Ships That Pass In The Night
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Summary

Talon Karrde and Shada D'ukal are not people who like entanglements, but they do enjoy each other's company on occasion.

Notes

Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing,
Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness;
So on the ocean of life we pass and speak one another,
Only a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence.


Setting: Six months after The Last Command by Timothy Zahn
One Night on Satyatwena Part 1

Shada always insisted that Mazzic sit with his back to the wall if at all possible.

As was customary she was sitting with Mazzic in a booth along the back wall of the cantina with a good view of the entrance. They had come to this cantina near the spaceport on Satyatwena meet a contact. After his business had been concluded, Mazzic had been sucked into what was proving to be a marathon session of sabacc.

To be honest she was more than a little bored. Watching someone play sabacc wasn't nearly as interesting as playing yourself. Not a single being who could remotely be considered a threat or even particularly interesting had entered in quite some time until Talon Karrde and Mara Jade came in. She could see them scanning the patrons of the cantina as they stepped through the door. Karrde's eyes settled on her and he gave her a brief nod of acknowledgement. Shada leaned close to Mazzic and whispered into his ear, "Talon Karrde and Mara Jade just walked in."

Mazzic looked up from his cards as both Karrde and Jade approached their table. "Karrde, Mara, good to see you when we're not dodging Imps. What brings you to Satyatwena?"

"You know better than to ask something like that, Mazzic," Karrde told him with a sardonic smile. "Or will you tell me what brings you here as well?"

Mazzic grinned, "This and that."

"The same for us," Karrde said dryly, then he turned to Jade. "Mara, I don't believe you've met Shada D'ukal, Mazzic's- ah- companion."

"No, I haven't." She nodded in greeting, her green eyes scrutinizing Shada closely.

Shada returned her shrewd assessing look evenly. Then she smiled up at Karrde, "I'm surprised you remember me, Captain Karrde."

"I tend not to forget beautiful ladies who hold me at blaster point."

Mazzic cleared his throat, probably not wanting a reminder of being taken in by Thrawn's scheme. "Join us for a game? We could use some fresh blood."

"Not today I'm afraid. Perhaps another time. Good luck." Karrde nodded goodbye and he and Jade made their way to another booth along the side wall.

The game resumed and Shada kept her eyes open for trouble as they played. Almost every time her gaze drifted to Karrde and Jade's table his eyes met hers. Mazzic seemed to notice that too. "Looks like you've got an admirer."

Shada snorted. "Hardly. I imagine he doesn't really trust us after you nearly fell for Thrawn's ruse."

Mazzic shrugged, returning to his study of the cards in his hand. "That's fine. I don't trust him either."
Shada allowed Mazzic to kiss her. Even though she didn't kiss him back, he had a look of drunken triumph when he broke away.

"Mazzic, I'm your bodyguard not your lover," she told him her voice low and deadly. "If you ever do that again you will regret it. I promise you."

"Oh, c'mon, Shada," he said almost pouting. "Let's have a little fun."

"Do you want me to embarrass you in front of Karrde and Jade? You know I can."

He scowled, "You need to lighten up."

"You need to sober up. I'm not dealing with you like this." She stood and walked over to the bar leaving Mazzic alone in the booth.

She smiled at the bartender as he came up and she ordered a drink that was more pretty than alcoholic. She caught Ihbotson's eye. He'd been hanging out at a table near the door guarding their exit. He casually got up with his empty glass and walked up to the bar beside her to order another drink. "Stick to Mazzic," she told him quietly. He nodded and when he had a fresh drink he sauntered over to the table where Mazzic was gathering his winnings. Ihbotson was one of the more reliable men Mazzic kept around for muscle and was well versed in keeping his boss from getting into too much trouble.

A short time later, Mazzic with Ihbotson in tow had swaggered over to a table with a Twi'lik female and a human female both dressed even more scantily than Shada was and flirted shamelessly with both men. Mazzic kept casting looks in her direction as if seeing if their attention was making her jealous.

Shada flatly ignored him of course. Just once she'd like to get an employer that didn't try to drag her to bed. Honestly, Mazzic wasn't as bad as most. He only got a little handsy when he reached a certain stage of drunkenness and he'd never tried to kiss her before. She figured the elation of winning the game combined with his drunkeness and perhaps wanting to show off in front of Karrde made him try to take things further than he normally would.

She glanced over at Karrde's table where he and Jade were in a deep discussion with a Sullustan. She wondered if Jade had the same sorts of problems with employers as Shada did.

Karrde and Mara watched Mazzic and his associate leave with their arms around the Twi'lik and Human females.

"Well, that's certainly very interesting," Mara commented.

"Isn't it though?" Karrde looked over at Shada still seated at the bar and chatting blithely with one of the bartenders. "I understand she put one of Mazzic's men in a neural reconstruction facility for a month after he attempted to accost her."

"Did she now?" Mara looked impressed which generally wasn't easy. "You'd have thought Mazzic would have learned from that."

"Obviously not."

Mara drank down the rest of her drink. "Are you ready to head out?"

Karrde looked down at his empty glass then looked back at the bar. He couldn't help but be
intrigued by the situation. "I think I'll stay for one more drink. You go ahead."

"Okay." Mara followed his gaze to the figure in red at the bar. She stood. "Just tell me one thing before I go."

Karrde looked up at her. "What's that?"

"Is there any planet in particular you'd like to be buried on?"

"Pardon?" Karrde asked as if he didn't get her meaning, but a smile twitched at his lips.

"She might not out right kill a coworker or her boss, but I doubt she has any such qualms about you."

"Mara, I'm shocked that you think I would give a lady any reason to get violent with me."

She shrugged. "It's your life. I'll be by the morgue in the morning to identify your body."

"Get out of here," Karrde waved her away with a grin.

"May I join you?"

Shada knew the deep rich voice coming from behind her. She glanced over her shoulder to see Karrde standing there as she expected. She gave him a cool assessing look. "If you like," she told him keeping her tone bored and indifferent.

Karrde took that as an invitation and sat on the stool beside her. "It seems both our companions have abandoned us," he said conversationally.

"What do you want, Karrde?" she asked her voice cold. She didn't feel like playing games with him.

He gestured to her empty glass. "Merely to buy you a drink and have a few minutes of companionable conversation. Is that permissible?"

"You can buy me a drink, but I won't tell you anything about Mazzic or his organization." She wanted to curtail whatever he was angling for.

He gave her an amused smile. "I have no interest in Mazzic or his organization."

She raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "Well, I won't tell you anything about me either."

His smile broadened. "That is a shame, but understandable. I'm not fond of discussing myself either."

"I'm sure."

Just then the bartender came back over. "What would you like to drink?"

She shrugged. "Whatever you're having."

"Whyrens?"

"That's fine."

The bartender brought back two generous glasses of Corellian whiskey and Karrde paid for the
drinks along with a nice tip that no doubt accounted for the substantial portions.

Karrde held his glass up in a silent toast and she clinked her glass to his. She took a long sip, eyeing him while trying to discern anything from his pleasant faintly amused expression.

"Seriously, Karrde, what kind of game are you playing at?"

"I thought we said no personal questions."

"So we did," she conceded. She was curious about what he was after. He didn't seem interested in pumping her for information. Was he trying to pick her up then? "I suppose I'll just see how this plays out then. I should give you fair warning that I don't like to be trifled with."

His expression turned serious. "I have no desire to trifle with you."

"Good. I'd hate to have Mara Jade come by to pick up the pieces of you."

He smiled again at that, apparently greatly entertained by her threat.

"How do you find Satyatwena?" he asked politely.

"I haven't exactly seen anything other than the spaceport and various cantinas," she told him. That was pretty much all she ever saw with Mazzic.

"Would you like to walk along the waterfront? It's quite lovely at night."

She gave him a suspicious look and he returned her look evenly if not exactly guilelessly. He was trying to pick her up she decided. There was a part of her that almost wanted to let him. She supposed Karrde was what was termed 'rakishly handsome' with his piercing blue eyes, his long silver shot black hair, and neatly trimmed goatee. He was rather taller than she was which as a tall woman she'd always found particularly attractive in a man. She thought it might be pleasant to be seduced by him.

If she was honest, there was also a part of her that wanted to teach Mazzic a lesson.

"Sure," she agreed drinking the last of her whiskey. She stood and he took the cloak from the back of her stool and settled it over her shoulders.

"Shall we?" he offered his arm.

"A gentleman. How novel." She slid her arm through his.

"Just because we're smugglers doesn't mean we have to be barbarians."

"You are a rare breed then."

They strolled for a long time along the waterfront talking of inconsequential things. She found Karrde surprisingly good company and his wry commentary frequently made her laugh. There seemed to be some sort of festival going on at the far end. They wandered around for a bit perusing the wares displayed in the stalls, mainly local crafts and food.

At one stall she admired a pendant with an unusual looking native flower preserved in crystal. Before she could produce the credits from her pocket to purchase it, Karrde beat her to it.

"Karrde…” She truly didn't know what to say. She was torn between being insulted and charmed.
"Allow me to provide you with a small souvenir to remember seeing more than the spaceport and cantinas. Satyatwena is famous for its flowers. You should see the High Garden Districts."

She decided to be charmed. "Thank you." She turned her back to him. "Will you put it on for me?"

He draped the necklace around her neck and connected the clasp. His fingers softly caressed her neck. It was the first time he'd touched her tonight.

Next they decided to go to one of the food stalls and try some of the local delicacies. They settled on a bench overlooking the bay and away from most of the crowd. They ate and watched the distant lights of the spaceport and ships coming and going. As they finished off their wine she began to again wonder what he was about. This wasn't what she had expected at all.

She turned to him. "Aren't you going to try to seduce me?"

"Try?" he asked looking offended.

"So you think you would succeed?" she challenged him.

His smile was full of easy confidence. "Yes. I do."

"That's rather arrogant."

"Not at all. I'm merely confident in my abilities." His expression turned serious. "Do you want me to seduce you?"

Karrde had been a constant surprise to her all evening, turning over nearly every expectation she had. She suddenly realized she very much wanted to see what he had in store next, so she answered, "Yes."

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Karrde didn't kiss her then and there on the bench. Instead, he stood and offered her his hand. She took it and rose to her feet. He tucked her hand in the crook of his arm and they set off.

She had expected him to take her back to his ship, but she should have known by his reputation that he was much more discreet than that. He led her to a hotel perched on the edge of the bay and procured a room.

She felt more than a flutter of nervousness as she rode up the turbolift with him. It had been a very long time since she felt this way.

Karrde opened the door to the room and motioned for her to enter first. She glanced over her shoulder at him, but his expression gave nothing away. She wondered if he was as nervous as she was now. He certainly didn't appear so. Maybe this kind of assignation was something he did all the time. She stood awkwardly surveying the room as he turned on the lights. It was a nice room. Not extravagant, but certainly not low rent either.

"I asked them to send up a bottle of wine."

She nodded and walked to the floor length windows which proved to be doors leading out to a small balcony with a couple of chairs. She opened the doors and went out onto the balcony. There was an impressive view of the bay. She leaned on the railing watching the lights coming and going from the spaceport as she tried to get her nervousness under control. It wasn't like she hadn't done this sort of thing occasionally before. But those times had been hurried couplings that left her no time to think. Karrde was giving her way too much time to think and wonder why he was treating this more like a date than just sex. Not that as a Mistryl she'd ever been on a date, but she assumed this is what it was like. She wasn't sure if she preferred the slow build or the quick screw. She supposed she would have an answer in the morning.

She turned as he stepped out on the balcony carrying two glasses and a bottle. A bottle of very expensive sparkling wine. This one night certainly wasn't coming cheap for him. She didn't know if she should be flattered or not. Maybe he thought he was buying her. He leaned back against the rail and studied her as she took a sip of her wine.

"We don't have to do this, you know," he said quietly, his expression serious again.

She raised an eyebrow. "I thought this was what you wanted."

"It is, but only if you want it too." She was struck by how genuinely he meant that. Others might have mouthed the words, but not actually meant it. No recriminations. He would just walk away if she wished it. Such a display of honor made her want him more.

"I haven't changed my mind," she told him suddenly sure of herself. "It's just that this isn't something I do everyday. Honestly, I'm a little nervous."

He nodded and set his glass down on the top of the rail, moving closer to her. "May I kiss you?"

That he would be so polite as to inquire made her huff a startled laugh and a smile quirked up the
corners of his lips as well.

"Yes," she whispered so quietly she could barely hear herself.

He plucked the glass from her hands and set it next to his. When he turned to face her she could see the desire burning in his pale blue eyes. His hand was gentle as he caressed her cheek. His other hand reached out and slid beneath her cloak to settle on her hip. He pulled her flush against him. Her hands clasped the warm leather of his jacket as he tilted her head back and lowered his mouth to hers. There was nothing tentative in the kiss and she liked that.

Shada was awoken from a light doze by the sound of the balcony door opening. In the near darkness, she could see Karrde out there collecting his jacket and her cloak that had been discarded before they came inside. He started to come back in, but seemed to change his mind and sat down on one of the chairs out there. She watched as he riffled through the pockets of his jacket for a moment before pulling out a cigarra. He lit the cigarra and refilled his wine glass, leaning back in the chair and staring off into the night.

The man still mystified her, even after- well, the best sex she'd ever had in her life. She could now truly understand what the word 'sated' meant and she wasn't sure she ever wanted to move from this bed again.

He was a very skilled lover. She could certainly give him credit for that. She'd asked him to seduce her and he had- slowly and exquisitely. Shada had ended up surrendering herself to his control unable to do anything other than revel in the pleasure. Only now that her brain was working again could she marvel at the control he had over himself. Most of the other men she'd had sex with had been unable or merely didn't care to control themselves. Karrde had almost seemed to take more enjoyment out of manipulating her body than his own release. It was puzzling.

Mazzic seemed to think Karrde cold and calculating. This experience with him didn't exactly contradict that assessment. He had wanted to make her lose control but he held himself apart, unwilling to be drawn in himself.

She gazed him sitting bare-chested even in the chill of the night, calmly sipping his wine and smoking his cigarra. She didn't expect or particularly want him to cuddle her in the aftermath but his complete detachment irritated her. Suddenly her blissful lethargy was gone. She had never been able to resist a challenge. She wanted to know what it would take for him to lose that careful control.

She got up from the bed and he glanced back at her when he noticed the movement. He quickly looked away when he saw she was still naked, though not before she saw the flare of desire on his face. She smiled to herself as she fished his shirt from the floor and pulled it over her head.

She walked out onto the balcony.

"Will you join me for a glass of wine?" he asked reaching for the bottle. "We got rather distracted earlier." He was certainly the master of understatement.

She accepted a glass and leaned back against the rail, enjoying the cool breeze coming in from off the water. She watched his eyes focus on her long bare legs. He seemed to catch himself ogling her and he looked up to her face. So polite. A laugh bubbled from her lips.

"What?" he asked.

"You."
"Me? I amuse you?"

"Oh, yes." She pushed off from the railing and sat down in his lap. He set his cigarra aside so he could lay a warm hand on her bare thigh. She reached out and ran her hands through his long thick hair, still damp from his previous exertions. She leaned down and almost met his lips with hers before she pulled back. "May I kiss you?"

He laughed. "You think I would say 'no' to you?"

"I'm just checking. I wouldn't want to take advantage of you."

He laughed, his eyes twinkling in amusement. "You, my dear Shada, may take advantage of me anytime you wish."

"I so glad you said that."

Cracking open his eyes, Karrde saw the long slender finger with red enamailed nail tracing patterns on his chest.

"You're looking very satisfied with yourself," he observed, taking in her slyly pleased smile.

"Shouldn't I be?"

"Oh, I think you have a right to be." He paused, considering her. He had been surprised by her aggressive seduction considering how nervous she had been the first time. "Did you get what you were after?"

She studied him. "I think so."

"Good. You were very determined." She certainly had been. He had rarely surrendered himself so completely to the heat of passion. Shada hadn't really left him with much of a choice. Strangely, he wasn't as disconcerted at giving up control as he though he might have been. He felt oddly safe with her. After all, she was someone as used to being in control of herself as he was and she had let herself go with him earlier. He supposed it was only fair that he do the same. It was something he wouldn't mind exploring further with her. "It's a pity my schedule doesn't permit me to while away several days with you." He reached out and stroked that lustrous dark hair of hers.

"We're leaving in the morning as well."

"Well, there's still some time yet until morning." His hand tighten in her hair, his other grasping her hip shifting her up on top of him. She slid up his body, meeting his mouth with equal passion. He really did enjoy her eager, responsive kisses.

When morning came they shared a leisurely breakfast in bed. There was no suggestion that there be further assignations planned. That suited her just fine. She had no interest in a lover and she suspected neither did he. She was content with this one night.

When their time was at an end, Karrde escorted her to the landing pit where the Distant Rainbow was berthed. One of the crew darted up the ramp when they entered, to alert Mazzic no doubt. Karrde walked her to the edge of the ramp. He took her hand and kissed it, bowing formally. "Thank you for a wonderful evening. I've rarely had a better time."

She smiled at him. "Thank you, Karrde. I enjoyed myself as well."
"Have a safe journey." He threw a quick salute to Mazzic who was now standing at the top of the ramp and walked out of the landing pit.

Shada walked up into the ship. Mazzic looked hungover and bedraggled in yesterday's clothes. "What the hell was that about?" he demanded pointing in the direction Karrde had disappeared in.

"Karrde was kind enough to escort me back to the ship," she replied calmly.

"You were with him all night?" He seemed shocked by that.

"Yes."

"Did you sleep with him?"

Shada's expression hardened and her tone was frosty, "I don't really think that's any of my employer's business, Mazzic."

He gritted his teeth. "You're right." He took a deep breath. "And I guess I should apologize for my behavior last night. It won't happen again."

"Thank you, Mazzic," Shada accepted his apology and she would be holding him to it. "Did you have a pleasant evening?"

A satisfied grin lit up his face at the memory. "Oh, yeah." He quickly schooled his expression. "And was your evening- ah- pleasant?"

"Very." She smiled and turned to go to her quarters.

"Shada?" he called and she stopped turning back to him. "Do I need to be worried you'll be leaving my group?"

"No. I never mix business with pleasure."

He nodded satisfied with her response. "We're leaving in 30."

"Well, are all your parts still attached?" Mara gave Karrde a cursory once over as he walked up the ramp of the Wild Karrde.

"They are indeed."

"I take it you managed to enjoy yourself?"

He merely looked at her with a knowing smile.

"Oh I forgot. You're a gentleman," she said mockingly. "You don't kiss and tell. That's fine I don't want the details. I just want to know if Mazzic's going to be gunning for you now."

"That's unlikely. Mazzic knows how these things are." He sincerely doubted Mazzic would hold a grudge about this provided Karrde kept his mouth shut and didn't make Mazzic look like a cuckold.

"Well good." Mara studied him through narrowed green eyes. "Were you just trying to provoke Mazzic?"

"Mazzic had nothing to do with it. I've admired Shada for some time and a suitable opportunity
presented itself." He shrugged. That was mostly true. Shada had piqued his interest on Trogan and more so at the meeting on Hijarna. Although he may have gotten the smallest pleasure of having something Mazzic wanted but couldn't have.

Mara shook her head. "You're a strange one, Karrde."

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Shada draped a shimmering brocade shawl she'd bought earlier in the day around her bare shoulders. She gave herself one last glance in the mirror. She felt certain no one would recognize her as Mazzic's 'companion'. Her wine colored velvet dress was positively conservative compared to what she normally wore in Mazzic's company. She'd left her hair down combed out in soft dark waves instead of up in zenji needles and she only wore subtle cosmetics. The firefacet gems in the necklace she was to deliver glittered brightly around her neck.

She went down to the hotel bar where she was to meet her contact. She was glad they were meeting here so she didn't have to go outdoors. She hated slogging through the snow in evening wear. The bar was crowded. It seemed she wasn't the only one who didn't want to venture out into the frozen Rhinnalian night. She threaded her way through the crowd to the bar, luckily finding a vacant seat. She ordered a glass of Sullustan wine as she waited. She politely deflected several offers of companionship until finally she caught sight of her contact.

He came up to her, his eyes going unsubtly to the firefacets at her neck. He offered to buy her a drink and they sat together a while making small talk maintaining the illusion that he was picking her up so they could go up to his hotel room and make the exchange without drawing attention to themselves.

After a sufficient time had passed and she had made certain no one had them under surveillance, Shada walked with her contact toward the exit. On their way he recognized someone and approached a group of several men to speak to them. There was something a little familiar about the stance the one whose back was to her and she was instantly on guard. The man in question turned as they walked up to the group and she felt a wave of conflicting emotions cascade through her as she recognized Talon Karrde. She hadn't seen him since the night they'd spent together. There was only the merest quirk of his lips to suggest that he recognized her. Introductions were made and she had a tremendously hard time not rolling her eyes when Karrde was introduced as Jhustin Tyme. He thought himself entirely too clever for his own good.

Karrde bowed politely over her hand when she was presented to him. "A pleasure to meet you, Sleena."

"Likewise," she replied. She wanted to snatch her hand out of his grasp but she forced herself to stay relaxed and allowed him to press a light kiss to it.

The men talked for a while and Shada affected boredom, while surreptitiously studying Karrde. He had made small alterations to his appearance to fit the role of the respectable businessman she had discerned he was playing. He had grown his goatee into a full beard though still kept neatly trimmed. His hair was slicked back and tied in a queue. He wore conservative but well cut formal clothes. To the untrained eye she doubted he'd even be recognized as the infamous smuggler chief.

After a few minutes, she and her contact took their leave and returned to his hotel room. She
exchanged the jewels she was wearing for the cash credits. Then they waited around in his room, playing cards for about an hour in case they might have been watched.

When she exited the turbo lift on her floor she caught sight of the shadow of someone lurking in one of the adjacent halls. She slipped through the door of the service corridor and came out behind the lurker who proved to be Talon Karrde as she suspected. She move silently behind him and had a vibroblade at his throat before he knew it. "What do you want, Karrde?"

"My dear Shada, have I done something to make you cross with me?" his voice as calm and amused as it ever was.

