

Kordath jerked as he heard his name, sitting up straight in the chair and looking around the room. Several holographic images flickered, the faces of those displayed showing amusement and annoyance dependent on which he looked to. To his right, the Zeltron who'd recently taken on the role of his boss shook her head and rolled her blue eyes. At the head of the table, Atyiru sighed.

"I'm here," he mumbled, rubbing a hand over his face.

"Any thoughts on the situation, Bleu?" came the Consul's sing-song voice.

"Everythin's karked ta hell?" he asked, taking a shot in the dark.

"That doesn't prove you were paying attention, Kord."

"Grand, toss me under tha speeder, Q, thanks."

He glanced down the table and saw the muscles around the Miraluka's blindfold, on the left side, twitch. With a cough he fumbled for the datapad sitting in front of him and glanced it over, hoping a quick skim would explain to him what this blasted meeting was all about. Ship losses, personnel...

"Everythin's karked."

"At least you understand the numbers," sighed the Shadow Lady, settling back into her chair. "You need to pay attention in meetings, Kord, you're responsible for these people too, now."

"Right," he muttered, feeling his eyes already glazing over.

Beside him, the Zeltron shifted and leaned forward, a thoughtful look on her face.

"With all the troubles we're having with outside threats, maybe we should send my Aedile out to pick up the final reports in person? Interview those left of the officers from the fleet and all that?"

Kordath groaned as he realized this meant going off the planet, though he was pretty sure she was trying to save his hide.

Tapping fingers on tabletop drew his gaze back down to the Consul, a lump in his throat.

"They're gathering at Ol'val, do you mind Kord making a trip out to the port, Terran?"

"If it speeds this along, send him. Hard enough keeping things quiet here without a bunch of refugee naval ratings wandering around."

"He's right! Move things right along I will, get everythin' sorted and them back to Selen in a hurry, yeah?"

"And yourself," whispered Qyreia. He grimaced and nodded. "Sort yourself out, see her, and dry out. You're no good to me a mess."

"Aye," he replied with a sigh.

"Arrangements will be made to get Kordath to Port Ol'val to receive reports and organize the transport of the crews back to Selen, be ready to leave by this evening. Any other business to attend to?"

Atyiru's sightless gaze looked across her summit, such as it was without her second present and the Rollmaster sitting in silence at the other end.

"We're on alert until further notice, with Shadowgate's current casualties," began Maenaki.

"What bleedin' casualties!?"

The Sephi halfbreed shot him a cold look that was chilling despite being a hologram, "Members of the team were attached to the fleet, many took injuries saving crewmen. The Warden among them. Why do you care?"

Her tone almost got to him, almost got him to shout at her. *Because I'm gonna marry that bloody Warden you blasted harpy!* He kept it in check, barely.

Kord quit paying attention again, sinking into his seat. Somebody from the team would have contacted him if it was a serious injury, he told himself. Celevon knew all about their relationship, Koliss and Tali were pretty sure about what was going on as well. A few others, he hadn't been very careful to cover it up anymore after proposing. People were bound to find out.

He told himself it was fine; she had to be okay. Otherwise, somebody would have commed him. She was fine. She had to be. Otherwise, he'd be tearing his hair out well before the shuttle departed later.

The meeting wrapped up blur to the Ryn, who followed his Quaestor out in a daze. He almost ran into her when she stopped in the corridor and turned, giving him a look of concern.

"Were you drunk in there? I heard you had a problem, but that you'd gotten it under control."

"I, uh, I had it, a wee bit under control, aye. On Ol'val."

"Ah," she stated, her lips forming a thin line. "I get that; when Keira goes off for a while, I hit it a little harder too. But you can't do that kinda of crap before meetings; it's gonna be my ass!"

Kord nodded, not even bothering to make one of his usual remarks towards the woman. If he'd been paying attention he'd have seen the look of worry; lechery had been part of the package deal of taking the job. He was really out of sorts if he wasn't even taking a low-hanging joke about her backside.

"Just get to Ol'val and see your lady, okay? I'll keep an eye on Shay. Keira is out on Cartel business, anyway, so I could use the company."

