

"Damn it, Brixen, they're still in there!"

Aittera was sitting up in the bed in her quarters on the Devious Hope, her breaths coming in rapid succession as her vision cleared and the nightmare faded away. The protocol droid was standing in the doorway, and it took her a moment to realize she must have shouted in her sleep about the same time she realized her head was throbbing. With a groan, she winced and fell back against the pillow, squeezing her eyes shut.

"What?" she snapped at the droid, a little more irritated than she meant it.

"Master Selus instructed me to administer this," the droid patiently explained. "It is a hangover remedy." She lifted one eyelid very, very carefully until she could see the steaming cup in C2-X4's hand.

"I'm fine," she responded, waving him away. "Just get me something for a headache." The droid didn't move.

"Master Selus instructed me to tell you that if you refuse, I am to contact him to return immediately to - forgive me, Master - force it down your throat." The tremor in the droid's metallic voice would have made her laugh under other circumstances.

"Fine!" She sat up again and held her hand out toward it, and the droid crossed the room to place the cup in her hand. "What'd I tell you about calling me master, you annoying piece of tin?"

"My apologies, Captain Badass."

"When is Selus expected back?" Even with a hangover, the droid's answer struck her as satisfyingly funny.

"Some time this evening, Captain Badass."

"Good. Now, go away." She brought the rim of the cup to her lips and took a tentative sip as X4 left her room and the door slid shut behind it. The concoction was surprisingly sweet in spite of its foul odor, and she nursed it for a few more minutes.

Gingerly, she pulled the covers back and swung her feet over the side of the bed, but the 'remedy' was already doing its work as the expected wave of nausea didn't come. She took another drink from the cup before setting it down on the side table and slipped off of the bed to her knees, turning to bend down and look beneath it. She reached for a floor panel a little further under the bed and pressed it down on one side until the opposite side rose enough to slip a finger beneath and remove it.

The strongbox waiting within lifted out easily, and she drew back to sit cross-legged on the floor with it in her lap, tapping in the security code and pressing her thumb to the identification screen. Once it popped open, she reached in to withdraw a small rectangular wallet and set it aside on the table next to the cup.

Once the strongbox was returned to its hiding place, she stood and walked over to the retractable sink to splash some water on her face, fending off the last remnants of sleep and the dream that came with it. The memories of her fiancée's last moments of life hung in the air around her like a thick fog, and she indulged just a few moments of reflection.

She'd managed to banish the nightmare of those final few minutes before, but the dreams had returned more vividly than ever.

It was Selus's fault, she told herself. He'd shown up in a little out of the way cantina she'd been resting (...hiding...) in. In the brief firefight with two bounty hunters that had tracked her to the cantina, she and Selus had acted in perfect synchronization as though they were merely extensions of each other. They were so connected in that moment, no longer individuals, and...

She let the thought die there. That was the moment she'd committed the ultimate sin - she'd forgotten that Davin Vael had ever existed. The dreams were her punishment. She'd promised to love him forever, and for that one careless moment, she'd forgotten her fiancée had ever existed.

With a heavy sigh, she pushed the sink back into its retracted position and walked over to the bedside table to pick up the wallet. At least one loose end from her subsequent drinking binge could be dealt with. The last thing she needed hanging over her was a Sith Lord's interest, whatever that interest turned out to be.

At the desk, she opened the wallet and withdrew an identification chip that she inserted into the computer. In minutes, she was finished with her message to Rasos, detailing everything that she knew about Jheryth Christopher. It really wasn't much. That was the whole point, of course. If she'd been able to do this on her own, she'd have never sought out Universal Investigations in the first place.

She was glad she had, though. Between keeping her busy with work and giving her new acquaintances and allies, she felt almost like a normal person living a reasonably normal life. The proverbial spy that came in from the cold. How cliché.

Jheryth opened his eyes calmly and sat up in bed, the covers sliding down his bare chest to pool in his lap. He cocked his head slightly, feeling out with the force. Nothing stood out at him. He took a deep breath and released it slowly. He looked at the clock on his nightstand, glaring at

him a time some 3 hours before daybreak. Something woke him up. He could not sense any reason for it and sighed. Disappointing he thought to himself, as recalling the last thing he remembered before waking up was 'her'.

The image of her face, the scent of her body, the feel of her against him, was all he could think about. He took another deep breath, letting it out slowly and took stock of his emotions. He shrugged his shoulders, and releasing yet another breath, threw the covers off and swung his feet off the bed, placing them on the soft rug that spread out from under his bed. He knew, with her image now fixed in his mind, sleep was no longer going to happen today.

He made his way to the closet, pulling out his meditation robe and padded across the floor, through his bedroom and into his meditation room. He set about the meticulous placement of incense, music and kneeling mat. He brushed his robe outward, allowing him mobility to sit down, breathing in the serenity.

