

"I want to be surprised that you're in a cantina. I really do."

Aittera put her datapad down on the bar with an irritated scowl without looking over her shoulder at the source of the deep, rich Imperial accent. "I figured it'd be the most likely place you could look for me."

Kol moved to stand beside her. "Did you see it when you flew in?"

She bristled, taking a drink from the bottle of whiskey in her hand. "It's bigger than the one I blew up. I'll need a few more charges next time."

"You know that you have no desire to destroy that ship," he asserted smugly.

"Are you really so sure?" Aittera sneered, refusing to look over at him. "It was just a dream."

Kol smirked. "For now."

"I have the Hope back. Already have work lined up."

"So, we're moving on to *that* part of the dream then?"

Aittera looked over at him, her expression determined as she met his gaze. "I thought we might skip to the part where we figure out how to make the dreams stop."

Kol laughed. "Come on. I have at least one idea, but this dive has lost its charm."

"Fine, but keep it in public for now. I don't trust you."

"I don't believe you."

Aittera glared at his back as she followed him out of the cantina and through the promenade, to a public (as in not inside) but quiet corner. He turned and moved in close, giving her a grin that did nothing to hide his nature as a predator, but wasn't meant to be threatening in the traditional sense. Her deep blue gaze slipped to his lips even as she squared her shoulders resolutely against the magnetic pull that now seemed to exist between them.

"I honestly don't know how to make the dreams stop, if we even could. However, I know better than to think that was your intent in inviting me here."

"I...did that without really thinking it through. I think finding some way to sever this connection between us is our best bet though."

"You're lying, I always know when you are." Kol moved a finger under her chin, to bring her eyes back to his, and while she would expect his armor to be cold, the touch of his gloved finger was actually warm. "Why fight this so hard?"

Without shying away from meeting his gaze again, Aittera lifted her chin just a little higher to remove it from contact with the glove, a note of defiance in her tone. "It's not a lie. I didn't want to go to Kaas, but just the idea of seeing you was... It's not a lie. And I fight it, because I can't tell the difference between what I really want and what I want because of the dreams."

"You didn't have to go to Kaas. I came to you, I will *a/ways* come to you, Aittera. I already made that promise once." He withdrew his hand. "Isn't dreaming about it an indication that it is something you truly desire?"

"Or it's a side effect of the shielding that went wrong. Khor did say that we were still going to feel something of each other's presence. It could just be that it went further wrong than suspected." She wasn't being defensive so much as offering the same explanation to him that she'd been mollifying herself with. The promise he referred to was something she didn't want to dwell on, because it was the kind of promise she could want to count on, so she reminded herself one more time of the nature of the man standing before her like a ward against those feelings.

"I don't think that it is. The presence may be, but these dreams, they feel different. They're not like when I can hear you thinking at me." Kol removed his gloves, attaching them to his belt before reaching for her hand, taking it in both of his. "If it was just some quirk of the witch's spell, I would know. I would be able to feel it. We Sith bend the force to our will, and my experience with that has given me a perspective of it, even when it doesn't do exactly what I require."

Aittera watched him pull his gloves free and found herself fighting the urge to do so with her own - so much so that she had to replay what he'd just said in her mind to let it truly sink in. The dreams were different, and her gut told her that he was not lying or manipulating his explanation of why. "The question is, why aren't *you* fighting it? I thought Sith believed in crushing their enemies. No mercy, right? No exceptions. Doesn't any of this bother you?"

"You're not my enemy, Aittera. You haven't been my enemy for a very long time." It was an honest answer. Even when she was his captive, he'd already stopped seeing her as an enemy. "I've already told you that the admission of needing you was a hard truth for me to bear. Sith do not turn from those truths, they face them, and they accept them. Though that may seem like I'm taking a cold approach and just doing this because I have given in, that is not the case. It's something I've wanted for longer than I'd even known I wanted it."

"Why?" It was just as honest a question. "And don't just say it's because I wouldn't break. That's something that might earn me some respect, but I can't see how that leads to...whatever this is."

"That's only part of it, a small part at that. It's everything about you. How no matter what happens, you remain this strong, beautiful, resourceful, intelligent woman. Half the time you're the picture of a Republic citizen, the other half, I truly believe that uniform from the dream is meant to be yours. And that's only scratching the surface of you."

She was stunned at the answer; not just for it's content, but for the conviction behind it. For several moments, the only response she could give was the way her eyes held his gaze firmly in their own, speaking volumes about her own desire to be wanted - *needed* - so completely. Some part of her believed that getting the freighter back that had become home after losing Devon would prove to sate that desire, but of course it hadn't. She had known what it was to feel whole, but that had been so long ago, she had somehow managed to convince herself that the Hope had become a suitable substitute after she'd lost her soul mate.

