

UNKNOWN FORCE

The Fleeting Existence of Darth Devia the Firebrand

by Chris Maley

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, the cries of the enslaved went unheard until a Sith answered.

2500 years before Sidious and Vader conquered the Galaxy,
1500 years before Bane implemented the Rule of Two,
Devia rekindled the fire in the darkness.

"I can't believe there's still slavery in the galaxy. The Republic's anti-slavery laws..."
- Padme Amidala, *Star Wars Episode One: the Phantom Menace*

Three-volume story takes place when slavery is still practiced in the Republic.

Volume One: Sith Rebirth

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Ever mindful and focused, the Jedi remained in the moment. Their relentless campaign targeted star systems across the known Galaxy. After enough decades went by, the light side wielders had wiped out the totalitarian threat, eliminating entire societies of dark side believers.

A civil war that consumed the Old Republic and independent systems alike came to an end.

In the present times, no Sith Lords exist.

Wars rage. Corruption wins. Slavery thrives. And no Sith Lords exist.

In the great ones' absence, a respected medical institution named the Scholars of the Academius safeguards some of the order's most important artifacts and texts.

Centuries after the original Scholars swore allegiance to the Sith, a burned-out Jedi Knight gets wounded in action. As she rehabilitates, the Scholar elders only grow more convinced of their belief: Sylmonica Valkanna's destiny lies with the dark side of the Force.

Unfortunately for the Scholars, they are about to discover that their intuition is correct—more accurate than they ever could have known.

Jedi Knight Sylmonica “Syl” Valkanna, late thirties, a veteran of many campaigns and missions. She is dutiful, but psychologically damaged. Keeping the peace in the various systems is unrelenting and unforgiving. And also, not enough. Suffering is everywhere.

Jedi Senior Knight Tiruss Dunn, Syl’s mission partner, a few years older, also a veteran of many campaigns. He and Syl haven’t been partners for long, both were experienced when they met. He is in line to become a Jedi Master.

Jedi Padawan ArraKel “Kel” Kitaros, late teens, readying to take the trials to become a Jedi. She wants to be out in the Galaxy, finally putting years of training to work. Kel’s attachment to Zennon Tannerum grows after a tragic loss.

Jedi Padawan Zennon Tannerum, late teens, about to begin the Jedi trials. Grieving recent death, he causes to Jedi Command wonder if he is fit to be a Knight. In this final year, he and Kel Kitaros must focus. Nothing else matters.

The Scholar Emeritus and Emerita, Mattias and Zinora Ree, leaders of the Scholars of the Academius. Retired from the public medical school, the couple appears to spend their days doing good works. In reality, the Emeriti keep the dark hearth ready for Sith lords of the future.

Scholar Dilani Vestagon, mid-twenties, newly-initiated, poses as a medic treating Syl. Continues to make her mark helping the dark side. Like Quim-Na Sulif, the Scholar Emeriti, and Tramm Nurado, Dilani has a limited connection to the Force.

Scholar Officer Quim-Na Sulif, around Syl’s age, befriends her posing as someone from Syl’s home planet. She’s got a brilliant mind and quit working publicly at the medical school, instead devoting herself to the true cause: the dark side of the Force.

Scholar Sergeant-At-Arms Tramm Nurado, warlord, underworld crime boss. Force-sensitive like some fellow Scholars. He built an empire after being enlightened about this connection to an energy field, an avenue that pain and rage illuminate.

Bryan, Laura, and Shannan: thank you for your feedback. Much appreciated.

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I: Commencement

Chapter One

A short time ago, the fleeting tempest at the center of the red sun died as violently as it began. The sudden disturbance stirred up fusion-generated fields of radiation. This energy broke free from the core's crushing gravitational pull. Wave after wave left the depths to ripple through the convection zone, upper photosphere, and chromosphere before flying out into space.

Not long after leaving the star's surface behind, a fraction of the rays entered the upper atmosphere of the small moon orbiting this Middle Rim system's largest planet. The thin air absorbed the barrage's positive charges, raising the temperature and stoking the breezes. In the fluid environment, the brief commotion created a chain reaction. Growing wind currents spread into the lower altitudes, eventually kicking up rust-colored grains of sand.

Many body lengths above the desert floor, a rock climber felt a fresh gust run through her hair, jet-black curls that were just long enough to meander back and forth. The thirty-nine-year-old human welcomed the tingly wisps that interrupted her meditative state. With a mind elsewhere, four limbs and a core have been scaling this narrow wall since dawn. If the free soloist were to look around, her eyes would see that she had covered eighty percent of the distance to the flat top. Like the fifteen other igneous formations nearby, the orange-white spire of lava rock shot up from the plant-free landscape.

Realizing that both feet had anchored on an inwardly-tilting ledge, she shifted forward to rest. Weathered lines on her left cheek melded with the windswept face and soaked in its coldness. Both nostrils took in the new breath, her chest cavity swelling as much as it could without upsetting the balance. Her short-sleeved shirt, flat black in color, absorbed the cloudless day's warmth and fed it to her back and shoulders. Every part of her reenergized.

Three items hung from the green belt around her waist: a pouch full of sticky hand rosin for her grip, a soft-sided canteen, and a card-sized communicator that linked to the *Brakebug Mark II*-class patroller parked on the ground below. The Galactic Republic issued her both the two-seat vehicle and a separate hyperdrive unit on a temporary pass.

Her first conscious thought on this perch had to do with gaining bearings by determining the passage of time. *Mid-day*. As soon as this small insight crystallized, all desire to expend mental energy on the mundane vanished.

"You know, Valkanna, climbing that skyscraper of a rock would be easier if you removed the green blindfold and used your eyeballs. The Force is nice—don't get me wrong, but..."

Jedi Knight Sylmonica Valkanna had to smile at the sudden vision that popped into her head. Her mission partner of four years, Jedi Senior Knight Tiruss Dunn.

His dumb sense of humor helped pass the time during the stretches of monotony that every deployed Jedi deals with. Tiruss Dunn knew how to make sense of it all. If the fellow first responder were present right now, Syl could see him uttering some type of cheeky remark along these lines. She would answer his schtick with something like, *"Shhh...it's meditation time, Russ. Go meditate somewhere. Bye-bye..."* After she shooed him away, the two would laugh and enjoy the levity.

The blindfolded knight wondered how her colleague's meetings were proceeding. Eight years her senior and in line for promotion, the aspiring master needed to engage in a series of deep discussions with the Order's wisest, most learned souls. Philosophical talks about subjects pertaining to the Force helped experienced Force-wielders determine for themselves what was required to achieve this next rank.

Looked at another way, these discussions were interviews. Ones designed to break a candidate down. Not every Knight takes the big step.

Syl ceased this train of thought, returning to the here and now, this desert moon, this cliff. Russ will do fine. Or he won't. Whatever the outcome, it will all be as the Force needs it to be.

Denying herself the use of her eyes, the remaining senses processed real-time input. The wind had died down. In the calm, she recalled another train of thought, one from her meditation. It tied to the living Force:

A long time ago, long before explorers discovered this moon, an explosion happened in its innermost regions. The outwardly-expanding blast wave fractured the crust in various locations. Lava from the lower mantle layer shot upward to fill the cracks, eventually cooling and hardening to end up much denser than the crust's outermost layers. Time and erosion conspired to reveal it. Today, sixteen geological structures reach for the stars.

The living Force bonds to the dull-orange stone. Syl can feel it running through the non-crystalline minerals and basic organic compounds—combinations of atoms that serve as building blocks for the proteins and vitamins that trillions of species need to survive. Synthesized near the core by intense pressure and heat, these molecules have remained in stasis for millions of years inside this spire. A canteen hung from her belt. The powdered blend mixed with the water contains nutrients similar in composition. The Force connected all of it. And Syl to all of it.

If this moon contained more moisture, perhaps these walls and towers would not exist. With the change of a variable or two, a few billion extra rainstorms might have broken them down into soil. Micronutrient-rich water droplets could have found their way back to the moon's lone ocean and nourished the microbes that produce the breathable air—supercharging their evolutionary potential, driving the invisible creatures to grow larger, smarter, visible. If only.

So many influential beings in the Republic do not think twice about dismissing moons and planets like this. If a power broker or two were standing on the blood-colored gravel below, their lungs would inhale the exhalations of organisms that live near the seafloor's volcanic vents. Once this air left their bodies, the cartel leaders, lawmakers, and financiers would complete the circle of life. And many of them refuse to see moons like this as anything but dead.

Her entire Jedi career, Syl has interacted with small-minded beings from every section of this Galaxy. More than a few Jedi fail to grasp the larger picture.

Mining, construction, and fuel cartels would love to receive Galactic Senate approval and reduce this moon to a husk, extract everything of value and discard what is left. Decades-long "planet harvesting" operations brought gigantic returns, much of it from the Republic Treasury. But unfortunately for the wannabe harvesters, the Republic has classified this moon as inhabited, therefore not exploitable. The microbes on the ocean floor are the reason why.

Little people at the bottom of the sea...messing up big people's plans, Syl thought to herself. *I love you, little people.*

Even though the ocean sits in another hemisphere, the living Force acts as a bridge, from the microscopic troublemakers to her, up here.

Her left arm extended, roving back and forth but making sure not to cause a disturbance that would upset her position. Time to get going. This cliffside stop was only temporary.

Fingers that got smashed in a blast door years ago while the public servant was pursuing an assassin now traced across a subtle outcropping. One by one, each finger gripped, tensing up to test the hold. The hand relaxed. The Force urged the digits to keep searching. They crawled back to the right and upward, across another jagged surface. A trench sat to the side. Rising, Syl found the swell. It offered leverage.

Her left foot, long since healed after being broken by a nuprak's hammer-tail, figured out where the next foothold was: just above the ledge where it had been resting. A logical place.

Syl began to ascend again. The Force informed her that a path existed.

Existence. Actuality is all that the Force ever needs to communicate. Sylmonica Valkanna's lifelong and unshakeable faith takes it from there. It always has and it always will.

"Warlord: thirty-two drones entering upper atmosphere, descending to planet surface now."

The operation coordinator seated at the tech station ran a thin, scaly index finger across the console's grease-caked levers and buttons while waiting for his crime boss to respond. Like the other four outlaws in the stolen flagship's cramped Combat Information Center, the coordinator focused on the task at hand: this final attack.

Criminal soldiers stayed in constant contact with cohorts on the bridge, two decks up, as well as the team in the engineering space a few levels below and aft. Monitors and oversized wall mounts brightened up the windowless CIC with blinking colors of dancing, glowing light.

A fresh data point popped up on one of the cracked screens. It got relayed to the room. "Formations...eight attack diamonds...four drones per diamond."

Warlord Tramm Nurado stopped pacing to concentrate on the flowing information stream along the far wall. The symbols, figures, and video pertained to a bluish-green planet which three warships now orbited after dropping from hyperspace and launching drones. The privately-owned farming colony sat at the edge of Galactic Republic territory.

His two yellow, bloodshot eyeballs studied as his two meaty fists found the railing which separated the row of workstations from the command deck and creaky set of doors that opened to a dirty passageway. Though it was too late to make changes, a self-educated mind couldn't help revisiting months of planning. The strike campaign's chief strategist surveyed the flickering visuals, then shut his eyes to ponder one last time before giving the go-ahead. Bushy eyebrows, still the bright-green color that his no-longer-existent hair used to be, closed tight. A scarred, wrinkled face scrunched up from tension. A slow exhale left his snout.

The contemplative moment ended. His pronounced brows shot upward at the rusty overhead so the warlord could see again. After a glance at the data, he said, "Silnius, bomb and strafe at will." The scratchiness in his voice came from a poison gas attack, years ago.

The operation coordinator Silnius' trio of gray, opaque eyes blinked independently of one another while his gray-green finger hit the blinking commtech button. "Lead diamond: proceed to fuel refinery by the river."

Prisoner drone pilots sat in captive pods two decks below. Their comms clicks indicated acknowledgment.

"Weapons platform engagement in two minutes, warlord."

Tramm Nurado had to move around. The veteran space traveler detested this clunky industrial freighter that got transformed into a combat vessel. His own cruiser, besides being more accommodating and cleaner than this hammered-together heap, was custom-built by fellow darksiders who based its design on the battleship of a long-dead legend.

Live footage began to appear. Anxious gazes jumped from screen to screen. A clear day on the planet below. High-flying craft sent back sweeping views of the target landscape—crop fields, villages surrounding a town center, a river, a mountain range beyond.

Assembled out of scrap metal in some backwater Outer Rim system, no two drones looked alike. A ragtag collection of rickety buzzers without cockpits, each not much more than a delta wing, antiquated flight computer, and engine. Remotely flown, maneuverability was spotty and the short-range power plants were too weak for anything more than a medium-watt blaster and six or eight bombs per craft. Their performance issues didn't matter. Like this temporary command ship, the squadron was taken from its previous owner.

In tight groups of four, pilotless fighters dipped below the clouds.

Imagery from the drones' onboard cameras made the boss think of various lenses that his spies used. Zoom close-ups revealed the foothills' slopes. Wide-angle shots of green fields with mountains in the distance made it look picturesque on the big screens, some frames showing more dimension and richer color than others. Taken together, the mix conveyed a visual story. A story about a brief and lopsided war that would soon begin.

"Voyeuristic, almost. Isn't it, Silnius?" The scowl relaxed. "Strange to observe from orbit. Different from being there."

"Not like our younger days, warlord."

"Those days are in the past, my friend." When laughing for real, Tramm's eyebrows and jowls would both shake. "Too many injuries. Far too many injuries."

The imminent bombing and strafing distracted his mind from his upper back pain. Somewhat. On an attack day of all days, an old war wound reminded an old warlord of its existence. At an earlier point in time, a first-tour Jedi Knight used the Force to hurl a boulder at a fast-rising hired gun who had just killed a weapons dealer and his civilian hostages.

At an even earlier point in time, that hired gun was a teen who found the dark side of the Force in a Middle Rim prison. After serving his sentence and going back to his old ways, wiser beings sought out Tramm Nurado and explained that the enterprising gangster's connection to an eponymous field ran deep, beyond spiritual insights and life meaning. While not as proficient as the Jedi Order or the greats of bygone eras, the charismatic wielders could read minds and lift objects with their thoughts. They informed Tramm that a rare few, while not as in tune as the lords of old, can still leverage pain and anger to open doors in their psyches and step through to the other side, where a multi-dimensional grasp of the Force lay.

Unlike most of the Galaxy, darksider clans believed in Tramm Nurado. Even so, the underworlder never felt he possessed their abilities, despite their passionate statements to the contrary. Until the confrontation with the recently-knighted Jedi in a subterranean mineshaft as dimly-lit as this Combat Information Center is now, he doubted.

On that long-ago day, the twentysomething tough with the thick green eyebrows and thinning ponytail sensed danger and turned away at the last second. The heavy rock cutting through the cavern's dusty air slammed into his back, cracking the right secondary spine instead of connecting with the base of his neck and skull.

Inside an overloaded brain, the Force crystallized. A mind processing excruciating sensations from distressed nerve endings also began to fathom how more gifted wielders fling rocks. Hours of study about an ancient field piped through Tramm's consciousness at once. A moment became a flashpoint.

He remembered the words of Grintada, Dark Deacon of Korriban. *"At the epicenter of pain lies clarity of thought. In the midst of intense discomfort, an epiphany brings comfort."*

A voracious reader, the recent convert had devoured the teachings of Grintada, a philosopher who lived six millennia ago in a system now lost. This specific passage, while powerful, lacked meaning until the rock hit. That rock brought clarity. And epiphany.

His broken back tortured him with the slightest movement. Yet when he did move, the Force flooded the recent parolee's intellect and made sense of lessons. Two extremes fed. Tramm Nurado saw and heard. He felt. Holocron passages were now visions, scents, and sounds.

He turned to face the husky, scruffy-faced Jedi who was eyeing the strongbox full of money. Powering through pounding hurt and mentally ingesting raw rage, a suffering hitman raised his right arm at the fist-sized stone by the cave's entrance—an act which enraged his fractured back. An energy inside a Force-sensitive and newly-enlightened creature fed itself. Before the rock leaped up from the pile by the metal doors, violently vivid thoughts showed it hurtling through the musty air straight at this most worthy of targets. An injury's sensations consumed. But the injured believer directed it all at a wielder more talented. The one who hurt him. Who deserved this blow to the head.

Standing in this CIC decades later, Tramm could visualize the younger, less-scarred version of himself limping over to the twitching body and reciting the words of Darth Sabotaa the Healer while pocketing the green-bladed light saber. *"I mourned and pitied every Jedi I killed, for they are the biggest slaves of all."*

Silnius' situational report broke the CIC's humming silence. "Warlord: all drone diamonds approaching the surface, bombing and strafing runs commencing."

Snapping out of the past and recentering on the present, Tramm nodded an approval at Silnius. The old ache in his spine was still there.

Every screen showed blossoming destruction taking on a life of its own. None of the drone's camera angles matched and their altitudes all differed, but the squadron recorded a colony in its death throes.

Grunting, the nervous overseer shifted around as much as he could in such a claustrophobic space. In hopes of reducing the aches, he put more weight on the creaky guardrail and his left side. His heavy left boot creaked when he did.

Choppy video, a fuel dump going up in flames. The mix of secondary explosions and endless black smoke ruined the day's clearness. Toxicity started to fill a river. Blast waves flattened structures, regardless of size. Fires that would continue for the next month spread across the supply depot and town center. Tramm's gaze jumped from tall screen to console and back. He ignored lower-flying drones' shots that captured terrified living beings sprinting around in confusion, their last moments. Not the kinds of sights that bothered him.

Once he began to breathe easier, he said, "Silnius: status report."

"Two drones lost, too close to the fuel depot when it got bombed."

This news brought out a smile. "Since the fleet's former proprietor is no longer alive, his underlings will have some explaining to do when investigators come calling."

The back pain caused a wince as the bombing's commander put on his animal skin trenchcoat. "Finish this off. I'm going to update the Rees."

Silnius rose from his console. "I'm sure that our successes will please the Scholar Emeritus and Scholar Emerita greatly. Please tell them that it was an honor to serve them."

"You serve the dark side of the Force, Silnius Seethagrat. Not the Rees." The mission head turned to scream at his mission coordinator, the deep scowl radiating contempt. "You serve long-dead Sith lords like Nihilus and Malak, Torturok and Sabotaa. Not the Rees."

"Yes, warlord."

"You serve and honor a way of life more than 20000 years old—a way of life that has asserted itself in every region of this galaxy. Mattias and Zinora Ree serve and honor this way of

life. I serve and honor this way of life.” Damaged vocal cords and all, his voice still thundered. “To serve and honor is the purpose of every believer, Silnius.”

Both sides of Tramm Nurado’s mouth began near his ears, so his current huge grin revealed full rows of white teeth. Depending on the angle of his brow, the face-wide smile could come across as either inviting or terrifying. “If the Rees were here in this disgusting compartment with us right now, they would explain the incorrectness of your words to you. And the Scholar Emeriti would do so using tones of voice much harsher than mine.”

“I stand corrected, warlord.” Silnius kept all three eyes on the metal deck.

After an extra second, the two semi-functioning doors at the back of the CIC slid aside. Tramm cursed at them before ducking through to slouch down the tight passageway towards the rusty ladder that would take him to his temporary quarters, one level below.

Months of planning paid off. His team of old pros thought through every step. Recurring back pain and this junky ship and Silnius’ moronic comment failed to stop the senior citizen from infusing his walk with some youthful spring. The realization of a job well done sunk in.

All three strikes, successful. He got his flask from a coat inside pocket and took a swig.

Years ago, the dark elders cautioned him against quick retaliation after a hijacking. Though the arrogant pirate emperor deserved to be dealt with, Tramm’s sages advised patience as the three of them strolled through the Rees estate’s manicured gardens.

The Scholar Emeritus, Mattias Ree: *“Tramm Nurado: do you want to hit back at this scum like a common criminal or do you want to approach this whole situation like a gifted believer who has read the stories from when the Sith almost conquered the Republic?”*

The Scholar Emerita, Zinora Ree: *“Strike back on a grand scale, warlord. Maximize your hate and send a message to others. Think like the greats once thought. Let the Force guide you and exponentialize your anger. You are better than this filth, do you understand? Better.”*

The transmission faded in on the loyal henchman’s squarish screen. Mattias and Zinora Ree greeted him. He returned their nods.

“So...Scholar Sergeant-at-Arms Nurado, you settled some old scores. How does it feel?”

“I feel like a new man, Mattias. Thank you for asking.”

The couple sat side by side, the husband cradling a curved-handled pipe, at the remote estate where they escaped their Coruscant City penthouse. Whenever they are near their beloved gardens and can gaze out at the foothills and wilderness, the Rees breathe easy.

What seems another life ago, a young parolee first met the little-known influencers face to face at their private sanctuary after their network helped him forge Republic travel documents. Now the underworld magnate flies wherever he wants in the Galaxy using a portfolio’s worth of identification credentials and does not think twice about it.

The Scholar Emeritus stroked his white beard with his pipe-free hand. “We have been receiving details about the first two attacks. Flawless, old friend. Flawless...if this were a different era, Tramm, you would be some dark army’s general, in service of a lord.”

“Your compliment means a lot. This final hit was a success, too.”

The Scholar Emerita let out a rare snicker at this news, her long fingers fondling the shiny bracelets around her narrow wrists. Known to outsiders as respected philanthropists who came from wealth, the Rees usually dressed formally due to their social circles. Even though they dressed down today, Zinora’s appreciation for jewelry and cosmetics showed, as always.

The sages' excitement replaced a normal stoicism that kept others on their toes and their committed follower loved seeing the animated expressions on his comms device. With the brilliant old couple so jovial, he took another celebratory drink. Zinora winked her approval.

"Be honest, Sergeant-At-Arms..." She gave the tough a playful frown, thin lips turning downward. "Admit your temptation to strike earlier...go behind our backs, kill discreetly."

Before the fidgeting enforcer could attempt a rationale, her finger-waggle at the screen cut him off. "Nothing to be ashamed of. You are a profiteer. That pirate filth hit your finances."

"I was tempted, yes. But I am glad to have held off, per your instructions." Recalling the revenge session, Tramm took another swig and laughed. "Tresskuss hasn't lost his step. That ex-convict and I took our time. I let the anger build up in me over two years and savored it."

Eyes sparkling, Mattias saluted with his smoking device. "The dark side, the best ally. If it is kind once again, the Republic will find our planted evidence and hunt down the remains of your foes' crime operations. The Jedi need something to do." Smirking, he took a puff.

His bride wrinkled her nose. "Yes...they need to endanger themselves. Needlessly."

The antipathetic sense of humor intimidated many. Tramm enjoyed seeing her so happy.

"Once you have everything handled, turn your crew loose for rest and relaxation." The Scholar Emeritus tapped his pipe in an urn. "Your presence is required back on Coruscant."

Tramm's eyebrows raised up. "The commencement ceremony is on then?"

The Scholar Emerita's small but growing grin answered his gaze. "Four new initiates. Two are soon-to-be medical graduates of the Academius. One is an honors graduate."

"She is a find. Like us, Tramm, she holds a connection with the field. Though all four are smart, curious and only want to know more about our way of life."

After signing off, Scholars of the Academius Sergeant-At-Arms Tramm Nurado went up to the topside bridge and ordered his pilots to set a course for another system where his own flagship, the *Bloodred Epiphany*, was waiting. The sooner he left this neglected garbage-heap behind, the better.

Two medium-sized and one heavy spacecraft jumped to hyperspace. Trails of light stretched out behind their exit from sub-space, then fizzled.

Chapter Two

Shoulder to shoulder, four robed initiates marched the length of the cold hallway. A slow beat bounding from the torchlit ceremonial chamber at the far end acted as their guide. While the anxious believers hadn't planned it, their cadence synched up after a dozen or so steps. If they were wearing hard-soled shoes instead of slippers, the sound of heels hitting the ancient stone floor in unison might be noticeable under the soft drums.

Her curiosity on fire, Academius graduate Dilani Vestagon gazed at the lively spikes of light spilling from the arched doorway ahead. Flickers brightened up this narrow hall with a fierce yellow, hints of red sprinkling in. The honors student fought the temptation to walk faster. Two feet carried her forward—to a new life? Maybe. At the very least, an avalanche of enlightenment was about to hit, that much she knew.

A lifelong friend, more like a young aunt or older cousin, is taking part in this commencement ceremony. Academius Alumnae Quim-Na Sulif waited inside with the other believers.

Three years ago, the graduate introduced the student to the Scholar Emeritus and Scholar Emerita. They expanded her mind with their sage insights about alchemy and magick, dark wisdom not taught in classrooms. Entranced by their mastery of millennia-old subjects that fascinated her, Dilani felt a rush when the elegant couple said her own relationship with the Force could take an illuminating turn.

She about fell over in shock the first time Zinora Ree revealed her silly side. *"We Scholars are not the dark warriors of old, young Vestagon. Look at me...a shriveled-up and batty-brained bag-of-bones."* Since the fiercely-committed darksider rarely smiled, much less kidded around, the soon-to-be-initiated Scholar will always treasure this tender memory.

The Rees stood with Quim-Na inside those open doors. Their vast expanse of an estate sat halfway around the planet Coruscant from the Academius campus in Coruscant City. Students gossiped about the reclusive pair who commanded the respect of every faculty member.

The collective that started the school sprang out of an older movement devoted to Force-worship. A staunch believer, acceptance to the Academius thrilled Dilani because the medical school did not disregard the energy field like many scientific institutions did.

This final walk as innocents neared its conclusion, the end of the tunnel. Pulsating torches shined on their red robes as the octagonal chamber's warmth blanketed the entrants.

Around fifty Scholars, clad in heavy robes made of rough cloth, stood in a circle, hoods down. An opening, a lone interruption in a curved wall of living bodies. With Dilani in the lead, the four initiates followed one another inside this opening to spread themselves evenly around the boulder-sized crystal in the middle. Torchlight danced off of its red and white shards.

The outer circle closed inward, enveloping the new members.

Peering over the top of the crystal, Dilani got taken aback by Quim-Na Sulif's cold stare. The fellow human, fifteen years her senior, wore her hair up this evening and had applied only a light layer of cosmetics, a different look than her usual cosmopolitan stylishness. Trying not to overthink the stoicism, she recalled Quim-Na once mentioning the compulsion to remain on her best behavior whenever she was around the Scholar Emeriti.

Mattias Ree, standing in the outer circle, spoke. "500 Academius graduates revel tonight, celebrating graduation from a public medical institution earlier today. Instead of joining the masses, the four of you have chosen to learn about this institution's beginnings...why it exists."

Mattias' love for the dark side came through in his tone of voice. It still had yet to hit Dilani that she was truly here, experiencing the Force among so many big-minded believers.

This dreamy train of thought slowed once her eyes landed on a person she had never seen before, a raw presence that clashed with the sophistication filling this ancient space. The intimidating older man with the thick brows and scarred, green skin next to Quim-Na stood a head taller than her statuesque friend, robe hanging awkwardly on his wide frame.

A Dirnn. A species native to an Outer Rim system, like many other sentient races it had migrated over the millennia to live all around the Galaxy. She dissected one in her second-year anatomy seminar. That cadaver, also male, was younger with a full head of hair and not as muscular or pot-bellied. Dirnns had three spines, one primary spine in the middle anchored by a secondary left and secondary right on each side. The wide snouts contained extra layers of bone, hence the higher bridges that pushed the oversized eye sockets outward.

The Dirnn's bulging eyes locked on, an icy piercing like Quim-Na's. Dilani's zoning mind snapped out of medical school days. Stare fixating on the rock wall, she paid extra attention to Zinora's gravelly voice.

"Darksiders, give thanks."

"I thank the dark side of the Force for revealing its hidden light to me. I owe the dark side everything. I thank the dark lords of the past. They created this way of life, a gift which no being deserves. I thank the Scholars of the Academius. They show me how to live with passion and intensity. The Scholars tell the truth: the dark side of the Force will change the Galaxy."

As she and the other three finished the creed, Dilani tried to meet Quim-Na's gaze again.

Zinora Ree stood next to Mattias. "For millennia, the dark side has maintained its hold. Jedi and Jedi puppet-masters may have slaughtered many of us, but our grip remains strong."

"Earlier Galactic wars ended. The Hyperspace Wars ceased. But the last Galactic Civil War proved to be devastating, due to the cruelty of the Jedi." Quim-Na Sulif raised her gaze above the crystal, coming to life. Hearing the soothing, lyrical voice further reassured Dilani that this was real. "As this war wound down, the founders of our society, high priests and priestesses of the dark side who were the original Scholars of the Academius, pledged to watch over some of the Sith's most sacred texts and works of art until a new time of lords begins."

This was the Quim-Na she knew, animated and standing tall, the charmer.

"A Sith..." The Scholar Emeritus' drive came through whenever he talked of a world long past. "Charismatic and driven, newly elevated to lord, he placed his faith in our forebears before sacrificing himself in an act of bravery that we inferior beings could never match."

The tough next to Quim-Na spoke up, his scratchy voice still full. "Though he would have preferred a saber fight, ideally, the Force decided that his head-on collision with the light side would take place in space."

Zinora Ree took the story from there. "Intrepid and devoted, the avid pilot and philosopher gave his life to build a hearth. Allow us to tell you about the final flight of Darth Torturok the Faithful. A moment in time called 'the Dark Allegiance.'"

No more explosions. Or rocks falling from the cave ceilings above.

The enemy has secured the city. But the thirty-eight-year-old Sith leader felt no need to hurry. Defeat did not concern Darth Torturok. His nearly-ready fighter craft waited at the far end, across the diagonal of the underground hangar, looking like it was spoiling for one final fight.

While sealing the thick gloves with fittings on the spacesuit's sleeves, the lord scanned across the cavern. The last of his people. Tearing up, he slowed his gait.

Terrified technicians scrambled to ready the *Poison Dart*, his sportster-turned-fighter. Popular with the wealthy, the model's compact size made it an ideal "second ship" for hyperspace-capable yachts' landing bays. After he purchased his, tech-savvy believers showed their gratitude by removing the back seat and installing modifications like a blaster-control system, stronger communications, and signal scramblers.

A clunky shuttle with an illegal hyperdrive sat nearby, also being prepped for flight. If the Force wills it, the *Poison Dart* will draw pursuers away while believers escape with the artifacts in a rusty blob that barely looked flyable.

It made him proud. Selfless subjects were warming up the two sub-light engines at the rear of his v-shaped craft and testing control surfaces like the knife-edged stabilizers atop both engine housings. At the nose, where the hull came together to form a point, a tech specialist sat in the cockpit underneath the open bubble canopy readying flight computers. Such urgency and purpose. Scared out of their minds, yet they babied his high-performance machine. Then again, they had earned his faith many times over. Just like the legions of soldiers on the surface above who, as of this moment, are either prisoners of war or were killed in action.

Death. A pleasure and an honor Darth Torturok would soon know as well. The solid thuds of his heavy, black boots hitting the stone reassured him.

A bulky spacesuit accentuated the human's stocky frame. The green helmet made his squarish head even larger. Before donning his flight gear, the monarch cleansed one last time and removed the jeweled hoops from his left ear, the functioning and scar-free ear. Meditating in his bunker, he praised the dead. As space travel became common in this quiet area at the edge of the Middle Rim, his ancestors had the foresight to turn a network of tunnels underneath a mountain range into a hangar for launching ships from the hidden mouth in the nearby canyonlands. Today, the secret base served as the staging area for a critical mission.

A congregation, more than fifty in all, saw their revered authoritarian approaching and ran over to gather around tight—needing to steal some closeness before he left them forever.

Noticing their concern, Torturok pretended not to and looked over his gear instead. A flip of the blue switch on his left wrist console activated the breathing apparatus. He brought the combination breathing mask/visor up to verify its working condition by taking in a few breaths, then let it fall back on its hook so it hung from the chest of his flight suit again.

Rocks fell from the ceiling. Unlike his subjects, he ignored the rumbling.

He finished sound-checking his helmet's earphone before looking around at faces in need of guidance. "Friends, I must share truth. At this moment in time, the Jedi have an advantage."

A growing smile calmed the dejectedness. He said that masters failed, not believers. "Other lords got impatient and greedy, yes. But I feel no bitterness. My final flight is an honor."

Those around him were in tears. Standing behind an older, hunched-over chaplain was a young student who engaged in physical exercise and meditation every morning with the study group. Torturok unfastened his matte-black saber hilt. The ponytailed, muscly twentysomething shook his head. His trembling right hand only extended a quarter of the way.

Torturok nodded at the watery eyes. "Mikko Sorteliun, my fiercely-competitive ally, take my lightsaber. I enjoyed our group's spirited debates as we conditioned our bodies and then consumed nutrients afterward and intellectualized to exercise our brains. You and the others, thank you for being there. Protect my red blade, Mikko. Help safeguard the artifacts. Most importantly, live a long and wonderful life."

Turning to face the rest of the group, he offered a grin. “Thank you. For your dedication to all we hold dear and a history that goes back twenty millennia. The ancients embrace you. All who dare to love as fiercely as we love embrace you.”

Sobs met his words. “If we walk a few steps back and see the Force along its continuum, we grasp the miniscule size of this moment in time. Its pain, anguish—loss is temporary. The dark side is going to be so strong one day. The Sith will rule the Galaxy, I know this.”

The time to depart was near. An explosion told him so.

“For the near term, our way of life does not ask for warriors and charismatic lords, but scholars and quiet, but steadfast, believers.” His softness comforted a congregation. “Envision our work as a hearth. You must keep this dark hearth ready. In the future, new lords will seek it out and reignite the blaze. When that time comes, your descendants must be there. This is not a request. This is now your life’s mission.”

So many of this independent system’s inhabitants are now lost. Those around him breathed easier as he inspired. Overcome, some leaned on each other. “Surviving lords across the Galaxy are telling believers this same thing. You are loved.”

Darth Torturok paused before fastening the breathing mask to his helmet, cradling it in his left hand. “To show my love and faith, I will now make the all-important task twice as easy.”

He raised his gloved right hand. “Your funds and resources are considerable, only now I am doubling their power.”

Half of the circle started to wheeze and cough. By the time the lord’s hand finished its extension upward, the unfortunate subjects’ breathing pathways had closed off. A few fell right away, bodies begging for air. Most of the fortunate and surviving half had zero idea that their cohorts were in agony until the last few gave out and quit writhing on the cave floor, done.

Darth Torturok’s yellow eyes glared. His baritone voice remained even. “Never forget: the half that just died, the half that are still living...I made each and every decision.”

His shaking hands gripping the unlit saber, Mikko screamed. “We do not deserve you.”

Before locking the mask in place over his eyes, mouth, and nose, the estate owner needed the comforting smells of grease and fuel to fill his nostrils one last time. His grandfather gave him his first flight lessons in this musty cave when he was a boy.

The group cheered as he strode to the bow of his fighter and climbed into the cockpit. A few of the soon-to-be-corpses at their feet shuddered.

The bubble closed around its expert pilot. He hit the release, unleashing the idling engines’ energy. The pointy-nosed craft sprung from its landing struts and banked right before shooting down the circular cave tunnel, struts folding into the underbelly as the *Dart* accelerated.

Heading unchanged, the tiny speedster rocketed straight up from the surface of the planet. After the third contact attempt also failed, the Republic orbiter’s controllers notified a Jedi patrol.

The six orange-colored fighter craft were little more than one-person standup cockpits, each with a sublight engine mounted almost like a backpack on the reverse side and twin blasters positioned at the head and foot. Acting as one, the squadron hard-flipped in a sharp arc, maintaining the tight delta formation as they turned to engage. The ships’ collective triangular shape resembled an arrow. The leader at its tip sent out a hail. Again, no response.

Torturok had hacked the signal. The growing fixation on the *Poison Dart* piped through his helmet’s left earphone; the worried chatter got his blood pumping better than music. While

taking in the stars and loving the jolts from turbulence, the Sith began to comprehend the Jedi strategy: cut off any possibility of boarding the only hyperspace-capable ship in this quadrant.

Near mid-orbit, a luxury star-yacht listed in a flat spin, powerless. His eighteenth birthday present, the *Bloodred Rancor*. Five decks of circular portholes along the lean crimson hull's clean curves, as well as lights lining the starboard landing bay doors, were dark. The leading section of the customized beauty angled upward. He nicknamed the command bridge, "the head of the beast." Only that curving bank of windows at the front showed no light. Like the rest of the beast, the head looked tame.

The *Dart* aimed at the *Rancor*, pushing the orange arrow to do so as well.

Torturok hit two buttons on the portside console. The side control panel blinked red, then beeped three times. Ahead, lights that bordered the landing bay flashed on all at once. A square button on the starboard console extended the *Dart* landing struts. His gloved finger pressed it.

Six Jedi broke from the delta, their jerky flight paths turning insect-like.

Two o'clock high from around the planet's bend, a second triangular-shaped formation of short-rangers sped to intercept.

One of the twelve enemy pilots locked on to the signal that activated the landing bay lights and disrupted it. Halfway open, two bay doors stopped.

The *Dart* communications panel and his earphone went quiet. So the Sith philosopher reflected instead. Last winter, he and two cousins landing their speedsters on board the *Rancor*...a final vacation, a hunting safari before the war. Reclining in the captain's command chair, Torturok toasted with his cocktail, a gesture that instructed the small team of pilots and navigators on the forward command bridge to make the hyperspace jump happen.

Those cousins are dead now.

The weapons panel's blinking light interrupted his recollection. Cannons, full power.

Adversaries ambled back and forth, positioning their cheap fighters between a littler spacecraft and a larger one's landing bay.

As the first Jedi ships swarmed, the second team closed in.

Briefly, he wondered if any of the pilots had bothered to peer inside the partially open bay. If so, they would have seen that there was no room to land. Torturok quit wondering and began an ancient Sith chant. Its translation: *Fury is a blasting cap*.

In the middle of the fourth reciting, the explosives packing the *Rancor* landing bay went off. The destruction hit fuel stores and additional ordnance stacked in the aft bays. The blast engulfed four Jedi ships and knocked out two.

Torturok hit the button that retracted the *Dart* landing struts, then jammed his directional controls downward. He relished the power of negative g-forces pulling him up from his seat.

The speedster snaked underneath the developing fireball, a fluid wall of burning debris that gave him cover. Looping around this wall, the Sith maximized his moment of surprise and the second squadron of Jedi craft did not see him open fire from their right flank. He destroyed four before the survivors locked onto his tail.

The leader of the duo zoomed in. The hidden swivel cannon made quick work of the threat but, as much as the darksider juked and spun, the surviving lightsider stayed on him. Header and footer cannons firing at a constant rate, white-hot blasts ruined the cockpit's armor cage. Ultimately, the pest overcommitted and got punished.

Thrusters max, the dark victor set his course for the planet's upper horizon, the higher of the two suns. Hits of speed rattled the damaged starboard hull. He ignored the pain in his thigh.