"Yes. Why are you here?" She pressed the blade closer to his neck.

"On this planet or outside your room?"

"Both."

"Surely Mazzic has taught you that information is never free. Perhaps you have something to exchange for it?"

She couldn't believe the man was bargaining with her when she had a blade to his throat. What gall. "Alright, Karrde. How about I don't slit your throat if you tell me what I want to know?" She nicked his skin a fraction to show she was serious.

"It's not exactly a fair bargain, but I do so enjoy life. I am on the planet to negotiate a contract with the gentlemen you saw me with earlier. I assure you it has nothing to do with whatever it is you're here to do."

She was willing to believe it had been a coincidence that they were on the planet at the same time. The textile firms on Rhinnal often made side contracts with smugglers to avoid some of the more stringent tariffs. "And why were you waiting for me?"

"My business has concluded and I thought if you were similarly free you might consent to have a late supper with me."

"Supper?"

"Well, I had hoped the evening would extend past supper," he amended. "We enjoyed each other's company on Satyatwena, perhaps we might do so again. But I would be content with only sharing a meal."

"How did you know I wouldn't already be engaged for the evening? After all I did leave with another man."

"You're not his type. The man you were with is not completely unknown to me. My sources tell me he prefers his bedmates much younger and more helpless than you are, my dear."

Shada made a disgusted sound in her throat. She hated the kinds of people she was forced to associate with working for Mazzic.

She withdrew the vibroblade and released Karrde, slipping the blade back into the sheath concealed beneath her long sleeve.

"Is that a 'yes'?" He turned around to face her, his expression amused as he pulled out a handkerchief and held it to the cut on his neck.
"I shouldn't be seen out with you after I left with my contact."

He nodded in understanding. "Perhaps we could dine in my room then?"

"I'd prefer my room."

He shrugged. "As you like."

She opened her room and he followed her in. Karrde was close behind her and pulled the shawl from her shoulders. She turned, not stepping back, so close to him she could feel the heat from his body in the slightly chilly room.

His hand reached up and gently traced the area of her neck where the necklace had been. "You're missing something."

"Am I?" she said noncommittally and took a step back. "Make yourself comfortable. I'll be back in a moment." She took her shawl from him and walked toward the sleeping area. She hung her shawl in the closet and safely stowed the credits. When she returned Karrde was lounging in a chair perusing the room service display looking for all the world as if it was his room and she the guest. He certainly knew how to fill a space when he wanted to.

She had brought back with her a first aid kit from her bag. When he saw it in her hand he tilted her head back without her asking.

"Aren't you going to say you're sorry?" he asked as she cleaned the small cut from the vibroblade.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not sorry," she told him, placing a small bacta patch on the cut. "You needed to learn a lesson about who you should toy with."

His hands went to her hips, his thumbs stroking the plush velvet. "I'm not sure I've learned it yet." She let him to pull her down on his lap. "Perhaps you can instruct me further."

"Perhaps." She felt that same flutter of nervous excitement in her chest she'd felt before with him.

His slid his hands up caressing her back until they made their way into her loose hair. He pulled her head down to his, their lips a breath away. "May I kiss you?"

"Yes."

By the time the food came they had made it to the bed but were restraining themselves to touches and kisses, enjoying the anticipation of the acts yet to come. Karrde had managed to divest her of her dress and had shed his own tunic and shirt. Shada had unbound his hair as soon as she could. She much preferred his hair unrestrained. When the door rang, Karrde passed her his shirt to put on and went to answer the door and paid for their meal.

Once she sat down to eat, Shada realized she was famished. The food was rather good and the wine Karrde picked out was excellent. During their meal, she was reminded that Karrde was very good company. He seemed to be able to converse on any topic in the galaxy, but carefully didn't mention what they were both onworld for. He was respectful, charming, and made her laugh. And she knew she felt entirely too comfortable with him than was good for her.
Shada couldn't seem to stop herself from yawning in the turbolift. Though that was probably to be expected, she didn't get much sleep last night. She smiled to herself as she remembered the night. It had started off much the same as before with Karrde trying to make her lose control while holding back himself. She was on to his ways now and managed to shift things into more of a mutual loss of control. Once they'd gotten past that, they'd spent the night losing themselves in each other in as many ways as they could until morning.

When she reached the lobby, she stopped by the hotel restaurant to grab a large cup of caf for the ride to the spaceport. She paused near the entrance of the hotel, setting her caf down on the table and her valise on the floor. She pulled the fur trimmed hood of her heavy coat up over her head before fishing her gloves out of her pocket to put on. Just then a man stepped up beside her pulling his own gloves on. She knew without looking at him who it was.

She turned and glared at Karrde.

He just smirked at her. "Why it's Sleena, isn't it?" he asked calling her by the name she had used as cover. "We met last night."

"Yes, of course," she replied politely. "How are you, Mr. Tyme?"

"Tired. Didn't get much sleep last night."

She looked away from him thankful her deep hood hid her flush. "That's a shame."

"Not really," he said, his voice was low and husky, the way it had been in her ear last night.

"Well, if you'll excuse me," she said picking up her things. "I'm on my way to the spaceport."

"As am I, perhaps we could share a taxi?"

She looked back at him wondering what he was about. They'd said their goodbyes in her room. She hadn't expected to see him again here, but decided to play along.

"Sure."

He went to the valet droid to request a taxi and then they stood together inside the transparasteel doors waiting for it. She saw him keep gazing longingly at the cup of caf she was drinking. She couldn't help but noticing that he looked as tired as she felt. He hadn't been exaggerating when he said he hadn't gotten much sleep last night.

When the cab came he took her valise from her put them both their bags in the back before sliding in beside her. Once seated she decided to take pity on him and passed the caf to him. "You can have the rest. You look like you need it. You worked very hard last night."

He gave her a grin that was decidedly wicked, but he said very politely, "Thank you. You're most kind."

They were mostly silent on the trip to the spaceport until he spoke. "I have a ship. I can drop you somewhere if you like."

"Thanks for the offer, but I already have a ticket for a stateroom on the transport." She knew Mazzic would have pittens if she actually allowed Karrde to drop her at the base. Besides, she suspected it would be dangerous to spend any more time in Karrde's company. Especially with several days in hyperspace alone together.
"Of course." He didn't seem perturbed by her refusal. He got out at the transit terminal with her instead of going on to the landing area. He carried her bag and walked her to her gate.

He bowed politely over her hand. "Thank you for the pleasure of your company. I greatly enjoyed our time together." With a quick deft motion he flipped her hand and pressed his lips to the silver of skin exposed between her glove and sleeve.

She couldn't stop the shiver that went through her and she said, "I had a very good time as well. Thank you for your assistance." She took her bag from him.

"Have a pleasant journey," he told her. "Perhaps we'll meet again," he seemed to add almost as an afterthought.

Was he really suggesting that they do this again? She hadn't expected there would be more than that first night, but this opportunity had presented itself. If another opportunity arose, she'd be tempted to take it even though she knew she probably shouldn't. Karrde was after all something of a rival of her employer's, not to mention Mistryl rules against such ongoing liaisons, but she couldn't stop herself from telling him, "Maybe."

Karrde nodded seemingly satisfied with her answer. He stood there watching her until she disappeared through the gate to her transport.

Mara was waiting for Karrde when he descended the ramp of the ship. "How'd it go?"

"Without a hitch," he told her. "Shipments start next month."

"Good." They started walking toward the main building. "Sudden Demise ran into a little trouble with pirates, but it was nothing they couldn't handle." She gave him a sidelong glance and asked far too casually, "So did you run into Mazzic?"

"No," he replied, wondering why she was asking, but not allowing his surprise to show. "Did you hear he was on Rhinnal?"

"No," he replied, wondering why she was asking, but not allowing his surprise to show. "Did you hear he was on Rhinnal?"

"So Shada was on her own then? Convenient."

"Hmph." He couldn't help but inquiring, "How did you know?"

"I can't miss the sense of satisfaction rolling off of you. It's a different flavor than the conclusion of a good deal or when you've had sex with someone else."

Karrde was glad it wasn't obvious except to a Force user, but still… "I liked you better before you became a Jedi."

"I'm not a Jedi," Mara growled. She looked over at him again studying him intently. "What I can't figure out is whether it's the infringing on Mazzic's territory part that's so appealing to you or if there's something else that's special about Shada?"

"I suppose it's just that we're very compatible in the bedroom and neither of us desire further entanglements. If an assignation is convenient, why not enjoy ourselves. If not…" he shrugged eloquently.

"Do you think she'll tell Mazzic she spent the night with you?"

"I don't see where it's any of his business. Or yours for that matter."
"His bodyguard is sleeping with his competitor," Mara pointed out. "I'd be a little concerned if I was him."

"Very little sleep occurs I assure you." He grinned at her, then unable to resist needling her, "So have you run into Skywalker lately?"

"Oh, go to hell, Karrde," she stomped off leaving him there grinning.

TBC
Shada waited by the door of the hotel room she'd spent the last few hours in with Karrde. She watched him slip his jacket on then adjust his holster to make sure his blaster was clear of his jacket.

"It's not necessary for you to always walk me back to the ship," she told him. "I can take care of myself you know."

"I know you can," he replied mildly. "But perhaps I prefer to have you by my side to handle any trouble as I walk to my ship."

Shada snorted. "You're not exactly helpless, Karrde."

"Then it must be because I enjoy your company." He held out his arm. "Shall we?"

Shada shook her head and took the offered arm. "You think you're so smooth, don't you?"

Karrde just gave her that arrogant smirk of his and led her out the room. It was near dawn as they made their way from the hotel to the spaceport. When they reached the Distant Rainbow's landing pad, Karrde bowed formally over her hand. "Thank you for a lovely evening, my dear." His courtliness always made her feel vaguely uncomfortable. She didn't understand why, because she certainly didn't feel uncomfortable when they were tangled intimately together as they had been earlier in the night. "Have a safe journey." He gave her fingers a squeeze.

"You too." She pulled her hand away and walked onto the landing pad. She knew he would stand there at the edge and watch her until she had safely made it to the ship. Shada never could quite decide whether to be insulted or appreciative of his courtesy.

Strangely the ramp of the Distant Rainbow was already lowered when she approached. She reached for a zenji needle in her hair.

"It's just me," Mazzic called out and as she got closer she saw him sitting on the ramp.

"Are you waiting up for me?" she asked, with more than a trace of annoyance in her voice.

"Nah, couldn't sleep." He tried to sound casual, but she could see the haunted look on his face when she got to the edge of the ramp. She knew he suffered from nightmares. When she first started working for him she had heard him screaming and she thought someone was attacking him, but she had only found him alone tangled up in the sheets of his bed in the throws of a nightmare. She wondered what gave a man like Mazzic nightmares. "Sit with me a little while?"

She sat down beside him on the ramp beside him pulling her wrap closer around her bare arms. There was quite a breeze coming off the ocean and the water off the landing pad's platform roiled noisily underneath. She'd be glad when they left. She didn't like water worlds, so much ocean with so little land made her feel oddly nervous.
"Did the good Captain Karrde satisfy you well this evening?"

"Mazzic," she said warningly, pinning him with a glare.

"Sorry. It's just so funny to think of Karrde having that kind of itch to scratch like the rest of us mere mortals."

"Do you mind?" Shada asked. She and Mazzic had formed something of a friendship now that he had stopped trying to get in her pants every chance he got. She'd found he wasn't a bad sort as far as smugglers went. She sometimes wondered if he had stopped pursuing her because he'd learned the lesson she had intended to teach him when she had left with Karrde on Satyatwena or if he saw her as somehow belonging to Karrde now. "I mean me occasionally spending the night with Karrde."

"Well, I can't say my pride wasn't stung you picked him over me, but you're right- mixing business in pleasure is too messy." He sighed and glanced over at her. "And, honestly, I'd have gotten bored with you as soon as I'd had you. You're too good of a bodyguard to waste like that. As long as you don't make me look like a fool, I don't care." He sighed again and focused his gaze back on the sun rising over the dark water, his voice oddly wistful, "Trust me, Shada, life is too short. Take your pleasure when you can find it."

"Thanks."

"No problem." Mazzic laughed, his mood shifting away from seriousness. "Though I got to say this whole affair has been incredibly entertaining so far. Karrde's audacious, I'll give him that, picking up the woman that's supposed to be my mistress. Who knew he was interested in women or, hell, anything other than smuggling and information?" He nudged her with his elbow and lowered his voice conspiratorially, "So is he like- kinky?"

"Oh shut up, Mazzic." Shada stood abruptly and kicked him in his side, not hard but enough to display her displeasure.

He rolled easily with her kick still laughing. "I can't help but wonder. There must be a reason he's so secretive about his liaisons."

"It's called discretion," she said tartly. "Not something you'd know anything about."

He grabbed her hand and was suddenly serious again, "Be careful, Shada. Karrde's got a peculiar sense of honor, but you're not one of his people. He'll try to use you if he needs to or sees a way to profit from you."

Karrde was honorable and very protective of his people, but she didn't think that he would use her like that. However, Karrde was known to be ruthless and she was aware that he could be playing a long game and trying to lull her into a false sense of security.

"It's just sex," she told Mazzic.

"And if you're smart you'll keep it that way." He squeezed her hand.

"Come back inside." She pulled him to his feet. "I don't want to have to worry about you getting murdered while I sleep."

TBC
Chapter Notes

5 months later

One Dead Smuggler

"Oh, kriff," Mazzic said softly.

Shada went to him at the comm station, peering over his shoulder at the screen. "What is it?"

"Billey's dead. I can't believe it. I'm going to miss that crusty old bastard."

Shada found herself a little surprised at the emotion in his voice. She had met Billey once since she started working with Mazzic; his chief lieutenant, Dravis, handled most of the operations for the organization. She hadn't notice any particular closeness between Mazzic and Billey, but she knew Mazzic had once worked for the old smuggler before he started his own group. "I'm sorry, Mazzic."

"Me too," he sighed scrubbing his face with his hand. "Dravis is going to have a memorial for him on the Errant Venture. Neutral territory I guess." He keyed up the screen with their upcoming runs. "We'll need to shuffle our schedule a bit, but I owe it to Billey to pay my respects."

"You got your start with him didn't you?"

"Almost every decent smuggler that isn't mixed up with the Hutts got their start with Billey. He hated Hutts." He glanced over at her, smirking slightly, "Even your pal, Karrde, worked with Billey, before he fell in with Car'das. He and Billey remained pretty tight even then. I kept thinking he'd absorb Billey's group after his big buildup ten years ago, but he never did."

Shada put on her most sedate dress for the memorial, long and black with shear sleeves and hood to cover her hair. When she met Mazzic at the ramp she saw that he was dressed fairly conservatively as well, trading his normal crimson cape for black. They and several of the Distant Rainbow's crew made their way to the banqueting room Booster Terrik had set up for the memorial.

They greeted Dravis and some of his associates as they came in and offered their condolences. Booster welcomed them as well and directed them to the bar and buffet. Karrde and Mara Jade were standing nearby. Shada could feel Jade's eyes scrutinizing her as she approached. Shada returned her look evenly, giving nothing away. She surmised from that look that Jade knew about the liaisons Shada had with Karrde. She wondered if there was something going on between Karrde and Jade that she wasn't aware of. She'd heard rumors that they were involved but she had discounted that as the gossip that comes from members of the opposite sex working closely together.

But if the rumors were true then she had no desire to get in the middle of that.

After Karrde and Mazzic shook hands, Shada extended hers as well. "I'd like to offer my condolences, Karrde. I understand you were once quite close to Billey."

One Dead Smuggler

"I'd like to offer my condolences, Karrde. I understand you were once quite close to Billey."
Rather than shaking her hand he held it between both his larger ones for a long moment. "Thank you, Shada. You're very kind."

She gave a nod of greeting to Jade before Mazzic led her away to the bar.

The gathering had degenerated into raucousness. Mara Jade had already gone leaving Karrde sitting with Samuel Tomas Gillespee along the sidelines. The other members of Karrde's organization were spread throughout the group of smugglers. She wouldn't put it past Karrde to have deliberately scattered his people strategically throughout the gathering rather than sitting together as a group as many of the organizations did.

The memorial had started out soberly enough. Dravis, Karrde, Booster, and several of the other smugglers offered eulogies. Then it had been a general free for all as people shared their remembrances of Billey. The stories shared had been fascinating at first, but now they had descended into drunken tall tales, each more outrageous and lewd than the next no longer focusing on Billey.

Shada wished she could follow Jade's example and leave.

"Have another drink, Shada. And relax," Mazzic told her.

"I don't want another drink."

"Then stop radiating disapproval. Trust me this is exactly the kind of send off Billey would have wanted."

Shada hadn't known Billey well enough to know whether that was true or not, but she supposed smugglers weren't the most respectful bunch.

The party finally began to break up and head to various tapcafes to continue. "You don't have to join me for this, Shada," Mazzic told her as they headed for the door. That usually meant he was going to look for some female companionship and would like her to gracefully excuse herself.

"You're crazy if you think I'm leaving you by yourself in this crowd."

Booster, who was behind them, lay a large hand on her shoulder. "He'll be okay, Shada. Everyone's under my personal protection."

She shook his hand off and turned to face Booster, the large smuggler towering over her. "Then if anything happens to Mazzic, I'll personally have your head."

"Don't think she won't either," Mazzic said almost gleefully. Of course he was drunk otherwise he'd realize that Shada taking out Booster would have been caused by his death or severe injury.

She stepped off to the side. "Have fun then," she told Mazzic. "And don't do anything stupid."

"Yes, mother."

A little disappointed she watched as Karrde left with the rest of them, but she supposed this wasn't the most opportune time for a tryst. At least she wouldn't have to watch over Mazzic as he found whatever debauchery was to be had on the Venture.

Before she made it to the turbolifts to head back to the ship, she ran into one of the drunken smugglers who had apparently gotten separated from his group. He tried to proposition her and she
disabled him after he attempted to paw at her. He would awake with a headache that would have little to do with drink.

To her great surprise when she got to the turbolifts, Karrde was leaning casually against the wall with his hands in the pockets tailored black jacket. "What took you so long?" he asked straightening up.

"I had to teach someone a lesson about where they shouldn't put their hands."

"Ah." An amused smile touched his lips. "Do I need to worry about learning such a lesson?"

"I don't like being a forgone conclusion, Karrde."

Some of the amusement left his expression. "I would never presume such a thing, but if you are free and if you are amenable, I'd very much like it if you spent the evening with me."

She gave him a long assessing look, wondering why he hadn't gone with the rest of them. "Won't you be missed?"

He shrugged. "It's well known that I don't engage in such drunkenness that is sure to occur. Booster will just mock me in my absence for not being Corellian and thus not being properly able to hold my liquor. My organization is well represented there by serious drinkers anyway."

"Where are you from?" It was out of her mouth before she could stop herself.

Karrde smiled again. "Is that a personal question?"

"No, of course not," she said quickly. "I was just wondering aloud."

The smile grew broader. "I see. So will you join me?" She hesitated and he added, "I keep quarters on the Venture."

She hadn't wanted to risk being seen on his ship. That would surely start all manner of talk that could prove embarrassing to everyone involved. "Then yes, I'd like that."

Shada followed Karrde in to his quarters. They were immediately greeted by a pair of large quadrapeds with viscous looking teeth and stubby little tails that wagged in delight as Karrde scratched behind their ear.

"These must be the famous vornskrs," Shada said holding out her hands for them to smell.

"Yes. Sturm and Drang." He turned his attention back to the vornskrs, saying sternly, "This is Shada. She's a friend." They sniffed at her again, making that strange cackle/purr sound as she followed Karrde's example scratched them behind their ears. The one on the right, Drang, darted a long tongue out and licked her hand. "Drang's a little more friendly than Sturm."

Sturm had apparently gotten all the attention he wanted and had wandered away to lay a large pillow in the corner that was apparently his bed and started gnawing on a large bone.

"May I offer you a drink?" Karrde said moving to a sideboard with a row of crystal decanters and bottles set up. "Brandy, perhaps?"

"Sure." Shada was always a little nervous at the start of their assignations. Maybe a brandy would take the edge off. She walked over to Karrde, Drang trailing behind her. "Thank you," she accepted the glass Karrde offered and took a sip. "}
Drang nudged her leg with his head apparently dissatisfied he was no longer the focus of her attention. She reached down and petted him again and he gave a satisfied cackle/purr.

Karrde laughed. "Are you trying to steal my date, Drang?" The vornskr looked up at his master, who had put his hand in a jar. He pulled out several long pieces of some sort of dried meat. "Go to your bed." Drang slunk over to his bed opposite Sturm's and lay down. He then tossed both vornskrs their treats that they caught mid-air before settling back down.

"Now, where were we, my dear?" He moved close to Shada and she drank the rest of her brandy down before setting her glass aside. She looked up at him seeing the desire burn in his pale blue eyes.

"I think you were going to try to seduce me," she said lightly, feeling the flutter of anticipation in her chest.

"Try?" A smile tugged at his lips. "Oh, Shada. You are never easy." He said that as if it were the highest compliment he could give her and she imagined that was true. She knew Talon Karrde enjoyed a challenge. He reached out and lightly touched the sheer hood covering her head. "I like this. It makes you look mysterious."

"I was going for respectful mourning."

"You're very alluring in any case. May I kiss you?"

There was something different about Karrde that night. For once he didn't start out trying to control her while he held himself apart. There weren't the usual teasing games. He seemed to be seeking something other than disconnected pleasure- comfort, maybe. They were here for a memorial service after all. Even so, he was still a considerate lover and made sure she enjoyed herself while he sought whatever it was that he was looking for. Like everything else about Karrde his mood raised more questions than answers.

Afterwards, Karrde lay with this head on her breast, still breathing heavily. Her fingers tangled in his damp hair, the other hand stroking his sweaty back. His arm was heavy across her waist as he held her tightly.

"You're sad," she blurted out the realization without thinking. How strange to think this inscrutable man to be sad.

She felt his legs shift restlessly where they were tangled up with hers. "Yes," he said quietly. "It really is the end of an era. I thought Billey would out live us all. He was always a good friend to me, even after I left his group."