"I...thanks, Q, I'll try to sort myself out. And bring the folk back home and all that. You need anythin', you just hit up Sprout or Strong."

"Not taking them with you?"

"Nah, just get in tha way on somethin' like this, maybe you'll find somethin' for 'em ta do. Again, thanks, I'll go get meself sorted for the ride."

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The shuttle had taken him to the Nighthawk, and from there to Ol'val. He'd not really paid much attention, clutching either his seat or bucket, helpfully provided by the flight crew that remembered their old Captain's little flying issue. Overheard conversations about there being more traffic than usual were about all he'd caught before making it onto the shadowport.

It was hectic, wounded covered the Docks and subtlety was out the window. Ranking officers from the various ships that had been lost found him quickly enough, ashen faced and shell-shocked in turn, offering up datacards. Reviewing showed him just how bad things had gone for the fleet, the lists of dead crew and lost equipment or vessels outweighing the roster of wounded and able by far.

When the last of the officers left him, assurances that transport would be arranged to get everybody back to Selen, he took off. At first, he walked, quickly but still acting civil as he moved between crowds. Frustration welled up, and he began to run, shoving past those in his way, or darting between groups when a gap would open, heading for the nearest entry he knew of to the sub-levels of Ol'val. Barely bothering to check if he was being watched, with everything else happening he couldn't see it mattering, he punched in a code and entered.

He arrived in the sublevel base at a trot, sweating and panting on his way to the medbay. A nurse pointed him in the right direction, after affirming that he wasn't there for treatment of possible cardiac arrest or something idiotic. Kordath found her laying in bed, IVs and monitors,

asleep with a blanket pulled up to her chin. He felt his legs try to give out, whether from the sight or from his run, he wasn't sure.

Bleu looked around and then waved his hand, drawing an unoccupied chair over and sat down. He reached up slowly and touched her face, letting out a breath he'd not realized he'd been holding when he felt the warmth. It trailed down, over the blanket-covered arm till he found her hand, moving under it until he could grasp it. The nurse came through, checking screens and glanced at them.

"She's mostly fine, took a few hits and maybe a concussion. Nothing to warrant a bacta dip, but we did give her something for the pain that put her out for a while. She should be awake in a few hours if you want to come back." The way she said the last bit made it obvious she didn't like the disheveled Ryn in her medbay, though her eyes flickered down to where his hand was. When she noticed him absently running a thumb over the ring on the hybrid's finger she cracked, a small smile appearing.

"Of course, if you're quiet and don't disturb any of the patients, I suppose you can stay."

"Thank you," he said quietly, giving her a tired smile. "Thank you."

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He awoke slowly, his face laying on his arm, something...fingers, he thought, running gently through his hair. A warmth suffused him as he listened to someone humming, a tune that was just out of reach but sparking memories of childhood, of spending time with his mother and sisters. It nearly made him tear up, and he heard the humming break into a short laugh, one that he knew so well when his tail flicked happily.

"I didn't know if they'd let you come to the station or not," he heard her say as he looked up, taking in amber eyes and an exhausted but smiling face.

Kord rose slowly, her hand trailing from his hair down his face, fingertips tracing his features and snagging the bottom of his beard as he leaned in. As softly as he could, he kissed her on the forehead and wrapped his arms around her sitting form.

"Came as quick as I could, Zuj. I'm so sorry, luv."

"Not your fault the fleet blew up," she mumbled into his chest, making no move to push him away. "If you'd been there, I'd have just had to save you, too."

He grinned, pulling back to look down at her once more. "Probably. Saw tha roster, few of yer boys and girls took some knocks, but everybody seems ta be alive."

She relaxed in his embrace at that, some of the tightness in her face fleeing. "Good. Wasn't sure, it was...hectic."

"Just glad you're okay, lass. I can nae imagine...I saw everybody when I came through..." he trailed off, noticing his datapad in her lap.

"You need a better password than 'blueberries,'" she chided him, a sadness warring with the attempt at a joke. "I saw the numbers. I can't imagine how Atty is dealing with it. So many."