Looking back at the burning, the martyr gave thanks to long-dead Sith on Exegol. Believers discovered the *Ithanak* fungus growing on the shade side of the immense *Fworta* trees in the Heart Valley. As a boy, he read the texts of the original formulators who first bled the organic mass and developed explosive putty that detonated using its connection to the living Force. Witnessing what was left of the *Rancor* made Torturok realize why he felt compelled to learn about *Ithanak* and the larger subject of biology. He understood why he loved gardening so much. Another epiphany. *At the epicenter of pain lies clarity of thought. In the midst of intense discomfort, an epiphany brings comfort.*

New explosions. His starboard engine. A third Jedi wave, as expected. More insects. With his intentions no longer secret, the incoming flight made murder its sole priority and formed up tight on what was left of his tails. Raw concentration burned through his trance. Ending his existence mattered more than anything else. All let loose from every cannon. Blazes of light came at him.

He added power. As much as he wanted to turn and engage, bigger prey lay ahead. In the distance, along the green planet's curvature, two Republic battleships sat parked after delivering ground fighters. Both appeared to be nothing more than oversized cargo containers with engines slapped on amidships and holes cut in the bottom for the hangars. Zero style.

Throttle at full, Torturok shot for the closer transport.

Laser blasts from one of the Jedi pursuers ripped open a hole in the canopy. The next volley of bolts cut through the top of his helmet. As much as he counter-rolled, his pursuers had him. Slowing. After too many blasts, the starboard engine housing cracked away.

His hands weakened, losing the ability to hold onto the controls. But the mortally-wounded Sith concentrated with every bit of his will, manipulating the Force into doing the flying from this point forward—his brain exploiting it to push and pull his weakening legs and arms to work the damaged ship's controls while ignoring the deadly threat of outer space.

The distance closed.

One vision overloaded his mind: panicked Republic servicemen and servicewomen fleeing from an out-of-control vessel headed straight at their hangar bay. The Sith saw it.

His troubled craft now jerked, spun, and listed. Laser blasts tore through the portside engine, control surfaces, and windows. Billowing smoke in the cockpit sucked out into the cold of space.

But his trance worked. While it did not reach the hangar, the crippled *Dart* and its full fuel tank collided with the support for the starboard engine room and the blast knocked the housing loose.

As the Republic warship burned, Darth Torturok's followers escaped in their unassuming shuttle that launched from the cave hangar right after the *Poison Dart* took off. Devoted believers witnessed his last moments.

His final flight inspired countless works of art and philosophy.

Chapter Three

The ceremonial torch on the cracked wall across from Dilani Vestagon flickered again before resuming an even burn. Her faraway gaze grooved on its pulses while her spellbound mind caught up, still processing a tale it just heard.

Also staring at the flame, the Scholar Emerita let out a wistful sigh. “Darth Torturok’s final edict became known as the Dark Allegiance. It spurred the creation of the Scholars of the Academius. His sect spun out of those who followed Sabotaa and Paryah and he used their greatness to set our way forward.”

The Scholar Emeritus: “Lord Torturok’s biggest regret, like our Sergeant-At-Arms said earlier, was that his fight to the end did not involve sabers. What a fight that would have been...”

The believers bellowed out. Emboldened, the initiates joined in. Torchlight warmed everyone. Dilani returned Quim-Na’s genuine nod with a gigantic one of her own.

“Our lord was bound to succeed. His gigantic heart wouldn’t have allowed any other outcome.” From her place in the circle, the Scholar Quim-Na Sulif sounded like she was talking about a grandfather instead of a man who was her age when he passed into the next realm. “In all, thirty-three Jedi and more than two hundred Republic troops died by his powerful hand. And the troopship would never see action again. Still...the Scholar Emeritus is correct: what a fight that saber matchup would have been...”

She shot her longtime friend a wink. Returning it, Dilani felt the room’s electricity race up and down her spine and into her brain.

While standing in these centuries-old chambers, the recent graduate recalled professors who raved about the tight relationship between Jedi and Academius. Saving lives together. Protecting the Republic together. Humanitarian efforts, disaster relief, quick battles and drawn-out wars—the endless civil war on Cantio alone demonstrated the symbiotic relationship between Force-wielding guardians and Force-worshipping battlefield medics. The Jedi would never sense deceit because virtually nobody in the Medic Legions thinks deceitfully about their partners. Unlike Dilani, Quim-Na, the Rees, and maybe one hundred alumni currently living, the vast majority of Academians have no idea that the Scholars exist.

Quim-Na joked once. *“Other dark side societies value the Scholars for our connection to the Jedi. And Academians, bless their big hearts, are the greatest useful idiots of all.”*

“Together with quiet societies of believers around the Galaxy, we Scholars keep the dark hearth warm.” Zinora Ree boomed with pride. “The Republic may have won the larger war, but the reach of the dark side remains a mystery to them.”

The Sergeant-At-Arms nodded at Dilani, friendly. “Dark siders all around the Galaxy, into Wild Space and beyond, these people are your people now. You could find yourself out in the independent regions or the Outer Rim and all you have to do is seek them out.”

The Scholar Emeritus had broken from his place and walked a slow pace, clasping a shoulder of each initiate as he shook their hands with his other hand, a fatherly embrace. The Scholar Emerita followed and took each new member’s hand, nodding her head as a welcome.

Mattias Ree pointed to the red and white crystal in the center. “Millennia ago, Darth Paryah mined this crystal from the Caves of Kreetol.”

Dilani stared at the red and white twinkles of light, her awed mind breathing in his words.

“None of us in this chamber possess the power to wield the dark side of the Force like those long-dead Masters.” The old man surveyed the circle of Scholars.

All raised their hands, palms upward, and closed their eyes.
The crystal, the weight of a speedster's sub-light engine, rumbled on its stand.
As it bucked back and forth, the wise Zinora Ree lectured. "And of course, any Jedi Knight could pick up this heavy boulder with a simple wave of the hand."
Shaking side to side, the heavy boulder left its support.
As it rose up, she continued. "But when we work together and channel one another's limited connections...our abilities multiply."
It meandered, ever higher, its size seemingly inconsequential. The initiates stared. Quim-Na Sulif wrinkled her nose at her speechless friend. The boulder hovered at chest height.
Mattias Ree: "Join our circle. Your allegiance to the dark side of the Force adds power. Even you who are not sensitive, you feed it."
The new Scholars backstepped to the perimeter. Their new brethren, hands still in the air and concentrating on the crystals, moved aside to make room. Palms upward, a collective concentrated, edging the prized artifact upward and pushing a slow, in-place rotation.
Mattias shouted. "We are not strong like lords. But we are united, our minds ignited."
Zinora screamed. "We seek knowledge and enlightenment in service of the dark side."
Dilani, an orphan, felt a sense of family while her mind contributed to the group effort. Her beloved new clan lowered the precious rock back to the floor.
"Your learnings have only begun. Welcome to a new lifetime."
After congratulating other new initiates, Quim-Na said, "Sister, I have been looking forward to sharing this with you for a long, long time."
The two hugged and Dilani gushed. "I am so at one with the Force, Quim-Na."
"This feeling will only grow." She stroked hair from the initiate's cheek.
All smiles, Zinora informed the celebratory chamber that the banquet and performance was to begin shortly in the dining hall upstairs.
Hobbling up on his jewel-encrusted cane, Mattias winked at Dilani before grabbing Quim-Na's elbow. "You will join my wife and I tomorrow for breakfast on the terrace?"
"Of course, my wise and attentive leader." She twitched his long beard and wrinkled her longish nose. "You asked me that twice already, by the way."
Laughing, the fellow Academius alum squeezed Dilani's hand. "Young one, as you mature and learn, you will discover that flightiness is as much a part of old age as wisdom."
He extended his right elbow. "Escort me to the dining hall, Scholar Vestagon?"
Beaming, the new Scholar fixed her curls and straightened her dull-colored robe before taking his arm and proceeding towards the open doors.
The entire group exited the ancient, octagonal space and walked back down the way they came. The flames on the walls died not long after the last person left the room.

Scholar Dilani Vestagon took another sip of the sparkling sweetness and shivered from the intoxicant's tingling bite.

A performance stage took up a significant portion of the floor space. She and the other satiated diners sat around the stage's edge, tables in a u-shape. Though the Rees' high-ceilinged banquet hall could hold ten times as many occupants, it felt intimate to her, almost crowded.

As an apres-dinner treat, some Scholars smoked a mix of dried berries and cured roots from antique ceramic pipes that servants set out upon clearing the dishes. Clouds of blue smoke outlined the elevated platform. Dilani, though not a smoker herself, liked the ambrosian scent.

Seven dancers, all clad in black bodysuits, mounted the stage. The music began.

Upon hearing the light, cheery opening, it took a moment to recall the tune. *The Dance of the Glowtail Fleas? Yeah...the children's song. From when I was like...five...*

The perplexed new Scholar kept both eyes on the stage. Dark side dignitaries all around her, bellies full of gourmet cuisine and rare drink, could not hold in their emotions. Some bopped their heads to the goofy beat.

Just like “Dance of the Glowtail Fleas” performances from her early years, this one began with a lone black-clad dancer holding a red dowel meant to be the tail of the story’s lone red-tailed flea. The six antagonists, also in black bodysuits, held either blue or green dowels the same length. Surrounded by the others, the “red glowtail flea” smacked blue and green instruments away. None landed blows. Airy string music timed with exaggerated choreography.

Tramm and Dilani shared toasts with their five-course dinner. The “semi-retired entrepreneur” offered to practice magick and introduce her to other practitioners. Now, the aging legbreaker appeared to be tearing up. She observed his naturally-gigantic eyes darting back and forth, never leaving the spectacle.

Quim-Na took a puff and winked. Dilani smiled back. The most gigantic grin she could manage.

The serious medical student never had been much of a drinker and tonight’s initiation put her in the mood to enjoy herself—but yes, indeed, the dance routine taking place on the stage in front of her table was *not* a hallucination. She didn’t have *that* much to drink.

The red flea twisted left to fend off feigned hits from blue and green fleas. His series of quick strikes clacked back the other “glowtails.” He turned to face off against a green opponent. Accompanying the action was an arrangement so simple that any arrhythmic four-year-old could follow along.

A fact came to Dilani’s mind: schoolteachers across the Galaxy taught this common song to younger members of many races because it was so easy to learn and generally accepted as containing a positive message about standing strong, no matter the odds against you.

Quim-Na leaned over and placed a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “What’s the matter, Scholar Vestagon? Don’t you enjoy children’s stories?”

The desert moon breezes kicked up again. An energizing wind ran across her skin. Two hands and two feet kept finding new holds. Deep within her, Sylmonica Valkanna felt the completion of this solo ascent. Though a green blindfold blocked her sight, the Force told the fortyish Jedi Knight that the top of this rock wall lay just beyond the next outcropping. Strained and pained muscles cried out. But her will and the Force banded together to urge them on.

This close to the top, the angle of the orange-white wall curved inward, easing her task. Syl sped up her pace. The desire to see the task as a completed one consumed her.

After about fifty more handholds and footholds, the last-minute vacationer was pulling her spent body up onto the flat horizontal surface of the narrow summit in one motion, rolling away from the drop before allowing herself to relax.

Like the vertical rock faces, this worn-smooth surface felt cool against her body. Stillness. Which she knew would not last. Lying flat on her back, she nudged the green blindfold up to her forehead. Grime from her fingers left smudges on the skin above her black eyebrows. Two puffy eyes took in the purple sky, squinting in reaction to the cloudless, early afternoon day.

After resting until she tired of resting, Syl sat up. After sitting until she tired of sitting, she stood. A slow circle on two shuffling feet. A full view. A dead landscape spilled out in every direction. Fifteen other spires nearby and the blood-colored sand below and it all looked to be from the same decomposing corpse. Some formations stood taller and some were shaped more like towers as opposed to this rock wall, but the colors of their hardened lavaflows matched.

Many Jedi had climbed all sixteen, a feat Syl never envisioned herself completing. This quick trip was more about needing an escape from the tedium of mission standby than anything else. She wasn't important. Nobody important would notice if she disappeared for a few days.

The blue light on the matte-black communicator hanging from her belt blinked when she finally felt the urge to check. Most likely her mission partner, Tiruss Dunn.

While fiddling with her comms unit, twirling it between her grubby fingers, Syl chose to enjoy the view for a while longer. The moon, so little life. No. Just enough. Even though there was no flora or fauna, the breathable air let living beings spend some time here.

Centuries before, the Supreme Council had considered constructing a temple on the moon. But it didn't take the wise minds long to rethink, realizing that the possibility of upsetting the balance was too great. Standing up here now, the rank-and-file Jedi had to wonder if her leaders in these modern times would have arrived at the same conclusion.

The pliable instrument, a commscard, was not much more than a receiver and speaker that linked with the robust communication systems in the "Big Bug" parked below. The comms engaged when the card's sides were squeezed. The tinny speaker stated that Tiruss Dunn had signaled.

Her dirty thumb and index finger brought the device up to her chapped lips. "Transmit."

Her spent brain envisioned the lights on the ship's console blinking to life. A minute later, Russ picked up. If Syl were seated in the cockpit, the small oval screen just to the right of the wheel would be showing his scruffy, slightly-pudgy face, also the red curls which mixed with a ring of small horns that formed a crown shape on his skull. Still, hearing the witty Zabrak's greeting brought out her smile. Holding the commscard to her mouth, she gazed out at oranges and reds fighting with dull purples and hints of dirty whiteness in the light layer of clouds.

"Russ...you sensed that I was at peace and wanted to bother me, right?"

"R&R is over, Valkanna. The prospecting operation is a go, Niandra and Makkartho have been confirmed as our mission partners to start off."

Hearing the names of an old Padawan friend and a Jedi Knight she had served with made her grin reappear. "Excellent news...now that makes me happy."

"Good. I live to hear that, that you are happy. I live for nothing else except Sylmonica Valkanna's happiness."

"Shut up."

"We're also getting those Padawans for the first two months. They completed their Learnership, this is part of their final study before the lead-up to the Trials."

"We're supposed to treat them like first-tour Knights, huh? They can partake in the whatever-it-is that we'll be doing with us."

“Ha, ha. I guess they’ll help with these surveyors and scientists. I’m assuming...”

“Aww...I’m glad youngsters are along. Sounds fun. And fewer people overall...fine with me.” The exhausted climber absorbed as much of this picturesque deadness as she could in her short stay. “Safe region, no warzone nearby, no suicide bombers...sounds just fine.”

As Tiruss wrapped up the briefing, she joked. “So...after Phase One is over, a bunch more miners arrive and we’re breaking up fights between roughnecks on payday.”

“Let’s hope.” Tiruss chuckled along before signing off, stating that he confirmed their Courier shuttle and would see her at the Federal City hangar. Flat-faced and boxy instead of sleek, the unglamorous *Courier*-class was the government’s standard, medium-sized platform for lugging beings, cargo, and gear between star systems.

Fastening the communicator to her belt and scanning the scenery, the mid-level Jedi pictured the next few months. A mind-numbing mission serving the security needs of a sketchy mining corporation. At the same time, she looked forward to it because of fellow Jedi.

Above all, beings will be in danger and the Force needs her to be there. That mattered more than anything else.

She and a friend from Padawan days, Thia Niandra, had never served together in twenty years as Knights, something they talked about back when they were kids. The other Jedi was named Makkartho. Years ago, Syl and the easygoing Wookiee worked with a Republic detail that taught survival tactics to a planet on the verge of war. Jedi and Academius Medics lived in the jungles for a year.

Thia and Makk were mission partners. Syl and Russ crossed paths with them a few years back, a brief reunion on a space station situated along the Rimma Trade Route. On top of this rock now, Syl remembered joking with Thia about serving together.

And here we are. She let out a tiny laugh before closing her eyes and concentrating on eliminating every trace of negative thought from her psyche. The Force flowed through her, as it does all living things. Syl pondered the commonality, just like she has done many times before. Every time she meditates, new learnings appear. A consciousness reflected. Soreness left. As far away as her thoughts seemed, she remained present.

And here I am. She opened her eyes and every bit of her switched on to sprint straight at the clouds lining the purple horizon.

Launching, her right foot left the rock’s edge to join up snug with the left. Fingers and spine reaching, her outstretched frame sapped every last bit of sideways momentum from the air. Horizontal speed dying, vertical speed not yet materializing. A vegetation-free moon’s surface 1000 meters below.

Still meditative, Syl pondered the nanosecond of weightlessness. *Some creatures in the Galaxy experience the entire circle of life in this span of time.*

Inevitably, the vertical speed materialized. A desert floor pulled her to it.

Air flooded her ears—a monotone barrage. The falling being rotated, head pointing at the ground and arms to her sides. Every muscle squeezed rigid. All ten toes pointed at the bluish sky. The tip of her smallish nose trained on the redness below.

Sand. Straight ahead.

Currents engulfed—the earlier soft wind now an insane version of its former self. Invisible molecules and atoms tore at skin and closely-cropped hair.

As her body gained velocity, her mind wandered. Every nanosecond of this freefall—she knew she couldn’t capture every detail but tried to anyway. The rock wall that she climbed now

sailed by the periphery of her vision, those orange-and-white patterns in the igneous rock now dull-orange blurs.

Crimson owned more and more of the view.

Syl shot her arms outward and above her head, forming an upside-down “Y” shape with her torso. Fingers spreading apart, they channeled the Force. Her palms flattened, finding the exact parallel with the approaching terrain. She appeared to be swan-diving to the depths, also raising her head and hands in an act of praise.

Her limbs and spine tingled. Her plummet slowed.

Speed dying even further, the upside-down Jedi was too busy observing her heartbeat in sync with the Force to notice it.

Her climbing wall. Opening her eyes, she saw patterns and a mix of colors again, now that the blurriness had faded. The screaming in her ears a whisper like before.

A few body lengths above the red sand, floating. Syl flipped 180 degrees to land on her feet and took out her communicator to signal her ship, a short walk away.

The Brakebug Mark II, nicknamed “the Big Bug,” was twenty percent larger than the short-range Mark I version used for patrolling orbital shipping lanes and skies above cities. The Big Bug traded the ‘Bug’s bubble canopy for a metallic-paneled cockpit housing and arc of windows for the side-by-side pilots. A Big Bug addition, the long stem protruding from the curved front, could connect to an independent hyperdrive unit like the one currently orbiting this desert moon. R&R over, she would soon be docking with it and returning to work.

The sub-light engine that sat right behind the two-seat cockpit hissed, its starter motor engaging. The wraparound window rose upward, then rearward, welcoming Syl back.

II: Phase One

Chapter One

The light layer of clouds brought a soothing chill to the morning. A foursome consisting of the Rees, Quim-Na Sulif, and Tramm Nurado had just finished a hearty breakfast after a late night. Crystal glasses containing strong, pungent tea sat on the table in front of each of them.

The lone table and chairs formed their own group of islands in an ordered sea of hexagonal gray tiles. Accessible via a long curve of sliding-glass doors, the Rees' stone terrace sat outside the main banquet hall and could accommodate 1000 guests on a warm evening. The wide-open social space offered views of the gardens with the wilderness and foothills beyond.

Quim-Na placed her cup on the table while rising from the straight-backed chair. Gathering the blue bathrobe about her frame, she breathed in fragrances given off by the rows of manicured plants stretching out below the deck. To the fortyish darksider, this sprawling estate halfway around the globe from her beloved Coruscant City was one of the Galaxy's ideal places, a cocoon where she could let her guard down. Though forever a city girl who thrived on the bustle, she loved to get away from it all.

Her impression from the night before began. Quim-Na hunched in an attempt to convey the new Scholar's tentativeness. "Sooo...the 'Dance of the Glowtail Fleas' has to do with Darth Torturok...*am...I co-rrrrect...hmmm?*"

Slurring, the attempt at a higher voice was spot-on. Wide eyes inquisitive and lips muttering, she stayed in character with a wobbly stance. Both hands stayed glued to her hips while her head cocked to the side one way and then the other.

Out of love more than ridicule, the other darksiders laughed at the fun imitation of a young devotee now sleeping it off in a suite six floors up.

Done with her portrayal, the theatrical one took in the hills. "I wish you could have seen her expression light up when I said that one of our own composed this artistic reimagining of Darth Torturok's final flight as if it were a saber fight."

Zinora Ree let out a hearty laugh. "I can envision her sweet face."

"Dilani, Dilani, Dilani..." Mattias tightened the belt on his crimson robe, snickering. "To have been there centuries ago when the talented Mikko Sorteliun debuted 'Glowtail Fleas'... sporting a knowing grin on his wrinkled and devoted face. I like to imagine that wheelchair-bound old man just smiling and nodding at a clueless audience of midwits."

Chuckling along, Quim-Na soaked in her mentor's serenity, knowing it would not last.

Peak travel time. Since the mission wasn't classified or military-related, her detail would utilize a civilian facility instead of a base. A fact she did not mind at all. If there was ever any thrill from being granted access to the top-secret sites, that rush had long since left.

After verifying credentials at checkpoints, the Jedi Knight, dressed in formal robes with a purple credentials sash laying over her right shoulder, lugged two worn packs up the escalator, not paying attention to her steps because she had walked this route many times before on the way to a vessel that would take her somewhere else.

Her brown hood down, Sylmonica Valkanna's well-rested eyes took a semi-curious look around the buzzing hub where many species scurried back and forth. Passengers and civilian

pilots were identifiable by nicer clothing, workers by grease stains, and company pilots by a range of uniforms. Screams of engines fought with clangs from tools. Both battled an omnipresent intercom speaking Galactic Basic.

Republic and civilian airships, as well as space-capable craft, filled the Federal City air/spaceport's primary deck. Underneath an umbrella dome twenty stories up, waiting vehicles parked in orderly rows obeying the painted lines beneath them. Aircraft were bound for destinations on Coruscant, spacecraft headed beyond-atmosphere, some to star systems. The hyperspace-capable vessels in the spaceship section stood out. While none looked alike, all were larger than the models that would need to link up with a separate hyperdrive.

A sight, at the far side of the spaceship section. One image, three stages of Syl's life. She broke into a smile. Even with travelers and workers passing in front, she saw Thia Niandra, Makkartho, and Tiruss Dunn by the skinny ramp leading up to the starboard hatch, half a story up. Like her, they were dressed in their formal robes, as was customary for travel.

Thia appeared to have gotten some sun. Makk sported a few thick braids, a new look. Russ? Syl chuckled. *No changes since last week. Shaggy hair, goatee, not as fit as he once was.*

The trio appeared to be checking over a rack of heavy-pressure spacesuits. A mission task will be escorting geologists to the planet's surface to determine drilling sites.

The faded, Republic-blue shuttle that her friends were loading looked like it had seen better days. The *Courier-class*' bubble cockpit sat top-forward, maximizing cabin space on the single deck. The model's aft galley was meant to ease the grind of long spaceflights.

A boring, but noble ship, she thought. An unassuming workhorse.

The weight of her two packs seemed to lessen as Syl walked towards her new mission. She absorbed the peace. She gave thanks to the Force for the unexpected surprise of peace.

With the clouds above this wilderness region of Coruscant thinning out, a fuller light bathed the expansive, open-air deck. Zinora had just ordered servants to remove the breakfast table and bring out the lounge furniture. Their two guests reclined in their own chairs while the couple sat upright on an oversized couch.

Mattias took a sip of his freshly-poured tea before sharing he and his wife's feelings. "Our movement has hit a plateau. And we face an unfortunate truth: the dark side needs more."

Having lost his fun edge a while ago, The Scholar Emeritus now had Tramm and Quim-Na's complete attention. He stood from his comfortable seat. Fingers on his right hand ran along his beard as he addressed the others. "The dark side of the Force needs more than the four of us, other dark side sects, the king and queen, and yes...even the prince, know how to contribute."

"The most learned among us agree." The Scholar Emerita added powdered sweetener to her tea. "We must seek out partners who are naturally stronger with the Force than we are. The time has come. And this person here, a rank-and-file worker, she seeks answers."

While she was talking, her husband opened a Republic file that had been sitting on the table and flipped the tablet's switch. Their listeners sat up from their couches to look at the flat screen display of an ID picture. A short-haired woman in her late thirties, brown robes with hood down, lines under both eyes and a bored stare on a face that already showed a few wrinkles.

Quim-Na leaned forward in her seat to peer at the image. "That's the Jedi Sylmonica Valkanna, right? We've assessed her off and on ever since her court-martial."

"Jedi..." Tramm raised a thick eyebrow. "What's on your minds?"

Seated across from Quim-Na, Zinora addressed them both. “With the war on Cantio, littler conflicts everywhere, and the Republic’s rampant expansion, Valkanna is burned out. Many of their order are. But sources informed us a while ago that she might be deploying to a remote mining operation. The mission requires Academius Medics and this fact got our wheels turning. We used our influence to make sure believers got to be involved.”

“The isolation offers a chance to get near her.” Mattias paused to take in his property while his associates perused the documents. “For the first phase of this mission, she’ll be far from Republic oversight. No Jedi Masters will be along, just another two-person team of Knights. Valkanna knows them both.”

“They are friends. Friendships invite vulnerability.” His wife let out a rare laugh. “We are going to ruin her life, you two. Then she will reinvent herself and align with us.”

The Scholar Emeritus said, “To turn her, we must play the long game.”

Quim-Na shrugged. “Poisoning a soul takes time.”

“That it does. Other Jedi share her unhappiness and a few offer possibilities as well.” Mattias handed a file over to his strongman. “But too many variants have aligned in the here and now. The remote nature of this mining mission means Sylmonica Valkanna must be pursued.”

His eyes on an old commendation write-up, Tramm shook his head. “Anonymity provides the greatest source of any dark side society’s strength. Are we ready to risk stepping into the light?”

The Scholar Emeritus’ slow smile began his answer. “The Scholars already have, old friend. Your drone attacks were the first stage. This plan has been in motion for some time.”

“We thank you for holding off with the retaliations until the Force indicated that it was right to do so.” Zinora put her glass down. “And thank you for letting us pick the decoy targets.”

Quim-Na nodded in triumph. “So...that *was* Tramm’s goon spacefleet. I wondered...”

“Not *my* fleet. The fleet’s previous owner is no longer with us, just like the village that was his place of birth and also the focus of the first drone strike.” The mean laugh broke the leisurely demeanor. “The Rees helped fund my payback plan.”

The Scholar Emerita rose to gaze out at her beloved forest. “We chose that Mytyo farming colony, the third strike, for a reason: Valkanna’s family, parents and some uncles and aunts and cousins, were living there. Our network has been monitoring them for years.”

“This one has seen a lot of death.” The Scholar Emeritus stroked his beard, his thoughtful gaze far away. “Her Master, many Jedi *and* Medic friends, are gone. She got court martialed for her actions on Cantio during one of the worst terrorist attacks in that centuries-long conflict.”

“Heaviness weighs upon her psyche. We theorize killing family that she has never known will add to her burden. The strike was the first step. We plan to add more...and add and add...until...” Zinora marveled at her gardens. The Rees bragged that they would never sell this sanctuary—two stretches of foothills and a narrow valley in between—no matter how much the increasingly-opportunistic developers put on the table.

Quim-Na’s index finger played with the mouth of her glass. She winced at the face on the screen. “She has that beat-up look that so many of them have.”

“Sometime in the next few weeks, *this* beat-up Jedi is going receive word that a family whom she could not point out in a crowd has been senselessly murdered on a nowhere planet where she has never ventured.” The Scholar Emerita turned from admiring her lands. “Quim-Na, if all goes according to plan, more tragedies will strike Valkanna. Sometime, down the road, you will make contact. Your cover identity will be a woman who knew the Jedi’s family.”

The Rees were childless. Mattias thought of Quim-Na as a daughter. “Your cover will blame the Republic for their deaths. Your ability to conceal your thoughts will assist you.”

“Also, Quim-Na: spend these months studying the meditations of Darth Desparus, his quatrains about finding realities beneath the surfaces of falsehoods.”

“Happily.”

Mattias eyed the distance again, wistful. “What a big thinker Desparus the Just was.”

“Indeed. It’s why so many other lords as well as kings sought his counsel, dear.”

“To think that his cold, logical genes sired a star-hot firecracker like Famne the Poet...”

The Rees nodded to each other and giggled.

“Ahh...the old days.” Quim-Na finished her cup and winked at the two. “I’ll research Valkanna’s parents’ histories right away, start building my legend.”

Tramm laughed at her. “Telling the truth is not your strength, Quim-Na.”

She responded by raising her cup, as if to splash him with freshly-poured tea.

Zinora raised her voice. “Children.”

Quim-Na snickered. “Yes, mom...”

Upon sighting the approaching colleague whom she hadn’t seen in two years, Jedi Senior Knight Makkartho swooped up Jedi Knight Sylmonica Valkanna in her hairy arms and threw her into the air. Due to the Wookiee’s height, the laughing new arrival appeared to soar a bit higher.

An echoing boom piping through hundreds of speakers notified all twenty levels that travelers could be subject to search.

Fellow Jedi Thia Niandra’s whoops added to her two friends’ screams of joy. While the sound system’s mechanized voice stated that travel documents needed to be ready to be shown at all times, passersby got knocked out of their mental worlds by the sight of Jedi without stern looks on their faces.

Standing by the rack of spacesuits, Tiruss Dunn shrugged at the passengers, pilots, and flight deck workers walking past. “Just Jedi being Jedi, folks. Nothing to see here.”

After Makk caught Syl, Thia joined in on the hug. The three of them called over to Russ.

“Oh...okay.”

Arms around one another, four veteran Republic servants all squeezed as much as their good spirits let them. The moment the mass looked to relax and step away, Thia squealed out that it had been too long. The embrace tightened.

Still smiling, Syl opened her eyes. “Look, teenagers...dressed just like us.”

Four stoic and athletic seventeen-year-olds, three humans and a Rodian, were dressed in Jedi robes with green Padawan sashes and carried blue travel bags. The two human males were identical twins. Like them, the human young woman and reptilian young man were also hairless except for the two Padawan braids: one made from a patch of hair behind the right ears, and the other a short tail in back. All had Academy citation ribbons woven into their side braids.

The two Knights who were Padawan friends untangled from the giant embrace and started to inspect the stone-faced new arrivals, who stood still, shoulders back.

“Hmmm...” Thia took the clip out from her hair and redid it, her eyes scanning across all four. “Young...younger than I remember us looking...”

Syl nodded. “Such a freshness to their demeanor, Thia...only...too serious...”

“We’re assigned to this detail, I think...” The expressionless young woman attempted to hand over her document. The other three late teens held theirs out as well.

“Awww...put those things away and come here.” Wearing a friendly grin, Thia ignored the offer of documents and reached out her free hand.

“Welcome.” Smiling as well, Syl said, “Another hug.”

Sheepish but giggling Padawans joined. After letting go, they introduced themselves.

The Tannerum twins were named Zennon and Beddu. Identical, with not even hairstyles as an option to differentiate the thin-faced siblings, the diagonal scar on Beddu’s cheek offered a way. He was the one to say so, wearing a sheepish smile. “Saber practice got hairy one day.”

The skinny Rodian with scaly, orange skin and reddish hair was a bit taller than the twins. The boys were some of the most accomplished distance runners in their class. Zeephus Illim’s two antennae twitched as he shared that he went by the nickname “Mimms.”

“I’m ArraKel...Kitaros.” Eyes much wider, the student offered a big wave. She had relaxed since first walking up, clutching her travel credentials. “Everybody calls me ‘Kel’.”

“Not everybody...some people call you ‘Stupid’ don’t forget...”

Kel reached up to land a punch on the taller Zennon’s shoulder, causing him to tense up. Beddu and Mimms snickered, but stayed ready to cease laughing.

“Don’t worry, boys.” Her arm around Makk’s waist, Syl addressed Beddu and Mimms. “You can have fun on this deployment. Just do what you’re told, don’t get killed.”

The mission detail loaded their gear into the Courier’s hold and readied for takeoff.

Chapter Two

The Courier's flat-faced nose broke through the clouds.

Mimms Illim and the Tannerum brothers pointed out the buzz of activity outside the topside cockpit's curve of windows. Airships clogged the airways and high-altitude flight paths, evidence of Coruscant's relentless population growth. And starting at the edge of the ionosphere, an assortment of spacecraft flew in orbit. Supertankers and luxury liners mixed with all classes of cargo haulers, also peppy short-rangers that scooted cargo between haulers. Local commuters and joyriders, as well as dual-seat Republic patrollers, bopped all around the larger craft.

The most experienced of the five, Tiruss Dunn, sat in the front left seat, piloting. Seated behind Tiruss, ArraKel Kitaros could only chuckle at her fellow Padawans. The sight of air and space traffic was nothing new. She spent her Learnership, a four-year course of study, accompanying a Master who traveled between systems coordinating security teams. Checking out the various ships, she recalled his words once. They had just dropped from hyperspace and sent their landing clearance. *"More ships every time I come back here, Kel. More each year."*

Tiruss looked up from the controls and shook his head at the view. "Every year, Coruscant's orbit gets more crowded. Sheesh."

The seasoned public servant gestured at an older vessel four times their ship's size and also sporting a rough paint job, ambling away from their port side. "Long-haul freighter types are good to know. They hear about what's going on."

Turbulence eased as they left the airspace.

While the sight of mechanized spaceflight didn't impress Kel, the existential power of Coruscant's rich green surface underneath a layer of scattered clouds blew her away, as always.

Coruscant. A planet where she lived ever since being discovered as a toddler in the Troithe System. From space, the octagonal chunk housing three hundred million residents, named Federal City, made its gray presence known among the natural green. The further that Tiruss flew from the planet, the more she could see Coruscant City reaching up from the equator.

Zennon Tannerum's eyes lit up from his seat beside Tiruss. He pointed out the window at three royal-blue patrollers zipping by. "Check out the larger engines, the upgrade."

Co-pilots sat side-by-side under clear bubble cockpits at the front. Spherical enclosures offered both Brakebug operators full views in all directions—ideal for maneuvering through tight spaces like those found in crowded orbital dockyards and mega-cities' ever-larger developments.

"Unfortunately, we're getting first-generation 'Bugs, guys. Sorry." Tiruss flipped a green switch on the side panel. "This mining operation is far out of the way."

Zennon shrugged. "I don't mind. I need stick time."

Kel, eyes still on the planet they just left, giggled. "That's an understatement."

"We'll teach you four what we know about flying patrols." The seasoned Jedi pilot wore a scowl as he steered, spotted traffic, and also readied the ship for intra-system flight.

The control station's transmission interrupted to clear the Courier for hyperspace. After acknowledging, Tiruss added power and pulled the wheel back. The burst of speed and veer upward pushed the five into their seats.

"Next stop, Scatera 3B in the...Scatterion System...somewhere near Malastare, I believe." Tiruss muttered while doing his job. "A place I had never heard of until this gig."

Once the ship reached high orbit and set up for a hyperjump, Kel rose from her seat and descended the half-level ladder to exit the cockpit.

The featureless and windowless main cabin's metallic surfaces appeared to have been cleaned recently and reflected white light from tiny bulbs along the seams between the silver overhead and bulkheads. The cabin itself was a practical design: just a rectangular compartment with higher-than-normal overheads to accommodate more types of missions and cargo. The rack of spacesuits sat near the double-door hatch, the passengers' gear stowed in the floor bins lining the port side.

The Padawan felt tingles, the hyperdrive's whir. She ambled aft to the galley.

"Not impressed by space travel, either? Take a seat."

Three Jedi Knights sat at the lone table in the confined space, almost a cubby-hole off of the ship's kitchen. It, along with the benches' flat surface, appeared to have been made from the similar sheets of metal as the bulkheads, overhead, and deck.

Across from Thia, who just spoke, Syl shifted to her left and made room, offering water from the pitcher on the table. Like the younger Force-wielder, they had removed their robes and relaxed in tan tunics.

Makk's short-sleeve uniform exposed burn scars running the length of her right arm. The healed wound disrupted with slashes of pink where the black fur would never grow back.

Thia saw the teen's wide eyes. "She got those burns releasing a valve on a pressurized tank that some mobsters had sabotaged. Thousands would have been killed by that explosion."

The tall, slender Wookiee didn't appear too cramped. The galley, like the rest of the ship, had been designed with many species' body types in mind. She smiled at Kel and made a series of low, throaty barks.

Syl nodded. "Organized crime will never go away, Makk. Lately though, runaway slave catchers seem to be causing most of the problems. At least gangsters know they're the bad guys."

"It's that quasi-legal nature of the legislation, Syl." Thia sighed. "A few slave-practicing systems using their wealth to bend the laws...which is wrong, but that's how it is."

Glance moving between the three, a rookie soaked in the veterans' shop-talk.

"A while back..." Syl spat out a laugh. "Russ and I are doing diplomatic escort. This dignitary's kid won't shut up about wanting to hunt down runaways when he grew up, like a career. A rich kid saying this, like slaves were some sub-class of being. Made me wonder."

"I get you. Something weird going on." Thia removed the blue clip holding her thick hair in a bun. These locks fell below her shoulders.

The force-sensitives sat in silence, enjoying the energy of the drive.

Thia broke the quiet. "Oh...speaking of our younger days, Syl...I found this not long ago in the Archives. We got to talking about politics when I meant to give you this."

The old friend pulled a flat, silver square out of her tunic and handed it across the table.

Syl tapped the square. As soon as the loop began, she squealed. Her eyes lit up. "Ro."

Three young women in blue ceremonial Jedi robes popped up on the flat screen. The two humans were bald. The green-skinned Twi'lek was a hairless species and two headtails grew from the back of her skull almost to her shoulders. The loop ended with eighteen-year-old, brand-new Jedi Knight Sylmonica Valkanna yelling, "*We're done! And we've only just begun!*"

The two-dimensional image ran its right hand along the back of the bare head where two black Padawan braids, one in the center and the other just to its right, had just been shaved off. The images of the other new Jedi Knights, Thia Niandra and Rohandra Teek, screamed in triumph. The dancing footage continued for a few more seconds, then repeated.

"You are amazing, Thia." Syl flashed a grin across the table at one of her oldest friends and resumed staring at the loop. "I remember when that cameraman saw us goofing around."

“I had three copies made.” The gift giver refilled her water. “Yours, mine, and I put the third on Ro’s Commemoration Square.”

“We’re done! And we’ve only just begun!”

The gift recipient fixated on the repeating footage. “Look at us.”

The seventeen-year-old at the table twiddled the longer braid that draped over her right shoulder as she watched the new Knights dancing around. “I can’t wait to be done.”

Syl nudged the student. “Master Crartelius...does she still teach?”

“Yes.”

Syl lowered her voice as much as she could and lowered her stare, narrowing her eyes. “Patience...young ones...patience.”

The four giggled.

Thia shook her head. “That was a serviceable impression...maybe...”

“Shut up.” Syl faux-sneered at her buddy.

Laughing, Kel said, “I got it. Who is the third, if you don’t mind me asking.”

Thia nodded. “Ro got killed during a prison break on Cantio. Rohandra Teek.”

Syl exhaled. “Ahh, the neverending civil war...”

“I’m sorry if I—”

“Shh...” Syl shushed Kel.

Kel quit playing with her brown hair. “The Academy says peace talks are a go.”

The three Jedi Knights did not answer. Thia fiddled with the clip in her hands.

