rakata leader responds with a weary sigh. "But remember, Revan. Only you may enter. That is the deal we made."

"I'll remember." With that the mercenary stalks away from the cave with swift strides, weaving past the crew until he reaches the trail leading back down to the beach. Staring straight ahead, he begins his descent along the sandy slope.

Gravel crunches behind him as someone rushes to keep pace. "Vann!" Carth whispers urgently. "What the hells…"

"What do you mean 'not now'?!" Peering hurriedly over his shoulder to monitor the rest of the crew, Carth tries to catch his companion's gaze. "You think I don't know how close you came to killing everyone in that cave back there?"

Rolling his shoulders to try and alleviate some of the pent-up tension, the mercenary assures the other man, "I'm in complete control of myself."

"The hells you are!" A faint spike of fear colors Carth's voice as he cautiously whispers, "Vann, your eyes…"

"Yeah, I know." Hastening his strides, the mercenary blinks as anger continues to flow through his entire being. "I'm tired, I'm sweaty, I'm dirty, and yeah. I'm more than a little angry." Scrubbing a palm over his face, he tries not to picture the yellow currently tainting his irises. "You think I don't know what I look like right now?"
Carth sounds almost desperate as he insists, "They're not turning back."

"They will."

"Hey, come on. Please just… talk to me?" Carth reaches out to grab his companion's shoulder, only to be pushed back when the other man whirls around to face him.

"I'm done talking for the day," Vann grits out through clenched teeth. "I'm done with discussing things. I'm just… I'm done. So, drop it and leave me the hells alone!" Ignoring the hurt that blooms across the pilot's face he turns his back on the other man and stalks down the path, clinging to his anger the entire trek back to the Ebon Hawk.

* * *

The low hum of foreign chanting has become a constant buzz in Vann's ears, the sound blending with the melodic chirp of birdsongs and the drone of flying insects. Pacing before the temple doors like a caged beast, Vann idly runs his hands over the hilts of his lightsabers as he tries to keep his body loose and ready to move at a moment's notice. He glances over at the circle of Rakata performing the ritual to lower the temple's shields, noting the glazed expressions on all of their faces. It's a group of Elders joined by a few warriors who expressed interest in learning their people's traditions. Earlier in the afternoon, the mercenary thought that this newfound cooperation was charming, but as the day wears on and the shadows grow long across the fields the situation is starting to lose its quaintness.

Sighing he resumes his pacing, hands fluttering restlessly against his thighs as he checks for changes in the shield for what feels like the millionth time. But this time, he thinks that the barrier barring entrance to the temple actually shimmers. Pausing mid-stride, he examines the door more closely.

"Hurry, Revan!" The Elder's voice actually startles the mercenary, the sound a sudden departure from the hours of monotonous chanting. "You must enter the Temple of Ancients now, as we can only keep the shield down for a few minutes."

"Wait!" another Rakata shouts, peering off into the distance. "Do not enter yet, someone is coming! We cannot risk them following you inside."

Sending out his awareness through the Force, Vann carefully feels for the signatures of the approaching figures, his body relaxing minutely when he recognizes the familiar presence of Jolee and Juhani. "It's okay," he calls. "It's just some members of my crew. They probably want to check that I'm okay since I've been gone so long…" Even as he speaks he can feel the waves of worry drifting off his companions, the emotion intensifying the closer they get.

"Don't go inside!" Juhani yells breathlessly as she races across the field, kicking up sandy soil as she skids to a halt beside the mercenary. "Not yet. Jolee had a… a premonition."

Staring confusedly at the Cathar, Vann asks, "A what?"

"A vision through the Force," Jolee clarifies as he jogs up to the mercenary, panting slightly from exertion. He rolls his eyes as he adds, "If you don't know what one of those is by now, then even I can't help you, kid."

"I know what a vision is!" Vann assures the older man, throwing his hands up in exasperation. "I just… what type of vision?"

"A vague one." Chuckling softly at his own humor, Jolee waves a dismissive hand. "Oh, don't look
so surprised. You know how these things go... misty images, unclear messages... The type of thing you usually need to meditate on. Not that you would know anything about that."

Nodding enthusiastically, Juhani explains, "But we did not have time to meditate on the meaning of this vision. We immediately left the ship to come and warn you."

"About what?" Gaze darting between the other Force users, Vann lowers his voice to a whisper. "What's wrong?"

Turning to study the building before her, Juhani cranes her head back as she takes in the entire structure. "There is something waiting for you inside of this temple. Something dark... A challenge that you may not be able to overcome."

"What type of challenge? A battle? A... test?" With the shield finally down and the temple entrance only a few paces away, Vann's words take on a sense of urgency. "Come on, I need more information if I'm going to face this... whatever it is."

"You and me both, kid," Jolee grumbles, thoughtfully rubbing a palm over his chin. "The short answer is that I don't know what's waiting for you inside. But it's not good."

"And we cannot allow you to enter the temple alone. Not when there is so much at stake."
Squaring her shoulders, Juhani jerks her chin up defiantly as she quickly maneuvers herself between the mercenary and the door.

Upon hearing the Cathar's words, the Rakata leading the ritual climbs to his feet. "Revan, you must enter the temple alone," he cautions. "That is the way of our people and the rules of the sacred ritual."

"Oh blah-blah-blah." Jolee grunts wearily as he shakes his head at the Rakata. "Normally I respect the customs of others, but this is bigger than any of us. There is something dark in that temple and I have a feeling that Revan facing it alone is a bad idea." Scowling, he adds, "And we all know that we don't have time to stand around and argue. You did that all day yesterday!"

Keeping her gaze trained on the circle of natives, Juhani turn to Vann and quietly hisses, "Perhaps you can convince them to change the rules? After all, did you not enter with Malak in the past?"

"Hey, yeah." Vann arches a brow at the realization as he turns to address the ritual leader. "When I was here before you let two of us in, didn't you?"

Concern is etched across the Rakata's features as he stammers, "There was an exception made..."

"So, make it again!" Vann insists, clenching his teeth.

The ritual leader draws a nervous breath but stands his ground, clearing his throat as he states, "The last time you were here, there were extenuating circumstances. We had reason to believe that you and your friend were going to destroy the Star Forge. But now..." He trails off, his lips tugging into what passes for a disapproving frown. "We recognize that we should not have given in to your past demands. After all, Malak is the one currently using the forge for his own gains."

"He's not my friend," Vann mutters, rubbing his forehead. "Not anymore. Look, it's a long story."

"It doesn't matter," the Rakata flatly responds. "Our folly has allowed the Star Forge to once again be used to dominate the galaxy. We were fooled once. Never again."

Taking a few steps towards the gathered circle, Vann jerks a thumb against his chest. "Haven't I
proven that I'm not like Malak? That I'm not taking advantage of you?"

There's a general hum of agreement as a few of the Rakata nod to each other, murmuring among themselves. The ritual leader sighs heavily as he concedes, "You have proven that you are capable of keeping your word when you must."

"So, trust me again. One more time," Vann insists, resting both of his hands on his lightsaber hilts. "I'll take Malak down for you. I'll fix all of our mistakes."

For a moment the ritual leader's expression wavers, torn between acquiescence and frustration. The latter seems to win out as he wonders, "And if you betray us again?"

Shrugging, Vann gives one of the more honest answers he's ever uttered. "Then you're no worse off than you were before I crashed here a second time."

This response seems to intrigue the Rakata, and they immediately huddle closer as they converse privately in hushed voices. The conversation is brief, no more than a few seconds, but it seems to drag on for hours. Finally, the ritual leader turns back to the mercenary.

"Revan, we have discussed what you have said," he announces, tone formal. "And we will allow you and your companions to enter the Temple of the Ancients. We only hope that this time you will keep your word and complete what you failed to do the first time." His voice acquires a harder edge as he admonishes, "We are trusting you. Don't let our trust be misplaced yet again."

Quickly bowing his head to the assembled Rakata, Vann blurts out a hasty, "Thank you!" before sprinting back towards the temple entrance.

Jolee falls into step beside the younger man, muttering conspiratorially, "Well, I'm glad that worked."

"Yeah, me too," Vann agrees with a grin. "If they didn't let us in, I was going to start threatening them."

"Ha," the oldest Force user snorts. "Funny."

Lips twisting into a wry frown, Vann murmurs, "That, uh, that wasn't a joke…"

"Both of you, hurry!" Juhani calls as she leans her weight against the towering stone door of the temple. It swings open with a loud creak, the sound almost drowning out her voice. "We don't have much time until the shield rises again."

Both Vann and Jolee immediately join the Cathar in forcing the ancient door open, all of them grunting with the effort. A thick, musty odor immediately wafts out of the building, carrying the scent of dust and the damp reek of mildew. The temple itself is just as warm and humid as the outside atmosphere, though the interior is notably darker thanks to the distinct lack of windows. Dim light spills in from the revealed entryway and there is a faint glow coming from a nearby hallway, but otherwise the interior is pitch black.

"So," Vann breathes, examining the area as best he can in the gloom. "Now what?"

"Now we take care and watch our butts," Jolee responds, drawing his lightsaber and using the blade to illuminate the path ahead. "Least whatever I saw in my vision comes and attacks us first."

Removing her hands from the door, Juhani winces as it slides shut with the loud moan of rusted gears. There's a rushing sound as it slides back into place, sealing the temple and cutting off the
only visible source of outside light and air. Retrieving her weapon, the Cathar ignites it as she slowly stalks down the hall. "Allow me to take point?" she requests.

Holding out a gracious hand, Vann nods. "Be my guest." As he falls into step behind his companion he also draws a lightsaber to provide a bit of additional light.

"Strange," Juhani whispers as she walks. "I sense something living, but it is very faint. I cannot begin to predict what threats lie ahead."

"Well, I'm sure the Force will be creative," Vann deadpans, even as he extends his own awareness out around him. Just as the Cathar described, he can feel the faint thrum of a lifeform coming from deep within the temple. But it's an indistinct sensation, difficult to pinpoint with any accuracy. It could be something as benign as an animal, or something as dangerous as another Force user cloaking their presence.

"Don't tempt the Force, kid," Jolee warns as he brings up the rear of the group, his lightsaber humming as he uses it to point. "There's some light coming from the left. Might be worth checking out."

Juhani nods, though the gesture is muted by the darkness. "I was thinking the same thing," she agrees.

Gradually make their way through the long, humid corridor, the trio's footfalls sound unusually loud in the unnatural silence of the temple. Their breathing seems to echo off of the high stone walls, ragged and hoarse in the stale air. Vann's eyes keep flicking to every dark corner that he sees, trying to peer through the shadows and identify whatever threat is awaiting him. But all that he manages to observe are some crumbling statues and the decaying remains of intricate, formerly beautiful tile work.

The crackle of Vann's commlink makes all three Force users jump, their weapons whirring dangerously as they swing them into ready positions. Sucking in a sharp breath, the mercenary exhales heavily when he realizes what made the sound and he rolls his eyes at his own skittishness. Retrieving the comm with his free hand, he mutters, "Yes?"

"Uh… hey." Carth's voice is hesitant as he speaks, sounding almost as nervous as the mercenary feels. "I, um, assume that you got into the temple? I'm only asking because Tee-Three was able to perform some readings a few minutes ago, so the crew made an educated guess that whatever barrier was in place came down at least temporarily."

The pilot has been noticeably jumpy since the previous evening, and Vann knows that it's his fault. He snapped at the other man out of exhaustion and frustration, the strain of their mission finally pushing his temper to its limit. Or, at least that's what he's been telling himself. Either way, it was unfair and he probably owes Carth an apology. He considers hashing the whole thing out over the comm system, but Jolee's insistent clearing his throat reminds the mercenary that now is definitely not the time.

"Yep, we're inside," Vann finally responds, attempting to sound more cheerful than he currently feels. "Did Tee-Three find anything interesting?"

"Yeah, he did." Tone relaxing even as it grows vaguely puzzled, Carth explains, "We're actually still trying to decipher his readouts."

Peering down the hallway, Juhani points to the nearby junction between the various corridors. "I'm going to scout ahead while you speak with the crew."
Waving the Cathar on, Vann furrows his brow at the pilot's report. "Well, what can you tell so far?"

"It seems like the entire building is full of some type of electronic or mechanical components?" Carth continues to sound confused as he notes, "Whatever it is, it seems inoperative."

"Mechanical…?" Vann wonders. Images of the ancient droid unearthed on Dantooine spring into his mind. "Well, I do know that whoever built the Star Forge also left behind droids and complex computers. So maybe there's more of that in here?"

"Normally I'd say so too, but this all seems fairly modern." There's a faint tapping noise from the other end of the comm, following by the familiar beeping of the Hawk's various computers. "At least, the schematics don't match the scans that we performed on the Star Maps."

Vann carefully considers this new piece of information. "So, what are you trying to say?"

"Hold on, Mission thinks she figured something out." There are a few seconds of static as Carth and the Twi'lek hold a muffled conversation, their words too garbled to understand. Suddenly there's a sharp intake of breath, followed by a few colorful curses. "Oh, kriffing hells…"

"What? What did she…?" Vann's next words are interrupted by the loud shriek of blaster fire coming from just around the corner. The faint glow of lights suddenly bursts into full illumination as an array of colors erupts from the nearby hallway. He immediately moves his lightsaber up to protect his chest, noting that Jolee does the same. The whizz of bolts only grows more chaotic as though a multitude of weapons are suddenly being fired at once, the sound so loud that it almost hides Juhani's distinct growl of pain. Both men exchange a panicked glance and then leap forward simultaneously, breaking into a run as they race down the now brightly lit corridor. As his feet pound against the stone floor Vann shouts into the commlink, "Got any new information? Because I think we're being attacked!"

"It's all droids. The entire damn building is full of droids!" Carth's tone is thick with disbelief as he makes this proclamation. "They must be in some sort of extreme low power mode, which made them look unusual on Tee-Threes scans."

Ducking around the junction at top speed Vann doesn't have a chance to slow his momentum, not until he belatedly stumbles to a graceless stop when he realizes that the entire space is full of various sentry and assault droids. Their metal bodies shimmer beneath the protective fields surrounding them and their assorted weaponry glows brightly as they rain down a hail of bolts on Juhani who is desperately deflecting what she can. Upon noticing a new target some of the droids adjust the angle of their attacks, quickly taking aim at the mercenary.

"They're not in low power mode now!" Vann yells, using his lightsaber to deflect the barrage of blaster fire now coming at him.

"Oh Force!" Jolee exclaims eloquently as he comes to a halt just behind the younger man, a look of determination crossing his face as he also begins to drive the bolts back at their shooters.

Carth must hear the commotion, his voice filling with alarm. "Shit. Is there anything we can do to hel…"

One particularly well-aimed shot strikes the top of the commlink, knocking it out of Vann's grasp just before the device explodes in a shower of sparks. Blinking in surprise, he immediately moves to draw his second lightsaber. "Nope, not really," he needlessly responds to the pilot's interrupted inquiry.
As the second blade hums to life, Vann dives low and slides past Juhani as she injects a medpac hypospray into her thigh. The medicine acts quickly, though she continues to grimace in pain for a few moments before drawing a deep breath and resuming the fight. With a growl of fury, she charges towards the nearest droid, slashing at it with two sweeping blows that slice off three of its limbs. A final stab through the construct's center causes it to fizzle and spark, its optics flickering for an instant before it powers down and collapses into an unmoving pile of parts.

Both Humans also rush the droids, putting them in the center of the chaotic storm of blaster fire. Vann feels at least two bolts graze his skin, getting past his clothing and armor to burn gashes into his bicep and shoulder. Yelping in pain he draws upon the coldness that infuses him, feeding on the sensation as he dives at an assault droid. Out of the corner of his eye, he spots Jolee carving the legs off of a sentry, while Juhani is beheading another. Bringing both of his lightsabers forward, Vann jabs them past the droid's shields and into its chest, dragging the weapons downward in a shower of sparks and molten metal. The droid barely has time to power down before it drops to the floor in a clatter of metal.

Reversing his grip on the lightsaber in his off-hand, Vann states, "Malak must be using these as a last line of defense against anyone trying to reach the Star Forge!" Stabbing backward, he manages to catch another assault droid across its leg-joints, halting its movement. However, he doesn't manage to stop the bolt that digs into his outer thigh. Shouting as the pain burns its way down his limb, he struggles to remain on his feet as he whirs around on his good leg and lops the droid's head off with two clean strikes.

Jolee is breathing hard as he deflects a series of bolts with a few quick jerks of his lightsaber. Two of them are directed back at the droid who fired them, shooting holes in its chest that cause it to lurch forward unevenly. "Have I mentioned how much I hate that kid?"

Still reeling from the pain, Vann feels electricity surge through his arms in response to his mounting frustration. He allows the lightning to build until it crackles across his skin, holding out both hands as he shouts, "Juhani, duck!"

With a twirl of her lightsaber, the Cathar slices off another droid's arm before hitting the ground. As she lands on the stone floor, several forks of purple lightning streak through the air just above her head. They strike multiple droids, causing the constructs to shake and clank as hot sparks fly off of them in every direction. The acrid odor of fried circuitry fills the air and Juhani gags softly as she leaps back to her feet, kicking down two of the electrocuted droids before using a third as a springboard to flip through the air. She soars over Jolee just as he stabs his lightsaber through the optics of a sentry.

The Cathar lands a moment before Vann slides into the spot she was formerly occupying, slashing through an assault droid that was damaged but not destroyed by his lightning. As he cuts through its chest he feels a slight tingling in the back of his head, as though something previously dormant is suddenly springing back to life. He instinctively braces for the recovery of another memory, but the sensation that floods his being is far, far worse.

It’s as though a freighter slams directly into Vann's skull as the gaping void of the Force bond is suddenly filled, the connection feeling oddly foreign thanks to the cold buzz of darkness that now colors the mental link. He gasps at the sensation, his body temporarily frozen as he struggles to readjust to the strange-yet-familiar feeling. "Oh kriff," he moans as the realization settles into his bones.

Crouching on the ground as she catches her breath, Juhani turns to check on the mercenary. "What is wrong now?"
Blinking rapidly, Vann barely manages to deflect a series of shots from a nearby sentry. "I know who's in here with us..."

Hacking at the limbs from a particularly stubborn assault droid, Jolee grits out, "Is it something besides all of these damn droids?"

"It's Bastila." Vann breathes, and he feels a shimmer of amusement pass through the bond. "She's in this temple. And I think she's waiting for me."

Chapter End Notes

1. I know that in the game all of the Rakata wore the same style of clothing. However, I have a feeling this is because of the limitations of video game making and not a stylistic choice. It made more sense to me that the different castes would have vastly different clothing.

2. In this world Malak isn't using the Temple of the Ancients as a base, so there's no reason for him to staff living guards inside of the (locked and shielded) building. Thus, all of the human guards have been replaced by a droid army.

3. I apologize for disappearing! Some unavoidable complications came up in my real life and I was unable to sit down and work on this story for several months. My real life will always come first, so I can't promise that this won't happen again. But rest assured that I fully plan on finishing this story no matter how long it takes!

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Chapter Summary

An old friend comes makes an overdue return and hard choices are made for the greater good. Some people are deeply disappointed by the outcome. Nobody said that saving the galaxy would be easy...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

(Interlude – Bastila)

Wrinkling her nose in distaste, Bastila rubs her palm across the transparisteel surface of an archaic Rakata monitor in an attempt to clear away the centuries of grime that have accumulated. Even though her hand comes away covered in a layer of filth the security feed remains grainy and indistinct, familiar backdrops reduced to blurry specters painted in shades of blue and white. Even so, she's able to recognize the unique spectacle of Force lightning arcing through the air, shot from the fingertips of a lean figure whose graceful movements are distinctly lethal. A fond smile plays on her lips. "Oh Revan, combat always has been an art for you. I'm glad you've stopped denying it," she remarks, sending a glimmer of amusement through the Force bond. The emotion is met with a jolt of surprise, followed by a cold stream of irritation.

The sharp hum of multiple lightsabers crackles over the ancient speakers, making Bastila frown as she peers closely at the video. Worry creases her brow and she nibbles her bottom lip in contemplation, her fingertips disbelievingly tracing shapes that appear to be Juhani and Jolee as they battle their way through a unit of droids. From what her master has told her, Rakata tradition dictates that only one individual may enter their sacred temple at a time. While Revan managed to circumvent this rule during his first visit, the Supreme Commander didn't expect it to happen twice. "Well," she mutters with a thin smirk. "It seems your powers of persuasion haven't diminished."

A low thrum of challenge shimmers across the bond, the sensation so sudden and powerful that it causes Bastila to tense in surprise. The shriek of blaster fire and crackle of lightning has stopped, drawing her attention back to the bank of monitors where she notes that the complex turrets guarding the upper rooms of the temple have been dismantled. Both Jolee and Juhani seem to be breathing hard, though their postures are triumphant as they bob their heads to each other in silent approval. Revan's back is to his friends as he stares up at the camera with an expression that might be bitter satisfaction. Another burst of emotion travels between him and the Padawan, the message is clear. He's coming for her.

"I would expect nothing less," Bastila murmurs, tensing her grip on the hilt of her dual-bladed lightsaber. With one last glance at the smeared screen she draws a deep breath, the crimson edges of her robe flowing around her legs as she turns to exit the small control room that she's been occupying. The soft material of her boots is nearly silent as she sprints down the familiar corridors of the temple, her mostly-black clothing blending with the deep shadows that line the walls. As she runs she can feel the pulse of three Force signatures moving towards her, two of them nearly
eclipsed by the pure, raw strength of the third.

Leaping up a stone ramp, Bastila squints as she enters the open-air courtyard that sits atop the temple’s summit. Pressing her back against a stone column she slows her pace, carefully slinking forward as she keeps her attention trained on the darkened doorway that marks the only other entrance to the roof. Despite the tall walls rising up on all sides, the area beyond the temple interior is remarkably exposed when viewed from certain angles. Using this knowledge to her advantage, she positions herself so that she has an unobstructed view of the moment that Revan bursts into bright sunlight, flanked by his companions.

Frustration filters through the bond, reaching a frigid peak as the former Knight snarls, "Bastila, I know you're up here!" His original lightsaber hums angrily as he slashes the air. "Show yourself, you kriffing coward!"

Carefully slipping from her place behind the column, the Padawan holds both hands plus her weapon aloft and in full view as she saunters into the open. "Harsh words," she comments airily. "Am I truly a coward for considering my options, given the situation?" She inclines her head towards the other Force users with a placid smile. "After all, three against one is hardly fair."

"And you backstabbing Carth?" Frowning in disapproval, Revan grits his teeth. "That was fair?"

"I stabbed him in the side, not the back," Bastila clarifies, though her tone quickly grows concerned. "Is he…?"

"He's fine, despite your best efforts," Jolee tuts disapprovingly.

A faint sigh of relief escapes Bastila and her shoulders relax minutely. "Good." A smile tugs at one corner of her lips. "I was rooting for him, in the end."

"You sure have a funny way of showing it." Taking a step forward, righteous anger flares cold and harsh around the former Knight as the same emotion floods the bond, breathtaking in its intensity.

Exhaling heavily, Bastila shakes her head. "Oh, the situation is far more complicated than it appears." Lowering her hands but still keeping them in sight, she hums thoughtfully. "You of all people should realize that there are always multiple sides to every story, Revan."

"Don't call me that." The former Knight narrows his eyes in irritation. "It's not my name, not anymore."

"Fine," Bastila concedes. "Vann, then. But no matter what name you choose to go by, you are Revan. You cannot escape that fact. The way you move, the way you fight, every fiber of your being…"

"Stop!" The pure power of the Force infuses the man's words as he bares his teeth, thrusting one lightsaber at the Padawan. "I'm not listening to your bantha shit anymore!"

Inhaling sharply, Bastila falls still as the blade is aimed at her throat. "I'm not lying," she states. "That's something you can confirm easily enough. We're in each other's mind, after all."

Silent until this point, Juhani furrows her brows as she looks at her leader. "Vann," she warns, "Be careful. She has fooled us all before."

There's a harsh surge of power as the former Knight's consciousness surges through the Force bond and attempts to hammer its way into Bastila's head. When she lowers the mental shields guarding the deeper recesses of her mind, she immediately feels the disquieting sensation of someone
skimming through her thoughts. Sharing headspace with Revan had previously been an astonishing experience, and that was before he regained such command of his formidable powers. He's recovered more of his strength since they were forced to part ways and now his very presence threatens to overwhelm her. Fury and mistrust surge through their connection, the emotions so potent that they make her dizzy.

It's a few long minutes before Revan begrudgingly admits, "I think she's telling the truth. Or at least she's not overtly lying."

"Well that's a refreshing change," Jolee quips sarcastically, snorting in contempt. "So, kid, I assume you're here on behalf of your 'master' as a last-ditch effort to stop us from reaching that forge?"

"Ostensibly, yes," Bastila confesses with a sigh. "But I'm not a fool and am under no illusion that I can best the three of you in combat." She carefully tracks the trio of Force users surrounding her. "All I ask is that you hear me out. Allow me to explain the choices I've made and where my true loyalties lie."

Revan snarls as he presses his lightsaber a little closer to the Padawan's skin. "Why should I listen to a liar? Someone who tried to kill my…" There's a brief pause as he carefully considers his words. "My closest friend? Your loyalties have always been to yourself and Malak."

"While I may have pledged my 'saber to the Supreme Commander," Bastila spits, the title spoken like a curse. "My true goals are a bit more… complex."

"Sure they are." As he speaks, Revan's fury surges.

Drawing a deep breath, Bastila is surprised at the conviction in her own voice as she points out, "Consider this, Vann. There were dozens of times during our journey together when I could have destroyed your crew and then used their deaths to my advantage. It's a common tactic for hunting Jedi and Malak has little care if they live or die. Instead, I chose to assist all of you."

It's Jolee who hums thoughtfully at this confession. "I hate to say it, but the girl's got a point. I'm old, but I'm not senile. I can count a least five or six times when she could have killed us all without breaking a sweat." His expression quickly darkens. "Not that I'm congratulating her for that remarkable restraint…"

"But you did try to kill Carth." Revan raises his second lightsaber, a fierce sense of protectiveness and affection accompanying the gesture. "That wasn't your smartest choice."

"I understand your anger, Vann," Bastila hastily reassures the former Knight. "And I do apologize for what occurred on the Leviathan. Truly. But I beg you to listen for just a few moments longer."

"So far I'm not hearing anything that's changing my mind." Revan keeps both violet blades leveled at the Padawan. "You have sixty seconds. Fifty-nine. Fifty-eight…"

"Careful, Vann." Lips pursed, Jolee tightens his grip on his own lightsaber. "She's got a clever tongue and a devious little mind. And for once, those aren't assets in a face that pretty."

Talking over the eldest Force user, Bastila raises her voice to a low shout. "While Malak may be my master, my allegiance has always been to you, whether you call yourself Revan or Vann!" Desperation laces her tone as she admits, "Even before I realized you were alive I wanted to bring your vision for the Republic to life."

"You mean your master's vision?" Juhani asks with a hiss.
"No, I mean Revan's." Shifting her gaze to glare at the Cathar, Bastila continues, "I've long recognized that what Malak has made is a mere shadow of what Revan, of what Vann intended. But as the Jedi Council discovered, it's nearly impossible to stand up to a man with both the Star Forge and an armada at his disposal."

"Thirty-five. Thirty-four…"

Panic rising, Bastila presses on. She can feel the thin thread of Revan's patience as it rapidly frays beneath the weight of his anger. "Ever since I discovered you on Taris I've only wanted one thing for you, Vann. I wish for you to regain your memories and your connection to the Force." She pauses, a terse but genuine smile tugging at her lips. "I want you to be yourself once again."