"You respect loyalty."

"I do. And Billey was always a straight dealer. Not that he wasn't normally working an angle, but he was always true to his word when he gave it."

Shada thought Karrde had drifted off to sleep, then he unexpectedly spoke again, "Billey killed himself."

"What?" she asked startled. She hadn't heard exactly what Billey had died of but she had assumed it was old age or some related disease.

"He killed himself," he repeated, his voice low and a little rough. "He was diagnosed with a
degenerative neurological disease. Bacta wouldn't have done any good. Extensive cybernetic brain implants might have helped, but Billey always had an aversion to cybernetics. So he shot himself before he degenerated too far."

"I had no idea." Such suicides weren't unfamiliar on her homeplanet of Emberlene where medical care was expensive and hard to come by. Those strucken with severe illnesses and injuries frequently killed themselves to spare their family the burden of their care or themselves a life of hopeless suffering. Her own father had been one such individual.

"Please don't broadcast it," Karrde told her. "Dravis didn't want anyone to know. He wants everyone to remember Billey as he was not as he died."

"Of course not."

She felt him take a deep breath and release it slowly. "I keep wondering if it were me would I make the same choice. Or would I take the chance that the brain implants might work and give me a few extra years."

She had often wondered the same thing over the years following her father's death. Would she have been able to take her own life after losing her leg like her father or hold out hope to that she would be able to recover enough to eventually pull her weight again in the family? "I don't think we can ever truly know what we would do unless we were in such a situation," she told him.

"You're right I suppose."

Shada was instantly awake when the outer door of Karrde's quarter's opened. She automatically reached for the zenji needles on the nightstand and rolled out of the bed to her feet.

"It's just Chin," Karrde said his voice gruff with sleep as he rolled over onto his back. "He's taking Sturm and Drang for their morning walk and breakfast."

She listened intently and could indeed hear Chin talking to the 'littles'. She tried to remember if she'd left any clothing in the common room, but she didn't think so. When she heard the door shut again she relaxed and looked over at the chrono. "I should go before Mazzic wakes up."

Karrde waved a dismissive hand. "He's probably just gone to bed. You've a little time yet." Shada had to concede that was probably true. "Come, let me give you a reason to linger a while longer."

"You'll forgive me if I don't walk you to the ship? It wouldn't do to be seen together in this crowd," Karrde said from where he was lounging in bed watching her get dressed.

"I agree." Shada leaned against the dresser crossing her arms across her chest. "Can I ask you something slightly personal, Karrde?"

"Slightly personal?" He looked intrigued. "Depends on what it is."

"Are you involved with Mara Jade?"

"Mara?" he looked surprised she asked. "No. For one I don't get involved with my employees like that." His lips twitched into a smirk. "And for another I believe Mara's romantic interests lie with someone else, not that she'll do anything about it. Why do you ask?"

"I had heard rumors and I-" Shada cleared her throat, a little uncomfortable about openly
discussing the thing between them. "I like the simplicity of the sex between us. I have no interest in being dragged into some sort of triangle or any kind of entanglement really."

"A wise policy, my dear. One I adhere to myself. I will never promise you anything but no entanglements of any kind."

She nodded, relieved. "I'm glad we're on the same screen."

She walked over to him when he held out his hand to her. "Thank you for your company last night." He placed his normal courtly kiss on her hand.

"Goodbye, Karrde."

TBC
Shada came upon what looked like a pet store and decided to duck inside for a bit to escape the oppressive heat outside. The shop was filled with all manner of potential pets, colorful avians, exotic aquatic species, small primates, and a large variety of canine and feline species. She wandered around the shop for a while before her attention was caught by a small, sleek black feline with bright amber eyes. A Corellian Spumakas the label said. She reached her hand into the cage. The spumakas tentatively smelled her hand before rubbing it's face on her hand.

She heard the door of the shop open and close. Moments later soft footsteps crept behind her almost inaudibly. Shada lifted her hand to a zenji needle as if she was adjusting it, appearing as if her attention was solely on the animal in the cage before her.

“I come in peace,” a familiar deep voice said.

She dropped her hand and turned around, “Karrde, this is a surprise.”

“A very pleasant one.” He bowed over her hand and she couldn’t help but smile at his courtliness.

“Did you really think you could sneak up on me?”

“No, but it never hurts to practice such skills, especially against a pro. How did I do?”

“Not bad.”

“Such high praise. Thinking of a pet?” he asked gesturing to the store around them.

“No, just killing time. Mazzic is… otherwise engaged for the afternoon.” There were some pursuits Mazzic preferred not to have his female bodyguard present for.

“Ah. Perhaps you’d like to join me for lunch then?”

“I’d like that.” She started to move away from the cage, but the spumakas she had been petting snagged her dress with a claw.

“Looks like someone’s chosen you,” Karrde observed. “Would you like to have her?”

Shada laughed, “Oh, Karrde, what would I possibly do with a spukamas?”
Karrde held out his hand for the small black feline to smell. “People normally keep them as pets, you know.” The spumakas apparently liked his smell and rubbed her head on his hand.

"I basically live on ships."

"Sturm and Drang always travel with me. Besides, as I understand it, in the early spacefaring days Corellian freighters carried a spukamas to keep the vermin away, especially when they were carrying food stuffs. They were considered a ship’s luck."

“Karrde,” she protested, but at the same time remembering longing as a young girl to have a pet to care for. They could barely feed themselves much less a pet. “You’re not helping.” She reached out and stroked the spumakas’s silky black fur. “You can do what you want. You’re the boss. I’m not.”

“Well, perhaps one day you’ll be in charge too and you can have as many pets as you like.”

“Perhaps.” Maybe one day she would be one of the Eleven Elders and be able to effect real change in the Mistryl and on Emberlene.

“Shall we?” She took Karrde’s offered arm and he led her from the shop.

The second they stepped through the door, she felt like she was hit in the face by the hot humid air. It almost made breathing hard. She wore a local sarong style dress of light breathable fabric but it didn’t seem to help in this intense steamy heat. She was glad she had opted for open native sandals as well. She didn’t think she could have stood any more of an enclosed shoe.

Karrde on the other hand wore his normal tall spacer boots, his tailored tan pants tucked in the top. He had at least put on a loose white shirt to similar fabric of her dress and it clung damply to the muscles of his chest and back. He had also pulled his long hair up high in queue off his neck. It was an oddly attractive look on him. The stark white fabric contrasted nicely with his tanned skin.

“What?” he asked catching her attention on him.

“I just can’t figure out how you look so unaffected by the this blasted heat.”

“It is oppressive, isn’t it?” He steered her into the door of a small restaurant, the air inside blissfully cool. “My crew was having a debate earlier if this was worse than Tatooine.”

“What did they decide?” she asked as they were seated at a small table.

“It seemed to be a draw. Some preferred the dry heat, some the humidity.”

“I think I prefer Tatooine. dreadful place that it is. I hate feeling this sticky.” She pulled at the damp fabric clinging to her chest.

“We could go for a swim after lunch if you have time.”

“I don’t have suit with me.”

He got that devilish twinkle in his eye. “Even better.”

“And I suppose a purveyor of information such as yourself knows the perfect private spot.”

“But of course.”
Karrde didn’t seem to want to lose himself in her body for comfort this time. He wanted to drive her mad with his teasing and then laughed at her frustration until she flipped him over and rode him until she got what she wanted from him. Afterwards, Shada flopped beside him on the blanket and gave a contented sigh. He gave another deep laugh, trying to catch his breath at the same time. “Oh, Shada, you are always a delight.”

She supposed she should have been a little irritated at the way he always seemed to be amused by her, but she really couldn’t work up the energy for a scathing retort at that moment. She just lay there on the blanket on the sand feeling wonderfully relaxed.

Karrde felt perfectly content laying on the blanket on the beach of the secluded lagoon.

“Ugh. I hate this heat,” he heard Shada complain after a while and sat up beside him. “I’m going back in the water.”

“Alright,” Karrde replied not bothering to open his eyes as he continued to lie there relaxed and drinking in the sun.

After a few minutes, when he still didn’t hear any water splashing, he opened his eyes looking about. He couldn’t see Shada in the water or on the beach. He frantically scanned the area until he saw her climbing a nearby rocky outcropping that hung over the lagoon.

“Shada, what are you doing?” he shouted, trying to control the alarm in his voice.

She levered herself up the last few feet and sat on the top legs dangling over the edge. “Diving. Come on up. It’s not a difficult climb.”

Easy for her to say. “That’s okay.” Then he couldn’t help adding, “Be careful.”

He watched her stand and go to the edge of the overhang peering down into the water. Then she backed up as far as she could go before she took off at a run diving off the edge. Karrde forced himself to watch despite feeling like his heart was caught in his throat as Shada’s lithe body arched gracefully in the air and plunged into the water. She was beautiful. He could only release the breath he’d been holding when she surfaced in the water, slicking her hair back from her face.

Karrde waded into the water and swam out into the deeper water where Shada was floating on her back.

“That was fun.” Shada grinned at him as he approached looking as lighthearted as he’d ever seen her. “You should do it.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” He looked up at the rock overhang and it seemed even higher from here. “Adrenaline junkie.”

“And you’re not? The fearless Talon Karrde?”

“Jumping from great heights is not my idea of a good time.”

She laughed. “Have I discovered your weakness at last? Heights?”

“Falling.”
She laughed again and held a hand out of the water to him. “Come with me. I won’t let you fall.”

“Until the end.”

“That’s the fun part.”

“For you maybe.”

“What kind of spacer are you?” she continued to tease. "Afraid of heights?"

“The kind that prefers to have a sturdy ship around him.” He had no problem in airspeeders or ships. Although he did get a little nervous when flying with an unknown pilot, but that was more about wanting to be in control.

“You’re no fun.”

“That’s not what you said earlier,” he pointed out with a smug grin.

She splashed water at him before swimming away toward the shore and proceeded to climb the rocks again. Karrde swam a little away from her target area and she dove gracefully into the water again.

He began to get a little alarmed when she didn’t immediately surface. He felt something around his ankle and was barely able to take a quick breath before she pulled him under. They both surfaced a few minutes later, Shada was laughing her eyes dancing with delight and he saw a glimpse of the playful, carefree girl he suspected she’d never had the chance to be. Seeing her like that shot a bolt of desire through him and he pulled her to him covering her mouth with his. She responded to his kiss eagerly.

Karrde tied her sarong at the back of her neck. He ghosted a hand over the slightly pink skin of her shoulders. “You got a little bit of a sunburn.”

She shrugged and turned to face him. “I don’t care.” She smiled brilliantly at him. “I had fun today. Thank you, Karrde.” She stood on her toes and caught his mouth in a kiss.

His hands cupped the back of her head, carefully avoiding the zenji needles holding her wet hair twisted up. “I’m glad you had fun,” he said when their mouths parted. "But are you saying you normally don’t have fun with me?”

She gave him a playful swat to the chest. "I wouldn’t keep going off with you if I didn’t, but it was fun to just…” She shrugged as if she couldn’t think of the right word.

“Play?” he supplied.

She shrugged again looking a little embarrassed. “I suppose. Anyway it was a nice break.” She threaded her arm through his. "We should get back town. Mazzic should be done soon.”

Karrde felt the tension creep back onto her body as they walked back up the beach to the airspeeder. There was a part of him that wished he could provide her with a lot more opportunities to let go and play. But he knew it was dangerous to indulge those thoughts.
One Chipper Boss

Chapter Notes

Four Months Later

One Chipper Boss

Mara followed Karrde into his office and settled into one of the chairs across from his desk. She studied him as they waited for Aves to join them. To all outside appearances, Karrde appeared as his normal genial, if somewhat distant self. Karrde was rarely foul tempered and when he was it was well warranted. Mara had found that a refreshing change from most of her previous employers.

But just below the his calm surface she could sense something more underneath, almost imperceptible. He was attempting to mentally keep his emotions locked down, but leaking around the edges were feelings of intense satisfaction.

Mara leaned back in her chair watching him shuffle through the datacards on his desk, his expression having less of a sardonic edge than usual. She debated for a moment whether to call him out on it, but she couldn't resist. Besides, he never stopped himself from needling her about Skywalker. "How's Shada doing?"

Karrde looked up scowling. "Stop doing that."

"I can't help it," she replied, not even bothering to hide her smirk.

"Then stop bringing it up."

"You're such-"

"Hey," Aves said entering the office slightly winded as if he had been rushing from the other side of the compound. "Sorry. I'm late."

"That's quite alright. Your timing is perfect," Karrde told him throwing Mara a dark look.

Aves glanced between Karrde and Mara, before he sat on the chair next to her, snagging a spare datapad from the desk in front of him. Apparently, he had decided it was none of his business.

The meeting progressed onward and they hammered out the shipping assignments and schedules for the next couple of months.

"Hey, Mara, you got a second?" Aves asked as they exited Karrde's office together. The door slid closed behind them as they headed down the hall.

"Sure. What's going on?"

Aves looked around making sure they were alone and then he asked quietly, "Does the boss have a... lady friend?"
Mara didn't reply immediately as she considered how much to reveal. The she said, "I suppose you could say that. Why do ask?"

"He just seems particularly, I don't know... chipper after this last run."

"You noticed too?" Though she didn't know if 'chipper' was the word she'd use for it.

"Yeah and this isn't the first time either. I just thought it was odd."

"Odd? How?" she wondered. Aves had been with the organization a lot longer than she had and probably knew Karrde's sexual habits better than she did. She hadn't really noticed Karrde having any strange proclivities in that area. Unless, you counted having an affair with a very deadly woman who was his competitor's bodyguard. That wasn't very smart for a man of Karrde's reputed intellect.

"Yeah. I mean he's never been a monk or anything, but I've never known him to sleep with a woman more than once or maybe twice. This seems pretty regular."

"Huh." That was odd. He had been with Shada at least six times that she was aware of. Perhaps there was more to this than she thought.

"So, do you know who he's been seeing?"

"Yes, but I'm not going to tell you who it is."

Aves held up his hands in protest. "Oh, I don't care who she is. I just want to know if she's trustworthy."

About as trustworthy as a competitor's bodyguard who was also a Mistryl Shadow Guard could be. But Mara had never sensed any deceit or intent to harm Karrde from Shada D'ukal, only lust and affection.

"I think so."

"Well, good," Aves smiled. "Good for him."

"I don't think it's serious, Aves."

"Probably not, knowing Karrde, but still it's nice to know he's still human after all."

Mara was all too aware that no matter how good of a judge of character, Karrde was still human and sometimes quite capable of misplacing his trust. She just hoped this little affair didn't come back to bite him in the ass.

TBC
One Night Slightly Interrupted

Chapter Notes

4 Month Later

One Night Slightly Interrupted

Somehow the beeping of a comlink penetrated the fog of arousal and lust surrounding the inhabitants of the room, causing Karrde to pause in his task and Shada to growl in frustration, "Not now!"

Shada heard Karrde chuckle from his position between her legs. He reached up and disentangled her clenched hands from his hair. His goatee tickled the sensitive flesh of her thigh as he pressed an apologetic kiss there. "I'm sorry, my dear." Then he sat up and reached for the comlink insistently beeping on the nightstand.

Shada settled more comfortably in bed, pulling the sheet up over herself and adjusting the pillow beneath her head. She watched him as he grabbed his robe and headed to the sitting room to answer the call. "You tell whoever it is that it better be a matter of galactic importance. Or they'll have me to deal with."

Karrde laughed as the door slid closed behind him. Shada lay there patiently for a few minutes but it seemed his return would not be as quick as she'd like. She considered finishing herself off while she waited. She'd been so close to coming when Karrde had withdrawn his very talented tongue from her.

She decided it would be more fun to make him start all over again.

Karrde flicked off his comlink and wondered what sort of punishment Shada had in store for him. Hopefully, it would be the fun kind.

He knew Shada understood duty and wasn't the kind to flounce away because he had to take a call. She wouldn't have hesitated to answer her own comlink.

He dropped his comlink in his robe pocket, before refilling their previously abandoned brandy glasses and bringing them back into the bedroom.

"Trouble?" Shada asked as soon as he entered, apparently prepared for the evening to be cut short if necessary.

He paused for a moment taking in the sight of her looking lusciously disheveled and relaxed in his bed. He did like seeing her like that.

"No, it's been resolved," he said handing her the glass as she sat up in the bed. "I apologize for the interruption but it was necessary."

"I understand." She gave him a wicked smile over the rim of her glass. "You'll just have to start over."
He sat beside her on the bed, his back against the headboard. "With the greatest of pleasure." He leaned close to her, saying in a low tone, "I love the way you taste."

He saw her bare skin flush a bit with his words, but she didn't look away from him. Her lips just quirked into a seductive smile.

It hadn't been like this between them in the beginning. She had at first been uncomfortable with such intimacy. "Shada, may I ask you something?" he asked as a sudden thought struck him.

She took a drink of her brandy. "Depends on what it is."

"Why were you so nervous that first time? Did you get the impression I had some bizarre predilections?"

"Well, I was led to believe that you didn't have any predilections at all, but it seems that rumor was unfounded." She slipped a hand under his robe, sliding it up his bare thigh, teasing him. "But you did have one predilection that I did find a bit bizarre."

"What was that?" He couldn't imagine what she found strange. They hadn't done anything particularly unusual that first time.

Her expression turned thoughtful and she withdrew her hand, glancing at him almost shyly. "The respect and courtesy you treated me with. Like I wasn't just some woman you picked up in a bar to slake you lust with."

"You weren't," he replied automatically. The moment it was out of his mouth he knew he probably shouldn't have said it, but she didn't look like she entirely believed him anyway.

"Yes, well, I wasn't used to that and didn't know what to expect from you, what your game was. It made me nervous, but now I'm used to you making me feel like some fine lady."

"I treat you how you deserve to be treated. You are a fine lady. One of the finest of my acquaintance."

"I'm not," she protested, bitterness coloring her voice. "I've done horrible things in my life. I'm a killer. I'm-"

"You're a warrior, Shada," he cut her off. "A survivor. That's nothing to be ashamed of." It made him angry to think this magnificent woman thought so little of herself. "Those other men were utter fools if they took you as anything other than the finest of ladies." He wondered if she was ever with other men now. The thought made him feel strangely jealous, even though he had occasionally been with other women between the times he ran into her. They had made no promises to each other, so he shouldn't feel that way. "Not withstanding this between us, there are few beings I hold in higher respect. Why did you think I was interested in you in the first place?"

"I always thought it was a bit of petty revenge at Mazzic for believing what Thrawn told him about you."

Karrde shook his head. "No, you fascinated me. Ever since I met you on Trogan." He'd even thought to offer her a job when things calmed down following the defeat of Thrawn. However, while doing his research on her he had discovered that Shada was a Mistryl Shadow Guard and that Mazzic was likely her assignment along with her employer. Even if he could have lured her away from Mazzic, Karrde did not want someone with such divided loyalties in his organization.

Shada looked down at the glass in her hands. "I went with you because I wanted to teach Mazzic a
lesson." She looked back up at him with apprehension.

"I know," he replied without censure. "I knew you were angry at Mazzic that night and that it might be the only chance I'd get to pry you from his side so I could get what I wanted."

She laughed a little at that. "So we both got what we wanted that night. Why did you approach me again on Rhinnal? Why are we still doing this years later?"

"I'm still fascinated with you. Are you still trying to teach Mazzic a lesson?"

"No." She smiled, a touch mysteriously. "These nights are a nice respite from duty."

"Sometimes more than others," he smiled wryly, taking the empty glass from her hand and setting both their glasses down on the nightstand.

"Speaking of which…" She reached for the sash of his robe. "You have some amends to make."

TBC
Chapter Notes

3 Months Later

One Corellian Spumakas

Shada and Mirax Terrik Horn had been chatting of inconsequential things as the crew loaded the cargo Mirax had brokered onto the Distant Rainbow. Mazzic had already headed off with Booster for a drink.

They paused in their conversation as one of the crewmen approached with a small crate. "Shada, this one's marked for you not Mazzic."

"Huh. That's strange." She took it from him and looked at the label. Booster operated something of an underground mail service on the Errant Venture. Fringers such as smugglers normally didn't like to broadcast the location of their bases, but they all stopped off at the Errant Venture at one point or another, so it had become convenient to drop off point.

"Excuse me a second," Mirax said and wandered up the cargo ramp, gracefully giving Shada a chance to open the package in relative privacy.

Shada went off to the side and sat on one of the larger cargo crates. She knew Booster's people scanned all packages left for explosives, so she doubted it was a bomb. She broke the seal and opened the crate. Inside carefully packed in foam was a small sculpture of a Corellian Spumakas carved of some kind of black stone with eyes inlaid with topaz. It was obviously an antique, the edges a little worn with age. There was no card or note but she knew exactly who it was from.

Shada sat there lost in thought, trying to fathom what in the worlds Karrde had meant by this.

"Oh, that's lovely."

She looked up sharply seeing Mirax approach her again.

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" she replied forcing a nonchalant tone.

"May I see it?"

"Sure," Shada handed it over. Mirax often dealt in exotics and antiques. Maybe she could offer some insight.

"I haven't seen one of these in ages." Mirax held it up, examining it closely. "Let alone one in such good condition outside of a museum. Where did you get it, if you don't mind me asking?"

"A- ah- friend sent it to me. He tried to persuade me to get a spumakas a while ago. A live one that is. I guess this is his idea of a joke." That was certainly a possibility. It seemed in fitting with Karrde's often peculiar sense of humor.

"Expensive joke." Mirax handed it back.
Shada held it up and stared into the sculpture's topaz eyes. "What is it exactly? I mean other than the obvious."

"It's an idol. An animal form of one of the ancient Corellian gods. This is the goddess of luck. If you ever want to sell it let me know."

"Is it worth that much?"

"Oh, yeah. Your friend must really like you." Mirax gave her a teasing wink.

"It's nothing like that," Shada replied hastily.

The other woman shrugged. "Still, it's a very nice gift."

Shada didn't know if 'nice' is the word she would use. More like 'perplexing'.

