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Fragments  
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Cortray kept his eyes on the golden strings of the lyre, as he played, but his mind was wandering. He had been uneasy about the whole trip. The Obi-Wan made a very obvious mistake, he thought, when he told me why I must go with Skywalker. He, of all beings should have known how easily Anakin reads me. Or anyone else, he added, wondering how much Anakin knew about Kenobi's distrust already.

What a likable, smooth man Skywalker was, Cortray sighed, how friendly and easygoing, provided one never tried to look deeper than the surface.

Well, he won't even try. He'll keep his eyes open, as Kenobi had wanted, but he'd be damned if he'd do anything but watch.

He risked a quick glance at Skywalker.

Some Jedi, Cortray thought, never took the Oath and not even wearing the uniform.

Skywalker was sprawled comfortably on the couch, his face half-obscured by his outrageously long, unruly hair. He was reading. The silver-studded Sithlord garments he wore emphasized his wide shoulders and slim hips. He had elegant hands, tanned and obscenely naked against the blackness of his clothes.

Cortray continued playing, his restless feelings creeping into the song. I bet my whole aura stinks, he thought.

"It does. " Anakin remarked, looking up.

Cortray<sup>1</sup> s fingers slipped and the strings cried out, a false note.

"Come on, stop fretting. " Anakin continued. He moved to a sitting position, resting his hands on his knees. " I don<sup>1</sup> t see why you should try the impossible. Relax. Of course I know Kenobi wants you to report everything I do or don<sup>1</sup> t do. I also know that you aren<sup>1</sup> t comfortable with this. Your anxiety is extremely tiresome. There is nothing you should or could conceal from me. Relax, enjoy the trip. "

Cortray felt himself blush. Skywalker smiled at him. "Read me, I<sup>1</sup> m open. I don<sup>1</sup> t particularly like you, but that shouldn<sup>1</sup> t mean we can<sup>1</sup> t have a pleasant journey. I appreciate your insight: yes, Kenobi was rather foolish sending a spy. Oh, well, let<sup>1</sup> s say, an observer. First of all, I<sup>1</sup> ve never concealed anything from him and never will. I have no reason to lie to him. Second, I could, if I wanted to. " Cortray thought he saw a shadow darkening the blue eyes. "The Obi-Wan vastly underestimates me, I<sup>1</sup> m afraid."

"No, " Cortray protested. "He is . . . he thinks very highly of your abilities."

Anakin shrugged. He stood up to pour himself a glass of wine. "I had no opportunity to talk to him lately. What does he think about me as a Sith Lord?"

"I think the main element in his aura had been a strong nausea."

Skywalker laughed. "Does he feel that it<sup>1</sup> s a pretty title, a courtier<sup>1</sup> s excuse to receive a disgustingly large income? "

No matter how hard he tried, Cortray could not stop himself thinking the same. The Sith holdings were something the Emperor used to reward his new favorite. The seven Sith planets produced most of the chemicals to manufacture plastisteel, and

the title of the Sith Lord was ornamental, as the inhabitants of the Sith system never contacted the peoples of the galaxy. They rarely appeared on the surface, and obviously never cared who was skimming the vast oceans for the liquid metals they themselves had no use for. Previous Sith Lords had been associated with rather unsavory services rendered to various monarchs. Cortray thought that the Master's nausea was entirely justified.

"What does he think, why I'm going there?"

This was a question Cortray found very hard to answer. He tried to remember Kenobi's aura. "Maybe because you wouldn't want to own anything you don't know thoroughly . . ."

Skywalker was pleased. His satisfaction touched Cortray through the Force and for the first time, the young Jedi understood why people went to all lengths to appease Anakin. It was physically pleasant to sense his delight.

"Oh, so he does know me rather well, after all. Yet he despises me. Why?"

Cortray realized he had been opening his whole mind to Skywalker for a while now, and this helped him to get angry. "Damn, you are a traitor."

Anakin's outrage was a flash of black lightning in the Force. "I don't have to hear this!"

Cortray was afraid now, too afraid to disengage. "The Emperor hates the Jedi. What should we think of you, who refused to take the Oath, spend your time with Palpatine and accept his payment?"

As quick as it came, the black anger vanished and Skywalker sat down. "I tried to tell Kenobi that his visions lack both width and depth. Palpatine is power, more power than the Jedi can even imagine. It is unwise to disassociate ourselves from something that will, yes, he will, shape the galaxy to his liking. Kenobi will stay on the sidelines, at best a shocked observer, at worst a discarded loser, while the Emperor brings system after system under his control. Better be a part of this than give up all power the Jedi ever had."