But now, thanks to the dreams or this connection between them or whatever twist of fate this was, Aittera remembered that feeling all too well. It beckoned to her from everything in his presence.

Kol closed one hand around hers while the other found its way behind her to press against her back, drawing her in as he bent to kiss her - a kiss of passion and desire, but also affection, and even outright need. It was somehow gentle and rough at the same time, as much of an enigma as the two of them, and as she melted against him as she allowed herself to portray everything she couldn't put into words as his touch sent an electric pulse along her spine that awakened her senses in a way that made her feel truly alive. It was a moment of utter perfection.

In the wake of the kiss, as they looked into each other's soul, it seemed as though the universe itself stopped.

He leaned in to merely brush his lips against hers before bringing them to her ear. "Now, can we go somewhere not public?"

The feeling of power in the air shared between them promised to keep the world from rushing back in on them, and for a moment, everything in Aittera seemed to scream yes. Yes, before the memory of what it is to lose something this matchless catches up to remind her of what complete devastation feels like. Yes, before she can think herself out of what is happening. Yes, before the other shoe drops and reality smacks one or both of them in the face.

She gave a slow, almost shaky nod, as she whispered back the first of the disjointed thoughts that isn't any of those answers finds her lips. "I bought us a bed."

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As Aittera keyed the lock and swung the door to her flat open, she was remarkably calm in spite of the storm that raged in her thoughts. The cozy little living space within was warm and inviting

with its new furniture; a dark blue couch and armchair set in one corner, and a tiny dining table with two chairs nearer the kitchen. It had that homey, comforting effect for her even though it was still so new, and it already felt like hers.

Leaving Kol to make himself comfortable, she ducked into the tiny kitchen to retrieve two glasses and a fresh bottle of Whyren's while she asked herself one more time what she thought she was doing. There was a Sith Darth out there in her living room, and for all appearances, this was some kind of precursor to a date as though they were just two ordinary people.

Kol made his way over to the armchair, settling down as he watched her enter her kitchen area. He had left his gloves off from when he had removed them on the promenade, and found himself fighting the urge to wring his hands as he waited. It was something about *her*. He'd never been awkward in social situations before. In fact, they had always brought out his commanding presence. But this was something else, and he both hated and was fascinated by the effect that Aittera Timm had on him.

When she emerged from the kitchen, her own gloves were gone, and her fingertips brushed his own as she handed him one of the glasses. Normally, she would never stand on ceremony like this - filling each glass from the bottle and setting it aside before taking a seat on the end of the couch nearest his chair. She'd be drinking from the bottle in a mad race to get to the bottom. Yet, here she was, entertaining just as Selus had pointed out that she could do, drawing to mind a distant recollection of the way her parents would sit down at the end of the day to share everything that had happened since they'd kissed goodbye that morning.

"I'm not really sure where this can go," she admits honestly. "Nothing about either of our lives really seems to fit the other."

"It'll go as far as we take it. As far as we fight to take it." He smiled over at her and raised the glass to her before taking a drink from it. His entire life, pretty much every moment was a battle of some sort, and he knew this would be no different. "I don't think either of us would know what to do if it was any other way."

Aittera smirked as she raised her glass reflexively in response, but didn't take a drink. It was odd how much she didn't *need* a drink right now. Drinking was usually like breathing for her. "I don't even know what 'it' is."

"It is what ever we decide to make it." He reached out with one hand, holding it palm up for hers. "I think that is why we're here."

She set her drink aside to slide her palm onto his, curling her fingers around his hand. "To figure it out."

Kol nodded, leaning down so that he could lift her hand to his lips, kissing the backside of her palm before giving her a wink and lowering it back. "What do you want, Aittera?"

The question was jarring. In the past, what she wanted was already long dead, and she had so accepted that as a part of who she was that to even consider wanting something else in its absence seemed inconceivable. "I don't want to rush into this - well, part of me does," she amended with an almost sheepish smile. "But let's set the physical aside for a moment. I've given up something that means a lot to me just to be sitting here with you. I don't take that lightly."

He smiled at her, and it seemed that over time his smile was becoming less and less predatory, less dangerous, and more affectionate. "I know. If this was merely a physical thing, we'd both be disappointed. Did you notice that about our dreams? Yes, it was physical, but it also transcended that. There was a connection that ran much deeper."

The more affectionate his smile grew, the more it coaxed an unguarded one from her like sunshine peering out from behind spent rain clouds. "Like getting a piece of yourself back that you hadn't even realized you'd been missing?"

"Something like that. I wouldn't say a piece of myself, it was more a feeling. And then there was that admission of need for it." Kol set his own drink down to move from the chair over to the sofa, settling in beside her, and moved an arm behind her to once again take the hand he had been holding.

"It was like when we were together in those dreams. I could let the galaxy melt away, and I could just be happy. I know that is not possible in reality, not even for someone as powerful as I am," he added in a tone that was more sarcastic than serious. "But it was clear about one thing, I can be happy when I'm with you, even for fleeting moments."