Shoulders tensing at the implication, the former Knight jerks his head up definitely. "You mean that you want me to be Revan again."

"Perhaps," Bastila offers candidly. "But at its core, my goal has merely been to assist you in reclaiming your sense of self so that you can be complete rather than a shadow of a man haunted by his past and afraid of what the future might hold."

"Alright. Say I'm stupid enough to believe you. What if I do regain my memories but still decide to return to life as a mercenary along the Outer Rim?" The pair of lightsabers lowers slightly, though Revan's irritation still simmers. "What if I decide to let the Republic rot?"

Swallowing hard, Bastila makes no effort to hide her displeasure at the idea. "Then so be it. I'll admit that I would be disappointed, but history has proven that there's little anyone can do to change your course once you've made up your mind."

"Really?" Surprise surges through the Force bond, temporarily overshadowing all other emotions. "You'd just let me… let Revan walk away?"

"Yes, really." Her smile softening slightly, Bastila murmurs, "But somehow I don't think that you'll make that decision."

"And what makes you say that? What makes you think that you know me so well?" Frustration blooms around Revan, though it's not aimed at the Padawan. Rather, it feels directed at himself.

"Because a minute has passed and you're still listening to me." Bastila tilts her head to the side, sending a wave of comfort through the bond. "And because you've always been a good person."

Scoffing at the very thought, Revan rolls his eyes. "Really? What makes you think that?"

"Vann, perhaps it is not my place to say, but…" Clearing her throat, Juhani shifts uncomfortably, though her voice is strong and steadfast when she speaks. "You do not always give yourself enough credit. Revan and Vann Chis have helped many people throughout the galaxy."

"Quiet, you!" Jolee snaps, huffing irritably. "I mean, you're right, but you don't have to agree with the Malak's apprentice!"

Ignoring the bickering, Bastila turns her full attention to Revan. "Think about all of the suffering that you've witnessed throughout your travels. And then recall the fact that you've been unable to stand idly by and allow it to continue. On Taris…"

"I caused an orbital bombardment by attacking Davik Kang. Yes, I know," the former Knight mutters.
"No. Malak caused that bombardment because Taris, particularly its underworld and swoop gangs, were resistant to his rule. Kang was merely a convenient excuse," Bastila assures him, her expression softening. "You saved Canderous, Mission, and Zaalbar from certain death."

"I hate to say it, but you also did a pretty decent job on Kashyyyk." Wrinkling his nose, Jolee can't help but criticize, "Maybe not the way I would have handled things, but you got the job done."

Words gentle, Juhani adds, "And on Manaan you…"

Interrupting the Cathar, Revan winces as he pleads, "Can we never mention Manaan again?"

"Then perhaps we can discuss Korriban? I heard a rumor that you reunited a number of students with their families." Bastila arches a brow, knowing that her words are the truth. "And here on Rakata Prime, or as the Sith call it, Lehon, it seems that you've made peace between Rakata factions who were at war for generations."

Drawing back his 'saber blades, Revan shakes his head and growls. "Alright! So, I did a couple of good things! What's your point?"

"My point is that you've never been able to stand idly by while others suffer." Shifting closer to the former Knight, Bastila wonders, "Do you not remember why you pushed so hard for the Jedi Order to enter the war?"

"The Mandalorians…?" Revan asks rather noncommittally.

Nodding, Bastila quickly explains, "They were slaughtering innocent people. Cities were bombed into glass craters and fires were set that burn to this day. Whole populations were completely decimated upon their defeat."

Juhani's bares her teeth as she whispers, "Like my people."

Offering the other woman a sympathetic smile, Bastila agrees, "Yes, the Cathar. And so many, many more."

"And what did I do that was so wonderful?" As Revan speaks, confusion trickles through the bond, along with a lingering sense of guilt. "All of those people still suffered."

As she sends back a wave of reassurance, Bastila tells him, "You were the only Jedi to stand up to the Council. To state that the Order must enter the war if the Republic was to survive."

"And…?"

"And you won." With a light shrug, the Padawan recounts the details as simply as possible. "You found the proof that the Council demanded and a loophole that allowed the Revanchists to officially join the war effort as the Republic Mercy Corps."

Sorrow paints Juhani's features, though it soon fades to pride. "It was too late for my people, but the actions of the Revanchists still saved millions, perhaps billions of others."

"Yes, at the cost of how many planets? How many soldiers and civilians died in tactics that were just as brutal and utilitarian as the Mandalorians?" Jolee sounds exasperated as he looks between the other Force users, "Kid, you may have saved the Republic, but you lost yourself in the process."

"Or perhaps he found himself," Bastila slyly counters.
"I know what I said!" Jerking the green blade of his weapon towards the Padawan, Jolee admonishes her, "Don't interrupt an old man holding a lightsaber when he's spouting some damn important wisdom!"

"I apologize, Jolee. But you did touch upon a point that I myself was going to bring up." Bowing her head in contrition, Bastila sighs thoughtfully, "Vann, as Revan, you did what was necessary to ensure there was a Republic left to save. While yes, the Jedi Council questioned the morality of some of your choices, you know firsthand that they are flawed individuals who stubbornly cling to their ancient ways even to their own detriment. After what they withheld from you during your recent retraining…"

A flicker of realization alights in Revan's eyes. "Wait, what are you trying to say? Did the Masters know who I was when you brought me to Dantooine?"

Biting back a grin as the former Knight picks up on her hint, Bastila huffs in disgust. "You spent a great deal of time on both Dantooine and Coruscant throughout your life, long before you adopted the name 'Revan.'" She levels her gaze at the man, "Of course they knew your true identity. They kept it from you in the hope that they could mold you into what they wanted."

"Those kriffing bastards!" Indignation streams from Revan, cold and fierce.

"Of course, the Council has never been able to contain you." Amusement colors Bastila's words, "But that's of little importance now."

"And what is important to you, Bastila? What is your point?" Juhani watches the other woman suspiciously as she adjusts her grip on her lightsaber, "The war is long over and the victor, your master, has become the new conqueror."

"That is exactly my point." Nodding approvingly at the Cathar, the Padawan turns to the man whom she truly wanted to train under. "Vann, you as Revan could have accomplished so much more had you not… I don't want to say 'died,' as you're standing before me right now. But, and I hate to admit this, I still feel as though you lost a part of yourself in that crash."

"You mean all of the memories that I'm still missing? Because if you know of a way that I can get those back…" The former Knight trails off, though it's hard to miss the hope that passes over his features.

"Unfortunately, no. I'm referring to the part of you who accepted the innate darkness that you possess. The part who knew that utilizing the dark side was necessary in order to accomplish great things." Bastila offers an apologetic smile, "Though, perhaps if you accept that part once again you will discover a way to unlock your missing memories."

"Oh, no-no-no." Waggling a finger in disapproval, Jolee warns, "That is not a path you want to walk down, kid. That way lies nothing but trouble, let-me-tell-you!"

"Hush old man! You must sense that she speaks the truth in her own way. Vann possesses a natural connection to the dark side, and denying it has caused more than a little… turmoil." Juhani's voice is low, though her concern is palpable within the Force.

Biting back a laugh, Bastila inclines her head to the side, "'Turmoil' is an interesting way to describe it, though I prefer to think of it as more of an… emotionally charged lightning storm waiting to happen."

"Are you saying that, when I was Revan, I didn't have these…" The former Knight winces guiltily.
"These incidents?"

"Please don't misunderstand me. As Revan, you were very powerful, and you were not afraid to wield that power against your enemies." Pausing for effect, Bastila finally explains, "But you also had control, far more than you currently possess."

Scowling deeply, Jolee scoffs, "Kid, you know full well that you lack control because you don't want it!"

"What? Do you think that I like blacking out and slaughtering a dozen people?" Turning to glare at the eldest Force user, Revan snaps, "Because that's what happens! Things get hazy, and when I come to my senses there's a pile of dead bodies and a bunch of people looking at me like I'm a monster."

"You're not a monster, Vann. Not even close. But you are strong with the dark side, and I believe that connection has always resided within you." Thinking back, Bastila can still recall the cold aura of power and command that the man formerly exuded. "When I first met you during the war, I sensed it. As did many others, for that matter."

"So, I did fall…"

"That I can't say for certain. But the man, the Jedi I met had not fallen. He still had a great deal of compassion for the Republic and its people. And he had a vision for their future." The Padawan's expression flickers between nostalgia and regret. "It wasn't one of war and fascism, but rather of peace and prosperity."

"Vann, tell me honestly. When you first met me… did you believe that I was a monster?" Gesturing to herself, Juhani lowers her gaze. "I too have darkness in me. It is the reason that the Jedi stopped training me."

"No, Juhani!" Shaking his head, Revan quickly reassures the Cathar, "While you were, and still are, pretty scary with your 'saber, I never saw you as a monster. I only saw someone who needed help."

"Because that is who you are." Smiling despite the gravity of the situation, Bastila nods to the former Knight. "You have darkness within you, but you still want nothing more than to help those around you."

"You can help people without that darkness. Back in my day, we called that the light side." Waving the others away, Jolee grumbles, "But sure, don't listen to the old man..."

"What is it that you want me to do, Bastila? What do you want from me?" There's a new edge of desperation to Revan's tone, and it extends into the Force bond. "Why are you even here?"

"All I want is for you to stop fighting yourself so that you can focus that energy on something, anything else." Letting her honesty color her words, Bastila adds, "I would like it if you put that energy towards rebuilding the Republic, but if you'd prefer to disappear into the Outer Rim as another faceless mercenary, that's your choice."

Revan studies the Padawan for several long moments, carefully sending tendrils of awareness through the bond to test the truth in her statement. He still sounds disbelieving when he asks, "You… really do think that I can save the Republic, don't you?"

"Yes. I always have." Finally baring the truth that she had been holding in for so long, Bastila all-but blurts out, "When I sensed you on Taris, I still believed that you were the Republic's last great
hope. And I was right! Look how much you've accomplished in a matter of months, with only a small crew to assist you. You can deny it all you want, but you will always be a person who can make the impossible a reality."

Hands tensing around his lightsaber hilts, Revan draws a slow breath. "Alright, let's say that I lose my mind and decide that, yes, I'd like to help fix this entire mess and right all of my past mistakes. Beyond killing Malak, how do you propose I do that? Me? An Outer Rim mercenary with amnesia and a tendency to electrocute anyone who pisses me off?"

Glaring accusingly between the former Knight and the Padawan, Jolee declares, "I'll say that you've lost your mind if you're still listening to this nonsense…"

Cheerfully cutting off the eldest Force user, Bastila begins, "Well, to start, I'd ask you to merely close your eyes."

"Huh?"

"Close your eyes, breath, and let go." Opening up her end of the Force bond, the Padawan sends through encouragement, warm and bright. "Accept everything within you, including the darkness."

There are several long seconds of hesitation before Revan asks, "…You want me to fall?"

"No. I merely want you to stop resisting an integral part of you." Exhaling, Bastila continues to let her emotions flow freely through the bond, showing her perspective Master know that she has no ulterior motives other than helping him to reach his former strength. "Accept your darkness and realize that without it you are not complete."

For a moment the Padawan can feel the other Force user beginning to loosen his grasp on whatever it is that separates his conscious mind from the dark power that resides within the deepest recesses of his being. But then he pauses, trepidation swirling around him as he clings to that divide.

The resistance reverberates through the Force as Revan whispers, "I don't know if I can..."

"Think of it this way. How can you expect to defeat Malak and bring peace to the Republic if you cannot find peace within yourself?" Shuddering at the thought of her current master, Bastila hurriedly pushes that thought aside. "Stop fighting and simply feel."

Closing his eyes, Revan breathes deeply and centers himself with more conviction than the Padawan ever felt during his halfhearted meditation attempts throughout their journey together. This is true introspection, and through the Force bond, she can feel him journeying deep within his very being, the walls containing all of those strong emotions slowly dissolving as he surges past the apprehensions and inhibitions that Jedi Council convinced him were necessary. An icy mist is gradually creeping into the Force around him, swallowing his being as it overtakes the brightly flickering static of his uncertainty with a conviction that chills everything it touches.

Alarm suddenly radiates through the Force as Juhani's eyes grow wide, her own awareness flaring around her. "Vann, I do not wish to frighten you, but please proceed with caution." Her earlier confidence fades as unease suddenly taints her words. "You once told me that there is a difference between doing dark things and being a dark… an evil person. What you are currently embracing is not merely darkness, but something far more sinister that will consume you as it has done to Malak!"

"Forget about caution," Jolee scolds. "Stop this now, before you do something that you regret!"

"Don't listen to them, Vann. You know this is right! You know that embracing your connection to
the dark side is the only way you'll be strong enough to fight Malak." A flicker of uncertainty travels through the Force bond and Bastila acknowledges it, sending back encouragement. "It's the only way you'll be able to protect those you care about, including these two!"

"Jolee, you said it yourself. It's not about getting stronger. It's about using every tool at my disposal." Revan's eyes are still closed, but his voice has grown steadier and more self-assured. "And the dark side is a tool that I've been rejecting… why? Because the Jedi told me to?"

The coldness within the former Knight is growing and spreading, and the bond lets Bastila experience the moment when the last of his hesitation dissipates as the conflict that was raging within him is consumed by a frigid shadow. No longer does it feel like a violent storm as his conscious mind fights a losing battle with his subconscious fount of strength. Instead there is nothing but perfect blankness, a flat and gelid landscape of raw potential that is almost serene in its utter lack of anything but darkness and unbridled power.

Juhani's worry has morphed into pure fear as she calls, "Vann… I accept that most have darkness within them, including you. But what you are doing is not acceptance, it is surrender!" Her voice rises an octave as she glances desperately between her fellow Force users. "You are standing at the edge of a decision that you may not be able to turn back from. Please, stop now while you still can!"

Disappointment hangs heavy around Jolee as he wonders, "Kid, what are you doing?"

"What I did during the war. What I should have done back on Tatooine!" Revan's Force signature has lost the bright sparks of the confused mercenary, though this complete void of emotion is still vastly different from the man Bastila looked up to for so many years. Yet, he manages to sound like the assertive Knight he once was as he declares, "I'm accepting who and what I am so that I can actually stand a chance at fixing my mistakes."

"And you don't think this is a mistake?" Jolee stares in horror, his brow furrowing in consternation.

"Vann, please. I will tell you the same thing that you told me back in that kinrath cave." Slashing her lightsaber through the air to punctuate her shout, Juhani snarls, "You should be smart enough to recognize the truth of this situation!"

"I do see the truth." Contrasting his companions Revan has grown oddly calm, almost tranquil. His mind is a steadying presence within the Force bond, composed and thoughtful rather than driven by the anger and frustration that formerly lurked just beneath the surface, ready to erupt at any moment. Each breath that he draws is even and measured, though also oddly detached. "To beat Malak, to save the Republic and everyone in it, I need to be me. And that person is dark. Maybe that person fell, and maybe that fall was necessary."

A hollow sense of truth echoes through the Force bond, though that too is quickly engulfed by the dispassionate sense of stoicism that is beginning to signify the man's existence within the Force. Already the vibrancy and unpredictability of his strong emotions are becoming nothing more than a familiar memory, leaving behind something that resembles the calm serenity of a Jedi combined with the cold fury of a Sith. Yet, the sensation is far more frightening in its sheer capacity for the impersonal acceptance of anything and everything.

In a weak, almost resigned tone Jolee begs, "Please don't do this, kid…"

The other pair of Force users seem distant and indistinct compared to the utter power of Revan, and Bastila can't help but bask in his presence. He is still different from her memories of the armor-clad Knight and Republic general, but his connection to the Force is the same unyielding might that it
has always been. All of her admiration for the man blooms anew as she tells him, "No matter how this day ends, I'm here for you. You're not alone, and you never have to be alone again."

As the former Knight blinks back to the present and the scene before him, Jolee balks and takes a step back. "Kid, your eyes…"

Revan scowls at the older man, his irises completing their shift from deep brown to a bright shade of golden-yellow. "What color were my eyes behind my mask? What color were they when I saved the kriffing Republic?"

Hesitantly, Bastila asks, "What do you feel? That's far more important than what you look like."

The Force shimmers as Revan reflects inward, a new sense of understanding streaming through the bond. "I feel… calmer. Colder? I'm not sure how to describe it."

"The passion of the dark side is not what should be feared," Juhani murmurs as she recoils knowingly, bringing her lightsaber up to guard her body. "It is cold detachment that is dangerous as it can cause those in its thrall to commit unspeakable horrors."

"Lucky for you I'm not completely detached. What I feel is more like… power, but also control." Revan swallows hard as he admits, "It's a clarity that I haven't felt in a long time."

"And what, exactly, do you plan on doing with all of this clarity?" Jolee demands, using his lightsaber to point questioningly at the younger man.

There's a long pause, and then Revan states, "What I should have done over three years ago."

Respect colors Juhani's voice. "Of course, you wish to kill Malak."

"Yes. But I also I want to fix everything that he broke." Determination settles over Revan's features. "There's a Republic that needs to be saved. And I'm going to save it, even if I have to forcibly seize control of the entire kriffing government to make it happen."

Jolee sounds cautious as he asks, "And what makes you say that?"

"Because I'm Revan and it's my responsibility."

Sighing heavily, the eldest Force user's tone grows heavy. "That's the answer I was afraid of…"

"Vann, I respect what you wish to do, and I am forever grateful that you have already done for me personally. But, do you truly believe that taking control of the entire Republic will improve upon what Malak has created? Juhani grimaces as she acknowledges, "After all, he too started with the best of intentions."

Her own patience finally snapping, Bastila glares at the other Force users. "Do you both have so little faith in the man who saved the Republic? In the only Jedi who stood up to the Council? In the individual who ended the war when he bested Mandalore the Ultimate in single combat?"

"Don't take this personally, kids," Jolee chuckles mirthlessly. "But no one man can fix this mess."

"Which is why I was hoping that you, my friends, would stand with me." His eyes narrowing, Revan carefully assesses his companions. Suspicion curls around him as his awareness flows forth. "But right now, it looks like you only want to criticize me when I'm finally ready to actually make a difference."
"You were making a pretty big difference before you started listening to the Sith apprentice and spouting nonsense about taking over the government," Jolee responds, jerking an accusatory finger at Bastila.

"I prefer the term Dark Jedi, but I suppose that Sith will also do," the Padawan quips with a half-shrug.

"Vann, can you be sure that this is you speaking? You have never before expressed an interest in seizing control of the Republic," Juhani insists, her head shaking repeatedly. "This temple, this planet has strange ties to the dark side…"

"What was that, Juhani?" Revan counters sharply, focusing the full weight of his formidable Force presence on the Cathar. "Tell me more about the seductive powers of the dark side while you hold that red-bladed 'saber of yours."

"I…"

The former Knight merely smirks. "That's what I thought."

"I'm going to have to agree with the Cathar. This darkness in this place is corrupting." Using his free hand to gesture to the Temple of the Ancients, Jolee nods towards the nearest doorway. "All of us should get out of here so that we can sit down and think rather than doing something stupid… like trying to take control of the Republic as its new dictator! Which, I repeat, is a damn stupid idea!"

"I'm thinking just fine, but thanks for the concern." Twirling both of his lightsabers to emphasize his threat, Revan orders, "Now either help me or move out of my way. I need to get the disruptor field down so that the Hawk can leave this planet and head for the Star Forge."

"So, now you're giving us ultimatums? No, that's not going to happen." Tutting his disapproval, Jolee swings his own 'saber forward. "We're all going back to the Hawk alright, but only so that you can clear that thick head of yours."

Bastila chuckles as she senses the faint trail of fear coming off of the eldest Human. "I believe that Vann has made up his mind."

"Move, Jolee." The former Knight's tone does soften as he says, "I don't want to hurt you."

"Vann!" Juhani cries, "This is not you…"

"This is me," Revan responds, cutting off the Cathar with a sharp glare. "This is the same person who rescued you from Taris as a child. Now move."

"…No. Jolee is right." Raising her head defiantly, Juhani squares her shoulder. "You are not thinking clearly. Bastila has used the power of this temple to cloud your mind."

"I haven't done anything," the Padawan counters haughtily, keeping the bond fully open so that Revan knows that she's not leading him astray. "I merely gave him the tools to think clearly and be in control of his own life for the first time in years. Something that none of you had the courage or foresight to do."

"Please Vann," Curling her lip back in disgust, Juhani growls as she points the tip of her lightsaber at the other woman. "You cannot choose this traitor over us…"

"Now who's giving ultimatums?" Still startlingly calm given the situation, Revan takes a single
step forward, as though daring his companions to challenge him. "All things considered, I think I'm pretty damn patient. But now it looks like my friends are threatening me."

"Are they your friends?" Bastila wonders, gripping the hilt of her lightsaber just a little harder, her thumb hovering over the button that will ignite the twin blades. "I would think that your true friends would understand that you are Revan, with all of his darkness and all of his might."

"I thought so too. I guess... I was wrong." Hurt flickers over Revan's features, though it's quickly replaced by stoic resolve. "Last chance. Stand aside or I'm going through you."

"You can certainly try, kid." Jolee's feet move with surprising grace as he shifts into the traditional Jedi-ready position. "I may be old, but I still have some tricks up my sleeve."

"I do not wish to hurt you." Juhani's stance is more aggressive, her muscles tensed and ready to launch her skyward. "But I will do what is necessary to get you to safety so that we can fix whatever Bastila has done to you!"

"Sorry, but you can't fix what isn't broken." Anticipation surges through the bond as Revan glances at the Padawan out of the corner of his eye. "Bastila?"

Igniting her own weapon, the woman sizes up her opponents. "My blade is yours to command, Master."

"Good." Approval flows from Revan, surprisingly warm despite his current aloofness. Offering his former companions a slight bow, he sounds genuinely apologetic when he says, "I am sorry it has to end this way."

"Me too, kid." Jolee's voice is heavy with emotion, his sorrow nearly engulfing his Force presence. "Me too."

Juhani executes a graceful flip before Bastila can even blink, catching the Padawan by surprise. Luckily, Revan is even faster and he sends out a strong Force push that catches the Cathar in mid-air, knocking her to the ground before she can attack. The next moment the former Knight is repositioning the blade in his off-hand, wielding it in a defensive reverse-grip as he meets Jolee head-on with enough strength to send the older man stumbling back. For an instant, Bastila is overwhelmed by the rush of movement and the wave of unrestrained emotions flowing through the Force, but she hurriedly composes herself when she sees Juhani leaping to her feet. Swinging her blades into an offensive position, the Padawan smoothly blocks the Cathar's next strikes.

It soon becomes obvious that Revan doesn't need Bastila's help as he proceeds to show both of his former allies why he was, and perhaps still is, one of the best lightsaber duelists of his time. His movements are fast and aggressive, but no action is ever wasted. Each strike and slice that he makes is used to either block a blow or deliver one of his own, every motion carefully choreographed to drive the pair of Force users towards the choke-point that is the entrance to the temple. For her part, Bastila finds herself controlling the rhythm of the battle by distracting the pair, delivering stabs and feints to draw attention and drive both opponents towards her master.

After blocking two overhand chops from Juhani and parrying a slice at her abdomen from Jolee, the Padawan realizes something. While both of her adversaries clearly want her dead, neither is intent on hurting Revan. In the rare instance that either has an opening, they ignore it or resort to diversion tactics rather than true attacks. It's a show of weakness that she immediately uses to her advantage. Scoffing as Juhani makes another bluff strike at the former Knight, she spots an opening in the Cathar's guard. Her lightsaber sizzles viciously as she uses her left blade to knock the other woman's weapon back and then swings her right blade around to slash at a now-
unprotected shoulder. The hit strikes true, burning through flesh and producing a yowl of agony.

Sending a thrum of triumph through the bond, the Padawan aims a second, more devastating blow at her opponent's midsection. However, before she can follow through with her swing Revan shouts, "Alright, I've had enough of this bantha shit!"

A wave of raw power flows through the Force, plowing into Juhani and Jolee, instantly knocking them to the ground. Before the two Force users can climb to their feet, a second surge of pure energy wraps around both of them, constricting their throats and cutting off their windpipes. Tightening his fist, Revan stares coldly at the pair. "You were my friends," he says, his voice dangerously quiet. "I trusted you! I thought you would help me, not turn against me." Both of his victims wrestle against the choking grasp, their fingers desperately raking nothing but air. "But I guess I was wrong. I am sorry, you know. It shouldn't have ended like this."

As the Force pulses with a final surge of Revan's might, Jolee's eyes narrowing defiantly just before his eyelids flutter shut. Juhani doesn't put up as much of a fight, having ceased anything more than a token struggle the moment she realized what the former Knight was doing. Silence descends upon the roof as the pair lose their battle with consciousness, collapsing lifelessly upon the stone ground.

Reaching out her awareness, Bastila unintentionally gasps in surprise when she feels the barest flickers of Force signatures coming from their defeated foes. It's little more than a whisper, but it's there. "They're not dead," she mutters, turning to arch a questioning brow at Revan.

"No, they're probably more useful to me alive." The former Knight's jaw clenches. "I want to give them a chance to come around. They can't beat me, and now they know it. If I show them mercy, maybe they'll realize that I haven't completely fallen. Maybe then they'll understand."

Bastila frowns, though she considers this tactic. "You always did prefer winning others over to your side. Still..." Her frown deepens. "There's a good chance that they'll try to prevent you from reaching the Star Forge."

"Which is why we're going to lock them in this temple. They can sit, cool their heads, and think about what's happened." Revan looks down at his former allies, a hint of affection briefly gracing his countenance. "I can come back for them later, or send someone else to do it."

"But these doors don't lock. Or, at least, not from the hallways." Straining to recall the exact layout of the temple, Bastila offers an apologetic smile. "The few locks that exist are on the inside of the various rooms. So, they won't do you much good."

"That's alright, I have an idea." Smirking secretively, Revan taps an item clipped to his utility belt. Like the rest of his clothing, the accessory is rugged and worn, more appropriate for a spacer than a Jedi. "Just help me carry them inside."

A strong swell of energy envelops the two unconscious Force users, lifting them up and slowly moving them towards the entrance. Upon realizing her master's plan, Bastila quickly adds her own Force strength so that the pair are swiftly carried off of the sun-baked roof and into the temple interior. The building is dark and humid beyond the courtyard, the hallways littered with sparking bits of broken droids. The Padawan almost trips over a few of the larger pieces as her eyes adjust to the gloom, and she lets out a soft string of curses.

"Careful," Revan warns belatedly. "We left a bit of a mess."

"I've noticed." Squinting down the shadowy corridor, Bastila gestures to the left. "There's a small
room over in that corner. It originally contained a few Rakata artifacts, but it's since been cleared out."

Nodding in comprehension, Revan moves his hands to carefully float the unconscious individuals down the hall. "So, there's nothing these two can use to escape?"

"Precisely."

"Sounds perfect." Pausing, the former Knight allows Bastila to walk ahead of him. "Lead the way."

With the two of them working together, it only takes a few minutes to move Jolee and Juhani's prone forms into the barren little room. The corridor it's attached to is towards the center of the temple, rendering the space completely windowless and limiting it to a single door acting as both entrance and exit. Even a clever Force user will have difficulty finding an exploitable weak spot to break free, provided that Revan has some way to seal the door from the outside.

The former Knight is surprisingly gentle as he guides his former allies onto the hard floor, taking a moment to consider them before looking over at Bastila and nodding in satisfaction. "This should hold them." Without another word he strides out of the room, unhooking two items from his belt as he walks. Bastila is close on his heels, slipping through the doorway with hardly a sound. Without prompting she presses the archaic control panel embedded in the hallway and watches as the door slides closed with the soft groan of metal grinding against stone. Once the room is sealed, her new master wastes no time in setting the items from his belt onto the floor, directly against the threshold.