“We’re done! And we’ve only just—”

Syl shut off the square. “Let’s hope. But Cantio...is Cantio. For your sake, I hope that talks do something, for once.” She took the younger one’s hand. “But...don’t count on it.”

Thia’s misty eyes stayed far away. “Not one more innocent being should get killed and not one more Jedi or Medic should die dealing with that lost cause...if only it were that easy.”

Her mission partner reached her hand across the table, enveloping the human hand. The act received a squeeze from the recipient and a kind nod.

“If only.” Syl turned to Kel. “Phase One may not sound like much, but Jedi are needed to protect people who are just doing a job. And that’s one of the things we do best.”

The flat hologram on the table played again after the button got hit. The younger Sylmonica Valkanna said, *“We’re done! And we’ve only just begun!”*

Seated beside the pilot, Zennon Tannerum enjoyed the light jolts and stared out from the cockpit as the flooding streams of hyperspace’s bright light dissolved into actual space.

Impressed, the senior Padawan nodded at the yellow-pink planet bearing a ho-hum name, Scatera 3B. Though not visually pleasing when compared to so many planets and moons in the thousands of inhabited known systems, Scatera’s proximity gave the round mass presence. Outer space, a scattering of a few billion stars covering the entirety, with the next galactic arm forming a hazy blue arc—all of it came together as a background.

In near orbit above a dull-colored rock devoid of life, three deep-space vessels formed an evenly-proportioned line. Two oval barges looked dwarfed by the cruiser they bookended. But the three ships, a supersized and two oversized spacecraft, appeared tiny so close to Scatera.

Tiruss Dunn engaged the sublight engines and nudged the Courier towards the fleet.

Again in learning mode, Zennon watched as the Knight's fingers moved across buttons and switches.

The Courier closed in. The mining operation's Phase One ships ceased to look so tiny.

Zennon took mental notes as Tiruss used the controls to aim for the middle one, the *Bountiful Horizon*. A tall central superstructure and long, multi-leveled main hull created a cross shape. The headquarters satellite, its hangar sat amidships four levels below the intersection. Doors opening, each one slid away from the centerpoint. A light-purple haze, the protective field that kept breathable air trapped inside, expanded outward as the vertical metal slats continued to move sideways and join the other door panels at the ends of the frame.

"Check it out, Beddu and Mimms..." Motioning to his brother and buddy, the eager flier pointed to three Brakebugs among the few small craft parked inside the five-story hangar. The energy barrier dulled the skinny patrol ships' bright-yellow paint schemes. "The Republic already shipped my 'Bug for me."

Tiruss had to laugh at the proud teen next to him.

"My brother would crash a 'Bug so quick." Beddu rolled his eyes at the Rodian next to him. The antennae on top of Mimms' head fluttered back and forth as he chuckled.

The well-used shuttle's flat front broke the barrier's glowing plane.

Tiruss had his pick of spaces to park. Once he did, the awkward-looking government vehicle was the largest in the bay.

After introductions, a supervisor suggested a tour to the eight Jedi, of the *Horizon* and also the two smaller supply barges in the fleet.

The Phase One Chief Medical Officer used this as his excuse to leave the meet-and-greet, telling the arrivals that his team would follow up soon.

With a current crew of eighty aboard a ship that could house twelve hundred, Huedd Kallatrian encountered few beings in the pipe-lined passageways as he headed up to the Medical Bay. In a few months, the clean metal and white surfaces will show the dings and scuffs of work.

The harvesting operation's medical executive disappeared into his two-room suite at the far end of the empty treatment facility. No lights were on but the featureless planet below dominated his curved wall of windows and illuminated the room with reflected rays from the system's two stars. A spectacular sight, but one the Academius alumnus did not take in.

He unbuttoned the stiff topcoat of his high-collared, dress blue uniform. His belly enjoyed the freedom.

The scrambler on his desk's control panel blinked green, indicating that the transmission was secure. The Scholar Emeritus and Scholar Emerita's images faded in on the oval screen.

"Both of you are dressed as if headed to the latest-and-greatest gala, as always." Like his longtime friend Tramm Nurado, this lifelong believer knew down in the depths of his consciousness that his two superiors were more in tune with the ways of the Force than he could ever hope to be. "The target is here. Administrators are briefing the Jedi."

"Good, Huedd. Let them know who you are, but minimize interaction, for a week at least." The Scholar Emerita had tutored Huedd since he was a young man.

While stroking his salt-and-pepper stubble in a way that unconsciously paid homage to Mattias' habit of playing with his long beard, the darksider stared out the arc of windows at a celestial entity so close. "I sense tension. We can leverage the mining company's greed."

The haziness on the moonless rock below came from a permanent cloud cover of poisonous gases held in place by intense pressure which would crush beings not wearing protective gear.

The Scholar Emeritus laughed. “The tension you sense...the Jedi are knights being misused as Republic pawns, Huedd. These are frustrating times. Valkanna is far from alone.”

The onetime Academius star medical student let out a knowing laugh. “Well, *these* disgruntled Jedi will be busy right away. The geologists and business managers are anxious to conduct exploratory blasting on the planet’s surface. Phase One isn’t even in full swing and they are bringing up terms like Phase Four, Phase Five, and Phase Six.”

“Keep us posted. Our new believer will be arriving soon. Her name is Dilani Vestagon.”

Chapter Three

“Paradise.” A heavy spacesuit and the dead planet’s overwhelming pressure could not keep him down. *“The surface of Scatera, it’s...paradise...”*

A longtime company geologist named Rasskana appeared to dance as he trudged through fog taking reads with handheld instruments. The gray matter beneath the rock scientist’s heavy boots offered new worlds to discover. He ranted into his helmet speaker. *“Ores and minerals all around us.”* A Trandoshan, the green-scaled reptilian species drew out their ‘s’ sounds.

Sylmonica Valkanna took in the hazy vision appearing and disappearing through her triple-paneled visor. Both explorers were clad in reinforced suits that puffed out in the four limbs and all through the torso. Without the substantial amount of survival gear, the atmosphere would implode their lungs in an instant.

Nothing hindered the rockhound’s giddy footsteps. Syl could envision those naturally-giant yellow eyes almost popping out of his skull as his learned mind surveyed. Even with the connection’s static, the excitement came through loud and clear. *“Syl and Tiruss, aren’t these quanta-crystals spectacular?”*

“You enjoy, good buddy.” Tiruss Dunn’s choppy voice came through her helmet speakers. Four hundred paces behind the duo and pretty much invisible, Syl’s partner and two pilots worked in the oval-shaped lander that brought them to the surface.

The name, the *Biekkor*-class, came from a tree bug native to Coruscant. Biekkors were wingless, squat-bodied arthropods with pointy tails and ten stubby legs, five to a side. Ten blastoff and descent engines were mounted along the curves of the outer hull. The tail engine, mounted above the rear hatch and pointing rearward, assisted.

The Jedi protector enjoyed her charge’s ecstatic ravings about a world that was “so, so perfect” over and over. And then the ground beneath Rasskana’s feet started to crack.

Nanoseconds before the rock under his boots began to splinter, Syl learned that it was about to come apart. Her mind shut out voices in her helmet’s earphones so she could listen to the Force. The Biekkor was parked on a hill nearby. Russ could be heard, but had to be ignored.

She kept her hand raised at the sudden disruption in front of her, channeling. Rasskana, a being twice Syl’s size, floated above the sinkhole that just appeared. The ground underneath her rumbled. But her charge still hovered over a gaping opening. While she could not see him due to the flood of new dust, the Force revealed the exact location.

Another rumbling. Eyes closed and right hand outstretched, the Force-wielder prodded the geologist back to her. The pressure slowed her abilities. Her feet shifted as the surface trembled more. Searching hands, wrapped in thick gloves, stretched out to one another. Feeling his grasp prompted Syl to open her eyes. Present, once again.

“Syl...” Tiruss’ urgent voice flooded her helmet’s speakers. *“The ground beneath the lander is going nuts. Get back here.”*

Rasskana’s boots thudded on the grayness. The Jedi grabbed the geologist by the arm.

“One foot in front of the other,” she said into her helmet speaker. *“Keep it simple.”*

The two carved through thick, poisonous air that bogged them down, over inclines and declines of hardened ground. The lander’s ten side engines fired, lighting the way. Syl pulled Rasskana towards the brightness. Here and there, seismic activity knocked one or the other off balance. The corporate scientist and his Republic lifesaver staggered up the ramp extending from

the rear of the hovering ship. Also wearing a pressure suit, Tiruss assisted. After both were aboard, he hit the hatch's closing switch.

The ground shook—then crumbled once the thrusters afterburned. Gray rock gave way as the lander jumped upward, its oversized engines at full blast and angled straight downward to break the gravitational pull. The violent takeoff threw the occupants around the passageway until the two wielders used the Force to plaster all three to the bulkheads.

Gaining her footing once again and getting her bearings, the sight of cracks on Tiruss' visor made Syl thankful for the pressurized cabin.

Turbulence hindered the flight, but the lander co-pilots worked through it. Like Rasskana, Web Hyland and Grimesy gave the Jedi positive vibes, though Grimesy's were rougher.

The passengers fell back from the next jolt.

"That was engine number eleven, the breakaway blaster on the tail." Grimesy's growly voice came over the ship's intercom. *"Don't sweat the turbulence, I flown through worse. I got in big trouble for flying illegally in a system...won't mention names but it's outside Republic jurisdiction, so I can talk about it with you all, don't think—"*

"Upper atmosphere reached, everybody...Chatterbox and I are gonna get us home." The cheery voice interrupting her co-pilot, also tinny in the antiquated speakers, sounded more like the natural Web Hyland now that the chaos had subsided. *"Rough ride is over. The 'Horizon' is straight ahead, hangar doors opening...the purple air-shield is clear as day in my window."*

Sitting in the cabin, it occurred to Syl that she had never heard Web sound agitated until this flight. Seeing both hardworking, but fun-loving, flyer/mechanics bounce back to states of relaxation so quickly made the Jedi smile.

Still in their pressure suits, the partners were prepared to exit the lander and find the mining executives. Scientists, including Rasskana, had recommended another site.

Only Syl and Russ didn't need to work themselves up. After the Biekkor parked in the hangar by the larger Jedi Courier, the two of them marched through the hatch to see that their friends Thia Niandra and Makkartho had already cornered a trio of execs by the double doors at the far end of the hangar. The four Padawans stood with the Knights, quiet. The calm Wookiee held the agitated human back.

Demonstrating his training, Zennon Tannerum kept his right hand open and away from the unlit double-sided light saber hanging from his belt's right side. The Padawan hoped to convey to the intoxicated male twenty or so years older that violence was the last thing he wanted.

An unconscious miner pilot laid at the student Jedi's feet.

At the far end of the bright hall, another hulking miner pilot, not much taller but easily three times the teen's weight, stared him down, slobbering. A third roughneck, also out like a light, lay sprawled near a mess of broken glass and an upended table.

If his thick blue eyelids weren't so droopy from the drink and his snarling lips weren't baring sharp teeth, the hairy fella's resting facial expression would come across as almost aloof. "I ain't afraid of you...baldy no-hair bald guy...who ain't got hair...not afraid—"

"Grimesy..." Zennon cut him off. "It's me, Zennon. We are not doing this. Relax..."

He happened to be in a nearby hold training on the Brakebug flight simulator when the fistfight triggered the security system. The clangs—what turned out to be a man's semi-

conscious body crashing into metal furniture, a tabletop covered with bottles, then the collective hitting the metallic decks—disrupted his session.

He arrived at the scene ready for a confrontation. Now Zennon regretted a stance with his hand near the saber, which sent the wrong message. As far as he knew, Grimesy was a forever-immature, yet good-hearted, miner pilot who made his living way out here on the edge because he was wired too loosely for civilization.

Steam from some of the pipes along the bulkheads hissed near the woozy worker's head. Waving it away, he didn't take his squinty eyes off the kid who ruined his fun. A mound of a hand wiped away drool from the corner of prodigious jowls and he sneered.

The trainee's wrist communicator beeped a high-pitched voice, informing him that Syl and ArraKel Kitaros, the security team on duty, were close. His stare did not leave Grimesy.

Grimesy spit on the deck. "No hair...hair guy...bald and eyein' me...wrist-thing on your wrist, beepin' at me..."

Saber aside, Zennon also ruled out using hand-to-hand combat moves as well. Any type of confrontational tack...not a possibility. A confused doof in a sad and misguided—and very intoxicated—search for an adversary, that's all the Force-wielder faced.

The not-so-tough toughguy stumbled.

He looked all around to find whoever had pushed him.

Sheesh...Grimesy's off-kilter enough when he's sober. Zennon had to giggle.

In this quick second where his young mind recentered positively, the Force enlightened: a stack of four chairs sat around the corner, at the opposite end of the far hall, by a folded-up table. The young wielder felt the location by one of the bulkheads. While colors and minute details did not make themselves known, he grasped weight, four legs, back, and basic shape.

His left hand, the one away from his light saber, raised. Zennon closed his eyes.

The intoxicated adversary took this gesture as a challenge and charged, gigantic hands out in front ready to grab the pipsqueak by the throat.

At the end of the far hall, the topmost chair popped upward off the stack, unfolded, and got moving. The aspiring Knight reached out with his feelings, conveying to the Force what a nice guy Grimesy was. *Besides right now, I mean.*

The white chair did not lose anything while rounding the 90-degree hard turn and hurtling this way. The Force and a Force-user flipped it around. Now facing seat-forward, all four legs sailed millimeters above the metal grating.

Grimesy growled and poured on speed. The pursuer behind him almost looked to be chasing down a meal. A big meal.

The chair's front hit the back side of the wasted being's right knee first, then the left's back side. Grimesy fell back. Six legs landed on the deck planks. Four of them screeched to a halt and left scratches while Grimesy's two legs just flopped along. Bewildered expression aside, the blitzed oaf looked to be kicking back at the end of a long day.

He didn't even have a chance to get his bearings before he was face-to-face with the teen, who leaned down to have a talk. "I said *relax*, Grimesy."

"Hey, ZennonBeddu...or BedduZennon...whichever one you are...heyyyy..." The fading party animal flashed a huge grin. "Howyoubeen, T brother?"

Syl and Kel arrived.

"You good?" Syl kept her slight squint up until her charge looked over and made eye contact. She carried a small medical kit tucked under her arm and shifted it.

Zennon nodded. "You were right, Syl...we need to watch out when it's payday."

“Inventive solution to the problem you faced, by the way. The chair....” She put her arm around him. Kel nodded at her friend, too. He returned her grin.

“And think: this is just a phase one skeleton crew and there are only fifteen or so roughnecks. There will be seven or eight hundred more Grimesys after the phase two fleet arrives...isn’t that right, Grimesy?” Syl reached over to ruffle his thick, blue hair.

“Syl! Whereyouben?” Two lidded eyes turned upward to focus on two Jedi who just arrived. “And hey, Kel...Howyouben?”

Web Hyland regretted not leaving her tools and utility belt behind before dashing off. Now the instruments around her waist clanked and clamored, calling even more attention to her freaking-out self. Though the ship was not even twenty percent occupied, she wished to be invisible.

She ran down the pipe-filled passageways, mumbling under her breath that she could find another flying job, no problem. All those people she grew up with that would never leave their ho-hum home planet...*maybe they have the right idea and I don’t*. Unlike her, they aren’t potentially out of work and light-years from Yntok with no funds for travel fare.

Talk about dumb ideas. *Grimesy...he’s maybe one of the dumbest beings alive...yet he is this mastermind at coming up with dumb ideas...*

The mid-level miner pilot in her late twenties pulled her hair back and repositioned her gray cap before scooting up ladders, ducking around the corner by the fire extinguishers, and fast-walking to the Headquarters communication station. She re-hitched up her belt once again.

The central hub sat above the hangar. The tools announced her entrance. At the four-seat console in the center of the room, Thia Niandra and Sylmonica Valkanna worked in front of the monitors. One Jedi wore headphones and the other looked at the latest digital readout of a future drilling site on the surface.

Web stormed in, but came to a quick stop and a casual slouch. “Hi.”

“Web, what’s up?” Syl liked the friendly worker. All of the Jedi did.

“Hey guys...um...” Web repositioned her cap on her head. “Hi.”

“Yes...”

Figuring out that pacing wasn’t helping, Web took a seat. After a deep breath, she stood up again. “I feel bad about saying this...the supervisor is gonna flip his lid...but...”

“Yes...”

“So...Grimesy bet...”

“Grimesy? Oh no.” Syl put down the readout she was holding.

“Yeah...” Eyes narrowing, Thia was now fully engaged as well. “He ‘bet’ what?”

Before continuing, the pilot/mechanic took another breath. “Okay. So...Grimesy bet the shop guys that he could re-rig a low-energy pulse generator...you know...the ones our little one-person dockships use to push and move cargo around in the vacuum of space?”

“I am so not liking where this is heading, Thia...” Syl, her own angst more visible, smiled at the anxious pilot and repair specialist. “Please, Web...continue...”

“Grimesy bet that he could make a pulse generator work like a blaster cannon by focusing the energy beam and souping up the whole thing with a stronger battery.” Web fiddled with the wide tool belt. “So...he spot-welded mounts for his invention on a dockship and took off from the supply barge to test it and did you all just get some type of message about an energy burst or an explosion or something?”

Upon first receiving the urgent transmission from Thia, Kel scrunched her face and turned to her co-pilot. “Right as I’m thinking that this training flight is getting boring...”

“Grimesy.” Tiruss Dunn sat to her right. “Well, Padawan, how would you like to fly us around the planet’s curve?”

The Force-sensitive aspirant took control. After whipping the yellow ‘Bug around by cutting power and firing the tail jets, she re-engaged the main engine. They were off, screaming in the opposite direction and shoving back into their upright seats. Thrusters helped the new pilot level out the rocky path. Getting the hang of how they functioned, she hit the throttles.

Brakebugs got their name from an insect native to Tython whose shape it resembled. Just like the short-range craft, the long and skinny bugs with spherical, oversized heads could brake and change direction with ease. Both craft and creature could stop, flip on its axis, then accelerate on a new heading. The machine version had three swivel-mounted thrusters at the end of the tail that could redirect in all 360 degrees of a circle. The spherical cockpit design with clear windows all around gave both pilots full views.

Next to the concentrating student, the experienced flyer had closed his eyes for a catnap.

“Can I get you a pillow, Russ?” Adding power shook the controls. Kel liked this.

“You didn’t think ahead to bring one along, did you? Please say you did.”

She used the last tracking from Thia to make course corrections using her wheel. The ‘Bug rattled and juked while the quiet planet remained in its location. If they were orbiting a planet with a normal atmosphere, the ‘Bug could fly around and land on the surface, no problem. This one, though, would squish the craft if it ventured downward.

The future first responder snapped out of the quick zoning and resumed focusing on necessary buttons and levers. Her normal habit, goofing with her brown braid, was not even a thought as her attention shifted from controls to outside the bubble and then back again.

The blinker on the console notified that Grimesy’s tiny craft had been located and would be visible soon. She turned to her side. “Wake up, instructor.”

Looking around, Tiruss sat up. “Let’s hope he’s alive.”

His pilot had to laugh, her eyes not leaving the controls or the view ahead. “You know...since it’s Grimesy, I hadn’t really considered that he might be in any actual danger.”

“The Force does indeed watch over that miner pilot...”

“More like babysits the lunk.”

“We Jedi protect all kinds of species, Kel.” Tiruss yawned. “All kinds.”

As the ‘Bug drew closer, the simple docking craft went from a speck to a small square with round jets clumsily welded on two sides and a multi-jointed mechanical arm awkwardly mounted on a third side. Tumbling on all axes and blinking hazard lights now dark, the light-blue color jumped from the dull pink of the planet that engulfed it.

When they got close enough, Kel waved back at Grimesy, who was hailing them from the standup cockpit. The spacesuit and rebreather made his frame even bigger.

“Not the same as shooting at pirates with the blasters, but wanna fire the tow cable?”

“I haven’t trained with them yet, so sure.”

Stubby, triangle-shaped stabilizers replaced two longer wings on the living Brakebug, the creatures that inspired the name. Each stabilizer carried a blaster cannon and magnetic towing harpoon, mounted side-by-side underneath.

The sight of the ship occupant's giant hand undulating so spiritedly distracted the student pilot's aiming. "Ummm...how did he fit himself into that cockpit?"

The boring, rectangular dockcraft tumbled in the circular screen above her steering wheel. Kel kept him in her sights while her finger stayed ready above the tow cable button.

The first shot wasn't even close.

Tiruss, now sitting forward, shook his head. "Newbie mistake. Aim at the centerline."

The adolescent tried not to notice the older man's apprehension. But it clashed with his normal demeanor. She felt her heart speeding.

"Easy, just breathe." He added a friendly wink.

A moment after hearing that, she was beaming. That's because the starboard tow cable stretched out in front, taut due to the fact that it held a wayward craft.

"It's harder than it looks, good job."

The winch brought Grimesy's little vessel right behind the Brakebug. Tiruss' only extra advice to the novice pilot dealt with taking it slow.

Headquarters lay ahead, a long ship with a tall midsection. Her stare on the *Horizon*, she laughed at his last thought. "Taking it slow...yeah, I have been told that before. And I should enjoy this out here before the final push. I have so much to do."

"Can't say anything too original about all that. Just take it one day at a time, one training evolution at a time."

"How do you eat a bantha? One bite at a time."

He smiled at her insight. "I traveled to Tattooine once, years ago. Wild place. I was chasing a wild guy, now that I remember. Gonna miss you Padawans. Not too long from now, it will be Phase Two...Masters watching over all of this." He yawned.

Ahead, the hangar doors in the middle of the headquarters ship. Both opened outward. Inside, the two other Brakebugs, a few of the larger Couriers, and two Biekkor lander craft sat parked in a row on the aft-facing side. The Padawan who would soon be leaving tried to envision a full hangar. And a full fleet, some super-vessels more than twice as large as the *Horizon*, crowding this section of orbit.

The topside hangar entrances on Republic peacekeepers were four times as big as this side opening. The first time bringing a Brakebug in for a landing on the *Bountiful Horizon*, the spot seemed too tiny, like her role as a pilot was to aim at the head of a pin. Now, while she paid attention to the task at hand, it didn't intimidate her like it once did.

The added task of rescuing Grimesy and now releasing his dock lander near the arm of the magnetic swivel-crane that would pick it up...it all had a purpose: to liven up what was becoming fairly routine flights. She needed to be pushed out of her comfort zone. Her sudden frustration after missing the first shot will provide subject matter for her next meditation.

The Force surprises. Always does.

Chapter Four

Conditioned muscles went rigid, ending the tight tuck. The seventeen-year-old straightened her body, shooting her legs at the *Bountiful Horizon* hangar's rafters to slow her rotation. The third backflip's second half began.

ArraKel Kitaros added a twist as she unhooked the curved, silver hilt from her belt. Firing up, the hum added to the new hum that had just interrupted the clanging of tools. Her boots hit the metal deck as her extending blade countered the incoming slash from Zennon Tannerum's blade. Stance immobile and weapon at full, she held her block. Fierce pops, two blue beams fighting one another. Both teens' muscles trembled. Veins showed.

"Nice." Zennon stepped back while shutting off. The pewter-handled saber's hiss faded. Sounds of mechanics' efforts to keep spacecraft flying owned the hangar deck once again.

"You too, Zen. You're getting faster." She winked before turning to two other pals, placing her now-silent saber back on her belt while she talked. "Mimmsy, Beddu: on your feet."

Kel and Zennon stepped aside and rehydrated. The other Jedi Arts practitioners took the center of the hangar's landing strip and faced off.

Across the hangar from the trainees, an annoyed Web Hyland had been trying to program instructions into the computerized assistant that would help fix the Biekkor lander's fuel lines.

After swearing at the cylindrical, ten-armed device, the pilot/mechanic shook its control pad, then wiped her greasy face with a dirty sleeve. "Grimesy: how are we supposed to keep landing jets operable with junk technology like this?"

"Gee, Web." With two meaty thumbs hooked in his suspenders, Grimesy had been observing the Jedi. His eyes didn't leave the mix of gymnastics and sabercraft. "Sounds like you want one of those thinking machines."

"An astromech droid?" Web spat a laugh. "Like the company would fork out the money. Those expensive gizmos are just toys for the rich or military murder-droids anyway. They give us this relic here, some wrenches and spot-welders. 'Get to work, now or you're fired!'"

Sighing, she resumed punching buttons on the cracked device in her greasy hands.

Grimesy stretched his back, gaze still on Mimms and Beddu sparring. "If I had Jedi powers, know what I would do? I'd be an acrobat. Move to a big city with lots of people and put a humongous tip jar out on the street corner...jump around...make some real money."

After taking all the time needed, Web felt ready to respond. "Hey, flipper...we have a flight schedule to meet. You are aware of that, right?"

"Sorry, Huedd." Dilani Vestagon could not stifle her yawn as the new acquaintance handed over a glass of root-herb tea. "Hyperspace travel tires me out."

Her two pieces of luggage stood parked by the door of the phase one medical officer's suite. Getting comfortable on her new boss' simple purple couch, the recent arrival took in the view from the curved bank of windows: a roundish gray supply barge with a tiny arc of barren Scatera 3B taking over the background. The engulfing cloud cover looked to be pulsating. She sat in a windowless cabin her whole flight.

"Nothing to apologize for, believer. You're also fatigued from the meditation that cloaks your thoughts." Huedd Kallatrian met Dilani at the headquarters ship's hangar and escorted the

fellow Scholar to his quarters where they could converse in private. The left breast of his lab jacket featured the same symbol as the one on her simple dress-blue uniform. “The verses of the ancients are hard for a mind to digest. Your instincts will strengthen.”

Yawning, the worn-out traveler let out a laugh. “That’s what Quim-Na said.”

“Ahhh...Quim-Na Sulif...” Sporting a slight smile across his jowls, Huedd took a seat across from the couch. “She is a pet of the Scholar Emeritus.”

Dilani had yet to check out the quarters that she would be sharing with two other medical personnel, her cover. First things first: while readying to depart Coruscant, the Scholar Emeritus and Emerita gave her instructions to pass along.

“The mining company’s greed is accelerating our timeline, altering the plan.” The tea’s buzz hit from the first sip. She practically lived on this herb while in medical school.

“I assumed.” Enjoying his own steaming cup, Huedd snickered. “Execs became a pack of salivating gruperts circling a nerf carcass ever since that tibana gas deposit got discovered.”

“Contacts informed us that Phase Two will begin earlier than planned and security additions will include two Masters, more Knights, along with a company of peacekeeper troops.”

He shook his head. “Opportunity vanishes then. Sylmonica is wonderful. Critical of our modern times, what is referred to as ‘progress.’ And it is fortunate she is just a Knight.”

Dilani rose from the couch to take in an extreme closeup. The brightness outside warmed her body when she stood close to the panes. “I can’t wait to meet the target.”

Sooner or later, Sylmonica Valkanna would return to her quarters. But for the moment, she needed to stand here, alone, by this curved bay of windows along one side of the top-level observation deck. While zoning out with the enormity of Scatera so near, she ruminated on the idea of time.

When enough time passes, the Phase Two fleet will join Phase One. Orbiting refineries, each larger than the *Bountiful Horizon*, along with an array of support ships, will crowd this view. More workers, causing this ship to feel cramped. Like life in space normally does.

Syl imagined endless little explosions blotting that bleak planet’s surface, a constant barrage of devastation meant to break a solid mass apart. Much of its ore has been slated for Coruscant to become building materials which will help meet megacities’ rapid expansion goals.

Her master talked fondly of his own master, who used to say that the buildup on Coruscant would bring a ruinous future. Syl, Thia, and Ro were avid campers and spent many nights with other Padawans under skies lacking the full sight of stars due to light pollution. During these past weeks, Kel, Zennon, Beddu, and Mimms shared stories of enjoying the same activities, years later. Because kids camping in the outdoors is universal and timeless.

The products of planet harvesting operations like this one are used to eat away new sections of Coruscant in order to accommodate residents of an expanding Republic. And while the Republic expands, it still can’t protect its own. Especially if the lifelong citizens make the choice to seek work in independent systems.

Citizens like Syl’s family. Their star system’s local governing body passed a law widening the acceptance of slavery. In the aftermath, factories that employed beings chose to use slave labor instead. Which led workers to leave the world in search of new opportunities.

She just learned these details about her family’s lives a little over an hour ago. Parents, two aunts, an uncle, and cousins whom she did not know died in a senseless strike.

Slavery gaining acceptance again was something that Syl despised, but tried not to dwell upon. Like a lot of protectors, she told herself that barely fifteen percent of the Galactic Republic practiced slavery and it was easy to get posted in systems that did not accept it, steer clear altogether and focus on keeping the peace. Here and there, assignments brought her to those places, but never for any lengths of time. Like her, Thia, Russ, and Makk also requested to avoid service in slave-accepting places and their requests did not hurt their careers, either.

With so many types of other wrongs in non-slave systems, Syl kept busy over the years.

"I just heard." Tiruss Dunn walked up and offered his mission partner a hug.

"How do I respond, Russ?" She looked up into his eyes. "I mean...what? What do I say?"

"I dunno...they took me before I was one. Couldn't tell you about family or the moon where my ancestors had fled to during the last civil war." He pointed to his bare face to the side of his red goatee. "Never got my clan's tattoo on my cheek...a ritual."

"Us Jedi don't like cultural markings on our Knights' bodies, Russ." Both old friends laughed at a wry remark that many Jedi made. "I—"

"Syl, we just heard. I'm sorry." Kel ran in. She and Zennon had been training in the two-seat patrollers all afternoon. Zennon gave Syl a concerned squeeze, too.

"I appreciate it. My parents, aunts and an uncle, cousins...who I don't know one bit." Syl raised her eyebrows at the two students, her words barely above a whisper. "Lots of other innocent citizens died, too. People who knew the dead are feeling more grief than I am."

"It's okay to feel sadness." Tiruss stared out at a planet whose minerals had been estimated to be worth more than some star systems' treasuries.

"If I speculated about who they were or what they were like, I'd detract from the present." She headed to the elevator bank. "I hope their endings were quick, don't know what else to say."

When the elevator doors opened, one of the new arrivals greeted her. The mid-twenties woman her height wearing blue scrubs offered a big hug. "Syl, I'm sorry."

"Thank you, Dilani."

The one-story dwellings all around this two-room clay house serve as residences for beings who make their livings in desperate places like the village's marketplace. A marketplace which is now burning. Like many days on Cantio, another normal business day has ceased.

Syl's right hand unhooks her brushed-metal-paneled light saber from her utility belt and holds it out to the side of her right hip. Her eyes squint from the sunlight. But she still sees them standing at the opposite end of this dilapidated rooftop.

The tentative looks suggest that they are conscripts, not terrorists. Over the course of three tours on Cantio, Syl has faced prison-hardened murderers who treat this forever-war as nothing more than a business opportunity. She also battled idealists all-too-ready to sacrifice themselves. These two cowering fellas don't rank with either of those types.

She senses more fear than anger from the soft-faced young men before her. Probably working in a factory when they were rounded up. Neutralize any threat possibilities with these two, then focus on one of the countless other threats—that's what Syl requests of the Force.

Because neither raise weapons, Syl does not light hers. If they stay non-violent, she plans to reach inside her tunic for two nutrition bars she had brought along. Back when she thought

the workday would involve administrative meetings instead of explosions, she grabbed some snacks for later on.

Antiquated water towers, in the distance behind the two fighters who won't take their eyes off of her. One of the three towers still functions.

An explosion in the next village over rocks Syl's mind back to her present predicament.

The older of the two fighters raises his blaster. So Syl hits the switch on her light saber. Unlike so many times before, she does not hear the hum of the light blade springing to life. Her hand does not vibrate from power cells operating at full.

Her mind tries to process this fact. But the new explosion near the village's trash depot fights for headspace and wins.

Her thumb flicks the switch on her saber again. The village's two-story medical facility comes apart in an instant as the fireball destroys both building materials and beings inside.

Syl's thumb flicks the saber's switch. A blast obliterates the tower beneath the remaining water tank. The disintegrating hydration source soars up into the air, mixing steam with fire.

As the two young fighters can't contain their laughter, Syl looks down. Instead of the straight-hilted, brushed-metal saber that she had carried for almost two decades, she holds a crudely-fashioned detonator that used a section of pipe as the housing for the remote transmitter and battery, cylindrical like her Jedi weapon but covered in rust. Her first Cantio tour, years before, she killed a bomber who used a simple device like this. It linked multiple bombs to one trigger, could be set to activate all at once or one at a time.

The laughter from across the rooftop intensifies and floods her ears. Syl looks up to see her dead Padawan friend, Rohandra Teek. The twentysomething, dressed in full Jedi robes covered in blood like her green skin, is laughing. One of her lekku, the headtail, is severed. She has an arm around one of the fighters as if they are old friends.

Before Syl can stop herself, her right index finger triggers the device again. The explosion knocks her forward and her head hits the roof.

"We're done! And we've only just begun!"

Hovering above Syl's flat right palm, the silver gift from her friend Thia played its repeat loop. Syl, Thia, and Ro danced around, floating in the air thanks to the Force.

Sipping from a canteen filled with cold water and a nutrient mix, the public servant in a sweat-covered workout suit stared out the top-level observation window at a soon-to-be exploited planet where she saved a genuinely-nice being's life.

Syl's gaze shifted from the view in the curved window to the quick clip from her younger days. The video device remained around eye level so she barely had to look down.

The Cantio dream. If she could ask anything of the Force right now, she would inquire about the Cantio dream.

Why is she dreaming it again?

III: Phase Two

Chapter One

Entranced by the bright colors, Quim-Na Sulif almost sang the controversial theorist's words. "The supposedly simple-brained plankto-squid comprehends more about the Force than the majority of those who call themselves Force-wielders, light side and dark."

As the Scholar quoted Guinn Forsunni from the planet Exegol, her eyes swam along with the wormlike beings wiggling back and forth and up and down in the aquarium. Before Quim-Na and Mattias Ree entered the chamber, the plankto-squids were a bland gray. Now they glowed, their scales alternating between reds, blues, and greens.

The aquatic tank stretched from floor to ceiling and wall to wall, owning one whole side of the Rees' penthouse smoking lounge in Coruscant City's exclusive Peaceful Heights neighborhood, with the ceiling and other three sides clear black glass.

The building stood with extravagantly-priced dwellings of equal height or higher. Its featureless exterior helped it blend in—even more so when many attracted undue attention with off-kilter roofs, curvy shapes, decorative additions, and nearly-fluorescent glass tinting.

"Guinn Forsunni possessed an intuitive mind." Standing at a window near single-paned doors that led to a little deck, the Scholar Emeritus puffed on a stark-white pipe and observed a skyline at rush hour: stationary structures of all sizes and moving airships of all shapes, the whole mess colliding together. "Unfortunately, he grew too full of himself."

"Poor guy. Ick." Quim-Na giggled as she exhaled smoke.

The view from the high elevation offered a look at Federal City's affluent Kinjia District, the next-closest cityscape and one primarily consisting of glass, metal, and stone skyscrapers like this neighborhood. A shrinking wildlife preserve separated Peaceful Heights and the Kinjia. Both communities followed the planet's trend of clustering taller structures nearer to one another, allowing for open views and more room for vehicle air-lanes.

After a final drag, Quim-Na held it in while gazing at a kaleidoscope of architecture and pondering Forsunni, a brilliant pot-stirrer who had been one with the Force for many centuries.

"How many in this Galaxy receive the honor of having their thoughts live on after their physical body gives out?" She gestured about with her long-stemmed pipe while the smoke left her lungs. "Whether they die peacefully, or in icky ways, their thoughts reach others after they are gone."

Quim-Na ambled over to refill her pipe with a citrusy-smelling herb. In the tank, some plankto-squids followed, the energetic ones scooting and lethargic squids slinking. "Such an elite clan of souls Forsunni joined. He and his big mouth, I mean."

"An elite clan of bigmouths...no thank you." At the far end of the lounge, Mattias took in an outside world that rose higher to the skies with each passing year while also swallowing up more plots of green land. Due to he and his wife's connections, their own wealth increased as Federal City and Coruscant City became more monolithic. On this clear day, he could see the diamond-shaped beacons atop the recently-renovated Galactic Senate chambers, now able to accommodate staff for around 800 Senators. To its south, ritzy condominiums with air-tunnels connecting cylindrical towers of blue cidan-stone neared completion. Some of the identical buildings still showed the long arms of cranes jutting out from their top levels.

Quim-Na noticed Mattias' look roaming back to the Senate chambers. "If the Republic keeps welcoming in independent systems, they'll have to tear that complex down and build a new one."

The old man kept his eyes on the legislative complex. “Years behind schedule and overbudget...like every Republic endeavor. Though I guess it plays to our advantage.”

“Indeed. Keep it broken.” The Jedi Complex, a network of sharp-roofed buildings to the south of the wildlife preserve, looked tiny, being so far away and with so many more impressive-looking structures competing for a viewer’s attention. A community of 3,000,000 residents stood in between the complex and this sky-level vantage point, an array of living accommodations shooting to the clouds. But Quim-Na didn’t need to see Jedi HQ clearly because she had visited their facilities enough times—too many times.

She sipped from the thimble-sized cup containing a fermented root mixture, then turned away from the window to light her reloaded pipe. All throughout the lounge, tiny candles sat atop their own thin, metal stands.

The excited squids made the devoted Scholar grin. Sauntering back and forth in front of the tank, she appeared to be inspecting each creature, her pipe-stem her pointer. “To have been there in ancient times...our viciously-talented generals and guerilla leaders devising tactics that used these noble beings to confuse aggressors, cloud their connections to the Force...”

His underling’s wistfulness livened the old darksider up. His favorite subjects were long-ago wars and times when his way of life made its presence known. “King Tinnok had his legions place bowls of plankto all over his jungles. Our enemies marched right into his trap.”

Quim-Na studied war history because it pleased Mattias. “343 conquered more than 5000 that day.”

“Such is the way of the dark side, Quim-Na Sulif.” Zinora Ree’s screechy voice bellowed from the spiral staircase opposite the aquarium and closer to the deck doors. She just finished climbing the stairs from the art gallery on the level below. “Outnumbered, with nothing but our wits and passion...our superior beliefs. To the Sith, this is normal.”

Before joining the others, she fixed the fur around her shoulders. Mattias and Quim-Na greeted the Scholar Emerita. Formally dressed as usual, the enigmatic power broker appeared jovial. Tramm Nurado had just returned from an excursion to the Outer Rim. He followed Zinora and carried a tray holding a few ripe, red fruits, and a bone-handled paring knife.

After kissing his wife’s cheek, Mattias took the green tray and put it on the long table in the middle of the room. He grabbed the sharp cutting instrument and one of the roundish objects.

Quim-Na jumped in. “Ahh...today’s sermon involves the majestic red bressik fruit, I assume? I’m in the mood for a nutrient-dense appetizer that once fed our armies.”

As her superior pared away the skin, a dark purple meat showed inside. Mattias said, “This is not a snack. Dinner will be served. This meeting is about our accelerated timeline.”