"I would think that'd be easier for you anyway. You didn't have to sacrifice anything to get here - and before that gets you riled, let me be clear that I'm not complaining. I just think as proof that this could be good for you is piling up, I'm still sitting here in the wreckage of everything that's led me here." But, oh, isn't it simpler curled up at his side with that muscular arm wrapped around her shoulders, holding her close?

"And that's why it is very important to me to make sure that this is just as good for you, to make all the sacrifices you've already made worth it." He leaned his head down to press his lips to her temple. "I never want you to look at what this is, regardless of where, or how far it goes, and regret a moment of it. I want to not just think I am worth it, but to actually *be* worth it."

"I have an idea of where you can start, but I don't know that you'll like it or actually *do* it." The idea had come to her suddenly - as if all of the pieces to a puzzle were falling into place. "Step away from your life. Not forever. Just for a month or two. Take a leave of absence. No war, no

wife, no...whatever else. I'm taking a contract that will involve a lot of time we can spend on the Hope, just you and me and an assload of supplies to run past Cartel blockades. Step into my life for a little while."

"I will do this thing you've asked me, happily even. If when we return, you come on board the Avenger as my guest for a few weeks." He looked over at her with a smile. "Then you can see that the Empire is not nearly as evil as the propaganda portrays us to be. Just semi-evil," he teased. There was something serious underlying his tone; he truly wanted to show her that things could be good for them wherever they were.

"Deal," she answered without hesitation. "In the meantime - and I realize you'll need to make some kind of arrangements before we leave - will you stay on Nar as much as you can? Taking it slow is one thing, but taking it slow when you're cooped up on a freighter for days at a time is more than I think I could bear." She looked up at him with a mirthful smile. "It'd be nice to get to the point where we're ready to share a bed before there's really only one bed to share."

Kol nodded, smiling back at her. "I'd already planned to stay here for the foreseeable future. I will need to shuttle back to the Avenger and make the arrangements for staying on the planet instead of the ship. Then, I'll need at least a week before we can leave, but the initial arrangements shouldn't take more than half a day."

"You might want some less...polished clothing too," she smirked, tapping her finger on his armor over his chest. "The whole point of what we'll be doing is to *not* draw attention to yourself."

"I remember what wearing regular robes is like. I'll do it again, for you." He grinned and then added, "Plus, they'll be much easier to remove than this is. And I know how much you're going to enjoy doing that."

Aittera laughed as she lifted a hand to his cheek, drawing him into a warm, affectionate kiss that in no way diminished the seemingly continuous electric undercurrent between them, and he squeezed her hand as he kissed her back with a warm smile.

"Would you like to be the one to shuttle me up to the Avenger?"

Much as they had accomplished in the short time since his arrival, trust was still something she was reminding herself that he had to earn. Besides, she was not quite sure she trusted herself in this situation either as her gut had refused to weigh in since that first kiss on the Promenade earlier in the evening. "Not this time. If I can't make myself say goodbye and let you leave, this whole 'taking it slow' idea is going to go right out the airlock."

Kol smiled and placed a light, affectionate kiss on her lips. "You know, now that you mention it, it probably is a good idea not to this first time. I wouldn't want to have to execute any

subordinates that give you weird looks," he teased. "And I think that is where we should say goodbye, for now."

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Aittera sat at the small dining table with a datapad in hand, trying to focus on the information scrolling across the screen with little luck. She had gone to meet her contact for a new job and found an old friend - Jean Schramme - looking much better than the last time she'd seen him. He had a new contract, a new girl, and even a new eye (the last thanks to some wonder drug); and he seemed so much more the confident, strong man she had first met a year or two before.

And then, she had watched one of the few people in the universe that she had true respect for lose whatever respect he'd had for her in return. It was nowhere near as crushing an experience as when it had been Selus, but it still struck a damn nerve.

She'd confided in him about Kol. Not everything, of course, but enough to bring the same kind of reaction she would have had were the circumstances reversed. She wondered how she could even imagine she really knew what she was doing. The pragmatist in her screamed every reason that she had for calling everything off while another part of her - one she thought had died a long time ago - fought back every one with *'But I need this. I want this.'*

The door chime sounded, and she looked up from the datapad as Kol - his armor discarded for a simpler set of black robes - stepped into the flat and smiled at her. The pragmatist fell silent at the sight of that smile, and the other? The other rejoiced. This simply just *had* to work. She needed him. She wanted him.

Aittera frowned thoughtfully as her eyes drifted down over his clothing. "We're going to need to go shopping. I need you to look like you belong on a supply freighter."

He walked over to the table to take a seat beside her. "You mean you're going to scum me up?"