"Are those… mines?" the Padawan wonders aloud.

With a shrug, Revan pulls two more identical items from his belt and proceeds to set them as well. They blink and beep almost cheerfully, a sharp contrast to the destruction they can cause. "Yes. They're triggered by movement and should go off if the door opens."

"Isn't that a hazardous choice if you'd like to keep those two alive?"

Brushing off his knees as he climbs to his feet, Revan frowns. "They're both Force users, so their awareness should let them know that opening this is dangerous." He raps on the door with one knuckle. "And, if they're smart, they'll stay put for the time being."

"And what if the Force fails them? Or if they should decide to be foolhardy and take a risk?" A thin stream of worry creeps its way through Bastila's mind. While Jolee could often be annoying in his sagacity and Juhani was a bit stubborn once she became attached to an idea, the thought of either of them dying from something as impersonal as a mine is somehow troubling.

"Well, then they won't be interfering with me getting to the Star Forge and overthrowing Malak, now will they?" An expression of grim determination crosses Revan's features. "Come on, let's get out of here. I have a lot to do."

"Of course, Master." Bowing her head, Bastila hurries after the man as he stalks towards the courtyard entrance with confident strides. It takes effort not to glance back at the mines that are still twinkling in the gloom. "We can take my ship to the Forge. It's parked on the roof and can comfortably fit two. It will also be a bit less conspicuous than then Ebon Hawk."

"I'm not going straight to the Star Forge," Revan replies, shading his eyes as he walks back into the sunlight. Pausing, he reaches down and retrieves Jolee and Juhani's fallen lightsabers, tucking them inside of his jacket. "I need to head to the Hawk and get some supplies. Grenades, medpacs, maybe
H-Kay," he explains as he heads to the ancient terminal that controls the temple's electronic functions.

"Are you sure that's wise? After all, your crew may have some questions about what's occurred."

Bastila presses her lips into a thin line, glancing down at herself as her fingers straighten the edge of her robe, the crimson-and-black design partially inspired by Revan's own battle armor. "They may also object to your plan to usurp Malak's control of the Republic and claim it as your own."

Chuckling to himself, the former Knight taps some commands into the console. "Oh, I'm sure there will be some objections."

"While I would like to accompany you, if you fear my presence will only complicate matters I can stay here…" Grinning half-heartedly, Bastila concedes, "Or you could always lie. You're rather talented at that, after all."

The console beeps, and a moment later the entire sky seems to shimmer as though a million tiny sparks have all erupted at once. Revan nods in satisfaction. "No, I'm done lying. At least about this." He turns to the Padawan, his yellow eyes staring at her intently. "You said it yourself, if they're really my friends they'll understand that I am Revan. And that I'm the only one who can finish what I started during the war."

"Even if they don't understand, I do." Bastila smiles at this, the gesture soft but genuine. "I'll be with you till the end, Master."

"Good. That's what I like to hear." Nodding to the sleek silver craft partially hidden by the walls of the roof, Revan says, "We can take your ship in-atmosphere to the Hawk and then load it with any additional supplies before heading to the Forge. Like you said, using a ship that Malak recognizes should give us the element of surprise."

"That's a sound plan." Arching a curious brow, Bastila can't help but wonder, "Though, if we're taking my ship, why disable the disruptor field? All of Malak's vehicles are equipped with Star Forge technology which allows them to pass through the field at will."

Scoffing playfully at the question, Revan responds, "It's practically a crime to keep a ship as nice as the Ebon Hawk rusting away on that beach any longer than necessary." His expression grows more serious as he adds, "Besides, if I need back-up it's good to know that anyone who's still on my side can get off this planet and help me."

"Ah. A valid point I suppose." Sprinting on ahead, Bastila calls, "I'll start the engine."

The moment she enters the tiny cockpit, the Padawan slides into her seat and begins the launch sequence. Revan boards a few moments later, and soon the pair is lifting off from the roof. As they hover in the air but before they can soar into the clear blue sky there's an audible bang within the temple, the sound loud enough to rumble the entire exterior. A few clouds of dust shake loose from the ancient stonework and the foundation of the towering building seems to shudder for just an instant. Bastila jumps at the commotion, even as her master merely grows somber.

"Well," he Breathes out, his teeth clenching tightly. "I guess that's two less individuals we have to worry about convincing."

Gripping the controls until her knuckles turn white, Bastila swallows a whimper of sympathy. "I'm… sorry this ended so poorly."

"Don't be." Revan shakes his head as he stares at the transparisteel viewport, his expression void of
any emotion aside from a subtle tensing at his jawline. "They made their choice. Just like I made mine."

"Still…” Reaching through the bond, Bastila tries to send forth a swell of comfort. Unfortunately, her master's side of their connection is almost completely closed. She's able to sense a few stray emotions, though they surprise her. There's no mourning or sadness within his mind, merely a cold sense of determination. She briefly recalls Juhani's warning. 'It is that cold detachment that is dangerous. It causes those in its thrall to commit unspeakable horrors.' Could the Cathar have been correct?

Blinking hard, Bastila pushes aside that thought. She can't allow doubt to unsettle her, not now. Not when she finally has everything that she's wanted for so many years. Glancing over at Revan she manages a smile, reminding herself that it's a miracle of the Force for this man to be sitting here allied with her, ready to topple Malak and take back control of the Republic.

There must be a chill running through the cockpit that causes Bastila to shiver. At least, that's what she tells herself even as she averts her gaze from Revan's coldly impassive visage.

* * *

(Interlude – Bastila)

There's a loud commotion on the beach as Revan marches towards the Ebon Hawk, his back straight and his gaze focused as he navigates the shifting sands with practiced ease. After drawing several calming breathes the Padawan slowly begins to trail her master with noticeably less grace, her lingering guilt causing her steps to slow and falter as she braces herself for the confrontation to come. After all, she betrayed these people. It was out of necessity, but that doesn't change the essence of what she did or the trust that she's broken.

No, Bastila scolds herself. I can't think like that. One in my position should never apologize for betrayal. Gluing her eyes to Revan's back, she takes comfort in the sheer confidence that the man exudes. He clearly feels no remorse, so neither should she.

"V-Man, you're back!" Mission shouts, hurrying across the low dunes with Zaalbar close behind. The young Twi'lek is a bright spot of joy and energy within the Force. "Geeze, that took forever."

"Welcome back. I'd ask if the disruptor field is down, but your astromech droid has been beeping like crazy for the last several minutes." Canderous jerks a thumb towards the freighter as he follows the large divots left behind by the Wookiee. "Supposedly it's because the ship's sensors are finally working properly. Or, so your boyfriend claims."

Boyfriend? Bastila arches a brow at the term but says nothing.

"Yep," Revan confirms with a curt nod. "The field's down."

A moment later Carth comes jogging down the landing ramp, breaking into a wide grin when he spots the other man. Much of the bitterness and desire for vengeance have left his presence, replaced by affection and lightness that only glow brighter the closer he gets to the former Knight. "Great. Fantastic! So, what's the plan from here? I assume that we're heading to the Star F…” The smile immediately fades as suspicion chills the Force around him. "Vann, why is Bastila here?"

Glancing over his shoulder at the Padawan who's just coming into view from behind the rusted skeleton of a shuttlecraft, Revan calmly states, "Because there's been a change in plans."

"You little kriffing kath hound!" Canderous roars the second he spots the woman, the unrestrained
strength of his rage causing her to recoil slightly as he reaches for one of the many knives concealed on his person. "They told me what happened back on the Leviathan and if you think that I..."

As the Mandalorian yells, the rest of the crew immediately go on the defensive, drawing their various weapons and aiming them at their former ally. All of their levity seems to vanish, the Force becoming thick with the creeping coldness of their combined fear and anger. Zaalbar quickly moves to shield Mission despite the fact that the Twi'lek is expertly wielding a heavily modified blaster pistol.

Holding out one hand, Revan stares at his crew as he orders, "Everyone stand down so that I can explain what's going on!" His voice isn't as booming as the Mandalorian's, yet it carries further, aided by the natural air of command that he exudes. It takes a moment but almost everyone lowers their weapon a fraction, many of them clearly torn between distrust and curiosity.

Surprisingly, it's Carth who keeps his pistols raised. "Are you going to explain why your eyes yellow again? I know they were brown this morning. Now tell me what's going on or..."

"What color were the Revanchist's eyes, Carth?" the former Knight interrupts, his tone scathing as his irritation rises around him like frozen flames. "It's funny how almost nobody seems to know the answer to that question, isn't it?"

"Can you maybe have this lover's quarrel some other time?" Canderous asks, sounding more bored than concerned. He even chuckles briefly before changing the subject. "Anyway, the plans have changed? I can't say I want to work with the turncoat, but if she has inside information that makes it easier to reach Malak, I'm all for it."

Flinching at the well-deserved insult, Bastila clears her throat awkwardly. "I do have a bit of access to places within the Star Forge that may allow us to approach Malak without attracting as much attention. But that's not the main reason I'm here."

"Oh, so it's 'Malak' now and not 'master'?" Carefully training one blaster on the Padawan and one on Revan, the pilot sneers. "It's nice to see that you're as loyal as ever. Now Vann, tell me what's going on!"

"Carth, I'd appreciate it if you didn't insult my apprentice." The former Knight's tone is clipped in annoyance.

"Your what?!" The trepidation and frustration simmering in Carth finally boil over, sending out a chilled tidal wave of emotion.

"Bastila and I had a talk in the temple. We worked out a few things. It was... how did Dustil put it?" Revan's brow furrows thoughtfully. "Cathartic."

Visibly tensing, Carth's voice is dangerously low as he warns, "Leave my son out of this."

"Okay, fine. That was an overstep." Holding both hands up placatingly, Revan bows his head in contrition. "But that doesn't change the fact that Bastila showed me how to fix the mess that I caused when I disappeared. Actually, the answer is surprisingly simple. See, right now the problem is Vann Chis. He's just a mercenary who can't fix anything. But Revan? He's a hero, respected by the Jedi, the Republic, and the Mandalorians. Revan is the answer I've been looking for."

There's a general murmur of surprise that ripples through the Force as the crew absorbs this statement from their leader, though no one looks more shocked than Carth. He takes a step back,
muttering, "I don't like where this is going…"

Canderous, however, is grinning widely as he proclaims, "Hey, speak for yourself flyboy."

"The good news is that I am Revan," the former Knight declares, using one hand to point to his chest. As he takes a few steps forward his expression grows harder and colder. "Or, at least I will be soon enough. All I have to do is embrace everything that made me so successful during the war, like rejecting weakness and indecisiveness. This isn't about compassion or protecting a few individuals, it's about the greatest good for the greatest many across the entire Republic. And to achieve that goal, I need all of the tools at my disposal… including the dark side. I need to be at my best to save the Republic and to give it the future that it deserves. And my best is dark."

"Vann, I'm sorry but you…" Carth is shaking his head in disbelief, his eyes glued to the man he so obviously cares about even as horror creeps into his voice and surrounds his body. "You're scaring me. Stop it. This isn't funny."

Revan merely blinks. "Do I look like I'm joking?"

Looking around at the debris-covered beach, the pilot seems to be counting something silently to himself. As realization dawns across his features, his alarm only grows. "Where are Jolee and Juhani?"

"They're back in the Temple of the Ancients," Revan explains almost airily. "Or at least, what's left of them is." While his words are vague, the pride that tinges his voice affirms the implication that he is responsible for all of the harm that befell the other Force users.

The silence is almost palpable as the crew processes what's just been said, a mixture of shock and unrestrained fury painting many of their faces. The thick cloud of emotion that settled uneasily around them suddenly flares back to life, jagged shards of frigid anger shivering within the Force. There's hurt there as well, less violent but just as bitter and bleak. It's Carth whose reaction is the most telling as his arms drop to his sides and he gapes at the former Knight, his voice barely a whisper as he mumbles, "…What did you do?"

"You absolute scum!" Mission screams as she raises her pistol again, this time aiming it at her leader. Unadulterated rage surges forth in a torrent that engulfs her as her finger hovers over the trigger. "If you hurt Juhani or Jolee I'll, I'll…"

With a flick of his wrist, Revan yanks the blaster from the teenager's grasp, calling it into his own palm. Flipping on the safety he tucks it into his waistband before hissing, "Mission, stand down. You do not want to fight me, especially right now."

Tears well up in the Twi'lek's eyes and she clenches her teeth to hold back her sobs as she demands, "Why are you doing this, V-Man? I thought you left all of the Revan stuff behind…"

Refusing to dignify the question with a response, Revan instead turns to the Wookiee. "Zaalbar, you swore a life debt to me." Upon receiving a small, cautious nod of agreement he continues, "You know I don't usually do this, but I'm going to give you an order and I expect you to follow it. Take Mission into the crew quarters and stay there with her. Make sure she doesn't come out until I give permission. Understand?"

Bastila can't comprehend the growled response, but she can feel the confusion and disappointment crashing around the speaker. Whatever is said makes her master breathe deeply to carefully gather his rapidly-fraying patience before responding. The bond is still mostly closed on his end, but she can feel wisps of his mounting frustration seeping through. As much as she wants to send back
encouragement and comfort, the situation is also straining what little calm she has remaining.

"Why?" Revan must be repeating the question he was asked if his sarcasm is any indication. "Because if she gets in my way, I'm going to have to handle her the same way I handled Jolee and Juhani, and I'd prefer not to do that. So please, do both of us a favor and keep her contained. We can discuss all of this later when she calms down."

After a few more seconds of roaring the Wookiee turns to his friend with obvious reluctance, his fear a twisted ball of ice as he begins to gently push the Twi'lek towards the Hawk's landing ramp. At first, she resists, twisting away from the larger figure with a furious jerk of her arm.

"Come on Big Z, don't do this! Just 'cause you pledged a life debt doesn't mean V-Man gets to act like a total asshole to both of us!" As she's given another, slightly more forceful shove towards the freighter, Mission's tone grows more desperate. "Please? Are you really going to do this big guy? Hey, watch it!"

After another few brusque pushes, the teenager is unceremoniously ushered back into the ship amid numerous complaints. However, her voice quickly fades away as her slender form disappears within the metal hull.

Still watching the scene in horrified disbelief, Carth's jaw tenses as he yells, "You're threatening children now?"

"Last I checked, children don't point blasters at people," Revan smirks as he pats the spot where the pistol is safely stowed before he rolls his eyes. "And if it makes you feel any better, all I did was send 'the child' to her room."

"It doesn't." His voice flat with simmering rage, Carth snaps back, "If anything, it terrifies me that you think imprisoning a teenage girl is... what? Some sort of good parenting technique?"

"Look, I did what needed to be done." Letting both hands rest atop the hilts of his lightsabers, Revan gently taps the deadly weapons as he wonders, "Would you have preferred the other option?" His presence is still disarmingly calm despite the growing tension of the situation.

"No!" For an instant, Carth is at a loss for words as he tries to comprehend the threat that was just made. When he finally finds his voice, it's thin with desperation. "And let's be honest here, you're not doing what needs to be done. You're back to doing whatever the hells you want thanks to your unrivaled ability to be a complete and utter piece of bantha shit when you get some sort of crazy idea stuck in your head! And this, whatever it is, clearly takes the prize for crazy ideas."

"Calm down, it's fine." Watching the pilot as though he's nothing more than a petulant child throwing a tantrum, Revan assures the man, "This isn't another suicidal, nerf-brained plan. If anything, I'm actually thinking tactically for the first time in years."

"Vann, this is anything but fine!" Carth looks around at the remaining crewmembers, noting the contemplative expression on Canderous's face with a grimace. "This entire situation is once again the complete opposite of 'fine'!"

"Carth, I care about you a lot. More than anyone else on this ship. Maybe more than anyone else in this entire kriffing galaxy." Revan walks slowly towards the other man, careful to keep his hands aloft and his posture non-threatening. His tone is affectionate, even caring, a sharp contrast to the blankness of his presence within the Force. "So, I'm going to say this as simply and clearly as possible. Right now, you are pissing me the hells off."
"Why? Because I'm not a teenage girl you can push around?" The pilot takes another step back, raising both pistols defensively. "Are you going to kill me for disagreeing with you? Is that what happened to Jolee and Juhani?"

"Yes. In fact, these are their lightsabers that I took after my apprentice and I beat both of them in a duel." Opening his jacket, Revan reveals the two 'saber hilts that he collected from the ground after the short-lived battle. "If you don't believe me, you can go check for yourself. All of the proof you need is right on the top floor of the temple. I took down the shield while I was disabling the disruptor field so you can walk right in."

Bastila can't quite hold back her gasp of surprise at this admission, though she has to admit that she wasn't watching her master closely when he was using the Rakata terminal on the roof of the building. In truth, she wasn't aware that the shield could be taken down manually, mostly because she never needed the natives' assistance thanks to Malak's wealth of Star Forge technology. A little goes a long way when it comes to bypassing the various electrical barriers on Lehon.

"I can't believe you're doing this…" Carth is murmuring, his gaze wide as his weapons falter. "Remember when you asked if you were a monster? I should have said yes."

"I think we'd be better discussing this when we're both a little calmer. After all, I wouldn't want either of us to do something that we regret." Two long strides bring Revan directly in front of his apparent lover, and he gives the other man a terse smile that's immediately rebuked with a snort. That doesn't deter him, and he carefully reaches out to brush a few locks of hair away from the pilot's eyes, his fingers trailing tenderly as he softly remarks, "But for right now, get out of my sight and go to the Temple of the Ancients to find what's left of Jolee and Juhani if you want proof of what happened." He punctuates this order with a slight shove through the Force, his power rippling out around him.

Almost too stunned to move, Carth stumbles to the side as he viciously sneers, "I'm going to get out of your sight…"

Delivering a second push that nearly sends the pilot to his knees, Revan drowns out the rest of the man's words as he shouts, "Good, go! Get the hells out of here!"

Blinking rapidly, Carth shakes his head one last time as he takes off running down the beach, not bothering to look back. The former Knight stands and watches him go, attention glued to his form until he's nothing more than a dark blur on the horizon, the oranges and browns of his clothing nearly camouflaging with the surrounding sand. Even through the closed bond, Bastila can feel the heavy sorrow weighing on her master's mind, and she can't help but take comfort in the sensation. He's not completely blank inside after all. While the Jedi would frown at such attachment, Revan's affection for his lover assures her that he's still capable of feeling something other than the frigid indifference that he's been demonstrating since he accepted her assistance.

"Well, I'm no relationship expert, but that could have gone better," Canderous finally declares once the pilot is completely out of sight. "I never thought I'd say this, but I'm glad you're back to the man you were during the war. The mission that we're about to undertake won't be easy, and it's good to know that you won't go soft on anyone once we're in the thick of things."

"Uh-huh," Revan grunts noncommittally.

Undeterred, Canderous nods in hearty approval. "I never thought I'd say this, but I'm glad you're back to the man you were during the war. The mission that we're about to undertake won't be easy, and it's good to know that you won't go soft on anyone once we're in the thick of things."

Sighing heavily, Revan turns to the Mandalorian. "Like I said, Bastila helped me to realize a few
things."

"Please Master, you give me too much credit." The Padawan can feel a faint blush creeping over her cheeks as she waves her hand dismissively. Even so, the bond opens enough for a fresh stream of approval to flow through it. "I merely accepted you for what you are, something that the others have refused to do."

"Hey, I've always been supportive of Vann no matter what name he goes by. It's the rest of the idiots who keep getting mad when he saves their asses with lightning." Sneering at the notion, Canderous squares his shoulders. "Anyway, what's this plan of yours?"

"I'm still going to take Malak down, but once he's gone, I'm taking charge of the Republic. Knowing that they suffered defeat after defeat at the hands of the Mandalorians…" Revan trails off, quickly adding, "No offense Canderous."

"None taken." The Mandalorian grins, his chest puffing out with pride that shines around him. "Coming from you it's a compliment."

"My point is that Republic almost fell from a threat that they should have seen coming. It's not ready for whatever new dangers that lie ahead." Revan's next words are surprisingly quiet yet utterly determined, even as his emotions fade back out to the cool and misty wall of grayness. "But I am. And I'm going to make sure that the Republic is prepared, even if I have to seize control of the government with my own hands."

"While I'm all for your return, I'm not sure how the rest of my people will feel about this," Canderous admits almost sheepishly, one large palm rubbing at the back of his neck.

"I've seen and done a lot since the war. I've worked with more than one Mandalorian mercenary, and I realize that I made some mistakes." Meeting the taller man's gaze, Revan tells him, "If I control the Republic I can lift the sanctions imposed on your people at the end of the war, provided that you don't use the opportunity to take up arms against us again."

Nodding in approval, Canderous sounds as utterly grateful as he feels when he states, "That would go a long way in earning my people's support."

"Good." Revan lets out a soft sigh of relief. "So, I assume this means you're still with me?"

"Revan, I've always been with you." Adopting a more formal tone, Canderous informs them, "One of the six tenants of my people is to rally to the cause of the Mand'alor when summoned. Since you defeated us there has been no Mand'alor, so in their place, I rally behind you." Bowing respectfully, he taps one fist against his heart. "I'm your man until the end."

"That's more than I expected, Canderous." Revan bows back, not quite as low but still decidedly gracious. "I'm honored."

"It's my honor to serve you." Straightening, Canderous dons his usual pre-battle smirk. "Now, let's get this ship in the air so that we can storm the damn Forge already!"

"Actually, I want the Hawk to stay here for now."

Canderous's expression immediately falters. "Wait, I'm confused. She's the fastest ship in the Outer Rim and your best chance at reaching the Star Forge safely."

"Second best chance, actually," Revan corrects the Mandalorian.
"Um, yes," Bastila begins, doing a poor job at not tripping over her words. "You see, Canderous, I also have a ship. One that Malak recognizes as being part of his own fleet. Revan thinks that if we take my ship we'll have less of a chance of being detected prematurely."

"If I take Bastila's ship, I'll have stealth and the element of surprise on my side." Succinct in his analysis, Revan adds, "I won't if I take the Hawk."

"Alright!" Canderous rubs his hands together in anticipation, his excitement palpable. "Let's get on that ship, then!"

Wincing, Bastila quickly mumbles, "Unfortunately, it can only fit two people."

"Oh. I get it. This is a Jedi-thing, isn't it? Or a Sith thing?" Gesturing between the pair of Force users, Canderous admits, "I'll be honest, sometimes I can't tell the difference with you people."

"It's more of an… I'll probably need backup thing." Exhaling heavily as he considers his strategy, Revan assesses, "Stealth won't take us all the way to Malak. And once my cover is blown I'm going to need you and H-Kay to come in and shoot anything that moves."

Enthusiasm restored, Canderous claps the former Knight on the shoulder. "Now that's what I like to hear! Alright, I can do that, no problem."

Upon hearing his name, the assassin droid appears with surprising swiftness, seeming to melt out of the shadows of the Hawk's entryway. Bastila can't help but shudder a little when she realizes that he was probably listening to the entire conversation without anyone but Revan knowing he was present.

"Observation: Oh Master, it seems that you finally have someone you would like blasted." HK-47's eyes glow in appreciation. "Suddenly I am in an excellent mood!"

"Yes, H-Kay. I want you to assist Canderous for the rest of this mission." Smiling fondly at his droid, Revan orders, "If he tells you to shoot something, make sure it stays down."

Seeming positively delighted, HK-47 declares, "Observation: Master, you are sounding far more like your old self. This gives me great hope for the violence that we can achieve together."

"I'm glad that your psychotic droid is on board." Jerking a thumb towards the Hawk, worry worms its way around Canderous's presence as he wonders, "But, uh, what should I do about the kid and the carpet? And your boyfriend, for that matter?"

"Keep Mission and Zaalbar in the crew quarters, at least until you reach the Star Forge. After that, do whatever you think is best." Turning to glare warningly at the droid, Revan's voice is severe as he instructs, "And H-Kay, you do not have permission to kill any of them, Carth included."

"Statement: Master, your attachment to all of these meatbags is the only thing standing in the way of you achieving droid-like efficiency." Heaving a weary mechanical sight, HK-47 mutters, "But very well, I will comply."

"Forgive me, Master. But what about Carth? I noticed that you and he seem to be…" Bastila pauses, carefully choosing her words due to the sensitive nature of the situation. "More intimate than I remember."

"Let's just say that something good came out of your attempted murder back on the Leviathan. Near-death experiences are weird like that." A strange, almost wistful expression crosses Revan's face, though it only lasts an instant. Yet, it's long enough for fleeting wisps of affection to curl
around him in warm rays. "Anyway Canderous, I'm pretty sure Carth will be back and that he'll... have a lot to say. Hear him out if it sounds important. Other than that, handle him the same way you're handling the other two."

"Understood," the Mandalorian replies with a grin and a wink, mirth alighting around him. "I'll make sure that he doesn't try anything stupid."

Relief colors Revan's words, the sensation traveling through the bond and flowing over his being. "Great, I knew I could count on both of you."

Sounding distinctly annoyed at the admiration, HK-47 complains, "Statement: I am far more reliable than this slushy organic. But, I suppose I can accept that as a compliment."

"Shouldn't everything be a compliment if it's coming from me?" Revan wonders, eyeing the droid accusingly for a moment before exhaling sharply and adopting a more serious tone. "Anyway, both of you have your orders. I trust that Tee-Three can handle the rest of the ship, at least until Carth comes to his senses."

Sucking a breath through her teeth, Bastila quietly mutters, "Master, he may never..."

Revan hastily cuts his apprentice off. "Just... give him time." Turning to the Mandalorian and the droid, he withdraws a small commlink from his pants pocket. "I still have the distress signal we set up on Manaan and I'll use it once I need the Hawk's assistance. There's a large green light in the upper left-hand corner of the comm unit that will start blinking once I activate this. It will also raise an alarm throughout the ship. While I don't think you can miss the sound, stay alert for my signal."

"You may wish to get off of this planet and into orbit before then," Bastila suggests. "It will certainly make things easier on our end."

"Just... wait for Carth if you can." A faint spark of hope flutters about Revan for a heartbeat, momentarily outshining the cold blankness his presence has acquired. "Please."

"Don't worry, I can handle things from here." Shooing the Force users away with a wave of his hands, Canderous exudes confidence as he insists, "You two get to the Forge. And if you see Malak before I arrive... make sure you get the whole thing on video."

Giving the Mandalorian a firm pat on the shoulder, Revan's gratitude is a warm burst in the Force. "Thank you Canderous. For everything."

"You said that you needed to acquire some extra supplies?" Bastila asks, nodding towards where the Hawk is sitting.

"Yeah, I have most of them packed and ready to load." Gesturing to the freighter, Revan hurriedly strides over the dunes and towards the landing ramp. "Help me grab the bags and then we can head to the Star Forge."

"Of course, Master." Bowing obediently, Bastila falls into step behind the older Force user. Closing her eyes for a moment, she lets her awareness drift out into the greater eddies of the Force surrounding the planet. Everything here seems to thrum with power, a dark array of ancient energy that practically reverberates with possibility. She lets the gravity of the moment wash over her before declaring, "I sense that something great is awaiting you there."

"That something is my past." A chill moves through Revan, matching the lingering sense of dread that drifts across the bond with icy tendrils. "It's finally time to confront everything I left behind."
Chapter End Notes

1. Juhani’s quotes and warnings to Vann actually harken back to their first conversations on Dantooine in chapters 6 and 7. A lot has happened since then, so I figured a reminder couldn’t hurt.

2. I understand the in-game reason that Bastila’s ship can only hold one person. However, that never stopped me from being annoyed about it. So, in this story her ship can hold two plus a small amount of gear.