*"Power is Knowledge, Knowledge has no sides.
Without emotion, there is emptiness.
Without passion, there is no life.
There is no death, there is only the Force.
In battle, there is the Force.
While I am worthy, defeating my enemies gives me strength.
May I be defeated by hands more worthy than my own."*

Ping, ping, ping.

Aittera sat in the corner of the Devious Hope's medbay, watching Selus sleep in the kolto tank. She'd tried to go to bed, but somehow, laying there in silence was worse than the faint, consistent beeping of the monitor that tracked his life signs.

Ping, ping, ping.

In four years of service to the Republic in SIS, she never once disobeyed a direct order. Hell, for that matter, she'd never taken a life out of vengeance or even anger. She'd been an effective enough assassin when the assignment called for it, but she'd believed that she was working for the greater good. Before tonight, she would have thought it impossible and absurd to think that she could just take a life in cold blood.

And now, it hung in the air around her in silent accusation, punctuated by the soft, steady tones of the monitor.

She pulled her knees up and folded her arms atop them to let her head drop against them as tears welled up in her eyes again, the fight playing once more through her mind. She'd heard Rasos's order. She stepped forward to use the handle of her blaster to knock the Sith out.

And then, she saw Selus's body in the snow. *Ping, ping, ping.*

Denial had been her armor and practically her way of life for so long, it might have continued to come easily enough in that moment for her to complete their assignment. Why didn't it? Just a few more minutes of that false sense of emotional fortitude that convinced her that she felt nothing more than friendship and gratitude for the idiot who'd refused to let her run away.

Ping, ping, ping.

While she'd expected Rasos's anger and a swift boot out of UI, what really delivered the cold smack of reality was the accusation that she and Selus were together. Faced with the truth of the feelings she'd been firmly in denial of, with the evidence of her actions staring her in the face, she couldn't deny it further. She couldn't even find words to argue.

Ping, ping, ping.

He'd been right. And now, she was forced out of the safe haven of her denial and into this vulnerable, bright light of reality. She could no longer cling to the love she had for a man whose death she'd never faced.

Ping, ping, ping.

When Selus had tracked her to the cantina on that little rinky dink moon, he'd said he knew she was a runner the moment he met her. He'd been right. She'd been running since the day Davin Vael died. Even then, she had the opportunity to act in vengeance and kill her CO, but she didn't have it in her, no matter how angry she was or how much she believed he was solely responsible for the death of her fiancée and two other extremely competent agents. She'd just left, disillusioned with the agency that had been her home for as long as she cared to remember. She wanted to be dead with her partner and lover. Instead, she ran.

Ping, ping, ping.

In fact, there was a part of her that was whispering, even as she spilt tear after tear born of guilt and regret, that it would be easy to just go to the bridge and plot a course for some place far away from Universal Investigations and this colossal screw-up. It was like a little siren song that promised a new descent into denial with all the alcohol necessary to forget everything.

Ping, ping, ping.

Nar Shadaa. Though not a forest, it was a good hunting ground for other pursuits. Imagine Jheryth's surprise when he noticed a Jedi doing a bad job of skulking into an abandoned warehouse in the industrial sector of Nar Shadaa. He had his crew scout the place, and discovered that it is highly likely to be an SIS outpost. If there was any place to find the information he needed, an SIS database would be a gold mine.

He pulled out his old Jedi robes, setting his look in meticulous order, donning his old attire like an old hat. He walked with purpose to the warehouse, striding in through the front door past two sentries posted on either side of the door. They looked at him as he passed, uncertain but holding their position.

He was halfway across the warehouse, having a clear view of the main room, along with a couple of operatives sitting at makeshift desks, between Jheryth and the control room doors. Jheryth cleared most of the expanse of discarded boxes, and that's when he noticed the young Jedi picking at a piece of thread on her robe, sitting on a box near one of the desks.

Her head snapped up, her brown eyes opening wide in realization of what he was. Jheryth force jumped to the furthest guard, drawing his sabre in mid-flight, igniting the blade as he landed, running the guard through. Following the flow he already set up in his mind moments before, reached out with the Force and pulled the other guard off his feet and flung him into the blade of a fork-lift in the corner, before the young padawan even ignited her blade.

He smiled at her, noting the determined look on her face, as well as the gripping fear she was feeling. He stalked her, moving slowly around the desk, blocking one of the boxes she lifted off the floor and hurled at him. Jheryth smiled as he cut through another box thrown at him. The girl had strength, but obviously no real combat training.

He feinted to one side, watched her take the bait as he sidestepped her swing, moving in under her defense, pulling her to him with one hand as he thrust his saber through her chest, staring into her eyes as her defeat registered, her plea voiceless on her lips as she went limp in his arms.