Putting his feet up on one of the other chairs, he looked over at her. "I guess I can live with that. As long as I'm wearing clothes and not one of those idiots that run around with just a trenchcoat on with no shirt. It's one thing for a girl to do - it's sexy, and you wear yours oh-so-well - but a guy?" He made a face.

For a moment, she just...stared at him blankly; and then, suddenly, Aittera was laughing so candidly, it was like watching a complete transformation from hard-hearted smuggler to simply beautiful woman. "No trenchcoat. Check. How about a jacket you can hide your lightsaber in?"

"I could go for that. Guess wearing it on my hip would be a giveaway, better to go with a blaster." Kol looked over at her with a playfully devious grin. "I could also not wear any weapons and look like either a complete fool, or a total badass."

"We'll put a blaster on your hip. Only right if we're scumming you up." She set the datapad down and leaned over to give him a warm, tender kiss. It was so natural and easy, it felt like something she had done for her entire life. "So...the rest of your life is on hold now?"

"Not quite. I've called in someone to support my apprentice during her time running the Avenger, I don't want her to feel like she has no one watching her back while I am away. I've made most of the other arrangements though. I will have Khor relay a message to his mother, rather than make the trip back to Kaas."

"I met with the coordinator for this job. We'll have official paperwork to make it look like what we're doing is legal, but the Cartel is known for conducting random searches. If that happens, we'll have to play the part, so for purposes of this trip, we're partners that have worked together for a couple of years. We'll figure out an alias for you."

"So I shouldn't just off them if they try to search us?"

"Definitely not. Especially on our first run. The government-in-exile is staging a rebellion, and if we tip their hand, they're going to have a much worse time of it," she explained in case he wasn't joking. "On top of that, my reputation will be kriffed, so let's try not to do that."

Kol sighed. "Fine, no killing. Unless they're searching the ship and one of them looks at you like he wants to bend you over. Then I'll have to 'slip' and break their neck. Deal?"

Aittera smirked, answering with a firm, "*No*. If I can charm us out of trouble, settle for dirty looks. We're trying not to draw any attention, not get detained for killing a customs official."

He frowned for a moment before his lips curled into a charming grin. "I suppose I'll have to settle for making *you* scream for me during this trip."

A touch of color brightened her cheeks, and she stood to move nearer to him, leaning her ass on the edge of the table. "I think that's a fair trade. In the meantime, you can take me to dinner, and we can talk about what wasn't in the intel we poured over while we were trying to---well, while I was trying to kill you, and you were..."

Kol reached for her hands, using them to pull her down across his lap. "Resisting your efforts brilliantly?"

"I was going to say trying to drive me insane, but let's go with that. Makes me sound a lot more formidable and not at all like a gnat trying to kill a fly-swatter."



"I am rather good at swatting things. I could flip you over my lap and demonstrate if you would like?"

Aittera gave him a playfully scandalized look. "No! Dinner and...talking. Talking!"

Grinning, she leaned in to kiss him, raising a hand to cup his cheek with her palm. Once again, everything in the moment felt right...easy - so much so that she forgot to worry about all of the very bad ways this budding romance could go, and she melted against him like she had in so many of those dreams.

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It wasn't until they were standing at the entrance to one of the nicest restaurants on Nar Shaddaa - a fancy place that boasted a stellar show and private dining rooms with amazing cuisine - that Aittera stopped short with a look of uncertainty. She passed a look over to her side at Kol next and shook her head. He didn't need to indicate in any way that he agreed, and they turned hand in hand to go find the nearest taxi stand.

Fifteen minutes later, they were sitting at a rickety little table in a tiny diner with windows clouded with age in a rundown neighborhood somewhere near the Red Light Sector. The place wasn't filthy so much as showed signs of age, it's neon sign boasting "Good Noodles" barely half lit. The owner - a little middle-aged Nautolan wearing a white apron tied over thread-bare clothes - stepped out from the kitchen and greeted Aittera with a friendly wave, asking if she wanted the usual. She held up two fingers to indicate herself and Kol, and he disappeared into the kitchen again.

Until this point, they had been somewhat quiet and contemplative, using the excuse of not being alone at the taxi waiting area or waiting for the diner owner rather than make small talk - something she'd always hated anyway. Now, however, she really *looked* at Kol and smiled. He returned the smile and turned his hand palm up on the table between them.

"Regular place for you isn't it? I could swear I've been here before, but it might be one of your memories."

Her smile became warmer as her hand slid into place in his, palm to palm, and a light seemed to brighten her eyes from within - as though she'd woken up to find him lying next to her in bed, watching her with affection. That connection that was always there between them now seemed to sizzle to life with fresh energy, and she nodded. "Yeah, I discovered it the first time I really went exploring here a few years ago. Food is decent, nothing flashy or fancy. I just...wanted to be able to talk without all the distractions and fake crap around us."