3. The six tenants Canderous refers to are the Resol’nare, which is the central code of Mandalorian life and culture (at least in Legends/the EU).

4. I was originally going to present this chapter without comment. Either way, we’re headed to the Star Forge!

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The Star Forge Part I

Chapter Summary

After our hero embraces the dark side, he and his remaining allies fight their way through their enemy's base of power. The battles are hard and there are still some revelations to be made.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

29.

"I thought you said that you'd be able to sneak onto the Forge without being noticed!" Vann shouts as he presses close to the durasteel doorframe separating him from a remarkably aggressive squadron of Sith troopers and grenadiers.

"Which, at the time, I believed to be true!" Glancing around the other side of the frame, Bastila winces as she notes the sheer number of enemies standing in their way. "Malak must have sensed our approach and the danger that we present."

A thin, cold line of emotions shivers through the bond, causing Vann to narrow his eyes as he senses the now-familiar sensation of the Padawan's deception. "What else aren't you telling me?"

There's a long pause as the mental connection slams shut on Bastila's end. Still staring down the long metal deck, she swallows hard before admitting, "Well, if I'm being perfectly honest, Malak has seemed rather suspicious of me and my motives ever since our confrontation on the Leviathan."

"And you couldn't have mentioned that sooner?!" Drawing his lightsabers, Vann doesn't bother to hide his exasperation, letting it wash over him in a wave of cold power.

"I… I wasn't sure if it would be an issue!"

Both of Vann's blades ignite with nearly-identical snap-hisses of hot plasma, the violet color a sharp contrast to the yellow of his eyes. "Apparently it is!" he growls as he tenses, preparing to leap from his hiding place.

"These are merely minions," Bastila assures her new master as she draws her own weapon. "They'll be no match for your power, especially now that you've embraced…"

"Yeah… feed my ego later. Right now, just fight!" Vann shouts as he uses the Force to launch himself directly into the path of the oncoming troops.

To her credit, Bastila does as she's told and ignites her lightsaber, charging out from behind the doorframe with a shout as her dual blades whirl around her in a blaze of yellow. Her movement draws the fire of the nearest group of soldiers, and they rain down a barrage of rifle shots on both Force users. Most of the attacks are easily blocked by the Padawan, who manages to deflect several bolts back at their shooters. In the midst of this chaos Vann lands, using the momentum to drive his sabers through the closest troopers before his boots touch the floor. Summoning his Force
connection, he sends out a powerful push, knocking multiple opponents prone and giving him a clear view of the two grenadiers preparing to launch their assault.

Meanwhile, Bastila lashes out at the nearest opponents, her downswing bisecting one trooper's chest plate while the follow-through carves off another's leg. Both collapse with a scream, attempting to crawl away from the Force user just as the first round of grenades rocks the area. Vann manages to dodge the brunt of the attack, though the heat of the burning plasma still singes the edge of his clothing as black scorch marks are etched into the floor.

"Great! Now cover me!" he calls to the Padawan as he dives evasively to his left, using a burst of Force-enhanced speed to narrowly avoid another storm of rifle fire.

The Force bond tingles with a sense of puzzlement, the question of how one is supposed to provide cover from grenades hovering between them. Honestly, Vann doesn't have an answer, but he trusts Bastila to be creative. As he dives forward, his ears ringing as more grenades rain down, he spots three Sith troopers being pushed across the floor on a strong current of Force energy. They land in a groaning heap at the feet of the grenadiers, causing the pair to stumble back in confusion. It's as good a distraction as he's going to get, and the former mercenary seizes the opportunity as he hurdles over the disoriented troopers and swings both of his weapons. His lightsabers hum in unison as he sweeps his dominate blade upwards, stabbing one grenadier's throat while his off-hand arcs low and gouges the second grenadier's abdomen. Both soldiers stumble as they shout in pain, their cries cut short by four more strikes in quick succession.

With the grenade assault temporarily halted, Vann glances over his shoulder and watches as Bastila makes quick work of the remaining troopers. With a sharp slash upward, she cuts the blaster from one soldier's hand, her lower blade deflecting a shot moments before she springs forward and removes the arm of the shooter. Howling in agony both troopers stagger back. They're soon joined by the rest of their squad as the remaining soldiers hastily retreat from the Force users, their heads held high in defiance.

"They're moving away, but not from us," Vann realizes, reaching out his Force awareness to scan the surrounding deck.

"As I stated, these are merely minions," Bastila reiterates, moving her lightsaber into a defensive position. A withering glare from her new master causes her to hurriedly add, "I believe they're only a warning from the Supreme Commander. If Malak were serious he would send..." A metallic clanking noise vibrates the walkway as a pair of massive assault droids moves into position, blocking the only exits with their heavily armored forms. "...An actual challenge," the Padawan finishes with a sigh.

A sharp chill permeates the Force as Vann draws his awareness back towards himself, his brow furrowing as he sees four black-garbed figures slip around the droids, their faces hidden behind balaclavas so that only their pallid cheeks and sickly eyes are visible. "You don't say," he grumbles, infusing his body with the growing coldness of his own irritation.

The pair of Force users barely have time to blink before the Dark Jedi are rushing forward, their lightsabers hissing as their attack is covered by a flurry of blaster bolts from the droids. One of the black-garbed figures sends out a strong Force push that Bastila barely resists, remaining on her feet even as she's knocked back half a meter. She grits her teeth and glances at her master just as a second Dark Jedi sends forth a bolt of lightning. It's not a particularly impressive display and Vann easily redirects the charge, letting it sizzle through his body and out his other hand. He aims the electricity at one of the droids, hoping that the shock will disable it. Unfortunately, the weak jolt barely makes it past the energy shielding.
"Well, shit," the former mercenary growls, planting his feet and using both lightsabers to deflect the droid's blaster bolts.

Panting as she moves to cover her master's back, Bastila keeps her eyes trained on the swiftly-moving Dark Jedi. "Now might be the time to call the Hawk?"

Raising his dominant blade, Vann deflects the first slash aimed at his chest. "Already done!" he shouts, the shriek of the droid's blasters swallowing his words.

Stumbling back from blocking a powerful chop, Bastila lets out a gasp as she narrowly dodges a stab to her abdomen. With a yell she manages to push aside the attacking lightsaber, regaining her balance before delivering two slashes of her own. "You... what? I wasn't aware...!"

The rest of the Padawan's words are interrupted as a second Dark Jedi leaps in, the pair of assailants forcing her to fall back defensively as they harry her from both sides. Through it all she continues deflecting blaster fire from both droids, her lightsaber becoming a blur of yellow. Vann considers helping, at least until he hears the hum of a 'saber just over his right shoulder. A chill of warning ripples through the Force and he pivots just in time to block a swing from a third black-clad assailant. While he avoids the hit, his side is left unguarded and one of the droids seizes the opportunity. The shot is poorly aimed thanks to the chaos, but it still pierces his body armor and grazes his skin. "Ah kriff!" he curses, flinching back as he mutters, "And I called the Hawk the moment we got in here and saw the entire damn deck was full of Sith!"

Feeding on the pain, Vann sucks in a sharp breath and bares his teeth at the pair of Dark Jedi who recklessly charge him. He can feel the icy surge of the Force around them as they also draw upon the dark side, strengthening their bodies and helping them to resist physical pain. Realizing this, the former mercenary focuses on parrying his opponents, pushing the bright red blades back with smooth strokes from both lightsabers. Dodging low, he blocks a strike aimed at his thigh before twisting around and reaching out his off-hand just in time to deflect a blaster bolt, this one directed at his head. As the bolt harmlessly strikes the nearest railing, he rolls to the ground and kicks out his leg, tripping one opponent and sending them tumbling into the other. Leaping backward Vann begins to gather electricity at his fingertips just as a cold pressure wraps around his throat.

"Oh no you kriffing don't!" the former mercenary growls, shaking his head as he resists the Force choke with a roar of anger. However, the assault still distracts him and he's unprepared for the surge of power that knocks him over and sends him sprawling across the deck. With their target down both Dark Jedi race towards their prize, their weapons raised for the kill.

The sheer indignity of the moment increases Vann's ire, and before either opponent is within striking distance he releases a huge surge of brilliant purple lightning. The bolts strike both of his attackers squarely in the chests, their limbs jerking uncontrollably as electricity courses through their bodies. Narrowing his eyes, the former mercenary leaps to his feet as he sends out a second jolt that keeps the Dark Jedi incapacitated as he slowly stalks forward. The attack only lets up when he's an arm's length away, close enough to drive the blades of his lightsabers directly into his opponents' hearts. Icy satisfaction blooms through him and he watches dispassionately as the bodies crumple against the metal grate.

Bastila is breathing hard as she sprints towards the nearest wall, using it to help avoid the droid's unceasing barrage. One Dark Jedi tumbles frantically in her wake, moaning as they clutch the stump where their arm used to be. They're still fairing better than their compatriot, who's nothing more than a lifeless heap in the center of the walkway. "I fear that was only the first wave," the Padawan warns, ducking down as a bolt whizzes just over her right shoulder. "Malak plans to trap us here and tire us out."
"So, we need to destroy that droid," Vann assesses, blocking two shots in quick succession and managing to send one of them back at the shooter.

"Yes, and quickly!" Still crouched, Bastila creeps along the wall as she uses her lightsaber to guard against the ongoing assault. It hisses and hums as bolt after bolt is diverted, her determination flowing through the bond even as it's tempered with the faintest whisper of doubt.

Following close behind the Padawan to cover her back, Vann holsters one weapon so that he can retrieve his commlink. "Ebon Hawk, it's me." There's no response, and he briefly hopes it's because the crew is trying to maintain the element of surprise. "You're going to see a long hallway that's currently blocked by a very large and heavily shielded assault droid. If you can focus on disabling it, that would be…"

The shriek of more blaster fire makes Vann wince and he immediately searches for cover, his eyes desperately scanning the deck's wide-open layout. Bastila's Force presence glimmers with the same caution as she shifts to provide cover, giving him time to draw his second lightsaber. A series of loud explosions causes both Force users to fall into a defensive stance, their weapons raised and ready for whatever's coming. It's only when they hear the metallic groan of a damaged droid that they pause, glancing at each other and then at the now-sparking form that's still blocking the only route into the area.

Another round of heavy fire erupts, this burst far more effective now that the droid's energy shielding has apparently been disabled. Realizing that this must be their reinforcements, Vann and Bastila nod to each other, the bond thrumming with agreement as they begin to race forward. The electrical tingle of lightning crackles across the former mercenary's skin as he builds up a strong charge, only releasing the storm when they're within striking distance of the droid who's blocking their path deeper into the Star Forge. As they move, the Padawan viciously deflects blaster fire with strong swings of her dual blades.

The lightning crackles as it arcs forward, surging past the protective energy field surrounding the droid and striking it at multiple points. There's a confused series of beeps, followed by a heavy burst of blaster fire aimed at both Force users. Shoving Bastila forward, Vann uses both lightsabers to deflect the shots as he orders, "The shield is weakening! Attack it now and I'll cover you!"

Sending a flicker of acknowledgment through the bond the Padawan sprints to the left, using the Force to bolster her speed as she dances around the glowing bolts. Faking a lunge to the droid's opposite side, Vann manages to draw its fire. Prepared for the onslaught, he dodges several of the shots before whirling around and deflecting the rest of the bolts with wide sweeps from both of his lightsabers. The maneuver enables Bastila to reach the droid unhampered and she lunges at its optics with a flurry of blows. The first few strikes are partially absorbed by the rapidly-failing shield, but the rest break through and leave glowing gashes in the metal body.

Seeing that they have the advantage, Vann briefly calculates if he can electrocute the weakened droid without injuring Bastila. He's still debating the risk when a familiar chill of unrepentant outrage flows through the Force, followed by a series of blaster bolts that fly just over his left shoulder. Even though they don't appear to be aimed at him, he instinctively ducks and moves his main lightsaber to shield his body while reversing his grip on the other to better defend his back. Glancing over his shoulder he notes that the first droid has been reduced to a sizzling heap that Canderous and HK-47 are currently clambering over. Both of their rifles are still smoking from use, but neither one is close enough to have made an accurate shot across the deck. Which means…

"You Force-damned kriiffing bastard!" Carth's expression is livid and his pistols emit twin shrieks as he pulls the triggers, sending another barrage of fire at the second droid.
When the second round of bolts also narrowly misses him, Vann winces and takes one long step away from the pilot. "Hey," he calls, his relief warming the Force around him. "You made it back to the ship!"

Carth is still seething with rage as he marches forward, holstering the pistol in his main hand while firing several more bolts from his secondary weapon directly into the droid's body. "I cannot kriffing believe you!"

The shots sizzle, carving holes that Bastila immediately takes advantage of by sliding her 'saber blades into the weak points to carve apart wires and metal. Her weapon hums as she pivots lightly, carving off two limbs as the droid makes a desperate, flailing attack in her direction. Without pausing she jumps into the air, slashing her blade through what passes for the machine's head as she lands, destroying the droid in a shower of sparks. Wiping the back of her hand across her forehead, she heaves a sigh of relief and turns to Vann. "Master, I believe that the way ahead is clear for now. We really ought to…"

"I can't tell if you're a monster or just an idiot!" Spitting the words through clenched teeth, Carth drowns out the suggestion as marches up to the former mercenary. Before either Force user can react his fist flies forward, catching the other man in the jaw with a hard punch.

Granted, Vann probably deserves that. "But at least you're still helping me?" he mumbles, powering down his lightsabers and clipping one to his belt before reaching up to gingerly touch the red mark blooming across his jaw.

"While that did look immensely satisfying, maybe you should leave the damned idiot in one piece until after he'd done dismantling this place, hmm?" an older voice calls out, clearly amused by the scene. "Also, kid, I think you have something that belongs to me."

"You have something that belongs to both of us," an accented female voice agrees with a hiss. "Though I thank you for keeping my lightsaber safe and away from that one." Golden eyes glare at Bastila as a lithe form slips around the first droid, her arms crossed over her chest.

Blinking in disbelief, the Padawan's jaw drops slightly as she glances between the pair of 'dead' Force users before glaring accusingly at her master. "How…?" she wonders. "Didn't you…?"

"Lie to every single person in this room simultaneously?" Still radiating anger, Carth snaps, "Yeah, he did that."

"Oh, now you're just being dramatic," Jolee complains as he holds out his palm and wiggles his fingers. "Also, I'm still missing something."

"What is going on?" With her hands on her hips, Bastila looks like a petulant child even as her presence darkens with frustration. "How is this possible? I heard the explosion in the temple and it's inconceivable for anyone to have survived that!"

After stowing his second 'saber, Vann taps one of the mines still hanging from his belt. "Flashbangs. They're diversion devices that make a lot of noise and light, but they don't actually do much damage."

Digging one finger in his ear, Jolee grouses, "Tell that to my tinnitus."

"Oh, that's where all of those went!" Mission exclaims as she hops over the droid's body thanks to a boost from Zaalbar. Nodding appreciatively, she states, "That's a damn good plan-V-Man. But I'm still mad as hells at you for pulling a stunt like that!"
"The tactical genius who singlehandedly won a war managed to pull a fast one on you morons and you're pissed-off?" Canderous scoffs at the notion.

"Hush." Snorting derisively, Juhani waves off the Mandalorian's accusation. "You were fooled as well."

Canderous gives the Cathar a withering glare. "Yeah, but I'm also impressed."

"Assessment: It seems that your slushy, organic minds are incapable of comprehending the tactical brilliance of my master," HK-47 informs the others in the most patronizing tone he can manage. "As I have previously expressed, he has many droid-like qualities."

A mixture of anger and disappointment flows forth from Bastila, banishing all traces of her former hope. "So, this was all a trick to do… what exactly? Make a fool of me? Punish me for my earlier betrayal? Teach me a lesson?"

"To get your damn help," Vann clarifies as returns both confiscated lightsabers.

"Well, then you've made a grave error." Raising her head defiantly, Bastila shifts her gaze to disguise the hurt shining in her eyes. "Because you've barely entered the Star Forge and I'm now aware of your ruse."

Sighing, Vann places a hand on Mission's shoulder and gives her an apologetic squeeze before he offers Zaalbar a rueful grin. "I mean, it's wasn't entirely a ruse…"

Now it's Carth's turn to look indignant. "Wait, what? Are you saying that you actually want Bastila around? Jolee told me that you sent him some type of message asking him to play along and fool her! And why the kriff are your eyes still yellow?"

"Well, in my defense it was a bit hard to understand said message, what with the choking." Chuckling to himself, the oldest Force user ignites his lightsaber and gives it an experimental swing.

"Let's walk and talk." Gesturing towards the singular path deeper into the forge, Vann strides ahead of the group. "Because the rest of Malak's minions are probably on their way."

"It may take them a little extra time…" Mission comments innocently, even as a mischievous smirk splits her face. "We, uh, might have scrambled a few of their systems on our way here."

Nodding in agreement Zaalbar trills, "Yes, we thought it might be helpful. I apologize if that's not what you wanted."

"No, that's great!" Vann responds with a grin. "Actually, if you can find a way to slice more of their systems, that would really help."

Mission and Zaalbar exchange a nod, exuding a mixture of delight and determination. "Yeah, sure V-Man. We can do that… So long as this isn't another trick."

"It's not a trick." Drawing his weapons, Vann reaches out his awareness as he presses forward. The heaviness of the dark side obfuscates the entire forge, but he can still sense the thrum of multiple lifeforms lurking somewhere deep within. "But I also can't guarantee what you'll find in here. Now, if Bastila could…"

"Could what?"
"Help us out." The bond is mostly closed now, but Vann can still feel the Padawan fuming on the other side. "Get her head out of her ass. Recognize that we're all fighting for the same thing."

"Are we?" Bastila and Carth ask the question simultaneously, only to turn and glare at each other. The pilot's anger hasn't abated as he notes, "You never did explain what you meant when you said that it was all a ruse..."

"I feel like I don't know what you're fighting for, Vann," Bastila complains, cutting off Carth in the process. "In fact, I feel like I hardly know you at all..."

"Oh, for Force sake!" Pausing mid-stride, Vann turns to survey the rest of his crew. "Canderous, H-Kay, can you scout ahead and clear the path for Mission and Zaalbar?" he asks, gesturing emphatically.

Catching the implication, the Mandalorian salutes his leader with his blaster. "I gotcha. Don't worry, we'll keep the kid and the carpet out of trouble."

"Assessment: Master, as you are aware, when given an order to seek and destroy I never fail in my duty." HK-47 falls in beside Canderous. "And I delight in those orders."

"Fantastic," Vann mutters sarcastically. "Mission and Zaalbar? Follow a safe distance behind them and provide back-up if they need it. Just remember that your main objective is to find a terminal that connects to the main system."

"We will do our best," Zaalbar quickly responds, gently prodding the Twi'lek forward before she can argue. "And we will alert you if there are any problems."

As the quartet marches down the walkway and out of sight, Vann glances over to Jolee and Juhani. "Can you both use the Force to search the area?" Lowering his voice, he adds, "And um, make sure that they don't kill me while I explain what happened back on the surface?" His gaze darts between Bastila and Carth.

"You might need the whole crew for that one," Jolee quips. "But sure, I'll keep an eye out."

"As will I." Clearly sensing the open hostility coming from her crewmates, Juhani takes a careful step back. "Search for any potential dangers, that is. The rest is your responsibility."

Sighing softly as he accepts this response, Vann inclines his head in agreement as the other two Force users spread out and remain a few paces ahead. Now left with only the pilot and the Padawan, he shudders at the waves of cold hostility radiating off them. Drawing a slow breath, he carefully considered his words, but his musings are interrupted before he can speak.

"So," Bastila begins, her tone clipped and expression icy. "Is everything you told me since the Leviathan a lie?"

"No. Apparently he does want you around despite the fact that you betrayed all of us and tried to kill me." Snorting in disgust, Carth sneers, "It seems like you're his perfect apprentice."

Exasperated by the bickering, Vann turns to face his companions, hoping to the Force that someone will watch his exposed back "Would you both shut up?" He gestures to the Padawan. "Bastila, I meant it when I said that you made me realize a lot of things. Up on the roof of the temple, I finally did accept my connection to the dark side. Which is probably why my eyes are still like this..."
"Well, I'm glad that you've done such a spectacular job of embracing your penchant for murder and betrayal," the pilot snaps sarcastically.

"And Carth," Vann continues, disregarding the fresh wave of irritation that swells around the other man. "I'm sorry I tricked you."

"Oh, you didn't just trick me." As he taps his temple, the pilot's voice tightens with fury. "You mind tricked me."

"Because I needed you to go to the temple and get Jolee and Juhani!" Jerking a thumb at the other Force users, Vann can't help but notice that they're making a show of ignoring the current confrontation. He rolls his eyes, continuing, "It wasn't like you were about to leave the Hawk on your own, not with Mission and Zaalbar locked in the crew quarters."

"Which brings me back to my original point, and the fact that you apparently used the entire crew to trick me!" Still a frigid point of resentment, Bastila trudges a few paces behind the others.

"No," Carth corrects. "He used you to trick the entire crew."

"I lied to everyone, okay?" Pointing to each of his companions, he emphasizes, "Every kriffing one of you… except maybe Jolee. Some of this was his idea."

"Don't you pull me into your pile of bantha shit, kid!" The eldest Force user tuts disapprovingly. "All I said back on the Hawk was that you should trust your crew more and that we need to work together to handle Malak and Bastila. I never said anything about choking the elderly or locking teenagers in the crew quarters. That was all your bright idea."

Throwing up his hands in defeat, Vann admits, "Alright, fine! I lied a lot! And I'd do it again!"

Disappointment colors Carth's already bitter tone. "Of course you would."

Vann ducks his head apologetically as a frigid tide of genuine hurt cascades over Carth, the raw emotion enough to temporarily overwhelm his senses. He swallows hard as he pushes aside his guilt, instead focusing on the other individual who's still seething anger. "Bastila, I lied to you because I needed you to trust me… as counter-intuitive as that sounds." Waving his hands to brush aside the messy explanation, he keeps speaking before she can object. "More importantly, I needed to know if I could trust you. I had a suspicion that you weren't loyal to Malak, but with your mental shields up I couldn't be sure. I knew that the only way you'd let down your guard was if you believed that I abandoned the crew for you."

"How did you even manage to hide this?" Confusion paints Bastila's face. "We have a bond."

"I can conceal my Force presence well enough that I was able to hide from the entire academy on Korriban," Vann describes, attempting to shrug nonchalantly. "Really, all I did was cloak my mind and hope for the best. I'm guessing that I felt different than usual, even with our bond. Blank, maybe?"

"Actually, that's exactly how you felt." Bastila shudders minutely and she sounds unsettled by the memory. "It was as though you had forsaken all of the passion that has always defined you… which is quite contrary to how you feel right now."

Vann nods. "Because right now I'm not hiding anything."

"Great, so you can hide lies from the Sith." Carth's expression is deadpan as he mutters, "That's really comforting."
"Yes, I can hide myself when needed, unlike the rest of you." Glancing at the pilot out of the corner of his eye, Vann raises his voice when he notes, "In fact, some of you are honest, good-hearted people who literally can't lie to save your own life. So, I couldn't tell you my plan since one bad liar would give everything away."

"That's a pretty good point, kid." Jolee hums in approval as he bluntly stares at Carth. "Some of us are downright terrible liars."

Shaking his head at the eldest Force user, the pilot is only slightly mollified by this explanation. "And what was the goal of this scheme? You're here on the Star Forge, Bastila won't help us, and the rest of the crew feels like they can't trust you."

"I continue to trust Vann, at least now that I understand his motives," Juhani objects. "It is a good plan and nobody was permanently harmed by his deception."

Rubbing his ear again, Jolee gripes, "Have I mentioned my tinnitus?"

"My goal was to learn the truth about Bastila," Vann states, ignoring the complaint. "And now I'm positive that she doesn't support Malak or believe in his regime. Most of all, I know that she hasn't been completely consumed by the dark side."

Shaking her head too rapidly to be believable, the Padawan insists, "That's not…"

Vann cuts her off. "Don't try to deny it. Up on that roof you completely opened your mind to me. I saw everything." He offers the woman a terse smile as he sends a rush of genuine gratitude through their bond. "And I appreciate what you showed me. I listened, really listened, and it made me realize that I can't keep rejecting who I am. My inner darkness can be dangerous, but it's also a part of me. Like a lot of things, acceptance is the first step to control."

There's a gentle murmur of praise from Jolee that compliments the burst of understanding and respect that blooms from Juhani. Neither speaks, but the admiration that shines around them is louder than any words.

Still focused on Bastila, Vann insists, "I meant it when I said that I want your help through whatever lies ahead."

"Truly?" The Padawan blinks in surprise, her disbelief flowing between them. "I sense it, but I…"

"Can't trust him?" Carth finishes, his expression morose. "Now do you see my problem?"

"Carth, you know that we need her help to reach Malak." In an appeal to the pilot's altruistic nature, Vann points out, "More importantly, we can't leave her in Malak's hands. You saw with your own eyes what that Sith academy was doing to Dustil and his classmates…"

"Don't talk about my son!" the other man warns.

"I'm going to talk about your son because Bastila is also someone's child!" Not backing down, Vann feels a warm flutter of fondness as he recalls the teenager. "Dustil deserved a second chance even after he pointed a blaster at your head and Bastila is no worse than he was. Yes, she stabbed you, but she also warned the Jedi Masters on Dantooine about Malak's attack so they could evacuate as many people as possible."

Pausing in the middle of the hallway, Bastila exhales loudly. "You know that was me?"

"I'm Revan," Vann replies mysteriously. "Of course I do."
"You called yourself Revan." Bastila's eyes go wide. "Does that mean you were serious when you said that you wanted to seize control of the Republic for yourself?"

"Oh hells no. Have you met me?" Arching an incredulous brow, Vann gestures to his entire being. "I'm a former hired gun who's missing most of my memories. There's no way I should be running the Republic."

Bastila looks stricken. "But Vann…"

"Look, I don't want to rule the Republic," the former mercenary insists with a thin smile. "But I'm not completely opposed to helping rebuild some things after this whole mess is over."

It's a few long moments before Bastila finally nods, a new sense of resolve washing over her. "I… I think I understand. And I also believe that you may be surprised at how much you can accomplish."

"So, does that mean that you're with us?" Vann levels an assessing gaze at the Padawan, his tone somber as he reaches through the bond. "For real this time, no more stabbing Carth and running back to Malak?"

"Yes." The link between the pair bursts open as the last of Bastila's mental walls comes down, allowing thoughts and emotions to flow freely between them. There's trepidation within her as tenuous trust is gradually rebuilt, but the hope underlying everything is entirely genuine. It shines brightly, a dazzling beacon that illuminates the mental link between the Force users. "I meant it earlier when I pledged myself to you and I will honor that promise. No matter what you say, you are Revan and I still believe you to be the Republic's last great hope."

Closing his eyes, Vann basks in the glow of their connection until it begins to calm, less luminous but still sincere. "Good, and you better mean it this time."

"I do," Bastila promises, bowing deeply. "I really and truly do."

"Well, that was touching." Carth has holstered his pistols, his hands balled into tight fists by his sides. "I'm glad that you two are getting along so well."

"I, uh," Vann begins, his voice suddenly halting and unsure. "I… I don't know how else I can explain this to you…"

"Do you have any idea how scared I was?" Carth demands, turning to fix the former mercenary with an accusatory glare.

"Seeing as how I'm really damn Force-sensitive, I had some idea."

"I was terrified. And not for my safety, or even safety of the rest of the crew."

"I was terrified that I lost you, that you had fallen into some dark place that there was no coming back from."