Cortray listened to the calm words with growing alarm. "You're convinced this would happen."

The blue eyes were steady. "I know."

So it's true, Cortray shuddered, he can see the future. Immediately, he corrected himself. No one can see THE future, only the possibilities. "And what kind of future would you see, were you as intent to be a Jedi as you're now intent to help the Emperor?"

Anakin liked the question. "I could do a great deal, of course, to delay the inevitable, provided Kenobi would place all the Enclaves under my leadership. Provided the Jedi would be willing to stop polishing their lightsabers and start spilling blood with them. But, Cortray, do you think any of you would trust me? Obey me? Engage in serious sabotage, guerilla warfare, open rebellion? Assassinations? No, eh? I'd always remain a darksider. Damn you, only darkside tactics could save your noble asses. All of you will die. I'm the only one in the galaxy who can withstand the mind power of Palpatine. No one else can stay free of his influence. " He stared at Cortray intently, reading him. "Delusions of grandeur, this is what you think? This is what Kenobi thinks? "

Cortray felt the questing mind of Anakin, probing deeper and deeper inside him, peeling off layers of his memories, digging into his most intimate thoughts, revealing secrets he himself did not know and he whimpered in pain. "You're hurting me!"

He was released abruptly and heard Anakin laugh. "Have I proven my point? What you've experienced is a very mild version of what Palpatine can do. Narrow-minded fools, you Jedi, you have no idea what he had done to me, and I am still whole! "

Cortray took a long time to recover. He couldn't stop shivering. His whole mind hurt. Anakin moved as if he was about to help but changed his mind.

"Learn, Jedi. For Star's sake, understand what you're up against. Go back to Kenobi, tell him. Tell him I want to speak with him. One more time, I'd try to make him see the truth. "

Through chattering teeth, Cortray managed to say: "He does not want to see you."

"Blind fool!" Anakin shook his head. He was calm once again . His mood changes were so sudden, that Cortray started wondering if he was, indeed, still whole. Skywalker read him, of course and his anger vibrated around him, strong, but controlled.

"If I' m sane?"

Cortray nodded, terrified.

"That, my friend, nobody is qualified enough to determine." And he laughed again, with such genuine amusement that Cortray found himself laughing with him, terror and pain washed away in grotesque merriment.

The starfield shifted beyond the viewport. Cortray realized that they were already in the Sith system. "Where do we land?" he asked.

Anakin took him to the cockpit. Cortray saw that he switched all systems to manual, obliterating the preset coordinates, then leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes.

"What?" Cortray gasped.

"Shh."

Whatever Skywalker did made no sense to Cortray: their small ship skimmed the surface of an orange planet, then pulled up sharply and raced towards another, as if Anakin was trying to find a landing site within the system, flying only on instinct. Whenever Cortray tried to touch his mind, smooth shields bounced back his inquiries.

Anakin's eyes were still closed when their craft broke through the cloud cover on Sith 4, and approached the ground with stunning speed.

"I' m not trying to scare you, " Skywalker said, opening laughing eyes at Cortray. He slowed the ship and executed a textbook landing on a flat plateau.

"Why here?" Cortray asked.

" There is someone I<sup>1</sup> d like to meet. Open yourself and receive, but please be --"

Cortray never heard the rest of it. A wave of Forceful sendings assaulted him. Even after Anakin<sup>1</sup> s demonstration, he was not ready to withstand such intense curiosity. Something, someone, or maybe a herd of beings tried to learn everything that was in his mind. He sensed interest, caution, even joy, but the power of the questing mind overtaxed his Force-senses. The only defense left to him was unconsciousness and he accepted it gratefully.

When he came to, he was back in the ship, on his bunk. A message from Anakin blinked on the overhead screen.

"Wait."

Wait, Cortray sighed. Very enlightening. He got up and went to look outside. The plateau was wide, stretching to the foot of the far mountains. Everything shimmered in orange light, the ground reddish with the rich minerals of the system. To his left, one of the Sith oceans reflected the light. The mirror-smooth water was dark red. There was no sign of any mining activity. Cortray checked the scanners: those showed no machinery either. Skywalker managed to land on a planet that was not mined yet, Cortray thought. He would, he added.