He cradled her against his chest again as she began to shake, an urgent beeping heard from one of the nearby monitors. Kordath stroked her hair and back as she sobbed, fighting back his own at finding her in this state. It wasn't that she was sad, it was that he knew she was hurting, she'd been there, people had died and Zujenia being Zuj was probably blaming herself for those she couldn't help. And he couldn't figure out how to take that particular pain away.

They were interrupted by the sound of someone clearing their throat, causing the Ryn to glare at the new presence with watery eyes. He didn't recognize the man, but his uniform suggested DIA.

"Sorry to bother you, but your presence has been requested in the meeting room."

"She look like she's in any state ta be goin' ta a meetin', mate?"

"Not her, sir, you, please make your way there as quickly as possible," the man spoke, looking apologetic and uncomfortable.

Bleu was set to respond with something snarky when he felt a hand on his chest, drawing his attention back to his fiancée. "Go," she said, a tired smile on her tear stained face. "It might be important."

Zujenia grimace as she laid back on the bed, hissing as she straightened back out. She noticed Kord stiffen up as her shirt rode up a bit, exposing the fresh, red scar marring her side. The Ryn made a noise in his throat and nose, like a whistling growl. "Calm down, go see what's going on."

"...beat tha ever lovin' 'ell out o' him, I will."

"No, you won't, stop it, you don't know that it was him," she said patiently, her hand gripping his arm weakly. "Besides, it was my failure--"

"Failure would mean ya karked up," he snapped, though he placed his own hand over hers tenderly. "He knew what he was doin'. Do nae try ta convince me it wasn't him, I know Rogon's handiwork. Deal with that as soon as I track him down."

"Please, Kord." She looked so tired; he felt his eyes welling up again and his jaw tremble. He leaned in and pressed his lips to her forehead, sliding his head down till their noses touched.

"I'll try to be back, soon as Terran is done with me, yeah? Maybe I can convince him to give ya a vacation, you been through a lot lately. Get ya off station for a spell, out into sunshine and fresh air. You, me, Shay, go out and find a sunny spot on Selen for a few days," he whispered, watching some of the worry go out of her face until exhaustion took over, and she fell asleep.

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It hurt to wake up, and he was cold and stiff, his neck hurt. His head and back hurt, everything was sore. A bright light shone through his eyelids, causing his face to scrunch up despite his efforts to remain passive. He heard someone speaking in a guttural tongue he wasn't familiar with, moments before the world turned wet and icy. His eyes, bloodshot and swollen, opened to the sight of a Gran stepping back with an empty bucket and a self-satisfied look on his face.

A set of pudgy fingers grabbed his beard, wrenching his head painfully to the side. A fat-faced, pasty-skinned Twi'lek narrowed red eyes, turning the Arconan's face this way and that, as if inspecting livestock at a market.

That didn't bode well, decided Kord, trying to move his hands minutely, testing his bonds. Manacles, hanging from above into the darkness, clinked as he moved. He stood, gritting his teeth as the Twi'lek jerked on his facial hair again, on his toes as the chains on his wrists tightened. An unseen guard slapped him across the back of his head, a not so subtle, nonverbal way of telling him not to try that again.

"Short, decently muscled, likely dexterous due to species. A bit on the small side, but her Vastness probably will view that as a bonus," the Twi'lek rattled off in Huttese, another bad sign to Kord, as he handed a datapad off to a droid. "Those are the measurements, take them to the seamstress."

The red eyes turned back to Kord, a pointy-toothed smile spreading across the man's face.

"Welcome to your new life, Ryn. May you last longer than the others." The Twi'lek turned to leave, and Kord felt his restraints start to go slack. Options were racing through his head, from using the chains to try and wrap up the retreating alien's neck, to other equally hare-brained schemes. They were quickly overturned, his head was still foggy from whatever they'd done to capture him, and he didn't even have a headcount for the room yet.

Rough hands dragged him towards a doorway, his body going limp in their grasp. Mentally, he tried to review what had happened.