He continued to dice the fruit while his wife spoke, her eyes on the skyline. Zinora’s sternness took a hiatus as she grew contemplative. “The carnivorous bressik tree, native to Exegol, imitates a distress call to lure insects into narrow openings along its hollow branches. Unsuspecting bugs meet their end inside the twists and turns of tentacle-like limbs.”

Her wrinkly fingers plopped a newly-cut cube from the tray into her mouth. Juices that dribbled down thin lips came to a rest on her pointy chin. “Plant enzymes breaking down insect bodies, digestion...a bug’s organs reconstitute as the flesh of a refreshing and robust fruit.”

While the Emerita talked, the Emeritus had been turning whole objects into sums of their parts. “During meditation, the plankto-squid and the red bressik tree, both revered symbols of our kind, fused together in our collective subconscious to guide plan alterations for Valkanna.”

Quim-Na snuck a portion from the tray and winked. The wise elder proceeded with his lesson. “A plant and an animal, one from a Deep Core world and the other from the Unknown Regions, both revered by the dark side. Together, they enlightened us.”

“Once Mattias and I began to see their vision, we gave thanks to the ancients.”

Her spouse had finished cutting four round fruits. A pile of tiny chunks sat in their place. He took the tray over to the metal step ladder at the corner of the aquarium.

Eyeing this, the plankto-squids migrated to that side, their bright colors brightening.

“Nourishing one revered Sith organism with the body of another revered Sith organism. Each from opposite sides of the Galaxy and we, fellow Sith, brought them together.” Mattias slid open the door at the top corner of the tank and dumped in the pieces from the tray. The fish fed with delight. “Later, servants will clean this tank and mix the waste with dirt.”

His wife finished out his thought, as she often did. “In a few months, this dirt will have composted into the growing soil that gardeners at each one of our country estates will use when they care for our groves of bressik trees during planting season. A circle, now symbiont.”

“My wife and I chanted and sang. And, as it often does, the Force pointed to the past.”

“We must remain reverent of the greats.” Zinora’s natural sneer sparkled. “Always.”

Mattias admired as the pets lapped up every last morsel from the water. “Tramm, how is your former friend’s former flagship coming along?”

“The Deent brothers are almost done stripping it bare.” Their chief enforcer had been savoring his drink and held the glass up to study the glints of colored light. “It will be an unassuming heavy-freighter once again, free of its old modifications and identifications.”

“Wonderful...”

“After the brothers automate some systems, a minimum of pilots will be able to fly it.”

“Good, Tramm. Born a deep-space freighter. Lived an exciting mid-life as a pirate ship. Now, it will end its years as a bressik tree.”

“Sir?”

Quim-Na noticed Tramm’s curious reaction. “Mattias...your gift for suddenly turning cryptic out of nowhere isn’t always appreciated. I must admit that I am perplexed as well.”

The Scholar Emerita lit a jewel-lined pipe and held it to her bressik-stained lips. “The former flagship will be the bressik tree sending out its distress signal.”

Mattias finished his wife’s thought, as he often did. “And the Jedi will be the insects.”

Thirty years ago, after repeated delays, construction began on the expanded chambers for the Galactic Senate in Coruscant’s Federal City. Years behind the promised finish date, it neared completion. And the collective critical response obsessed over the fact that the design—a colossal auditorium, with row after row of box sections sloping down to an elevated stage—seemed perfect for a governing body that resembled political theater more with each session.

“The Galactic Republic needs to take a long look at itself.”

The high-definition screen behind the stage stretched from wall to wall and touched the rafters above. The pre-recorded message’s speaker stood behind his own podium. Republic Senators and their staffs, representing hundreds and hundreds of systems, gazed up at the angry address from behind half-walls that enclosed their boxes. The grizzled-looking human had a full head of hair, his image six stories tall. *“These three recent attacks are tragedies that the greed of the Republic brought upon those poor citizens—their own citizens.”*

The Chancellor of Yntok served an independent Middle Rim system and was popular with the inhabitants of its three planets and five moons. *“Two of the three drone strikes targeted settlements containing citizen workers whose jobs had been replaced by slave labor—the same Republic systems did not even see fit to provide protection to them? Slavery is an abomination on its own but the Republic seems to make it even more barbaric.”*

Around the cavernous chamber, voices speaking different languages added to the sound system’s echoing boom. Reactions to the speech ran from supportive to outraged to ignored. But the last sentence caused more than a few in these halls to glance up and take notice.

“The Republic is not shy about wanting Yntok to join. In fact, the controllers of hyperspace routes harass us as we engage in commerce and their industrialists make clear their desire to mine sacred sites in our sovereign territory.” The impatient, self-made man who rose up to fuel executive had just issued the statement. *“As much as they strong-arm, understand that Yntok stands firm. We are anti-slavery—now, in the past, forever. We cannot join the Republic.”*

Republic Senators from slave-accepting systems seethed. From their boxes, outraged officials booed and cursed, prompting others to yell back over their box seat walls. Someone shouted “somebody sensible” should cut the broadcast and do it now. Her words generated buzz.

“I issue this statement as advice to the independent systems of this Galaxy: Republic cartels and this march towards oligarchy is not to be trusted. This concludes my message.”

The broadcast cut out. The auditorium grew quiet.

The half-full bottle hit the screen near the bottom center. Clear shards and purple liquid defaced the viewing device. The sudden quiet amplified the noise.

Like most of the session’s attendees, the echoing sounds from the shattering glass stunned the two VIP guests. Before the commotion up front, the regally-attired husband and wife remained quiet, occupying two plush chairs along the back wall of the Corellian Senator’s box.

Hearing the breaking vessel and gasps of surprise, the Scholar Emeritus sprang from his chair. Dozing off just seconds before, he gawked at a section of the screen now stained purple. A smile crawled onto his jowls. After Mattias had enough of the heated exchanges, his jewel-covered hand reached over for his wife’s hands. “My love, we didn’t see this coming.”

The Scholar Emerita took hold of his grasp. “The Force surprised us, darling.”

“We didn’t consider that Valkanna’s family might have been displaced. Such a timely societal issue, the outrage on both sides assisting our endeavor when we didn’t even ask.”

Zinora snickered too. “That other farming colony we selected at random was made of displaced Republic citizens as well. Now our maneuver has a political agenda. How nice.”

The Senate Chancellor, a Twi’lek business magnate whom the Emeriti had never met, called for order from the stage. A heavy man with a booming voice, his words got ignored. Turning around in the Corellian Senator’s box to see the whole space, the increasingly-giddy Rees witnessed beings of all species growing more agitated and sharing words with occupants of their boxes or the boxes next to them. The absence of decorum brought the old couple joy.

“We didn’t take politics into consideration when we began.”

“The dark side of the Force is wise so we don’t have to be.” Fondling the colorful bracelets lining both forearms, Zinora absorbed the back-and-forth exchanges like they were gladiator matches. “The Republic is not the happy family it says it is.”

“Believers everywhere say the mood is bleak. Jedi, while powerful, are no match for bleakness. Darkness thrives on avarice, cynicism...” Mattias took her by the waist while feasting on the tension. “None of this bickering would be happening if the ancients were here right now.”

“In these times, my love, the strong own the weak and the weak have no idea. No one is here to explain this to the weak in simple terms because the strong lack true strength.” The quietly-respected dark side dignitary’s scowl radiated disgust at a box two rows down, representatives from a slave-practicing system. “A piddly issue, slavery. So trivial. Who cares?”

A few blue-uniformed security guards filed in, making their presence known at ends of the aisles. Though none of the Republic sentries were close to drawing their energy staffs, they stood fast, eyes not leaving the verbal attacks.

“Darth Torturok.”

Her husband’s sudden words caused her to stop gawking. “What?”

A slow smile developed through the Scholar Emeritus’ beard. “All of this chaos enlightens me further as to my vision last night, which I was going to share it with you later on. I saw Tramm’s operational stooge Silnius as the pilot aboard our bressik tree.”

“Silnius...what’s his name...Seethagrat? The ex-addict?” Chuckling, Zinora gathered her feathery overcoat and cane. “Volunteering for a martyrdom mission...the simpleton *is* a believer I will give him that. But I don’t see it, Mattias.”

“Years ago, Silnius lifted himself out of addiction thanks to guidance given by the dark side. Now he needs to pay it back, honor Darth Torturok.”

A Senator’s aide led the way for them out of the box and into the hall.

“Ahhh...shame.” Zinora Ree knew Mattias Ree’s language better than anyone.

“Indeed, sweetheart. Indeed. Tell Tramm to invite Silnius along this evening, join us in the smoking lounge. I’ll contact Quim-Na and tell her what to do.”

Chapter Two

"I'm glad Yntok rejects slavery." Her eyes glued to the footage on the main screen, ArraKel Kitaros finished her nutrition bar. "That system should stay independent."

The windowless control room on the *Bountiful Horizon* showed the Yntok Chancellor's broadcast, a portion of the weekly general briefing blasted out to deployed Republic units. Other inhabitants of the headquarters ship, including the pilot Grimesy, also occupied some of the orange chairs and watched the screen. Workers appreciated listening to the unclassified updates since they brought news from the outside world.

"Agreed." Zeephus "Mimms" Illims, the other Padawan present, nodded at Kel. Dual vocal cords gave his voice a slightly harmonious sound. When he spoke, the two round-tipped antennae on the top of his orange head twitched. "Yntok should stand their ground."

The students sat together after saber-sparring in the hangar. Since Rodians' reptilian-based physiology required fewer amounts of sweat glands than human genetics needed, Mimms' blue workout suit showed less dampness.

From his seat near the double doors, Grimesy snarled a laugh. "Hey...won't your Jedi bosses fire you for saying stuff like that?"

He had just returned from an uneventful surface trip. Thia Niandra and Syl Valkanna, also watching this update, accompanied as the rescue team. All three were sweaty and dirty from spending hours in bulky spacesuits.

Kel turned to confront. "We're not automatons, Grimesy. I, for one, would love to see the Republic pass legislation outlawing slavery for good."

Mimms backed her up with a nod, one which she returned. Emotion stirred his antennae and both bopped back and forth as the points on the tops of his ears joined in.

"The fire in you young ones." Thia acknowledged them with a smile. "Free thinkers, your big hearts...hang on to those. Don't let the Galaxy beat them out of you, I'm serious."

After toasting with her water bottle, Thia turned to check on her good buddy, who hadn't acknowledged Kel's statement. A flat facial expression that had been there for a few days didn't seem to be going anywhere. "Wanna go up to the observation deck and talk?"

Syl managed a shrug at a dear friend whom she had finally gotten to serve with, after years of barely-missed opportunities.

"I'm sorry." Thia hugged her before resuming eye-to-eye contact. "You know how Makk and Russ and I keep saying you can grieve...we're not doing this to pass the time on this boring space station with the creepy name, you know..."

Kel quit goofing with Mimms and turned to them. "Our emotions must flow through us, Syl." Mimms nodded, his antennae wiggling in agreement.

Syl flashed them a smile through her gloom. "I grieve, you two. For all who got killed."

Thia gave her a frown. "Jedi..."

Syl blurted out a giggle. "That look...like Master Zybalias, when we were kids."

"You're mean." Thia's clumpy, sweaty hair fell into her face as she wrinkled her nose.

The miner pilot tensed up while reinstalling the rotator nozzle to the foot of the number five engine on Biekkor Number Three. Fighting off the shakes, she needed a break. An escape. None

of her fellow workers noticed her remove the welder's mask, rise from the workbench, and hurry towards the set of wide doors for the elevator and the top-level observation deck.

Two puffy eyes barely registered the picturesque view offered by a curve of windows. She had flown to Scatera's surface twenty-four times now. The sight of an atmosphere's pink deadness, dominating from one side of the glass arc to its other, no longer felt scary. Needing something to do, the fingers on her right hand goofed with the gray-beaded bracelet on her left wrist, a piece of jewelry inspired by the Yntikkian Ruins back home.

Sinkholes, defective spare parts, long missions—none of the stresses from Phase One life mattered at the moment. An intragalactic political conversation occupied her mind.

Almost thirty years ago, Websten Hyland was born in Yntok Heights, the capitol city of Yntok, the main planet in the Yntok System. Personal details that she does not share with many on this operation. A few, like Grimesy and Rasskana, knew. The Jedi had no issues with her. Still, Web preferred to change the subject whenever someone asked where she was from.

After the Yntok Chancellor's last couple of fiery speeches denouncing Republic aggression and chastising the governing body because it allowed a few slave-practicing societies to set the agenda, Web avoided the political hostility in the crew quarters and passageways.

Despite the stress, part of her had to laugh. *Cash-strapped mechanics and pilots grumbling about slave labor taking jobs in one breath and, in the next breath, declaring that they would join the military to defend plantation owners if war with Yntok breaks out. Geez...*

While she could only shake her head, she kept her ridicule to herself. On this space station, she was outnumbered with only one other Yntokian on board, the galley worker Quib.

Her watery eyes were almost noticing the looming presence of the planet when the young man's voice boomed from the narrow hall that led to the forward command deck.

"I know, Beddu...gonna be nutty when we get back to Coruscant. Time to barrel down."

Web ran her dirty sleeve across her eyes. Smudges blended with her unwashed jumpsuit so the dirt didn't look conspicuous. Still, she could not hide her expression.

The teens' bouncing steps took them around the corner from the topside command deck.

"Web...you okay?" Besides having a slightly higher voice, she knew that Beddu was asking due to the small straight line of a scar bisecting his right cheek. The rangy twins were indeed identical. No mistaking it. Both stopped walking upon seeing her by the windows.

"I'm fine, T brothers. Just a little worn, that's all."

Zennon shook his head slowly, brown eyes intent. "Is this...about..."

She nodded. "Politics...again."

Already, her heart rate was slowing. It felt good to let it out. The Jedi detail knew she had quit her last job because of anti-Yntok sentiments—the final straw being a worker's wisecrack that the Republic should *"just enslave Yntok already."* After the mission where Syl rescued Rasskana, she felt comfortable sharing this personal information.

"Web, I'm sorry. We're here for you. You and Quib." Beddu now stood by his brother, eyes the exact same color and expressing just as much worry.

"Thanks, Beddu. I never doubted that."

"Yeah..." Zennon lowered his voice. "We protect all kinds...like Tiruss says."

The three giggled at the serviceable imitation of Phase One's easygoing Senior Knight.

Zennon continued. "Jedi get a bad rap because of Republic expansionism. But I've never met a Jedi who would say they'd refrain from helping a person, citizen or otherwise."

Beddu nodded. "And, in reality, less than a hundred systems still practice slavery. I plan on requesting to serve in the majority areas after I get knighted."

“Same here.”

The Yntokian shrugged. “That minority of systems seems to boss around the rest of your Republic, though. Just a non-citizen’s opinion.”

“Unfortunately, you are right there.”

“But thanks, guys. I know you two and everyone else here are cool. If anything, you all are like...good P.R. for the Jedi. Laid back, nice—opposite of what people say.”

Upon receiving the invitation to spend the evening talking about religion with Mattias and Zinora Ree in their high-rise smoking lounge, Silnius Seethagrat spent the sunny afternoon cleaning and pressing the lone formal cloak that he owned.

Outside the lounge’s walls of windows, the Coruscant sky’s darkening silhouetted and blackened the architectures’ bright colors.

Silnius’ tears, green in color, stained the loose folds of red cloth. Quim-Na Sulif’s adoring gaze stayed fixed on his three darting, watery eyes. Dressed for the occasion, the enchantress relit the pipe in his shaky hand using the candle sitting on the small round table before continuing.

“My dear Silnius...” Her long index finger took its time sauntering up and down his smooth sleeve. “One’s comprehension of one’s bravery can seem overwhelming, upon first *actually comprehending* all of that mind-shattering truth and intensity. So much to absorb.”

A woman who usually ignored or talked over him—and never once referred to him as “my dear Silnius”—doted like he was Mattias Ree himself. “Such maturity...truth, power.”

While he did enjoy the fine drink, sweet-tasting smoke filling his lungs, and bathing of affection, the career criminal still broke out into a fresh round of sobs.

“Get it together, Seethagrat.” From across the lounge by the glass doors, Tramm Nurado raised his voice. Silnius’ warlord had been silent while Quim-Na and the Rees discussed subjects like Torturok, Sabotaa, plankto-squids, bressik trees, and nobility. Now he stomped over to a henchman shivering in Quim-Na’s arms. “When I found you, you were huddled in some trash heap as confused as you seem to be tonight. Only then, you were an addict chasing a high. Now? Now you look like an ungrateful scamp. Are you superior to Darth Torturok?”

Silnius’ scream leapt from his lips. “Warlord! I never once said or believed—”

“Now listen here, you...” The Scholar Emerita, not to be trifled with when angered, marched over to cut off the pleading with a wave of her finger. “You...resentment-filled impostor of a...I hesitate to use the word ‘man.’ You have the soul of some little, whiny girl.”

Never a being to devote deep thought to the longevity of his life, at the same time Silnius Seethagrat also did not envision it ending anytime soon. His grip weakening, he dropped the glass pipe. After doing his best to remain upright, the believer fell next to the fresh shards.

Tramm’s heavy eyebrows didn’t move. Teeth bared, his stare stayed locked. “Silnius, times I considered you for enforcement jobs...now I know why the Force had me enlist others.”

“Warlord! I—”

His sickly-yellow eyes narrowed. “The dark side is calling you, Silnius. The Scholar Emeriti could have approached so many believers with a glorious mission such as—”

“Then why didn’t they—”

“Who do you think you are?” In an instant, the Scholar Emeritus’ echoing scream deflated Silnius’ burst of rebelliousness. “What type of imp could ever feel so empowered to express such disrespect towards his own warlord?”

Silnius curled up on the floor as the approaching the Scholar Emeritus went apoplectic. “I can only sense the shock emanating from Darth Torturok and Sabotaa and Paryah—Nihilus, Valkorion, Famne...so many of the ancients right now.”

The strongest of the group when it came to physical manipulation using the Force, Mattias liked to lift objects when making sermons, especially around non-gifted types. The candle stands hovered close to the glass ceiling, candle flames burning away. “What a mix of hurt and rage Lord Malak must be feeling at this moment. I can see his disbelief, Silnius.”

A top Scholar stood over one of the Scholars’ least important believers. The younger man, nothing but prey. “You hurt Lord Malak...”

After his glare derided the sobbing ex-addict long enough, Mattias shrugged his narrow shoulders. “We made a mistake. Money and shallow pursuits drive our friend here. A purity we see, Silnius does not. Is it intentional? I do not know. Judgment failed us.”

All of the candle stands lowered to the tile, clinking.

The Scholar Emerita had been sneering out the window at Senate pyramids bathed in colors of light, a nod to the many species in the Republic. “Silnius...did you lead yourself to believe that the Force rescued you from your own weakness without expecting to be paid back?”

“PLEASE FORGIVE ME.” Even with his head nestled in his arms and chest, the decibels of Silnius’ voice spilled out into the smoking lounge. “I WANT TO SERVE DARTH TORTUROK PLEASE FORGIVE ME PLEASE.”

Finally, Quim-Na handed her pipe to Tramm and tip-toed over. Gathering her dinner gown about her, she got down on the floor and took the wallowing being in her arms, rocking him. “Silnius, you are so, so brave. So brave.”

Running her fingers along his scales, she spoke barely above a whisper. The softness pushed him to raise his head. Her eyes, huge, did not allow his to look away. “Brave Silnius...Darth Torturok is counting on you. You know that, right?”

“Yes...yes, I do.”

“Do you want to let him down?”

“Never!”

“I stand in awe of you.” A beauty a few years younger, who used to walk away from him in mid-sentence, now hung on every move his trembling body made. “If one of the ancients asked me to undertake such a noble endeavor, I’d have doubts. Yes.”

Her strokes on his face stopped. “But do you want to fall short in Torturok’s presence?”

“Never. I must honor Darth Sabotaa and Darth Paryah as well.” Tramm helped Silnius back to his feet. “All of the ancients. They should have left me where I was, shaking, in pain.”

“But they didn’t, sweet Silnius...so good to hear you say it.” Quim-Na straightened his cloak. She focused on his teary eyes again. “You are better than me, than any of us. Know this.”

The Scholar Emerita sounded off from her place by the window, cheery. “You are intrepid, Silnius. The greats smile at you from the beyond.”

The plankto-squid changed colors and swam the lengths of the tank, picking up speed with each pass. Every aquatic creature looked like they were engaged in some type of high-stakes race, every other creature their competitor.

Dilani Vestagon spent the afternoon in a treatment bay. Not paying attention to his repair job, a mechanic slashed one of his four legs open using a cutting laser. With a broken elevator, the miner pilot Grimesy and others had to rush the injured worker up four flights from the machine shop to the medical bay, his blue blood splattering their coveralls and the passageway decks.

Taking control, the recently-graduated Medic ordered the freaking-out roughnecks to place the shrieking patient on her metal examination table. They stood back as she worked. She had studied the anatomies of many species and, after a moment of recollection, located crucial arteries. It all came back, just as Huedd Kallatrian said it would.

After sealing the wound with a handheld, heat-generating device, Dilani looked forward to an early dinner in the galley a few levels below. This was postponed.

All smiles, Huedd motioned her to his quarters. "I just talked to Coruscant."

Those words signaled that this was about the dark side mission, not the Medical Facility. The phrase "*I just talked to the Academius on Coruscant*" would have indicated that the matter was an actual medical issue instead of a Force-related one.

After shutting the outside door, Dilani joined an excited man who was enjoying the planet view through the windows. "What's with the ear-to-ear grin, you crazy ol' doc?"

"Lord Torturok has been kind to us."

Her huge eyes and gaping mouth had to remain until the shock wore off. "It's a go..."

"Zinora sounded more excited than I have ever heard. She told me you are the point-person now." He rushed over to bear-hug the smaller darksider. "We exist in exciting times, young believer. To be your age, with the future ahead—"

Dilani pulled herself away. "The Force is with us."

Standing by the desk, she straightened her scrubs. "Missions to the surface are on hold until Phase Two begins. So the Jedi have been trying to get the Padawans as much flying time as they can before they leave. I will monitor the flight schedule. They plan ahead and have to send onward for approval."

"I told the Scholar Emerita how effective you have been at shielding yourself from them." He patted her shoulder, each pat remaining there for a moment. "So effective."

She laughed him off. "Oh, it is easy, Huedd. I'm a Medic from the Academius, a trusted partner of the Jedi for centuries. I'm doing what I was trained to do. I just patched up a leg."

"The best spies rely on honesty, dishonesty." He followed her to the door. "I..."

The door's two sides hissed as they shut behind the young woman who just walked out.

Chapter Three

After finishing tense reviews in the headquarters ship's communications room with Masters at the Jedi Academy on Coruscant, four worked-up Padawans needed to change out of their formal robes before venting frustration through rigorous exercise. ArraKel Kitaros, Zennon and Beddu Tannerum, and Zeephus Illim moved Brakebugs and Biekkors to one side and spent the morning sparring in the *Bountiful Horizon* hangar. With no flights planned today, the five-story-tall space offered plenty of room to flip, jump—push one another to excel. For a few hours, sabers' sizzles and pops replaced the normal sounds of tools clanking and whirring.

Miner pilots Web Hyland and Grimesy spent the previous night repairing a landing jet on one of the Biekkors and were asleep in the workers' quarters.

In the control room a few levels up from the hangar, four Jedi Knights took part in a closed-door briefing. The three Masters were located in different parts of the Galaxy. Each one's image showed on one of the three wall screens.

"Knights: the Educational Committee wants honesty about each Padawans' strengths and weaknesses." The Master on Coruscant occupied the middle monitor. The Neimoidian talked through a breather. The smallish device barely covered his smallish mouth and paused as it processed his words, like a translator needing a moment to rephrase a statement in another language. "Niandra: as a candidate for Senior Knight, impress us with insight when you write your reports. Spare no criticism."

"Yes, Master." Thia Niandra made a note on her red tablet.

His gaze intensifying, the pupils bisecting the Educational Committee Master's orange eyeballs opened wider. The breather's speaker amplified his scarred vocal cords as he elaborated about his committee's set of expectations for Thia, Tiruss Dunn, and Makkartho.

Sylmonica Valkanna zoned and drank palm-leaf tea while he was talking.

Makk nudged her friend and winked. Syl rolled her eyes.

The push turned out to be well-timed. A moment later, the Master running the Corellian garrison spoke from the wall screen nearest to the doors. "Valkanna: I received your follow-up on the request list for spare parts. Seemed excessive, but I did forward it."

"Thank you, Master. These 'Bugs get their use." A Brakebug lost power in mid-flight last week. Thankfully, they were able to tow Thia and Kel's disabled craft back to the hangar.

Before signing off, the Masters informed Thia and Makk that they may be rotating out early because of tension related to the independent Yntok System. Command was considering assembling a small task unit to be sent near the region.

Tiruss shut off his tablet. "If Yntok becomes a problem and Cantio fires up again..."

Thia finished his thought, her thin eyebrows raising. "We Jedi might be a bit busy."

Makk barked out her insight, which made the others laugh.

"No big wars, just too many little ones.' Great way to put it, Makk." Syl gathered her tablet to go. "And everyone: speaking of Yntok, we need to look out for Web Hyland and Quib...I forget his last name...the young guy with the ponytail in the galley crew."

Sinking his teeth into the chilled bressik fruit, Mattias Ree unlocked tart juices from beneath a layer of red skin which stained his white beard dark purple. Savoring his ripe snack, he observed

the arrival of a dignitary's tall-nosed star-yacht at the Republic Senate complex. From the north window of his penthouse smoking lounge, he watched a two-fighter escort lead the lumbering luxury liner to a rooftop landing pad. The single-seat, triangle-shaped guardians flew a wide, zig-zag path, causing air traffic to find alternate routes.

The performative act made Mattias laugh. A few slave-supporting systems voicing concerns about citizens' safety was chuckle-worthy enough. But this ruse, bringing local military support, snubbed the Republic. *Darth Famne, oh how I see you... in the World Between Worlds, sitting on a rock, pen in hand, composing an uncomfortably-whimsical poem about this.*

The quietly-influential religious leader bit into his treat as the crimson-colored VIP ship lowered to rest on three stout landing struts. The burst of succulence interrupted his train of thought. Admiring what was left of the snack, he verbalized his sensory pleasure. "Refreshing."

Quim-Na Sulif had been reclining on one of the bar area's two sofas. After a sip from the dainty glass, followed by a hiccup, she said, "The dark side of the Force...refreshing!"

"My dear, you may have had too much to drink."

"How much is too much...really, Mattias?" Snort-laughing, the devotee topped off her glass with the green liquid from the crystal decanter. "I'm in the mood to celebrate. Besides..."

Her intoxicated vibrancy excited the tank of plankto-squids. She toasted them. "The kind of stock we come from...darksiders could pump themselves full of every possible vice, organic and otherwise, and rage at the inevitable dawn."

Mattias could only shake his head and wink at his screaming pupil.

"I raise my glass to Dilani Vestagon, bearer of good news, in the form of Jedi flight schedules." She rose to strut the length of the tank. The colorful water beings followed her light steps. "I celebrate the nobility of the humble plankto-squid and loyal bressik tree..."

She gulped her drink, her gait almost a dance. "I celebrate the ever-present guidance of Lord Torturok...of course...and I celebrate the martyr Silnius Seethagrat, suicide pilot of—"

"NEVER sandwich a lord's name in the middle of a statement between inferior entities. EVER." Mattias' volume halted her speech.

Quim-Na caught her glass after almost dropping it.

Amused laziness disappeared, her elder radiated hatred, thundering away from the window as his tirade began. "A Sith lord must always be the primary acknowledgment and first to be praised—with throaty, full-bodied deference. Always."

The bit of boisterous burst of spirit now dead, the offender put down her glass on the little round end table and bowed her head. "Yes, Mattias. I am so sorry. So, so, so sorry..."

Mattias had been stomping towards her. Now he patted her shivering shoulder, his voice even. "Your passion, Quim-Na Sulif, is an asset. But never forget how it pales compared to the fires in the hearts of Nihilus, or Valkorion, Agon—any of the legends."

Outburst over, the smiling patriarch took another whole fruit from the table. He looked back and winked while heading towards the spiral staircase. "I need to ask Tramm about the status of our 'bressik tree' that the Deent brothers are finishing up."

It was now the Scholar Quim-Na Sulif's turn to gaze out the window. She smoked from her long pipe. Tears streamed down her face.

“Niiice...” Syl nodded at Zennon, who just shot her a victory grin from his seat at the command console in the control room. “Full decode, all ten comms scrambles. You’ll do fine when they test you.”

Sparse traffic, both outside in space and in the ship’s halls, made for a quiet morning. All four Jedi wore their blue workout gear.

“And think: Zennon just learned how to count last week.” Goofing with her newly-woven braid, Kel kept her amused gaze forward on her lighted console, bracing for a small jab from the Padawan seated to her right.

Instead, he got up to refill his metallic-blue mug from the red pitcher on the tall, white counter where Tiruss sat reading his flat device’s screen. “I’m doing the ‘ignore ArraKel Kitaros’ thing today. See?”

Switching off a classified intelligence briefing, Tiruss rose to leave. “You two remember that the crew wants to have a Padawan thank-you party, right?”

Zennon cocked his head. “Where you been, Russ? It’s in two days.”

“Dilani Vestagon organized it, the sweetheart that she is. She—” Now upright, Kel adjusted her headset with both hands. “I...think...I got a distress signal here...”

Syl, Zennon, and Tiruss surrounded her screen.

Syl squinted as she scrutinized the data stream. “Preliminary energy readings look like a hyperdrive malfunction, it’s still in hyperspace...for the moment.”

“Some type of cargo hauler...I’ll say it now.” Tiruss picked up a headset. “Getting tougher to make profitable runs. They skimp on maintenance to save money.”

“Whatever it is, it’s coming this way.” Syl had already put on another headset, studying the computer’s predicted path for the ship. The blue arrow ended in a far orbit away from the fleet. She hit the green button on the console. “Crazy-Train One...Crazy-Train Two...”

As the Phase One mission began, Makk named their flight call sign on a goof. Thia and Makk were patrolling in two Brakebugs with Beddu and Mimms. Thia’s voice answered. “*Crazy-Train Two...go ahead Phase One Central.*”

Kel and Zennon had stepped away from the console to let the Knights work. Their superiors’ gazes did not leave the six flat screens delivering information.

Syl’s eyes glanced at multiple readouts as she updated. “Possible inter-system...large to oversize range...anticipating sub-space drop...Grid Three, out past far-orbit...”

“Data transfer to you now, Crazy-Train.” Tiruss held his headset to his right ear. With his free hand, he had been hitting buttons along the black console to the side of the main console. He tried to hail the vessel again, calibrating the frequency dial. “The comms...getting a feed, so their systems are functional. I hope our antennas aren’t broken again.”

“I think Dilani and Leel are scheduled as Flight Medics.” Syl paged the Medical Bay while Tiruss figured out how to contact the ship. She turned to the students and pointed at the sliding doors. “Hangar. Pre-flight the Courier. Now.”

The two Padawans grabbed green survival vests and their belts with sabers before sprinting out of the room, down the ladder and skipping the out-of-service elevators.

The rumbling became less head-rattling. Which meant that the drop from hyperspace was ending. A cannibalized vessel, while obviously in major trouble, no longer felt like it would

disintegrate. Of course, the possibility of catastrophe never crossed Silnius Seethagrat's mind. *Darth Torturok would never allow that to happen.*

The darksider stood up from his round meditation mat and exited the stateroom, the same trashy quarters that his warlord occupied during three drone strikes. Before heading aft, some unfinished business needed to be taken care of on the forward command deck a few levels above the Combat Information Center. *Concussion bombs for some. Electric shocks for others. Darkness and light, darkness and light.*

The previous owner invested in weaponry and illegal modifications to the detriment of everything else. With improvements gone, the former flagship looked even more run down. Loose fittings threatened to break as the ship slowed. Sad signs of neglect and foul smells made him mumble. He never imagined flying inside this dung-heap again after the drone strikes. *It's not a dung-heap, Silnius. It's a bressik tree. Darth Torturok told you this. You keep forgetting.*

Rough flight knocked him sideways a few times and the corroded metal paneling beneath his webbed feet almost gave out in places, but the believer kept marching.

Silnius had to push the entry button three times before the doors to the command deck opened. Just as his warlord said it would, the tixxa gas had already dissipated. Four dead humans slumped over command controls, two with their milky eyes wide. Tough-looking nobodies who thought they were delivering illegal live cargo to Hufra, the bare-bones ship their payment.

Intent on making contact, he shrugged off the deceased dupes. Eyeing the course readings on the console, Silnius stood in awe of Darth Torturok. The great one guided Warlord Nurado flawlessly. Shorting devices honed in on Scholar Vestagon's beacon and ignited when they were supposed to, burning out the hyperdrive to dump the ship near the target point. The desperation in the Republic servant's voice was like extra proof of the dark side's greatness.

"Yes, officer." Barely able to contain himself, the ex-addict conversed with unsuspecting souls who possessed more power than he, but their lack of knowledge made them seem weak. Communications panels had been replaced with an antiquated send-and-receive device and Silnius had to repeatedly hit buttons to reconnect the speakers. "I confirm, hangar doors, yes, I have opened them. Hurry, our hangar protection shield is draining power."

"I got...patrol teams on the...a third rescue...bringing med...personnel...about to launch. We will...landing shortly. Thank...sir."

"Please hurry, sir." After signing off, he armed the devices before proceeding aft back through the trashed-out hallways. When he finished the long trek to the stern and reached the rear hold, he had to catch his breath. Not from the walk, but the vision inside the sliding doors.

Plankto-squids swimming inside the cube-shaped aquatic tank lit up the room with glowing colors. Stronger wielders of the Force than Silnius were close.

The 180-degree turn's tightness slammed the two Brakebugs' occupants into their seats. In their rearview moments ago, the Phase One orbital convoy now lay ahead. The student pilots throttled and set headings for headquarters, Mimms in the lead and Beddu hugging his starboard wing.

Two aging supply barges and the *Bountiful Horizon* grew larger in their cockpit bubbles. A bluish haze, created by another of the Galaxy's tendrils, arced in the distance. The entirety floated at a near standstill, almost immobile.

While the Padawans flew, the Knights learned about the unfolding situation.

“Phase One Central, send us...” Thia’s voice trailed off. A piercing stream of light formed at a point in deep orbit.

Mimms’ hand left the wheel and pointed, his finger’s suction tip touching the bubble. Staring, Thia nodded. “I see it...keep both hands on the wheel.”

As the sudden burst flared, a form took shape in the brightness. The Brakebug’s little cockpit screen on the comms panel displayed imagery from the onboard camera’s zoom, a closeup. Snapshots showed a freighter’s pronounced nose listing to the right. At the stern, four oversized engines began to drift left as the ship reentered subspace. All looked cold. Without power, ungainly vessels seem even more ungainly.

The Knights assessed the situation while the Padawans piloted the patrollers.

Two ‘Bugs blasted by the convoy, main engines maxing.

Glancing over in that direction from her seat next to Mimms, Thia noticed the curved windows of the top-level observation deck. Along with Makk in the other Brakebug, she had been talking to Tiruss and Syl about this new problem.

A jolt knocked her back.

“Wayyyyy too much trim there, Mimmsy. Don’t...” The experienced one didn’t need to finish her instructions. Two of Mimms’ long fingers hit three buttons on the wheel in a sequence and the craft veered back to a straight shot.

“Excellent...you made sure not to fire the rear thrusters too much.” Thia patted the Rodian on the back and returned to her call.

The ‘Bugs jumped around as power plants firing at maximum shot the ships towards the growing speck out past high orbit. When they got close, Thia took it all in before radioing.

“Phase One Central...hey, Russ, we got...a deep-space...*Hyperna*-class, I think...a big one.” Squinting her eyes, she leaned forward in the cockpit. “Dead stick...lights on...forward sections, hangar doors amidships...nothing aft. Makk?”

Over the headset, Makk’s quick growl, confirming the ship’s class. Thia was about to ask Tiruss to hail the ship again when she shuddered. She turned to Mimms. “Did you sense that?”

The youngster had looked up from buttons and switches, his opaque green eyes blinking. Tiruss radioed. “*I just got word. Multiple passengers on this ship.*”

“We know. Felt like at least a few. At least.” Thia scanned brightly-colored readings on the arced console’s instruments. “Mimms: training session is over for today.”

Both Knights took over the controls of their patrollers and the ‘Bugs closed the distance.

“Everybody, stop.” While fast-walking, Sylmonica Valkanna double-checked the instruments on her green survival vest. “The Courier is too big. Sorry...wasn’t thinking. Unload it.”

“What?” ArraKel Kitaros, Zennon Tannerum, and Dilani Vestagon were carrying gear up the Courier’s long ramp. The second Medic, Leel Tra, just left to get more supplies.

“The freighter’s only working landing bay is not even a third the size of this hangar.” Syl saw Web Hyland. “Web...we need to borrow a Biekkor. Make room for survivors.”

Kel held a blue medical bag in both hands. “What about airlocks on the hull?”

“They’re fried. I ran diagnostics, that ship is done.”

The young team, snapping to it, ran up the ramp. Web bolted into the Biekkor side hatch.

Bringing out a puffy spacesuit in her arms, the pilot yelled to the hangar bay’s side doors at her co-pilot. “Grimesy, finish clearing out the cabin. I’m crankin’ the tail and belly engines.”

Tiruss Dunn was straightening his rescue vest over his workout suit as he entered the hangar. He squinted at Syl by the Biekkor. "I don't know how to fly that thing. Do you?" "I'll..."

Syl cut the miner pilot off with a polite smile. "Sorry, Grimesy...only Jedi and Medics."

Tiruss motioned, hands in the air. "So...right stick is directional...left is thrust?"

Grimesy gave Tiruss a meaty thumbs-up. "I hope you know what you are doing..."

"We share your hope, my friend." Syl stood by the lander's hatch.

They all strapped in. The humming eleventh engine, top-center above the tail, harmonized with the buzzing of the hover-generator, the small bulge on the hull's underside.

After familiarizing himself with the switches along the arc in front of the wheel, Tiruss engaged the belly engine.

Three struts left the deck. Syl found the button that retracted them.

With the tail engine joining the push, the egg-shaped craft buzzed right, straight through the protective shield designed to automatically activate when hangar doors open.

The awkward-looking lander angled away from the full view of the planet and aimed towards a directionless speck that almost blended in with the billions of stars so far away.

Chapter Four

Two Brakebugs came in for a landing inside the dingy secondary bay, aiming for its aft side.

Thia Niandra used the central wheel to spin a 180, lining up her round cockpit with the stretching body and tail of Makkartho's 'Bug. "Parking this baby tail-to-nose like this leaves more room for other rescue ships. This landing zone isn't too big. See, Mimms?"

Thia was opening the cockpit bubble hatch to hop out before the three struts had even touched down. Mimms jumped out right behind her.

Makk and Beddu Tannerum had just dismounted their 'Bug. Puddles of water and grease caked the deck. The foursome split up after a fast pow-wow, Makk stating that she and Beddu would venture back to investigate aft while Thia and Mimms Illim head to the forward hold. Two teams of two split, opposite directions from this midpoint.