TBC
One Frozen Night

Chapter Notes

4 Months later

One Frozen Night

Shada wore a coat of luxurious silvery fur. Mazzic had won it in a sabacc game while ago when his opponent had run out of funds. She thought Mazzic had contemplated keeping it for himself, but it was really far too ridiculous coat for him to seriously wear. So he had given it to her, saying that it would indicate he kept the woman who was supposed to be his mistress in style. She wasn't sure it was exactly stylish, but it was ostentatious and she couldn't deny it was warm in this snowy landscape.

"Karrde sure knows how to pick his bases," Mazzic said as they got out of the snowspeeder that had been sent to pick them up at the landing area.

The deep hood of her coat prevented her from glancing to the side, instead she had to turn her body to see an equally bundled up, though less furry, Mazzic beside her.

"Perhaps you could learn something from him," she told him. Mazzic's bases tended to be backwater holes in the wall, nothing like the abandoned snow resort Karrde had apparently taken over for the time being. He seemed to have a penchant for the dramatic. She remembered the ancient fortress that had once been his base on Hijarna.

They followed the path to what was once the main lodge of the resort. Slightly off to the side of the main entrance, the snow was stained in several places with blood and imprints left where bodies had fallen. They both instinctively drew blasters. The doors opened and Karrde walked out on the veranda.

"You won't need those," he told them. "Please come in and warm yourselves."

"So what's this about?" Mazzic waved his blaster at the bloodstains.

"A reminder of how betrayal is handled in this organization."

"I understand I might need to make a similar display," Mazzic said referring to the vague summons he'd received from Karrde. He holstering his blaster and motioned to Shada to put hers away too.

"We'll discuss it after dinner. You've arrived just in time for our afternoon meal."

Shada climbed the steps and looked up into Karrde's face. It was stony without a trace of the usual sardonic humor, his body tensed with controlled anger. He offered her a tight smile.

"I hope dinner's hot," Mazzic said coming up behind her. "This place is as bad as Hoth."

Karrde led them into the foyer. "I regret the necessity of having you come here, but I thought this news was best delivered personally."
"No problem. I appreciate the heads up."

The door shut behind them and they began shedding the layers of their snow gear. Shada took off her gloves and began unfastening her coat. No matter what mood Karrde was in, he was still the perfect host and pulled the coat from her shoulders. "Thank you," she said glancing at him over her shoulder.

"You're welcome."

After dinner, Karrde and Mazzic closeted themselves away to discuss the information Karrde had uncovered about some of Mazzic's associates stealing from the organization. When Karrde had interrogated those that had betrayed his own organization he had apparently learned that the scheme extended through several other smuggling groups including Mazzic's.

Shada retired to the common room with the others after dinner. They were a much more subdued lot than she was used to. Karrde's organization was a close knit group despite its size and the betrayals had hit them hard. She played a game of dejarik with Aves, easily beating him. Aves was doing his best to entertain their guest, but his heart really wasn't in it. She decided to put them all out of their misery. "It's been a long day. If you'll excuse me I think I'll retire for the evening."

Mara Jade immediately stood. "I'll show you to your room."

"Thank you."

They walked in silence up the rather rustic staircase to the top floor and down a long corridor.

To her surprise Mara followed her into the room and closed the door behind her.

Shada raised a questioning eyebrow. "Mara?"

"Karrde won't ask you to spend the night with him tonight."

Shada turned away making a show of surveying the room. "Thank you for the notice." She tried to keep the irritation out of her voice but it was difficult. She hadn't been expecting to spend the night with Karrde. They were here on business after all, not to mention on his base surrounded by his people. She understood the unspoken rules of their relationship quite well. She didn't need him to send a lackey to tell her presence in his bed wasn't wanted.

"He won't ask, but you should go to him anyway," Mara continued.

"I don't go where I'm not wanted." Shada turned back to the other woman and glared at her.

"He wants you. Trust me." A little smirk twisted her lips. "He's just intent on punishing himself."

"That's none of my concern."

Mara looked at her as if she didn't believe her. "There's a balcony that goes all the way around the top floor." She pointed to a door set between the large windows making up one wall of the room. "That's the best way to access his room without being seen. It's on the opposite of the building."

"Is coordinating Karrde's liaisons part of your job?" Shada asked irritably, feeling like she was being maneuvered and she didn't like it.

"No, he normally does that well enough on his own. However, it is part of my job to prevent him from making mistakes."
"And having no one to warm his bed on this frozen planet is a mistake?"

"He normally sleeps alone, so, no, not really. But it would be a mistake if he continued on in this dark mood. It's affecting morale. Maybe you can clear his head."

"That's not how this thing between us works," Shada protested.

"Maybe it should." Mara glanced at her chrono. "Give him at least an hour. He should be done briefing Mazzic by then."

Shada sat on the edge of her bed in the room they'd assigned her. It was a very nice room. Karrde never scrimped when it came to hospitality.

She hated that she was in a quandary. She didn't owe Karrde anything. She wondered for a moment if Mara had used some sort of Jedi mind trick on her. But if she had then Shada wouldn't be sitting here debating what to do. Shada abruptly stood and stripped off her quilted jumpsuit and undergarments. She doubted that Karrde would just fall into bed with her if he was in such a mood as Mara described. She pulled the zenji needles out of her hair and shook her hair out. After that she pulled her snowboots back on and slipped into her fur coat, pulling it tightly about her.

She went through the door onto the balcony. It had started to snow a bit again. She walked silently to the other side of the building. She rounded a corner and was surprised to see Karrde sitting in a chair against the wall with a steaming mug in his hand. He had on a heavy padded tunic, which still seemed inadequate in this cold. He should have had a coat on as well. "Aren't you cold?"

He glanced up at her seemingly unsurprised by her sudden appearance and took a long sip from his mug. "Always," he said, bitterness coloring his voice. "I thought you knew that."

She moved closer to him, "Let me warm you."

"Shada," he said in a warning voice. "I'm not sure this is a good idea tonight."

She ignored him and sat down across his lap. He didn't try to dislodge her. "May I kiss you?" she asked.

There was a long moment as he studied her, his face still hard, and she thought he was going to refuse her. Eventually, he said, "Yes."

She leaned down and met his cold lips. She absently heard the mug he had been holding clatter to the floor a moment before she felt his hands in her hair holding her still as he thoroughly explored her mouth. His mouth was warm on hers and tasted of the caf and whiskey he'd been drinking.

She gasped when his cold hands found the bare skin beneath her coat. "Shada," he groaned in her ear. "You're going to kill me."

"I hope not. I've got plans for you."

The chill from the air and his cool hands caused her nipples harden and he dipped his head slightly drawing one into his warm mouth. Shada groaned at the sensation and her hands slid into his hair.

She tried to guide his head to where she wanted, but he stopped and pulled away, his hands going around her wrists, stilling her hands. She looked down at him curious. "Don't fight me tonight, Shada," he said quietly. "Let me have my way with you for once."
She studied him for a long time, but his expression was impenetrable. Finally, she nodded. "If you do anything I don't like, I'll kill you."

He smiled slightly. "I know." She thought her threat might have aroused him even further.

He pulled her hands behind her back, then firmly grasped her wrists together with one hand holding her in place. She could have easily broken free but she didn't try. His other hand reached up tangling in her hair drawing her down to his mouth. The kiss was long and hard and more possessive than any between them before. When she eventually tried to pull back for breath, he would let her, his hand tightening in her hair. She almost felt lightheaded as the kiss continued. Her first instinct was to push away fighting, but she forced herself to relax. He released her hair and trailed kisses to her ear. "Good," he whispered roughly. An involuntary shiver ran through her that had nothing to do with the cold. "Very good."

His mouth was hot on her cool exposed skin as he made his was down to her breasts again.

Karrde lost track of how long it had been since Shada had come to him. It felt at once an eternity and a moment. But the deep cold finally penetrated his aroused and heated body and he knew they needed to move this indoors. He slipped an arm under her legs holding her close to his chest as he stood.

He carried her into the warmth of his bedroom. He lay her down gently on his bed.

She was a vision he'd never forget lying there looking like some sort of wintery warrior goddess. Half revealed and half concealed by the fur of her coat. Her skin pale, but her lips and nipples swollen and rosy from his mouth. She lay there passively waiting for him, her eyes dark with desire and her breathing ragged. She held out a hand to him, beckoning him to her. Unable to resist, he joined her on the bed he peeled the coat from her warm body.

She was his completely for the night.

Karrde's hands had not left her body since he had slid his cold hands beneath her coat.

It was near dawn now and his fingers were lightly stroking the skin of her back. Her skin almost felt raw from the sensation overload, But she didn't move his hand or shift away from his touch. She had promised him complete control tonight.

It had been difficult at first. She'd never submitted to any man like this before. Not even to him. She'd always seen such submission as weakness. She had no idea it could be so freeing. There was a strange sort of relief to not have to think and not have to be responsible. To put her trust in him and just let him give her what she needed. And he had. Things she didn't even know she needed.

It was oddly like her time in Mistyl training when she had unquestionably followed instructions and had felt safe and not hungry for the first time in her life. Although the Eleven and her Mistryl sisters would more than disapprove of her allowing a man to so dominate her sexually, probably more than anything else about her recurring liaisons with Karrde. They might have understood her need for the occasional sexual release, but not putting such trust in any man.

Karrde's hand traveled up her back and sank into her hair, raking it away from her shoulders and neck. He kissed his way across the newly exposed area, his beard rasping across her skin. "I see your brain is working again," his deep voice rumbled in her ear. "Am I to meet my death?"

She rolled over and looked up at him. His eyes were cautious but his face was relaxed, no longer
stony and hard. "No."

He studied her for a long time. His hand trailed down her bare arm his long fingers circled her wrist gently. "Did you like it?"

He had made her come so many times that night that she had lost count. But having an orgasm didn't necessarily mean that one liked how it had been achieved.

She felt her cheeks redden because she had liked it and she was embarrassed that she had liked to be restrained by him. "Yes," she whispered. "But don't expect this every time."

He smiled a bit and she could see the relief in his eyes. He brought her hand to his lips. "Thank you for your trust."

She couldn't help but inquire, "Would you trust me as much if I asked?"

"Yes," he answered without hesitation.

An odd emotion lurched in her chest and she knew they were on dangerous ground. They were in danger of becoming entangled. Something neither could afford.

She sat up in the bed and looked around for her coat and boots. "I should go."

"Of course."

She pulled her boots on and when she stood he wrapped that ridiculous fur coat around her. He held her close for a moment. "Thank you, Shada." He pressed one last kiss to her cheek. "You are a treasure."

Shada couldn't help but think that had been an odd thing to have said to her. She knew that she would spend many a moment trying to puzzle out what he meant.

TBC
Shada threw down her cards. "I can't take this anymore." The incessant hammering of the rain against the hull of the ship was driving her crazy. They'd been grounded for two days now on Legron waiting for the storm to let up. They hadn't left the ship since it had begun in earnest, mainly passing time by playing sabacc. She was thoroughly sick of Mazzic, the crew, and the close confines of the ship by now. "I'm going for a walk."

"In this storm?"Mazzic asked shuffling the cards for another game.

"I'd rather be drowned or blown away than spend another moment stuck here." She wasn't very good at being idle and confined.

"Be careful," Mazzic called as he dealt another round to the rest of the crew, who looked more than a little relieved to see her go. She hadn't been in the best humor the last couple of hours.

Shada put on her raingear and set out away from the spaceport. The wind was so intense the raingear was almost pointless. She was soaked almost as soon as she left the Distant Rainbow. The native Legronians were amphibious and seemed to be out in force enjoying the rain. Most of the offworlders were holed up in cantinas and tapcafes or on their ships cursing the natives refusal to utilize climate control satellites to regulate the weather.

After a while she thought about ducking into a tapcafe, but they all seemed packed and she was in no mood to be in such a side street she heard an odd sound that she couldn't quite place, but thought she should know. Shada warily reached for her blaster and looked about for the sound.

"Chin, is that you?" a very familiar voice called, followed quickly by a pair of vornskrs on leads held by Talon Karrde in rain gear similar to her own.

She holstered her blaster and walked toward them. "Karrde, if you think I look like Chin, I'm going to have to question your taste in women."

"Shada," she saw his a delighted grin even in the muted light. "I take it you're grounded as well."

"Unfortunately." The vornskrs were right in front of her now, making that strange cackle/purr sound at her, wagging their stubby tails.

"I see you remember this lovely lady."

Shada held out a hand allowing them to smell her before giving each a scratch behind the ears. "Don't you have people to walk these beasts for you?"

Karrde shrugged. "They're holed up in some tapcafe contributing to the local economy. Besides, I was going a little stir crazy. Where are you headed?"

"Nowhere really. I just couldn't bear being stuck on the ship longer."
"Would you like to come to my room? We'll have dinner if you haven't eaten yet."

Shada smiled. He always seemed to want to feed her. As if sharing a meal would make their liaison less tawdry. "Sure."

She walked with him, not to a hotel as she expected, but to a nondescript apartment building nearby. "I keep an apartment here due to the frequent delays when we come," he explained.

"Good idea." She knew spacers bitterly complained about the frequent groundings due to the intense weather, but Legron was the only place that could grow the Squell, a plant that seemed to only thrive in the stormy conditions here and was extremely prized by gourmands the galaxy wide. Squell was thus very expensive and traders and smugglers were willing to put up with the inconvenience to turn a tidy profit on the stuff.

They shed their raingear and boots in the vestibule that was common in the buildings near the spaceport, but the warm air dryers didn't come on. "I had them disabled," Karrde told her noting her apparently disappointed expression. "Sturm and Drang don't like them." He pulled a towel from the shelf and began drying one of the vonskrs. Shada grabbed another and began on the other one. Once the vonskrs were sufficiently dried, they all went into the apartment. Karrde eyed her wet and slightly muddy clothes. "Let me get you something to change into."

"Thanks." No amount of raingear could keep a person dry during that kind of driving rain.

Karrde went off into what she assumed was the bedroom. She stood there awkwardly looking about the common room. It was a rather spartan space. Not much in the way of the personal about, but she supposed Karrde didn't spend a whole lot of time here. The vonskrs had gone to lay down on two pads near the conversation circle, but their eyes were focused on her.

Karrde came back out and handed her a pile of clothes. "There's a dryer in the refresher."

"Thanks," Shada went into the refresher and dried herself off and put on the clothes provided, soft pullover shirt and some loose pants with a drawstring. After Shada had dried her hair she just wove it into a braid instead of putting it back up with her zenji needles.

She decided she'd better call Mazziic while she was at it. "I ran into a friend," she told him over the comlink. "I'll be back in the morning if the storm hasn't broken by then."

"Is it your 'special friend'?" She could almost hear the leer in his voice.

Shada grimaced. "I suppose you could say that."

"Just hang out then until the storm breaks. The boys and I are going to follow your example and find somewhere more entertaining."

She sighed. "Where will you be? I'll meet you."

"No. Just stay there. You'd cramp our style."

"Oh, that kind of entertainment."

"Hey, you're not the only one who needs to get laid."

"Goodbye, Mazziic."

Shada came back out into the small common room to find Karrde had changed into dry clothes
similar to the ones he'd provided her as well. She'd never seen him in quite such a relaxed state of dress and without a blaster, other than being completely disrobed of course. It felt strangely intimate.

Karrde ordered in dinner for them and they ate leisurely lounging on the sofa. It was the best food she'd had in a while. She was sick of standard shipboard rations. Karrde was always a gracious host anyway and managed to set a decent table no matter the circumstances. He also seemed to have a nice bottle of something stashed away no matter where he was.

Shada took a sip of her drink and surveyed the room once more while Karrde put up the remains of their food. She caught sight of a melodium lying on one of the end tables. "Do you play or is that just for show?" she asked, pointing with her glass to the instrument when he returned.

"Show?" he gestured to the minimalist surroundings. "Who do you think I'm trying to impress with this?"

"So you do play?"

"Not as well as I'd like," he grimaced, looking as close to embarrassed as Karrde ever got. It made her very curious.

"Play me something."

"I told you I'm not very good."

"What's this? Talon Karrde admitting he's not good at something?" she teased with a grin.

"Oh, Shada, you wound me," he returned in the same playful tone.

"Unlikely. Now play me something," she commanded in a mock imperious tone.

Karrde made an elaborate bow. "Your wish is my command, my lady."

He picked up the melodium and sat down beside her on the sofa, fiddling with the tuning for a few moments until he was satisfied. "What would you like to hear?"

She shrugged. "Something pretty."

After Karrde finished playing, she nudged his thigh with her foot. "You're a liar, Karrde. You play beautifully." And he did. She enjoyed music, but had no talent for it whatsoever herself, so she was always impressed with people who did.

"Thank you. I don't have time to practice as I should and I generally don't play for an audience. It just something helps me relax and get my mind off of things."

"I'm honored that you played for me then," she told him truthfully. "Will you play me something else?"

Shada had never before actually slept the night through with any man, not even Karrde. Sure they napped and dozed between their sessions of sex, but never like this.

After Shada had rewarded him for his lovely playing last night, they had fallen asleep spooned together and she didn't awaken until morning. For once she had nowhere to be, just bide her time until the storm was over.
It was strange and more than a little disconcerting.

When she woke, the rain was still pelting against the window and she found the sound curiously relaxing.

It had been months since she and Mazzic had met Karrde on his base and she had allowed Karrde to completely have his way with her. She had been worried that it might be the same with him again this time, but it wasn't. Whatever darkness had settled on him then had lifted and it was as it usually was with them.

She felt Karrde shift behind her, his arm tightening around her waist. "Good morning," his voice rumbled in her ear.

"Good morning," she replied, feeling a little awkward, not knowing exactly what to do or what was expected of her since she didn't have to leave. "What are your plans for the day?"

She felt him exhale against her neck. "Well, I'm going to have to work a bit today. So I won't be able to entertain you all day."

She tensed up, ready to spring out of bed. "I can leave. I don't want to be in the way."

"Oh, no." He ran a hand down her body soothing her suddenly taut body. "I have plans for you. Besides you're overestimating my stamina if you think I can last all day long."

"Well, you have slept all night," she teased, as he trailed kisses down her neck and shoulder.

"Oh, were you feeling neglected? Let me remedy that."

---

Shada was lying on the sofa, idly stroking Drang, who was lying on the floor beside the sofa, and watching the newsfeed on the Holonet. She had been unobtrusive all morning as he tried to work. 'Try' being the operative word. He found his gaze continually wandering from his screen to Shada as she lounged unselfconsciously looking deliciously relaxed wearing nothing but his shirt, her long pale legs in stark contrast to the midnight blue of the fabric.

"Shada," he called from his desk and she looked over at him. "Would you mind coming over here for a moment?"

She rose gracefully from the couch and walked over to him. "Is the weather letting up?"

"Not yet." He pushed his chair away from the desk. He reached out grasping her wrist drawing her closer. "Sit down."

An amused smile crossed her lips and she forwent sitting on his lap instead perching on the edge of his desk. She thought she was thwarting him, but he much preferred the view of her there on his desk. He snagged her ankles setting her bare feet on the arms of his chair. He ran his hands up her long smooth legs. "You, my dear Shada, are very distracting."

"Should I leave then? So you can get some work done?" she asked only half teasing.

"No, I could use a break."

He plucked one foot from the armrest. Digging his thumbs into the sole of her foot in a massage. She let out a throaty moan, closing her eyes at the sensation and he couldn't take his eyes from the blissful look on her face. "That feel good?"
"Mmhmm." She leaned back bracing her arms on his desk.

"Yes, I suppose you can't always wear the most practical shoes for your duties." His hands drifted up her calves massaging the muscles there. After a while he set that foot back on the armrest and started massaging the other foot and leg. So involved was he that he was startled when her other foot landed on his thigh. He paused, lifting the foot back on the armrest but it immediately dropped back down to his leg again running seductively up his thigh. "Shada..." he said warningly, but the foot trailed up pressing gently on his half-hard cock forcing him to swallow a moan of his own. He grasped both ankles holding them firmly to the armrests. She looked down at him with curiosity in her heavy lidded eyes. "Unfasten your shirt."

She sat up straighter and reached for the fastenings of the shirt, her eyes holding his. She leaned back again when she was done, only a sliver of pale flesh visible between the unfastened plackets. He released her ankles and sat up, parting the dark fabric to reveal the naked flesh underneath. His mouth trailed from her neck on down teasing her until her hands went to his head, guiding him where she wanted him and that insistent foot pressing on his arousal again.

There wasn't going to be much work accomplished, but he found he didn't care in the least.

After dinner that night, they played a game of dejarlic and Shada won apparently surprising Karrde.

He leaned back in his chair eying the board thoughtfully. "You're an excellent strategist."

"You sound surprised," she laughed. "I thought you didn't buy the vacant eyed mistress routine."

"I don't. But it's rare someone actual beats me at dejarik." Unusual for him, he sounded a little petulant.

She almost laughed, but kept her expression serious and affronted. "Oh, I get it. You're pride's hurt so you insult me."

"I didn't insult you. I said you were an excellent strategist."

"Your tone implied the insult," she said allowing a teasing smile.

"Then I apologize for my tone," he said matching her smile. "You are a most worthy opponent. Will you do me the honor of another game?"

It was a strange sensation, Karrde thought, to wake up to a woman in his arms two mornings in a row. Not just any woman either, but Shada D'ukal. While this situation was extremely enjoyable, it was also extremely disconcerting. He was self aware enough to know he could very easily get used to waking up beside her. And that would never do.

He sighed quietly and looked down at Shada. He had found he quite liked watching her sleep. She seemed softer somehow. The hard wariness in her features smoothed out and her face clean of the vibrant cosmetics she usually wore in her role as Mazzic's mistress made her look a little younger.

"Stop that," she said surprising him.

"What?"

She opened her eyes meeting his. "Staring at me while I'm asleep. It's creepy."
He laughed. "Well, I certainly wouldn't want that. It's just that I rarely see you without cosmetics," he told her, only voicing part of his thoughts.

She smiled a trifle ruefully. "I usually do have quite the mask on, don't I?" She reached her hands over her head and stretched. "This has been nice. You saved me from going stir crazy and possibly injuring someone."