He'd gone to the meeting room in the Phantom Complex and had a conversation with Terran about...something. Blue's brow furrowed as he tried to recall, something to do with the Sephi hybrid who'd taken over K'tana's job. Then the alarms, and bright lights. Concussion grenade? It was possible, he decided, as he was tossed into a small room and felt his shirt ripped from his body.

"Oi," he started to say, before being backhanded across the mouth. His pants swiftly followed, along with his boots. Idly he wondered where his coat was, and what passed for weapons. As they tore the last of his clothes from him, leaving him standing even colder, and now naked, in the middle of the room. Kord glared at the guards, a bit of blood already drying in his beard, not bothering to try and cover himself.

One of the guards laughed, nudging his fellow. "Little rat is trying to look brave. See how brave he is when Whallata gets a hold of him."

"Wally who?"

"Quiet, runt! Time for your bath," snarled one of the armored men, grabbing him by the back of his neck and lifting him up. Kord glared indignantly, his feet and tail hanging limply as the guard carried him towards a caged stall at the end of the room, tossing him in. The door shut with a clang, and the sound of crude plumbing kicked on.

"The hell..." began Kord, rubbing his head, before crying out in surprise as water jets began to spray him from multiple angles, scathingly hot. He curled up into a ball on the metal floor, which was growing in temperature. The water cut off abruptly, and one of the guards dumped some kind of powder on him through the bars. Bleu writhed as the decontamination solution went to work, eating at anything in his coat of hair or living on his skin.

It seared his flesh; it felt as if it was cooking him from the outside in. Mercifully the water cut back on after a while, though by then Kord was ready for death. He lay limply as he was rinsed, one of the guards rolling him over with a stick. After they had dragged him out of the cell, the pair of guards arguing over who had to carry the water-logged rodent, they took him to another small room, locking the door as they left him inside.

He lay on the floor for several minutes, shivering as the warmth from the shower left him, soaked and growing cold once more. A cursory, tired look around the room told him all he needed to know, though he weakly reached out for the pile of towels that had been left behind. Weakly drying himself, he inspected the thin padding of an excuse that was laid out as a bed. Otherwise, there was a bucket in the corner and what looked like a small clothes rack, though all that hung from it was a robe. Pulling the thing article of clothing down, he wrapped himself up and curled up on the pad, shaking until he passed out.

"AGAIN!" shouted the old woman. Kord couldn't tell if she was Human or some other variety of hairless species. She sat on her stool, cane in hand, glaring at the scantily clad Ryn. He was quickly learning to hate this woman, as she, and the guards with her, forced him to rehearse dance steps he'd not done since a child. "Her Vastness enjoys the tradional dances of your people, little one. And the clothes she had made for you ease your movements, show off! Give me more flourishes, shake that tail!"

He gritted his teeth, they had weapons trained on him and had kept him underfed for days before dragging him out for this. Then they'd had to beat on him to make him wear the 'clothes' they'd provided. The metal harness around his waist was tight, the near sheer material draped from it reaching down to not quite his ankles. As he moved, it moved, and he felt exposed, he felt tired. Mostly he was just karked off; the dance instructor had a gleeful tone in her voice as she demanded he 'shake what his mother gave him.'

"Better, I see more vigor in your movements. You're still the most terrible Ryn dancer I've ever had in here, though! Like you haven't been keeping in form, disgraceful. What else are your people good for?"

"Show you what I'm good for ya bleedin' schutta," he growled to himself, spinning through movements half-remembered from childhood. "Come have a talk when ya do nae have three or four goons with blasters at yer back, I'll show ya just how tight I can coil my bleedin' tail around that brittle neck."

He yelped as a low-powered blaster bolt impacted on his back, throwing him off his step and his feet. A glare towards the guards showed a chuckling Sullustan, his weapon still smoking. He'd forgotten about that one, big ears, good hearing. He couldn't even vent about his situation to himself with that one around.

"You'll learn discipline, little one, even if it needs to be beaten into you. But the longer you delay your debut for her Vastness, the more pain you will be forced to endure. Go along nicely, now, and you may find yourself rewarded!"