At the entrance of a smelly forward passageway, Thia used her wrist comms while Mimms shined his penlight ahead. "Syl, after you land, vector a team to the upper level and aft, with another team forward to the hold underneath the command deck...three or four levels up."

In the Biekkor lander, Syl responded. "*Affirmative. Forward hold.*"

After signing off, Thia called out down the dark hall. "Attention, vessel occupants. Please respond. We are an emergency team. Please respond."

Not hearing anything except the structure's creaks, she and Mimms proceeded forward.

In the Biekkor's cockpit, Russ' and Syl's attentions stayed glued to the aimless ship growing larger in the curved windscreen. They could see the open landing bay, a tiny rectangle of a target.

Some get concussions. Some get shocks. Some get big shocks...shocky-shocks.

In the aft cargo hold, Silnius Seethagrat held the plankto-squids up to his trembling mouth, then caressed his scaly cheeks with them. *All creatures of the Force. All. Even me...*

Each hand held six or seven creatures of the Force, who writhed around trying to free themselves. Their colors mutated, just like the ones in the tanks in the center of the room.

"Such beautiful beasts...soak in the energy...Jedi are stronger with the Force than mean-man Mattias and evil-woman Zinora...channel them...." He closed his three eyes. "Your friends in the forward cargo hold...can you talk to them, too? I bet you can, unlike me."

The metallic detonator hooked to Silnius' belt batted around as Silnius danced.

In one motion, Silnius stopped moving and squeezed his fingers as tight as he could.

Innocent creatures squealed in pain.

Thia and Mimms had made it almost the full way forward when the Force magnified what felt like intense physical violence, aft.

"Back the way we came, Mimms. This might be a hostage situation."

They reversed direction.

"And double-time it. To the aft cargo hold."

Neglected decks creaked as the two bounded across them, their brown boots slamming down on the flimsy grates. They passed the hangar mid-point and kept trekking rearward. Through the shorter hallways and longer passageways, up one ladder.

Both carrying their unlit sabers, Thia and Mimms rounded the top level's final corner. Makk and Beddu had stationed themselves by the heavy cargo doors at the opposite end of this hall. Makk's quick grunts communicated that the reinforced paneling would take too long to cut through. The risk of more innocent deaths was too great.

Thia could only shake her head. "That forward hold, too. No signs of trouble but we gotta get back there. Other ship's inbound, just heard from Russ and Syl..."

The impending explosion cut through the sensations of life from behind the blast door. Thia's fleeting glance connected with three other three Jedi. Their looks—they felt it, too. Beddu. Makk. Mimms. They understood. Like she did. All four were one with the Force.

While inwardly-directed, the bombs inside the aft cargo hold still tore a hole through the outside hull. The remainder of the blast obliterated all compartments nearby, its destructiveness reaching the sections close to the hangar deck, amidships. Aftershocks ruptured the supports of the upper right engine housing and the cylindrical structure separated from the main hull, outer space's zero gravity seizing control of its form.

On board the Biekkor, Syl yelled over her shoulder at the rear cabin from the co-pilot's seat. "Kel, Zennon, Medics: be ready. Forward section of the ship looks intact, we sense survivors."

The catastrophe ahead needed them to hurry. One of the engines had begun to float away from the bleeding aft section and the rest of the already-hurting vessel looked to be quiet.

Sitting next to Syl, Tiruss throttled, his attention fixed on pushing a ship's controls to perform in ways they weren't meant to. Nearing the wreck, the pilots gunned the tail engine hard one last time before turning the blunt nose upward.

The belly-like underside now faced forward, directly at the unfolding scene.

"Ten leg jets, now our space-brakes. Here goes nothing." Syl hit the button that fed fuel to the newly-warmed up landing thrusters lining both sides of the hull, five along each curve. She fired again and again, a series of short bursts that jolted their bodies. As predicted, the guesstimation slowed their speed by at least three quarters.

"These engines are sensitive."

"Landers are tuned for crushing atmospheric pressure, not the zero gravity of space."

Lander righted, the makeshift ambulance closed. The hangar was situated in the middle of what was once a heavy cargo hauler, now scrap metal, rolling on all axes. Debris bled from the aft section as the massive power plant meandered into space. With the Biekkor's blunt nose leading the way once again, the two nudged the craft towards a smallish opening.

"Gonna give this my best blind stab...bow side of the landing bay, biggest target." Tiruss pointed to the approaching entryway forward of the damaged sections. "At least that hunk of junk is listing at a kind of consistent rate. Still...gonna be tight."

"I just checked again: neither airlock is functional, flight path is too jerky anyway." Seated beside her partner, Syl brought out a rolled-up bandage from her medical vest and twiddled it between her fingers. She yelled into the back. "Russ and I will scout the front hold once we land. Kel and Zennon: stay with the Medics until we signal for help with survivors."

Rear aflame, the two veteran Jedi speculated that they had just a few minutes to save the remaining occupants in the forward section. Syl found the switch for the landing struts and continued to hit the switches that cut off fuel flow to the ten vertical engines.

“Gonna aim away from Makk and Thia’s Brakebugs.” Her co-pilot kept parallel with the moving deck. “Giving the rear engine power.”

The lander’s arc matched the dead hauler’s arc. A small, functioning vessel got enveloped by a larger, non-functioning one. Tiruss made for the hangar’s purple energy barrier.

“You got this.” Syl rose before her partner finished bringing the ship in, anticipating the thud, and grabbing the air tank and bag of breather masks.

Struts slammed into the deck. The side hatch folded up, the ramp down. Kel and Zennon were right behind Syl, also in rescue vests. Hangar lights flickered in random patterns, each their own. Tiruss and Dilani joined. Tiruss wore a medi-pack on his back just like Syl.

“Leel and I will wait for you two to give the okay.” Dilani got a nod from Syl.

“Sounds good, you all. We’ll signal when we need you.” The two Knights bolted down the long passageway that Thia and Mimms had taken just a few minutes ago.

With their leaders gone, the Padawans and Medic eyed the glowing shield that covered the open hangar doors and kept outer space at bay.

Zennon scanned the sensor on a metal bulkhead. “Power at seven percent...the explosion hit energy reserves...cutting overhead lights.”

Space darkening, only the energy barrier lit it. Structural creaks interrupted the quiet.

Kel nudged her good friend. “I sensed them, too. You okay?”

Instead of answering, he gazed outside at outer space.

Silnius’ final act before heading aft was to arm concussion bombs in the forward passageway that also triggered electric shocks inside the forward hold’s tanks of plankto-squid.

Two Jedi Knights hauling survival gear rounded the corner, speeding towards the hold and what both perceived to be innocent victims. Tiruss’ right boot hit the trip-wire, triggering the stun-blast. Three blunt-sounding devices went off in succession.

The one nearest the pressurized pipe punctured its worn-out shell. Steam and rusty metallic shrapnel met the left side of Syl’s face as she rounded the corner behind her partner.

Back in the hangar, Kel and Zennon sensed beings in their last moments of life.

“Zennon: cockpit. Dilani: let me scout forward first, picking up life and also death.”

Dilani nodded. She and the other medic followed Zennon back into the ship.

Kel raced down the first lightless passageway, turned the corner and up two ladders, the curved handle of her unlit saber in her right hand. Another ladder, followed by a sprint down a new long hall. She found the downed Jedi, thankful that they weren’t the deadness she had sensed. Tiruss lay on his stomach. Syl curled up against a bulkhead. Her closed right eye almost looked content, the left eye lost in blood. A bandage sat at the top of a rescue vest pocket.

After wrapping the eye wound and stabilizing both, Kel grabbed Tiruss’ air tank and ran into the darkness. She did not sense more life but still felt the need to check.

Smoke pouring from electrical fires inside the forward cargo hold flooded both nostrils. Her blue saber lit the surroundings. She readied to carve through the thick metal of the sliding door. Glancing around at the flooring, she needed to brace, give herself leverage.

The lights flashed on before going dark.

"Kel, it's Zennon. Somebody wired this junkheap to blow. Get back here."

She clicked her comms while dropping the pack and hurrying back the way she came, saber off and hanging from her belt once again.

The Knights had not moved. The Padawan scooped up the unconscious Tiruss with her right hand. With his limp body slung over her right shoulder, she bent to hoist Syl with her left. It took a few tries and she almost toppled backward, but she managed to grab them both.

Carrying the two concussion-blast victims down dark passageways, the grunting student almost hit a near-sprint in her drive to reach their ship. Before bounding down a thin ladder, steps unseen, she shifted the weight on her shoulders.

With power dwindling, only the landing lights on the Biekkor illuminated the hangar.

"No others." Kel had to catch her breath after laying the Jedi down in the Biekkor hold.

Immediately, Dilani and Leel went to work.

"The forward hold...no..." Kel turned to yell. "Zennon, get us out of here."

The Biekkor rumbled, moving backward as the teen reversed out of the small hangar.

The bang on the hull. A dunking lurch to the side.

Zennon yelled from the pilot seat. "Sorry. Just a scratch. I'm guessing..."

The Medics in the back speculated about possibilities like comas and seizures. While Syl needed more attention, Kel's wrap had stopped the bloodflow.

Kel took the right seat in the cockpit. The ship swayed back and forth.

"This thing handles like a drunken strankabeast...wow." Zennon worked a curving panel of controls. "How are Syl and Russ?"

"Out cold. Syl's in bad shape."

Back in the hold, the two Medics positioned breathing masks on both Jedi. Dilani stopped her work. "Could you go ask about flight time, Leel?"

The stressed Medic cocked his head at her and squinted.

The Scholar glared. "Just go. Please."

The second he was out of visual range, Dilani pulled out a syringe and injected Syl's arm.

"Thanks, Leel. Best I can offer on flight time, sorry."

Zennon followed up Kel's words, yelling over his shoulder to the rear of the ship.

"Thanks, Leel. You and Dilani holler if you need anything else."

As the Medic left the cockpit, the Padawan noted to himself that it felt like he was getting the hang of the lander's controls.

"Watch the power, Zen. Russ said it was twitchy. He almost stalled it." Kel hit the switch to bring up the landing struts, which had been extended ever since they left the broken hauler.

"Whoa...thanks, Kel. The steering is less sluggish now." His mind not thinking about anything beyond this cockpit and a hangar deck, he just wanted to be done with this.

"I can fly this, too...sure you're okay?"

"I'm good." Withdrawing his hand from hers, Zennon flipped the switch on the comms panel. "*Horizon*...uh, I have no idea what any call signs are...just winging this one. Hello?"

Kel had her headset on now. "Yeah...everybody. This is the Biekkor...got one on board who is badly wounded. Another also hurt, Medics have both stable. But we're gonna need help. No survivors on the hauler. Crazy Train is down, One and Two...they are down."

Zennon shut his eyes tight at her last words. So much else to think about.

The emergency channel gave the go-ahead. A Medic team would be in the hangar.

“Gonna hit the gas and get this thing...” Zennon’s voice trailed as all went dark. “Oops.”

“I told you...power.” Kel, who had not strapped in, already began to float out of her chair. She nudged the steering wheel to push herself away from the two-seat front and into the passageway that led to the cabin. “Medics, we lost power. Secure Syl and Russ.”

“Sorry...” After flipping a few lightless switches, Zennon rose from the left cockpit seat, allowing the pull of outer space to take him back into the passageway.

In the weightlessness and upside down, he wedged his left boot into a cranny by the overhead to steady himself. With no internal lights, only Kel’s flashlight and space’s dull shine could assist with the attempted restarting. Both reached inside the switching station’s panel to pull aside wires.

Nobody sat in the pilot seats. Through the curve of windows, the hugeness of a dead planet owned the view, its gravity pulling the powerless lander in.

Lips trembling, Zennon brought two connections together. Nothing. The planet’s arc dominated the cockpit’s sight, more so each second.

“We secured the patients. Uhhh, not to sound negative, but Scatera is dead ahead—”

The loud thump on the hull interrupted Dilani’s worried observation.

“We probably should have warned them about the lander’s touchy electrical system, huh Web?”

Both Web and Grimesy fidgeted in their seats trying to make room inside the Brakebug.

“Don’t give me that look. I got caught up trying to help out.”

After learning their lander lost power, the two miner pilots piled into the cockpit of the remaining ‘Bug in the hangar. Like the Jedi using their ship, the experienced flyers made mistakes while flying out to the dead vessel. But they had flown all types of craft and soon got the hang of the rear thrusters. The peppy patroller closed the distance with their listing lander.

Grimesy tightened his belt around his waist while shifting his weight to his left. “You know, Web. Maybe I’m not the one who is too big. Maybe—”

“Grimesy, you got one second to stop talking.” Web maneuvered around a ship whose topside pointed at the planet, the ‘Bug darting back and forth.

Her co-pilot figured out the best angle for the unfamiliar rescue tool. Grimesy wrapped his furry fingers around the controls, getting a feel for the cable. The little “X” in the circular screen moved with his finger movements.

He took the shot.

With the Brakebug’s starboard tow got tethered to their own Biekkor, Web flipped a switch which added power to the neuron engine of the short-ranger. Looking over her shoulder, she saw that the bigger ship trailing behind hers had quit listing. Kel bumped up and down in the cockpit. The teen gave a thumbs-up, her longer Padawan braid floating above her shoulder.

The technician who worked the rescue crane’s controls let out a whoop over his headset when Web and Grimesy communicated that some of the Jedi and the Medics had survived.

A group of workers waited in the hangar. A few cried.

News of the four dead Jedi spread through the Phase One fleet.

IV: Padawans

Chapter One

Overhead lighting fixtures flooded the examination areas. From the day she arrived, ArraKel Kitaros felt that the *Horizon* medical bay was too bright. Annoyingly bright...artificial.

Head in his hands, Zennon Tannerum sat in a chair behind her.

Exhausted, Kel took a sip of spicy tea to perk herself up. "Without Syl, we'd be dead."

Cradling the steamy mug near her lips, she stared at a comatose woman twenty years her senior whom she saw as a Knight to emulate. At the moment, the blast victim was not too visible due to bandages and tubes.

Her classmate looked up, his eyes puffy and bloodshot. "What?"

Her voice as scratchy as his, she said, "Syl pestered Central Command to get us parts for the Brakebug which was always down. She ruffled feathers, but we got what we needed."

After a sniffle, Zennon nodded. "I just helped Russ install the new directional mechanisms in the aft thrusters...Web and Grimesy wouldn't have been able to rescue us."

Both of Sylmonica Valkanna's eyes were covered, left more than the right. None of her black hair showed. Tiruss Dunn lay in a bed one section over. He did not need bandages and just stayed asleep. Kel had to appreciate his relaxed grin. Huedd felt he would awaken soon.

A beat-up Courier, similar to the one that Russ piloted here almost two months ago, waited in the hangar to take the Padawans back to Coruscant once they finished their goodbyes. That morning, they pressed their brown robes and took turns shaving each other's heads bald before reweaving their side braids. The two ribbons, one blue and one green, indicated seniority.

Kel did most of the talking when the security team arrived to take over, also with the Jedi Masters in the video conference which just finished. While overwhelmed herself, she did her best to support her grieving friend. It was her suggestion to see the wounded Knights before leaving.

Zennon got up to study the sleeping Jedi. "You know that, because of her court martial, Syl wasn't allowed to write evaluations for us."

"Really?"

"Mimmsy pointed it out." His voice shook at the mention of Zeeplus Illim.

Her chest heaved as she remembered a kind friend. "Mimms... nothing got by Mimms."

Zennon, tearing up himself, reached out for a hug.

While holding him, Kel tried to wrap her head around an exchange that just happened. As the conference with the Masters ended, one of them asked for a private word, phrasing his thought as "uncomfortable." The twins' acceptance had been a contentious matter. Now, with Beddu's death, senior Jedi questioned Zennon's eligibility for the upcoming Jedi trials.

Puffing quick puffs off of her pipe, Quim-Na Sulif did her best to squish against the side of the plankto-squid tank, wishing she could find a way—any way—to sneak down the spiral stairs, exit this smoking lounge, and spend the next few hours somewhere else. Anywhere else.

Behind her, lively plankto-squid scurried back and forth, a flood of colors flying in all directions at a pace that couldn't be hindered by order.

Her mind's rational side thanked the dead lords that Tramm Nurado was the target of the Scholar Emerita's blinding rage instead of her.

“Your so-called ‘soldiers’ placed the concussion bombs too close to those corroded pipes.” Zinora Ree swung her heavy cane with the vigor of a woman half her age.

Whatever Quim-Na could do to remain noiseless and invisible, she aimed to reduce the possibility of the littler woman spinning around and redirecting her fury.

“...again: you are worthless!” The next blow landed on Tramm Nurado’s left side, connecting again with the secondary spine. Her jewelry clanked around as she struck.

“Those old pipes were weak—just like you, Tramm Nurado.” Mattias Ree matched his beloved wife’s yells. “You rode on that ship. How did you overlook this?”

Huedd personally examined the unconscious Jedi and sent an encoded transmission. Chunks of pipe and steam destroyed the target’s left eye with burn damage stretching to the temple’s hairline. After signing off with him, the old couple summoned Tramm.

The Scholar Emerita’s cane once again made contact with the warlord’s weaker right side. His wincing became a yelp—bizarre coming from a being with over two hundred kills to his name. Another swing from the cane landed on the Dirnn’s right secondary spine. Wincing, he kept still. His elders’ beratement sped up color changes in the aquatic creatures.

“Stop obsessing over the idea that we must aim for perfection.” Quim-Na marched away from the tank and a few steps forward to join the room. “Miners’ greed pushed our schedule and we had to alter the plan. It wasn’t going to be perfect.”

Tramm’s chest heaved and the puffy teariness made his eyes even bigger. Both pleaded.

She made sure her elders were paying attention before continuing. “Our prospect is still alive. And she wouldn’t be the first Jedi to partially lose their eyesight. They learn to compensate. You two act as if she’s incapacitated—”

A flustered Mattias turned to his pupil. “What if she suffered brain damage and—”

“Trust in the light of the dark lords who once roamed the Galaxy. Now.”

Quim-Na needed to take a pause, as well as a puff. “Forgive my outburst. But you two have a habit of becoming too eager. Valkanna will be ours soon, recovering in an Academius facility in this city.”

Taking control of the conversation, she strolled the lounge. “I have been learning about the target’s home world and meditating on how to present myself authentically. Whatever setbacks...the way forward holds so much promise.”

The Scholar Emeritus soaked in the sight of his beloved underling. “My oh-so-lovely and talented Quim-Na Sulif, I have no doubt that you will mold into this role.”

His wife nodded. “Quim-Na *is* quite false, dear. You are right about that.”

Her confidence gone, Quim-Na’s bare shoulders slunk down.

The blindfold.

By feel, Syl knows the green blindfold. Its width barely covering her eye sockets, the softness. The blindfold from that climbing trip. Before the Phase One mission began.

Her left hand reaches up and raises it to her forehead. Syl looks around. Only she doesn’t. She can’t. Blinking, then squeezing both eyes before reopening them fails to work. All Syl can see is black. Nothing.

Her skin and short hair both suck in the cold, sending it to her core. The breeze runs through the thin cloth that covers her body, stirring her nerve endings. Shivering, she can smell

a staleness. A closed-up room long forgotten, unventilated because no one cares...only she believes she is outside—is she indoors or outdoors?

Mustiness permeates her olfactory system. The winds do little to dilute it.

Her head on a swivel, back and forth, all angles. Two green eyes still did not see.

An idea—Syl lowers the blindfold back down over both eyes—then raises it. No sight.

“Your family has a story.” The scratchy voice—Syl has never heard the older woman before—not yelling, but abolishing the stillness nonetheless. “Your family has a story. Do you know it?”

Still sightless, she was about to call out but the voice cut her off. “Every family has a story, unique to them. Something that—”

A scream bursts forth. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Indeed.” A shrill little laugh. “Because you are a Jedi, you have no idea.”

Syl turns her head, her ears searching to determine the location of the snickering. Her chest heaves as her breathing quickens. Two useless eyes dart around.

“Because you are a Jedi, it makes sense that you have no idea what I’m talking about. Do Jedi discuss the importance of family with one another? Do they discuss with younglings?”

“No! Who are—”

“A voice in your head. That’s all I am. Calm down.”

Though she had no idea what lay in front of her, the visionless Jedi Knight still charges forward, a rage welling up. “Who are you where—”

Whatever her left bare foot trips on, the obstacle stops her sprint before it starts, launching her headfirst. A mouthful of gravel and face down on the ground, tears from her sobs spill across the pebbles and dust.

After enough false starts, the Scholar Emerita’s left eye opened. Her right eye followed. Fluttering, both took in the sight of a ceiling. A sterile, brightly-lit white room. The constancy of a hyperdrive.

Just like every other wakeup, the first nanoseconds upon exiting the trance felt fuzzy, as if her temporal body did not exist. Her neck, stiff like she had been asleep for hours instead of ten minutes. The first conscious observation, after thinking about her smudged cosmetics, had to do with the fact that the hospital ship must still be in hyperspace. Altered states never last the length of time they seemed to.

Though they have no idea who the Scholars are, crewmembers recognized Zinora Ree as a respected person within the Academius and avoided this corner of the second deck.

Dilani Vestagon, the third person in the stateroom, had been watching over her elder and the comatose Sylmonica Valkanna, remaining careful not to disturb. Since her Force-sensitive tendencies leaned cerebral, the recent initiate relished this chance to observe a mentor who had a reputation for gleaning insights from, as well as planting thoughts in, beings’ psyches.

“She is weak, Dilani.” Zinora winked and reached for her hand. “Weak, but strong. So strong. She may not be a Master, but still. A strength is there.”

Her assistant helped her from the bedside chair and straightened her jeweled headdress.

The Scholar dignitary grinned at the unconscious Knight’s pained expression, imagining a green blindfold covering her eyes instead of white bandages. “You did well, injecting her with *Psychius*.”

“I give my praise to Sabotaa for her wondrous formulation.”

“The all-powerful Healer created it specifically for times like this, for those of us who are not as innately-powerful as light-side aggressors. It will work with the concussion to prolong recovery.”

Dilani shrugged. “Malak, Nihilus, Sabotaa, Paryah...I felt so many lords watching over me. But...that lander dying...”

Zinora laughed along. “Such bravery. And you have another mission, a quick one a few weeks from now. A pragmatic maneuver.” Putting her cane aside, her thin hands took one of the younger woman’s fingers into their grasp again.

“Whatever needs to be done.” Dilani peered down at the oblivious woman whom she first referred to as “the target.” “Spending time with the Jedi honed my skills. Shielding my thoughts was tiring at first, always thinking about it. Now, it’s fine. Thank you for this first task.”

“Thank *you*, believer.” Zinora squeezed her young associate’s arm tight, her drowsiness fading. “You will use that skill forever. Do not call attention and you will stay hidden.”

“Even the two Jedi aboard this ship have no idea what we are doing.” Dilani giggled.

Before exiting the bay, the snickering Zinora had to soak in the mix of anguish and mystification on the face. Even with the bandages, the Jedi’s emotions showed through.

Chapter Two

The breezes. So much more invigorating than a deep-space cruiser's recirculated air. The rooftop gardens energized Tiruss Dunn down to his pores. A mix of colorful flora from four different star systems created the blend of smells. True, the various trees, flowers, and bushes aligned too much for his liking. Even so, their soothing, natural goodness made up for any over-attention from Academius gardeners who maintained these beds.

If only the current conversation weren't taking place. "Once again, I don't like the insinuation."

Awakening two days ago, he requested a trip outdoors immediately. After time in space, the recuperating Jedi Senior Knight had to soak in any hints of nature he could. Unlike that visit, today's garden walk felt unpleasant—not from the surroundings, but the talk. A Master and his third-tour Knight assistant asked to speak further after reading his testimony about the catastrophe and Tiruss was the one to suggest outside.

"Now, Dunn." The once-burly Master moved with difficulty. Facial disfigurements blended with his wrinkles. "All I am saying is that an experienced Knight probably would have scouted forward before returning with the ship, that's all."

Tiruss strolled the gravelly paths without a cane today. This informal meeting began with a cordial update. The team stated that the wreckage, a popular model of freighter, was proving difficult to identify. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary until ArraKel Kitaros got brought up.

Bristling at the inane talk, he looked out at Coruscant City. The megalopolis was, literally, expanding outward and rising upward at the same time. With the cool airflow, the weather felt perfect, something he made note of to temper the negativity.

Tiruss stopped and faced them both. "As far as I'm concerned, Kitaros got it right and there weren't any survivors. That ship was on its last legs and she and Tannerum saved us."

"And it looks like the young duo had escape time. They were a distance away when the devices detonated." The younger investigator, a human, stepped in. His thick eyebrows gave his cold stare intensity. "Not to disparage her, but it's safe to say that an experienced Jedi, in that situation, most likely would have reconnoitered the hold."

"What? You guys need work to do?" The patient turned away, but needed to finish out his thought. "Call me crazy here, but I'm going to put my trust in the Force and those two Padawans who are both going to be fantastic Knights one day."

He made his way to the elevators as quickly as he could, no longer noticing the vegetation and its living Force connectiveness all around him.

"Dilani Vestagon, my dear, you have the Jedi fooled." Quim-Na Sulif nudged the fast-rising believer. "Aiming for the heartstrings is smart, tactically. You've got a knack for tradecraft, like one of Famne's spies."

This after-lunch jaunt through the expanse of the bustling promenade helped the pair digest the delicious food they had just devoured.

"I wouldn't be that presumptuous." Stuffed from the three-course mid-day meal, the younger darksider soaked in the praise. "Though...I do like it here in the shadows."

With beings around her going their own ways in their own worlds, Dilani had yet to feel like she was on a planet again. “I guess I have somewhat of a knack for tradecraft. Yeah, I do.”

“Don’t smirk. You do. Be proud, Scholar.”

“I read up on *Psychius*, the serum that I injected into the target.” After months in space, it felt rejuvenating to be dressed up, hair styled and a new hat, a relaxing walk on a sunny day.

“Before she captured three Jedi to experiment on them, Darth Sabotaa used her slaves with earlier formulations of her mind manipulation drug. I despise slavery, but admire her work.”

“Stay conflicted. Passionate beings possess critical minds.” Quim-Na draped a lazy arm around an old friend. “Our lord Sabotaa wanted to help followers with limited Force connections, give them an edge with stronger wielders, as a thank you for their devotion.”

“So she formulated *Psychius*, distilled from the echius root native to Exegol that ancient darksiders brewed as an aphrodisiac.”

“That she did. The raw root delivers quite a kick, if you’re ever looking for a good time.” Quim-Na took a pull from her pipe. “And yes...more than a dozen of our lord’s slaves died of madness in the process. But those slaves had it easy, compared to what she put the Jedi through.”

Both giggled at her quip as they walked, shutting out the planet around them.

Earlier today, Dilani kept watch while the Scholar Emerita again telepathically connected with the still-unconscious target. Following the session, the recent grad video-conferenced with some Jedi about Valkanna’s slow progress before changing out of her scrubs. Quim-Na picked her up on the landing pad in front of the Academius campus’ eight-sided skyscraper and they flew off in a vintage airship borrowed from the Scholar Emeritus.

Satiated from the ‘welcome back’ lunch, two Sith practitioners who could be mistaken for bored socialites ambled through a hopping commercial district, their speed slower than the commuters and businesspeople who hurried to and fro and ran for the escalators.

At a five-point intersection of streets, a troupe of brightly-clad street performers played a goofy song on upright string instruments set up beneath a blue lamppost. Passersby couldn’t resist checking out the twangy music. A stout species called Dug, the troupe’s goofball of a lead singer danced around on two burly arms and clapped a noisemaker’s two shells using his clawlike feet while hooting at the crowd through his long-nosed snout. His musicians plucked the strings with long, fur-covered toes.

Fans threw coins at the band. Quim-Na’s clanked along the beaten stone before coming to a rest. She took out a jeweled pouch full of smoking herb as the two resumed their cosmopolitan hike.

While again adjusting the tilt of her green pillbox hat, Dilani enjoyed the sight of random beings all heading in their own directions. The scene made her think of her molecular science classes and video footage of cells taken with microscopic equipment.

Traffic crowded the skies. A nearby regional airport serviced the range of personal and commercial craft which flew all around, as well as in between, Coruscant’s expanding cities.

“It all connects, young one. Everything around us affects everything around us.” The more learned Scholar pointed around with her pipe as she shared insight. “The attack on the Corellian embassy a week ago tapped into the overall apprehensiveness. Subsequently, two days later, the Cantio preliminary peace talks are on hold, again. All is connected.”

Nearing the end of the open promenade, the fresh breeze prompted Quim-Na to adjust the fur cloak around her shoulders. “Star systems, each on opposite sides of the Galaxy, one influencing the other for no tangible reason. It’s just irrationality and fear, nothing else.”

“Irrationality and fear...look out.” Handing the pipe back, Dilani exhaled smoke.

Turning the corner, the littler avenue took the shape of a shallow cavern as three- and four-story merchant buildings lined both sides. The dark disciples discussed Valkanna's condition and the next steps of the plan, oblivious to shoppers, workers, and security personnel as well as aircraft in the skies.

At the ending of the blocks-long mercantile stretch, the street opened up to another building-free stretch of plaza. Its tens of thousands of square, off-white tiles created a gap before the government district began where some of the spires rose up to the clouds.

"There she is." Nodding in triumph, Quim-Na pointed to an imposing statue, the square base surrounded by nothing but pale stone. The art faced the skyline ahead past the esplanade.

As a student, Dilani had passed by the public work many times. A faceless stick-woman just stabbed a faceless stick-man through the chest and the ultra-thin broadsword in her left hand raises his limp body outward and upward. The creators built it so he dangled above the tile with only the bending blade holding him up.

"The public-at-large has no idea who inspired this piece."

"Who inspired it?" The design only implied what the bodies looked like.

"The wife of a crime lord, then a crime lord. And then... a Sith lord, the one who paved the way for the ancients who almost conquered Coruscant. Her dark light attracted Sith from far away." She gestured at the skyline on the flat ground's far side. "Today, this statue sits not even three hundred city blocks from the Jedi Complex. She keeps tabs on them for us."

"What was her name?"

Her oldest friend used her pipe to motion towards a section of the district's skyline. "The tip of her sword points directly at the center of the Jedi spire, I don't know if you knew that. You should study this woman, Dilani."

"Quit being cryptic like you're Mattias Ree himself. What was her name, Quim-Na?"

Quim-Na needed to admire the art and enjoy a pull of the sweet leaf before answering. "Darth Nefari. She was known as the Enforcer."

Taking in the statue again, Dilani couldn't wait to ask the Rees for a volume or holocron about this lord from long ago. As a gift, Mattias and Zinora had given her a rare and tattered copy of a biography about Famne the Poet and her father, Desparus the Just. Dilani stayed up all night reading about their complicated relationship.

Those two. Malak. Sabotaa. Paryah. Now she ached to learn about Nefari, the Enforcer.

Syl inches forward with her right foot. Her left shuffles after it. The thin gown does nothing to stop the breeze.

A rumble behind her. Both feet plant themselves on the cold rocks after she finishes turning around to face the noise. Shivering, eyes wide open, she yells as loud as her lungs allow. "Why can't I see? Tell me—now...please...please?"

The calm wind generates enough noise to be audible. Her sense of hearing seems to be reliable. So, Syl pays attention to it after realizing her vision is useless.

The old woman's condescending laughter penetrates after it interrupts. The giggles trail off. "Don't be so assuming, young one. Nobody can see."

In vain, two sightless eyes dart around. "Stop it. Stop—"

"My dear, with the dense fog, no being can see right now. A thick layer of clouds surrounds all. Quit thinking everything is about you."

*Syl ambles in a slow circle, her lips trembling.
The voice says, "You're not alone."
Bringing her hands up to cover her ears, the miserable Jedi continues moving in the
circle. Her lower lip now matches the frequency of the shakes that have taken over her body.
The voice says, "Jedi: can't you see the fog...the fog that clouds your sight?"
"No!" Syl can only scream in frustration.
The rocky ground fails to cushion her fall.*

Chapter Three

Hurling above the deck at nearly the speed of sound, the blue Air Assault Delivery Skiff banked hard right towards the wilderness, the screaming tail engine leaving a bluish arc of exhaust in its wake. The whirring hover-pulse generator mounted on the underbelly worked with the tail engine to keep the pug-nosed airship just above treeline.

Nicknamed the “Addi,” the troop carrier design was no-nonsense: little more than two power plants, a metal container for twelve standing passengers, and a two-seat cockpit at the front.

I am one with the Force. Kel Kitaros exhaled. *The Force is with me.* In the cramped cabin, the wild darting around prompted the young woman to recall her first treetop run. Like many of her classmates, she vomited breakfast all over the metal grating. On this morning years later, the twelve senior-level Padawans inside this claustrophobic box rode the sharp curves and eased the flight’s violent bumpiness by relaxing their legs so their knees acted as shock absorbers. Overhead handrails helped steady them in the turbulence. *I am one with the Force.*

The communicator in Kel’s ear beeped. “*Padawans: a rapid deployment air assault delivers Jedi units into the middle of a hot zone.*” The Jedi Master instructor co-piloted a blue Brakebug, flying alongside and supervising the loose grouping of blocky ships. “*A high speed/low altitude approach impedes the enemy’s tracking ability.*”

A formation of four thundering Addis hugged the geography of the planet.

“Focus on the moment before the floodgates open and you step out.”

Some students double-checked gear and straightened one-piece black jumpsuits so that the cloth would not bunch upon exiting.

“Use the Force to slow your fall...but not so much that you become a floating target.”

Zennon Tannerum stood in the other column, also bouncing around.

Kel inhaled. *I am one with the Force.* She exhaled. *The Force is with me.* Her right hand gripped the handrail. The rest of her body stayed loose, ready for whatever the rough air brings.

The Addis shot hard left—then right again, climbing and diving before leveling out.

One pilot’s voice crackled over the intercom. “*Drop zone ahead. Countdown.*”

The cabin light flashed green.

“Floodgates in five...four...” The co-pilot’s voice, higher-pitched than the pilot’s, squawked over the static-filled intercom. “*...three...two...*”

Eyes wide open, Kel shifted her stance to turn her body aft a few degrees. Per her training, her right hand stayed positioned on the hilt of the unlit lightsaber hanging from her belt.

“...one...floodgates...”

The fast-moving door didn’t even finish opening upward before Kel stepped out. At an angle, her left boot’s push-off launched the Padawan away. This rearward jump killed most of her forward momentum before the drop began.

A brief pause. Then, gravity. Windblasts battered her body—sensations she did not allow to cloud her thoughts. Her left hand, parallel to the surface of the approaching planet, counteracted the force of gravity with the Force. Not falling, not floating, she closed with the surface below.

By the time the unseen Republic sharpshooter had begun to squeeze the trigger, Kel had already unhooked her curved-hilted weapon. The incoming laser bolt heading for her mid-section met unbending blue light instead.

She kept the glowing sword ready as her two brown boots hit the dirt. Four steps backward—now she and the other Padawans in her three-person combat team created a formation that maximized protection. Backs turned inward and blades outward, they trisected the fire zone. Each Padawan needed to only focus on one-third of the threat area, the other two also doing the same. If need be, the air assault team could form up with others or function on its own.

Lungs heaving, her eyes darted all around her landing zone trisection. The collective buzz, generated by so many Kyhber crystals in such close proximity, owned her hearing.

“Padawans...stand fast.” The booming voice over the loudspeaker.

The combined powering down of weapons brought back the sounds of winds and creatures native to the wilderness region. Kel took stock of her teammates and smiled. Sixteen teams of three, ready for the next phase of a battle.

Wincing. A male voice.

“Tannerum.” The speaker’s loudness cut into the moment.

Zennon, dressed like every other Padawan, stepped forward. He held his side, the larger of the two rips in his jumpsuit. Eyes forward, standing rigid, he sounded off. “Yes, instructor.”

While the training rounds that the Republic used for these exercises were not deadly like blaster shots, the weaker slugs could rip clothing, as Zen’s jump gear now proved.

“Everyone, if this instructive evolution were a fight...say on Cantio...your insertion would be minus at least one combat team because Tannerum let his concentration falter.”

The subject of the verbal lashing did not show any emotion as the dressing down continued. Kel kept her gaze on the ground. Not too long ago, Zennon was finishing up a deployment in another star system. And his brother Beddu, as well as Mimms, was still alive.

What was once a light string of green foothills had been built up into an artificial plateau that rose from the river’s edge. The hemisphere’s primary spaceport, the twenty-story-tall umbrella-like structure behind her, sat atop ruins of a society whose origins stretched back to Coruscant’s early periods, before the system and the Galaxy made contact. While Dilani Vestagon waited for the fellow believer’s flight to arrive, she took in the expanses of Coruscant City and Federal City from the higher point.

Sections of cityscape seemed ready to rumble away from the surface. New construction shot to the cloudy sky all around, though a few green spaces held firm among the commercial and residential zones. While both shores had long since been developed, the ruined tributary still managed to cut through it all. Bridges spanning the disgusting water stretched out to the spaceport complex from surrounding city sections.

Air cars buzzed by as ground-traveling cars traversed the roads. To shut out traffic, the Sith devotee leaned over the railing to peer down at the sickly stream below, her mind on the past. Careful not to mess up her outfit, she stared at murky water that once held the power to feed the people who lived here. Long ago, a fortress sat along the river’s bend in the section of town now called Riverbend. The woman in this castle went by the name Nefari. *Ignoramuses who use this spaceport have no idea.*

More and more, Dilani found herself severing ties with classmates and caregivers who raised her. So many did not matter any longer. Compared to the enormity of the dark side, piddly relationships seemed insignificant. She had no desire to know the latest Academius gossip,

which classmate said what unkind thing about whom. These days, she spent evenings learning about science, magick, alchemy, art, nature, long-dead titans and their fiery followers.

Zoning and reflecting on a dark lord's autobiography she just finished, *Nefari at Twilight*, she did not notice her colleague walking up.

"Dilani Vestagon, lovely and talented Medic, I can't tell you how gorgeous you look."

"Speak for yourself, handsome." She hadn't even finished turning around as the words came out of her mouth. Stepping to, she ran her gloved fingers along the new arrival's sleeve. "You didn't buy this gorgeous blue cloak just for me, did you?"

Huedd Kallatrian answered with a blush. Her light hug ignited his spark once again. "To suggest that you chose such flattering attire on my account would be taking it too far, I'm sure."

The woman half his age gave his elbow a squeeze. "Don't be so sure."

Pulling away from him while smoothing out her purple midi dress over her mid-section and hips, Dilani led the way. "So, I assume your flight was uneventful?"

"We encountered a mild disruption in hyperspace." The Phase One Medical Officer's feet carried him wherever she went. "But the pilots handled the rockiness wonderfully."

A wide walkway lined the edge of the plateau. The path itself was never popular with pedestrians so the associates had no distractions and attentions could remain on one another. The lifelong bachelor did not miss a chance to steal looks. On the space station, she dressed in drab, loose-fitting medical scrubs. Now her calves teased, taking their turns being exposed by the front and back slits in her outfit as her black heels stepped.