"I like that. I go through the motions so much back home, I'm glad I don't have to do that here with you." He closed his hand around hers and brought it to his lips before settling it back down on the table, just keeping hold of it. His smile reflected affection, then curiosity. "You have things to say to me."

"You don't have things to say to me yet?"

"Oh I have plenty to say to you. I was being a gentleman and letting you proceed first. Uncharacteristic of me, I know," he teased with a smirk.

Aittera chuckled, dipping her head in the kind of nod that was really more a chance to adjust to the warmth rising in her cheeks than affirmation. "And here I was hoping that you'd go first so I wouldn't feel quite so much like I'm making an absolute fool of myself."

Kol chuckled. "I can, if you want. I have never had a problem with feeling like I was making a fool of myself."

"You're kidding me. I would have thought that would be the most likely time you'd start killing people off. Can't have anyone around who's seen you as anything but the big and scary Darth Ragious," she teased back.

"I'm always the big and scary Darth Ragious. Even when I'm Kol, he's just waiting under the surface." He gave her that grin that was probably a little more predatory and dangerous than he intended, and she laughed.

"So, you first, and we'll take turns?"

He nodded. "So this thing we're going to be doing, why are you involved in it?"

The Nautolan re-emerged from the kitchen with two steaming bowls heaped with thin noodles soaked in a meaty broth with vegetables, a fork sticking out of each one. He set them in front of his only customers, retrieved a pitcher of ice water and two glasses for them, then disappeared into the back again without a word.

"Well, in my work, I hear a lot from all over, and the mercs pass around stories about labfra like legends. The Cartel took over that world, and the people fought back tooth and nail over a really long and bloody campaign. It wasn't about outside factions coming in and making it their own battleground like Balmorra, though. It was a people standing up and trying to hold onto what belonged to them, and they didn't lose without a hell of a fight. Just the chance to help set things right..." Aittera gave a slight shrug. "I just couldn't resist."

Kol nodded as he listened, sampling his food, continuing to give her that look of affection as she described her personal motive. "You like long shot causes."

It's an observation; one particularly fitting considering that the two of them sitting there together enjoying the company of the other was once the same thing.

"I'm torn on it. Part of me wants to help you more than just by accompanying you. I could bring an entire armada to bear and liberate the world. Of course it would draw me into another war, and I really have no desire to fight two at the moment."

Aittera shook her head. "I think that would do more to hurt it in the long run really. These are people fighting for their freedom. If someone were to come in and just hand it to them, it might make them feel like they were seen as weak. They have a saying there - labfra overcomes. It's like a mantra that they have held onto all this time, and now, it's being spread like wildfire across the mercenary community, and they're not hiring mercenaries to fight but to train their *own* people to fight. This is something they want to win back for themselves."

She took a bite of her food here and there as well, the atmosphere of the little run down diner such that nothing felt rushed or hurried. They could probably sit there for hours without interruption.

"And now, it turns out that an old friend has been put in charge of the whole thing, and I know he hated losing that world the first time. I think it'll do him good to be the one that helps them win it, and he's had enough hard times in his life."

"Do I know this friend?"

"I don't know if you know him. His name is Jean Schramme. He ran security on the Promenade for a while."

"The name rings a bell, but I can't place a face. You know I don't visit the Moon often."

"So, my turn?"

"Yes, your turn. See? I didn't look like a fool, so you shouldn't worry."

They continued to eat as they talked, and Aittera was pleased to see that he seemed to actually enjoy it. Finally, when he had finished his first bowl he asked the Nautolan for a second, and he looked over at her with a grin. "You should be careful, I might have to hire our chef to make this for me on the Avenger, which means he won't be able to keep up this place."

She laughed. "Not sure you'd have room for his family. He has..." She looked over at the smiling Nautolan to confirm, who in turn nodded proudly to each numeration. "...10 children, 34 grandchildren, and his wife and mother living in the building upstairs."

"Okay, so I guess I'll be getting my noodles take out only..." Kol frowned playfully, bringing another easy laugh from the redhead.

Just like that, the flow of conversation never seemed to stop, and when they finally found themselves ambling along the Promenade later hand-in-hand, it was sparsely populated. They talked about small things, of course. They both hated the excesses of the Smuggler's Moon, but saw the opportunities it housed. She'd grown up on Coruscant. While he appreciated beauty, he had an eye for the kind of true beauty that could only be found beneath the surface.

And then there were the not so small things.

"I hope this doesn't hit too close to home, because of what happened, but I've wondered ever since I learned about this..." she began as they stopped to lean against a railing to look out over the cityscape without even so much as a gesture from either of them in precipitation. It was barely even a thought for either of them.

"Like I said, I read every bit of intel I could find on you, and most of your known associates fit your reputation. Except one. Why did you choose Temivi to be your apprentice?"