"I'm always happy to do my civic duty in the interest of public safety. Especially, if that duty is so delightful." He leaned down and kissed her, determined to make the most of the scant hours they had left. The storm was forecasted to break around mid-day and they would both be going their separate ways shortly.

TBC
"If I don't see you before we depart I bid you good journey." Karrde shook Mazzic's hand then Shada's.

She was surprised to feel him press something small into her palm. She waited until she was in her room before seeing what it was. It turned out to be a scrap of filmsy folded into a tiny square. She unfolded it to find a series of numbers. Karrde's room number and access code.

She was surprised, she hadn't expected to have a night with him since they were all here for a meeting of the Smuggler's Alliance. He had never suggested a night together at any of the Alliance's previous meetings.

Karrde returned to his room later than he had planned. Par'tah had caught him and it had taken him some time to politely extract himself. He found Shada sprawled in the center of his bed to all appearances nude under the sheet. Her long, loose dark hair was a stark contrast against the white sheets. She was awake but her eyes were a little bleary as if she had been asleep.

"I apologize for keeping you waiting," he told her stepping up to the side of the bed. "I was unexpectedly detained."

"It's alright," she smiled up at him.

"I'm happy you were free to spend the evening with me."

"I'm happy you asked. I wasn't expecting it."

He shrugged nonchalantly. "Our business has been concluded. I saw no reason why we shouldn't indulge ourselves. May I get you something? A drink perhaps?"

"I already took the liberty." She pointed to a glass on the nightstand. "I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all." Karrde poured himself a drink and then sat on the edge of the bed, enjoying the sight of her in his bed and the anticipation of what was just beneath the sheet. "Are you going to share?"

She looked supremely comfortable sprawled there in the middle.

"I don't think so," she said stretching her arms across the bed on either side of her. "Your room is so much nicer than mine."

"One of the perks of being in charge." His eyes were drawn to the creamy flesh of her outstretched arms. His fingers itched to touch the silky skin of her inner arm. "Well, if you're not going to share the bed, may I at least touch you?"

She looked up at him with heavy lidded eyes, "Yes."
He gently lifted the arm closest to him, lightly running a finger down the sensitive skin from the
crease of her elbow to her wrist. He was rewarded by seeing her skin break out in goosebumps. He
brought her hand up and pressed an open mouthed kiss to her palm. She shivered in response but
pulled her hand away. "I didn't say you could kiss me."

"My apologies, my dear." He reached out to stroke her arm again. "May I kiss you?"

"No."

He was surprised by her answer. "No?" he questioned.

"Not yet."

He gave her a long considering look. "Turn over."

She raised a questioning eyebrow but complied.

He moved farther up on the bed in order to reach her better. He ran his hands through her long dark
hair pushing it over her shoulder. His hands skimmed over the soft skin of her back, the muscles
beneath tense. He suspected that Shada, like him, never fully relaxed. He ran his hands over her
back several times feeling out which areas were the most knotted. When he dug his thumbs into the
muscles at the base of her neck she let out a pained moan. "Was that too hard?"

"No. That was perfect."

Karrde had discovered over the years she sometimes liked a little pain with her pleasure. He
continued the deep massage.

"I should hire you as my personal masseuse," she commented.

He smiled at that. "I doubt you could afford my rates."

"Probably not."

"You're going to be sore tomorrow."

"I'm usually sore after a night with you." He could tell she hadn't meant to say that because she
immediately tensed up. He redoubled his efforts and didn't comment. Although he did feel a surge
of masculine pride at her admission. He only stopped when she was relaxed into a boneless heap.

"May I kiss you now?"

Shada languidly turned over onto her back again. She reached for his hands and he thought she was
going to pull him down to her, but she didn't. "You have nice hands," she said studying them. One
deceptively delicate looking finger traced the skin around the wide tooled leather cuff of his chrono
and up his forearm until she came to the rolled up sleeve of his shirt. "Take your clothes off," she
told him, her voice husky. She looked up meeting his eyes challenging him to follow her
instructions. She knew he had difficulty surrendering control even during the nights they shared
together.

He pulled off his boots and tossed them in the direction of the closet. He took out his blaster and
comlink placing them both on the nightstand with her comlink and zenji needles. All within easy
reach of them both. He stood and took off his gunbelt. Her eyes never left him as he disrobed. He'd
never undressed in front of a woman like this. He felt vaguely uncomfortable yet incredibly
aroused at the same time. When he was naked, she held out a hand to him and he let her to pull him
down on the bed and on top of her the sheet still between them. "May I kiss you now?" he whispered desperately.

"Yes."

Karrde was awoken by a comlink. He automatically reached over to grab it off the nightstand and flicked it on. "Karrde."

There was a long pause before Mazzic said, "Can I talk to Shada?"

In the dim light of the room, Karrde stared at the comlink in his hand. It wasn't his. Shada sat up beside him in bed and glared blaster bolts at him. She grabbed it, before smacking him hard in the arm.

"Kriff. That hurt," he protested.

She hit him again as she crawled out of bed, making his arm ache. It felt like he would have a bone deep bruise. He watched her go into the refresher to take the call in private. His head fell back on his pillow and he sighed deeply. He knew he had screwed up.

A short while later, Shada exited the refresher wearing his robe tightly belted about her. She strode toward him with a murderous look in her eye. His hand itched to reach for his blaster but he knew if she truly meant to harm him it would be worthless.

And he probably shouldn't have been as turned on by her anger as he was either.

"You bastard! You did that on purpose, didn't you?"

"I did not," he replied calmly, meeting her burning eyes. "I'm not used to having other people's comlinks going off in the middle of the night. I naturally assumed it was mine."

"I can't believe, you of all people, would be that sloppy."

"You're quite right, Shada. It was sloppy. I apologize."

All the anger seemed to drain out of her and she sat beside him on the edge of bed. She reached out to stroke his bearded cheek. He had to force himself not to flinch away from her as her now cool grey eyes studied him intently.

"You know, Karrde," Shada said, her voice barely a whisper, but deadly nonetheless. "For all your vaunted intellect and cold calculation, you're reckless. Otherwise, you wouldn't have gotten involved with me to start with. I am not a wise choice."

He could have hardly picked a worse person to have a liaison with. She was a Mistryl Shadow Guard, a deadly woman with a fanatical devotion to her people, not to mention a job involving masquerading as his rival's mistress. A bad combination all together. "I know," he replied, his voice just as quiet as hers had been.

His hand trailed from his cheek down to his throat, her fingers cool on his heated skin. He had no doubt that graceful hand could crush the life out of him in mere moments. "Don't put me in a position where I have to kill you, Karrde. Not after all these years." She seemed extraordinarily weary in that moment. He wondered if that would be the price she would have to pay if the Mistryl ever found out about their continuing liaisons.
"I'm sorry, Shada."

She nodded and removed her hand from his throat. He took her hand and pulled her down on top of him. Her hair was a dark curtain around them as he leaned up to catch her mouth with his. "I'm sorry," he whispered again between kisses.

He was reckless, but so was she, for the smart thing for them both to do right then and there would be to part company forever. But neither suggested it.

TBC
"Hey, Shada," Mazzic said coming up to sit at the table where she was eating breakfast. She was surprised to see him. Usually she was the only one up at this hour of the morning. "You remember that I owe Karrde for that save a while back."

"Yeah," Shada said warily, setting down her fork and focusing her attention on Mazzic. Several months ago, one of Mazzic's ships had been impounded and Karrde, who happened to be on planet, had gotten the crew offworld before they could be arrested.

"Well, he's called in his marker and I've got what he wants ready to go."

"And?"

"And I thought he might appreciate it if you delivered it."

"Mazzic, are you offering me as a thank you to Karrde?" she asked her voice low and dangerous.

"No! No, of course not. I can't take it myself since I have to be at that meet on Utapau. I could send someone else, but I just thought since you two didn't get a chance to hook up in while you might want to, y'know-"

Shada felt her face flush hotly. She didn't think she'd ever been so embarrassed in her life. "Mazzic, it's not like that."

He held up his hands forestalling her arguments."Hey, I don't pretend to understand it. Karrde's one of the most cold blooded bastards I've ever met, but he obviously does something for you. I know it's none of my business, but you need some sort of outlet same as the rest of us. You're not a droideka."

Shada leaned back studying him. "Aren't you worried that he plans to use me against you?"

"Are you worried about that?" Mazzic asked pointedly.

"No. He doesn't operate that way. And if he ever tried, I'd kill him."

"See, I got nothing to worry about. I trust you, Shada."

"Thank you, Mazzic," she smiled for a moment, before saying sternly. "And I don't ever want to have this discussion again."

Mazzic laughed. "So are you going to take the run?"

"Are you sure you won't need me on Utapau?"

"No. I'm not expecting trouble."

"Then, yes."

As the ramp lowered, Karrde and Booster walked up to greet Mazzic. But Mazzic wasn't there.

Shada D'ukal stood at the top of the ramp alone dressed in a serviceable grey jumpsuit with a blaster holstered on her thigh and a vibroblade in her tall boot. Her hair was simply dressed in a
long braid without her trademark zenji needdles. He'd never seen her in anything so casual. She looked like any common spacer, not the exotic creature that usually hung on Mazzic's arm.

But he found her no less appealing like this.

"Shada," Booster called. "Did you space Mazzic and decide to take over?"

"Not yet," she smiled at the big man. Then her attention shifted to Karrde. "Mazzic was tied up with another matter and asked me to deliver your cargo. He sends his apologies that he wasn't able to do it personally."

"Not at all. I'd rather it had not been delayed." He took her extended hand and shook it. "Besides, it's always a pleasure to see you."

"Thank you for understanding."

"You can tell Mazzic he can just send you from now on," Booster said with a grin. "I'd rather deal with you too."

"I'll tell him," Shada returned his grin. "I'm sure he'd rather not deal with you either, Booster." She turned back to Karrde. "Do you want to make the transfer now?"

"If that's convenient for you."

"Of course."

Karrde called his crewmen over and they brought a repulsor sled over and Shada escorted them into the ship to the cargohold. She watched as they loaded the shipping containers. When they were finished, she joined Karrde in the landing bay. Booster had wandered away and was talking to one of his crewers near the door.

"Are we good?" she asked Karrde.

"Yes. Thank Mazzic for me."

"I will."

"Do you have to leave immediately?"

"No, I'll be here a couple of days. Mazzic gave me a shopping list."

"In that case, would you care to join me for dinner?"

"That would be nice. Thank you. Would you mind if I get changed first?" she asked pulling at the material of her jumpsuit.

"Will an hour be sufficient? At the Bright Star?"

Shada nodded. "I'll meet you there."

---

Karrde stopped by his own quarters and changed as well into something dressier than his normal shipboard clothes and leather flight jacket he'd been wearing. Before he left he put a quick polish on his boots too.

He arranged for a table when he got to the restaurant and then went to the bar to wait for Shada. He
had hoped she would be with Mazzic and that they might have a night together, but he hadn't been counting on it. Shada coming alone and being able to spend several nights with him was good fortune indeed. Despite himself he found he quite looked forward to these assignations with Shada.

A large figure leaned against the bar beside him and signaled the bartender. "What are you doing here?" Karrde demanded.

"Having dinner with you and Shada," Booster replied.

"You weren't invited."

"That's not very nice. Besides, you need a chaperone."

"I assure you, Booster, a chaperone is the last thing we need. Now be away with you."

"Yes, you do," Booster said slowly like he was talking to a small child. "Because you're about to do something really stupid like try to seduce Mazzic's girl."

"That's not the case at all. And I wouldn't let Shada hear you call her 'Mazzic's girl' either."

Booster scowled. "I know you like playing these little power games, but is it really worth pissing off Mazzic like this? He'll want to kill you."

"It's none of Mazzic's business. Shada is not his mistress. She's his bodyguard."

"She's a Mistryl Shadow Guard," Booster pointed out as if that had been a revelation to Karrde.

"Yes, I know."

"She's dangerous and won't put up with any funny business from you."

"I have no intention of giving her cause to do me harm. Thank you for your concern."

"Y'know, if you're this hard up for companionship-"

"I am not hard up. I-" Karrde stopped when he saw Shada enter.

She was wearing a simple turquoise dress that was much more elegant and much less flashy than he was used to seeing on her. It was almost demure, compared to what she normally wore. Her hair was down, brushed out in long ebony waves. He realized he was seeing her for the first time when she wasn't in the costume of Mazzic's mistress.

He saw her eyes go to Booster and he sent her an apologetic look. "I hate you, Booster," he told his friend.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long," she said when she reached them.

"Not at all," Karrde replied. "Especially when you turn up looking so lovely."

"Thank you." She turned to Booster. "I wasn't expecting you to join us."

"I couldn't resist. Can I get you a drink?"

"Sure." If Shada was disappointed in Booster's presence she wasn't showing it. After they were served their drinks, they were led to a booth along one wall that afforded them a good view of the door and the live band. Shada sat in the middle between Karrde and Booster.
Booster turned on his charm as if he was intent on seducing Shada himself. Booster could be one charming bastard when he chose to be. Karrde had to admit that he wasn't completely unpleasant company, but Karrde wasn't in the mood to share Shada's attention. As if sensing the direction of his thoughts Shada placed a warm hand on his thigh as she listened in apparent rapt attention to the story Booster was telling. At least he would have her to himself tonight. He could be content with that.

"Booster," Shada said giving him a dazzling smile. "I love this song. Would you dance with me?"

"Certainly." He winked at Karrde over her head.

Shada gave his thigh a squeeze before standing up.

On the dance floor, Booster pulled Shada closer to him than was a polite distance. "Booster, if you don't move that hand, you're going to lose it."

He laughed but his hand moved up higher on her back. Shada felt almost tiny in his arms and was surprised to find him rather light on his feet. "I know you get no greater joy than winding Karrde up, but I'm only going to tell you this once. If you don't manufacture some emergency that will get you out of our hair, I'm going to cause you to have a medical emergency."

He pulled back from her and looked down so he could study her face. He looked shocked by her serious expression. "Are you really having an affair with Karrde?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to call it an affair."

"But you're sleeping with him?"

"Occasionally. When the opportunity arises. And you're ruining one of those rare times."

"Well, I'll be Kesseled. Does Mazzic know?"

"He's aware of the situation and doesn't care as long we're discreet and it doesn't interfere with business."

"So that's why he sent you alone. That's sort of romantic. I wouldn't have thought he had that in him."

"It has nothing to do with romance. It was convenient. Mazzic was tied up elsewhere. Karrde and I merely enjoy each other's company and when there's an appropriate opportunity we spend the night together."

"Hmph. Well, that answers one question."

"What's that?"

"Whether Talon Karrde has ever desired anything other than information or power."

"He's a man just like any other."

"Just like any other?"

"No," she amended. "He has one rare quality. He's always treated me with the utmost respect and I have found that rare indeed."
Yeah, he would. Okay, Shada, I'll leave you two alone.

And if you ever tell anyone about us, I will end you.

Booster laughed.

I'm serious.

I know. I won't breath a word to anyone else, but I won't promise not to mess with Karrde about this.

She glanced over at Karrde who looked relaxed and supremely confident lounging in the booth watching them. He's a grown man. He should be able to take a little teasing.

I like you, Shada. Booster began leading her back to the table, but paused half way there pulling out his comlink. Shada continued back to the table alone.

She smiled at Karrde and sat down at the table beside him. Booster is a surprisingly good dancer.

He had his arm draped across the back of the booth and his fingers trailed across her bare shoulder. I understand his late wife was fond of dancing.

Did you ever meet her?

No, I never had that pleasure. She died before I became acquainted with Booster. She was by all accounts a very fine lady.

Mirax must take after her mother then.

Karrde grinned at that.

Booster came back up to the table. Well, Shada, I hate to leave you alone in the clutches of this reprobate, but a message just came through from Mirax. I need to get in contact with her.

I'm sure I'll be fine, if not maintenance may have some blood to clean up.

I'll have them on standby.

After Booster left, Karrde gave her a long measured look as he took a sip of his wine. Did you by chance have something to do with Booster's abrupt departure?

Perhaps. Are you complaining?

You know he's going to hold this over my head for the rest of my life, don't you?

Oh, well, in that case, she began sliding to the edge of the seat. I'll just go back to my ship.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her close to his side. No, I've got you in my clutches now. You're not leaving. I can handle Booster.

Are you sure? she grinned.

I'm sure.

Lando Calrissian's headed this way, Shada said quietly.
Karrde looked up from his dessert to see Calrissian approach their table from across the restaurant. Karrde set his fork down and stood to greet him.

Calrissian asked after Mara and after Karrde assured him she was well, the other man turned his attention to Shada. He offered her a charming smile. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your beautiful companion?"

Karrde looked momentarily shocked that he didn't recognize her but covered it quickly. "Of course. This is-"

"Sleena," Shada put in quickly, returning Calrissian's smile with a flirtatious smile of her own. She held out her hand and Lando bowed and kissed it.

"It's a true pleasure to meet you, Sleena." He glanced at Karrde, giving him a knowing grin. "I won't impose on your evening any further." He turned his attention back to Shada. "I hope we will have a chance to meet again, Sleena."

She gave him a mysterious smile, "Perhaps."

Lando bowed again to her when he departed.

Once they finished their desserts, Shada turned to him, "Now, Karrde, you are going to dance with me."

"Do you think that's wise?" he asked remembering her previous threats about being reckless.

"If an infamous ladies man like Lando Calrissian didn't recognize me, do you really think anyone else will?"

"I am rather shocked by Calrissian," Karrde admitted. "He is by no means stupid or unobservant."

"You shouldn't be so surprised. People see what they want to see and I am trained to craft my image for any purpose. You do the same sort of thing. You're always altering your beard or your hair or your clothes to blend in."

"I suppose so. But you're rather memorable."

"That's because you saw me fighting on Trogan. Tell me, what did you think of me when you first met me there, before the Imperials attacked?"

"I…honestly didn't give you much thought. I just thought you were Mazzic's latest plaything."

"And that's what I wanted you to see. That's why I'm a good bodyguard. People dismiss me until it's too late."

"And what image are you projecting tonight?"

"Certainly not that of Mazzic's mistress."

"Hmm." He ran a light finger across the asymmetrical neckline of her dress. "I like this dress."

"You don't think it's too modest?"

"Not in the slightest. I like a little mystery."

She was glad she had read him right. She had bought this dress with him in mind.
"But you've already seen everything I have to offer. Surely there's no longer a mystery."

"There's always a mystery with you. Every time we meet I uncover a new facet of you." She had come to realize that he enjoyed the intellectual seduction as much as the physical.

Karrde stood and offered her a hand. "Shall we?"

She accepted his hand and rose. He led her to the dance floor and pulled her into his arms, keeping a polite distance between them. Shada was not surprised to find he was a good dancer. He seemed well versed in any sort of genteel skill.

"You do know that Calrissian will spread the gossip that I was dining and dancing intimately with a beautiful woman far and wide," he whispered in her ear.

"It might improve your reputation."

He pulled back slightly to meet her eyes. "Pardon?"

"Surely you know most of the fringe thinks you're something of a cold fish."

"Yes, well," he said, looking oddly embarrassed for once. "I've always believed one should keep one's private life private."

"We can leave," she suggested, not wanting him to be uncomfortable. "We don't have to do this."

"No, I find I like being the envy of other men." He pulled her closer to him, so that they were practically cheek to cheek. "Will you stay with me while you're here?"

"You don't mind?"

"No, I also find I like waking up next to you. I'm here for the next week anyway, working on some things with Booster. How long will you be here?"

"I have to rendezvous with Mazzic in four days on Utapau."

"So we gave three nights, then?"

"Yes."

"I look forward to making the most of them."

Shada lay half on Karrde, her head resting on his chest. One of his hands was combing through her hair. It was very soothing. She knew she should have been disturbed by how comfortable she felt with him. These moments were some of the few in her life that she felt at peace. Karrde was probably the last man she should feel safe with but she did in these moments out of time.

"I can hear you thinking," Karrde's voice rumbled under her ear. "What's on your mind?"

"What ever happened to our no personal questions rule?"

"How about I offer you a trade? You answer mine, I'll answer yours."

She sighed and considered lying, but decided to be at least partly truthful. "I was thinking how odd it was that that I feel so comfortable with you."
"Well, it has been a little over seven years since we began these liaisons."

"Has it really been seven years?" That seemed incredibly hard to believe.

"Indeed it has. I think that entitles us to a little ease with each other."

"Hmm."

"Your turn," he prodded when she didn't say anything further.

She didn't really want to know anything more personal about him. It was hard enough to remain unentangled as it was."Where are your vornskrs? I expected to see them."

"They died."

She shifted her head to look at him, his expression sad. "I'm so sorry. I know you cared for them a great deal."

"Well, they did live much longer than vornskrs in the wild. I knew it was coming for some time, but still... I do miss them."

Shada didn't know really what to say. She'd never had any sort of pet and she didn't quite understand that attachment. But she did understand loss.

TBC
Shada awoke spooned against Karrde, his arm heavy across her waist. She shifted against him stretching a little.

"Good morning," Karrde breathed into her ear.

"Good morning."

They lay there for a bit in silence, reluctant to start their day apart. Finally, Shada asked, "Will you be working with Booster today?"

"Yes. I trust you'll be able to amuse yourself?"

"Of course." She would be spending today tracking down the items on Mazzic's shopping list.

"And how might I entertain you tonight, my dear?" He pressed a suggestive kiss to her neck. "Perhaps an intimate dinner alone?"

"No. I want to go to the casino."

"The casino?" He pulled back, sounding surprised. "I thought you'd get enough of that sort of thing with Mazzic."

She turned over and propped herself up on her arm looking down on his slightly confused expression. It made her smile to see him caught offguard for once. "Well, I'm not going to just hang off your arm and watch you play sabacc." She poked him in the chest with a finger. "That's all I ever get to do with Mazzic. I want to have fun. I want to play."

He studied her a moment, taking in her teasing smile and the touch of apprehension in her eyes, wondering what she was really thinking. "Very well. We shall go to the casino and gamble outrageously."

"Not too outrageously. Just enough that I feel like I'm living a little."