Jheryth laid her down gently, turning as he heard the hiss of a smoke bomb, and a few blaster shots, heralding the entrance of his associates. Aven stepped over the downed sentries, making his way to Jheryth at a quick walk, "Communications have been neutralized, but secondary security systems are still online, my lord."

Jheryth growled as he tried the control panel buttons, getting no response. He tapped his ear comm, "Decker, can you get these doors open?" A female voice answered, "I think....um...yeah, um...no. The penthouse suite is not open today." Growling, he stood there, drawing in the Force,

focusing on the doors, willing his anger and passion for the information he desired pull on the door, willing it out of its secured position.

With the doors groaning against his onslaught, they suddenly flew open, a Jedi flying out at him with a flurry of sabre swings. Jheryth reacted with the instincts of the Force, blocking each one. Jheryth grinned as he reacted, trading block for block, cut for cut, enjoying the feel of this Jedi as he can sense the emotional turmoil coming from him. Jheryth reveled every moment of it, admiring the Jedi's skill, and the moment he was searching for came.

Jheryth moved to the side, the Jedi's swing barely missing him, as he got into his space, around his arm, bringing his sabre up and cutting through the Jedi's sabre hilt, the sabre sparking, spinning to deliver an elbow to his face, knocking the Jedi down, standing over him, the killing blow poised at his neck.

And then Jheryth heard it. It was barely perceptible, and louder than an avalanche. A heartbeat, not his own.

He stood there, looking down on the fallen Jedi, his own master drifting intangibly in a corner, telling him to finish him. His thumb moved, the sabre's blade winking out. The fallen Jedi looked quickly from Jheryth to the other companion's shocked faces, scurried to his feet and out the door.

"My lord, are you alright?" Jheryth barely registered Aven's question, too busy staring down at his own trembling hands. Taking stock of the situation, he was aware of his breath coming in ragged waves. He closed his hands into fists, knuckles showing white, to keep them from shaking, "**FIND HER!** I want that data file **NOW!**"

As Aittera stepped into the moonlit clearing, a gentle breeze stirred the skirt of the emerald silk dress that she wore. The sounds of the forest mingled with that of the dying embers in what was left of the fire in the center of the campsite. He was standing on the opposite side of it, waiting for her, and the waning firelight cast a dim glow in his loose white hair and piercing green eyes.

The dark shadow on his neck and chin told her that he'd been here a few days, and the amusing contrast of a dark beard with all of that white hair struck her, causing a smile. She took one step further to join him in the fading circle of firelight, his gaze leaving hers just long enough to appraise the way the dress flowed around her while defining every delicious curve like a sensuous embrace. It seemed only fair, she thought to herself. While he was drinking her appearance in, she was admiring his muscular arms and strong, chiseled chest.

It seemed as though one step brought him to her side of the fire, and he was standing before her, his hands raised to cradle her face as gently as though he were handling something

delicate and precious. Her senses were so filled with his presence, she swayed on her feet, leaning into him until he captured her lips with his own...

Aittera's eyes opened to the darkness of her quarters aboard the Devious Hope. Beside her, Selus slept with an arm hooked around her, his breath slow and steady. The dream had seemed as real as this moment, and it took several minutes to dispel it, dismissing it as nothing really important.

Jheryth stirred, his arm instinctively reaching out for something. He became dimly aware of the empty space under his arm, and the cool dampness of the grass. He opened his eyes, sitting bolt upright, looking around. He was still at the campsite, the sun was rising, and he was alone. He blinked his eyes, absently rubbing the scruff of his chin. He filled his lungs deeply, certain he could still smell her perfume. He could see her face so clearly in his mind. It felt so real, he was certain she was really here.

Or was.

He shook his head, chuckling to himself. If it was his dream, he was amazed at how beautiful she looked in that green dress. He contemplated having one made the next time he was at a marketplace. The dream was so intense, it still hadn't begun to fade as he started to pack up the campsite. There was something important about that dream, instinct screamed it at him, he just could not piece together what exactly that was.

He pulled his comm out from his backpack, placing it into his ear and pressing the call button, "Good morning you two. It's time to go. I've found what I was looking for." Jheryth pulled out a green holocron crystal, made of pure Emerald, in just the perfect shape for his lightsaber. He rolled it around in his fingertips, admiring it, before placing it back into his backpack. He finished getting dressed and packed up the campsite. He could feel the wind stir from the wake of his ship.

He looked back, across the ashen remains of the campfire, "She would have been standing right there."

Aittera looked around her at the destruction in the hangar where the Devious Hope rested as she reflected on the first time she'd met Jheryth Chrystopher several months before.

Aittera was sitting in a small cantina in the back of a casino on Narr Shadaa's Promenade with her third or fourth drink in hand. She'd chosen the brightly lit and garishly colorful venue,

because at this time of the evening, it was mostly empty as the larger, more well-known places drew the heft of the gambling crowd. This was the kind of place that filled up later, after the bigger prizes were doled out and the parties were over.