"Because of the way she acted at the choosing ritual. She was...defiant. She was perfect. She's one of my few regrets." His answer was completely honest. Temivi was his perfect apprentice, and he knew he'd failed her.

"What do you regret?"

"That I wasn't as attentive to her as I should have been," Kol began. "A few other things as well, but they involve a topic I don't think you want to hear about."

"I was able to get a look at a psych eval. She didn't strike me as someone with a killer instinct. It's pretty impressive that she managed to survive the academy."

"Let's just say Temivi was full of talents that weren't evident on paper, and her loss, my failure, lessens the Sith."

"Alright. Now, tell me what you think I don't want to hear."

He spoke one word. "Agonar." His wife's apprentice; a man whose reputation could chill any civilized person to the bone, and by all accounts, only controllable by the Lady Kiabe herself. The nicest reference anyone seemed to have for him was when they referred to him as 'the savage'.

Aittera fixed her gaze on Kol's face, giving him a short nod to encourage him to explain further.

"He's the regret. If I had not acquired him for my wife, Temivi would likely still be my apprentice, and not merely an echo inside my sister's head."

"What did he do to her, and I'm not sure what that...an echo in her head?"

"Temivi was possessed by the spirit of one of my ancestors. When it left her body and entered my sister's, an echo of Temivi was taken along with it. Agonar later murdered Temivi after doing things much worse to her. She was...no longer pure, and to my dishonor I no longer desired her." His voice was tinged with the regret he felt, and it was apparent that the entire ordeal still bothered him even though it had been years.

Aittera squeezed his hand with a look of sympathy. In fact, not once during this brief explanation did she display anything but the continued desire to understand, and her emotions reflected nothing like the distaste, disappointment, or pity. She had asked, because she wanted to know; and she was prepared for the answer, no matter the light he worried it might cast him in. "Have you spoken with the echo? It might not be *her*, but it might help you put some of those regrets behind you."

Kol shook his head, grateful that she didn't seem to have judged one of the more shameful moments of his life. "No, when I spoke to my sister, it was to repair *that* particular rift. Perhaps in time, I may seek out the part of her that comes from Temivi, perhaps even find a way to return her to flesh once more."

Aittera picked his hand up to bring it to her lips, pulling her palm back in order to press a kiss into his, and they spoke in quieter tones of lost opportunities, dashed hopes of their youths, and dreams that never became reality.

Somewhere along the way, they'd managed to find themselves in her little apartment again as night was slowly inching past to give way to the new day, and she found herself prodding softly. "Your turn."

"Before I ask this, I want to be honest about why. I want to see your face light up." He gave her another affectionate smile. "How great is it having the Hope back?"

Kol was right in that the question lit her up, but the smile that accompanied her reaction was bittersweet as she looked down for just a moment before answering. "I knew I missed it, but I had no idea how much of me was missing without it. When I bought it, I was going to fly as far away from home and the SIS as I could get. I told myself that I would find a sun that couldn't be seen from Coruscant, so that my parents couldn't watch from their graves when I flew into that sun to make the pain stop."

There was a shine of emotion in her eyes that might have been tears if she had been anyone else. "I just started flying, and it was like I could hear Davin trying to talk to me. Then, it was like

he was trying to talk me out of it. Eventually, I just...had to stop in the middle of nowhere and work my way through it."

"I'm glad of that." He offered a look that he offered few others - one of sympathy - but for her, it was a look that told her in no uncertain terms that he would have done anything to make that pain never have been felt by her. Suddenly next to her again, he slipped an arm around her. "I didn't mean to bring up a painful memory, I just knew how much your ship meant to you, *that* ship. And wanted to see a look of happiness."

Aittera looked up into his face with an affectionate smile and nodded, grateful for everything from his reaction to the way having his arm around her made her feel like a whole person again. She wasn't feeling that loss she'd just described so much as reminding herself what it would be like to lose *this* feeling - that she could be complete. "You're the first person I've told that entire story to. I usually brush over the details or refer to a small bit of it and leave the worst out. I'm glad you asked."

He placed a kiss on her cheek, whispering, "It shows me how deeply you love. And I'm glad you trusted me enough to tell it."

"Is there any other way?" She lifted her hand to touch his chest as she looked into his eyes, finding herself caught there a moment she knew was made up of more than just a simple connection.

"Not for me."

And then his lips were pressed against hers, passion and desire, affection and love, all wrapped up in the intensity of the contact. It was as though she could feel her soul pour itself into his lips as she kissed him, every defense gone, and everything that made her Aittera laid bare before him.

There was an ache in that kind of vulnerability. It was like drawing back layers of skin until there was nothing left between the air and raw nerve, and the intensity of it was overwhelming. It was the kind of feeling that one was supposed to instinctively draw back from in self-preservation, but instead, the one all consuming thought she had in the moment was the understanding that he felt the same thing she did.

