

The Crimson Pill
GJW XIII, Phase II: Combat Writing
Thuvis Imperial Shipyard: Assembly Plant 7X-TYR

*“You take the **blue pill**—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the **red pill**—you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember: all I’m offering is the truth.”*

The crack of an armored helmet striking the floor reverberated in the cold silence, rolling once before settling upright. Its stark, scarlet lustre contrasted with the dull floors of the assembly plant, but brought some cohesion to the blood-bathed scene before her eyes.

Dozens of men were flattened under the weight of a massive, yellow beam that once ferried ship parts across the assembly plant. Others were impaled by haywire machinery, and countless ship parts in various states of manufacture buried the rest in a pile of steel and alloy that reached halfway up the durasteel walls.

Captain Chelsie Crimson drew both hands to her head, vainly gripping at sweat-matted copper through soft, but armored gloves. She struggled to make some sense of the situation, but her mind was reeling with shock, horror and real grief. These were *her* men – many of them recruits she’d personally shaped and molded into soldiers. They’d trusted her with their lives, and somehow she’d lost them to malfunctioning machinery?

“...CC!”

The strained but familiar voice calling her nickname made the captain’s stomach drop and heart race. She hadn’t even considered that there could be survivors.

“Soldier!” Wasting no more time on shock, Crimson leapt into action, searching out the source of the voice amidst the pile of steel and corpses. Flinging emptied bacta bomb canisters aside along with smaller bits of machinery in her attempts to uncover the survivor, Chelsie groaned inwardly at the desperation her recruits must have felt in their final moments.

“If you’re looking for your soldiers, Captain, I can assure you ... they are quite dead.” This time, the voice came from above. “Turns out, this plant wasn’t quite ready to be made operational again. Shame you weren’t here to stop it – I just didn’t know what to do.”

In an instant, the captain's BlasTech E-11 was in her hands and she was whirling to fire. Despite not being quite designed for the range, the instinctive volley of plasma crashed against the face of the woman who stood, unflinching, behind the transparisteel windows of the control room.

A chuckle carried through the control room's comm system now, its icy tone warmed by the sheer pleasure its speaker took in her little game. "Marvelous shot, Captain. I can see why your soldiers have such admiration for you."

The observatory of the control room was perched high above the deck below, but the three-paneled windows allowed Crimson to see what she needed to see. The raven-tressed woman reached down to tangle her fingers in the blonde mop of hair that belonged to one of her soldiers, lifting it from its formerly slumped, limp position.

"He looks dead, doesn't he?"

Captain's Crimson's hand hovered over the frag grenade at her belt, but hesitated when she saw the soldier struggle in the woman's grasp.

"Not to worry. A few broken bones, perhaps, but I wanted to learn a little more about him and this woman he and all his comrades seemed so eager to die for." Drawing the man's head back to look into his eyes, the Tarentae traced the cold steel of a dagger down his cheek with just enough pressure to draw a hint of blood to the surface. "I used to have that, you know, before your Collective. Men and women who would go to war at my word. They were more than soldiers and clansmen to me; they were family. You and I are not so different, CC."

"I will end you!" The voice of a general boomed from the woman as her eyes found the turbolift that led to the control room.

"No. No, I don't think you will." The gentle caress of Ciara's dagger at the man's cheek turned swiftly to his throat, ending the soldier's life in an instant. Releasing his head, she smiled as his body slumped once more in the chair. "But I hope you'll try."

Crimson was already in motion when she felt a tug at her boot, still buried in the pile of machinery, and heard that voice again.

"Here, CC! Help me."

Chelsie looked down at her boot. Nothing. But she *did* hear the cry for help. If any of her soldiers were alive ... she wouldn't leave them again. "Soldier! Keep talking, I'll find you."

She didn't hear the voice again. Instead, after several minutes of searching, she found herself staring into what felt like a vivid, sensory memory, but it wasn't hers. It was the assembly plant, just hours ago. The panicked shouts of her soldiers were almost drowned by the frenetic sound of whirring machinery and the stench of short circuiting parts. Then she saw his face. Wiliguen.