She'd been feeling anti-social, and in spite of the sounds of slot machines and the canned music from the speakers overhead in the ceiling, this was as close to a quiet drink as she was likely to find on the Promenade. She could've gone elsewhere, of course. There was no lack of seedy dives on the Smuggler's Moon. However, she had a meeting later, and convenience trumped...well, anything else, really. She'd felt a slight tickle at the edges of her perception since she'd landed, and it made her eager to get business wrapped up so she could leave.

As a rule, she relied on her gut, but this was very different. It wasn't the feeling she got when she knew she was being watched, for example, or when something dangerous was about to happen. Instinct and sharp reflexes were the cornerstone of her ability to stay alive in spite of her tendency to put herself into situations she shouldn't be able to walk away from. This was more like something that remained just out of focus, but hinted at a kind of feeling a child might get when reaching for the stove in the moment before his mother smacks his hand. The more she tried to analyze the feeling or figure out what it was, it darted away and left the question as to whether or not it was there at all.

She knew her luck, though. It was there, and whatever that sense was indicative of, it would not be a good thing. What was worse was that she'd be the idiot reaching for the hot stove.

"Just a brandy, please."

The voice had come from a little further down the bar, and she was roused from her thoughts at the same moment that little tickle became a magnetic pull. What struck her first was the vibrant green gaze that was fixed on her with intense contemplation. Immediately, she liked and hated the way he was watching her, taking her measure, smiling with an unnerving confidence that mirrored her usual brazen cockiness. His white hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail at the back of his neck, and the suit that framed his muscular six foot form was easily worth more than she'd made in the past six months.

The air between them was electric, and she could have easily focused on that save for the mental image of the hand and the stove top. Her gut was finally weighing in, and it was screaming danger.

He started the short exchange of bantering and flirting that followed as they spent the better part of the next hour in the usual dance. He bought her a drink. She gave him a hard time for being so pedestrian as hitting on a woman at a bar. He insinuated. She deflected. In any other circumstances, she would have been enjoying it, but damned if that stove top wasn't beckoning. There was a flow to it that was just so easy that she was tempted to stay and blow off her meeting to see where things might lead.

And then, she noticed the lightsaber hilt on his belt.

With a final witty jab, she got up and was halfway to the door before he came up from behind her, asserting that he'd at least earned her name. When she turned to respond, he was close enough to her that she was in his space, and the draw had somehow felt even stronger.

Looking up into his face, she saw it there - he wasn't creating that magnetic pull, he was experiencing it too. She leaned forward as he bent his head forward, and she whispered something in his ear. It wasn't her name, but it would surely stick with him long after she'd left, and it was distraction enough that he didn't notice that his jacket pocket was a little lighter as she turned to walk away.

"Go ahead. Shoot."

Aittera's vision was filled with the vibrant green eyes that spoke the dare behind the challenge as he took another step closer so that the blaster's barrel was pressed lightly against his chest. The scent of him - after-shave, the barest presence of a cologne that mingled well with his natural musk - hung in the air between them, drawing her further in. She could feel the heat of him, the barely contained desire to touch her, and the weight of his hand as it came to rest on the top of the blaster with the barest brush of his fingers against her hand.

She hesitated. Her instincts failed her as they wavered between a very real sense of danger and an equal portion of yearning. The recent dream swam to the forefront of her mind to taunt her with the time spent in the light of the dying fire. If she could just bring herself to squeeze the trigger, she could be free of this moment and the influence of that emerald gaze that dared her to give in to the inexplicable passion between them.

Her hand was at the back of his neck, pulling him into a heated kiss. He swept her into his arms and held her body against his as the blaster fell from her gun hand.

Time stopped.

The spell broke as their lips parted, and she took a step back. There was a new, deadly element in her demeanor as she recovered and glared at Jheryth. "Leave. Now."

Her shotgun was in hand before he'd cleared the hangar entrance, and she turned with a furious growl to loose shot after shot at the large cargo containers that had been waiting to be loaded. The smell of burning plastoid rose from one of them as her shotgun jammed, and she threw it forcefully against the far wall.

The fire suppression system kicked on, spraying the smoldering crate with white foam, while she stalked to a stack of smaller crates and picked up one after the other, hurling them against the closest wall. Several of them broke open on impact, spilling their contents - mostly food and dry goods - onto the floor as they landed, a tirade of expletives in a smattering of languages accompanying the act.

Later, after convincing dubious security personnel that she'd had a weapon malfunction with a great deal of smooth talk and a credit voucher passed between hands, she sat down heavily on an undamaged crate to survey the damage.

She could still taste him on her lips.