For the fourth time since they hugged, he straightened his new tunic.

"Handsome Huedd..." She giggled. "We need to celebrate a job well done."

His step grew more animated as they made their way towards the tall central bridge. "I have to say, this is a nice surprise. Our rapport on the *Horizon*...I was wondering."

She gave him a playful nudge. "I was thinking of the mission. Valkanna."

"Ah, yes. You were a novice...nervous...probably feeling helpless as anything."

"I could not have gotten through this first mission without you."

"Oh, Dilani." Her quick hand caress gave him a charge. "Your beautiful heart, so big and tender, so...devoted to a dark side that you barely underst—"

"Look...a flock of winged chrysinthia." Breaking away, his former underling pointed at the sky. A grouping of twenty or so reptilian creatures made few attempts to flap their nearly-transparent wings because the stiff breeze did all the work of keeping their bodies airborne. "Shrik Priestesses of Malastare believe that chrysinthia bring good luck."

"Of course." Huedd scoffed at the flight above. "Those hack 'priestesses' as you call them *would* believe in luck. Beings unaware of the Force rely on false devices like luck and chance and pray to 'gods' that are nothing but extensions of their worst selves."

"So animated." His associate pinched him. "Does the thought of...converting a tribe of non-believer priestesses to the dark side of the Force excite you?"

"Well, aren't you randy?" Emboldened, a walk became a strut. "Been reading the love sonnets of Sabotaa and Paryah, have we?"

"Actually, I have been reading some of Famne's poetry, along with *Nefari at Twilight*." She reached into her fur-lined purse and for her tube of gloss. Her gaze stayed on him as she applied the quintaberry color to her lips.

"Darth Famne..." He snickered. "I'd never want to make that fiery, little woman angry. You know...you're cunning and alluring enough to be one of her spies."

“Quim-Na...the one you call Mattias’ ‘pet’...she told me the same thing.” She winked. The view of environmental destruction caught her fancy again. “Famne was fiery. But while the Poet lashed out when she needed to make a point, her hypnotic skills were her greatest asset.”

“Indeed. The Poet made many do whatever she wanted. She and The Healer were similarly gifted when it came to mental manipulation, though Sabotaa’s gift transformed a person’s idea of reality rather than controlled their actions like Famne’s.” Now by her side, he also watched a mid-sized freighter come in for an approach, a meandering glide path. “After the Poet’s death, followers formulated the potion Famnessence as a tribute, in case you didn’t know...it’s not on the level of the Poet’s powers, mind you, but it works. I’ve seen it used.”

“I might have read that the drug is potent, yes.” While he was pontificating, she had reached into her bag for a little pink bottle with a spritzer on top. “Look at me.”

As told, the excited darksider turned, his eyes on her purple lips first, then her gaze. The cap was off the spritzer and she held it up at him. Wetting her lips, she said, “Open...”

He gave her a wink. “I freshened up before exiting the spacecraft. But...if you insist.” As told, he leaned down a bit and relaxed his jaw. She hit the button on the device once. The quick-acting mist left the nozzle and entered his body between his two accommodating lips.

After hiccupping, Huedd stood tall, shoulders back. Both feet together, his wide eyes now fixed on a point of the crowded landscape stretching out before him.

“Famnessence also comes in aerosol form, Huedd. In case you didn’t know.” Cap back on the bottle, Dilani put the illegal toxin back in her purse. Noticing his dilating eyes—a good sign—she took his right arm. Passersby would see two people a moment away from an embrace.

“Easy...” Dilani steadied the unsure steps. Leading, her fingers around his, the recent initiate walked the longtime member over to the ledge. “The river below...Darth Nefari’s favorite place. The dark side is all around us, Huedd.”

“Yes, Dilani. The dark side *is* all around us...I feel it.” Swagger gone, his two feet shuffled forward. A hand met the black railing. Since he was ordered to, he stared at the river. “That river was where Nefari centered herself. Camping by its shores, casting nets for food.”

His former direct report pretended to take in the sights. “Her ancestral village is not far, just down the way from here. You could drop in and say hello...just a suggestion...”

“I could drop in from above...” His darting glances followed her finger as it motioned towards the central bridge which was a good, but still manageable, stroll.

“Yes, Huedd. Like one of Darth Agon’s Force-sensitive assassins...”

“Yes, like Darth Agon himself...” As droplets of sweat on his forehead began to show, his blank stare studied the suspended span, a downward-sloping arc. “That walkway...the ruins of the Enforcer’s ancestral home are below it, if you didn’t know.”

“Wow...Huedd, you’re right. And you could fly in from above and surprise her.”

“I know. I know I’m right. I know. I should drop in, say hello.” Without looking away, he wiped the sweatiness from his face using the sleeve of his pressed coat.

“Ohhh...she would love that.”

Huedd didn’t return her giant hug. His searching eyes locked on the bridge.

“Why not reflect on the immensity of the Force?”

“I am one with the Force. And the Force is with me.”

Dilani backed away to the walking path. “Yes...repeat those timeless words another...2000 times, or until the sun sets, whichever comes first. Then head to the bridge and drop in like you’re a Force-sensitive assassin instead of an over-the-hill schlub.”

The busy skyline caught the drugged one’s attention as he recited and recited.

Nearing the quiet accessway, the new Scholar turned around one last time. “Our wise teachers say hello...and goodbye. Both of them thank you. The wife wanted me to pass on that you were knowledgeable and curious and hardworking. Future believers will speak of you.”

Huedd did not turn around to see his old employee cross a ramp, one which led to the transportation deck where she would hail a transport. He grinned at endless construction. “I am one with the Force. The Force is with me.”

Chapter Four

The light stung. Her bloodshot eye scanned the sparse room anyway.

Pristine, white walls. A white ceiling. A circular lighting fixture bringing an intense and constant presence. One wall's seamlessness interrupted by a sliding door. Its tiny button blended in with the one-color color scheme as well.

As Sylmonica Valkanna acclimated, she took stock of her surroundings. All was fuzzy. Flat. The functioning eyelid trembled less as the fuzziness diminished. The flatness remained.

Four times in her life, she had woken up in rooms just like this. The other three could be interchangeable with this one. Her bewildered mind could not tell how far or near these points were in relation to each other but still knew that this was a sterile environment meant to protect vulnerable beings in weakened states from invisible killers like germs and viruses. As little as Syl comprehended right now, she was confident that this was an Academius medical facility. Its institutional air reassured her that she did not become one with the Force.

Blackness overtook the left portion of her line of sight. A dull ache on her left temple. The bandages on that side of her face itched. Neither hand had the strength to scratch.

The watery-eyed Padawan who had been sitting at her bedside shot up from his chair. Before he could summon an Academius professional, her scratchy voice gave him pause. He wiped his eyes with the back of his robe as he turned away from the door.

"No, Zennon. Stay—" She had trouble determining the distance from her to him.

"Are you okay?" Worn-out eyes now beaming, Zennon Tannerum touched the edge of her bed with his fingers.

Syl nodded. Though her face was gaunt, seeing his giant grin lit her up. "Let me wake more before docs come in...poke and prod."

"A few more minutes of peace and quiet...never a bad thing." The teen sat back down in the little chair and reached for her hand. "It is so good to hear your voice, Syl."

Two days ago, medical personnel removed the last of the tubes from her body, save for the nutrient drip. Brain scans looked positive. Worries about neurological damage had passed.

Her left hand reached out to rest in his.

"They restricted access to your room when you first arrived. Everyone was worried."

She looked at the bags under his eyes, her fingers caressing his fingers. "I'm sorry about Beddu. And Mimmsy."

"You remember?" Zennon squeezed her hand. "And Thia and Makk?"

She nodded. "Also...you and Kel did good. Solid. Here we are."

"Well, we all need to thank Web and Grimesy." Zennon proceeded to explain how the miner pilots rescued them after commandeering the third patroller.

Syl's right eyelid fluttered to a close, only to open. This cycle repeated.

Taking her weakening hand in his hands again, Zennon said, "And everyone needs to thank *you* for bothering Supply Command to get spare parts for that 'Bug.'"

Syl blinked her eye. She had trouble following his last sentence.

"I still don't think any of this is real." He stood up as if to go, then stopped to glance around the windowless, picture-free room. "Me and my brother—all of us—we'll wake up on the *Horizon* and go to work. Thia and Makk and Mimms will be there."

The fading Knight observed anxious footsteps. His pacing, different than his easygoing demeanor on board the HQ ship. If anything, Beddu was the more serious of the two. Syl's right

eye nodded off, then sprung open before the drowsiness again set in. Her head listing to the left side of her pillow, she offered a weak smile.

“Rest up, Syl.”

She didn’t hear the young one’s words or see him get up to leave.

Syl’s right hand unhooks her brushed-metal-paneled light saber from her utility belt and holds it out to the side of her right hip. Her eyes squint from the sunlight. But she still sees them.

Thia and Makk, both dressed in dirty long pants and shirts. Standing at the opposite end of this dilapidated rooftop. Thia’s thick hair is blowing with the wind gust. Makk’s black fur rustles as well. The tentative looks on their faces tell Syl that Thia and Makk are conscripts. Syl senses more fear than anger from both of them. Neutralize their threat possibilities so she can focus on one of the countless other current threats—that’s what she requests of the Force.

Because Thia and Makk keep their blaster barrels pointed downward, Syl does not light her blue saber. If they continue to stay non-violent, she will reach inside her tunic to grab the nutrition bars she had brought along with her earlier.

Syl’s eyes blink. When they open, all she sees is black.

Blaster fire. Explosions, all around the settlement—she can still hear everything.

Thia and Makk’s laughter—now louder and more grating.

A detonation in the next village over interrupts the condescending fits of chuckles.

Syl hits the switch on her light saber. Near the village’s trash depot—while Syl can’t visualize it in this particular dream, she has seen it transform into a deafening fireball before.

Syl’s thumb flicks the switch on her saber. The village’s medical facility comes apart.

Syl’s thumb flicks the switch again and obliterates the tower. She can’t see it this time, but the details are clear. Memories she does not want fill her in.

Thia and Makk can’t contain the pity. They laugh harder.

Syl blinks. Eyesight returned, her dead Padawan friend Rohandra Teek—dressed in full Jedi robes covered in blood like her green skin—stands with the other two and laughs at Syl.

Thia and Makk are now dressed in Jedi robes splattered with their red blood. The three distinct voices meld, guffaws and chuckles morphing into ugly shouts of disdainful laughter.

Syl looks down. Instead of a straight-hilted Jedi weapon, she is holding a crudely-fashioned remote detonator, cylindrical and rust-covered.

The laughter from across the rooftop intensifies and floods Syl’s ears.

Before she can stop herself, her right index finger triggers the device again. All goes black. Her ability to hear vanishes as well.

The Rees’ stone deck bathed in the softening light. A mix of screeches and caws interrupted the stillness caused by a late afternoon winding down into dusk. With so many flora types in bloom, the manicured gardens and forest behind the estate’s main house attracted a wide variety of fauna. This time of year, servants kept busy with shooting, trapping, and carcass disposal. The estate’s owners insisted on keeping their perfectly-arranged plants, bushes, and trees as vermin- and insect-free as possible.

“To youth. To Dilani Vestagon. Her second task, completed to perfection like the first. Our rising star.”

The other three answered Mattias’ toast by raising their crystals. “Dilani.”

The five Scholars reclined on couches and oversized chairs that formed a circle around a small round bonfire pit, unlit.

“I’m honored.” The special one rewrapped her purple robe around her body and kicked off fluffy slippers before sitting down and taking a sip from her crystal glass. “I am honored to have been entrusted with the task of helping Huedd part ways with our future and—”

“I am at ease and enjoying the quiet, that’s what *I* am.” Quim-Na Sulif yawned. “Sorry for being rude and cutting you off, rising star.”

Lying on a red couch, Quim-Na reached over to grab her handcrafted pipe from the table and took a few puffs. Right as Dilani was about to speak again, she talked over her. “So refreshing to not breathe in that polluted city air.”

The Scholar Emerita sat upright next to her husband on the deck arrangement’s smallest couch. “So, it is...everyone is at ease...”

She had been viewing the green foothills and looked over at the Scholars Sergeant-At-Arms dozing in his oversized chair. “Speaking of which, this news should make you rest even easier, Tramm. Our Senate connection informed me that, in retaliation for the drone strikes, the Jedi received quiet clearance to hunt down the remnants of your former adversaries’ armies.”

“Let’s hope for many casualties.” Eyes closed, he let out a yawn. “On both sides.”

The Scholar Emeritus let out a hearty laugh while giving his wife a squeeze. “The Jedi Council fears that the Republic perceives them as weak for failing to protect the colonists. Their political allies within the system are pushing the Jedi to make a stand, for appearance’s sake.”

“They feel like they got caught when they weren’t looking.” His wife held out her crystal to be refilled. Mattias also topped off Dilani’s. “When, in reality, they weren’t given authority to watch over those workers anyway.”

Mattias laughed. “Let them bring unnecessary guilt upon themselves.”

“Jedi are cruel...taking children at such young ages.” Quim-Na fiddled with a metal ornament that had been sitting on the table by her pipe. “Valkanna never knew that her family were devout followers of the Archangels of Odessen.”

She twirled the star-shaped object in her fingers before holding it up to the setting sun.

Scholar Emeritus nodded. “Ahhh...So that’s why you have been fooling with one of their silly Prayer Stars—I thought you had rejected the Force or something, my dear.”

Four of the group chuckled. Quim-Na, the only one who didn’t laugh, delivered a quick reply. “Oh...followers of the Archangels are true believers in the Force.”

She leaped up from the couch to strut. “They even deify some Jedi and Sith. They—”

The Scholar Emerita spat her disgust. “Pacifism? Pathetic. Speak no more of this.”

Zinora rose and strode over to the wall. Perfect rows of bushes and plants, their bright colors too perfectly aligned. “The important thing, devoted and loyal Scholar, is that you feel ready to make contact with Sylmonica Valkanna. Do you?”

The elder turned around to make her point. “Now that she’s awake, it’s your turn—”

“I am ready, Zinora.” Quim-Na downed her full drink, maintaining her glare the whole time, even afterward as she cast the glass aside and wiped her mouth. To the sound of her glass breaking, she strode away, back indoors to her suite of rooms four floors up from this stone terrace. “Which happens to be the same answer I gave the last four times you asked in that condescending tone of voice.”

V: Archangels

Chapter One

Invaders from the Republic stayed on the attack.

With a once-dominant criminal empire in turmoil, a seasoned fighter stepped up to coordinate an escape from this wilderness moon in the Iakar System. Unlike anybody else, he had a plan. An evacuation plan—away from the Outer Rim, to a safe haven in Wild Space.

His underlings summoned remaining soldiers to the makeshift headquarters, a run-down storage bay near the waste disposal complex. Too beaten to stand, a few of the toughs leaned on one another under flickering ceiling lights. Blasters and rifles, covered in grease and dirt, lay everywhere. Bandages and field dressings had come undone. Whether it was weapons or wounds, battered beings did not care to clean them.

Hoping to reduce his pain, the new leader loosened the buckles on the rusty chestplate with his green claw while issuing his first order. “Quit wondering why this is happening. It’s happening.”

Two tired, beady eyes reviewed ninety-odd assassins and mercenaries. A fresh hit of chest throbbing caused his lower set of nostrils to flare. “We’ll use back alleys, small teams. Disappear into the foothills and forest, wait it out on the far side of the wilderness.”

The makeshift battalion rounded up their gear. The path out of town proved to be slow-going, but they kept heading. The terrain was arduous. Still, two days later, the fighters had left the foothills behind and now slogged through a dense forest that led to the high plains.

Not too far above treeline, aircraft from the Republic fleet flew at high speeds. By remaining so low, waves of engine noise bounced off the planet’s surface.

The exhausted commander stopped his quick-time pace. This fast halt brought a string of worn-out followers to a standstill, with the oblivious ones stumbling.

“You hear that?” He slammed the legs of the metal tripod in the mud while loosening his armor’s straps and pointing a filthy glove at a late-afternoon sky covered by an olive-red canopy of branches and oversized palm leaves. “We need to pick up our speed.”

Screams produced by neutron-fusion engines rumbled all around, growing more intense by the moment, then waning—only to become louder again. Looking up, the only thing any of the worn-out survivors could see was a cover of vegetation.

“With all due respect, it’ll be nightfall soon.” The youngest of the mercenaries wiped mud from his purple fur. “Captain: we have energizers and ammo. I say we dig in.”

He was the son of a revered mercenary, now dead. Being so muscular, the once-eager rookie had been tasked with carrying the blaster that fit on top of his new captain’s tripod. Remaining careful to keep the bulky gun out of the mud, he huffed while waiting for a response.

Machine-generated noise from overhead threatened to increase, only to start decreasing.

The one who reluctantly took charge of this getaway three days ago spat on the ground. After staring at his green blood long enough, he said, “Form a perimeter.”

Excited, everyone mustered energy from themselves as they unslung blasters and launchers. Bits of moldy food got passed around.

The younger fighter grabbed the tripod and set up the rig with practiced competence. After clamping the energy seals tight, he gave the twin-barrels a spin. Blue lights on the console lit up. As assistant gunner, he readied to spot targets.

At least one aircraft made itself known overhead. The noise level thundered. Here and there, squawks and shrieks from wildlife disturbed the uneasy silence.

Pointing the side-by-side barrels toward the green clearing, the grizzled gunner slapped his assistant on the back. The two of them searched their field of fire.

All waited in a circle, backs to the middle, business ends of weapon systems outward.

A flash brightened the foggy grayness with a turquoise glow.

Too late, too few of the fighters looked up. Those who did saw that the sudden light change came from a mix of green and blue light sabers.

The Addi co-pilot hit the switch and both side doors on the troop carrier opened.

Twelve Jedi dove out headfirst, six from each side. All ignited sabers immediately.

With the Addi engines' overbearing noise providing cover, most everybody on the ground failed to hear two Masters and ten Knights slice through the forest canopy from above.

Upon carving a hole through the highest branches and visualizing the threat that the Force had already shown, one of the Masters flung her double-sided weapon at an arc of the perimeter as she fell to the ground. The Force helped her aim the spinning energy disc straight at the fire teams. It tore through every outlaw in its path.

The bottoms of the Master's brown boots touched the mud as her long, straight-handled hilt, now unlit, boomeranged back to its place in her waiting left hand. Even though she was missing two fingers, the Master had no problem catching it and reigniting one of the blue blades before pivoting to take out five more adversaries.

A fighter's own blaster bolt split his forehead. While he was falling, the mid-level Jedi Knight who ended his life decapitated his two partners and was seeking out the next adversary.

She shifted to her right to back up another Jedi Knight, also a human, who screamed at the opposite side of the perimeter as loud as his lungs allowed him to scream. "Dismount now."

Side by side, sabers lit, the two Jedi charged the tripod-mounted blaster.

An old gunner and young assistant gunner—as beaten up as all the others—fixed the twin-blasters on the incoming duo. The first burst killed eight comrades instead. The second took out another five after the volley of red energy bolts bounced off of the energy blades. A third never happened. Body parts and body armor splashed in the mud.

With no ADDI aircraft nearby, hums and hisses flooded the ears of the dying. Whether they worked in teams or solo, twelve experienced Jedi neutralized the threat. Except for a Senior Knight who took a shot in his shoulder, none of the air assault squad sustained wounds. As per their pre-strike briefing, they used the sneak attack to act with extreme prejudice which minimized suffering. The last criminal perished not long after the first.

Receiving a nod from his superior, the mission's deputy hollered the operational detail's mission name, followed by the command to stand fast. "Razor Team...strike."

Beams died out, darkening the forest. The undulating, improvised song that had been emanating from a collective of sabers came to its end. Smoke from the battle hung in the air.

Jedi in fighting stances now stood upright. To a person, each used their vision to absorb their surroundings. Until now, their adrenaline-fueled focus had been a mix of mission-focused mindsets and semi-meditative states. Most noted the stillness, always an opportunity to listen to the Force. Not even a slight wind offered noise. None of the targets were breathing any longer.

With the fight over, the Master who neutralized the arc of the perimeter untied the knot that kept her graying hair in a bun. Thick locks fell down, waist-length.

One mud-covered Knight cracked his neck while stretching. The Knight standing next to him laughed as she brushed clods from her black jumpsuit. "Admit it: you're getting old, Coll."

The slight human resumed stretching. "Time is a fabrication, Pennu."

Pennu Zannel rolled her eyes at Coll Clawson as she bent down to examine the body of a fighter. "You sound like my Learnership Master."

Standing upright again, she brushed away clumps of sweaty, darkish hair. The fingers left streaks of dirt and covered up the scar on that cheek. She held up the piece of jewelry that the dead one had been clasping. "Master: is this a Prayer Star? Archangels are peaceful."

"Archangelism inside the Republic differs from some offshoots that flourish out here, Pennu." The Master held the Prayer Star up, sneering at the expensive gems that decorated its front side. "Most Archangels of Odessen would frown upon such opulence."

She studied this symbol, her eyes narrowing. "Hijacking peaceful religions to repackage violent visions by exploiting the familiar is a story that has been unfortunately told and re-told...since the times of the ancients."

She handed the Prayer Star back to Pennu and gathered the Jedi around. "Months ago, a criminal army 2000 strong showed up at this peaceful settlement. While they may not have been the operational planners, these killers made the enterprise function. Along with the drone strikes, they robbed, assaulted...treated this place like their waste facility." She nodded at her second.

"Just to entertain their sick minds, this gang would threaten settlers by saying they'd sell them off to slave brokers." The bald, bantam Master who called the operation over strode in his own circle. Emotionless, he made eye contact with species of Knights, born in different places but with the same connection to the Force. With a pause, his brown eyes grew soft. "If nothing else, citizens of this independent colony will go to sleep tonight without worry."

"For those Jedi who feel like Republic policy ties our hands with slavers and less-reputable interests, I hope you feel good right now. I do. These were their business associates."

Wafting smells of incense and smokable herbs from above meandered downward to the gallery below the penthouse. Senator Zayonus Horkuk yelled out as he and the other well-dressed gentleman his age neared the top of the smoking lounge's spiral staircase. "Hello, Zinora my lovely...you too, Mattias...oh how I have missed the view of our sprawling city from up here."

While straightening his red sash over his prodigious belly, the Senator from the Kuat System led the skinnier man up to a scenic space he had not seen in years.

"You're the one who has always been too busy, Zayo, not us." Mattias Ree had spent the late afternoon enjoying the sight of freshly-fed plankto-squids changing colors as they danced in their wall-to-wall tank. He puffed on a long stem pipe.

"My husband is right, Senator." Dressed for the occasion in robes and a jewel-lined tiara, Zinora Ree couldn't keep her eyes off the lounge's latest addition. The work of art had remained inside a sealed storage case on the couple's fathier ranch in the Corellian highlands for years. Feeling nostalgic, she ordered it shipped to Coruscant City. The animal skin, a long-dead artist's canvas, stretched between two vertical stanchions that almost touched the glass ceiling.

The Senator and his expressionless associate walked up to her side. Zayo's hand fiddled with the shiny pendant around his neck while he took in the simple work. "Hmmm, I will assume that you two ventured to some backwater art auction and discovered a find that the not-as-astute attendees all missed, am I right?"

Since the Scholar Emerita had not viewed it for so long, the artist's sparing rendering of Darth Sabotaa's unlit saber enthralled like it was a new purchase. She had to take it in again second before replying, her eyes not moving. "This piece has been in my family for years."

Born into high society, Sabotaa constructed her saber after being excommunicated from a strict religious community that scoffed at the Force. The gold leafing that covered the curved handle did not come across in this one-colored art. But, at times of the day, outside light would shine through the animal skin to infuse the sparingly-drawn weapon with a sense of luminosity and heat. Shifting her gaze from it and looking past Zayo, Zinora extended her ring-covered hand to the silent one, who also appeared to love expensive cloth and jewelry. "This is overdue."

"A long-overdue introduction, Zinora Ree, indeed. You as well, good sir." Upon taking her hand, Besson Overtanos removed the red skullcap and held it to his breastpocket. The business tycoon acknowledged Mattias before putting his hat back on. His thin lips finally showed their ability to smile. "Darksiders have been respected by my extended family tree in all sections of the Galaxy for centuries."

Mattias flashed a huge grin. "Your ancestors were some of the dark side's silent partners during the last civil war, providing financial infusions at key moments."

"Indeed, they did. And if there is a beyond, my people are happy we are talking tonight."

"To think of the beyond as a place..." Giggling, Zinora patted his hand. "My dear guest, your ancestors are one with the Force now." Her bony fingers didn't release their grip.

"Followers of the Force live out our existence on this plane knowing that it's just a passage." Joining the circle, her husband placed his right hand on Besson's shoulder before removing it.

As the host stepped away to the long bar to mix drinks, the hostess walked one guest by his elbow towards the view of the cityscape while leaving the other guest alone.

"Nearly a millennia ago, ancestors of mine supplied the raw ore which got used to build that entire neighborhood's earlier levels." The business clan's chieftain pointed through the windows. The upper-middle-class section of Federal City now consisted mainly of conical high-rises topped off with communications antennae adorned with blinking hazard lights. "From the support superstructures constructed over the top of the old slums upward."

"Those were the days before Coruscant began to frown upon the use of slave labor."

"My family solves problems, no problem too tough. Slave labor is but one solution." The stare held, his little mouth expression-free once again.

"Your industrious family helped make the Kuat System what it is today."

"Indeed. Only now, with business so diversified, Kuat is nothing more than a centralized location for clan gatherings. My own children barely know the star system of their heritage."

"Forget Kuat, Besson." From across the lounge, Mattias sounded off as he placed drinks on the marble bar top. "You have more in common with, say, a churla-fruit cartel based on the opposite side of the Republic, or those who inherit the rights to a hyperspace lane, than Kuatis. The concerns of a water reseller or construction worker are not your concerns."

"I'll go one further: I have more in common with those of means who are *not* citizens of the Republic than I have with the vast majority of citizens in the Republic. As do both of you."

Zinora led her new friend towards the bar where refreshments awaited. "The cartel system is effective because all of you leaders, from food and textiles to mining and shipping, all look out for one another's interests. Various sects of the dark side look out for one another, too."

Mattias handed over chilled glasses. "Like you, we dark siders operate beyond the Republic."

“I know. Republic boundaries and our boundaries are not the same.” After a discerning sip, Besson nodded an approval at the drink’s maker. “Now your people and mine here inside the Republic need to work on persuading government to see the bigger picture.”

Upon removing his own glass off of the bar top, the Kuat Senator back-peddled to take a seat on the couch behind the others, who did not take notice.

“The Senate thinks that no one knows about Jedi operating extra-judicially outside of our territory.” A captain of many industries held his glass up to admire the blue color in the light. “Someone will exploit this politically, when the time is right.”

Mattias sampled his concoction. “Many independent systems that complain about the meddling are going to be in the Senate one day anyway. I say get used to Jedi.”

“More systems are a good thing.” Besson strode the bar area. “Welcome every religion, while the Republic is at it. Draft official documents that make it so. Myself and those like myself love the idea of an accepting, familial collection of star systems. How uplifting.”

Zinora sneered at the Senator fixating on the aquatic tank. “Agreed. People value hope.”

“Citizens have more influence than they know. Take the slavery issue: Kuatis would not approve, so we do not use slave labor in Kuat enterprises. Not a battle worth fighting right now.”

“Many like Mattias and I understand completely. My ancestors made their fortune in textiles using forced labor, his owned plantations that provided poorer workers with an affordable smoking luxury. We know the traditional future you envision.”

“We do. And it’s time for solidarity, Besson.” Mattias frowned at the other guest. A wealthy representative who received tens of millions of votes sat on the edge of a plush couch pretending not to hear. “Senator, why not wait downstairs? Besson will be along.”

While heading towards the top of the spiral staircase, Zayonus Horkuk talked over his shoulder. “Perhaps we will all meet up again sometime—”

“Thank you.” Zinora sipped her drink, her eyes staying with the visitor who mattered.

After the Senator had descended the stairs and walked out of earshot, Mattias said, “When you and your associates push for the first planet-harvesting contract utilizing forced labor, be assured: you will find many of our friends comprehend the economics.”

“You two have heard rumors about me. Now you are talking to me. I’ll lay out my planet-harvesting ideal: a thirty-year government contract with tax concessions, unpaid labor in the mineral extraction, Jedi protecting it all to minimize operational expenses even further. Post-production, owners of the raw product set prices and elected officials support it.”

Besson Overtanos gave them both a friendly hug, his most positive and animated display of emotion yet. “Sure, that’s a lot to wish for. But I dream big.”

Chapter Two

High above the Coruscant City skyline, the wind's chill energized. Fresh air filled her lungs. The light cloud cover did its job to reduce the glare barraging her sensitive eyesight. On the negative side, the unfamiliar black eyepatch still itched. With no depth perception, the buildings all looked to be the same distance, even though she knew some were closer than others.

Sylmonica Valkanna turned to ArraKel Kitaros, who had stopped by the facility. "It may be a bit too cared for, but this roof garden has been a nice escape from that stale air."

The last time Kel visited, Syl's head was bandaged and she couldn't leave her bed. To be greeted in the lobby and led up here was a wonderful surprise for the overwhelmed Padawan.

"They look nice and smell amazing, but nope." Nose scrunching, Kel surveyed a colorful, ordered landscape design that covered the confined rooftop space. "The too-perfect alignment stifles the Force. I sense it."

The patient walked with a cane, still not used to the two-dimensional view. The student had a few evaluations today, which didn't go well. Exhausted friends who had been strolling the gravelly paths at a cautious pace now took a rail spot on one side of the octagonal building.

Kel turned away from the vegetation to observe the cityscape view from this new point. "But you're looking good to go, Syl."

"Thanks."

"I say bust out tonight."

"It hurts my head when I laugh. But don't tempt me."

The forests of the preserve were in the distance. With few buildings standing as tall as this one in between, the canopy of greenness seemed to cut a path through the development, though the opposite was happening, in reality. Syl had trouble visualizing how far away the natural park was, but could gather an idea of it from memory. She scratched her temple above the healing wound, to the side of her eyepatch.

The gardens were quiet, only a few Academius Medical staff up here.

"I'm worried about Zennon." Kel fiddled with the sleeves on her brown dress robes.

"He's got it tough." Syl gazed at the Jedi temple spires, small and far away. "So tough. A Padawan's final year is challenging, regardless. But he's facing something else entirely."

"That none of us have faced." The student frowned at endless construction. "Before, he and I bonded because, during Learnership, neither of us got along with our Masters. We'd talk about it. That all seems like another life. An easy one."

Kel's shaking overtook her. "Now I know he's in pain but I don't know how to help."

Syl hugged the collapsing one tight, her gaze on the landscape.

"This is so hard, Syl. And...like...he's fading, but I have to be there for him. Which is so tough." Her sobbing gained steam. "No one gets it...none of our classmates do."

Her cries stayed loud and Syl steadied the shaking teen.

"They get it, in their own ways. I get it. So does Russ." Syl held the trembling young woman tight. "So does Zennon. He's grieving and I know he values your presence in his life."

Once Kel got the tears out, the two watched the day become evening.

They stayed quiet until Kel spoke again, shaking her head. "In other news about ArraKel Kitaros' life: the Internal Review team won't leave me alone about...the forward cargo hold."

"Russ told me. I hope that's okay." Syl let out a long exhale. "And the Council stands by while mining execs obstruct the investigation. There's something wrong with us, Kel. Jedi talk."

“IR says that an experienced Jedi would somehow have—what? Saved the lives of dead people?” A small snuffle left Kel. “I tried talking to Zen about this and could use his backup.”

“He needs time.” She paced to stretch after weeks of being bedridden. Seeing a smile, she nudged her friend. “I could talk to him, if you want. Besides, reaching out would be good for me. I’ve been thinking about family lately, I could seek Zennon’s advice.”

“You two could help each other make sense of it. The Force aligns like that, you know.”

“So I’ve heard. Thanks for stopping by, breaking up my monotony.”

“I’d be going INSANE if I was here.”

Syl took her place by her friend on the railing. They relaxed and enjoyed their own peace. A four-plane formation of security Brakebugs angled towards the spaceport. The royal blue craft looked flat in Syl’s vision.

“Kel Kitaros: I heard you stopped by.” Dilani Vestagon yelled as she walked from the elevators. “I’d hug, but I was with a patient. A sanitized hand?”

Kel laughed and took Dilani’s handshake as the Medic joined them. Dilani nodded at Syl. “And you’re looking stronger by the day.”

“The tests and the people running those tests disagree.”

The Medic shrugged the dig off.

Kel spoke up in the silence. “I’m sorry about Huedd, Dilani. It’s been a while.”

“Thank you, Kel. It has been a minute.” After a swallow, the Medic said, “From what we’re learning, Huedd led some kind of double life. A mix of behavioral and financial problems, which he dealt with via substance abuse. I think that day was the final blow.”

She quit making eye contact and looked over the building’s railing at the plunge below. “But think about it. During Phase One, what if Huedd operated while high...or...intoxicated or whatever it is that those people do to themselves? As Academius grads, we—”

Syl touched her sleeve. “You and I talked about this before. It’s awful.”

“Sorry. Sorry, Kel. Things like an Academician endangering lives? Sorry.”

“It’s still fresh for all of us.” Kel took the Medic’s hand with her two hands.

Dilani changed the subject, straightening her blue scrubs. “Some happier news, Syl: I talked to the team installing your optics. The lens part will fit over the outside of your eyelid.”

“My left eyelid? The one that got torn apart by shreds of a rusty pipe?” She waited for the thought to sink in before flashing a smile. “I’m sorry. Thank you for the update.”

“Thank you for helping Syl, Dilani.” Kel attempted her best official-sounding voice.

“After the eyepiece is installed, Knight Valkanna, it’s off to a resort vacation for you on some exotic, high-end stay at an historic castle with a scenic view—”

“You mean some old, musty Jedi Temple, Kel?”

“I was just trying to lighten the mood.”

Dilani laughed as she walked away. “Thank you, Kel. I appreciated your humor.”

After a bit more zoning, Kel walked Syl to her room, then headed to the Jedi Complex.

Not wanting to, she stopped by the four-person bunks down the hall from her own. Zennon shared a room with three boys who, like Zennon, Kel had known since they all could remember. Like she once knew Beddu and Mimms. She knocked. Nobody was inside.

Kel’s sealed note—a quick scribble asking Zennon to talk, due to the fact that he hadn’t answered her three messages—had been moved from the place where she put it yesterday. While it sat on a dresser now instead of his bunk, it was unopened.

Throughout the Galactic Senate complex, protesters seemed to grasp where the line had been drawn. By the public park, in the main square, around the receiving gates—wherever they demonstrated, the tens of thousands of outraged citizens who descended on Federal City stepped right up to this line's edge yet did not cross over.

"These citizens' livelihoods have dwindled over the years and the bitterness is obvious. But the last two days have remained relatively peaceful, considering potential alternatives."

As the briefing for this third day of crowd control began, Jedi Masters and Chief Medics told Jedi, Medics, and peacekeeper troops seated in the auditorium staging area to realize that this line with a frustrated public did exist, almost in a physical sense.

Tiruss Dunn sat in the audience. Like the other few hundred or so present, the newly-returned Knight studied the green-and-white, two-color representation of the geographical location. Instead of riot gear, Jedi in the briefing wore standard brown robes with tan tunics underneath. Outlining the plan of the day, Masters and Chiefs brought up a video map of the government complex on the screen and pinpointed grids where the potential for violence remained high.

"...and the citizens want to be heard." Slow-moving, the Security Master stopped and leaned on his cane to complete his thought for the rows of listeners. "Before reacting, ascertain. We will be operating on the saber's edge today. Master Yadasa...feel free to add your thoughts."

"We want to send a message of good faith. That's why we aren't wearing armor." The Deputy Security Master brushed her silver locks from a serious, but empathetic stare. "Superiors tried to push back, but we stand firm. Protesters want to be treated like people, not adversaries."

As chaotic as the public spaces appeared, the Academius Medical Corps treated relatively few injuries and vandalism ranked among the worst of the problems so far.

The DSM continued, a smile growing. "These past two days of heated words have been just that: dialogue. Dialogue is healthy. Never forget. No matter a being's religion or faith or lack thereof, all of us seek communication with others."

Upon dismissing the first responders, the Security Master said, "Remember that delicate line. Also: *listen*. From my two hundred and fifty years as a Jedi, I know that ignoring people is a sure-fire way to lose them. And you're outnumbered. May the Force be with you, everyone."

Not long after the dismissal, Tiruss manned a post to the side of a wide, courtyard entrance near the Galactic Senate's central building, the one two times the size of the next largest structure and always the busiest area in the complex.

So many angry faces. The growing crowd seemed one degree away from unraveling. Small brawls that bordered on breaking out died of their own accord or after the sighting of peacekeepers. Of course, the next one seemed to already be hatching somewhere else in the mass. A slight shift and it all could mutate into a riot.

The balance. The line. Many would love to see this organism burst open.

In the middle of telling himself once again that, despite the current tension, it felt good to be operational, a shout cut through the monotone of discontented voices.

"The Republic does not care about us. We are not wealthy enough."

The woman's urgent voice came from the direction of those assembled by the stairs. From the briefing, Tiruss recognized her. True, the hair color was grayer than the picture that

accompanied her bio. But the furious human near his age, according to the briefing, was a science educator, activist, and Archangels of Odessen Cathedral teacher. Ran for local office twice and lost.

Today, she enjoyed a commanding view over the top of others' heads perched on the shoulders of a long-haired Besalisk woman who looked to be near the human's age. Wobbling, the slight teacher tried to stand up on her tall friend's wide shoulders. A naturally muscular species, the angry Besalisk used her two upper arms to grab the smaller one's calves, steadying her stance. The two lower arms, along with the fierce glare from her narrow yellow eyes, kept others from crowding in.

Seeing so many Besalisks protesting today pleased Tiruss. Their size and strength made them a target for slave traders. He traveled to the Besalisks' home planet, Ojom, many times.

Still unsteady, but now towering above the majority of the other protesters, the teacher cupped her hands to her mouth. "The Republic does not care about us."

Like a sail, her long blue trenchcoat caught the breeze. The two surged forward as much as the jam-packed area allowed. Their spirit caught on. Her words became a chant. A chant that simplified as it spread.

"The Republic does not care."

The turbulent scene stayed tense. His communicator chirped. Other sectors seemed the same, from the channel chatter. Potential energy flirting with the idea of becoming kinetic.

The squeaky voice. "You can't be a Jedi. You have horns on your head."

Turning away from the two women and peering down, Tiruss saw a child in unwashed clothes with his hands on his hips. The tiny Twi'lek scowled at the Zabrak, sizing him up.

"Well...*you* can't be a Jedi because you display such a negative attitude."

The boy shook his head. "But I'm not a Jedi like you." The two blue lekku protruding from the back of his skull continued to shake after the rest of his upper body stopped moving.