"I didn't mean…" Vann begins, but he's immediately stopped.

"No, let me talk dammit! I thought that you were gone, and somehow that was worse than the idea of you dying." Despite the calming breath he draws, Carth's voice is strained and thick with emotion. "When I lost Morgana and Dustil, I felt like I had nothing left but my need for revenge. It was like my ability to care about anything or anyone else died with them. And then you fell into
my life and changed *everything.* The slightest smile tugs at the corners of his mouth as he studies the former mercenary. "It took me a while, but I finally realized that I have a reason to live beyond Karath or Telos or even the Republic. And that reason is one of the most incredible people I've ever met. But... it felt too good to be true, and a part of me was *sure* that it was a lie or a betrayal waiting to happen."

"And then I went and kripped it all up by being me. Shit. I... dammit." Vann groans as he drops his head and lets out a heavy sigh of frustration. "I've never been good at this stuff. Or, at least I'm pretty certain I've always been terrible at it." Shame sits like an icy lump in his gut as he quietly admits, "I didn't think about how badly one lie could hurt you."

Jolee's voice is an unexpected point of levity when he comments, "Kid, not to ruin the moment, but it was a lot more than one lie."

"A *series* of lies, then. Still, I didn't mean..." Swallowing down any further excuses, Vann's eyes remain downcast for several moments before he finds the courage to meet the pilot's familiar gaze. "I'm sorry, okay? I'm a kripping *idiot* who doesn't always think about everyone else's feelings and I'm so, *so* sor..."

The rest of Vann's words are swallowed by Carth's mouth as the other man leans in and presses a searing kiss between them. Pure, raw affection blooms within the Force, surrounding the pair with glimmering heat that cascades around them. The former mercenary presses close as he parts his lips, deepening the kiss and wrapping his arms tightly around the other man's shoulders, humming softly in appreciation all the while. It's not until he hears someone loudly clearing their throat that he reluctantly draws away, his attention still fixed on his companion.

"Just don't ever scare me like that again." Carth gently cups the other man's face in his hands, his thumb caressing the rapidly reddening mark left by his knuckles. "Please, I'm begging you."

"I won't." Conviction fills the former mercenary's voice and surrounds him in the Force. "I promise."

"Oh, and Vann?" Placing a firm hand on the back of his companion's neck, Carth presses their foreheads together. His expression is a mixture of amusement and admonishment when he warns, "Don't you *dare* mind-trick me again!"

"Heh," Grinning up at the pilot, the former mercenary chuckles. "I'm actually surprised that worked."

It's Bastila who primly states, "I'm not. You are Revan after all."

Cutting the Padawan off before she can say anything else, Jolee's tone is just a bit frantic as he calls out, "Well if everyone is done hashing out their feelings in the most inappropriate place in the galaxy, I'd like to point out that there's definitely some trouble up ahead."

Vann reflexively unloops his arms from around Carth's shoulders and draws his weapons, both blades igniting with a *snap-hiss* as he spreads his awareness out across the deck. The icy haze of the Star Forge is still clouding his senses, but he manages to feel the thrum of combat reverberating from further up the deck. When he concentrates, he can hear the faint shriek of blaster fire combined with the sharper hum and sizzle of lightsabers deflecting the bolts. A prickle of warning runs down his back, though it's tempered by the solid warmth of the pilot pressed against his side and Bastila's brightness flickering through his mind.

Igniting her duel-bladed lightsaber, the Padawan twirls it once as she announces, "I sense it too.
"My blade is still yours, Master."

"Alright, let's do this," Carth grumbles with notably less enthusiasm as he draws his pistols.

Frantically gesturing for the others to hurry, Jolee mumbles a few good-natured complaints under his breath as he grips his lightsaber. Juhani needs no encouragement as she charges forward with a growl, her blade illuminating one side of her body with an eerie crimson glow. The others rush to catch up to the Cathar, their boots clattering against the grated floor as they skid around a corner and sprint down a long hallway.

They all hear and feel the commotion before they see it, thanks to the constant shriek of blaster fire and the repeated booms that rock the area as grenades are launched in rapid succession. For a moment Vann worries that his friends are going to be blown-up before he reaches them, at least until he feels the familiar tingle of Mission's mirth rippling through the Force. Turning to the others he announces, "I can sense the others up ahead. It seems like they're... having fun?"

"That sounds about right for this group." Jolee's own Force awareness spreads around him and brow furrows thoughtfully. "I also sense a few of Malak's Dark Jedi up there with them."

Gazing down the hallway, Vann can't see much past the squadron of troopers blocking their path. While the soldiers seem distracted by whatever's going on up ahead, it won't be long before they notice the threat at their backs. But for now, the crew has the element of surprise.

"We should take them out quickly, as there are undoubtedly more on the way," Bastila states, raising her lightsaber into an offensive potion. "Malak's goal is to prevent us from reaching the Command Center."

"Well then." Infusing his body with the Force, Vann prepares to dash ahead. "Let's go ruin his day."

The Star Forge becomes a blur as the Force enhances the former mercenary's natural speed, propelling him down the hallway so quickly that his feet barely touch the floor. He reaches the center of the conflict in a matter of seconds, though a quick glance over his shoulder reveals that Juhani is close behind as she uses the Force to leap through the air. Lashing out with his main blade, Vann cuts through the chest of the nearest trooper before lunging forward and catching a second across the shoulders with his off-hand. The Cather lands less than a meter away, knocking a trooper to the ground as she uses her momentum to kick them in the neck. A moment later the pair is back-to-back, flowing around each other in a mixture of Ataru and Juyo as they carve a path through their opponents.

Most of the troopers are rendered easy targets thanks to Jolee. Though the older man remains on the edges of the fray as he uses his Force powers to immobilize multiple enemies at a time, allowing the others to dispatch them with minimal effort. The battlefield is awash in his presence; a mixture of warmth, bitterness, odd waves of calm that speaks to his personality. It's soothing in a strange way, and a sharp contrast to the frozen fury of Juhani or the flickers of ice and heat that surge through Vann as Bastila draws closer. Her yellow blades methodically block blaster fire as she dodges and weaves, her slender form moving between the larger troopers with ease.

As he dives forward and slashes through the arm of an opponent blocking his path, Vann notices a few streaks of red fly just past his right shoulder. The bolts hit a trooper directly in the face, dropping them just as they take point-blank aim at the former mercenary's heart. A few meters away, Carth shakes his head as he heaves an exasperated sigh before shifting position so that he can pick off more of Malak's soldiers. Winking in thanks, Vann flips the lightsaber in his off-hand and strikes at the thigh of the last adversary standing in his way. The hot blade burns through
armor and flesh, drawing a scream of pain from the individual as they drop to the floor.

With a clear view of the walkway up ahead, Vann notes that a trio of Dark Jedi are positioned defensively, the floor around them scorched from detonated grenades. One of their peers lies crumpled in a heap by their feet. HK-47 shouts various insults as he lays down a constant barrage of blaster fire that's mostly deflected, though this doesn't lessen his glee. The droid is the only member of the crew currently visible, but the former mercenary can sense a thick cloud of fear filling the Force a few meters away. It's too potent to be caused by a single sentient so he rushes ahead, enabling him to spot three figures clustered at the very edge of the walkway. One is clutching his furry head and roaring in frustration as other two aim blasters and toss grenades around him.

"Hey, that one totally counts as mine!" Mission shouts indignantly, her bravado disguising some of the terror in her voice.

"No way kid," Canderous barks back, his own tone more strained than usual. "I weakened him. You just took the easy shot!"

"Stop it! Stop it!" Zaalbar growls, though whether he's talking to his crewmates or someone else is a mystery.

A ripple of cold energy shudders through the Force as the Dark Jedi gather their power for another attack. Before they can unleash their assault, Vann calls, "Hey, nerf-brains! Over here! I'm pretty sure I'm the one you're looking for!"

All three Dark Jedi turn around simultaneously, their yellow eyes narrowing with frigid hatred. Vann can taste the ozone in the air as the trio simultaneously form Force lightning in their hands, the crackling balls of purple light casting jagged shadows across the grated floor. Unsure if he can actually absorb and redirect this much, he inhales deeply and draws upon the Force for strength as he reaches one hand towards the incoming electricity. But before the glowing forks of energy can reach him there's an ear-shattering series of bangs that shakes the walls and rattles the ground of the forge. The former mercenary lurches on his feet, struggling to keep his balance as a blinding orange flash briefly engulfs the area, the intense light and heat forcing him to shield his face with both forearms.

When the worst of the effect dissipates Vann peers up, his eyes squinting against the harsh glare that still shimmers in the air. New scorch marks score the floor, almost hiding the charred remains of the three Dark Jedi who were standing there a moment before.

"Those three definitely count as mine!" Arm still extended in a throw, Mission manages to grin weakly as she rocks back on her heels.

Canderous merely grunts, his own hand tucked into a pouch at his hip that's bulging with grenades. "Fine, I'll give you that one. But only because you were slow and made your throw after mine."

Still clutching his head, Zaalbar blinks and then lets out a confused trill, glancing around in confusion. "What happened?"

"Malak's Dark Jedi," Vann responds irritably, his lightsabers still raised as he looks for any signs of further opposition. "But it seems like Mission and Canderous took care of them. Thank you. I'm not sure I could have handled that much lightning."

"Heh, it would have been interesting to see you try," the Mandalorian admits. "But we were glad to help. I meant what I said back on the surface, I'm with you until the end."
"Yeah, those guys… they were easy stuff," Mission lies, her knuckles white around the grip of her pistol. "I could take down ten more of 'em, no problem."

Craning his neck to search the nearby area, Vann nods towards a room a few meters away. "How about some computers? Can you still take those on?"

"Oh yeah!" Waving the Wookiee after her, Mission darts down the corridor. "That's no problem, right Big Z?"

"I can only hope it's easier than everything else we've faced," Zaalbar rumbles, easily keeping pace with the much smaller Twi'lek. Within moments they've both slipped out of sight.

The faint hiss of lightsabers powering down helps to calm Vann's nerves, the comforting Force presences of his companions drawing closer as they finish off the squadron of troopers. "So," he asks nobody in particular, "Is this better or worse than you were expecting?"

"While this is worse than I'd hoped, nothing has been particularly unexpected," Bastila hums thoughtfully. "It seems that Malak took your rejection on the Leviathan rather personally."

"That… was a rejection, right?" Carth's brow wrinkles as he thinks back to the encounter. "I'll admit that I was barely lucid at the time, but I don't exactly remember you rejecting whatever it was that Malak was offering. All you seemed focused on was, well, saving me."

"I shot him full of lightning!" Vann counters defensively. "I'd say that kriffing counts as a rejection."

"To a Jedi, maybe." Contemplation colors Jolee's words. "But to a Sith, that's just a challenge to make a more persuasive argument."

Juhani narrows her eyes at this assessment. "So, what? Do you think this is merely a test or some demonstration of might?"

It's Canderous who responds. "Maybe. Malak should know Vann well enough to realize that a couple of troopers and a few mediocre Dark Jedi aren't going to be enough to hold him back for long. Especially not with an armed crew backing him up." Noting the incredulous looks he's getting from some of the others, he snaps, "What? You can't tell me that the second in command of the Revanchists and current Supreme Commander of the entire Republic military hasn't noticed that the Hawk landed in his base of operations."

"This is all true. Still, there's only one place to go from here, and that's the elevator to the deck where the Command Center is located." Bastila chews her bottom lip as her eyes dart down the long hallway. "It's at the end of that corridor."

Looking in the indicated direction, Vann blinks once before groaning in frustration. "You mean past all of those deadly-looking turrets?"

On cue, the rest of the crew turns to peer down the shadowy passageway, spotting the series of large turrets that line the later third of the path. While none of them are currently firing, all are blinking a sinister shade of red to indicate that they're armed and ready the moment that something triggers the network of sensors surrounding them. There's a simultaneous shudder as everyone acknowledges this new threat, their anxiety turning the Force bitterly cold.

"Well," Bastila responds dryly. "I never said it would be easy."

It's almost a relief when HK-47 cuts in, his voice dripping sarcasm. "Observation: perhaps you've
all been distracted by the constant sloshing of your fluid-filled bodies, but you seem to have forgotten that most turret systems can be shut down by accessing the appropriate computer system."

"Good point." Without waiting for the droid's undoubtedly derisive response, Vann jogs towards the nearby control room. "Hey Mission, how's the slicing going?"

"Um, pretty good, V-Man. But, uh, we found something that you might wanna see." The Twi'lek's voice is audibly nervous as trepidation flows around her.

Worry jolts through Vann's system and he speeds, sliding into the room just as he ignites his lightsabers against whatever threat is waiting for him. However, he's only greeted by a large computer console and his companions' confused faces. "So, what's the problem?"

"It's, well, it's not a problem…" Mission begins awkwardly, grimacing as she digs the toe of one boot into the floor. "It's just… weird."

Pointing one large finger at a what appears to be an open locker hidden within the wall's paneling, Zaalbar explains, "We accidentally discovered something that belongs to you."

A mixture of curiosity and terror surges through Vann, the emotions pulsing hot-and-cold beneath his skin as he creeps towards the locker, powering down his weapons as he moves. He's vaguely aware of the rest of the crew making their way into the room, mostly because he senses the mixture of concern and alarm that they're projecting. He thinks that someone asks him a question, but he can't answer because he's solely focused on the contents of the disguised compartment that he somehow knows he sealed shut using this very computer.

Reaching inside the locker he trails his fingers down the black robe resting inside, the texture identical to what he felt in his scattered memories. As he gently brushes the fabric aside his palm taps something metallic, and he finds himself tracing the dented planes of the breastplate that protected him throughout the war. The deeper he searches the more items he recovers, each one handled with care as glimmers of recognition flicker within his mind. A myriad of emotions course through him, his initial shock slowly turning to wonder. As his thumb touches the smooth grooves in his vambraces, his perception suddenly warps until he's experiencing a different moment in his life.

The imperfections in his armor smooth out as it returns to a more pristine state, losing the patina created by years of unrelenting warfare. Though his cloak is a more traditional shade of brown, his tunics are still black, just like he has always preferred. However, how Revan currently looks is completely overshadowed by how he feels, the sense of accomplishment that cascades through him a bright point within the Force. It's joined by another glowing presence that showers him with comradery and affection.

"You did it," Malak declares, clapping his large hand over his friend's shoulder. His head is bald but unadorned, the skin pale in a way that suggests his hair loss is fairly recent. "You finally gave the Council the proof that they demanded."

"We did it." Grinning recklessly, Revan gestures between the pair currently standing on what appears to be the bridge of a large ship, a field of stars twinkling through the transparisteel viewport behind them. His face is currently bare and somehow looks remarkably younger, still unlined from the stress of wartime leadership. For now, his signature mask is tucked safely into the sash of his tunic.

Nodding assertively Malak grins back, satisfaction blooming around him. "It doesn't matter who
gets the credit. What's important is that we can act with the Council's full backing. We can actually stand up and prevent another massacre like what happened on Cathar, or Serroco, or..." He sucks in a breath as he's reminded of how the pain of those massacres reverberated through the Force and impacted his friend.

Gently patting the other man's hand, Revan's voice is reassuring as he declares, "Those ancient bastards took their sweet time, didn't they? Kriff, when I think about the number of lives lost while we were investigating, or the number of worlds destroyed while we were still beholden to the Council..."

Malak shakes his head to banish those regrets. "You can't dwell on that! What's important is the present. Now that we're officially part of the war effort we are going to protect the people of the Galaxy from any future attacks." His expression is stern, but there's a wealth of compassion within his bright blue eyes. "Just remember, there are hundreds more innocent worlds that still need our help."

"I know, I know! We've both seen the suffering the Mandalorians have caused and I know that if we can do anything to alleviate it, we will." Revan's attention briefly drifts to the stars beyond, his countenance glowing with hope and idealism. "We are going to save the Republic and its people. That's a promise that I made back on Cathar, and it's a promise that I intend to keep."

"That we intend to keep." Correcting his friend with a playful chuckle, Malak also peers into the vastness of space, as though looking out into the future...

Panting as his mind rushes back to the present, Vann finds himself clutching the vambraces, his fingers still moving across the lines carved into the metal. He exhales, still feeling unsettled at seeing such an early memory that, judging by his robes, predates anything else he's recovered.

"Another vision?" Though Carth is standing less than an arm's length away, he seems unsure how to comfort the other man. "And is that...?"

"It's my..." Stammering awkwardly, Vann jerks a thumb at Zaalbar. "Like he said, it belongs to me."

"We didn't mean to find it!" Mission blurts out, embarrassment flushing her cheeks. "I was trying to slice the security system and I found a locked door in this room and I mean, I couldn't just leave it locked, you know? It might have been something important. Not that your uh, not that it's not important. I mean..."

Swallowing hard, Vann offers the Twi'lek a terse smile. "It's alright. This isn't bad. It's just..."

"Weird," Canderous finishes, the hot glow of his pride momentarily tempered by a sense of contemplation. "I haven't seen that armor in a long time. It brings back a lot of memories, some of them pretty good." Juhani fixes the Mandalorian with a cold stare, but he purposely ignores her. Rubbing his knuckles against the stubble on his chin, he smirks softly at whatever recollections are replaying in his mind.

Jolee hums conspiratorially. "So, you found your old gear. The more important question is what you're going to do with it."

"None of us would think less of you if you were to burn it," Juhani offers, the corners of her lips dipping into a frown that matches the apprehension streaming off her. "Or merely leave it here and never think of it again. Revan may be an icon to us but to you, he is a past shrouded in shadows that you deserve to leave behind if that is your wish."
"Alternately, I don't think any of us would be horribly insulted if you were to don that armor again." Bastila shoulders her way past the Cathar, earning a scowl of disapproval. "Revan represents so much more than just the war, and more importantly you are Revan."

"Quite the dilemma, Vann." Waggling his brows Jolee holds up both hands, weighing his words as he speaks. "You can lock your past away or you can wear it proudly. I guess it all depends on who you think Revan was… and who you want to be. Warrior or warmonger? Avenging savior or sadistic butcher? Did you fall, or did you manage to rise above that temptation?"

"Arrgh!" Groaning as frustration washes over him, Vann temporarily turns his back on the locker as he scrubs both hands across his face. "I still don't know! I don't know if I fell first and dragged Malak down with me, or if I clung to whatever light I had left even as my best friend went tumbling into the dark."

A strong hand grasps the former mercenary's shoulder, giving him a comforting squeeze as Carth draws him close. "I know this might sound weird for me to say, but… maybe it doesn't matter who you were." Shaking his head, he hurriedly amends himself. "I mean, of course it matters. But maybe this is your chance to move beyond the question of who you were and how much of this is your fault…" "Oh, it's all my fault."

"What I mean," the pilot grits out, "is that right now you have the chance to finally write your own story. You can make the right choices. Which, considering that it's you…"

"And that you have a natural connection to the dark side…" Bastila quietly adds.

"Is an idea that's doomed to fail. Vann closes his eyes as the fear of failure makes his gut clench. "Got it."

"No!" Glaring at the Padawan, Carth hurriedly assures the other man. "I just meant that your past decisions were sometimes… Very utilitarian. But right now, you can make a conscious choice to move beyond that. Who you were during the war doesn't have to impact what you do today."

"You do remember that earlier today I tricked the entire crew into believing that I betrayed them?"

"I think we all remember that," Carth grits out as he exhales heavily through his teeth. "What I'm trying to say is that living in the past is no way to live. Trust me, I know. I lived for nothing but revenge and what did that get me?"

"Revenge, from what I heard," Canderous responds with a smirk.

"And a pretty nice reunion with Dustil!" Looking up from the keyboard, Mission's amusement bubbles effervescently. "I mean, you both totally cried."

"None of you are helping!" Shaking his head, Carth waves off the rest of the crew before turning and gently cupping the former mercenary's chin. He meets the other man's yellow eyes with only a slight flinch. "Listen, my point is that right now you get to decide how you want to be remembered. Malak isn't the only one telling the story anymore. So, decide what type of man you want people to remember you as and be that man."

Heaving an annoyed sigh, Bastila concludes, "I think what Carth is attempting to say, perhaps in a roundabout way is that…"

"I know what he's saying!" Vann interrupts. Gently grasping Carth's wrist, he moves the hand
away from his face, giving the knuckles a soft kiss before turning to the locker. "Kriff it, I'm putting on the damn armor."

The pilot stares down at his hand for a moment before looking confusedly at his companion, his presence flickering between hope and distress. "I… honestly can't tell if that's a good thing."

"Revan saved your precious Republic," Canderous reminds him. "It's a good thing."

"He also may have fallen to the dark side and lead many others astray in the process. So, from a certain point of view perhaps it is also a frightening concept." Juhani's own darkness is sharp and cool as she thoughtfully taps the hilt of her lightsaber.

"Can you all shut your mouths and let the boy explain?" Waving his arm through the air with exaggerated urgency, Jolee gripes, "And I thought that I was the only one who was never allowed to get a damn word in around here."

Briefly dragging his fingertips over the faded lapels of his coat, Vann takes some time to gather his thoughts. He knows why he needs to wear his armor but it's hard to find the words to explain this, at least not without describing the complex nuances of the memory he just recovered. In hindsight, he and Malak were impossibly young and optimistic when they entered the war, but the strength of purpose that radiated off of them was undeniable. While some of their ideas were undoubtedly naïve thanks to the idealism of the Jedi, they were far more altruistic than what they became beneath the weight of bloodshed and death. The men in that vision practically glowed within the Force, beacons of hope and light for the galaxy.

Vann draws a shaky breath as he shrugs off his worn jacket, letting it fall to the floor with a heavy thud thanks to all of the gear stored within its pockets. "My memory might be… incomplete, but I know that when I first put on that armor it was because I wanted to protect innocent people from harm. I knew that the Republic was in danger and that I needed to act if I wanted to prevent any more suffering. And maybe things got a little skewed along the way…"

This time it's Jolee who does the interrupting. "A little skewed?"

"Alright, fine! I admit that the war changed me, and not for the better." As he pulls the thick, black tunic from the locker Vann's voice grows thick with sentimentality. Holding the garment up to his body he silently acknowledges that it's still a perfect fit. "But it all started because I wanted to defend the helpless against a mounting threat that they couldn't face alone. That's the man I want to be remembered as, especially since that's still my objective. The threat may be different, but my goals are the same."

Carth nods, his approval nearly luminescent. "You want to protect the Republic."

"I want to protect the innocent," Vann clarifies. "And if I need to use the dark side to do it, I won't hesitate. Maybe this time history will remember that I'm a man and not some untouchable ideal."

"Sometimes you have to enter the darkness to save the light," Bastila whispers, almost too quietly to be heard.

Still sorting through his various layers, Vann looks up just long enough to ask, "Did I say that?"

"No, though it rather sounds like something you'd say, doesn't it?" Falling silent for a moment, Bastila eventually admits, "Perhaps you were the inspiration, but Malak is the one who taught me that phrase."

"Ah." The memory of a younger, lighter Malak causes Vann to shift uncomfortably.
"So, inspired leader," Jolee hastily interjects. "What's your plan?"

"While I'm figuring out this damn armor, Mission and Zaalbar can disable those turrets."

"And then?" Canderous asks, already hoisting his blaster in anticipation.

Vann furrows his brow as he notes that one piece of his armor is missing. "And then we get on the elevator and head for the Command Center."

"To face your destiny," Bastila concludes, seeming to also note the absent item.

Shaking his head, Vann subconsciously recalls Malak's insistence that It doesn't matter who gets the credit. "This isn't about destiny or legacy. It never was." Looking around at everyone gathered he takes in the mixture of worry, anticipation, and trust that they're exuding, each of them watching closely as they hang on his every word. He can feel the weight of their expectations, but it's an oddly familiar burden to bear. "Right now, my only goal is to take Malak down. Call it destiny or call it justice, I'm just trying to do the right thing."

Chuckling softly to himself, Jolee's respect burns brightly within the Force. "You know kid, that's a mighty good plan."

* * *

"Keep moving, we will hold them back!" Sweat pours down Juhani's face as she swings her lightsaber, slicing through three troopers with a series of rapid slashes that reverberate with unrestrained fury.

"What? No!" Ducking low, Vann barely avoids a barrage of blaster fire and at least two of the bolts still bruise his shoulder through his armor. Swallowing a grunt of pain, he sends forth a wave of Force energy, knocking multiple opponents to the ground at Jolee's feet. "I'm not going to lose you too!"

Attacking the downed soldiers with precise strikes, Jolee pants with the exertion. "You're not losing any of us! We're just doing our damn job, which is to clear the way for you." Stabbing through the protective chest plate of one trooper just as they grab for their blaster, he scolds, "We're here help you, dammit!"

Sighing in resignation, Vann nods once before his attention is completely consumed by the pair of Dark Jedi who are now charging the group, lightning crackling at their fingertips. But they throw the bolts imprecisely, narrowly missing Bastila as she dives down and rolls neatly out of their path. One of them tries to sprint after her but is stopped by the answering forks of electricity that Vann shoots at them in a torrent of light and heat.

Juhani flips through the air, landing beside the second Dark Jedi with a feral grin as she draws her arms back and stabs them through the gut with a flourish. There's a single wet gasp before the body collapses to the floor. For an instant, the deck is still though the peace is immediately interrupted by a surge in the Force as three more dark-robed figures appear. Jolee grumbles a few curses under his breath, lowering his lightsaber as he scoffs at the new opponents. An instant later the Dark Jedi's charge is halted as the eldest Force user freezes them in place with a flick of his wrist.

"Damn kids think they know the Force just because they put on some fancy robes and play with the dark side."

Baring her teeth at her now-incapacitated adversaries, Juhani spares Vann a final glance as she calls, "We can handle them. Go!" Her expression is fierce as she races forward.
The former mercenary tries to object, but here's an insistent tug on his vambrace as Carth half
guides and half drags him down the hallway with a bruising grip around his forearm. "Come on,
they can take care of themselves!" the pilot insists for what must be the tenth time since they
started their march to the Command Center.

Bastila comes sprinting up behind the two men, urgently waving them forward. "I can still sense
Canderous fighting behind us, and Mission and Zaalbar's presences are still strong at the computer
terminal on the deck below." She sends a burst of shining comfort through the bond. "They're
handling their jobs so that we can do ours."

Stretching out his awareness, Vann brushes against the consciousnesses of his companions. He can
feel them pulsing within the Force, each one still fighting despite the seemingly overwhelming
odds. Their combined determination as they battle Malak's innumerable troops just to get him to
his destination leaves him breathless. Stumbling a bit as he races down the corridor, he's steadied
by Carth's presence at his side and the familiar glow of Bastila within their bond. It's a comfort, as
is the fact that the entire crew is still alive despite the Supreme Commander's best efforts.

"Keep going!" Bastila shouts, pointing to a door straight ahead. "Up there is where…" She trails
off, her eyes growing wide as her feet skid to a halt. "Oh no."

"Where what?" Sensing the alarm that's currently thrumming through the Padawan, Vann slows his
pace and turns to face her. "What's wrong?"

"I sense more than Malak up ahead," Bastila admits. "There are other Force users with him, and if
they are who I believe them to be, this may be far more challenging than I anticipated."

Worry creases Carth's brow as he demands, "Can you be a little more specific? Who do you think
is over there and why are they so dangerous?"

Bastila slowly swallows her building anxiety. "As you may be aware, Malak was not the only
Revanchist."

Waving one hand, Carth urges the Padawan to hurry. "Of course not. What's your point?"

Closing her eyes for a moment, Bastila extends her awareness as her tone grows foreboding. "I believe that there are three individuals currently accompanying the Supreme Commander… Three
of the original Revanchists that Malak recruited at the beginning of the war."