"That reward involve me gettin' tha kark outta this pisshole?" he snarled from the floor. This earned him another blast, getting a yelp from the Ryn as he felt a bit of skin burn.

"Tsk, every time you do that we have to patch him up, he will be no more blemished than we found him when he stands before Lady Whallata. Use the blaster stock, if you must beat him, but stop burning patches of hair off of him." She pushed herself up with her cane, hobbling over to his floor-bound form.

"You will learn, little one, to behave yourself. If you want the pain to stop," she almost sounded casual as she prodded him in the ribs with her cane.

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Kordath groaned from where he lay in his cell, upon the roughspun pad. Besides the bits with bacta patches on them from where he'd been shot with the low powered blasters, every muscle felt sore. His meal lay just inside the cell doorway, another bowl of questionable gruel that he felt no motivation to eat. Mostly he just didn't want to move. Part of his brain was still stuck on his situation, wondering if life would be any easier if he just did as he was told for now. Somebody would come for him. Eventually, they always did. That and...

His thoughts shifted gears, thinking beyond his current predicament and to the larger picture. Whoever her 'Vastness' was, the Whall...Whaley...Wally the Hutt was, she had assaulted Ol'val. She'd raided the Phantom Complex directly, that meant she knew enough about Arconan operations to be informed about that place. Although, he mused, he didn't know who'd built the damn sub level in the first place, maybe it'd been the Besadii when they were running things.

Either way, if he made it to whatever passed for her throne room, and he knew a Hutt always would have a throne room, he could start gathering information. Recovering his strength was an important second, there was no way they'd be able to keep him here against his will if he was at one hundred percent. He nodded to himself as he lay there, willing his body to get its act together. First gather information, second determine as much of the layout of...wherever they were holding him. Third, get the kark out, find Zuj, take a vacation. And call Quibbles and make sure she could watch the kiddo.

A plan, or at least the outline of one, in his head, he closed his eyes and tried to meditate, or sleep, whichever would come to him first.

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CLANG CLANG CLANG

Kord shot to a sitting position, feeling the muscles in his back and legs protest immediately, almost sending him back down. Slowly, he turned to look out the front of the cell, the grinning guard lowering the rifle he'd been banging the door with.

"Isn't sack time yet, runt," stated the man, walking off.

"Sleemo," growled the Ryn, dragging himself over to inspect the bowl of gruel he'd ignored earlier. It didn't budge when he poked it, having hardened into something he was certain he could have laid bricks with. "So much for regaining strength, gotta eat, Bleu, don't do that again."

"So she found another Ryn, hope you're better than the last one," came a booming voice from the hallway that sent Kord scrambling backward.

"Sithspit you're quiet! Did nae even hear ya walk...up...oh."

Outside was the slimmest Hutt he'd ever seen, sporting, oddly, a vest and twin blaster holsters on his chest. His skin was a vibrant green that suggested youth.

"Okay, I'll bite, tha last one?"

"Bad dancer, couldn't keep her entertained," the Hutt shook his bulbous head, almost looking...sad? "Had her shaved completely and dumped on an ice moon. Whallata kept the tail, though."

Kord felt his stomach turn into a rock. This was the sort of crime boss he was dealing with, then. "And you, mate? Ya hear ta slap me around like yer mates?"

"They are not my friends," the young Hutt said, vehemently. Kord arched a bushy eyebrow as he watched muscles ripple under the Hutt's arms as he balled up his fists. "My arrangement with Whallata is a business one."

"Business, eh? That mean you're open ta tha concept of 'Ryn pay credits, Ryn goes free' by chance?"

"I do not desire to be deep fried, so, no."

"Eh, was worth a try. And sure, I'll try not ta disappoint. Rather attached ta me tail," he said, grimly.

The Hutt simply nodded and slithered off.

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Kord was going to have words with that hag who'd been coaching him on the dancing, he decided, the third time he was pulled to the throne room floor. Nowhere in the forced practice sessions had he been collared and chained to a damn post. Not that he could get out of the throne room if he tried, the exits were well guarded, and Whallata enjoyed her audiences large.