"So...are you saying that I *am* a Jedi? What's your angle here, my man?"

The little one shrugged. "I mean...*you are* wearing the robes that those weirdos wear."

"Weirdos? Ahh...I see. So—"

Before the Jedi in the weird robes could say anything else, he visualized a heavy object hitting the teacher/activist in the head and knocking her off of her friend's shoulders. The Force showed him this. The veteran Republic servant rose and stretched his right hand into the air to channel the energy field. His mind had located the object, speeding towards the protester. Then his eyes spotted it.

The youngster stood back as Tiruss Dunn concentrated.

The machine part—possibly a gear, maybe for large-format cooling processors—now hovered in the air above the crowd, half a meter behind the activist's head.

All faced forward, repeating their rally cry at the row of security guards in front of the administration building.

In tune with the Force, Tiruss floated the piece of round metal over, raising it above lines of sight. Just a few turned their gaze upward. He hurried in case more followed suit. Before the rusty gear could injure anyone, he guided it over to crunch on the tile steps. Besides the physical danger of hurting citizens, it was best to conceal the machine-tooled piece. With the tension, a misperception could spiral.

He almost signaled the Master in charge when Tiruss looked across the sea of bodies. Three Jedi, sabers in hands but unlit, had confronted a brown-furred Wookiee wearing an empty

backpack. The beast of a suspect snarled, but sized the armed guards up and thought better of it. The crowd backed away to let them remove the troublemaker.

No blasters or explosives, just garbage found in a junkyard that Jedi did not detect. The flat communicator beeped, interrupting his observation. *"Dunn: it looks like you're 100%. Myself and Master Yadasa sensed your work from here in the Command Center."*

"Thank you, Master." He had served with both Security Masters before. "I see those other Knights also sensed this gentleman's ugly plan."

"The Force was with all of you. I am already curious to know if our friend had accomplices, got hired, or acted alone. A question that seems like it has an interesting answer, don't you agree?"

"Indeed." Tiruss monitored the protest. "Many would love to see this spin out of control."

"Many. Many agendas these days."

Oblivious to the preceding few moments, the human-besalisk duo and their contingent kept demonstrating, confronting security without pressing too far. *"The Republic does not care."*

"Thank you for stepping in today last minute, Dunn. We needed help."

"I was bored out of my mind, Master Yadasa. Thank you for authorizing me."

"Well...consider yourself operational. I will put in a word for you with the Council, tell them to step up the processing. Keep us advised of the present situation."

"Yes, Master." Switching off his communicator, Tiruss took note: the metaphysical line mentioned earlier still existed. While voices were raised, fists were not. He put the communicator inside his tunic and resumed watching the crowd.

"I'm sorry, Master. I was wrong. You're a Jedi."

"I'm not a Master, my friend. Hopefully one day." He reached inside his tunic to find a pre-wrapped nutrient bar and handed it over. "Be safe, all right?"

Wrapper torn off, the kid talked through a mouthful of food. "Safe...from what?"

Chapter Three

Fascinated, Quim-Na Sulif zeroed in on the rising star's pupils racing all around the inverted night skyline. Stepping closer to the black-metal railing, the older Scholar giggled at her young associate's panicked and darting gaze. *Eyes reveal everything. All defenses shattered.*

The believer appeared to be searching every mental nook and cranny, desperate to make sense of it all. And, most likely, still unable to comprehend the reality of the here and now.

"What did I say?" A new round of shrieks punctuated the imploring screams from Dilani Vestagon's throat. "Whatever those words were—whatever I said, I am so, so sorry—so sorry."

Hanging upside down by her ankles over the deck's ledge outside of the Rees' smoking lounge more than one hundred stories up, the shivering Scholar blubbered. "What did I say?"

Tramm Nurado held Dilani's two ankles, and her fate, in his gargantuan right hand. This stretched out over the ledge of a scenic balcony that faced the spaceport umbrella. His arm, a mass of hard-earned muscles covered by fat layers and green skin, did not twitch.

Quim-Na stepped beside the warlord, a long-stem pipe made of green blown glass cradled along her folded arm. A nickname materialized out of nowhere, giving her a snicker. "Dangling Dilani...the dark side's rising star. Eliminated Huedd Kallatrian...helped us discreetly 'trim the fat' as they say...and now the Rees love you...the rising, dangling star."

Humor dying, a photogenic face that possessed the expressive power to emote happiness resumed its icy stare. From the looks of it, her sobbing victim did not even think of struggling. Of course, one look down would be all that any person would need to remain still. Dilani's silver high-heeled shoes, as well as the new green hat that accessorized her jacket and slacks, had fallen to the depths. Her hair swayed back and forth in the slight breeze.

After a puff from her pipe, Quim-Na sauntered closer to the black railing and gawked at the night, enjoying the breeze through her hair. "Such an ideal temperature this evening."

Blowing smoke in the teary-eyed face, she ran a finger across the cheek. Her almost-annoyed eyes locked on. "Tramm, how is your back feeling?"

"It aches." Tramm took a drink with his free hand. "Had a flare-up earlier today."

This news gave Dilani's whimpers power.

"An impetuous young Jedi got in a lucky shot and fractured Tramm's back, that was years ago. Long before you and I, honey, were born." Quim-Na tweaked Dilani's nose. "But the teachings tell us: pain and suffering offer paths to beings with lesser connections to the Force."

Tramm nodded. "At the epicenter of pain lies clarity of thought. In the midst of intense discomfort, an epiphany brings comfort."

"Grintada, High Priest of Korriban, in case you didn't know. Your back *is* okay, right, Tramm?"

"Let's hope. When the Jedi scamp injured me, Dilani...it...call it a moment of understanding. I could fathom how correct Mattias and Zinora were when they said to be patient and wait for the Force to offer guidance." He looked down. Two cold eyes that had witnessed hundreds die did not let go. "Beings like us are small. So small."

"Tiny, Dilani Vestagon." Quim-Na whispered, fingers running along the tear-covered cheeks. "Insignificant. You could fall to your death all those stories and splatter your young body all over the ground in a pile of mush right now and it would not matter a bit."

She took another puff and sighed. The Rees were away attending a wedding in the Kuat System, so there was no chance of this little hazing session being interrupted.

The hanging one contributed subdued hysterics to the talk.

The helplessness lost its charm. Quim-Na drew close so her scream would not have far to travel. “Are you experiencing pain and intense discomfort, precocious Dilani? Our rising star...the Scholars’ rising star...Mattias and Zinora’s rising star...are you experiencing pain and intense discomfort—answer me now. Do you see your own death out there in the cityscape?”

A quiet response. “What did I say, Quim-Na?”

Tramm held the believer’s life in his hands. More accurately, his right hand held her ankles and the two green pantlegs that covered them in its oversized grip. He snapped the fingers on his free hand. “You with us, Dilani?”

Quim-Na headed towards the deck’s sliding glass doors. “Bring whimper-girl inside.”

The aquarium filled the wall on the opposite side of the room. In between, the etching on display between two stanchions. Quim-Na sneered at the piece as she walked past.

While she ventured behind the bar, Tramm carried the shaking new initiate to one of the couches, where she curled up in a ball immediately. He stepped away for another cocktail.

“Mattias is going to slit my throat and watch me die slowly after he finds out that I have cracked this open.” Quim-Na brought two little glasses full of green liquid over. “It was a gift from King Werral and I am in such trouble. Here. Die with me, youngster.”

She attempted to hand the other glass over. A wild-haired youngster stared back.

The first sip hit the back of her throat more deliciously than Quim-Na thought possible. “Mmm...” She had to lean back and breathe as the chilled intoxicant tingled.

“Mmmmmm...” Rising, she slow-danced a circle, glasses in her hands. “Tastes like...like a vanishing sense of craftsmanship. Every molecule tastes like that.”

She downed her drink, eyes closed in ecstasy. After offering again, Quim-Na took the refused vintage for herself. “I perish without you then, Scholar Vestagon.”

Fresh glass perched in her hand, she found her pipe on the table. “We’ll even break out some of the spice, since you’re in such a festive mood. Will that cheer you up, rising star?”

“Ease back, Quim-Na.” Tramm shook his head at the scene from the bar. “When are you leaving for Alderaan, anyway? Valkanna did get assigned to Alderaan City, right?”

“Yes, she did. Our people confirmed it.” Quim-Na packed her pipe. “I leave in a few days. We’re redecorating the safehouse to look like a little inn where, as my cover, I will book one of the rooms with Gorgath as innkeeper. But I’ll return here for a while after we set up. Valkanna needs to settle in at the temple before I make contact.”

“Tell Gorgath he owes me.”

“Oh...Gorgath...degenerate gamblers are pathetic.” Newly-lit pipe now in her free hand, Quim-Na walked by the saber etching and gave it a snicker. “The safehouse is going to look so cute. Oh, how I love creativity.”

“But what you love most is drama.”

“Shut up, Tramm.” She raised her glass. “To the Archangels of Odessen and their weakling, average perspective on the Force. The way they almost worship some long-dead Jedi and Sith, like they’re deities...it’s actually kind of sweet.”

Curled up on the couch and not comprehending the conversation, Dilani watched colorful plankto-squid scurrying all around the far wall.

Thanks to a generous gift from the Ree Foundation, the Academius campus' flat-roofed auditorium could seat 5000. Tonight, the packed hall rumbled with festive energy.

Now an annual event, Recognition Night got created to show a corps of first responders that their often-thankless work still mattered. As stated in this evening's opening monologue, its originators wanted Recognition Night to highlight graduates who embodied the institution's creed, words carved in the gray stone over the auditorium's arched entryway:

Science must remain in fearless pursuit of truth. Trust in the Force. The Force is truth.

This year, with civil unrest around the Republic combining with spiking worries over a new flare-up on Cantio, Recognition Night's familiar optimism brought a breath of fresh air to a stressed audience of public servants.

The M.C. announced the name of the third and final awards recipient.

Five rows from the stage, Sylmonica Valkanna yelled as loudly as her weakened state would allow. Over the course of four tours together, Syl had seen Ryle Zambreeth covered in mud, fuel, waste, multiple colors of blood. Tonight, he looked sharp in the simple, yet elegant, blue Medic dress uniform that many in the audience also wore. With nearly twenty years in the Medic Corps, her buddy received many cheers as he headed to the podium.

She wished that Ryle had been the first recipient so she could sneak out. Still, emotion infused. A longtime friend is getting recognized for qualities that she first saw years ago.

The barrel-chested Besalisk placed his lower right hand on the shining awards podium. With his size, standing behind the rectangular box looked awkward so he shifted over. "They ask us Medics why we deploy to all types of hot zones without thinking twice."

Per his species, Ryle had a fold of green skin under his bottom lip that led to his neck. Called the wattle, it ruffled as his wide jaw moved. His uniform had been tailored to accommodate it. "The simple answer is we were born to. We were born to do it, then lucky enough to get trained by the best medical institution in the Galaxy."

Another burst of applause. A happy Syl added her voice. Earlier, it felt good to don her newly-cleaned brown robe, formal tan tunic, and credentials sash. Sitting here almost felt right.

As was his habit, Ryle used both upper hands expressively when he talked. "But I'll tell you all what makes serving in those wild places easier: the Jedi Knights who are there with us. Many of us...unfortunately...have stories from Cantio, but our bond is more than that endless tragedy. Medics help the Jedi form a line of defense against all sorts of societal afflictions."

He took a breath while people clapped. "Because she became one with the Force recently, I'd like to tell you about a Jedi Knight. A wise Wookiee with jet-black hair named Makkartho."

The friend that he was, Ryle checked with Syl about telling this story when he visited. They caught up while walking around the rooftop gardens. Sitting here tonight, the story didn't surprise her. Instead, she couldn't wait to hear her boisterous friend recount it.

Ryle straightened the glittering headband over the three prongs of his headcrest. The ceremonial piece was native to his home planet in the Inner Core.

As he warmed up to tell his tale, Syl thought back to the *Horizon* for a moment, specifically Makk's insight about how there weren't any big wars right now, just too many little ones. The attendees of this event were the people who dealt with those small battles that added up. Many sitting in these seats had the worn-out looks and scars and prosthetics to prove it.

"Our transport crashed in the neutral zone. Makkartho and another Jedi, who is in this audience, stood watch while the Senior Medic and I dealt with an expectant mama who went into labor unexpectedly. Yeah...we had problems. Either the little fella wasn't having a good time, or mama wasn't having a good time—basically, no one was having a good time."

The audience chuckled at the veteran Medic on the stage.

“The thing is...we were isolated. And baby told us he was a-comin’ early.”

Syl remembered herself then. Hair almost down to her waist. Three-dimensional sight.

“We not only faced attacks from a bandit crew whose own mothers should have thought twice before saying yes to their fathers, but get this: mining company drillers misjudged a dig nearby and stirred up a nest full of Vernacas in heat—and I’ll tell you right now: you do not want to stir up a bunch of Vernacas ever, ever, ever—whether they are in heat or otherwise!”

This got the audience laughing.

Ryle leaned on the podium again. “So much birthing energy in the air all around us. Yet none of it was happy energy. Not one bit.”

The room roared.

Tears flowed from Syl’s right eye, partially from the memories but also from Ryle’s spirited retelling, a talent she did not possess.

“The good news is: the Jedi deterred the troublemakers, we delivered the kid, then we got rescued. Today...that baby is a young man, wants to join his system’s fire brigade.”

A being that Syl last saw as a newborn now wants to fight fires. A realization that gave her a shudder. Thoughts of the passage of time rarely affected her.

Booming applause got Syl laughing again, her negativity dissolving.

After the claps subsided, Ryle said, “The other Jedi Knight who stood watch with the brave and wonderful Makkartha is here tonight. Sylmonica Valkanna, please stand for us.”

The applause fired up again. The Jedi Knight started to stand.

Almost reaching a full stance, instead she passed out and fell forward into the married couple seated in front of her.

As the third recipient wrapped up his somewhat-amusing speech, his mention of Syl’s name made Dilani Vestagon perk up. The Jedi fell over a moment later.

Like most of the awards show attendees, Dilani leapt to her feet. From a private suite at the rear of the auditorium, she rose from her high-backed chair and looked downwards at the backs of folks’ heads, along the slope of seats.

Earlier this evening, the Academius graduate told the truth. A rarer and rarer occurrence. She bumped into Syl before the show and said that the first awards recipient was a school advisor. Which was not a lie. When she heard her patient calling from across the marble-walled reception area, Dilani had been searching the sea of well-dressed faces to congratulate this educator. Syl excused herself from a conversation to come over. The Medic brought up the optic, which would be installed soon. The Jedi shrugged. The pre-show exchange was brief.

While Dilani kept her eyes on the rows near the stage and the event attendees helping the unconscious attendee, Mattias and Zinora Ree stayed parked in their suite’s seats. Neither had a clue what the commotion was about. Neither of them looked to find out. Upon learning from their associate the reason for the commotion, both shrugged.

“Poor thing...Knight Valkanna is probably still weak from the blast in space.” Mattias paged the attendant in order to grab their coats. “A restful stay on Alderaan should help.”

Rising out of her chair, his wife pointed a skinny finger at Mattias. “It might not be the blast, dear. There’s also a new strain of the hussam virus going around. Could be that.”

The three exited the auditorium using the private side entrance. The Rees' dome-topped airship awaited on the VIP platform, their longtime driver attentive as always. The hairless, hunchbacked Duro, a lifelong believer, helped the three into the plush passenger chamber before shuffling to the single-seat cockpit at the nose and taking off.

No sooner had they reached cruising altitude just above building-top level and the Rees were sleeping once again, this time lulled by the elegant vehicle's vibrations.

While enjoying the view, glass and metal blackened by night sky, Dilani had to chuckle. Her life, these last few months, it all gave her a laugh. For some reason, Quim-Na decides to connive Tramm into helping with a bullying or whatever, some worried response to Dilani being called "rising star" by the Rees.

Zoning out on Coruscant City, she thought back to that night and hanging over the ledge. Upside-down, unable to focus due to fright with the overwhelmingness of death thundering in, Dilani Vestagon looked into Quim-Na Sulif's eyes. Inverted, she saw fear.

At the epicenter of pain lies clarity of thought. In the midst of intense discomfort, an epiphany brings comfort.

The epiphany of that moment, its clarity, crystalizes.

Dilani Vestagon terrifies Quim-Na Sulif.

Chapter Four

Sylmonica Valkanna wrapped up her story. Their mutual friend and trusted work partner, Ryle Zambreeth, took the stage at an event weeks ago back on Coruscant.

As much as his ruined body would allow, the burn victim laying in the bed laughed out loud at the self-deprecating retelling of the fainting incident. More than ninety percent of a once-muscular body was now covered in bandages. His fellow Jedi Knight offered to stop talking whenever pain hit. Each time, he told her to continue.

Syl had been sitting bedside with Zuk Vandersett for the past few hours. His room was also in the sleeping quarters and tiny like hers. Ancient stone walls felt forever cold, a feeling that she considered neither good or bad.

“...and by the way: that new eyepiece looks good on you, Valkanna.”

“Looks good on me?” The recent arrival laughed out loud at Zuk’s reference to the round silver-colored device covering her left eye cavity. “What...like this is a fashion statement?”

The mention of her still-unfamiliar optic prompted Syl to itch the scars on her left temple. “I can see gray tones, not much else. Therapists say three-dimensional sight will develop.”

Her friend raised his left hand off the sheets to point, a gesture which meant that he wanted another smoke. The curved stem in her hand and its thin hose connected to a water pipe perched on a table by the bed. She reached forward and held the black mouthpiece to two thin stretches of skin that were once a set of lips. The areas around Zuk’s mouth and eyes, unlike most of his body, were not covered in sterilized wrappings.

He exhaled, then demanded another.

This made her smirk. “Didn’t your lungs get damaged in that radiation blast, too?”

“I don’t recommend inhaling radiation, Knight Valkanna.” The goofy expression cut its way through the bandages. He winked as much as his muscles let him wink. “Seeds or leaves or roots or flowers or...say...shavings of bark from the hullum-palm, grown naturally and infused with the living Force itself, then cured...mmmmmm...much, much better. Much better.”

Syl liked obliging a dying being with a small luxury. “You make *this place* better, Vandersett.” As she held the mouthpiece forward again, he took a big drag.

“Well...enjoy me now. I’m terminal.” Exhaling, he turned to look at the blank ceiling. “Body parts turning septic, bit by bit. The living Force grasping to maintain a hold, though it’s hopeless. I get the privilege of sensing it all. Feeling too weak to connect to the Force is...is...”

“I know.”

Zuk, two years her senior, fluctuated in his perspective. This was one of his removed times. The Weequay was now missing the majority of the leathery skin that helped his species survive an unforgiving planet. Many Weequay Jedi wore lighter combat armor in locations like Cantio because their bodies’ tough outer layer was resistant to some weapons.

“Quit zoning, Valkanna. I need a drag.”

She took care of his request. “Sorry...just thinking about Cantio. That peace treaty is gonna get torn up. It stalled. Then it started. Now it’s stalled.”

“Cantio peace treaties get torn up.” Nodding was a tough task, which his discomfort showed. “They get torn up and fired at the Twin Suns of Reeb. Cantio isn’t a star system. It’s a quagmire in the middle of space.”

Zuk barely got the sentence. The ferocious, out-of-nowhere cough fired up his weakened body. It looked like he would rip his bandages, thrashing around the bed so much.

Fit subsiding, he raised his left hand to indicate that he wanted a puff. Syl obliged.
“What you did on Cantio was unfortunate, but necessary, Valkanna. They hit us.”

The wounded Jedi tried to tune out her trusted colleague’s words, recalling that some Jedi at this Temple, like many Jedi, disagree with his opinion.

A two-fisted throb struck her temples and sinuses.

The rubber-covered metal sphere clanked onto the stone floor. Following a string of dwindling bounces, the palm-sized therapy ball rolled along its own crooked path before slowing to a stop on the hard surface. While the object’s final bit of kinetic energy died, Syl’s overloaded mind kept trying to transport her out of this drab study room in a 2000-year-old temple in Alderaan City—wherever could bring relief from the pounding to her brain.

Based on the outcome of the two previous attempts, the rehab team decided to use an unbreakable object for today’s rehabilitation exercise. And unlike her first tries at using the Force to levitate an object, the patient remained standing this time as the ensuing headache overpowered her skull. Though she was upright, Syl felt disconnected from every being in the Galaxy, on her own plane, one where discomfort was the pinnacle of happiness.

The fiftyish Academius physical therapist put her sky-blue tablet on her chair and headed towards the arched doorway. “I’ll get a freezepack for her forehead.”

“Bring Valkanna a tube of water as well, Kinnick.” Almost kicking back in his chair, the affect-free Jedi Master did not move, beyond twiddling the writing instrument between his long fingers. His dull stare stayed fixed on the eye of the person in distress a few body lengths away. “None of the herbal remedy. Just plain water. Room temperature.”

Syl’s right eye squinted at him. The new optic, a dull mirror, stared, unblinking.

Kinnick, the physical therapist and Academius graduate, left the room.

Syl’s first attack, the Master leapt to help as she tried to fight off the head-splitting agony. Now, in this third session, he ignored her and opened his black tablet. “Zero progress today.”

Their initial meeting, he brought up her court martial. The relationship stayed the same ever since.

Two bulbous eyes gave one last glance around for predators among the bustle of gargantuan creatures. The adventurous one cocked its tiny green head in all directions. Once the feisty opportunist was sure it didn’t perceive any threats, it gobbled the chunk of sweet roll crust from the brown cobblestone in one gulp before extending its four scaly wings and flying off. Like many species, the humble, fist-sized scroop made its home in this big city.

From a little table on a patio overlooking the open-air marketplace, Syl toasted the victory with a steaming glass of a spicy brew made from a dried root plant, grown locally.

While pouring herself tea from the ceramic pot, she sensed intensity and hunger. Looking up, she spotted the hungry animal circling the discarded food morsel on the sidewalk in front of the elderly Trandoshan artisan’s brightly-colored display. She had to watch the feeding unfold.

This mix of same-sized tables offered folks a restful island amidst the shops and vendor booths in the epicenter of an ancient town beloved by many cultures. The wide patio was popular

at night. Alderaan City's arthouse district and the language institute's sprawling campus were nearby. But with clouds in the air, not many sat outside, a fact the patient did not mind.

The long jacket and blue head scarf were bought in another market a few weeks earlier. Blending in with an unfamiliar city seemed right. Afternoon walks got longer and longer. Jedi and Medics encouraged them because of the therapeutic value. Others sometimes joined. Today, she set out from the temple grounds alone.

Thia's gift, the loop of their final moments as Padawans with their friend Ro, sat on the table. She tapped the silver square again. Three young women danced in victory.

Syl liked to think that these two friends, along with Makkartho, were among those who have been greeting Zuk Vandersett as he becomes one with the Force. Before leaving today, she sent messages to Ryle and Russ about Zuk's passing a few days ago. Both had served with him.

Thoughts about death were running through her head when the scroop distracted her. The reason for sitting at this table right now had to do with death.

She was about to watch the quick loop another time when a woman her age walked up.

"Are you Sylmonica Valkanna?" Plainly-dressed with her dark hair in a simple bun, the human was a little taller. "Meena Euclin—born Vermeena."

"Syl." After sitting again, she offered the other chair at the little metal table. "Your communication took a while to get to me, going through the system."

"I wrote to that contact address on a whim." The nervous-looking woman took the seat.

"And here we are." Syl's left hand gestured to the pot. "Tea, Meena? The owner recommended totika-root and I believe he read my thoughts perfectly."

"Ohh...totika has a kick to it. Sure." Two hands played with the brown shawl around her shoulders. "I'm sorry about your injury and your friends...or...work colleagues...or?"

"Thank you, they were friends. Good friends. And I'm sorry for the loss of your parents. The drone strikes were right before the mission where..." She pointed to the blank-eyed optic and tentacles of scar tissue that ran to the temple. "...my accident...."

Since Jedi investigators were still working, the public story was that it was an accident.

The owner of the drink enterprise wheeled over a fresh pot and a cup for Meena.

Meena pointed to the bandage wrapping her left forearm. "Is that from the accident?"

The Jedi laughed. "No. Saber practice...trying to get my moves back."

"That must be tough, coming back from so much loss. Doesn't seem real, does it?"

Meena reached across the table, taking both of her new acquaintance's hands, then let go to bring the new cup to her mouth before placing it back on the table as her lips lost control. "Why didn't they tell us losing family would be so awful?"

Her tears began in a rush. "Our parents are there for us, all of our lives...guiding us...feeding us...turning us into who we are. Then they're gone so suddenly and you and I didn't get that last chance to say—I'm sorry, Syl. I...I...I mean...I didn't mean to..."

"No. Please. It's okay." Syl laughed it off while freshening her half-full cup.

"No...that was insensitive—I can't do anything right. That drone strike turned me inside out." Sobbing, Meena looked across the table through tears. "Your mother and father, all your relatives, were proud of you. They never saw your childhood and progression to adulthood, but Seero and Berrel were so honored. The Jedi Knights hold the Galaxy together."

"If only." A tear rolled down Syl's right cheek. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you for that." After a sob, Meena smiled. "You have Seero's eye color."

From the sound of it, the new starship coming in for approach at the spaceport was mid-sized. The cups shook on the tables as it passed by overhead.

“Your message said he was a factory technician before he lost his job, right?”

“Seero supervised a group of technicians. Your dad was a leader.” Taking a drink, Meena let the next ship finish cruising above before going on.

“After that law got enacted, they pushed everybody out and started with the leaders. No jobs were safe after that.” The sobbing lessened as the outrage grew. “The industrial district, processing plants, the farm collectives—citizens’ livelihoods meant nothing.”

Seero Valkanna’s daughter had been observing the quiet marketplace while learning more about the planet where he lived. “The bosses just fired everyone, brought in slaves, huh?”

“No...they had to start gradually...but it was obvious. Your home planet is a Republic experiment. An experiment being conducted by the powerful.”

Two high-performance sportsters screamed by, their high-pitched engines still quieter than those of larger freighters that used lots of power when in an atmosphere.

“It’s all connected, Meena. I remember when the Senate was debating the sleazy bill.” Syl shook her head while taking notice of the sleek, little ships. “Such an end-around they pulled: not promoting slavery, but instead sabotaging labor...then making slavery seem like the logical alternative, nobody seeing slaves’ lives as worth anything. These are sick times.”

In a crafts booth, a well-dressed buyer and raggedy-dressed seller began to haggle.

“They have an endgame, you know. Slavery or no slavery, control of the masses is what matters.” Meena’s voice quickened. “How can the Jedi risk...sorry, I’ll change the subject.”

She took Syl’s hands. “I felt so close to your parents. Our families all went to Cathedral and I loved them so much. So much.”

A couple took a table by the walkway. The woman was older than the man by at least ten years. The owner of this tea enterprise greeted them as soon as they were seated.

“Cathedral...yeah, you said they were Archangels.”

“Your parents were devoted Archangels of Odessen. Your mother Berrel was one of our Cathedral’s most beloved teachers.”

“A teacher...nice.” Syl watched the younger man flirt with the older woman at the other table. “I don’t know a lot about Archangelism, but I know it as peaceful.”

“Like the Archangels, the majority of the Chalactan people trust in the Force, just as much as the Jedi. This was your parents’ tie to you, why they gave over their only child without thinking twice.” She took a pause to sip more of the pungent drink.

The lifelong Jedi also sipped tea, the last part of Meena’s last sentence still processing.

“I went to their abode after they died. They were about to return to their cozy home for a spell because the growing season was ending.” Meena reached inside her knit vest. “I took this because I knew its importance. It couldn’t be lost.”

A five-sided gray piece of metal sat on the table.

“This Prayer Star isn’t unique, sold everywhere. But its sentimental value...your dad bought it on their first date after your mom mentioned that she lost hers.” The visitor grew more animated. “They displayed it on a shelf in their main room. Your mother used to tell people that it made her realize that your father was the one.”

Syl picked it up and twirled the five-sided piece around while the Archangel talked. She levitated it above her hand, far enough to float. *Only a slight headache using the Force now.*

“When I saw it in their house, I knew it could not be lost. You need to have it.”

The gift dropped into the recipient’s hand from the air. She turned it over on all sides, now with her hands instead of the Force. Her voice shook. “Thank you, Meena.”

“I can see why they were so proud. The stories you must have about protecting the—”

“I should get going.” Syl stashed the star in the inside coat pocket that held the viewing square and her light saber. “But I’d like to see you again, talk more. About home. And family.”

Her new friend rose for a hug. “Like I said, I’m going to be in Alderaan City at least two months commemorating victims at the Archangels of Odessen cathedral. My little inn is nearby.”

After leaving the patio and heading back to the temple, the rehabilitating first responder chose to take detours instead of going directly back. Cutting down new streets and alleyways, she searched for excuses to keep walking. The modern neighborhoods were mostly red brick, the older neighborhoods pale stone. So many different houses of worship, some built in the last millennia and a few in the last decade. Some were decorated with art, others bare.

Her left optic still had yet to truly function, so her view lacked depth. She had been told that, between the optic and the Force, she would regain the ability to see in three dimensions.

Of course, Sylmonica Valkanna had been told many things over the course of two decades as an operational Jedi Knight.

VI: Two Dimensions

Chapter One

Yawning, the Scholar Emerita thumbed the sky-blue tablet's button, advancing the medical chart to the next slide. The physical therapist's notes documented a patient's progress.

Possibly it was the cluttered office that annoyed Zinora Ree. A tight space in general, now even more confining because its occupant appeared to have squeezed a library's worth of medical disks and texts onto the rows of shelves that covered three walls.

While absorbing information contained in confidential files, the Academius board member shifted around in the beat-up chair behind the cluttered desk and reminded herself that she would soon be leaving this nowhere system. Tramm Nurado's new gold-and-silver sportster was parked on the VIP landing pad in front of this facility. He stood outside this office door.

Yawning again, Zinora resumed reading. Earlier pages answered her chief concerns, so now she wanted to scan the rest to see what tidbits of information she could glean, possibly pass along to Quim-Na Sulif. *If the whiny imp would even accept input from me, that is.*

The dark elder looked forward to returning home, the penthouse in Coruscant City, to coordinate last-minute details for a weekend soiree in the smoking lounge with the Earl of Sussens. A system on the edge of Republic territory, the monarchy made its riches from crops grown on plantations which fed a sizable portion of the Republic.

Zinora snickered, fiddling with her bracelet as she read the screen. *"Patient improving..." Well, of course the patient is improving. We quit dosing Valkanna over a month ago.*

"...her ability to see is improving as well, but slowly which is concerning." Interesting...

"She's coming, Zinora." Tramm, standing watch, leaned his head in.

Zinora heard a woman's tentative voice. "Can I help you?"

Without answering but stepping aside, the veteran legbreaker motioned to the entryway.

"Don't let my chauffeur's rough nature intimidate you, Kinnick. Come in."

Eyes wide and taking heel-toe steps, the fiftyish physical therapist in a blue Academius jumpsuit poked her head around the corner of her own workspace. Her gaze roamed from the sight of a strange toughguy at her door to fix on the esteemed Academician seated in her chair.

"Zinora Ree?" A tentative smile started to appear. "I'm...I'm...this...this is a pleasant surprise. I had no idea that you knew my name or who I was."

The woman standing in front of Zinora had no idea who the Scholar Emerita was. Or the Scholar Emeritus. She had never heard of the Scholars and knew little about the dark side of the Force. But she did know the Rees as members of the Academius Board of Directors.

Zinora nodded back. "Oh, this is quite a surprise for you, but I'm sure it's more confusing and less pleasant. If you have a seat, I am almost finished."

She motioned to the woman's own chair. "And don't worry: I don't believe you're in trouble. Then again, I don't talk to many in management these days, so...just sit down. Sit."

Kinnick had to set aside a stack of charts that were resting on the desk's other chair before she was able to use the piece of furniture. Her posture remained upright.

Zinora went back to reviewing the tablet as if Kinnick was not present. She hummed a little tune, her attention on the glowing screen.

The person who had sat here the past five years cleared her throat. "If you don't mind me asking, is...is that...that song...is it the 'Dance of the Glowtail Fleas'?"

"Yes, it is." The Scholar Emerita read the tablet, enjoying her light and airy song.

Kinnick nodded. "Ahhh...I just...I...my little nephew was just in a recital, that's all..."

The other did not respond, so Kinnick continued. "And...in the...the recital, one of the kids' musical numbers was 'Glowtail Fleas,' that's all...I was just...just...saying?"

After Zinora had enough, she shut off the tablet and rose from the desk. Before walking out using her jewel-adorned cane, she patted the fellow alumnae's hand. "I was never here."

From the late-afternoon meet-and-greet through to dinner and afterward, Quim-Na Sulif's intent gaze betrayed none of her simmering boredom to the weekend's host. As the night wore on, Besson Overtanos' mix of humble-bragging and overt bragging grated even more.

"I hope the main course was satisfactory. My chef used meats from the estate's own flock." He led the foursome of Quim-Na, the Rees, and Tramm Nurado down a long set of stairs for after-dinner refreshments.

The two younger Scholars just met the cartel principal today after Tramm picked Quim-Na up in his recently-purchased toy: a shiny, high-performance machine with a new evolution of hyperdrive, small enough to fit in the ship just behind the cockpit, no need for an external unit.

The journey from Alderaan was short. Besson and the Rees awaited on the raised, metallic-grid landing pad that connected to the lakeside estate's centuries-old courtyard. A tour of the property in a hot-air balloon got followed by a four-course feast in the more intimate secondary dining hall. Now, the formally-dressed party descended the stone staircase.

"What was originally a dungeon, an ancestor turned into a game room, my favorite room in this castle. It's a shame I don't stay here more often."

With the push of a button, the game room's creaky metal doors opened. Inside, torches lining the millennia-old rock walls ignited, showing two dozen species of hunting trophies, mainly mammalian and reptilian.

Before sharing a new tale, the magnate removed his longcoat as his guests gazed about. A round gaming table owned the musty, circular space. Eighteen high-backed chairs surrounded the pewter-colored tabletop. Avid gamblers, Mattias and Tramm admired the room's centerpiece. Quim-Na's heels hit the stone floor as she sauntered over to run her fingers along a purple animal fur that hung on one wall, an act which brought out a glare from Zinora.

"The amounts of bets that have been wagered over the centuries around this table..." Besson pulled out one of the purple-colored chairs to lean on its back. "The treaties that have been negotiated around it...financial agreements...countless hands of Sabacc, of course..."

Turning to Tramm, he reached up to clasp the larger man's shoulder. "My esteemed warlord, give it some wraps with your knuckles and tell me what you think it's made of."

The underworld boss' reputation preceded him and the mining boss mentioned this as soon as they met. Tramm's scarred fist wrapped the metallic surface. The resulting chime brought a low-pitched clang. He knock-knocked it again. "Was this table made with beskar?"

"Made with?" A rare smile widened a thin face. "This table is one-hundred-percent beskar steel. All twenty legs as well. An ancestor had it specially-made."

"Goodness..." Mattias Rees walked an arc around one side of the piece which dominated the space, his eyes fixed on the spotless surface. "What is the monetary worth?"

"Worth? Such an unimportant question. But if one wishes to calculate, my long-dead relative purchased close to six dozen Mandalorian suits of armor from various dynasties at auctions over the course of a few decades or so. Collecting artifacts of war was a hobby." He

focused on the heirloom, like Mattias. “Until it wasn’t. On a whim, he had the armor melted down into this table...turned an instrument of war into a platform for the pursuit of pleasure.”

“Less violence from men, more game-playing by overgrown boys.” Quim-Na toasted, joining the conversation. “That is what the Galactic Republic calls ‘progress’.”

Despite the other Scholars’ stares, she inched closer.

Besson did not budge. “Oh, Quim-Na, I’m no warrior. Those dark titans in your lore would make quick work of me. Let’s you and I have a drink.”

Offering his arm, they slow-walked to the stone bar area at the room’s far side. Mattias followed. Quim-Na looked back and winked.

“Instead of engaging in war, people like myself work extremely hard at gamesmanship.”

“Gamesmanship is hard work.” Right behind them, Mattias offered his two cents.

Besson grabbed a dust-covered bottle from a rack on the wall behind the long bartop and uncorked it. “Yes, it is. One must stay sharp to remain competitive these days.”

“Competition is the way of monarchs. Since the times of the ancients.”

The host gave Zinora’s comment a polite nod while pouring the red liquid into little sip-glasses arranged on a tray. “I approach life with the mindset that we are all seated around a gaming table, chips and credits stacked in front of us.”

He made his way around his own gaming table’s far side, tray in one hand and bottle in the other. “But unlike you and I, the not-as-fortunate have no idea they are seated at the table. They do not feel the cards in their hands, the meager stacks in front of them also invisible.”

Though Zinora reached out, the tray got offered to Quim-Na first, Besson philosophizing while she took a dainty glass. “Take the Jedi...a vital service and connected to the good of the Republic, by nature they have a seat. Yet they have no idea.”

Quim-Na chuckled while taking a sip. “Ahhh...their millennia of noble deeds lined up like chips in front of them that they can’t see.”

Besson gave her a wink as he offered a drink to Tramm, who toasted a thank you.

The host’s speech continued. “Jedi, though brave and driven, would make horrible gamblers, wouldn’t you agree?”

The group laughed and nodded.

“As long as they’re at the table. To the Jedi seated at the table.”

The Scholars toasted him back.

“Tiny bets add up, over time.” Quim-Na caressed the littler man’s shoulder, oblivious to the Rees’ incredulousness. “I say bleed those chips out of the light-siders. Make it bloody—”

“Now, what Quim-Na meant to say was—”

“I know what your lovely associate meant to say. And she’s right.” Besson gave Mattias’ full glass a splash. “It would be preferable if the Jedi aligned with the interests of the Republic more than they do. If they pay the price, so be it.”

He turned his attention back to the younger woman he just met. “I am not a necromancer from one of your stories who desires to destroy the Jedi.”

“You just want them in line.” Quim-Na winked. “I get it. While the Force outshines everything, wealth possesses energy. I won’t deny this fact.”

She ignored Zinora’s big nod and turned back to finish out her thought. “I guess I would approach life like you do, if I were...less like myself and more like you, that is.”

Besson waved off the panicked Rees. “Don’t look so stressed. Whatever minor disagreements there are, Quim-Na and I share the same enemies and desires.”

She took his side. “I wish the Overtanos consortium’s asteroid-harvesting venture the best. I’d never even heard of this Yntok until tonight. Tramm and I know of a reputable slave-broker consortium in the Outer Rim, Besson, they specialize in mining inventory.”

Their loyal henchman avoided Mattias’ and Zinora’s gaze while chiming in. “Smart outfit, former employees of mine. They contract bounty hunters to custom-fill orders.”

“We’ll talk more once efforts proceed further. I look forward to making you four much wealthier.” Downing a big swallow, Besson turned to reach for a refill.

It wasn’t there. Quim-Na had heisted the bottle and was refilling her glass with a smile.

A desperate scroop tugged at the discarded slab of meat with everything it had. That’s because another scrawny flyer had bitten into the other end of the rotting piece of gross flesh and was pulling backward as much as its malnourished—and probably vermin-infested body—could pull. The grubby parasites engaged in a back-and-forth struggle underneath a hot sun.