"Wait." Frowning in confusion, Vann looks at his companions for clarification. "Aren't all of the
Dark Jedi we've been fighting technically his, er, our followers?"

"Most of the individuals who hide their faces and call themselves 'Dark Jedi' left the Order early in
life due to a lack of talent, while the rest are Force-sensitives who were never found by the Jedi or
who were rejected due to their weak Force-sensitivity." Bastila scoffs at this, her arrogance seeping
out. "Either way, they've found an outlet for their anger towards the Jedi Order through Malak's
cause."

"Alright, that explains why everyone we've met in the forge wasn't as skilled as Lang." Noting
Carth's confusion, Vann clarifies, "The Jedi general who was in charge of the Republic base on
Taris? He tried to choke me to death, so I killed him with his own lightsaber?"

"Oh, him." The pilot winces. "If you didn't manage to get the upper hand in that battle, Lang
probably would have taken me and Canderous out in a matter of seconds."

Nodding in vague approval, Bastila frowns grimly. "I'm not surprised. A majority of the
Revanchists, including the strongest and most skilled individuals, still wear the robes of the Jedi and call themselves part of the Order even though their beliefs no longer align.

"Oh, you mean like you've been doing?" Carth asks scathingly.

"Yes, precisely." There's no hint of remorse in Bastila's words. "Perhaps now you understand why these individuals are so dangerous."

There's a long pause as the trio considered this information, their fears slowing expanding within the Force. Drawing his awareness back into himself, Vann focuses on sensing whoever is waiting for him behind the door. The frigid blast of Malak's presence is the first thing that breaches his consciousness, the raw strength of it only tempered by the all-encompassing darkness that permeates the forge. Almost lost among that power are three other signatures, each one surprisingly fierce and exuding a distinct chill.

"...is Malak we're talking about!" Carth is saying, having apparently started an argument with Bastila while the former mercenary was focused on the flow of the Force.

Huffing petulantly, the Padawan snaps, "And he is not to be underestimated, especially by someone who has practically no understanding of how the Force works! Need I remind you that…"

Vann doesn't hear the rest of the discussion, his mind subconsciously drifting back to the memory that he recovered when he found his armor and the earnestness tugging at the corners of Malak's lips as he swore to protect the innocent. Guilt settles heavy in the former mercenary's gut. No matter what the others claim, he knows it's his fault that Malak is on the other side of that door, entrenched in this bastion of the dark side. Drawing a slow breath, he feels a faint sense of acceptance blossom around him and he suddenly knows exactly how to handle this.

"Kriff it, I'm going in," Vann declares as he hooks both of his lightsaber hilts onto his sash. It's strange how, even with his missing memories, his old armor still feels like a second skin.

"What… no!" Carth stutters as he rushes after the other man, both of his pistols still drawn. "We need an actual plan."

"For once, I'm in total agreement with Carth," Bastila sputters as she struggles to keep up with the former mercenary's longer strides. "Malak is expecting you, but if you can somehow manage to figure out…"

Using the Force to push the panel that opens the heavy door, Vann glances at the Padawan. "No. I'm done trying to stay one step ahead of my own past. I have one plan left, and that's to walk right into that room and find out exactly what Malak wants from me."

"Vann, you can't just…" But the rest of Carth's warning is cut off as the ancient door slides open with an eerie hiss.

Standing in the center of the circular space is the tall, red-garbed figure of the Supreme Commander of the Republic. He looks identical to his appearance on the Leviathan, no worse from the lightning attack that enabled Vann and Carth to make their escape. Flanking him are three robed figures, their armor and cloaks each a different style and color, but all recognizable as Jedi. They turn to look at the door as Vann strides in, a mixture of surprise and anger exploding around them.

Calmly observing the scene, Vann recalls Canderous's suggestion of shock and awe back when they were planning this mission. Capitalizing on this idea, he plasters on a cocky grin and
addresses his former followers. "So, it's been a while."

The temperature of the surrounding Force plummets dramatically as four pairs of eyes glare balefully at the man once known as Revan.

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Art for this chapter from ranoutofrun - Facing destiny (shotgun style)

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Chapter End Notes

1. Mission’s flash mines are mentioned in Chapter 25, in her message to Vann while she’s visiting her brother.

2. When Vann is Force choking Jolee and Juhani, he sends out a secondary pulse of energy. This is when he sent Jolee the mental message to “play along.” Bastila assumed that Jolee was narrowing his eyes in defiance, but it was actually confusion.

3. Vann mind tricks Carth when he pushes the pilot’s hair back, his fingers trailing over the other man’s eyes as he gives a very specific command. The trick is hidden from Bastila when Vann immediately Force pushes Carth and then talks over the command as it’s being repeated. Carth is theoretically too strong-willed to be mind-tricked, but I think that the emotional distress, his relationship to Vann, and Vann’s raw power are enough to make the trick work in this instance.

4. In Chapter 25, Vann and Jolee have a conversation about trusting in the crew and letting them help whenever and wherever they’re capable.

5. As a reminder, Vann spends Chapters 22-23 Force-cloaking himself from the entire Sith Academy on Korriban, including Uthar Wynn and Yuthura Ban.

6. “Sometimes you have to enter the darkness to save the light” is actually a quote from Alek (Malak) in the Knights of the Old Republic comic.

7. There’s only one full chapter left. It's already written and just needs to be edited.

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The Star Forge Part II

Chapter Summary

A final showdown, a final battle, a final chance for our hero to make amends for his past... Or to shape the galaxy as he always intended. Is this the end of the journey, or simply the beginning of a new adventure?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Revan." The name is hissed like a curse by a pale-skinned woman with dark hair and equally dark eyes. "So, it's true that you survived."

"I'm exceptionally hard to kill," Vann quips, repeating Malak's own words. For the briefest moment, he thinks that he sees the corners of other man's eyes crinkle in amusement.

The gentle brush of Bastila's presence alerts the former mercenary to the arrival of his companions and he glances over at the Padawan for reassurance. But it's immediately obvious that her attention is solely trained on her former master, her gaze meeting the Supreme Commander's for a mere second before demurely dropping to the floor. The former mercenary grits his teeth as he accepts that Bastila won't be much assistance, turning instead to check on Carth as the pilot moves to flank him. Despite his confident grip on his pistols, fear swirls in thick clouds around the other man as he looks around the room and acknowledges that he's horribly outmatched.

Malak's expression is stern as he studies the trio who have spent several standard months making his life increasingly difficult. When he finally speaks, his voice is carefully modulated by his prosthetic. "I see you found your armor."

"It was right where I left it." As he pointedly scratches the stubble on his cheek, Vann arches a brow. "Well, all except for one thing."

Ignoring the obvious implication, Malak's presence grows colder as he seethes, "And you've managed to cut your way through my troops."

"It was right where I left it." As he pointedly scratches the stubble on his cheek, Vann arches a brow. "Well, all except for one thing."

Ignoring the obvious implication, Malak's presence grows colder as he seethes, "And you've managed to cut your way through my troops."

"Actually, that was mostly my crew." Vann does his best to seem nonchalant as he adds, "Seems like you need better troops."

Despite his calm and collected air, tendrils of the former mercenary's uncertainty leak past him and into the Force, adding to the already oppressive chill of the room. It's unsurprising that the Revanchists sense this doubt and two of them, the woman and a handsome man with dark skin and neatly-trimmed facial hair, tense suspiciously. But the third, a blonde man who appears younger than the others, arches a curious brow.

The sensation also reaches Malak, who chuckles bemusedly. "I think you'll find that three war veterans trained by your own hand will prove significantly more challenging." He casts a withering glance at Bastila and Carth. "Especially since the Padawan knows not to get involved in this, and
"blasters won't fare well against lightsabers."

"Three against one? I don't mind those odds." Still wearing a cocky smile, Vann shrugs off the threat. "Besides, it doesn't seem like I have much of a choice."

"There's always a choice, Revan." Stepping cautiously forward, the blonde man holds up both hands to show that he's unarmed. Or, as unarmed as a Jedi can be. "We don't want to fight you. If anything, we'd rather fight alongside you… Commander."

"While Talvon is correct, you should be well aware that we're perfectly willing to take you down if the need arises." The Revanchist with facial hair narrows his eyes as a chill of aggression flows forth, eclipsing the faint shimmer of hope surrounding his compatriot.

"Easy, Xaset." Giving her fellow Revanchist a warning glare, the dark-haired woman sighs. "Malak told us what happened. That you were shot down along the Outer Rim and lost your memories in the crash. He also told us that, despite all of it, you're still you and that you still want what's best for the Republic."

Vann bites back a snort at the lie of omission. "That's what, the fourth version of that story?" He glances at his companions for confirmation, but they're both stoically silent as they stare down the four Force users. "So, Malak, what's the offer this time? That you'll spare my crew who are currently mowing down your forces?"

"The offer I made on the Leviathan still stands. Come back to where you belong, Revan, and lead by my side just as we always intended. Reclaim everything that's rightfully yours." The Supreme Commander's eyes are surprisingly kind, though it doesn't temper the darkness he radiates. "I have nothing else to sway your decision… other than information."

Frustration simmers cold just beneath Vann's skin, and he grits his teeth when he remembers Jolee's earlier words. To a Sith, that's just a challenge to make a more persuasive argument. He shakes his head to clear the warning. "Alright, I'm listening. Give me one reason not to slice my way through all of you so that I can shut this kriffing forge down." The very tips of his fingers brush over the hilts of his lightsabers. "And it better be good."

"You always did have a temper." Releasing a mechanical hum, the taller man sweeps past the Revanchists as they swiftly step out of his way.

There's a tense moment as he approaches his former friend, both Bastila and Carth twitching towards their weapons until Vann holds up a hand to stop them. Reaching out his awareness he prepares to batter it against Malak's mental shields. But there's no need for such aggression as they willingly yield at the slightest brush of his consciousness. For an instant he's immersed in the other man's thoughts, his own body thrumming coldly with the anger and hatred that have overtaken his former friend's being. It's overwhelming and yet empowering, the cold strength of the dark side thrumming through every fiber of his being. Yet, for all of that darkness, there's no sign of deception.

"He doesn't mean any harm… yet."

Another mechanical chuckle escapes the Supreme Commander, though he quickly soberes as he leans closer. "I don't know how much you remember, but right before your untimely crash, we discovered something. A being who didn't merely serve the dark side, but encompassed it."

A shudder passes through Vann's spine at the memory of the mysterious figure perched atop a throne, dark pleasure radiating as blood was spilled in his name. "Yes, I remember."
Sensing the truth in this statement Malak's expression grows grim, the Force surging around him as he worriedly admits, "He, the Sith Emperor, is still out there. And he wants the Republic for himself."

"Wait." Carth's voice is unexpected, though not unwelcome. "Vann, is he talking about the uh, the 'true Sith' that you told me about on Korriban?"

Malak is clearly startled by the comment and his brows arch incredulously as he assesses the pilot. "I am. Though, I'm surprised that information was shared with you."

"I shared that information because I thought it would help," Vann counters defensively, automatically shifting to shield his companion. "Honestly, I'm surprised that you didn't tell the Senate and the Council about this!"

"Do you really think that would help? The Senate relies on the Jedi to handle matters related to the Force. And the Council, well…” Trailing off, Malak gives his former friend a pointed look. "You know better than anyone that they're reluctant to act even when innocent lives are at stake."

The dark-haired woman's tone is clipped as she reports, "We don't know much about this Emperor, but he's already finding weak points in the new defensive measures that the Supreme Commander put into place."

"What Cariaga means to say is, well… Eshan was recently attacked, resulting in the death of a Senator and thousands of civilians," Talvon offers, bowing his head. "This Emperor is far cleverer than the Mandalorians ever were. Eshan is an Inner-Rim world, but neither the Senate nor the Jedi Council was able to predict what happened. The Supreme Commander was the only individual who sensed the incoming attack, but even he was too late to prevent tragedy."

Letting the information sink in, Malak's metallic voice is quiet as he admits, "Right now, my military and those under my direct command are the only individuals with any chance of stopping this Sith. Our actions may be the only thing preventing the downfall of the galaxy as we know it."

"Well, shit," Vann mutters, the truth of these statements surging through the Force around him. As he nods, Malak's eyes smile wryly. "Exactly."

"Mas… er, Supreme Commander," Bastila begins tentatively. "Now that this Emperor has broken through your defensive measures, do you have a plan? Or are we once again standing on the brink of war?"

Ignoring the Padwan's slip, Malak's tone is resolute when he declares, "My plan is the same as it's always been. I'll eradicate troublemakers to help stabilize governments, improve defensive measures throughout the Republic, and increase the size of the navy with the very forge we're currently standing in."

"So, you're still a bunch of fascists," Carth deadpans. "Great."

"Is it really fascism?" As his gaze turns to the pilot, Xaset's Force presence grows frigid. "Those who break the laws of the Republic face consequences just as they always have, all while civilians retain almost all of the same freedoms they've always enjoyed. And any new laws have been enacted to protect the populace from something far larger and more dangerous than they can ever imagine."

"Doing the wrong thing for the right reason doesn't make it morally acceptable!" His knuckles white around his blasters, Carth looks desperately at Vann. "Please tell me that you're not buying
"I, er, well…"

"If you don't agree with how we're running the Republic, then join us and lend your insight." Hope flares in Talvon's pale eyes as he turns to his former commander. "The Revanchists will still follow you once they realize that you're the same man they remember. And the rest of the Republic will fall in line when they see that the hero of the Mandalorian Wars has returned."

Bastila's tone is pensive as she acknowledges, "Vann, the fact that you're alive truly is a miracle of the Force and most will see it as a sign that you're here to help the Republic in its time of need. You can accomplish a great deal with that type of power."

Sucking in a sharp breath, Vann finds himself at a rare loss for words as he surveys the room. He can feel each individual Force signature flowing through the domed chamber, some tinged with the chill of apprehension while others glow brightly in anticipation. Only Malak remains a mystery, his emotions tightly controlled and his expression obscured by his prosthetic. The only hint of his presence is the darkness that rolls off of him, merging with the inescapable chill that permeates every millimeter of the Star Forge. The sensation within the ancient construct is reminiscent of the boundless coldness that Vann experienced in the presence of the Sith Emperor, a memory that sends a subconscious shiver through him.

For all that Malak is a liar and a murder, he seems to be telling the truth about the attack on Eshan. Thousands of innocents are dead and Vann somehow knows that this is just the beginning. By pushing his Force connection to its very limits, he can sense the faintest flicker of danger looming at his periphery, a sensation that sends dread screaming through every molecule of his body. This impending peril can only be the True Sith, the very creature that turned him against his best friend and closest ally, and the catalyst for everything that tore his life apart. Now, this emperor has his sights set on the Republic and is poised to systematically destroy it just as he destroyed Revan. And as the Republic teeters on this precipice, Malak is the only one with the knowledge and skill to prevent the Sith from succeeding.

As he observes the taller figure, Vann recalls his most recently recovered memory. For an instant, the tattoos and worry-lines disappear from the Supreme Commander's countenance and he can see the young, idealistic man who swore to save the Republic and alleviate suffering at all costs. Frowning, he glances down at himself and then back at his former friend. Was this the cost of peace? Did they lose themselves in order to save the galaxy?

"Sometimes you have to enter the darkness to save the light…" Vann doesn't realize he says the words out loud until Malak gives him a puzzled look. Waving the other man off, he hurriedly mumbles, "Never mind."

"You finally understand, don't you?" Cariaga studies her former commander. "You see what's at stake and why we need you back, Revan."

"And if I join you…?"

The Force bond blooms with excitement as a thin smile tugs at the corners of Bastila's mouth. However, the sensation is nearly drowned out by the crashing wave of frustration that explodes around Carth.

"Oh, for Force sake, you cannot be serious!" The pilot's arms sag at his sides as he stares at his companion in disbelief. "Vann, for once in your kriffing life don't make an impulsive mistake because you're trying to atone for your past. You know that there's a better way to save the
Republic. Completely giving in to fascism and the dark side won't stop the Si... Ouch! Did you just pinch me?"

Poised to deliver another sharp tweak to Carth's neck, Bastila hisses, "Hush and let Vann make his own decisions!"

Leveling a defiant gaze at the Padawan, the pilot challenges, "If you want me to shut up you're going to have to stab me again because I'm not letting Malak and the rest of his cronies convince Vann that their method is the only way to save lives!"

Talvon looks vaguely insulted as he wonders, "And what makes you think that it isn't?"

"Do you really think that destroying planets full of innocent people is the right way to save the Republic?" Carth snorts in disgust. "Vann, if you really believe that Malak's doing the right thing, look me in the kriffing eyes and tell me that you think the people of Taris and Telos deserved what happened to them."

The destruction of Taris slams to the forefront of the former mercenary's mind, the acrid scent of burning durasteel blending with the sizzle of ozone as cannons fire indiscriminately at anything or anyone in their sights. Screams fill his ears and he fights the urge to cover them despite knowing it will do nothing to mute the cries of panic and pain as sentients are trapped beneath molten slag with plasma raining down around them. All of this is overlaid by images of Telos's blazing fields, the devastation described to him in short, choked whispers when he and Carth were alone on the Hawk with nobody else around to hear the unhealed grief in the pilot's voice.

The distress floods the Force in a frozen torrent, and Malak actually winces at the sensation. "Telos was an accident. And Taris was a hive of scum that nobody will miss."

"Mission will," Carth insists. "Just like Juhani will always miss Cathar."

Malak's irritation surges in a torrent of frozen fury, and he struggles to keep his modulated voice neutral as he objects, "The massacre on Cathar was a completely different situation..."

"Was it?" Carth interrupts, meeting the Supreme Commander's sickly gray eyes with a challenging glare. "Or is the Republic you've created no better than the Mandalorians?"

The Force roars around Malak as his hand shoots out, his fingers clenching tightly as the pilot immediately gasps for air. "You dare to compare...!?"

Electricity crackles through the air as lightning sparks in a few jagged forks just over everyone's heads. The same energy dances across Vann's fingertips as he speaks, his tone deadly calm. "Hurt him and I will end you right here and now, the Republic be damned."

Bastila and the Revanchists fall completely still as they watch the leaders of the Mandalorian Wars stare each other down, Carth still caught between them as he gasps for air. The silence seems to stretch on into eternity, the tension palpable in the Force as their individual signatures surge with power that feeds the cold might of the Star Forge. The air crackles frigidly with their combined aggression before Malak finally backs down, heaving a sigh of disgust as he releases the pilot with an annoyed jerk of his wrist. An inscrutable emotion briefly flickers over his features, caught between rage, wounded pride, and something vaguely reminiscent of jealousy.

"I see you've finally managed to develop a personal attachment at the worst possible moment."

Carth falls to his knees as he inhales painfully, one blaster sliding from his grip as he reaches up to rub his tender neck. He glares balefully up at the Supreme Commander, attempting to speak but
only managing a rough croak of pain that causes alarm to flare through both Vann and Bastila. The latter sends a flicker of concern through the bond as she hesitantly crouches beside the pilot, placing a hand on his shoulder that's immediately brushed off in disgust. At the same time, the former mercenary exudes nothing but seething irritation that ripples off of him in frigid waves as he stares down the other Force users with unblinking determination.

"This isn't about 'attachment,' Malak. It's about you killing anyone who doesn't immediately bend to your will."

Disappointment colors Xaset's words as he states, "You care more about this one man's freedom than about the fate of the Republic as a whole."

"Honestly, I just might." Vann considers this point for a moment, both of his hands hovering just above his lightsabers. "But more importantly, he reminded me that I respect the Republic enough to give all of its people a choice in how they're defended from whatever threats they face. I care about everyone's freedom, and that freedom is something I'll always fight for."

Nodding sadly, Cariaga reaches for the hilt resting at her own hip. "You always were stubborn when it comes to your ideals. I take it there's no convincing you to reconsider?"

"Not a chance."

"Your loss." Taking a long step back, Malak's taller form is quickly shielded by the trio of Revanchists as they close ranks and move to surround him. Gesturing to the Padawan, he orders, "Bastila, come with me. The rest of you take care of Revan and his pet smuggler."

Gritting his teeth as he retrieves his pistol and climbs to his feet Carth groans, "And here comes the inevitable betrayal…"

Bastila immediately trails in the Supreme Commander's wake, her side of the bond slamming shut as her head dips in submission.

"Dammit!" Vann snarls, drawing and igniting both blades. "You made a pledge to me, you kriffing coward!"

"If I taught my Padawan anything, it's self-preservation," Malak taunts as he strides towards the room's only visible exit. "She knows to pick the winning side."

"Yes Master," Bastila agrees, her lightsaber hilt clutched in both hands. "You taught me well. A moment later the yellow blades snap to life, whirring dangerously as she swings them around and takes aim at the Supreme Commander's chest. "And by watching you, I've learned that the Republic can be so much more than what you've built."

Malak's anger crashes down in a cold deluge of power as he summons his own weapon and knocks the Padawan back with an easy swing. "What!?" he roars. "You're turning on me? The one who took you away from the Order that would have broken you to their will? Who trained you and granted you access to more power than any Jedi can ever possibly imagine?"

Tensing her jaw in determination, Bastila holds steady. "You may have taught me Malak, but you were never truly my master."

"Bad choice." Swinging his blade at the Padawan, the Supreme Commander sneers, "I hope that your choice is worth dying for."

Though she barely manages to block the heavy blow, Bastila's expression is almost serene. "I may
fall today, but I know Vann will prevail. He's been to the brink of death only to be saved by the Force itself and has been reborn stronger than ever. Compared to him, the rest of us are nothing."

"Strong words," Cariaga commends as she ignites her blue blade and adopts a ready stance. "But let's see if Revan can cheat death twice."

"Like I said," Vann quips, sizing up the trio of Revanchists. "I'm remarkably hard to kill."

All three charge at once, moving with practiced coordination that was notably absent in the maneuvers of the Dark Jedi the crew faced earlier. It takes all of Vann's effort to block the attacks that come from both sides, all while dodging a hard chop that soars in from above. He's distantly aware of the steadfast resolve flowing through his Force bond with Bastila as she lets out a shout, the duel blades of her lightsaber clashing viciously a few meters behind him. But he can't see the battle as he's distracted by Talvon's green blade swinging towards his face. He barely manages to parry the strike, stumbling backward as Xaset lunges in from his left side.

The violet plasm of Vann's lightsabers hums around him in a blur of heat as he rolls to the floor, narrowly avoiding the savage stab that burns a hole in the edge of his robe. With a snarl he leaps to his feet and counters a second attack, catching a blow aimed for his chest. He uses the blade in his off-hand to knock the opposing weapon aside while his main blade strikes out and burns a gash between Xaset's ribs. The Revanchist shouts as the scent of burned flesh fills the air, his pain washing through the Force with cold fury. Yellow-tinged ferocity flashes through his eyes as he inhales sharply, drawing upon his anger as he lashes out with renewed vigor just as Cariaga dives in from overhead.

The shriek of blaster fire is the only thing that prevents both hits from landing simultaneously. A hail of red bolts whizzes through the air, forcing Xaset to whip around and deflect the shots before they strike his chest. Cariaga still comes soaring down but Vann sends out a wave of Force energy to hold her back, earning him a screech of frustration as the Revanchist flies half a meter through the air before landing neatly on her feet. The former mercenary doesn't get a chance to see her next move as Talvon leaps in from his right with a hard swing that's parried millimeters before it hits flesh. Both blades hiss as they clash, the plasma sizzling menacingly. Pivoting on his heel, Vann catches a glimpse of Carth laying down another round of suppressive fire while sprinting backward, each bolt batted aside almost playfully by Xaset.

The Force bond flares again, this time with a hint of desperation. The former mercenary only sees brief flashes of the duel between Bastila and Malak as he arches away from Talvon, the tip of his opponent's lightsaber burning through his robes and slicing a long, shallow wound along his left hip. He hisses and stumbles as the pain sears into him, his head thrown back just long enough to watch as the Padawan struggles to hold off her former master. Her dual-bladed lightsaber is the only thing making their fight competitive, helping to compensate against the Supreme Commander's superior height and strength. Their weapons hum viciously each time they meet, the sound almost drowning out Carth's sharp intake of breath as he desperately tries to remain at the edge of the fray while still harrying the Force users with a hail of bolts from his pistols.

Crossing both of his blades, Vann blocks a hard, underhand chop from Cariaga as he uses the Force to propel himself backward. 'We're in trouble,' he thinks to himself, fear swirling through his body like an ice storm. 'I can't let the others die because of me.' The emotion blazes beneath his skin and he closes his eyes, releasing a slow breath as he welcomes the familiar combination of rage and terror, allowing it to infuse him until he can taste the crackle of ozone on this tongue. He blinks back to awareness as an eruption of white-hot lightning explodes from both hands, smoother and more controlled than in the past. The heat fills the room as the purple electricity illuminates his face and what he knows is the sickly yellow glow of his eyes. He doesn't care.
In this moment, all Vann cares about are Xaset and Cariaga's screams as the energy surges through
them, stopping the pair in their tracks as their bodies shake uncontrollably. Their agony is palpable
in the Force, apparently too great for them to draw upon as they collapse to their knees, both falling
prone as their former leader flips forward. Still twitching with agony, Cariaga struggles to her feet
and lunges at her attacker just as he lands, managing to slip past his guard and run her blade across
his left bicep. Vann snarls, the pain flooding his system in a frigid blast that he embraces, using it
increase his speed as he swings down with his good arm. His lightsaber is a blur as it arcs through
the air, intercepting the Revanchist's next strike by chopping off her hand at the wrist. There's an
anguished scream that's quickly silenced by an upward slash from the second violet 'saber. It slices
past the dark-haired woman's armor and she crumples to the floor in a heap.

"Vann!" Carth's eyes are wide as he raises both pistols.

Gritting his teeth, the former mercenary is about to shout that this is not the time for a morality
lecture when he senses a cold stream of alarm from the other man. He manages to turn around just
as Talvon dives at him, flipping his off-hand lightsaber into a reverse grip to block most of the
attack aimed for his right thigh. But his technique falters thanks to the fresh wound in his arm and
the very edge of the Revanchist's blade manages to catch his flesh. With a howl of outrage, Vann
lifts the Revanchist by the throat using the Force, strangling the blonde man as he throws his
former follower through the air directly at Xaset, who is just climbing to his feet. The pair collides
with a shout, their limbs tangling as they crash to the floor.

Lighting sparks at Vann's fingers and he raises his hand to deliver a finishing blow. But he's
stopped by a feminine cry of pain that fills the room and reverberates through the Force bond.
Pivoting sharply, he watches as Bastila stumbles backward, one hand clutching what appears to be
a deep wound in her left shoulder. Smugness radiates off the Supreme Commander, though he
doesn't move in for the kill. Instead, he sprints towards a nearby control panel and punches in a
code that reveals a hidden door in the wall. Alarm radiates through the former mercenary when he
sees his main target escaping and he uses the Force to race after the taller man, both of his
lightsabers clutched in his hands and a scream of frustration on his lips.

Pain is still flooding the bond when Vann rushes past Bastila, causing him to pause mid-stride as
he glances at her worriedly. Sensing the doubt, the Padawan shakes her head. "Go!" she orders.
"Before he gets away! Carth and I can handle the other Revanchists." The words are joined by a
burst of reassurance that's brighter than her discomfort.

Using the Force to bolster his speed, the former mercenary races after Malak as Carth calls out,
"Our job was to get you here. Now go and finish this once and for all!"