"Well, well, well. Look what the sand panther finally drug in," Booster said as Karrde entered his office later that morning. "Have a good night?"

Karrde just smiled and went over the carafe of caf and poured himself a cup.

Booster gave him a sour look. "Figured you wouldn't be the type to kiss and tell."

Karrde sat down in one of the chairs in front the desk. "Where do you want to start?" he picked up one of the datapads stacked on the surface.

Booster pawed through the datacards scattered across his desk and said almost offhandedly, "Lando was by here this morning before he left."

"Oh?"

"He was very interested in 'Sleena'."

Karrde looked up sharply. "Did he recognize her?"
"No. But he did want to know if she was unattached. He didn't think it likely that she was really involved with you," he said a mocking smile twisting his face.

"What did you tell him?"

"That she was a contact of yours."

"Hmm." That was probably the best explanation. His contacts were many and varied.

"Can't say I blame him. Shada's a hell of a woman. When she gets tired of you, I may look her up myself. I like the idea of a warrior woman," Booster mused, leaning back in his chair. "I kind of like that she could break me in two, but she still looks so delicate."

Karrde didn't know if delicate was the right word for Shada. There was nothing fragile about her. She was strong in both body and mind, but there was also an elegant fineness to her features. He supposed anyone short of a Wookiee would look delicate compared to a massive man like Booster. "I'll be sure to let her know."

"You're lucky no one can seem to fathom that you might be romantically interested in a beautiful woman, Karrde. I wouldn't either if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

"It has nothing to do with romance, Booster," he objected. "Just mutual pleasure."

"Yeah, just keep telling yourself that. I've never known you to lie to yourself like that, Karrde."

"I'm not lying to myself," he replied, a touch of exasperation coloring his voice. "I've never desired a romantic relationship with anyone and I don't now. The lady in question certainly doesn't. Why shouldn't we enjoy the pleasure we find in each other when the chance arises?"

"So you're telling me this is just sex," his friend asked, disbelief clear in his tone.

"Of course."

"I know you, Talon Karrde." Booster wagged a finger at him. "If it was just sex you wouldn't be carrying on for so long. And I can tell this has been going on for quite a while. You get bored with that sort of thing fairly quickly. There must be something else going on for you to stay interested. Some sort of intellectual stimulation or something."

"That is true," Karrde agreed, hoping that would shut him up. "She is a fascinating woman."

"She's a dangerous woman. So is it the danger of who she is and what might happen if you're discovered that turns you on?"

"Booster, I'm not discussing this anymore," he said, finality clear in his voice and expression.

That evening when Karrde returned to his quarters, there was the lingering scent of Shada's perfume in the air, but the woman herself wasn't there. He hadn't expected her to be, but the scent teased him, ratcheting up his desire for her.

He pulled out his formal suit from the closet and gave it a once over, making sure it was clean and pressed. Then he took a quick sonic shower before getting dressed.

He made his way to the tapcafe he'd agreed to meet her at. He scanned the crowd as he entered and inadvertently paused in the doorway for a moment when he caught sight of her at the crowded bar.
He could hardly miss her.

She was wearing a crimson shimmer silk gown caught up in the front by a silver collar and draping low at the back. Her dark hair was in loose curls held back from her face by a silver band.

She was smiling and laughing, flirting outrageously with the man next to her.

Karrde tamped down the spike of jealously that went through him. She looked directly at him over the man's shoulder, but didn't act as if she knew him. *I want to play*, she had said this morning. Well, it seemed gambling wasn't the only thing she had on her mind. He made his way to the bar and pushed his way into an empty space beside the man. He nursed his drink, entertained by the ridiculous lies she was telling the man who seemed to think he really had a chance with her. After a while she deftly sent the man on his way, but she still didn't acknowledge Karrde.

He moved closer to her. "It seems your companion has abandoned you. May I join you?"

She turned to him and gave him a look as if she was assessing him. She smiled slowly, "If you like."

"If I buy you a drink, what sort of lies will you tell me?"

She grinned and laughed. "What sort of lies would you like to hear?"

A dozen fantasies he'd had of Shada skittered through his mind. Most of them involving her belonging to him in some fashion without any conflicts of interest. No Mistryl. No Mazzic. It terrified him to even think of indulging those fantasies, even in jest.

"We have always been honest with each other, haven't we?"

"Yes," she agreed some of the teasing light leaving her eyes. They were honest despite their secrets and always very careful not to get too personal.

"Perhaps it would be best not to start lying to each other now."

She smiled with a touch of bitterness. "Of course. You're right."

"I'm sorry," he couldn't stop himself from saying.

"Don't be." Her smile lightened again and she surveyed him from head to toe. "Well, then I'll be honest. You clean up quite well. Formal wear suits you."

"I wouldn't have you ashamed to be seen with me," he replied lightly.

"As if that would ever be the case."

"So, do you want that drink or would you like to proceed to dinner?"

"Let's go to dinner. I didn't have lunch."

Karrde gestured for her to precede him. He didn't offer his arm as he might ordinarily. There were far too many people on the *Errant Venture* who knew him and would wonder about the oddity of it as Lando had.

As they were about to walk into the casino after dinner, Karrde pressed something into her hand. "A little something to have fun with." He closed her hand around it.
She stopped and looked down at the credit chip. "Five thousand? I-"

"Please," he interrupted her. "Don't say anything as cliché as 'I couldn't possibly…'"

She looked down at the chip and back at him again, a smirk on her face. "Is this what being Talon Karrde's mistress is like?"

He kept his face expressionless, but wondered if he had been reading his mind earlier. "I wouldn't know. Talon Karrde's never had a mistress."

"Of course not." She grinned. "That would be entangling wouldn't it?"

"Quite. But for curiosity's sake would you apply for the position if there was one?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she said lightly. "You'd be much less interesting if I had to live with you day in and day out."

Karrde laughed. "That's likely very true."

Karrde hid his grin by taking a sip of his drink as he watched a gleeful Shada counting out her pile of chips.

Shada had tried every game in the casino except sabacc, even the lugjack machines. But she had hit a real hot streak on the jubilee wheel. Every time she won she had let out a delighted laugh, clapping her hands in excitement. Even after all the years that they had been meeting and finding pleasure in each other, he'd rarely seen such a carefree smile on her face. He found her even more irresistible like that.

He was pulled from his musings when she slid a pile of chips across the table toward him. He raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Thank you for staking me."

"Shada, that's not necessary."

"It is. Thank you," she said firmly still smiling. "I had fun."

"I'm glad." He pulled the chips toward himself noticing that it was a couple thousand over the five thousand he'd given her. "So what are you going to do with your winnings? Buy something expensive and frivolous?"

She looked down at her chips, her smile losing a touch of it's lightness. "No. I'm afraid I'm not very frivolous."

He wondered what she'd do with the money, pass it along to the Mistryl or perhaps stash it away for retirement. One couldn't be a mercenary forever. He imagined she'd had quite the harsh life from growing up on a destroyed world to the hard life of a Mistryl Shadow Guard. "You should indulge yourself whenever you have the chance," he told her.

Shada smirked at him and took a sip of her wine. "I'm afraid I can only afford one indulgence at a time," she said, her voice turning husky and suggestive.

"Well, then." He pitched his voice low, so as not to be overheard. "I don't mind being your one indulgence then. Especially when you look so delectable. I've had a hard time keeping my hands to myself tonight."
"Then, by all means, let us adjourn to a more private location."

TBC
Chapter Notes

A/N- I apologize for the insane delay in this story. I got so wrapped up in working on some sewing projects that I couldn't seem to find time to work on anything else. But I seem to be back in the swing with my writing again, so hopefully I'll post a little more regularly.

Three Nights on the Errant Venture Part 3

Shada watched Karrde step out of the refresher dressed for the day while she still lounged in his bed. It was a wonderful luxury not to be bound by a schedule or her employer's whims.

Karrde sat on the bed beside her, giving her a look that suggested he'd like to do nothing better than crawl back under the covers with her. His hand reached out and gently caress her bare arm. "So what would you like to do tonight?" he asked.

"How about that intimate dinner alone you spoke of yesterday?" she suggested. "I don't want to be in public tonight." Their last night for who knew how long.

"Excellent idea."

"And..."

"And?" he prompted.

She shifted her eyes away from his face, instead focusing his fingers teasing sensuous patterns on her arm. "You remember that night on your base on Holaris?" She could feel her face flush hotly and was glad her hair hid most of her face.

"How could I forget?"

She glanced up at him, holding his gaze. His expression was carefully neutral, but she could see the heat in his eyes. "I want that again," she almost whispered.

His fingers trailed down her arm until he reached her hand. He lifted it and pressed a kiss to it in that gallant way of his. "Whatever you desire."

"Karrde!"

"What?" He shifted his attention to Booster, wondering guiltily how long he'd been speaking to him.

"You have been in another world all day."

It was true. Normally Karrde was an expert at compartmentalizing, but he couldn't stop his mind from focusing on Shada's request for tonight instead of this project with Booster. He generally wasn't one for daydreams or fantasies, but he couldn't seem to prevent his thoughts from veering
constantly in that direction.

Booster started laughing and Karrde shot him a sharp look, but it only made Booster laugh harder. "I never thought I'd see the day when Talon Karrde was in a twist over a woman."

"You're being ridiculous."

"I'm not the ridiculous one in this room. For once at least."

Karrde glowered at him and then tried to focus back on the information on his datapad.

Booster seemed to drop the matter for a few minutes while they went of some of the figures. Then he asked far too casually, "Shada's leaving in the morning, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"Then why aren't you making the most of your time?"

"She's shopping for Mazzic." He tried to ignore the way Booster was eying him, hoping he'd finally drop the subject. And, of course, he didn't. He was enjoying having this bit of information about Karrde's private life far too much.

"Are you going to make her an offer?"

"For what?"

"Her companionship-" Booster waved a hand. "Or whatever. Give her a job in your organization and she would be around all the time."

Karrde sighed and set the datapad down. He might as well get this over with. "I don't mix business with pleasure. You know that."

"Then make her a personal offer."

"You should also know that I don't like personal entanglements."

Booster grinned. "Those are the best entanglements of all."

"And I don't like entanglements at all. Really, Booster, what's wrong with you? Weren't you the one that was just pointing out she's a Mistryl? She's not the type for entanglements either. Besides you couldn't pay me to have a Mistryl in my organization or that close to me personally. You know their loyalty to their order in unparallelled and there's usually some sort of ulterior assignment along with their main one. I won't have have that kind of divided loyalty in my organization."

"But these little dalliances are okay though?"

"They mean nothing."

"I'm gonna remember you said that."

"Booster-" Karrde stopped the blistering retort that was on the tip of his tongue and rose from his chair. "I'm going to take a walk. We'll finish this later."

Karrde wandered around the various levels of the *Errant Venture* trying to get Shada and the disturbing conversation he'd had with Booster off his mind. He knew Booster was just trying to
wind him up and the very idea that he had succeeded disturbed him greatly. He decided that in the future he would not spend more than one night with Shada. It was far too dangerous. If he was honest with himself he enjoyed her company far too much. And if their positions were different...

He squashed that thought ruthlessly. If wishes were starships...

And suddenly he saw Shada in one of the stalls in Trader's Alley. It seemed almost as if his thoughts of her had conjured her. He ducked into the next stall, not wanting to encounter her when his thoughts about her were in such turmoil. Blast Booster for stirring them up.

After a few minutes, he left the stall and saw Shada striding away toward the turbo lifts. He glanced at the stall she had been pursuing and saw that it contained mainly jewelry and some pretty bits of Chandrilan crystal sculpture. Karrde smiled to himself, wondering if Shada had indeed bought herself something frivolous with her winnings.

He nodded in greeting to the older human woman who seemed to be the proprietor. "The woman who was just in here, did she buy anything?"

"No."

"Did she look at anything in particular?"

"Oh, yes, sir. She seemed quite taken with this set," the woman gestured to the open case on the table. It contained a large parure of red cabochon stones set in a woven silver filigree. Hapan, he thought, and quite old. The set included a necklace, earrings, a pair of bracelets, a brooch, a large hair comb, and even a belt. Definitely, Hapan. They had a taste extensively matched jewelry.

An image of Shada in nothing but those jewels sprawled across his bed flashed across his mind.

But he knew she would never accept them from him.

And he knew he'd be a fool to offer them.

Karrde was just pouring the wine when Shada entered the small living area from the bedroom. She had on a long filmy black negligee that caressed her lithe body like a shadow, revealing nothing yet also hiding nothing. Her long hair was in loose soft waves and he practically itched to run his fingers through the silky strands. In fact, he longed to skip dinner altogether. She certainly knew how to dress to arouse his desire.

Shada raised a questioning eyebrow and he wondered if his thoughts were so blatantly displayed on his face. "You've gone to a lot of effort," she said, gliding across the room to the small table set with their dinner.

"Were you not hungry?"

"Oh, no. I was looking forward to it. You always set a fine table."

He pulled her chair out for her. "I believe in living well when you have the chance. The next moment your luck may turn and suddenly you're living on protein bars."

They had moved to the sofa for their desert. Shada was leaning against one arm cradling her glass of wine and feeling lusciously relaxed after the wonderful meal. She eyed the remaining citrus tart on the plate. She certainly had to give Karrde credit for this meal. Apparently, he had been filing
away all of her favorite foods from the meals they'd shared over the years for future reference. Although, she'd expect nothing less from an information broker with the reputation of Talon Karrde.

She felt his warm hand on her thigh and she shifted her gaze to him. "You might as well eat it," he said with an amused smile.

"Because tomorrow I may be living on protein bars?"

"One never knows."

She reached for the tart. He definitely trying to seduce her with food. She felt a nervous flutter wondering what further seductions he had planned, especially after her request this morning.

They'd had a delightful meal. Karrde was charming and he hadn't attempted to touch her until just now. She looked down at his hand on her leg, stroking the soft sheer silk as much as her flesh. She had come to realize over the years that Talon Karrde was a sensualist. He didn't just enjoy pleasures of the flesh, he loved fine food and drink, beautiful music, well made clothes, and lovely objects. If she had learned one thing from him, it was take her little pleasures where she could find them. So she ate the last tart and sighed when it was gone.

He laughed in that rare unguarded way that only happened when they were intimately alone. "Oh, Shada. I do like to see you enjoy yourself."

She thought that was an odd thing to say. "You're a very strange man."

He seemed unoffended. "That's probably true. But what is this thing between us if not enjoying ourselves giving each other pleasure?"

"I don't really think about it," she told him. "I can't."

"I know," he said without censure. He reached out and stroked her cheek. "Do you trust me?"

She hesitated, "I shouldn't."

He raised an eyebrow.

"But I do."

"Turn around."

She set her wine glass down and turned her back to him, the flutter of nervousness was back in her chest. He lowered a black silk scarf over her eyes and tied it off. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to relax.

"Don't think, my dear. Just feel," he whispered in her ear. "May I kiss you?"

A shiver went through her. "Oh, yes."

Karrde turned her slightly in in his arms and pressed a kiss to her jaw slowly making his way to her mouth.

Karrde awoke to find soft lips tracing down his chest. "Shada?" he asked groggily.

"Were you expecting someone else?" she nipped his skin playfully, before sliding up his body. She
threw one leg over him and straddled his hips.

His hands went to her thighs sliding up her soft skin to her waist. "Of course not."

She leaned down and kissed him. "I should hope not."

"You're insatiable," he gasped when she broke the kiss.

"It's my turn now." She took his hands from her body and raised them over his head.

"I am completely at your mercy," he said as she bound them in the same silk he'd used to blindfold her.

"You always are."

When Shada was back at Mazzic's base and the three nights with Karrde just seemed like a dream, she was surprised to find an unknown leather bound case at the bottom of her bag when she unpacked it. Only one person could have put it there. She took a deep breath and then opened it. Inside was the jewelry she had admired in Trader's Alley. She couldn't fathom how he had known, but it didn't really surprise her knowing Karrde. A small piece of flimsy was sticking out from under the brooch. She pulled it out and read the brief unsigned message. *Just something frivolous.*

The jewelry may be frivolous but it certainly wasn't cheap. What did he mean by giving her this?

She remembered his words from their last night together, *What is this thing between us if not enjoying ourselves giving each other pleasure?*

Even if he enjoyed giving her something that she might take pleasure from, she wouldn't be able to enjoy this gift. She'd never be able to wear it, even a piece or two. Mazzic had an eye for such things and would certainly question where she had gotten anything so fine. Karrde should know that.

He should know she wanted nothing from him other than the fleeting physical pleasure.

"What were you thinking, Talon Karrde?"

TBC
Three Hours on the Errant Venture

Karrde glanced at Booster who had just stepped up beside him at the bridge observation screen. "Mazzic just landed," he told Karrde.

"So?"

"You want to change your departure time until tomorrow?"

Karrde quirked an eyebrow at Booster who looked far too innocent to truly be innocent. "No. There's no reason to delay." He actually couldn't postpone his departure if he wanted. Not that he would tell his meddling friend that.

Booster scowled. "I don't know what she sees in you, you cold bastard."

"Discretion."

"You've got that in staves, but it can't be much fun."

Karrde responded with an eloquent shrug.

"You're hopeless."

He clapped his friend on the back. "Good bye, Booster. See you around."

He left the bridge and headed for the turbolift. When the door opened Shada was revealed. Yes, Booster was quite the meddler.

"Karrde," she said in surprise, obviously shocked to see him.

"Shada, it's good to see you." He bowed over her hand. "You look lovely as ever." And she did. She was wearing an deep blue evening gown that verged on the scandalous and her hair was up in a complicated style held in place by matching zenji needles.

She smiled at him warmly. "Thank you. Did you just get in as well?"

"No, unfortunately, we're leaving shortly."

He was gratified by her disappointed "Oh." It had nearly eight months since their last liaison, those three nights on this very ship.

"I don't suppose you're free for the next three hours, are you?" he asked only half joking.

She sighed, "No. Booster requested my assistance with some sort of project. I'm supposed to meet Mazzic at the casino afterwards." She gestured to her formal dress. "To watch him play sabacc, as always," she smiled ruefully.

Karrde shook his head and laughed. "I'm fairly certain I'm the project Booster has in mind. Go on and check in with him and see what he has to say. I'll meet you in my quarters shortly." He entered the turbolift and she made her way to the bridge.

Shada walked up silently behind Booster. She could see his satisfied smirk reflected in the bridge
viewscreen. "You needed my help?"

Booster was so startled that he actually jumped. "What are you doing here?"

"Didn't you ask Mazzic for my help?"

"Yeah, but- Didn't you see Karrde?"

"Should I have?"

"Kriff!" He pulled out his comlink flicking it on, then narrowing his eyes at her. "You did see him."

Shada laughed.

"Get out of here. Time's wasting."

She hurried as fast as she could without looking like she was hurrying to the quarters Karrde kept on the Errant Venture. She knew she should not be so anxious to be with Karrde. She should not crave his touch like this, but it had been so long since she'd even seen him.

He opened the door as soon as she rang, dressed in just his robe. Apparently, he was just as eager for their liaison as she was. She stopped just outside the door and took in his appearance. "This is awfully presumptuous, Karrde. I thought we could just chat and catch up. It has been a while," she teased.

He reached out and dragged her in. As soon as the door was sealed he pulled her to him. "We can multitask."

She ran her hands up his back over the plush fabric of his robe to his broad shoulders. "I suppose that could work."

He lowered his head to hers until their lips almost met. "May I kiss you?"

She was about to say yes, but she pulled back as a thought occurred to her. "Don't mess up my hair."

He gave a startled laugh. "What?"

"I won't have time to completely redo it before I have to meet Mazzic."

He reached up and lightly traced one swirling loop of her elaborate hairstyle. "You do know how to torture me, my dear." She knew he would have a hard time not taking out her zenji needles and running his hands through her hair. "I will try my best."

"Alright. Now kiss me."

"Yes, ma'am."

Shada stood in front of the dresser mirror trying to repair her hairstyle. It had remained mostly intact. Karrde had tried very hard to keep his hands from it, but the rather vigorous session had taken it's toll regardless.

"I tried not to damage your coiffure," Karrde said coming up behind her skimming his hands across her naked body to her most sensitive places.
"I appreciate your self-restraint." His body was warm against her bare skin and she leaned back against him. He continued his teasing caresses as he watched her coil and pin the hair that had come loose.

"Next time I fully intend to have my hands in your hair," he said pressing a kissing the sensitive spot behind her ear.

"Is that some sort of fetish of yours?" Shada inserted the last pin and lowered her arms. She reached behind her running her fingers through his thick hair holding him in place for a moment and allowing herself to focus on sensations his hands and lips were causing.

"It may be. Denial only makes one crave something more." And that was probably why they still continued meeting like this. If they were to spend a long enough time together they'd likely grow bored with each other rather quickly. At least that's what she told herself.

Karrde's skilled hands caused her to melt back against his bare chest. "You're going to have to wash off before you go. You smell like sex." His breath was hot on her neck. "But I'm not done with you yet. We still have a bit of time." He mouthed scorching kisses down the column of her neck that made her knees weak. She allowed him to lean her over the dresser and she braced her arms on the top. She gasped and closed her eyes at the exquisite feeling of him sliding into her.

His voice was rough in her ear. "Open your eyes, Shada. I want you to see how beautiful you are when you come."

Mazzic gestured for Shada to precede him into the casino and he followed behind her with a guiding hand on her back. "Shada," his tone was low and urgent and her eyes immediately started scanning the crowd for threats. "You've got a hickey."

"What?"

"Right here." He touched the juncture of her neck and shoulder and it throbbed dully under the pressure from his finger. She felt her skin flush scarlet as she remembered Karrde biting down there as he came that last time when he had her bent over the dresser.

"I'm going to kill him," she hissed. How dare he mark her!

"Can I watch? Remind me to thank Karrde next time I see him. This is going to do wonders for my reputation." She turned and glared sharply at Mazzic who just grinned in delight. "So Booster wasn't the one that needed 'help' after all?"

"No. And I'm going to kill him too when I see him again, that conniving bastard!"

"I'll sell tickets."