As he lifted her into his arms to carry her to the bed, Kol's thoughts turned to how this could and likely would end badly even as he made up his mind that he was willing to take every risk just to be with her that much longer. And as they curled up together on top of the covers, he pulled her close, just hugging her to him to savor the feeling of having her so close.

Aittera pressed her heart against his, resting her forehead into the crease of his neck, each hand clinging to his robes against his sides. She could now sense his feelings almost as

strongly as her own, and that was enough to banish any last refuge of practical thought or caution that might have been lingering in the back of her mind. He was as much hers as she was now his, and no matter how terrifying that was, it was the most exhilarating and perfect rush she had ever felt in her life.

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Aittera may as well have been in orbit long before the Devious Hope's cargo bay was brimming with the combination of legal machine parts and illegal supplies they were to deliver to labfra. It had been a week (*only a week?*) of the kind of happiness that she would have scoffed utter disbelief about before. Every kiss, every moment spent tangled in bedsheets or wrapped in Kol's arms, every conversation, all of it...it wasn't just perfect. It was *right*.

Somewhere along the way, she had left cynicism and caution behind, and they had fallen so perfectly in sync with each other that sometimes, it was hard to know where one of them left off and the other began. As much as Aittera had resisted the desire to throw everything she was - heart and soul - into a relationship with someone like Kol Arren (*but truly, was there anyone like him in all the universe?*), it never came to making a decision of any kind. She was his long before she ever acknowledged it, and as soon as she got out of her own way, she forgot all of the reasons she had for holding back.

The briefing with Jean Schramme had been almost too entertaining when she'd introduced Kol, who had left behind his Sith robes in favor of a more spacer-like jacket, shirt, and sturdy trousers. Aittera had to keep from laughing outright when Kol had insisted that he stop referring to him with the awkward "my lord", and the poor mercenary soldier switched to an equally awkward "Kol" that made him seem just as uncomfortable. By the time they left, though, she had the impression that he might have won her old friend over, at least in the sense that Jean had perhaps realized that Kol had her best interests at heart, which would mean that he would do everything he could to ensure this would be a successful run.

Jean had warned them that random searches were being conducted, so they took the order to move to coordinates where they could be boarded in stride. For one sticky moment, Aittera worried when one of the creeps in the security detail took an unhealthy interest in her, sure she could actually feel Kol preparing to lunge at the smelly thug, but in the end, he'd managed to maintain enough control to let her flirt her way through the situation. Really, really bad flirting at that. Sheesh, give a big dummy with muscles a little smile, and he thought was the Force's gift. Uggh.

Once they'd returned to Nar Shaddaa successful, she left word for Jean that they were ready whenever needed for another run.

And then, no one heard from them for a few days while they let the universe fall away again.

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*"Devious Hope, move to the coordinates being transmitted to you now and prepare to be boarded for inspection."*

Aittera loosed a frustrated sigh before toggling the comm switch to respond. "Copy that. We'll have tea and cakes ready for your boys, Command."

As she moved the freighter into position, she looked over at Kol with a cocky grin. "So, out of eight runs, this makes the fifth time we've been 'randomly' picked for inspection. Remind me to tell Jean he needs to throw in a bonus for my stellar acting skills."

Kol just shook his head as he looked over at her. "I really think I may kill them this time. I've been patient, I've played nice while they ogled you. And I half believe it's that kriffing inspector just wanting to stare at your chest while his goons scan the ship. I swear, Aittera, if I don't get let off leash soon I'm going to start looking into that planet killer thing again."

She chuckled, shaking her head. "One more run after this one. I promise. Then, I can be the one being cranky about...whatever I'll hate about staying on the Avenger."

"Professionally prepared meals by one of the most sought after chefs in the Empire? Do you know how many people I had to kill before he became open for employment?"

Groaning, she finished maneuvering the Hope into place and prompted the system to prepare for sealing the airlock with the security ship. "I can't ever tell if you're joking when you say things like that, you know."

"And that's part of what makes me so fun." Kol moved out of the cockpit and back to the airlock to greet their guests, waiting for the same team that scanned them the last few times to board before leading them back to the cargo bays.

Aittera joined him a few minutes later, giving the lead 'inspector' - a big, burly man who leered at her the moment she arrived and made her wonder whether or not the Cartel ships had freshers on them at all - a friendly, slightly suggestive, smile. "As much as I curse my luck for these delays, at least we get to see a friendly face whenever we get selected for inspection. How are you, Gido?"

The large mercenary pushed past Kol to stand closer to the spacer, who noticed her 'first mate's' hand slip momentarily beneath his jacket where she knew his lightsaber was hidden. Thankfully, a moment later, the hand reappeared and was empty, but she was finding that her



own feelings reflected that sign of irritation. The scumbag who was now leaning against the wall beside her rested his arm above her, violating her personal space stench first.