At least the crime lord seemed to find it amusing when he'd eat deck, and hadn't threatened to turn his tail into a bell pull. Not yet, anyways. The audience chamber was a big place, though with the massive she-Hutt dominating it, it didn't seem as large as it was. He'd never seen one of the slugs get this big before; it was unreal. The way the bulging yellow eyes followed him around the room was distracting him as well, the hunger was worrying him.

Kord didn't think she'd actually try and eat him. He was almost certain that wouldn't be a thing he'd have to contend with. But every time she stuck her slimy tongue out and ran it across her thick lips, he got more concerned about the threat.

He struggled to his feet, annoyed by the weight of the chain around his neck, he went back to it, trying to find his step again. The music playing was synthesized versions of old Ryn folk songs, sped up and louder. It was terrible. What happened between musical numbers was almost worst. He'd tried to wander off to a quiet corner in search of water the first time a song ended and found himself tugged back by his throat. Up and on to the repulsor sled that Whallata was reclined upon and forced to nest himself against her.

He felt every rumble as she spoke. He smelled everything she crammed into her fat face. It took every ounce of willpower, all of his fortitude and resolve, to not toss up his morning gruel when she began to reach down and stroke his hair like a lap pet. In deep, thundering 'whispers' she spoke of him giving her more private showings later, suggestions spilling from her lips. He feigned ignorance, shrugging and giving weak smiles, claiming he didn't speak a word of Huttese. Which meant that her translator droid decided to reiterate in impeccable Basic, every foul thing she told him. Loudly, to the amusement of the courtiers filling the room.

The only upside in the situation was that part one of his plan was going off without a hitch. Well-wishers and favor seekers were in abundance, praising the Besadii on her capture of Port Ol'val. That was the first clear piece of information he gleaned from the proceedings. The shadowport had fallen to the Hutt, which made getting away a bit more complicated than he cared to think about. Still, it had only been a few days; odds were one of the women who bossed him around on a day to day basis would realize he was gone soon and come looking for him.

He hoped.

After the sycophants and psychopaths were done, on came the progress updates. Reports of sickness on Selen, people dying on the streets, orchestrated by the Hutt's people. It wasn't the projections of deaths, a number he barely noticed, that had him feeling ill. It was thoughts of Shay'Ira, on a world that was getting ravaged by an engineered disease. He swallowed and fought to keep his face from showing any of the emotions roiling inside.

When the music started, he went through the practiced routines with a dead look in his eyes. By the time it was done, he couldn't recall how he'd done, he didn't care, he couldn't stop thinking of his half-Zeltron infant he'd left on Selen instead of bringing her to Ol'val with him. He could have, Zuj would have been delighted to see his, their, daughter.

That evening Kordath sat in his cell, arms around his knees, head resting upon them. He couldn't sleep, he felt sick, this was a new experience. This was the first, inevitable, crisis to pop up since Shay had been dropped into his lap. Parenthood had proven rough at the start, but they'd been getting the hang of it, he and Zujenia. She hadn't run off, despite him saying he'd understand, that he wouldn't be mad at her for it. She'd chosen to take the little one on as if her own, and they'd been figuring it out.

And now he couldn't get her out of his head, the idea of getting out of the Hutt's grasp only to find...

No, no, he decided, he had to stay away from that line of thought. Shay was with Qyreia; she was safe, the Zeltron merc wouldn't let anything happen to the little one. But all he'd learned today meant a change of plans.

It wasn't about getting out anymore; it was about getting out with all the information he could find about this plague. For Shay, for everyone's sake, he had to get his hands on that intel. He looked up as something made a noise in the hall outside his cell, the slight sound of a body swishing across the floor. The younger Hutt was coming through again.

Right. New plan, flip tha kid, maybe he can help, he thought grimly.

Now it was about getting the intel and whatever assistance he could manage before somebody came to rescue him. Or he broke out, though he felt the intervention of others was more likely.

"Right, lets get ta work, Bleu. The wee one is countin' on ya, now, make it work."

--Finished, because the rest is in the plot updates anyways.