Captain Crimson drew in a sharp breath as the vision faded. She knew where he was.

When she found Wiliguen, tugging his torn, cooling body free of the machinery that had buried it, she realized she'd been a fool. She'd come away with only half a man. He certainly hadn't been – Chelsie's heart stopped as she stared into her soldier's opening eyes and watched the words form at his pale lips.

"Where were you, CC?"

Horrified, Chelsie dropped the soldier's upper half from her arms and stumbled backwards, tripping over the machine parts she'd just carved a path through. The moment she landed, a laced, armored boot was there to flatten her arching spine back into the various machine parts on the assembly room floor. The heat of a humming, amber blade swiftly followed at her throat.

"How long will you wallow in corpses, Captain?" The Tarentae's emerald eyes fixed on the captain as she inquired again. A certain venom laced the last two words. "Don't you think it's time you *moved on*?"

Crimson almost couldn't believe the arrogance of Force users. The sorceress had caught her off guard and had every opportunity to end her life, yet she chose to continue her game of cat and mouse. That ended now.

"I'll move on when I'm standing over yours."

Wrenching her body up and twisting narrowly out of the path of the deadly blade, Crimson drove the full force of her elbow back down behind Ciara's right knee. The impact should have been enough to cripple the leg and pitch the woman on her face, but the Warlord seemed to anticipate the attack, bending her knee a split second early and rolling forward with a natural ease.

Observing that the Sith had extinguished her blade to complete the roll, Crimson didn't give her the chance to recover. Tucking a piece of shrapnel from the floor into her hand, the captain sprang from her crouch and sprinted forward to tackle the woman to the ground.

It worked. Pinning the hand that held the lightsaber to the ground with the shard of metal in her left hand, Crimson pummeled the woman with her right, splitting her cursed lips against her teeth. *Gods*, it felt good. Right up until she smiled.

Crimson caught the flying, metallic object out of her peripheral vision, but it was too late. When she awoke, she was stretched out on one of the plant's conveyors. The back of her head was hot, sopping wet and throbbing.

"You pack a potent punch," Ciara alliterated, albeit accidentally. Idly wrapping her pierced hand in a piece of cloth torn from her cloak, she regarded the captain thoughtfully. "You have the kind of passion that would give you access to the most divine power if the Force deigned to course through your veins."

"Keep it." Crimson spat the blood that was pooling in her mouth in the woman's general direction as she struggled to sit up without dizzying. "I wouldn't use it if it did."

"No, of course you wouldn't." Eyeing the woman carefully, Ciara thumbed the activator of the lightsaber she now held loosely in her left hand, watching the captain's hand make its way to the small pistol still in its holster. "You'd stand no chance with dear Rath, then, would you?"

On cue, the amber blade lifted to deflect the blaster bolt away from her head.

"And with scarcely any blood left in your head! Well done!"

"Stay out of my head!" The woman fired again, but the bolt went wide as her eyes continued to blur and her arm dropped weakly to the side.

"Your head? You mean the head that finds some moral superiority in a man so insecure in his own power that he seeks to exterminate any spark of life – man, woman or child – that might prove greater than his own? The head that idolizes the man who sends these *civilians* you're so attached to, outfitted with scarcely more than leather and sticks, to play war against their clear superiors?" Ciara drew closer to the woman now from her

place beside the conveyor, laying her pierced hand atop the blaster pistol as her voice lowered. "You mean the head that represents nothing more to me than the Collective cowards responsible for destroying my home and my Clan?"

"This head?" Crimson screamed as Ciara's fingers left her blaster and found the open wound responsible for the sopping, bloody mess on her head. The hum of the Tarentae's lightsaber was silenced and replaced with the sound of a sword leaving its sheath. "Once it's emptied of its delusions ... perhaps I'll have it mounted."