Vann's not sure if he hears or feels his companion's confidence in him as he bursts into the
secondary room just as the hidden door is slamming shut, catching the edge of his robe. He tugs
the fabric loose with a jerk of his shoulder before lifting his head to take in his surroundings,
noting the huge viewport that overlooks the blackness of space. The entire chamber is a simple and
almost brutal series of platforms and ramps, the metal and transparisteel blending together into a
single, soaring dome that's lit with a dull yellowish-green light. It's almost beautiful in its
simplicity. The grates underfoot are lit from beneath, adding an eerie glow that's only offset by the
stars twinkling brightly in the distance.

At the center of it all, positioned in the middle of the circular room as he's backlit by the vast
expanse of the galaxy, is Malak. His prosthetic wheezes softly in time with his breathing, his chest
still heaving from his duel with Bastila and the sprint through the hidden door. Despite this, he
stands at his full and impressive height, his shoulders back as he clutches his lightsaber hilt with an
easy grip. There's a twinkle of amusement in his gray eyes as he looks down at his former friend,
something akin to resignation settling across his features.

"I don't suppose you're here to agree to my terms?"

"No, sorry." Shaking his head, Vann almost feels like his apology is genuine.

Malak sighs, the sound tinny and mechanical. "There's something far worse than me out there, watching and waiting. When the Republic seems weak, he'll strike. You know it as well as I do."

Nodding in grim acknowledgment Vann tightens his grip on his weapons, irritation flowing through him as he remembers the grief on his companions faces as they recalled the destruction of their homes by the Supreme Commander's forces. "I also realize that the Republic deserves a choice. They deserve to know what threat they're facing and the opportunity to choose how they handle it."

"They'll handle it poorly."

"Probably." Shrugging in acceptance, Vann narrows his eyes. "But it won't be any worse than what you're doing now."

Tone low and dark, Malak's anger crests around him in icy waves. "You're wrong, Revan."

"No, I'm not." Durasteel laces Vann's voice as he states, "I might not remember a lot about my past, or about the state of the Republic before you turned it into a Sith-damned nightmare, but I know I'm right about this."

Bringing the long hilt of his 'saber up to guard his chest Malak observes, "I suppose there's no solving this peacefully, then."

"Are you planning on backing down?"

"I can't." Malak's blue blade comes to life with a snap-hiss. "I assume you understand why."

Arching a curious brow, Vann ignites his own 'sabers with an easy twirl. "Aren't you going to ask me the same question?"

Malak actually laughs at this. "Of course not. I know you, Revan. Right or wrong, you don't back down. Not when you think it matters."

"Well then, I guess it's time for a rematch."

There's a pause that seems to stretch on for eternity as Malak and Vann face-off, slowly circling each other like angry kath hounds bristling for a fight. Upon closer inspection, it's obvious that the Supreme Commander didn't escape his battle with Bastila unscathed. Small burns mar the torso of his armor, fusing it to his flesh in gruesome patches. But then, the former mercenary can still feel the sharp sting of his own wounds as he tenses and flexes his muscles.

Despite his size, Malak is shockingly swift and he lunges forward with a speed that catches Vann off-guard. It's only his natural reflexes that enable him to leap back, deflecting a strike that was aimed for his injured thigh. With a sneer he leans more weight on the wound, purposely refusing to favor it as he's quietly thankful that his robe hides the gash on his opposite hip. Realizing that targeting his opponent's injuries isn't an effective tactic the Supreme Commander dives in again, this time with a feint to the right that tricks his former friend and provides an opening. The only thing that saves Vann from a crippling gouge is his second lightsaber, still held in a reverse grip, which he sweeps up to guard his exposed side just in time. The blades sizzle when they connect
and sweat beads on both men's brows.

The former mercenary is smaller and quicker, and he tries to use this to his advantage as he dives low and strikes with a fierce sweep that would easily overwhelm a weaker opponent. But his attack is met with an impossibly strong block that sends him reeling, and he barely manages to spring backward and land on his feet. Time ceases to exist as they fall into a rhythm that Vann didn't think was possible. Aside from a few scattered memories, he only remembers Malak as the dark shadow who's been stalking the Ebon Hawk's crew for months. But his body recalls hundreds of practice spars and thousands of hours spent together, both on and off the battlefield. They intuitively know each other, or at least their subconscious minds recognize the people they used to be, and the Force sings with their connection as their presences swirl together in a miasma of emotions.

Vann is breathing hard as he glares at Malak, gritting his teeth as his muscles burn from exertion. Their battle is ebb and flow, push and pull, each of them gaining ground for only as long as it takes to counter a slash or parry a stab. Irritation is evident on both of their faces and the Force flares coldly in response, feeding into the oppressive darkness and frigid currents that infuse every millimeter of the Star Forge. Embracing the sensation, the former mercenary smirks dangerously as sparks ignite around both hands, the sizzle of ozone the only warning that the Supreme Commander receives before a storm of lightning descends on him. He howls, his larger form forced to the ground by the electricity surging through him.

The lightning keeps flowing in purple torrents until Vann begins to feel the drain on his inner reserves, weariness washing over him that sinks down to his marrow. He sucks in a sharp breath, refusing to buckle as he stalks forward and raises both lightsabers, preparing to deliver the final blow. But as he draws his arms back Malak climbs to his feet with a scream of pure rage, the Force growing even more gelid as the Supreme Commander embraces the agony jolting through his body. Without so much as a wince, he leaps to his feet and rushes forward, meeting the attack that would have ended his life with a powerful chop infused with raw fury. Both combatants are locked together for a moment, staring eye-to-eye as they snarl aggressively before breaking apart and circling each other once more.

"You're more powerful than I remember," Malak observes darkly.

"I wish I could say the same but..." Despite his sarcastic shrug, Vann's tone is scathingly vicious. "You shot me out of the kriffing sky and now I really don't remember much at all."

Malak merely shakes his head. "You were never the victim, Revan." With that he charges forward, his speed enhanced by the Force.

Boots clattering loudly, Vann attempts to sidestep the attack. However, the ferocious down-sweep he uses to deflect Malak's blade leaves his left flank open, an opportunity that his opponent immediately seizes. Without slowing down the larger figure utilizes the momentum of his missed swing to strike the exposed area with the hilt of his lightsaber, nearly knocking the former mercenary prone. Sensing a new opening the Supreme Command summons the Force, gathering it around himself in a frigid frenzy. Meanwhile, it takes all of Vann's strength to remain on his feet. While he's aware of the shift in the Force's flow there's little he can do to prepare himself as he's sent skidding across the floor, one lightsaber powering down as he digs his fingers into the grate to maintain his balance.

The lightning shouldn't be a surprise, but the sight of it still stuns Vann even before it strikes him, sending wave after wave of burning hot pain through his body. He tries to redirect it back to the source but his body isn't properly positioned and the overwhelming power of the current is too much to control. It's a hundred times worse than Karath's sadistic shock collars and blood fills his
mouth when he bites the tip of his tongue in between screams of torment and outrage. Through the haze of agony and electricity, he manages to catch a glimpse of Malak's victorious smirk as the larger man sends forth bolt after bolt of forking, purple energy. The temperature in the room seems to drop several degrees as their combined anger feeds into the dark side, the Force surging from the intensity of their emotions.

There's a strange stuttering in Vann's chest and it takes him a moment to realize that his heart isn't beating properly. Teeth clenching uncontrollably, he tries to embrace all of the fear and frustration that he's currently feeling and use it, but his mind is reeling beyond his control. 'How did Malak shake this off?' he wonders distantly, even as he subconsciously supplies the answer. Maybe it's just a hallucination from the pain, but for a moment he can see how the Force moves around his former friend. It's as though the Supreme Commander is hollow inside, devoid of anything meaningful except for the darkness consuming him.

But when Vann looks inside of himself he sees anything but emptiness. He's a cacophony of conflicting emotions and unrestrained passion, all of it underlaid by his incredible fondness for his crew. And right now, it's killing him. In the face of death, he's crippled by terror because his mind is filled with their faces. Mission and Zaalbar, each naïve in their own way but still so determined to follow their hearts. Jolee and Juhani, each with their own brand of wisdom and understanding. Canderous, whose loyalty is unshakable despite every defeat and humiliation his people have experienced. Bastila, whose haughtiness is only tempered by her cleverness and compassion. And Carth… Carth.

In this instant, Vann can sense all of his companions throughout the Forge, some continuing to fight while others wait nervously in anticipation. They're alive and still holding out hope that he'll emerge triumphant, none of them realizing that his heart and lungs are currently failing. He's about to disappoint each one of them, in all likelihood thanks to a technique that he kriffing taught Malak in the first place. There's an irony to this, but he can't find the humor as his chest fills with terror that pulses in time with the erratic clamor of his heartbeat. He tries to close his eyes and find some type of peace, just like the Jedi taught him, but the swell of emotions overwhelming him won't be released. Distantly, he recalls the words of the Sith. Peace is a lie.

'Carth,' Vann thinks as he takes in the cold, satisfied look on Malak's face. 'I'm sorry. Even after I accepted all of my darkness, it wasn't enough to win…'

Without meaning to, he thinks back to their time alone on the Hawk, before they landed on Rakata and everything turned into a huge pile of bantha shit. He remembers the affection that shone in the pilot's eyes as the other man assured him that, I'm pretty sure that you're not all dark… I wouldn't be here if that wasn't true. That assurance was obviously proven false, but the memory still creates a tiny spark of warmth in the Force and Vann reaches for it, drawing the sensation closer as a final comfort. He wraps himself in the lingering glow of Carth's smile, a glimmer of light even as darkness takes him. Suddenly, that single ember ignites into a flame that engulfs him like a sun gone supernova, enveloping him in brightness and heat that chases away the agony coursing through his body.

Vann gasps without realizing that he's drawing a breath, his chest heaving as he desperately sucks in air. The inside of his mouth tastes like copper and he aches like nothing he's ever experienced, but he's somehow alive despite the storm of lightning that's still erupting all around him. It crashes wickedly against the metal grate but no longer touches his body, the glowing radiance of the Force temporarily shielding him from harm. Distantly he notes that he's hunched over on his knees with both lightsaber hilts resting on the ground before him, his heart pounding with a rhythm that's growing steady and sure. Drawing another breath to focus his mind, he finally sees Malak staring at him with undisguised shock as the electricity fizzles away.
"How…?"

Spitting blood onto the ground, Vann rolls to his feet as he grabs both hilts, igniting them with a wicked grin. "I told you I'm remarkably hard to kill."

The air in the room grows warmer as he lunges forward with renewed vigor, catching Malak off guard with a sharp slash to the right thigh. The pain only seems to pull the larger figure out of his stupor and he responds in turn, lashing out and catching the former mercenary's left bicep just above the injury caused by Cariaga. Vann's left-hand jerks uncontrollably and he almost drops his weapon as a fresh jolt of pain shoots down his arm.

'I can't go down again,' he tells himself. 'Not when they're still counting on me.' A surge of protectiveness washes through Vann as he thinks of his crew, the sensation a pinpoint of brilliance within the darkness of the Star Forge. He clings to the emotion as heat flows through his body, some of the agony rapidly ebbing away. His limbs feel looser when he dodges Malak's next swing, countering with two fierce strikes of his own. 'This isn't about me,' he keeps reminding himself. 'It's about everyone who's depending on me.' That affection strengthens every stab and parry that he makes, enabling him to finally set the pace of the duel. Yet, even as he delivers a flurry of blows that his opponent struggles to block, he feels an odd sense of serenity. Yes, he has passion, but it's not the cold chill of absolute fury. This emotion radiates like fire and there's peace in the warmth that it brings.

In contrast, Malak is screaming, his strikes losing their well-honed elegance and becoming nothing but brute force and raw anger. But the more enraged he becomes the more his strength grows, as does his resistance to any discomfort that he's feeling. It's difficult for Vann to tell if he's even winded as the only sounds coming out of his prosthetic are animalistic grunts and growls. The Supreme Commander manages to break the former mercenary's guard through sheer brawn, carving past chest armor and into the flesh beneath. Vann staggers back with a gasp, though he clings to his resolve to just keep fighting because there's an entire Republic depending on him. The warmth within him only intensifies, illuminating the Force and infusing his body until the pain once again fades away.

He belatedly realizes that he's healing himself, though he doesn't have a chance to consider how because Malak is relentless, driving him backward towards the viewport with great cleaves of his oversized lightsaber. Without thinking Vann lets out a snarl of frustration as he throws a potent bolt of lightning, the electricity momentarily stunning his attacker and giving him a chance to shift his position so that he won't be trapped against a wall. His new vantage point allows him to glance through the transparisteel and he briefly notes the way that the stars twinkle against the blackness of space, light and dark coexisting in hauntingly beautiful harmony.

Ducking low, Vann skids just beneath a heavy chop aimed for his throat as he lashes out and strikes Malak's shin with the tip of his main lightsaber. He hears an accompanying howl of outrage, though the sound is drowned out by the burst of agony that erupts through his left shoulder. Glancing down at the wound reveals that only the hilt of the Supreme Commander's weapon made contact, but the sheer power of the hit was enough to dislocate the joint. Unable to feel anything but the pain he accidentally releases his grip on his off-hand lightsaber, which clatters to the deck before rolling off a ramp and out of sight. His defenses now lowered, the former mercenary shifts to protect the injury, hoping to pop his shoulder back into place before it becomes a liability.

But Malak immediately sees the weakness and leaps forward with speed enhanced by the Force, aiming his blade directly at Vann's left side. A mixture of triumph and regret flicker through his gaze as he brings the weapon down, the attack too quick and accurate to be completely avoidable. At best the former mercenary will lose the arm, though it's more likely that this will end his life.
Instinctively, Vann draws upon the spark of warmth that he's been kindling since he deflected Malak's lightning. It's the same thing that he reached for in order to shield himself and Carth during their messy landing on Taris, and the same protective force that kept him alive during the crash that should have killed him three years ago. The flicker of heat flares to life once more, engulfing him in the lumiance of the Force and absorbing the full might of his opponent's blow, his body unharmed even as he feels the burning plasma of Malak's blade brush just over his robes. Vann barely registers the astonished expression the Supreme Commander is wearing as he reaches out with the Force and yanks the lightsaber out of the other man's grasp, crushing the weapon's oversized hilt in a shower of white-hot sparks.

Tossing the mangled 'saber aside, he wraps the same cold tendril of power around Malak's neck and squeezes, his own fingers tightening around the hilt of his remaining weapon. The Supreme Commander wheezes ineffectively as his throat is constricted, his artificial jaw cracking with an audible snap as the pressure increases. His now-empty hands reach up to claw at the warped prosthetic as he's lifted off the ground, but there's nothing he can do to free his airway. Rage and fear fill his eyes as he continues to gasp ineffectively, his nostrils flaring in desperation even as no air reaches his lungs. Just as the other man's panic crests to an icy peak, Vann uses the Force to slam his former friend into the floor of the Star Forge with enough might to bend the grate. A sickening crunch sounds through the room as flesh and bone meet metal, the blow rendering the larger figure prone across one ramp.

With a final flourish, Vann releases his hold on Malak and watches passively as the other man weakly sucks in life-giving air. Clipping his main lightsaber onto his belt, he summons his fallen weapon into his good hand and ignites it. The violet blade hums dangerously as he stalks forward and levels it at the Supreme Commander, the burning plasma hovering millimeters from the other man's face.

"I win. Surrender, or I'll carve off the other half of your face."

Surprise alights in Malak's eyes and he slowly raises both hands, releasing a broken rasp that could be a laugh or a sob. His voice is strangely tinny thanks to the now-broken prosthetic. "Finish it, Revan. Somehow, there's enough light left in you that I know you'll be merciful."

A thin chuckle escapes Vann. "Oh, I want to. I really do. But I also realized something today while storming this damned forge."

Somehow Malak manages to arch a brow. "Humor me… What is it?"

"I'm not sure what started you down this path, but if it was me then… I'm sorry. But you were the one who chose to keep following it even after you tried to kriffing kill me!" A cold burst of anger flows into the Force and Vann draws a slow breath, shaking his head. "That's not the point. The point is that you used to be a good person. Hells, I used to be a good person. I don't know what happened to change that and I may never fully understand it. But we changed, and not for the better."

"War. War happened."

Vann nods sadly. "I believe you."

"So, you're not going to kill me because you realized that we used to be one with the light?" There's a flicker of realization in Malak's gaze. "Maybe you truly are the better Jedi after all…"

"Yes. And no."
"I understand." Leaning his head back as far as the broken grate will allow, Malak closes his eyes. "Then make it quick. If not out of mercy, then out of respect for the men we used to be."

"Sorry, Malak. But I'm still not going to kill you." As he speaks, Vann paces towards a nearby wall as he channels whatever healing energy he can summon into his dislocated shoulder. Once the area is surrounded by a warm tingle he sucks in a breath and rams his limb against the hard surface, snapping the joint back into place with a pop that makes his stomach churn. The ensuing pain is enough to make him blackout for a millisecond and he has to grit his teeth to bite back a scream, but as the lingering Force power fades he's pleasantly surprised to find his arm completely functional.

Striding back over to Malak, Vann crouches down and grabs the other man by the front of his robes. "You're going to live, but not because I'm a merciful person. It's because there's no kriffing way that anyone in a position of power in the Republic that you built is going to believe that mercenary, a Twi'lek kid, a Wookiee, an exiled Jedi, a dark Force user, a Mandalorian, two droids, a Republic defector, and your own kriffing apprentice killed you 'for the good of the Republic'."

The corners of the Supreme Commander's eyes crinkle in amusement. "Always thinking one step ahead. So, tell me Revan, how will you get them to believe you?"

Scoffing at the question, Vann responds, "Do you really think that I'm going to tell you my plan so that you can sit here and think of a way to counter it?"

"I had to ask."

"That's fair." Lifting the hilt of his main 'saber, Vann prepares to bring it down on Malak's head. "But the current plan is for you to take a little nap. When you wake up, you finally get to be someone else's problem. Hells, maybe I'll hand you over to my Mandalorian friend. Or the guy who lost his home and his wife to your orbital bombardments."

"You may have some light left, but there's still a great deal of darkness in your." Grey eyes look up with an unfocused sense of wonder. "It's strange that I'm only noticing this now, but the darkness and the light wage a constant war within you. I think that in the end, you're both. And yet you're neither."

"I think that you're concussed, and that concussion is about to get a whole lot worse." Steadying his hand, Vann furrows his brows curiously. "But first, one final question."

"Hmm?"

Vann gives his former friend a rough shake as he demands, "Where the kriff is my mask?"

"Heh." The chuckle is pained and sounds oddly mechanical, but there's a naked honesty to it. "It's in my private quarters just off this room, beneath a hidden panel in the Republic footlocker."

Reaching into the Force, Vann searches the Supreme Commander's mind for any signs of dishonesty. But the other man's thoughts are open and unguarded, showing no traces of cold deception. For a moment he considers plunging into the stream of memories that runs just past the surface and searching for all of the experiences that he's still missing, but he resists. Instead, he raises up the lightsaber hilt and then slams it into Malak's forehead, instantly banishing any remaining threads of consciousness. The body he's grasping goes limp, though the harsh sound of breathing proves that he didn't strike too hard.

"Good night, Malak," Vann mutters as he drops the other man to the floor and wearily climbs to
his feet. Retrieving his commlink, he opens a channel. "Ebon Hawk, come in. It's, uh… It's me. Mission accomplished."

A near-deafening burst of static erupts as the entire crew attempts to respond simultaneously from different parts of the forge. "One. At. A. Time. Please." Wincing, Vann holds the comm away from his face as he makes his way over to the only panel that can possibly open a door to Malak's private quarters. It doesn't take much to rewire it, revealing another hidden entryway and a smaller room beyond.

The exclamations of awe, pride, and disbelief still filtering through the commlink barely register as Vann stumbles into the chamber and towards the only item that can be described as a footlocker. It's scratched and dented in numerous places, though the faded symbol of the Republic Mercy Corps is still visible on the side. Lacking the patience to fiddle with the tiny lock, he ignites one lightsaber and slices the entire latch off. The lid creaks as he kicks it open, the battered hinges protesting the rough treatment.

"The job's not done," Vann warns the others, still unsure of the exact details of their previous chatter. "Mission and Zaalbar, I need you to continue slicing the computers and save any information that seems even remotely incriminating. Get Tee-Three to help you."

"Sure thing, V-Man," Mission chirps back. "But, uh, mind telling me what you're planning on doing with all of it?"

"A data-dump." Tossing aside the various robes and assorted bits of armor in the locker, Vann feels along the bottom for a hidden compartment. It only takes a few moments to find a suspiciously hollow corner. "It's the fastest way to show the people of Republic that Malak isn't the leader he claims to be."

There's a pause before Zaalbar trills, "That's an excellent idea! While I don't know much about the average Republic citizen, I believe that we've already discovered information that they will be unable to ignore."

"Good," Vann responds as he rips the panel open. "Oh, and can all of the Force users come up here and guard Malak? I have him out cold, but I don't think it'll last long…"

"Malak is still alive?!"

The shriek of feedback almost causes Vann to drop his comm, though he smiles weakly when he realizes that Carth must be nearby. However, his mirth fades as his hand settles on a bundle of fabric containing something small and obviously metallic. He retrieves it, his fingers trembling slightly as he unwinds the cloth. "Yes. As I already explained to him, there's no way that some Outer Rim mercenary can get away with killing the Supreme Commander of the entire kriffing Republic."

"Good point." Jolee sounds a bit winded as he speaks. "Though, I bet Revan might get a pass from a lot of officials."

"Yeah." Brushing away the last of the wrappings, Vann swallows hard. "I'm, uh, working on that."

"So, is your plan to become Revan again just so that you can kill Malak without repercussions?"

Blinking, Vann momentarily thinks that he's hallucinating when he hears Carth's voice coming not from the commlink, but from the doorway behind him. He didn't hear anyone approach, but when he turns around the pilot is standing an arms-length away.
Wincing at his own inattentiveness, Vann wonders, "Is Malak…?"

"He's still unconscious." Carth scowls as he adds, "Bastila is guarding him."

"You trust her?"

Striding forward with a slight limp, Carth shrugs halfheartedly as he admits, "Well, you trust her and I trust you so…"

"You trust me?" Eyes wide, Vann chokes back a nearly-hysterical laugh.

"Yes, Vann." Tiredly scrubbing his hands over his face, Carth nods as though he's not sure he believes his own words. "Despite everything I somehow still trust you."

The laugh feels more like a sob as Vann clutches the bundle in his lap, staring down at the mask that has haunted his dreams and waking nightmares ever since Taris. Tone pleading, he barely manages to choke out, "Then you can you please just… Get over here?"

Even without the Force, Carth senses the desperation in the other man's voice and he rushes over without regard for his own injuries. Though he only glances at the half-covered item, it's enough for him to recognize what it is. "Is that your…?"

"Yeah." Forcing his hands to remain steady as he holds up the mask, Vann shifts it until the scuffed red-and-black metal catches the dim light. "It's weird, for some reason I thought that I would somehow recover everything I lost once I found this. That I could just put it on and become the man I used to be. But now I realize that this really is just a mask."

Carth shakes his head. "That mask, Revan's mask, is so much more than just a thing. It's a symbol to the galaxy, a representation of freedom against oppression and the bravery to speak out against atrocities even when others want you to stay silent."

"But I'm none of those things."

"Vann, you're all of those things and more." Pressing closer, Carth urges the former mercenary to meet his gaze as he searches for the words to express all of the thoughts that are clearly racing through his head. "You're a savior, but to do that you also had to become a conqueror. To a lot of people out there you're a hero of the Republic, and to others you'll always be the villain. No matter what, history is going to remember you as someone who stands alone in the hearts and minds of the galaxy."

The words resonate hollowly within Vann, and he swallows hard as he asks, "And when you look at me, what do you see?"

There's a long, pained pause as Carth considers the question. But when he answers, his voice is resolute. "Someone very complicated. But also, some who I might just love." His calloused fingers gently trace his companion's cheekbone as they push away a few sweaty strands of hair, genuine affection blossoming around him in a brilliant burst of warmth. "And you're someone whose eyes are brown again."

Without prompting Vann surges forward, dropping the mask into his lap as he presses a desperate kiss to the pilot's lips. He's met with a gasp of surprise, though the sound is quickly swallowed as Carth wraps his arms around the former mercenary's shoulders and pulls the pair closer as he deepens the kiss. The glow surrounding them grows steadily brighter, enveloping them in a swell of light that's almost solid in its intensity. Vann can't stop himself from clinging to the other man, digging his palm to the back of Carth's neck as his fingers tangle in short, brown hair. It's so easy to
melt into warm arms and a solid chest, to let a clever tongue tease his lips apart and trace his mouth with sweet promises of things to come. This moment is simple and perfect, far less complicated than everything else that lies ahead.

But there's still so much more to do. Pulling back with an apologetic murmur, Vann burrows his face into Carth's shoulder and screams silently, pouring out a thousand unspoken anxieties. A soothing hand caresses his thigh, gentle enough to avoid aggravating the half-healed wounds burned into his flesh. When he lifts his head, he blearily notes the other man watching him with a thin but hopeful smile.

"So, hero. What's the plan?" As his eyes study the former mercenary's conflicted expression, Carth's tone grows quiet as he realizes, "You're not going to kill Malak, are you?"

Sighing, Vann lifts the mask back up. "No. Maybe the Republic will, once Mission and Zaalbar are done uncovering all of his lies and secrets."

"Considering that they've already found proof that Malak has a group of assassins working to eliminate any politicians who oppose his plans, execution is definitely a possibility." Carth's expression darkens as he contemplates this information, but he quickly shakes his head to clear the anger chilling his mood. "So, what are your plans for the mask?"

Tracing the strange-yet-familiar panes, Vann explains, "The Republic officials needs to know what happened, and Revan might be the only person they'll listen to."

Footsteps pound through the doorway, followed by Canderous's booming voice. "Hey Vann, are you really going to destroy this forge? It's incredible! I've never seen this type of power in my life, and I've seen some weird shit let me tell you."

Jolee is more subdued as he enters, tutting, "Kid, just remember that you did promise the Rakata you would keep your word this time around."

Wincing slightly, Carth mutters, "I am going to deeply regret saying this, but… I agree with Canderous. Not for the same reasons, of course. But this forge is a strategic resource that the Republic can utilize in the future."

"I can't destroy it," Vann admits as he climbs to his feet, looking at his gathered companions. "I thought I could, but that was before Malak confirmed that the Sith we discovered is still out there, and still wants the Republic for himself. This forge might be the only way we can stop him."

Another figure joins them as Bastila's slim form casts a long shadow across the threshold. Juhani is now visible in the adjoining room, her crimson lightsaber directed at the Supreme Commander's still-prone form.

"The Star Forge is also deeply entrenched in the dark side," the Padawan cautions. "Even if Malak fell long before he came here, I don't doubt that this place made it impossible for him to return to the light."

Vann nods grimly, still acutely aware of the darkness that pervades every inch of the ancient construct. "I'm not going to use the forge, at least not yet. In fact, I plan on shutting it down once Mission and Zaalbar are done with the computers."

"And then what?" Carth wonders with surprising gentleness.

"We find a way to guard this place until we need it again."
Burns scorch Canderous's armor and mar his skin, but he doesn't seem to notice them as he snorts and crosses his arms over his chest. "Do you really think that your precious Republic is going to agree to all of this?"

Uncertainty swirls coolly around Vann, even as Bastila sends a bloom of bright reassurance through their bond. "I honestly I won't know until I contact them."

"So." Amusement colors Jolee's words. "You're really going to become Revan again?"

"Apparently."

"Well, the Supr… er, Malak, frequently used to contact his fleet Admirals utilizing the console in this very room." Slowly walking into her former Master's quarters, Bastila nods to a comm unit resting in the corner. "You can probably do the same once you're ready to make your presence known. The channels are secure and access is limited should you want to keep your reemergence contained to a smaller audience."