Shada pulled out a few strategically placed pins taking down half her hair arranging it around her shoulders. "This is not funny."

"Oh, yes, it is."

TBC
It was the final evening of a meeting of the Smuggler's Alliance and after dinner they had all split off into smaller groups. As host Karrde continued to circulate and make sure everyone was comfortable and had everything they needed. Dravis called to him and he went over and joined their discussion of trade routes. He glanced at the group playing sabacc, Mazzic was there, of course, and Shada was at his side.

Mazzic looked his way. He smirked and then leaned over to whisper something in her ear. She gave him a warning look and he laughed before returning his attention to his cards.

Karrde pondered that exchange. He had the oddest feeling that he was missing something and that was not a feeling he like at all. He had not had a moment alone with Shada so far, but that was to be expected. Still now that he thought back, there had been a few times that it had seemed like she had deliberately steered Mazzic away from him.

"What do you think about that, Karrde?" Dravis asked.

"Pardon?" he asked his focus drawn back to the conversation.

Karrde walked through the common area as the cleaning droids began clearing away of the detritus of the night. It appeared none of his guests had fallen asleep or passed out before they could make it to bed. Now it was time for him to seek his own bed. He stopped in the hall when a flash of bright blue caught his eye. He paused at the window and saw that it was Shada standing in the moonlit garden.

"Ah, there you are," Karrde said as he stepped out the door.

"Here I am." she said not even bothering to turn around to face him.

"Are you avoiding me?"

"Your powers of deductive reasoning are a marvel."

"I see. May I ask why?"

She turned to him then, her eyes flashing in anger."Because I'm angry at you."

He forced himself not to take a step back despite her ferocious expression. "And what have I done to incur your wrath?"

If she hadn't been so angry at him, it would have amused her to see him forcing himself to face her despite the fact she could kill him in an instant."The last time we were together, you… marked me. Where everyone could see."

"Oh." She could see him thinking back, putting the pieces together. "I certainly didn't mean to. I suppose I was…overcome."

"You could have at least told me so I could have covered it up."

"I thought the strap of your dress covered it."
"Well, it didn't," she hissed. "I thought you were famous for your discretion. It's the only reason I have continued to meet with you all these years. I'm supposed to be Mazzic's mistress. I can't be walking around with other men's marks on me." She paused and glared at him even harder. "Is that why you did it? To take a poke at Mazzic?"

"No. of course not. I suppose I just forgot your position at the time. We hadn't been together for so long. We were rushed... That's no excuse of course. I do offer my sincerest apologies. I can assure you it won't happen again."

"You don't need to assure me because none of this will happen at all again. I was a fool to let this go as long as it did, to think that it wouldn't interfere with my duty." She would miss the time she spent with him, where she could relax and let go. This was for the best though. She had a responsibility to Mazzic and the Mistryl and Karrde was interfering with that.

His expression turned stoney. "Did Mazzic give you a hard time?"

"If he did, what are you going to do about it, Karrde?" she asked, her anger flaring once more. "What goes on between Mazzic and I is none of your business."

"Shada..." She saw the worry in his eyes and it made her even more furious.

"What? You think he might have hurt me? Smacked me around? Don't be so utterly ridiculous. Mazzic would and could never lay a finger on me. I don't need you to defend my honor, Talon Karrde. No, he thought it was hilarious."

"I'm very sorry you were embarrassed. That was never my intention in any of this." His expression was deeply apologetic and she knew he was sincere.

"I know." The anger drained out of her and she smiled sadly at him. "I did enjoy our time together. I'll always remember you fondly. Good bye, Karrde."

She turned to walk away, but stopped when he grabbed her wrist. "Shada, if this truly is goodbye, let me tell you goodbye properly. Our last time was so rushed. That shouldn't be our final memory of each other."

"Karrde..." Why did he have to say that? Why couldn't he just let her go?

"Please, Shada. One last time."

"Alright," she sighed. "One last time."

Shada lay with her head on Karrde's chest, his hand gently stroking through her hair.

"Are you certain this is the end?" he asked quietly.

"It should be."

"But?"

"But you're a manipulative bastard."

"Thank you."

"That wasn't a compliment."
"Of course it was."

"Just tell me one thing."

"Perhaps."

"Why didn't you let me go?"

"I- I don't know." He didn't want to examine those feelings of panic when she said their association was over and the sheer relief like he'd dodged a blast when she agreed to one more time.

"Surely there are other women that you do could do this with. Someone less dangerous."

His lips crooked up. "I suppose I've become accustomed to you, Shada. And I wouldn't have wanted to part on such a note if we are indeed to part. I value our friendship more than that."

"Friendship?"

"Are we not friends after all these years?"

"I suppose. After a fashion."

"Is this still the end?" he asked again, afraid of the answer.

He felt her warm breath on his skin as she sighed. "I suppose not. Apology accepted."

His arms tightened around her. Then he flipped them to their sides and kissed her. When they parted he reached out and stroked her cheek. "You know, you're very beautiful when you're angry."

She smiled at that, perhaps for the first time tonight. "What an utterly cliché thing to say. I wouldn't have expected it of you, Karrde."

"It's true. But I must say I don't like it directed at me. I know you can snap my neck in an instant and I like living far too much."

"Then don't make me angry again."

"Shada, I am really very sorry. I never meant to cause you pain."

"I know," she replied quietly, the mood turning somber once more. She reached out and stroked a spot where an angry looking bruise was forming on his shoulder and then traced the red scratches from where her long silver enameled nails had clawed at the skin of his chest. There were probably scratches down his back as well.

He looked down where her hand was. He raised an eyebrow, "Is that payback?"

"No, not really. I was very angry. I- I wanted to hurt you. But at least your shirt will cover it up, so you'll be okay." Another thought occurred to her. "Unless... I hope you don't have to avoid someone for a while." She looked away.

He reached out for her hand. "I have no entanglements, Shada." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers.

She looked back at him her expression shuddered."Well, good." She pulled her hand from his and sat up. "I should go."
"Of course," he replied, glancing at his chrono. Breakfast would be served in a hour before everyone departed.

After she left, Karrde lay there a moment, working up the energy to get out of the bed and go take a shower and make himself presentable before bidding farewell to the members of the Smuggler's Alliance.

He groaned as the skin of his back pulled as he sat up. Now after the heat of passion had faded, it felt like Shada had completely flayed the skin off of his back. He went over to the mirror to survey the damage. "Well, kriff..."

His back was crisscrossed with red scratches and deep red crescents where her long nails had dug into his flesh, some of the wounds still bleeding. It hadn't really hurt at the time, the brief pain adding a sharp edge to his pleasure. Shada had wanted no gentleness from him tonight and she had certainly offered none to him, quite the opposite.

She hadn't lied when she said she was angry. Once they were in his room, she had made him work very hard to melt her iciness, but once he had her passionate anger had been unleashed. She had not given any thought at all to his pleasure, only her own. He couldn't help but smile at the memory of Shada so passionate and unrestrained. She had been magnificent.

TBC
Shada was propped up on her elbow looking down at Karrde. His eyes were closed, but he wasn't sleeping. He looked thoroughly relaxed, well, as relaxed as Karrde ever did.

Their time together had not been marred by anger tonight. It had been no less intense, but had been full of the usual languorous and sensual teasing that commonly marked their assignations. But there had also been something different that she couldn't quite name. Something that she didn't quite understand had shifted between them.

She reached out and traced the line at Karrde's waist separating the tan skin of his chest and the pale skin below. "You've been spending a lot of time in the sun."

"I spent two weeks at a resort on Amfar," he replied not opening his eyes.

"Did you have fun?"

"It was nice. I needed a break. We had an extraordinarily long run, too long aboard ship living in each others' pockets and breathing recycled air. I needed some time to myself to recharge and feel a sun on my skin."

She had noticed that he did tend to usually have more of a tan than most smugglers she knew. "Not a true spacer born and bred then, huh?"

He half shrugged. "I like the freedom of space as much as the next spacer, but I do enjoy putting my boots down on a pretty world every now and again probably more than most."

"Is Amfar as beautiful as they say?"

He finally cracked his eyes. "You've never been?"

She shook her head.

"It is very beautiful, especially if you enjoy oceans and a tropical climate. I always find it relaxing." He reached up and caressed her face. "You'd have to wear some good sunscreen if you went. All this lovely creamy skin would burn to a crisp without it."

"Hmm. It must be nice to see something other than spaceports and cantinas."
He smiled at her oft repeated sentiment. "Perhaps I'll take you with me next time."

She thought about how wonderful it would be to have to break from her duties both from the Mistryl and Mazzic. To have an actual vacation with no responsibilities other than to enjoy herself. Karrde would be an enjoyable companion, she knew that. She also knew she probably wouldn't want to return to Mazzic at the end of it.

"That's probably not a good idea," she told him.

His expression didn't change, but he gave a little sigh. "You're probably right."

She slid down on the bed laying her head on his chest, his steady heartbeat echoing in her ear. His hand trailed up her back drawing teasing patterns along her spine.

"It can never be more than this," she said quietly, reminding herself as much as him. Never more than an infrequent night of sex, no strings whatsoever. These nights were dangerous enough as it was. The Eleven would disapprove of even this tiny connection.

"I know," he murmured, surprising her with a tender kiss to her brow.

"Karrde..." The affection in that gesture made her heart ache in a strange unexpected way. A part of her that shouldn't be touched. She sat up suddenly, throwing one leg over him so that she was straddling him and pinning his arms to the bed. He looked up at her in confusion. "Don't ever do that again."

He studied her and she thought she could see a certain loneliness reflected in his gaze. He nodded his assent and then something shifted in his eyes. A wicked smile played across his lips. "It seems you have me trapped. What do you intend to do with me?"

The tension was broken and she let out a throaty laugh. "Torture you for information, of course."

"I won't tell you anything."

"All the better."

Karrde didn't even notice when Mara entered his office. He was staring off into space, apparently in deep thought.

She stood there for a few minutes waiting for him to realize she was there. There were odd emotions swirling through him very close to the surface, sadness being chief among them.

She stepped further into the room, the deliberate click of her boots against the floor startled him out of his reverie and he focused on her. "Mara." She could sense him locking down his thoughts. Compartmentalizing as he was so good at. "You're back."

She sat down in the chair opposite his desk. "Did something happen while I was gone?"

"No." He sat up straighter. "Have you heard something?"

"No. But you seemed pretty deep in thought when I came in. You didn't even notice me."

He grimaced. "It's a rather personal matter. None of your concern."

She raised an eyebrow and pinned him with a look. That could only mean one thing, his ill conceived affair with Shada D'ukal.
"It is my concern if I have to worry about someone possibly gunning for you."

"It's nothing like that. It's..." He trailed off and then sighed. "I suppose you should know. I've decided I can't see Shada anymore."

"May I ask why?"

"I've gotten too close."

Mara couldn't stop herself from barking out a laugh. "It's been a decade Karrde and only now have you gotten too close?"

"I suggested we go to Amfar together."

"Oh, so that's too much is it? A vacation?" she scoffed. She never quite understood the thing he had with Shada, especially the way it had continued for so long. "Not the years of screwing like durni."

"There's no need to be crude, Mara," he said, his expression turning cold.

"Alright. So what's the issue? The two of you could probably disappear into the tourist crowd on Amfar, especially if you took steps to avoid being recognized."

"That's not the point. The point is that I never should have suggested it. It wasn't in jest. I was completely serious. I forgot all about who she was and how dangerous she could be to me. I forgot that we weren't really lovers. I can't afford to do that again."

Mara was surprised by his words. If she had been sleeping with someone for 10 years, even if it was only occasionally, she would certainly consider them a lover. "Well, if you want more than you've had, you could always ask her to leave Mazzic."

"She's a Mistryl, Mara. Have you ever heard of one of them leaving their order? Especially for a man? Would you want to have such an agent in our midst anyway?"

"No." She thought back to all the encounters she'd had with Shada over the years. Never once did she sense the intent to do harm to Karrde or manipulate him any way. While she didn't know all the intricacies of the Mistryl Shadow Guard she doubted that they would approve of one of their sisters having a long term affair with a man such as Talon Karrde. And they'd probably cast her out if she chose a lover over her assignment. But Shada also wasn't a young woman. Surely they didn't stay out in the field their entire lives. They must retire sometime. "Have you discussed this with Shada?"

"No. I would never be able to trust that her loyalty was completely to me in any case."

That struck a cord deep within Mara and she had to stifle the anger that flared within her. "You are a fool, Karrde." She stood and walked out the door.

TBC
Shada hated herself for the way her heart seemed to flutter in her chest when she saw Karrde striding down the ramp of his ship.

She studied him from where she guarded his wayward Devaronian as Mazzic went up to greet him. Karrde wasn't as tan as he'd been last time they were together. He had let his goatee grow into a neatly trimmed beard again. His hair was a little shorter, reaching just past his collar now and seemed to be more shot with grey than she recalled. He met her eyes for a moment and gave her a brief nod in greeting. She didn't bother to return it and kept her expression blank.

It had been more than a year and a half since their last night together. For a while she had suspected he had been trying to put some distance between them after he had suggested taking her to Amfar and she had reminded him that it couldn't be more than sex between them, but when months later an opportunity arose for an assignation he had avoided her altogether.

She was disturbed that more than missing the sex, as good as it was, she found herself missing the man himself more- his easy companionship, his dry humor, and his odd courtly manners. And she was angry that he hadn't even bothered to officially end their association. Karrde had merely cast her aside without a word like some whore when he had finally tired of her. It hurt far more than it should have.

Mazzic and Karrde chatted for a few moments before one of Karrde's people handed over a case containing the money for the finder's fee. Then Shada released the prisoner to the care of two more of Karrde's people. She moved to Mazzic's side as they hustled Lak Jit into the ship.

"I regret that the urgency of my task won't allow us the chance to share a meal and catch up," Karrde was saying to Mazzic. "It's been far too long since we've had the opportunity to work together. Perhaps we can arrange something soon."

Shada knew that was his way of apologizing to Mazzic because he wanted to avoid her. And he had been avoiding her. Of that she had no doubt. Karrde shook Mazzic's hand and she thought he would have done the same with her, but she kept her hands firmly in the pockets of her jacket. A tiny smile twitched at his lips and he nodded to her once again before he went back up the ramp of his ship. His amusement at her anger gave her the sudden urge to fling all of her zenji needles into his back. Instead she clenched her fists in her pockets, her nails digging into the palms of her hands.

They walked back to the Distant Rainbow. "Well, blast it," Mazzic said as he opened the case after they were safely aboard.
"What? Aren't all the credits there?" she asked peering over his shoulder.

"No, it's all here. Karrde'd never stiff me like that. I was just hoping he'd be able to hang around for
a bit so you could get laid. You've been beyond grumpy lately."

She smacked him hard on the shoulder, taking some of the anger she felt at Karrde out on her boss.

"Well, you have," he grumbled, rubbing his shoulder.

"That isn't why."

"Hmph," Mazzie grunted non-committally hoping to forestall any further assault to his person.
"Let's get outta here."

TBC
"Where will you go?" Mazzic asked as he watched Shada pack. She was packing light. One bag. Only the essentials.

"As far from you as I can get," she said without pausing in her task.

He picked up the ancient Corellian idol she kept on her beside table. She'd told him that she had picked it up for next to nothing on the Errant Venture. The seller had either been completely clueless or Shada was lying, but he'd never figured out which it was."Take this," he handed it to her. "You should be able to sell it for a good chunk of credits if you need to."

Shada stared at it for a moment with a peculiar expression on her face, before wrapping it in a tunic and stuffing it in her bag.

"You should contact Karrde," he told her. She looked up at him sharply. He held up a hand to stay whatever retort she may have had. "You'll need work and he'll give it to you. His organization is large enough that you might be able to disappear. Besides, he has contacts that I don't have. He may be able to help you resolve this death mark."

"The only way he could resolve it is if he had enough firepower to finish slagging Emberlene," she said bitterly. "He won't want me anywhere near his organization. I'm too hot."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that."

"It was just sex, Mazzic. A night or two here and there." Her eyes flared with anger and it made him wonder just how exactly she and Karrde had ended. He didn't think they had been together in more than a year, but Shada had always been very circumspect in any case. But there had also been a strange tension between them when they'd turned over Lak Jit to Karrde.

"A decade of it. That means something to a man, especially someone like Karrde." Mazzic could tell she was unmov ed, so he handed her a credit chip. "Here's what was outstanding for this quarter's services. I figure you deserve it more than those Mistryl bitches."

She looked down at the amount. "This is more-"

He cut her off. "Think of it as a bonus for years of dedicated service. I owe you a lot, Shada. I owe you my life."

Her face softened into a smile. "Thank you, Mazzic. I appreciate it."

"And I want you to take one of the Preybirds to get you wherever you're going. Just drop me a line and let me know where you left it."
"Mazzic, I couldn't-

"Just a loaner," he said quickly. "I'll want it back. They'll probably be keeping an eye out on transport ships. I doubt they'd expect you to take off in a fighter."

She nodded. "Thank you. That's more than I can possibly repay."

"Just take care of yourself, okay?"

TBC
"What a dive," Mazzic muttered to himself as he walked into the Red Rancor. He pushed his cloak back over his right shoulder, making sure his holster was clear in case he needed to draw.

He spotted Han Solo in a corner booth and made his way over to him. "C'mon, Solo, shouldn't someone in your exalted sphere be able to afford a decent bar these days?"

"Well, I never was flashy as you, Mazzic," Solo said as he gestured to the seat next to him.

"It's not about flash. It's about not getting randomly bladed." Mazzic sat down, then he held up the glass that Solo had waiting for him at the table and examined it in the light. "Or poisoned." He shrugged and despite the dirty glass took a sip. At least it was decent booze.

"Yeah, well..." Solo looked like he was trying hard not make some sort of disparaging retort. Apparently, he was learning something about diplomacy from his wife. "Anyway, thanks for meeting me so quickly, Mazzic. I wasn't really expecting to hear from you so soon."

"No problem. I happened to be in the neighborhood. So what's this about? I'm assuming it wasn't just for the pleasure of my company."

"Ah, no." Solo flashed a grin."I ran into an old girlfriend of yours."

"Oh?" There was more than a note of apprehension in Mazzic's voice.

"A Shada D'ukal."

Mazzic sighed in relief. "Is she alright?"

"Yeah, she was fine. Despite breaking into our apartment looking for a job."

"Oh, yeah?" He grinned at the thought. "What are you looking for? A reference?"

"Sorta. Leia sent her off with Karrde to the far Outer Rim on a sensitive mission."

"Good."

"Good?" Solo narrowed his eyes. "Is she a danger to Karrde?"

"Oh, no. Karrde couldn't have a better bodyguard. I actually told her she should look him up after she left my group."

"Why exactly did she leave you? If I recall correctly, she'd been with you quite a while."

"She acquired a death mark."
"Really? Why?"

"Well, it's not really my story to tell."

Solo rolled his eyes. "You're as bad as Karrde. What's it going to cost me?"

"Some things don't have a price, Solo," Mazzic took another sip of his drink. "Suffice it to say I owe Shada a lot and I hope she can find a way to resolve the death mark. Maybe Karrde can help with that, set her up with a new identity or something."

"Hmm. Maybe. Are you sure Karrde's safe with her?" Solo still didn't look satisfied.

"Why are you so worried about Karrde?"

"I'm not worried. Leia's worried. She's got a soft spot for Karrde. You know all those aristocratic manners and the like."

"Sure." Mazzic snorted. He doubted Leia was the only one. "So what did Shada do to him that's got Leia worried?"

"Nothing. We just got the impression she didn't care for him too much."

"I'm sure many people feel that way about Karrde,"

"Yeah. Right." Solo seemed unconvinced.

"Look, if Shada committed to being Karrde's bodyguard, she will lay down her life before she allows anyone to touch a hair on his head, no matter what may have happened in the past between them. She's the honorable type."

"So something did happen between them in the past?"

Mazzic laughed. "Solo, if you only knew."

"You could tell me."

"Again, not my story. Though I will be very curious to hear how their little adventure plays out."

Mazzic could see Solo spinning different scenarios in his head. "Did they have an affair?" His tone was incredulous. Karrde had quite the reputation of being cold and aloof.

He just grinned and threw back the rest of his drink. "Do me a favor and let me know when they get back. I'd like to know Shada is okay."

"Sure." Solo still looked stunned. "Are you kidding me, Mazzic?"

"I haven't said a thing. You drew your own conclusions." He stood. "Thanks for the drink."

TBC
One New Mission

Chapter Notes

Takes place between Specter of the Past and Vision of the Future by Timothy Zahn

One New Mission

After Karrde introduced her to the crew of the *Wild Karrde* and explained the mission they were about to set out on, he showed her to the room that would be her's during the trip. "These are the quarters Mara uses when she's onboard. I'm sure she won't mind if you use them."

Shada nodded. "Thank you." She was glad to have private quarters. She wasn't much in the mood to bunk with a stranger.

She could feel Karrde's eyes on her, scrutinizing her as she looked around the room. She kept her expression bland and her body relaxed and hoped that he would not notice the tension that had not left her since she had saved Mazzic from her fellow Mistryl.

Of course, hoping Talon Karrde wouldn't notice something was too much to ask for.

"Shada, are you all right?" he asked when he finally spoke.

She turned sharply back to him."You do not get to ask me that, Karrde," she told him, her voice as cold as she could make it. She would not allow him to worm his way back into her affections just because they were thrown together through circumstances beyond her control. Nor would she tolerate a polite pretense of concern. "I'm merely here as your bodyguard, to make sure you get from here to there and back again in one piece. Understood?"

He seemed taken aback by her iciness. "Indeed, but I feel I must-"

"No," she cut him off. "This is strictly business. The past stays in the past."

He gave her a long look. Finally, he said, "Of course, business is business." He took a deep breath and it seemed like his closed expression shuttered even further. Had he expected to pick up where they left off, even after he cast her aside? No, she didn't think so. There was an odd uneasiness she had rarely seen in him before, but she didn't want to think about that too closely now. There would be plenty of time on this trip for that.

If nothing, Karrde was always unfailingly polite. He told her, "It will be a long journey and you must let me or any member of the crew know if you require anything and we will do our best to accommodate you."