"Always better when your ship comes through, Red. Glad that you keep making the number for the random stop." His ugly grin all but confirmed their suspicion that these inspections were anything but random.

There was a slight twitch at the corner of her mouth that outwardly indicated that irritation and disgust Kol had always felt from her in the mercenary's presence, but Gido missed it completely. His attention was wholly on other parts of Aittera's anatomy as she leaned against the doorframe with her hands clasped at her back. "So, when are you going to ditch the Cartel and come work for me? I bet anything I can beat their benefits package."

Bad flirting or not, the burly ruffian responded with a salacious grin of his own, his attention never straying far from her ample cleavage. "Oh I bet you could. Sure you don't want to give me just a taste?"

Taking advantage of the inspector's distraction, Kol used the force to tip one of the empty crates that his two goons had been scanning onto the unwitting scanner. "Hey! You break it you buy it, and I don't think your cartel pay is even enough to cover the cost of the crate."

He shot a look back at the inspector that was a clear dare to say anything to him for yelling at his men, the air tingling with just a hint of the unspoken threat. Gido gave Kol a look of murder but turned back to look at Aittera - or, rather, Aittera's cleavage. "Your employee has a big mouth. That why you keep him around?"

Grateful for the interruption that at least seemed to slow the man down, Aittera looked past Gido toward the disruption. "Well, not everyone I run into is as capable as you," she responded with a wink, looking back up at the oaf. "Mind having your boys clean that up for me? I hate when my customers are unhappy."

The inspector looked over his shoulder again - this time at his men - and barked, "Clean that up!" before returning his full attention to the redhead.

Normally, Aittera was exceptionally good when it came to keeping her cool in this kind of situation, but today, she just couldn't seem to wrangle the way her stomach was churning in Gido's presence. Was his breath even worse than last time? Was that even possible? How she managed the flutter of eyelashes and the suggestive, "You're so authoritative with them." was beyond her, but the moron ate it up.

As he moved to supervise the clean up, Kol shot Aittera wink unseen by Gido, whose eyes were once again on Aittera's voluptuous form.

"Is that what you like, gorgeous? Authoritative men? We can slip back to your quarters and I can show you just how authoritative I can be." He moved his hand from the wall sliding it down to her hip. "Give me what I want, and I'll make sure your ship doesn't get searched your next time through."

The last time he'd made a similar offer, Aittera had somehow coyly maneuvered the conversation into safer waters, but this time, something inside her just snapped. Her fingers curled around the vibroknife secreted at her back beneath her jacket, and before she'd even realized it, she was shoving it into his throat.

With a wet gurgling sound, the large mercenary's body spasmed once, then crumbled. His weight took her down with him in a shower of blood, and it was only a moment before one of the men from the inspection crew looked over to see his commander's lifeless form and the freighter captain sink to the floor.

Feeling the burst of pure rage from Aittera, Kol turned in time to see her sink to the ground beneath the mercenary's weight. On pure instinct he threw up both of his hands, lifting the two scanners from the ground by their throats. As he closed his fists, he heard the sound of their necks snapping. In the next moment, he was kneeling at Aittera's side. "He touched you, didn't he?"

An uncharacteristic growl sounded as she pushed at the body while wriggling her way out from beneath it with Kol's help. She drew the blade free and turned it with a flick of her wrist to strike the dead man squarely in the temple with the handle. She didn't have to answer. The look in her eyes said it all when she turned to get to her feet, still shaking with anger she barely recognized as her own, ready to take out anyone else who dared come near her.

When she realized Kol had already taken out the inspection team, Aittera aimed a kick for the man's head that resounded with the crack of his skull beneath the heft of her boot. "Mother-kriffing bastard!"

Kol stood and held his hand out for the vibroblade. "Give the knife to me, Aittera. And then I'm going to fix this. They're going to contact him in a few minutes. They always do. And if we don't make our move first, I suspect those guns are going to open up on us."

She handed Kol the vibroknife as she glared down at the mess. "Damnit! DAMNIT!"

She knew she'd screwed up, but there wasn't much that could be done about that now. He was right. They had to act fast. She looked across the cargo bay toward the other members of the inspection team.

"They're good and silenced. But I have an idea. Do you trust me?" He looked at her for confirmation before he even gave voice to it.

Aittera nodded without hesitation. If there was anyone she was questioning her trust in at this moment, it was herself.

"I'm Darth Ragious. You're how I've been smuggling myself onto the planet for high level meetings with the Hutts. Their man fucked them up, and I'm thinking of withdrawing my support."

"Better than dumping their bodies back through the airlock and trying to blast our way out of here, I guess."

"Oh we may still be doing that. I need to get my armor out of your quarters. I'm going aboard their ship."

She nodded again, then looked down at her blood-soaked clothes. "I'll go clean up."

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