Carth looks thoughtful. "Actually, that's a decent place to start. A lot of Malak's Admirals served with the Revanchists during the war, so they might still be loyal to you in their own way. If nothing else, they might be more receptive than the senators."

Nodding once, Vann immediately strides over to the console before he can change his mind. "Alright, that's what I'll do. How do I hail the nearest ship?"

Rushing after his companion, Carth reaches for his shoulder as he warns, "Vann, I didn't mean that you had to contact the Republic right this instant! Maybe you should rest first…"

"No!" Whipping around, the former mercenary gives the other man's hand what he hopes is a comforting squeeze. "I need to handle this entire situation before the data-dump happens, or before Malak wakes-up and changes his mind about surrendering. The sooner I speak with someone who holds power within the Republic, the sooner I can undo all of the damage that Malak caused."

Canderous nods somberly. "Spoken like a true commander."

"Here allow me to set things up for you," Bastila insists as she hurries over to the console, pressing buttons and adjusting dials. The speakers crackle softly as they power-up, filling the room with soft static.

Vann hardly notices what the Padawan is doing. He's still grasping the mask, his thumbs tracing the battered planes as he cautiously raises it to his face. The scent of metal fills his nostrils as he slips the item into place, though there is also the faint odor of ozone and smoke combined with a coppery tang that might be blood. The fit isn't perfect and yet its flaws are familiar. The edges press against his forehead and chin, digging grooves into his skin with a pressure that's almost reassuring. Everything is tinted a shade darker by the visor, the dim lights of the room appearing foggy and indistinct. It's as though the entire world is bathed in shadow. Despite being eerie, the sight also resonates with the darkness that flows in cold waves just beneath his skin.

Lost in thought, Vann almost doesn't realize that the main monitor is now illuminated, displaying a middle-aged woman with blonde hair pulled back in a tight twist at the base of her neck. When he approaches the console, she's already begun to speak.

"Greetings, Supreme Commander. This is Admiral Dodonna of the…" A long pause follows, the woman's eyes narrowing as she processes the image on her screen. "Wait. Who are you?"

"This is…” Even though he struggles to recall his former rank, Vann's voice is assertive as he
states, "This is Commander Revan."

Anger tugs at the corners of the Admiral's pale lips and she sneers in visible disgust. "Very funny. When the Supreme Commander finds out what you're doing he'll…"

"Wait!" Shoving herself in front of Vann, Bastila desperately waves her hands at the screen. "Admiral Dodonna, this is Bastila Shan, the Supreme Commander's Padawan."

"Bastila! What's going on?"

"It's a very long story, Admiral. Before you pass judgment on either of us, all I ask is that you run voice recognition on the man currently speaking. Cross-reference it with both Jedi and Republic military personnel files." Straightening her shoulders, the Padawan assures the other woman, "It will be worth your time, I promise. As does the Supreme Commander."

There's a bark of muffled laughter from Canderous, though the sound isn't loud enough for Dodonna to hear.

Spurred to action at the mention of Malak, the Admiral nods curtly as she presses a few buttons on her console. "Alright, but if you're playing some type of joke your Master will hear about it."

"Trust me, Admiral," Vann grumbles as he bites back the irony lacing his tone. "He's already well aware of the situation."

"I'm running the audio samples through both databases now and…" There's a long pause as Dodonna's eyes grow wide, her fingers frantically typing as she checks and then re-checks whatever readout she's looking at. "What in the hells? No, this can't be… It's impossible!"

Behind his mask Vann grins sardonically, his body slumping forward as the weight of what he's about to do settles on his shoulders. He draws a slow breath, closing his eyes as he centers himself in the Force currents flowing through the room. The cold of the Star Forge is unshakable, echoing the fear and anger that he's come to accept are an integral part of him. But he can also sense the presence of his friends and allies, each of them a unique point of brightness that he draws close and savors, the warmth of their affection swirling around the chill of the forge in an interplay of dark and light.

"It's all very possible, Admiral," Vann states, slipping into the persona of a Jedi Commander more easily than he anticipated. It still feels like an act, but it's one that he's oddly comfortable with. "And before you ask any more questions, you might want to sit down because things only get more unbelievable from here…"

Chapter End Notes

1. Xaset Terep, Talvon Esan, and Cariaga Sin are three of the Revanchists that the Exile battles in her Force vision on Korriban in KOTOR 2.

2. "Compared to him, the rest of us are nothing." - This line from Bastila is based on a quote from the Revan novel. (Admittedly, I've never read the book.)

3. I obviously didn't include the captured Jedi from Dantooine in the final battle. While it's a good game mechanic, it doesn't work as well narratively. Additionally,
Malak in this universe hasn't fallen quite that far.

4. Malak, Vann, and Carth all reference Malak's dialogue from the game:

"The darkness and the light wage a constant war within you. The balance is tipped one way now, but it can easily be tipped back. Savior, conqueror, hero, villain. You are all things Revan, and yet you are nothing. In the end you belong to neither the light nor the darkness. You will forever stand alone."

5. Apologies to anyone who sincerely hoped Malak would die. His story isn't over yet.

6. Additional apologies to anyone who wanted a true "dark side" ending. This story was never about total darkness. However, it's also not about total redemption to the light. If anything, the moral is about finding balance and accepting one's self, including one's flaws.

7. There is an epilogue.

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Epilogue

Chapter Summary

The end of things and a new beginning. Darkness still looms in the distance, but as the sun rises on a new day there is light.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

EPILOGUE

One Year Later

"Just breathe. In and out. Let your breath move with the tide. Calm your mind and immerse yourself in the Force." The soothing tones of Bastila's voice blend beautifully with the gentle ebb and flow of the waves as they break against the shoreline, her presence flowing through the Force in ribbons of light and shadow.

Vann gradually relaxes as he listens to his companion's words, matching his breathing with hers as he closes his eyes, reaches out, and feels. The Force on this planet is strange, scarred by years of warfare and brought closer to the dark side by the blood spilled and lives lost. Some of the screams still echo. But nature is reclaiming the ruins of the fallen Rakata empire, bones and buildings decomposing into lush greenery and white sand only to be swallowed by the tide. Sitting here on the beach he can sense the bright thrum of the many thriving lifeforms and the chilled thread of their inevitable deaths, every echo and every heartbeat deeply entwined in the Force. It's a current that runs through the entire galaxy, burning like a sun but without the glare.

"Good." Bastila smiles, both physically and within the bond. "Your meditation skills have improved dramatically."

"That's because I'm finally understanding things beyond what Jedi and the Sith claim." Opening his eyes Vann looks out across the water, the tide bathed in the misty light of the early morning. The sun hasn't risen, but its first tentative orange rays are breaking through the cloud cover. "You can experience emotion and serenity simultaneously. They're not diametrically opposed concepts."

Nodding, Bastila hums softly. "Yes, I believe that we're all beginning to understand that there is far more to the Force than merely 'light' and 'dark.'"

"Sometimes I think that's what I was originally trying to research when I discovered the Star Forge," Vann admits, turning to the person who he's come to view as his closest friend. "I wasn't aiming to learn the secrets of the Sith, I was just trying to understand the Force outside of what the Jedi taught."

"Speaking of your past… You didn't wake up before sunrise just to reminisce about your previous studies. I felt it. The nightmares are getting worse, aren't they?" Concern shimmers through the bond.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Vann still feels the beads of cold sweat clinging to his skin from
whatever phantom dream jolted him awake. The haunting images were foggy, nothing more than yellow eyes watching him through the jagged illumination of a lightning storm, but they were enough to chase him from his warm bed, out onto the beach where Bastila was already waiting.

"Not worse, just… Clearer? More vivid? I really can't explain it, but I know that whatever is locked inside of my mind is important. I always feel like I'm on the verge of remembering something, but then I wake-up."

"Calm down and breathe." When the Force only grows colder with her companion's irritation, Bastila sighs. "I know that you're frustrated, but we've already learned that unlocking your memories is not something that can be forced. It will happen when your mind is ready and the damage has been healed."

A few months after the Star Forge, when Vann's already scant sleep schedule became almost nonexistent thanks to recurring nightmares that woke him up with a scream caught in his throat, he begged Bastila to use their bond to try and recover his missing memories. But hours of meditation and countless attempts to breach the shroud separating the time before the crash from the rest of his conscious mind had yielded almost nothing. There were a few misty images and scattered thoughts, but anything of value remains locked away. After a particularly harrowing attempt left both of them with headaches that reverberated through the Force for days, they decided it was too dangerous to continue.

Of course, this didn't stop Vann from growing increasingly angry with himself. "And when am I finally going to remember? After even more Jedi and other Force users mysteriously disappear? After whatever dark thing I've been sensing finally makes itself known? When the Sith Emperor I know is out there comes and conquerors the Republic?"

At the mention of the disappearances, Bastila nibbles at her bottom lip. Reports of missing Jedi have been prevalent for months now, despite the Council's best attempts to keep the information private. "I know that your last conversation was less than productive, but is there any chance that Malak…?"

"He still won't talk to me." Shaking his head, Vann grits his teeth at the memory. While the Republic has gradually come to accept that Malak is a tyrant who condoned the murder of his own citizens to keep his tenuous peace, the Supreme Commander himself has remained stoic and unrepentant. The last words he said to his former friend were on the Star Forge, and any further attempts to ask questions or make conversation have been met with complete silence. "From what I've been told, he hasn't such much to anyone since the trial. And can I add that I'm honestly still surprised that the Republic let him live?"

Bastila shrugs a bit. "It wasn't the Republic that spared his life, it was the Jedi Council. After all, the Jedi don't execute their prisoners."

The entire situation had been a political mire that Vann was glad he didn't have to navigate thanks to spending several months classified as legally dead. While his status has recently been upgraded to "alive," the change didn't come before Malak was transferred over to the Jedi Council's custody, mostly because the Republic didn't want the responsibility of detaining a powerful Force user. It's probably the wisest decision they've made, not that the Jedi have proven to be any more competent.

"And we all know what paragons of wisdom and virtue the Jedi Council are, what with them trying to re-recruit every Force user who was part of Malak's capture. I mean, can you imagine Juhani as a Jedi? Or me?" Scoffing at the notion, Vann sits back in the sand.

"In their defense, you were an upstanding member of the Jedi Order for quite some time and many still view you as a hero." When she receives an eye-roll in response Bastila sends a flash of
admonishment through the bond before acquiescing, "Though, declining their offer was probably
the wiser decision. You must also remember that the Jedi have suffered great losses in recent
generations. Exar Kun, the Mandalorians, and Malak's rule have greatly depleted their numbers."

"Which is why I want to figure out who, or what, is targeting Jedi. The Republic is busy trying to
rebuild in the wake of Malak's kriff-up and they don't have the resources to investigate. Hells,
they've told me as much!"

"Juhani, Jolee, and I are still investigating any leads we can, and many of the others are more than
willing to help you as well. After all, I'm no longer the only one calling you 'Master.'" Bastila's
gaze slowly moves past the beach, to the collection of gleaming structures on the rocky hillside
above. While the largest of the buildings are still under construction, a number of smaller homes
and offices have been completed and are already inhabited. While the sleek facades are distinctly
modern, they've been designed to blend with the rustic seaside setting.

"Yeah. This is… It's still weird," Vann admits. "When I moved to Rakata to help guard the Star
Forge I thought I would be alone, living in peace. I didn't think that an entire damn Republic base
and an active enclave were going to settle here!"

Even though Vann had resumed the identity of Revan, his missing memories and time away from
the Republic government made it impossible for him to fully step back into the positions he once
held. That, and the fact that he has no real interest in residing on Coruscant and living as a
commander and politician. The sum of his remembered experiences mostly consists of life as a
mercenary along the Outer Rim, with all of the freedoms that existence afforded. While he tried
to reclaim his old life for a few months, he quickly chafed under the expectations and responsibilities.
When the military finally decided to post a permanent sentry on Rakata to safeguard the Star
Forge, Vann immediately volunteered for what he assumed would be a self-imposed exile, far from
the reach of the Senate and the Jedi Council. Of course, his expectations turned out to be vastly
different from reality.

Still studying the growing military base with its connected Force-user enclave, Bastila appears
unperturbed. "The Republic wants to guard the forge as a strategic resource. As for the rest of it,
well… The Mandalorian Wars changed the way the Force moves. Surely you must feel it. The
dark side has grown and many are finding it impossible to return to the light if they ever even
walked there to begin with. Even so, the individuals tainted by loss and bloodshed continue to need
guidance that the Jedi are unwilling or unable to provide."

A cold breeze blows off the ocean, swirling with the dark energy that still permeates parts of this
planet. Vann shudders. "I still don't remember what the Force felt like before the accident. I know
that it's always been a part of me, but I feel like my Force-sensitivity was awakened on Taris. To
me the Force has always been what you feel now, a brightness dappled by shadow."

"Perhaps it's better that way." A pleased smile slides over Bastila's lips and her tone grows playful.
"If you've only known the Force as the current coexistence of light and darkness, it will be easier
for you to explain the concept to the rest of your, ah… Students."

"Stop calling them that, I'm not a teacher."

"Vann, despite all of your insistence you are one of the few Force users who has found some type
of balance between the light and the dark sides. Granted, it's often tenuous at best but…" Trailing
off, Bastila waves away her own objections. "You've taught me a great deal in the past months and
I'm sure the others here will agree."

"The others don't share a Force bond with me." Snorting at the absurdity of the situation, Vann
mutters, "Of course, the others also don't get woken-up before dawn because of my nightmares."

"No, they don't." Sighing, Bastila rubs a palm over her eyes, the dark circles beneath them visible even in the dull light. Stifling a yawn, she sits back in the sand and digs her bare toes through the grains as she stares across the beach. A small smile tugs at the corners of her lips. "Though, it appears that we're not the only early risers this morning."

Vann is about to ask what she's talking about when he hears the familiar whirr of lightsabers clashing, the lower tone of the hum indicating that both weapons are turned onto a lower training setting. Closing his eyes, he extends his consciousness and feels for the two presences who apparently decided that the crack of dawn is the perfect time for a spar. It doesn't take much searching to identify the individuals and he chuckles to himself as the familiar signatures brush against his own. A moment later the early morning quiet is broken as two figures come charging down the shoreline, their crimson blades sparking with each hit as they slash and parry amongst the breaking waves.

"Dustil's form is improving," Bastila remarks appreciatively.

"It is. But Juhani's still kicking his ass."

Carth's son is actually the newest member of Vann's extremely unofficial enclave, having arrived less than a month ago with nothing but a small bag of personal items and a sheepish grin. It's been a complicated situation, to put it mildly.

Biting back another yawn Bastila wonders, "So, how's Carth taking all of this?"

"He's been very… Carth about it. One minute he's thrilled that his son's here, the next he's convinced that he's going to ruin everything. But they haven't tried to kill each other yet, so I count that as a win."

"I'm pleased they're both embracing these changes. In my experience, Onasi men can be…” Bastila wrinkles her nose. "Stubborn."

Shrugging even as he grins in agreement, Vann muses, "Maybe it's this planet. There's darkness left from the Rakata Empire, but it's not overwhelming. There's also something fresher and cleaner that's almost rejuvenating."

"Perhaps." Bastila stretches as she slowly climbs to her feet. "If nothing else, the Force feels different at this time of morning. It's clearer and easier to focus."

"And is that difference in the Force why I woke up to an empty bed?"

Vann can't hide the grin that spreads across his face when he spots a lone figure slowly making his way across the dunes from the direction of the base. Carth's greatcoat is draped over his pajamas to ward off the morning chill and his boots are on but untied, the laces trailing through the sand. His hair is thoroughly mussed from sleep and falls across his groggy eyes, and in this moment the former mercenary thinks that he might just love the other man a little more.

"Good morning, Captain Onasi," Vann calls in an overly-cheery voice as he sidles up to greet the pilot.

"This barely constitutes as the morning, Master Revan." Running his fingers through his hair, Carth attempts to right the mess. "And stop calling me 'captain,' you're not part of the military."

While both Vann and Carth were offered military reinstatement in the wake of Malak's arrest, only
the latter accepted. He was initially going to be stationed on an active naval vessel, possibly so that the navy could keep tabs on their 'former deserter,' but things changed when the newly approved base on Rakata needed a captain. While there was initial reluctance, some officials cautious to place a 'problem' officer so far from the Core and others claiming that the placement was poor utilization of a recognizable hero, Carth ultimately received the position. The pilot claims it's because he's the only member of the navy with any idea how Rakata or the Star Forge operate. However, Vann is fairly certain that the Jedi Council pulled some strings with the hope that his partner's presence would curb the worst of his dark tendencies. Which, honestly, shows how little the Jedi know.

"I'll stop calling you 'captain' when you stop calling me 'master.' Hells, you're not even Force-sensitive!" Vann sighs as he leans against the other man, his eyes downcast to try and hide his exhaustion. It doesn't work.

"More nightmares?" Before it can be denied Carth hurriedly points out, "I don't need the Force to know that this is the third time this week you woke-up before dawn trying not to scream."

"Fourth time, but who's counting?"

Worry paints Carth's features. "These nightmares are getting worse."

"That's exactly what I said!" Bastila agrees, the same concern coloring her Force presence.

Vann just shrugs and rolls his eyes. "I'm right here you know. I can hear both of you!"

"I'm sorry, I just worry about you. This can't be healthy…" Noting the dark circles shadowing both of his companions' eyes, Carth quickly adds, "For either of you."

Leaning closer, Vann presses a soft kiss to the pilot's cheek as he whispers against the other man's jaw, "Well, I'm sorry I woke you. You should go back to bed, you have work in the morning."

"I'm not going back to bed unless you come with me," Carth insists, wrapping a possessive hand around the Force user's waist. "And besides, it looks like work is starting early today. I happened to check the comm unit and it looks like I have a message from my contact on Coruscant…"

"You mean Mission," Vann interrupts with a snort.

"My contact who is in training with the Republic's Intelligence Division had some information that I should look into as soon as possible."

"Wait." Bastila's brow furrows in confusion. "I know that the Republic offered Mission official training after the impressive data-dump she performed on Malak, but I thought she declined! Didn't she claim that she didn't want to become, and I quote, 'Just another stuffed-shirt slime in a stupid uniform'?"

"Yes, and Canderous just happened to drop below the Republic's radar because he went back to his life as a mercenary." Throwing the Padawan a blatantly obvious conspiratorial wink, Vann deadpans, "He's definitely not trying to reunite the Mandalorian clans."

Carth scowls at the implication. "You're supposed to tell me if you have any new information about the Mandalorians."

"So, how's Mission's delivery business doing?"

"Well, at least Zaalbar has been completely honest about his movements in the past year. Aiding
his father in leading his tribe is a very noble pursuit," Bastila hastily interrupts before the discussion can become an argument. "Which reminds me, I should contact him soon. I heard about a Wookiee who might be his brother operating on Nar Shadda during my recent visit."

At the mention of the Padawan's ongoing travels to the less savory parts of the Outer Rim, Vann wonders, "How is the search for Malak's escaped loyalists going?"

After the former Supreme Commander's capture and subsequent trial, the Republic was obviously interested in rounding up the worst of his cohorts. However, the span of time between the battle on the Star Forge and the Republic's official investigation was long enough to give the savvier and less scrupulous of his followers a chance to flee to the Outer Rim before the law could catch up to them. With resources spread thin and more than a few dangerous assassins and Force users on the loose, Bastila has volunteered to hunt them down personally. While she claims that it's to help atone for her past actions as Malak's apprentice, Vann gets the sense that she gleans legitimate joy from capturing her odious former colleagues.

"Better some days than others." She shakes her head in frustration. "There's one particular assassin who's been giving me quite the slip. He's the reason I was on Nar Shadda in the first place, but I couldn't catch his trail."

Glancing towards the two figures who are now crashing through the waves and making a break for the beach Vann comments, "Maybe you should get Juhani to help you. She seems pretty good at beating-up boys who annoy her." Cupping his hands around his mouth he calls, "Keep your shoulders back, Dustil! And watch your footwork!"

Despite this advice the teen missteps as the cold water washes in around his ankles, the wet sand sucking him down. He stumbles slightly before managing to right himself, looking up just in time to see Juhani perform a neat flip directly over his head. She lands with a splash, her lightsaber aimed at the teen's neck as she kicks out a leg and sweeps her opponent off his feet and into the breaking tide.

"Oof!" Dustil groans as he lands with a hard thud. "I thought I had you!"

"Not quite." Reaching out a hand, Juhani hauls the Human upright and helps him brush off the sand. "Vann is right, your footwork is sloppy. That is why we practice in the surf. You must learn to dance with the waves rather than fighting them."

"It's a clever technique." Bastila offers an approving nod.

Powering down her lightsaber, Juhani clips it to her belt as she bows her head in thanks. "I believe it has helped as Dustil is making great progress. Carth, you should be proud."

"I… I am. I don't claim to understand everything that you're doing here, son. But I'm so, incredibly proud of everything that you've accomplished. You've come so far and just…" The pilot scrubs his palm over his face, astonishment audible in his every word. "You're an amazing young man. Your mother…"

Dustil catches his father's hesitation and offers the older man a soft smile. "I'd like to think she'd also be proud. I… I think she'd like it here."

"She would." Carth gets a far-off look as his gaze travels skyward to the field of stars just fading beneath the pale gray early morning light. After a long moment he blinks, quickly sweeping his knuckles over his eyes as he turns back to his son. "Actually, I also like it here. There's a lot that makes me happy."
Grinning cheekily, Vann nudges the pilot with his shoulder. "I'm one of those things, right?"

"Yes, you are. Sometimes despite yourself." Sighing in false exasperation, Cath leans over and wraps both arms around his partner's shoulders, drawing the other man close as he kisses him deeply, his lips parting as soon as they meet. Vann hums as he leans into the touch, canting his hips slightly as he reaches up and hooks his fingers around the pilot's neck, nipping at his bottom lip.

"Oh, eww!" Dustil makes a gagging sound. "My eyes! Get a room, you two."

"I have a room! It's a pretty nice room with a bed and everything. It's not my fault that someone got up and left the bed cold..." Still pressed against his partner, Carth's tone is gentler as he asks, "How about we head back and try to get a few more hours of sleep?"

"I don't think I can get back to sleep. Not today."

"What do you mean you can't get any sleep?" a voice calls as a figure hops over the nearest dune, his piecemeal robes fluttering in the sea breeze. "Aren't you young people supposed to sleep in all the time? Why is everyone up before the old man?"

Waving Jolee over to the group, Vann quips back, "We're all up so that you can't call us lazy."

"Pfft, I'll call you whatever I want. But if you're all awake you might as well greet the sun with me." Nodding to the growing line of burning orange flaring across the horizon, Jolee rocks back on his heels. "Might do the lot of you some good and help you to understand a little more about how the Force flows."

Furrowing her brows, Bastila looks around as though she'll be able to spot what the older Force user is referring to. "How so?"

"Well, first of all, you can see better if your lips aren't moving!" Pointing to the golden glow of Rakata's sun as it rises over the ocean, Jolee orders, "Now shush and watch the horizon. Just look and sense."

Wrapped in Carth's arms, Vann turns towards the crashing surf as he casts his eyes in the indicated direction. As the light filters through the clouds it burns the early morning mist out of the atmosphere before breaking up and sending out rays of orange and fuchsia that glitter over the cerulean water. The sun itself shines a brilliant shade of yellow, seeming to set the line between sky and sea aflame. Beneath it all, the wrecks of dozens of ships lay partially buried beneath the sand and waves, slowly turning to rust. It's a stark contrast, ugly and yet beautiful in the way that so many things on this planet are.

Gradually the dark blues and grays of the night begin to fade from the sky, though the deeper hues still remain at the very apex where the cloud cover gathers. Most of those clouds are tinted almost black by the shadows cast as the glowing sun continues to rise. Closing his eyes Vann breathes in deeply as he spreads awareness out along the shore as the beach gradually begins to illuminate. Rakata's history of violence and oppression run down to its core and the planet will always be touched by icy tendrils of the dark side. But as the first tentative rays of daylight spread across the sands, the warm glow is not just physical. It's a light that burns from beyond the atmosphere, pulsing like the heartbeat of the universe.

Vann opens his eyes as he exhales, his gaze settling on the tideline as the waves rush in and break against the shore. The nose of an old fighter juts out of the sand, casting a long shadow beneath the golden glow of the rising sun. As his Force presence stretches out around him he can feel the
warmth slowly seeping into the dunes and rocky cliffs, contrasting the lingering chill of the ocean's fathomless depths. It's all here, land and sea, hot and cold, nature and machine, light and darkness. And suddenly, he understands. Life is not a battle between sunlight and shadow, but a balance. One cannot exist without the other, and both are a part of the necessary cycle. There is peace and passion, power and harmony. The Force that flows around and through him, frozen and shining, is neither light nor dark and yet both simultaneously. It simply is.

As the sun burns through the last of the morning grayness, the sky turns a beautiful shade of clear blue as the clouds lighten but don't lift. For the first time in four years Vann lets out a breath and it feels like a weight lifts from his chest. At this moment his mind is calm and the Force thrums strong and sure beneath his skin. Glancing to the side he sees Juhani and Jolee standing with their eyes still closed, their minds lost in partial meditation. Dustil is more alert, his nose scrunched up in a thoughtful way that's reminiscent of some of his father's expressions. Bastila, however, just looks confused.

Resting his head on Carth's shoulder Vann lets a faint smile play on his lips as he reaches out and drapes a companionable arm around Bastila's shoulders, even as she continues to stare out at the waves. Drawing her closer he gives her arm a fond pat. She startles slightly, though the bond flares with appreciation and trust, a sensation that he returns twofold before sending the emotion out to the other Force users. He'll never stop being deeply thankful for all of his allies, the people who believed in him even when he was only a shadow of himself.

The future is uncertain and Vann can still sense a threat looming on the horizon. But today is a new day. Standing between Bastila and Carth he feels their individual strength flowing through him and for a moment, he's at peace.

The darkness will come. But there will always be light.

Chapter End Notes

1. Vann’s meditation on the beach reads a lot like Rey’s first lesson with Luke in Episode VIII, which is mostly unintentional. This scene was outlined almost a year before The Last Jedi came out.

2. I know that canonically Mission and Zaalbar start a business together, but I thought that they deserved a more interesting ending.

3. There might be a vague reference to Bastila hunting my favorite KOTOR II character. (Hey Atton.)

4. I’m not sure how accurate my views on balance within the Force are, but this is what’s canon for my universe. KOTOR and KOTOR II encourage the player to choose either the light or the dark side, and I wanted an opportunity to explore how a truly “gray” outcome might look.

5. Thank you for sticking with this monster of a story! It took a little over two years to write, and I’m grateful to everyone who took the time to read it. This has been quite the journey (both for the characters and for myself), and I’ve enjoyed sharing it.

6. There is a planned sequel that covers the events of KOTOR II, some of the events of the Revan novel, and the overall ending for this universe. It will be written in a
different style with the aim of keeping the story shorter and thus more manageable. I’ll be waiting a bit before posting anything as I want to write a decent chunk so that I can get myself on something resembling a regular update schedule.

7. All of that said, this story can stand alone. I wanted to finish things on a bright note, and to give Vann a happy (or at least peaceful) ending.

Want updates as I write? Follow me on Twitter: ergo_maria

FINAL NOTE - There is now ART for Chapter 29 by ranoutofrun! Please go to that chapter to check it out or click on "other works inspired by this one."

Works inspired by this: [Pacing destiny (shotgun style)] by ranoutofrun

Please [drop by the archive and comment] to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!