"Thank you. That's most kind."

"Not at all."

They stood there awkwardly facing each other. Finally, Shada said, "If you don't mind, I'd like to get a little rest before the mission is truly underway."
"Certainly. Pleasant dreams." With that Karrde left the small room, the door sliding behind him. Although his presence still lingered and she was left wondering what exactly he had been going to say before she cut him off.

She decided she was best left not knowing.

TBC
After a surprisingly pleasant dinner with Jorj Car'das and Entoo Nee, Car'das invited Karrde and Shada to join him for an after dinner drink in his beautiful conversation room. Entoo Nee bid them goodnight and retired for the night, leaving just the three of them.

Karrde could tell Shada still didn't trust Car'das. Neither did he as a matter of fact, but he no longer thought that Car'das meant to kill him. Shada was still cautious and watchful though, she'd barely drunk any wine at dinner and now only took a couple of polite sips of her brandy.

"I give you my word I'm not going to kill him, Shada," Car'das told her clearly amused by her vigilance.

"I'd prefer not have him maimed either," she replied tartly.

"Thank you, my dear," Karrde said. He was both amused by her obvious dislike of Car'das and gratified by her dedication to guarding her. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate that. But you don't have to stay to watch over me if you'd prefer to go to bed."

"Are you sure?" she asked confirming his dismissal.

"I'll be fine."

She nodded and left.

"I do like her a lot," Car'das said watching her go.

"So do I." Karrde reached over and picked up Shada's abandoned glass. No use for such a fine brandy to go to waste.

"What's this? Has the great untouchable Talon Karrde fallen at last?"

"Don't be absurd. Shada would be an extraordinary asset to my organization if I can convince her to join us."

"I don't doubt that, but she could be an extraordinary asset to you personally."

"Don't mix business with pleasure. Isn't that what you taught me?"

"There are exceptions to every rule. Besides, you don't want to end up like me, do you? An old man living alone under a mountain on the edge of the known galaxy."

"Don't presume to know me anymore, Jorj, or what I want."

"I don't have to presume to know you want Shada, my boy. I can see it with my own eyes. I can
also see she's attracted to you too."

Karrde didn't respond. Attraction had never been their problem. He just took another sip of his drink.

"She's a fine woman," Car'das continued to prod. "You were always too much of a gentleman for your own good, Talon." Karrde rolled his eyes. "Or are you? You're already involved with her, aren't you? Oh, this is a delightful turn. Maybe I don't know you as well as I thought."

"Not that it's any if your business, but Shada and I are not currently involved."

"Did she break your heart, Talon?"

"Don't be melodramatic. It was never that deep. We enjoyed each other's company on occasion when we ran into each other over the years. That's all it is. Or was."

"It's a long trip to Exocron…"

"This is business."

"Your business is completed now."

"But now I'm going to ask Shada to work for me."

"I never realized you were such a masochist, Talon."

"I worked for you, didn't I?"

"Touché." Car'das laughed. "And I gave you hell, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did."

"Can an old friend offer you a piece of advice, Talon?"

"No." Karrde drained his glass and stood. "Good night, Jorj."

"Pleasant dreams."

Karrde left Car'das and headed toward his room. He paused at Shada's door. It was true. Their mission was basically over. This might be their last chance before she came to work for him. If she came to work for him. He knocked gently on her door. He knew she was a light enough sleeper that she would hear him and open the door if she wanted his company. He waited a few moments and the door remained closed. He went on to his own room.

Shada heard the soft knock on her door and knew it was Karrde. She knew if she opened that door and allowed him in that it would be inevitable that they would fall into bed, no matter what each of their intentions might be.

Personally, Shada knew she most definitely did not want to talk, although they probably should. Something had shifted between them once again. She was no longer angry at him and the galaxy in general.

She was just so… weary.

And she knew that he was fully capable of making that feeling disappear if only for a couple of
moments. She also suspected that he would be more than willing to oblige her. She had felt the heat in his gaze occasionally, during the last few days when he had thought he had been facing his imminent doom and would have been happy to loose himself in her arms if she had offered.

Somewhere along the line during this trip she had started thinking of him as a friend. Not as just as the man she was charged with protecting or the former lover that had abruptly cast her aside. He had called her a friend years ago, during their affair. She had never really believed he had meant it and she had not allowed herself to feel that way about him. A friend was much more permanent than an occasional bedmate. At any rate, she knew he could not give her what she truly wanted and refused to let him be a distraction tonight.

An idea had formed in her mind when she saw Car'das's immense data library. Surely he must have some piece of information on what had happened to Emberlene.

So, she ignored Karrde and after a bit heard his footsteps move away. She lay there on her bed, waiting for the rest of the household to seek their beds as well so she could then return to the library to search for the information she desperately needed.

After Shada had picked the special datacard instead of the history of Emberlene's destruction, Car'das had ushered them into the corridor and instructed them to pack their belongings for immediate departure.

After the emotional turmoil she had gone through in the library, she felt strangely raw and numb at the same time as she walked beside Karrde back to their rooms. She could practically feel the concern emanating from him and that made her feel even more fragile.

"Shada," Karrde said softly. "Are you alright?"

She keyed open her door wanting to get away from him before she embarrassed herself.

He grabbed her wrist stopping her, his hand gentle. "I'm so very sorry."

The sincerity in his voice was almost painful to hear. She tried blinking away her tears. "Don't. Please." She turned her face away from him. "Let me go."

But he didn't release her. She could easily have broken away from his light hold, but she didn't try. "It will be alright," he told her and she allowed him to pull her into his arms holding her tightly. "I promise."

She wanted to rail at him to tell him that it would never be alright again and he was an arrogant bastard for promising her it would be. Instead something within her broke and she sobbed into his neck. She barely registered him walking her into her room and the door sliding shut behind them. All she felt was the ache in her heart and his strong arms around her, supporting her. She lifted her head and caught his mouth in a desperate kiss. She felt him try to pull away at first but she wouldn't let him go. He finally gave in, deepening the kiss.

She backed toward the bed her hands pulling him with her. She untied the sash of his robe and he shrugged it off. She reveled in the warm, very alive skin revealed. The back of her legs hit the edge of the bed. She fell back onto the mattress dragging him down with her, her hands immediately going to the ties of his sleep pants while he started pulling at her tunic. Their mouths only parting the instant it took to get it off over her head. Distantly, he felt him pull out the holdout blaster she had tucked in her waistband and heard it fall carelessly to the floor.

There was something raw and desperate in his kisses as well. This wasn't the calculated seduction
and teasing games she was used to with Karrde. It was frantic and real. And exactly what she needed. There was little foreplay once she was able to wriggle out of her pants. She didn't mind. All she wanted was him inside her. They didn't have the luxury of time. She didn't have the patience for the finesse that she knew he was capable of.

Their joining was rough and quick and all she could think of was how wonderful it felt to be here in this suspended moment. When she came it was with a sob and tears streamed down her face again. He murmured in her ear, "It's alright. I've got you. I promise it will be alright." And she believed him this time. "I've got you, Shada."

After it was all over she still held onto him tightly, unwilling to let him go. Unwilling for this moment to end. Eventually, he pulled away, feathering delicate kisses across her face, kissing away her tears. It made her heart ache in a completely different way. "We have to go," he said quietly.

"I know," she whispered closing her eyes, trying desperately to pull herself together. They still had work to do. He gave her one last kiss full of warmth before gathering his things and leaving.

TBC
One Job Offer

When Karrde returned from the *Errant Venture* and his negotiations with General Bel Iblis and Admiral Pellaeon, he commed Dankin to let him know they would be leaving soon. To his surprise, he found Shada sitting alone in the darkened ward room of the *Wild Karrde* with an empty glass and a bottle of whiskey on the table before her as she stared blankly off into space.

He stood in the doorway a moment studying her. The look of raw anguish on her face wrenched at his heart. He longed to pull her into his arms again and make her feel anything other than pain. Instead, he said, "One doesn't often receive an invitation to freely roam an Imperial Star Destroyer."

She looked up at him sharply, quickly schooling her features into blank indifference. "I told Dankin I would stay with the ship while they explored."

Karrde chose not to point out that if she was truly intent on guarding the ship it would be better done on the bridge. He walked into the room, retrieving another glass and sat down across from her pouring them both two fingers of whiskey.

"I have a proposition for you, Shada," he said after taking a sip.

Her expression changed to weary resignation. She took a long drink from her glass. "You know I don't want to work for you, Karrde. I might as well go back to Mazzic if my only options are with smugglers."

Karrde nodded, expecting that response. However, he chose not to mention that Admiral Pallaeon had expressed interest in her services. "You don't want to work for me now, smuggler and information broker to the highest bidder. But what if I told you I had just made a deal to act as intelligence liaison between the New Republic and Empire, all in the interest of fostering peace and trust?"

She stared at him. "Have you gone insane?"

"Maybe." He smiled. He imagined he was going to get that response a lot in the near future. "It will certainly take some time to completely disentangle myself from all of my illegal activities. However, you would be a great asset to this new *legitimate* venture."

She was still looking at him like he was mad. "I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll think about it on the way to Coruscant. It won't be an easy job though."

"I don't mind a challenge."

"I know. And I would rely heavily on you. It would probably be more politic not to have Mara involved in this aspect of the business. Neither the New Republic or the Empire are overly fond of her."

"Hey, chief," Dankin stuck his head through the door. "We're back. You ready to head out?"
"Yes, set course for Coruscant." Karrde threw back the rest of the whiskey and rose to his feet. "Promise me you'll think about it."

"I will."

Karrde found her in the small gym on the Wild Karrde. He sat on a bench against the wall and watched her complete her workout. As always she moved with smooth grace, but he could still detect more than a hint of anger in her punches and kicks against the punching bag.

After she was done, she walked toward him and he handed her a towel. "Enjoy the show?" Shada asked a little testily as she wiped herself down.

He shrugged. "It's always a pleasure to watch a true professional."

"Right." She picked up a bottle of water and took a long drink.

"So, Shada, we're nearly to Coruscant. Have you had to time to sufficiently consider my proposal?"

Shada's face was unreadable. "I have a couple of questions before I make my mind up."

"Of course."

"Are you actually offering me a real job? I won't be your mistress."

If she thought to surprise him she couldn't tell if she did, his expression didn't change except for a slight sardonic smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Of course not. Didn't I once tell you that I don't keep a mistress? This is quite a legitimate job offer. You have skills my organization could use and I don't mix business with pleasure."

"Neither do I. I just wanted to make sure we're on the same screen."

"Indeed. It's always best to get these things out of the way up front. Anything else?"

"You said you would rely heavily on me. How would I fit in with Mara and Aves?"

"Well, my plans are rather tentative until the negotiations between the New Republic and Empire are completed, but I'd like to put Mara over our shipping interests and disentangling the organization from it's more illicit ventures. And I'd have you as my second over the information sharing portion. And Aves would bridge those two areas."

"Won't Aves be upset about how you're bringing someone in from the outside for this?"

"No. Running interference in the background is his forte."

Shada wasn't sure if she entirely believed him. "Okay then. How would my position in you organization be... portrayed?"

He blinked, trying to figure out what exactly she was alluding to. He thought he'd straightforward in his job offer. Then he remembered she'd spent the last decade pretending to be Mazzic's mistress. "A cover is useful for a bodyguard, but not so much for helping to run an organization. Of course, that's not to say that you won't have to occasionally go undercover in the course of your work."

"Of course." Some of the tension eased out of her and it made him wonder...

"It's difficult to always be pretending to be something you're not, isn't it?" he tried.
She smiled slightly. "Yes, it is."

"Anything else?"

"Are you sure you really want me for this?"

"I think we've worked pretty well together this whole trip. And I need someone I can trust with this. Sadly, I'm only one person and can only spread myself so far. I know I can trust you, Shada."

"Well, then, I accept your offer." She held out her hand and he stood before taking it.

"Welcome home, Shada."

TBC
An Engagement

Mara didn't think she had ever heard Karrde laugh so hard. She scowled at him as he wiped tears from his eyes. "It's not *that* funny," she growled.

"Isn't it?" He tried to smoother his laugh, but wasn't entirely successful.

She glared at him even harder. She should have known he'd react this way. Talon Karrde delighted in the foibles of other peoples' emotions, even as he suppressed his own.

"Oh, you're right. I'm sorry. It just caught me by surprise. I never thought I'd see the day when Mara Jade admitted that she was in love." He schooled his features into a very polite mask, but there was still a smirk tugging at the the corner of his lips that he was having difficulty containing. "Let us toast to your happiness."

He got up from his chair and went to the sideboard and poured them both a brandy.

"Karrde, it's the middle of the morning," she protested, but accepted the glass anyway.

"Don't be such a prude. How often do you get engaged?"

"Only once."

"Well, then," he held out his glass to her. His smile turned sincere for once and he said, "I wish you both all the joy in the galaxy. Truly. And may the Force be with you. I have a feeling the two of you are going to need it."

Mara huffed out a laugh. That was probably true. She clinked her glass to his and took a sip of the brandy. "Thank you, Karrde. I appreciate your understanding and your support."

He shrugged and sat back down in the chair across from her. "Who am I to stand in the path of true love?" he asked, his tone a slightly less cynical than normal. "Besides I feel somewhat responsible for your romance since I didn't let you kill Skywalker when you wanted to."

"You're never going to stop bringing that up, are you?"

"It makes for such an entertaining tale." He grinned again.

And Mara knew exactly what to say to wipe that knowing smirk from his face.

She took a long sip of the brandy and leaned back in her chair and eyed him, her own smirk forming. "You know, Karrde, I think you may have an entertaining tale to tell yourself. Lando was concerned that you wouldn't make it back and that Car'das might have killed you. But when I found out that Leia sent Shada D'ukal with you, I put my credits on her being the one to gut you. I'm not sure if I'm disappointed in her or happy that you managed to placate her enough to survive."

"Yes, well," he said looking vaguely uncomfortable, taking a long drink from his glass. "We've come to an understanding. I actually hired her. It's a good thing really, since you're leaving me to play house."

"Well, well, well," Mara smiled slyly. "You're getting what you always wanted, aren't you,
"Karrde?"

"What's that? Certainly not being entangled with both the New Republic and the Empire, I can assure you of that."

She gave a derisive laugh at his deflection. "Shada D'ukal. She's completely within your grasp now."

"You're very much mistaken. It is only business between us."

"And how long do you think that will last?"

"For a very long time I hope. Especially since you're leaving me," he said trying to guilt her in ending this line of inquiry.

"You're deluding yourself."

"Are you speaking from experience, Mara?"

She shrugged. "Maybe I am."

Karrde studied his glass very intently before taking the final sip. "When I offered her the job, Shada was quite adamant that she will not be my mistress."

Mara grinned in delight. "Good for her."

"Yes." A peculiar smile twisted his lips and she wasn't quite sure what it meant. "Not that I offered her that."

"Of course not." No, Karrde believed in 'professionalism', even to his own detriment.

He sighed heavily and glanced back at her. "Mara, now that you've found true love, you're not going to be one of those annoying people that tries to pair off their friends?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she replied tartly. "I wouldn't inflict your poor sense of humor on anyone I called a friend."

He laughed again. "I'm so happy to hear that."

Karrde walked into the hotel bar where he was to meet Shada and immediately caught sight of her despite the pre-dinner crowd. She was leaning back against the bar in a position that allowed her to keep an eye on the door and the small band in the corner. The other patrons around her seemed to be giving her a wide berth. He couldn't blame them. She practically radiated a dangerous aloofness. She looked coolly elegant, wearing a long black highnecked gown that would have been demure if not for the slash down the length of her full sleeves that exposed the pale flesh of her arms. Her dark hair was up in an elaborate arrangement of braids held in place by her customary zenji needles. Even from this distance he knew the silver belt and jewelry she wore was from the set he'd given her on the _Errant Venture_ so long ago. He had to wonder what she meant by wearing them now at the beginning of their professional relationship.

He tried to tamp down the wave of desire that flooded through him at the sight of her. She was his business associate now. Not the woman he had once occasionally shared a bed. That part of their relationship was over.

He knew the moment she saw him. She straightened and a touch of her icy demeanor melted. He
made his way through the crowd to her.

"I'm sorry. I'm a little late," he apologized.

"It's fine. I've been enjoying the music."

"Good. Shall we get a drink before we go to dinner?"

She shrugged. "If we have time."

"We do."

Shada turned around to face the bar looking for the bartender. And Karrde realized that her dress wasn't very demure after all. It was a tease. It was open just below her collar to her low-slung silver belt revealing a hint of skin all the way down her spine.

He quickly looked away and leaned against the bar beside her as they ordered their drinks. He felt her eyes on him scrutinizing him.

"Is everything alright? You look a little tense. And tired."

He was tired and he knew that would be a common feeling in the future given Mara's departure. "I'll tell you about it over dinner," he told her. Mara's engagement wasn't public knowledge yet and he didn't want to discuss it in such a crowd. "You on the other hand look lovely."

"Thank you," she smiled a bit uncertainly, perhaps unsure of what that compliment meant from her new employer. "I decided to do some shopping today since I don't really have any clothing suitable for meeting with government officials."

"Submit an expense report."

"What?" There was something wary in her eyes. "I'm not allowing you to buy my clothes."

He immediately realized it was perhaps something he should have not suggested, especially in the early tentative stages of their professional relationship. "It's a job related expense. Do the same with any weaponry you might need." She still looked suspicious, but he refused to allow her to make it into something he didn't intend it to be. "Didn't Mazzic ever buy you gear? And I distinctly remember you telling me that Mazzic bought you that dress you had on when we first met on Trogan."

"Yes, but..." she trailed off, but he could imagine what she was thinking, something probably about their former relationship. "Never mind," she said picking up her glass. "To peace."

"To not dying." He clinked his glass with hers.

"I would have avenged you if Car'das had killed you." She said it with such vehemence that he couldn't help but be flattered by her intensity.

"Thank you. That means a lot, but I'm very glad it didn't have to come to that." Karrde finished his drink and then held out a hand to her. "Will do do me the honor of a dance?" He saw Shada hesitate. "We don't have to worry about being seen now, you know."

"You're my employer now."

He shrugged. "What does that matter? Mara and I have danced on many occasions." Then he smirked at her. "And I know you want to. I saw you tapping your toe when I came in."
She gave him that suspicious look again, but took his hand anyway. He led her out into the group of dancers. He was very careful to place his hand on the fabric of her dress instead of her bare skin. Even so she was very stiff in his arms.

"Well, this is very refreshing," he commented blithely. "Mara never lets me lead."

Shada laughed and finally relaxed in his arms. "And is Mara alright after her little adventure?"

"The short answer is yes. The long answer is a great deal more complicated."

They danced in silence for a bit, then his eyes focused on the brooch pinned to the high collar of her gown. "Shada, may I ask you something?"

"I suppose."

"Why are you wearing that jewelry tonight?"

"Oh." She looked slightly embarrassed. "It's just that I've never been able to wear it before. I was afraid Mazzic would ask questions if he saw it. I didn't think about the connotations of wearing it tonight. Would you rather I didn't?"

"No, not at all. I wanted you to enjoy it. I just wanted to make sure there were no misunderstandings."

She held his gaze questioningly. "We can be professional, can't we?"

"Of course we can." And he really hope that was true. The song ended and he released her. "Shall we go on to dinner now?"

Shada nearly choked on her wine. Once she recovered, she asked, "Surely you're joking?"

Karrde grinned in a unrestrained way she had rarely seen from him. "Oh, no. I assure you I am in full seriousness. Mara and Skywalker are indeed getting married."

She had to be missing something. "Why would they do that?"

He laughed. "Is the concept of love so foreign to you, Shada?"

She cast him an irritated glare for his mocking tone. She thought a man famous for his cold detachment was the last person that should be mocking someone for questioning the idea of love. But she decided it wouldn't be wise to call her new boss out on that. "Well, I rather thought it was to people such as Mara and I. Not to mention Skywalker. Aren't Jedi forbidden such things as love and marriage?"

"That's probably one of the reasons the old Jedi Order fell. Skywalker doesn't seems feel such monastic ideas are relevant to Jedi preforming their duties."

Shada took a large drink of her wine. "Well, it's certainly ironic. The Emperor's agent and the Rebel hero."

"Yes, the fates do seem to have a rather wicked sense of humor, don't they?"

In more ways than one, she thought. "So what does this mean for your organization?"

"My first thought was to offer Skywalker a job so he could be close to his wife. Having a Jedi on
the payroll would be useful. But Mara has other ideas. She has decided to officially become a Jedi."

Shada raised an eyebrow, but didn't reply. Instead she busied herself by filling her and Karrde's glasses.

"You disapprove?"

She sighed deeply, not quite sure how to express her thoughts clearly. "I've only recently come to the realization of how being indoctrinated by zealots can damage a person. I wouldn't wish that on anyone."

Karrde's hand twitched where it rested on the table near hers as if he was going to reach out to her. Instead, he crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in his chair. Away from the temptation of touching her. "True. But I suppose the it's a little different if you are one of the head zealots and get to make the rules." Shada laughed a bit at that. Trust Karrde to think about the benefits of being in charge. "Mara will be good for the Order. The Jedi could use a grayer perspective on the galaxy. Skywalker is still terribly earnest even after all these years. But, I'm afraid, my dear, that Mara's departure means I will have to rely even more heavily during this transition."

"Does that mean I get a raise?" Shada asked only half joking.

Karrde laughed. "Greedy. I admire that. You'll certainly earn it."

After dinner as they walked back to the hotel, Karrde offered Shada his arm. She told herself that it didn't mean anything and that was just his odd courtly manners. After all she had seen Mara on his arm more than once.

But she would be lying to herself if she said she didn't miss this kind of closeness with him. As they walked back to the hotel, she had to stop herself from leaning into him as she might have once done and kept her touch on his arm light and formal.

Karrde walked her to her door. And she would also be lying to herself if she said that she wasn't tempted to invite him in.

But Karrde bid her a quick but polite "Goodnight," and retreated to his own room.

Shada was at once both disappointed and relieved.

TBC

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