Something caught his eye. A line of beings, reddish, long, multi-legged creatures, not at all humanoid-looking, marched somewhere. They paid no attention to the ship, and when Cortray tentatively touched their mind, he found nothing but dutiful determination to march. Hive-brains, he realized. Damn Skywalker, he<sup>1</sup> s probably off dining with the Queen, Cortray grinned, or maybe he<sup>1</sup> s the main dish.

How long am I supposed to wait, he wondered.

Two days later he was still wondering. The sensors located Skywalker, half a mile underground and alive. Cortray cursed for a while, before deciding to go after him.

The tunnels leading down were gently sloping spirals. Cortray met a few of the multilegged creatures, but none

of them bothered him or even looked at him with their insect eyes.

He arrived to a large cavern. Its smooth red walls were carved with patterns. The level floor had concentric circles of different red hues. In the innermost circle, Cortray saw Skywalker, sitting cross-legged, motionless, his face turned towards the ceiling.

Cortray looked up and gasped. A gigantic creature hung up there, its ten long legs anchored to the perimeters of the dome. Its semi-transparent, green body throbbed with the beat of its heart. Cortray knew better than to try and join the communication. The Force-sendings between the Queen and Skywalker were strong enough to charge the air with static. Anakin's hair sparkled and floated eerily around his face.

Was there anything more behind the man, Cortray thought, than insatiable curiosity?

Was Kenobi wiser, superior, because he had stopped at one point and devoted himself to the known world -- or was he a coward, afraid to look further? Was Anakin but a boy, rebelling against the restrictions imposed by the Master -- or was he a misunderstood hero?

Cortray was not sure he wanted to know either Anakin or Kenobi that deeply.

He saw Anakin shudder and cry out.

"Enough! Please, I can't bear more! I'm too small, too frail, Mother, I won't last much longer. Release me."

The creature turned its enormous eyes towards Anakin's small figure. Soft, deep humming noises filled the cavern. Cortray was tempted to flee, but the noise stopped and Anakin slowly came to his feet.

"Thank you." he said softly.

Another sequence of the humming came.

"Yes," said Anakin.

There was no answer, and the Force-link was gone from between them. The Queen flattened herself against the ceiling and Anakin began to walk to the exit. He was unsteady on his feet, sleepy and tired, looking very much like someone after an extended visit to a portside bordello. He blinked at Cortray, barely recognizing him at first.

"I told you to wait, " he said.

" So I waited -- here. What was this?"

"Oh. A marriage proposal." Anakin almost smiled. "She liked my primitive human ability to feel pleasure and offered to stimulate me through a few centuries to come, if I shared my feelings with her."

Cortray stared.

"I agreed to a very short, what would you call it, intercourse. "

" It was more than two days and I don't think you are remotely sane, " Cortray blurted. "What did you say yes to?"

" Coming back later for more. " Anakin said, this time definitely grinning. "And she did give me permission to represent her race in the Senate, and to mine whatever minerals I please to mine. "

"This is what you wanted! To be the first Sith lord actually representing the Sith?"

"I think so . . . " Skywalker leaned against the wall of the tunnel, half-asleep. "Tell Kenobi. I hope to hell it'll bother him. I know it'll bother Palpatine."

Cortray prodded Anakin to go. Getting out was slow, the upwards slope taxed Anakin's remaining strength. Cortray stopped frequently, to let him rest.

There was something in Anakin's last, sleepy sentences he did not like. "Why are you so pleased with annoying your . . . masters?"

"A reminder that neither of them owns me."



"Why do you think any of them wants to own you?"

Anakin's mocking glance was surprisingly alert over a stifled yawn. He said: "Am I not worth having?"

"The Queen Brain let you go pretty easily, " Cortray remarked.

"She is much more civilized than any of us. She wouldn't consider destruction a viable option."

Cortray shivered at this. He asked: "Who does?"

"Kenobi. Palpatine. Me and everybody's uncle. " Anakin fought a yawn and lost. "Stop the questions: they are much too inspiring. My present state is quite conducive to futuresight. There are some things I'd rather not know. " He took off, walking resolutely to the ship. Inside, he made it to the couch and collapsed on it. "Take off , would you? I'd sleep now. "

Cortray just nodded and went to the cockpit. Even there, he could feel Skywalker's pleased aura as he drifted off to sleep. Cortray wondered what things are there in the future Anakin would rather not know. The moment of mindtouch between them was short, no longer than it took to say the word "destruction" , but Cortray was sensitive enough to catch a fragment of Anakin's vision.

The loss of his hair?

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