As she observed the sad tug-of-war from a seat on the patio, the plainly-dressed woman sitting at the round table played back previous conversations in her head, making sure she had details of another’s life straight. She stopped and looked up when she heard that woman’s voice.

“Welcome back, traveler.” The grinning person striding up to her table sounded happy and looked healthier than the last time the two had hung out, her skin more radiant and the color not as flushed, her functioning eye bringing more sparkle. The two were close in age.

“Nice to see you, my Jedi friend.”

Sylmonica Valkanna took the other seat, removing her long jacket before relaxing. “I gotta say that I’m a bit jealous, Meena. I miss Coruscant. Glad you got to see it.”

Not many of the other tables were occupied. At mid-day, both women squinted.

“I thought about you while I was away, hoped that rehabilitation was going well, your eyesight improving and all...”

“It’s still pretty flat. But I guess I’m seeing better.”

She looked the target over. “And don’t see any new bandages, no bruises, so...I’m guessing the rest of rehabilitation is going good?”

Syl laughed. “Retraining isn’t going as well as everyone likes, but I’m getting it again.”

“Are they still pressing you?”

This question received a stare into the distance. “So...how was your trip?”

The newly-returned one took a piece of the sliced fruit off the communal plate. “Well, you were right. Coruscant City truly feels like the center of the Galaxy. The culture, the food.”

“I didn’t take in much of that during my times living there, but I’m glad you got a chance to check it out.” Syl grabbed a section of the purple fruit and bit in.

The one possessing an ID chip with the name “Meena Euclin” talked about a shopping district that she had patronized countless times, so much so that she could rattle off details—though she remained careful to sound less knowledgeable. As she was describing the smooth cloths in a custom boutique, she got cut off.

“And...the job? You did do stuff besides sightsee and gawk at clothes, right?”

She laughed and grabbed another juicy slice, noting to herself that the Jedi seemed to be bonding. “Oh, yeah, very positive. Seemed like I have the skillset and they talked about housing arrangements and all that...which is good?”

“‘Good?’ Yeah, Meena. It sounds good, gotta believe.”

Not far away, the emaciated scroops fought hard. The piece of foul meat gave in and broke apart. After the pests took off, her gaze shifted. Off the street-facing side of the patio, shoppers had congregated around one of the booths to see a chipper merchant's product demonstration: a self-inflating chair for the city's tiny dwellings. She took in the sight of commerce, conjuring up tears while she stared.

After a sniffle, she turned back. "Coruscant...mother worked there in her early twenties, part of an Archangel mission..."

"Shh..." The Jedi took her hand.

"I'm sorry. I keep doing this when you and I meet up."

"Don't be." Syl sniffled. "I think about it all, too. Thank you so, so much for telling me about my folks, their lives. All my family."

"No problem. Our talks about slavery, how it plays into their deaths and this meeting, I thought about those talks while I was off-world. The news stories about new pressures in the government, what you had mentioned...like they don't care."

The cart owner came by with their tea and poured cups for both. Seeing the emotion, the old man worked quickly and dismissed himself.

As he wheeled away, Syl picked out seeds from the red fruit in her hand. "I sat in on the Security Briefing broadcast this morning. I guess I feel the urge to dive back into it, I dunno."

"And?"

"Word is, the Senate is pushing for some vote. Jedi got told to prepare for riots, all systems." She ate the fruit. "Slavery dying out in the Republic...now creeping back. The people behind it are enraging working folks to smokescreen it all, just like they did in the past."

The fresh cup of tea was hotter. She had to grimace from the temperature. "But Syl, it's like what you said a few weeks ago: fault lies with a Senate that never officially outlawed slavery once and for all, putting down a resolution back when they should have."

Syl brought out the Archangel Prayer star from her green jacket and clutched it. "That wasn't my crystal of wisdom, but words from a wise Master I knew. She's dead now."

That cheap little Prayer Star was a wise investment. She is attached to it. "I hate slavery, Syl. How could beings do that to one another?" She felt her lips tremble more.

"Those who benefit from slave labor contributed to our families' deaths, Meena. I've been meditating on it all." She got up and stood behind her chair to stretch her back. "And people connected to those people hold power in the Republic. We can't go after their illegal operations in independent systems because they control the Senate."

Interesting...her lack of inhibition...airing dirty laundry about the Jedi Order.

A loud pop over by the marketplace. The Jedi's diatribe ceased.

Looking over as well, the one called Meena's heart quit beating so fast as she took in the activity. The commotion by the booth turned out to be unwarranted and overblown.

From what she could gather, a Gurnithian, a blue-skinned species with sharp spines protruding from vertebrae in their backs, had wanted to try out the self-inflating chair. Now he was pulling himself off the stone tiles and also hurrying to pay the no-longer-chipper booth owner for the ruined merchandise.

Seeing her target observing, said, "It's a shame that Jedi don't carry more influence."

Sylmonica Valkanna spat out a huge laugh.

Chapter Two

Full sprint. Two feet pounded the path and two lungs synched up the heavy breaths with the stride's pumping rhythm. The harmony filled her ears. The Force hit the drums.

As the heat of the day hit, it energized rather than beat her down.

Sylmonica Valkanna had forgotten what being bathed in sweat felt like. Obstacle courses that she used to sometimes dread as a Padawan were fun again.

While eating a bowl of fruit and grain earlier, she told herself she was going to push it today. *Mission accomplished.*

Before warming up, the late thirtysomething wrapped her scarred ankles with stretchy bands of flat cloth, then tightened the fastenings for her worn-in brown boots as much as she could. After being bedridden, wearing these old things again didn't feel right at first.

Now they do.

A mass of green overgrowth covered the path on both sides and obscured the view of the landscape. No need to see. The scenery's connection to the Force was all the runner required.

The recuperating guardian of peace and justice charged forward. Rounding the hill's peak, the boulder blocking the tree-lined road looked to be twice her height.

She cleared it in one leap.

Syl bounded over the next two obstacles, the slope's decline her natural accelerator.

The bottom grip-sole of her right boot left the dirt to plant on the knee-high rock, staying until the other boot joined. Redeveloping thigh and calf muscles springboarded the whole body rightward, upward, and into the air. She tucked her chin to her chest as the first front flip began.

In the middle of her third rotation, the Force enlightened. Her blue light saber blade surged to life and deflected the simulator's blaster shots. While the third somersault became the fourth and then the fifth, her right arm operated on its own swivel—independent of the rest of her spinning body, yet aware of where all parts were at all times.

Her right boot hit the dirt and ended the sixth somersault, brushed-metal-handled saber once again hooked on the right side of her belt, unlit. She bolted down the path.

A ramp ahead, narrowing into a metallic jump-off with a freezing body of water just beyond. The living Force helped visualize what could not be seen. Syl charged up the incline and her thigh and calf muscles exploded, the right leg functioning as a counterbalance while the left hand stretched out for the first vine.

She caught it. Momentum sailed her upward along a shallow curve. She let go as her right hand snagged the next vine which propelled Syl downward, forward, then up again. With the next handhold in sight, she sensed a barrage of slugs leave the barrel of an air gun. A fired-up weapon blocked an incoming wave of six blasts.

The problem? It failed to block the seventh. It stung Syl's right temple at her hairline.

She released the vine. Muscle memory guided her right thumb to switch off her saber. Before her tumbling even reached the halfway point to the water below, the hilt was hooked to her belt.

Her right shoulder blade hit the surface first. Splashes shocked her neurons. Immersion in coldness supercharged every nerve ending. Using both nostrils, Syl exhaled all of the air from her lungs. Doing so killed her buoyancy. Bubbles raced out of her nose, back up to the surface while she sank. Gravity pushed her limp body deeper into the murky ravine.

Hands floating at her side and legs tucked underneath, soon she was sitting on the bed's floor. Upright and cross-legged, her form bobbed back and forth, hopping up and down at the whims of the current. A meditative pose. The water and the Force, influencing her body's sway.

Though her vision could not pick up anything in the cloudy depths, Syl decided to stay under and look around as long as her air-starved lungs would allow.

The stillness. Like late at night in the Temple when everyone else had fallen asleep. A rapid cool-down brought on by total submersion.

After it became absolutely necessary to breathe in air, she stood up and her feet pushed off the ravine bed, all in one motion.

The surface approached. The waters cleared up. The light brightened.

"Valkanna!"

Syl's head had indeed come up for air. The grate of the Jedi Master's voice proved this.

He waited by the shore between the cliffs. The green-scaled Trandoshan was dressed like her in a tan short-sleeve shirt and loose pants, also tan, though his clothing was dry. "Padawans negotiate that course better than you."

Sopping wet, she stood up. "Would you like me to run it again, Master?"

The sleeping quarters in the Alderaan complex took on a life of their own during the morning's early hours. Only Master Chief Medic Crutt's snores from down the hall disrupted the stillness. As Syl hovered upside down sitting cross-legged in the air above her little cot, she noted that, truth be told, the old Niemodian's sleep sounds soothed her.

While damaged all over and suffering from dementia, old age would be the thing to take him and this joining with the Force would be soon. MCM Crutt had traveled the Republic and also out into the independent systems over six operational decades. To Ryle Zambreeth, the fellow Academius grad was a legend.

Syl's meditative state lessened. Concrete thoughts like these ones about MCM Crutt proved it. The majority of the time, she welcomed the transversal back to consciousness.

The Archangel Prayer Star and Thia's silver memory square floated in her line of sight, each rotating on its own axis through the air. Gazing with fresh perspective, they looked to be floating in liquid, the way both meandered.

The obstacle course. She sat in a similar body position at the bottom of the ravine, though facing right side up.

Submersed in water. The Prayer Star remained in Syl's vision while her mind elaborated. *Submersed in the Force. Both run through my body.*

She liked the look of her quarters from this inverted viewpoint. No. She liked the fact that the view seemed to be the same, right-side-up or upside-down. No wall decorations, just dull brown color. At the moment, the arched doorway and her little cot looked to be protruding from the ceiling. They were the only two items that hinted at upward and downward directions.

Zennon came to mind. Through all of her ups and downs as a Jedi, Syl felt fortunate that she got paired with Master Zatan. She just turned twelve and served under him for four years. Not all Padawans and Masters click. If she were in either Zennon's or Kel's shoes, she could have leaned on him. Wherever he would have been deployed, she could have reached out.

Syl stretched out with the Force. Once it clicked on, the memory square's light added to the dimness. A few seconds later, the recording played. Three novice Jedi Knights danced

around in victorious ecstasy to celebrate the end of one chapter and the start of another. Master Zatan was there that night.

The stream of new tears from functioning tear ducts rolled off of her temple and splashed onto the stone floor.

Master Zatan was killed during a battle on Cantio.

Cantio. Years after his death and hours after the first explosion kicked off the bombing campaign that ended speculation about peace talks, Syl and Ryle Zambreeth and Zuk Vandersett found each other in a damaged hallway. Some beings wandered in a daze. Others laid in makeshift cots along the sides. Thick, acrid smoke assaulted everyone's noses. Multiple colors of blood stained everyone's clothes. Concrete details from the frenzied aftermath in that makeshift hospital took a couple of years to materialize in Syl's head.

And here on this Alderaan moon, encircled by the Force and suspended in the air, it occurred to her that the idea of contacting Master Zatan didn't even materialize as a thought after the Phase One explosion. All of the rehabilitation, especially the initial part where she felt that she lost the ability to use the Force—this existential terror—Master Zatan would have been a nice sounding board.

But it wasn't even to be considered. Like so many, he was gone.

Dear Zennon,

It's late at night and I sense the stillness in everyone around me, asleep in their hovels, hearts beating slower. It's that precious kind of silence where you feel the world is yours, as long as you remain quiet. The tactile feel of this parchment and ink stick, I appreciate this break from either talking or using a transmitter to communicate. I appreciate using this feeling to write you.

Life has its quirks, my Padawan buddy, quirks made visible by the living Force. Those dreaded obstacle courses from my Padawan days are fun again. I get faster every time I launch. Between us, I guess I bring on the extra workout torture because the stress on my body feels good, after all that time laying in a bed and hobbling around with a cane. After feeling disconnected from the Force, it's like reacquainting with an old friend. That friend you want on your side.

And I'm getting a feel for this silver mirror covering my wound. It helps me see three dimensions. I guess I'll get used to it one day.

So...how's the lead-up to the Trials going? I hesitate to ask about this, but Beddu and Mimms are pulling for you, Zennon. Makk and Thia are as well. Your brother and Mimms won't leave their class behind in this late hour. When it's all done and you're shaving your braids, they'll be yelling and screaming, out of their minds happy, sharing in the moment with you and Kel and the rest. I know this, Zennon. I know that you know, too.

I want you to experience that sensation, where you are finished and starting—both at the same time, like so many Jedi Knights before you. What we learn is that this sensation runs through every being, at every moment of their lives, but it hit me that day so many years ago, on that conscious level where I could visualize it. I feel thankful for those seconds captured in the recording, seeing them years later. Dancing around with Thia and Ro, that feeling...I want you and Kel to feel it. And not just because of the personal aspect, either. The Jedi need both of you. The galaxy needs you.

If your superiors are giving you a hard time, or they don't seem to empathize, ignore it all. This is advice I need to heed as well. And don't hold back that sadness you feel. Express it. You lost a twin brother and a good friend.

I wish my advice could ease your burden, that I had words beyond telling you to not keep it in. But I haven't gone through anything like it. Even though I did lose family, my loss can't compare to yours. My dead family is a group of people I'm only beginning to learn about, thanks to a kind woman who knew them. But as much as I think about a mother and father, the rest, I have no memories, just a collection of wondering, wandering thoughts.

You, unlike so many Jedi, have more. The Force took Beddu. But it brought him first.

We lose Jedi. We Jedi have no choice in the matter. And tears still show up, years after each friend passes on. But the trick is not to lose ourselves. I know it sounds cold, but you might have gotten a head start that will serve you well in your time as a peacekeeper for the Republic. Others will die. That is a certainty.

But you need Kel. She needs you. Don't push her away. You two have a lifetime together, but don't take this connection for granted. Finish it with her. Don't let go.

May the Force be with you, Zennon,

Syl

Chapter Three

Two Republic Brakebugs fast-stopped to hover in the night sky. The duo trained surveillance lights downward. Using tail thrusters, both patrollers rotated on a horizontal swivel scanning this quadrant of the spaceport complex. After a 360 sweep right, the main engines fired and shot the 'Bugs forward.

Sticking to the shadows, four brown-hooded fugitives maintained a tight formation. Not looking back, the identically-dressed crew ran from alleyway to alleyway. All stayed close. Brown boots splashed in the filthy water. Faces hidden, they dodged stalled haulers and rusty cargo containers in their path. Certain that pursuers were not far behind, none slowed down. Authorities surprised them. Making their getaway from the expansive processing facility on foot, all carried just basic belongings and light weapons.

Tracking technology was everywhere. Some of it functioned.

The escape route took them past the switching station. A mix of broken-down vehicles gave them cover. At the quiet transit intersection, they shot ninety degrees and ducked into the grimy service tunnel. From the smell, the garbage processors had yet to process the trash.

They made the far side of the tunnel and dashed into the secluded alley. The buildings, though ratty and grimy, became more uniform in their architecture. The warehouse district.

The groans of six-wheeled ground cars heading this way. Most likely local security.

One by one, the gang grabbed the ladder attached to the outside wall of the five-story vehicle confiscation facility and scrambled upward. All four scaled the side of the windowless, gray monolith in darkness, only touching the rusty rungs. Reaching the top, they spotted the diagonal corner and went all out. Each one hurdled the distance to the next roof across the way and hopped the next three buildings as a fluid unit.

Just as they were about to leap to the next roof, two blue lightsabers lit up. On the other side, the glow cut into the gray night.

The foursome skidded to a stop at the ledge.

"Surrender. Gar, Atta—the rest of you." A Brakebug's loudspeaker cut through the engines' hums. Searchlights dotted around as patrollers closed in on the glowing sabers from blocks away.

A group of seven pursuers—all in brown robes just like the pursued—finished the last leap and hurried across this pocked rooftop. The burly Lannik leading this detail gave his hand signal, a clenched fist. The other six wielders lit weapons, a mix of green and blue. The arc they formed cut off any chance of escape in the opposite direction.

The Brakebugs' searchlights had now identified their targets and illuminated the four.

These four ignited their own lightsabers.

The woman and the scraggly-bearded man faced the other building, her single and his two blue blades at the ready. Their armed cohorts squared off against the contingent behind them, one brandishing a green blade and the other blue.

Three distinct groups of blue and green all waited for one of the others to act. Brakebugs' lamps flooded the center group as the patrollers' screams drowned out the buzz.

The leader peered into the cavern between the buildings. In both directions, security details blocked off the alleyway at its intersections.

"Don't try cutting through the roof. We have teams inside this building already." One Brakebug now hovered directly above the targets.

The surrounded Jedi made a slow circle, counterclockwise. The Jedi doing the surrounding remained motionless, every saber frozen in position. As Padawans, every being involved in this standoff had been taught the value of silence. The encircled stood as still as those who encircled.

The one called Gar switched off his two sabers, a move which prompted the other three Jedi to disarm. All four placed their weapons on the flat roof.

The woman, looking as exhausted as the other three, shook her head, her fierce stare locked. "Gar...stop. Now. Don't even think about it."

The rangier of the two human males answered her hard look with his own while bringing out from his robes a snub-nosed mini-blaster, the kind that gamblers conceal up their sleeves. "Settle down, Atta, putting it with my saber."

"Not now, you two." The Mirialan rolled his blue eyes. Like the others, he was also around fifty years of age. The huskiest of the four, his blue skin shone in the spotlights. "Not the time for one of your lovers' spats."

The muscular human with the long beard backed him up with an annoyed, groggy nod.

As a show of good faith, all four of the Jedi Senior Knights removed their brown outer robes and took off their belts, laying them with their sabers. Within moments, the Jedi captors had all four in energy shackles capable of holding Force-users.

"After two years of demanding that the Republic look into our complaints of corruption by the Jedi, the citizens of Yntok get proven right. Now how about that!"

The broadcast from the towering, high-definition screen behind the stage filled the Galactic Senate's auditorium. Walls and a domed ceiling reverberated from the anger emanating from the gray-haired man giving the address. The Federal City hall was full. Government workers and meeting attendees fixed their attention. The intensity on display was too much to ignore. Plus, the subject matter itself had already stirred up feelings.

Footage of four Jedi Senior Knights who faced charges over an extortion scheme mixed with the Yntok leader's speech.

A scowl cemented itself on his face. *"Yes. The Republic ignored our repeated submissions of evidence and it turns out we were correct. They were targeting Yntok workers. Their own Jedi!"*

The gruff speculator's temper had earned him a reputation as he built his wealth. It helped him get elected to Yntok's highest office. *"Is it not enough that Republic cartels openly talk of mining sacred Yntok sites, now our ordinary grain haulers must fall victim to extortion?"*

"Stop this now." The enraged cry from the boxes was accompanied by a tech worker lowering the volume of the transmission's audio portion.

Kuat Senator Zayonus Horkuk hiked back his jewel-lined robes before climbing up on the wall of his box. Two assistants helped him gain his balance. Taking stock of the crowd and clearing his throat, he prepared to scream even louder, now that the auditorium speakers went silent. "My esteemed colleagues: this is nothing but political theater. Political theater that very well might be backed up by people in this hall..."

The acoustics and arch of the hard ceiling carried the baritone voice throughout the auditorium. Such stoppages of parliamentary proceedings were not uncommon. The inhabitants of the semi-full cavernous space allowed him the floor.

Though Senator Horkuk possessed an ability to project, an aide still handed him a wireless microphone. Furious, the impeccably-dressed public servant stepped in a circle, one hand on his hip and the other clasp the orb that patched into the facility's system. Sneer growing, he surveyed his listeners and raised the mike to his lips. "If you ask me, the esteemed Chancellor of Yntok seems to have a problem with the Jedi, not the Republic."

The booming echo throughout the chambers drew spirited response from both sides. Behind him, the soundless video of the Yntok Chancellor shouted in anger, his arms sweeping and gesturing.

Senator Horkuk egged on the noise with pumps of his free fist, keeping his back turned from the contingent of Jedi elders a few rows below. "And his blathering about our esteemed cartels somehow threatening his little system's sovereignty and its religions or whatever...again? He always brings this tale up, doesn't he?"

He gave his friend, the Senator from Malastare, a big thumbs-up. The Kuat Senator's eyes roamed down into his own Senatorial box. From his seat along the back wall of the box, Besson Overtanos gave a nod to Senator Horkuk. He sat next to the Rees, who offered smiles.

"Zayonus once wanted to be a thespian." From the seat between Zinora and Mattias, Besson motioned at the amped-up Senator beginning a new diatribe. "But he got into politics after realizing he didn't have the soul of an artist."

Senator Horkuk's esteemed guests had dressed the part. Attendants waited on every need.

"Artists..." Zinora almost screeched her response. "Parasites with attitudes..."

Besson leaned into Mattias' ear. "And please thank Tramm Nurado's associate for persuading the auditorium's sound engineer to lower the volume so Senator Horkuk's words could carry. It delivered the effect that I was looking for."

"Your people helped with the associate's citizenship credentials. Tramm appreciates it." Mattias patted the back of his new friend's hand.

Besson frowned at the image on the big screen, the corner of his lip turning upward. The echoing chatter gave the power broker's voice cover. "Mattias and Zinora: unlike you, I do not believe in religion. Results drive me. Results like profits from superior-quality ore, mined cost-effectively. Yntok's religiosity can't deny a fact: the Yntikkian Ruins, their supposedly-sacred asteroid field, is mineral-rich. No planet harvesting needed; it's all floating in space, ready for the taking like some miner's dream. I make my dreams a reality."

A sip of his cocktail whetted his throat as he checked out the hall again, glaring at the sadness. "Some long-dead con artist decreed that field 'holy' or whatever because it was once a Yntok planet, tragically destroyed by a meteor. Few Yntokians ever venture to it. The asteroid field itself is just a faint blip in the night that needs a telescope to be seen."

To settle himself, Besson took a gulp, and then finished off the expensive intoxicant. "Right now, at least fifty entities or governments in this galaxy could conceivably engage in a hostile mineral-harvesting operation with this nowhere star system. If my venture does not act, another just might. The idea is not new. The powerful have spoken of exploiting this asteroid field for centuries and it's only a matter of time. Mattias, Zinora: I do not lose. Ever."

Once the evening had grown dark enough, the stressed owner of the intimate smoking emporium grabbed the long sparkstick from behind the counter and waddled through his low-ceilinged space sparking the miniature torches hanging above. Two green webbed feet carried him around islands of well-dressed patrons congregating on overstuffed pillows.

A haze, though somewhat dissipated by two ceiling fans, draped the room. The establishment's visitors puffed on herbs and spices from standing, brightly-colored water pipes. Each smoking device offered multiple mouthpieces so groups could enjoy a minor luxury.

Meena Euclin and Sylmonica Valkanna sat cross-legged on their own red pillows, a rainbow-patterned vertical pipe on the low table between them.

Syl exhaled, checking out the civilians relaxing. "Such a different evening for me." She had to hold the mouthpiece and tube with her left hand because her right arm was in a sling.

With clientele from the professional class, the Alderaan social club's wall-to-wall screen showed Republic news coverage. Yet since it was a lounge, music played over the audio.

Meena took a puff and held her mouthpiece between her thumb and index finger, waving the tube in the air. "Well...even though you're injured, you're a trooper."

"Trooper..." You're being melodramatic again. It's a sprain. I keep thinking of my old eyesight, not what it is now." She wore a cloth bandeau tonight and adjusted the blue headpiece over the left temple's scar. "So, tell me about this opening musical act. Who are they?"

"Four brothers, born as slaves in the Outer Rim. Forbidden to play musical instruments, so they would sneak into a nearby Cathedral with a rehearsal space."

"I have yet to hear their music and I love them."

"When Archangel parishioners found out, they left instructional manuals for them."

While her friend shared the band's bio, Syl watched a fresh-faced couple who just got sat. Obviously one of the first dates from the way they were so stiff.

Exhaling a stream of smoke, Meena said, "Fast-forward: one day, they and a whole bunch of others escaped, found their way to the Republic. And we're seeing them tonight."

"I love it." She stuffed a fresh pinch of the sour-tasting smoke from the metallic sampling tray into the pipe's bowl and offered the first light. "Speaking of the show...time?"

The emporium filling up, free pillow-seats were now in short supply. The first-date duo had yet to loosen up. Chain-puffing failed to alleviate their nervousness.

"The music hall is close. You could have invited some Jedi along, you..."

She quit speaking. Her gaze turned to follow her friend.

Rising from the pillow, Syl shuffled a few steps to get a clearer view of the oversized wall screen. The broadcast showed ID pictures, three males and a female. One male was a Mirialan, the other three human. They looked to be in their late forties. In Galactic Basic and two other languages, the graphic read: *JEDI CRIMINALS*

No patron could hear the Republic newscast because of the music. Syl didn't need to, though. The Alderaan temple had discussed the incident ever since the arrest a week ago.

She returned, sitting on her pillow. "Bad news travels fast."

"I heard. Did you know those four?"

"I served with one, the Mirialan. But the deployment was over fairly expansive territories. We didn't interact much. Can't say anything negative, though, he was nice." She took a long drag. "My friend Russ knew two of them pretty well."

Smoke trailed out of Syl's mouth. She turned to look at the news screen again. "The woman had a respected reputation as an investigator. I heard she was sharp."

“Is it true though?” Meena watched the wall as well. “That they were singling out Yntokian pilots? I heard this was because they were non-citizens.”

“That’s what the facts seem to say.” Syl shrugged. “I guess I’m of two minds about it.”

“What do you mean?”

The lifelong Force-wielder took a bit, staring at the torchlight reflections off of the swirled colors on the pipe. “I don’t get why they did it. And I get why they did it. Yntok is bringing out the worst in the Republic, Jedi included. Maybe the Republic is big, they are small, I don’t know. Unfortunately for Yntok, their system contains valuable resources and the predators are circling.”

She pointed to her mechanical optic. “On the mission where this happened...one of the miner pilots who saved my life was from Yntok. Web had this bracelet, a thin strand of beads meant to represent the Yntikkian Ruins, wore it for luck. I don’t believe in luck, but I believe in love and faith. The people who want to mine that asteroid field are evil.”

“I hear that’s just a rumor. Is it not?”

“The wealthy and entitled have opined about wanting to mine the Ruins for more than a millennium. Who knows if the recent news stories are true.”

A handsome Twi’lek couple noticed that the women were preparing to leave. They floated near their pipe and pillows, ready to seize the spot while appearing nonchalant.

“You don’t get it, Meena.” She took one last drag before the two headed out. “Regardless of whether it’s true or not, something could unravel so easily, become another obligation. Another thing for Jedi to fix.”

“Well...the Jedi *do* serve the Republic.” Meena’s eyes widened. “Was that insensitive? It didn’t come out right.”

“You are not wrong.” Syl shrugged, her weaker shoulder only raising a bit. “You’re not correct...but you’re not incorrect.”

The two walked through the bustling lounge and the rows of bright curtains lining the entranceway, off to enjoy music created by a family born in bondage.

Chapter Four

Two worn-in green sandals brought a tired, but relaxed body down a boulevard lit by burning streetlamps. The loose-fitting civilian attire also made the lifelong Jedi feel invisible. Soaking in the warm breezes and the crowds, Sylmonica Valkanna had no desire to hurry back to the Temple. Upon returning, the plan was to meditate until sleep took over. Moments from the art show ran through her mind while she ambled through the thin lanes and wider avenues.

"I never heard your parents talk of this, but many Archangels whose relatives get taken by the Jedi talk of wishing that their sons and daughters grow up to accomplish great things so future Archangels memorialize them like we have done with a select group of Jedi and Sith."

Earlier, the two friends had been strolling in an arc around the perimeter of the busy gallery when Meena Euclin brought up the Valkannas, her parents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. A cultural engagement with strangers capped off a few days of training and rehabilitating. Syl left and decided to take her time getting back to the Temple.

Modern sections of the city used powered streetlamps. Syl preferred the campfire-like smell of older lights, a subtle odor due to the light wind. Entering a hybrid commercial-residential district full of three and four-story buildings constructed from clay brick, the thoroughfares grew busier. Bumps and nudges from partiers and tourists barely registered because the recuperating Jedi Knight's mind stayed focused on earlier, the word "religion" roaming in her head.

Veering right towards a narrow street that shot off on a diagonal, a happy group, all similarly-dressed in flowing, bright blue robes, walked along arm-in-arm in front of her. Syl took their leisurely pace as a hint and slowed. Doing so, falling back, she noted the group's physical resemblance. Light-orange hair color and large upper sets of ears that stuck out, more pronounced than most Vimalians...similarities beyond the clothing. They were a family.

Sylmonica Valkanna had been born with a connection to the Force. A link that was discovered in utero during a medical test. She got taken at nine months of age.

Chosen by the Force. A term that the Jedi use when ripping children from parents'—

One block away, three intoxicated men closed in on a man and Syl ceased thinking about her life because the Force brought her back to the absolute present.

After side-stepping around the surprised family members, she sped to the corner of the block, shoving folks aside. She searched the packed scene for cracks in the crowd. On instinct, her hand felt for the lightsaber inside the little green handbag slung over her right shoulder as she hurried. She almost did not bring it along tonight.

Three ugly minds had targeted an oblivious citizen. Syl ascertained that the man was wearing what was believed to be expensive jewelry. Also, one plotter hoped that the safehouse was ready. It took a second for the non-operational Knight to recall that ransom was a tried-and-true moneymaker for small-time hoodlums everywhere. Smart kidnappers never demanded large amounts. Upper-class citizens tended to pay without involving authorities.

The jammed corner. At the opposite end of this thin street, blocks away, three converged on one. But a street festival containing a few thousand revelers stood in the way. Syl could not eyeball victimizers or victim.

The decorative sandals on her feet were not constructed to offer support—a fact which did not hinder her from bounding up to the second-story balcony to the left. Thigh muscles and calves constricted, then exploded, launching her to the ledge.

She quick-walked the first three railings like they were balance beams or a series of durasteel girders, hopping between each one. Two green-skinned, elderly folks relaxing on a tile-lined deck barely noticed when she sprinted by, light on her feet.

One balcony was closed off. So Syl leaped to her right, diagonal, soaring in an arc through the span of space over the revelers' heads. Below her, a warbling street vendor's angry rant at a customer petered out as he looked up, his three green eyes sighting the airborne human.

She landed flat on a railing across the way barely wider than her feet and raced to the next ledge, then the one after that. At the end of the row, she jumped.

The heels of her nearly-bare feet hit the stone ground one story below, slapping the hard surface. But the strategy worked. While in the air, Syl lit her saber. Its hiss and glowing blue presence attracted the notice of one kidnapper, the oldest and the drunkest. By the time she landed, the barrels of all three hoodlums' cheap blasters trained on the disruptor.

The youngest of the three squeezed the trigger. And died by his own shot. After deflecting this laser blast back at a point to the right of the criminal's nose, the Jedi kept her blade in front. Her free left hand raised, she gestured with the palm to keep the crowd back.

No need. Both kidnappers already started to flee down the feeder of an alleyway. Though she considered giving chase, the raggedy duo appeared to be desperate locals. The precinct's peacekeepers could round them up and Syl knew of a contact station nearby.

Thankful civilians on both sides of the street clapped. The potential kidnapping victim—a skinny, well-dressed human maybe twenty years older—stood in shock as the realization set in.

"Are you okay? Way to be alert." Though she cushioned her fall, the landing in soleless foot coverings still smarted. She winced.

Shaking off his fear, the nearly-hysterical man said, "Can I pay you, Jedi?"

"Don't even think of it."

Syl had attracted enough attention. Time to notify authorities. Resuming the urban hike, she realized that she had no problem judging distances between balcony railings. After months of physical therapy, the optical device and the Force were working together for three-dimensional sight. As much as it bothered her feet to do so, she walked to the security outpost.

Syl's toes flexed and arched in her brown boots, the folds of her formal brown Jedi robes covering the subtle movements. Her feet still felt sore from the hard landing on the street.

The still-athletic Master kept his cold stare locked. "...let me repeat, Knight Valkanna: what if your saber deflection hit a civilian?" Four blue eyes, sunken in their sockets, did not let her go.

Hood down with her clasped hands covered by the brown robe's wide sleeves, she stood in front of a review board. Six Jedi and Academius personnel sat at the arced table in the middle of the featureless Jedi Temple room. All zeroed in on the rehabilitating Jedi Knight.

Behind her stoicism, her mind replayed the previous evening's events. A few balcony railings were barely wider than her feet and she had no trouble negotiating them. *I'm getting my moves back.* She shifted her pained feet again.

Last night's incident, after a formal report had been taken by local authorities, got passed along to the Jedi temple.

The louder of the formal review's two Jedi Masters rose from his low-backed chair. The creaking sound brought Syl's mind back to the present conversation. He gathered his brown

robes about his lanky body and leaned his head forward, glaring down at the shorter subordinate. A snide bureaucrat who, at earlier points during rehabilitation, only felt she deserved plain water for her headaches and seemed apathetic about her progress. Now, he zeroed in, the normal detached expression nonexistent, slight sneer gone and lazy eyebrows now arching hard. “Do you understand you put lives in danger last night? Do you want to keep tarnishing your record instead of improving it? What?”

Throughout this last-minute gathering, the subject of this meeting made a conscious effort to maintain the straight expression planted on her face. Demonstrate a rigidity. Minimize body language. Convey as little information as possible.

Outside the Alderaan City temple’s window, chirps of a scroop sailed through the air, a distraction she could not enjoy and had to ignore.

“I’m confused.” Syl did her best to keep her voice steady. “That deflection move is second nature. My goal was to draw the shooters away from the man. I don’t—”

Now it was the shorter Jedi Master’s turn to scream. He brushed aside his silver dreadlocks from his face before unloading. “Understand: you put lives in danger because you are not an operational Jedi.” The round top set of eyes blinked. The oval bottom ones stayed open.

All desire to appear expressionless gave out. Her lower lip started to tremble.

The first Jedi Master’s cold sneer returned. “I will say it, Valkanna: some wonder if you are impeding your own progress, purposely slowing your recovery in some devious way or—”

“Devious?”

Syl’s head shook before she could stop it. After catching herself, she continued. “I...I am...devious? That could not be more wrong.”

The Academius physical therapist who had been working with Syl reviewed from her sky-blue tablet. “Personally, I don’t take my thoughts as far as my Jedi colleagues, but medical data does support the recommendation that you continue rehabilitating. After the attack, you—”

“What is this ‘data’ you are talking about, Kinnick?”

The dismissive Jedi Master got up to leave. “I have a solution, Sylmonica...take a few days for yourself. And we can talk about transferring to a temple in another system, if you want.”

The scroop outside the window had been joined by another scroop, two beings harmonizing, a tune that was not heard by any being in the room.

Just a short time ago, her elders had eased her mind. But a fresh round of freakouts consumed and once again, Quim-Na Sulif was yammering on, body shivering as she screamed. “I’m a dead woman, you two—a dead woman. No! Stop—you weren’t there.”

The Scholar Emeritus and Emerita stood side-by-side near the lounge’s aquatic tank and skyscrapers graced the background. While listening to their calming words, Quim-Na had been soaking in the grayness of an overcast Coruscant day through her screen, wistful at the sight of buildings touching the clouds, designed by different architects from all over the Republic and beyond, reflecting true cultural diversity.

She conversed with them from Alderaan and her unassuming suite of rooms in what looked like a mid-priced inn. Breathing easier, the Scholar was soaking in the Rees’ insights and allowing views of Federal City to soothe—until it hit her that she may never see this vibrant and wonderful city again. “I’m dead.”

A sunny day had been spent posing as Meena and walking Alderaan City with the livid Jedi. After being there as a trusted confidante to let the target unload, Quim-Na nearly collapsed as soon as the two said their goodbyes. In a panic, she sent an urgent message to the Rees.

New tears consumed, prompting a need to turn away from the transmission screen. “Sylmonica Valkanna is far too powerful for us.”

She stormed from view.

“Quim-Na...get back here. Now.” Mattias leaned in to scream into a camera at a room where he could not see the person he was lecturing. “You called this meeting and we had just spent the last hour reasoning with you. Calm down this minute.”

The crying one stood by her window at the inn. The blooming tree in the safehouse’s little fenced-in yard had yet to drop green fruits that would litter the ground and rot. “No.”

All day, Syl’s rage blindsided with its intensity. Weather mild, the two women close in age strolled from neighborhood to neighborhood.

“The Jedi are helping our cause, mistreating her the way they do.” Her cosmetic-free lips trembled. “But mark my words: we—I—must tread delicately. So delicately.”

While lighting her pipe, she let her shaky voice be heard. “Being so close to such a strong Force wielder makes me see our weaknesses in a new light. I need to consider every word and it wears me down. I don’t know if I—”

“Quim-Na, you must *not* let this momentum with Valkanna go to waste. Her—”

“Syl is regaining her strength, don’t you understand? The initial inhibitor drugs have long worn off and she no longer fears that she has lost her connection to the Force.” The clandestine operator paused to wipe away tears. “Don’t nod like this is good—again, you weren’t there. The fury I saw as she ranted about the Jedi calling her ‘devious’...I am dead, you two.”

“My dear, you have broken down barriers to earn her trust.” As false as Mattias’ soothing tone of voice was, it felt good. “She is alone and needs you. Guide her to the moment where she learns the truth. She could see you as part of a better future, if you present yourself right.”

Two puffy eyes were locked on a screen and a man light years away. “Go on, Mattias.”

“Who was the one Scholar that studied the dogma of the Archangels and devised the deification angle to confuse our friend Valkanna? You, Scholar Sulif. You have a mind that can slalom between honesty and dishonesty, use one to maximize the other. Such a rare gift.”

His wife stifled a yawn. “Sylmonica’s mood is an opportunity. She is just not thinking.”

The Scholar Emeritus shushed his wife. “No, dear. Our Quim-Na is tired and needs us.”

“She’s amazing, saw through the Jedi’s ruse long before we targeted her. I know you had been eyeing others and you chose well...just maybe too well?” The brief cheer vanished.

“I’m sorry, dear. I am.” The man who taught her so much stroked his beard.

“Hmmm...she feels isolated. Going forward, find ways to shut out connections. You can’t steer her—the idea of doing so made you apprehensive. But you can remove other options.”

“Bring up lost friends.” Zinora smiled at the screen. “Keep her mind on an unchangeable past, which is truth. She can’t get mad at you...wait. Cantio. She has yet to talk about Cantio.”

“Yes...” Quim-Na wiped tears away. “I get where you are going, Zinora.”

Breathing easier, she let the simple yard and tree outside relax her.

Zinora waved her finger. “She is weaker than you know. But walk delicately.”

“Thanks for this talk. I apologize for snapping.”

Just as the dark believer was ready to turn off the device, the Scholar Emeritus raised his voice. “Quim-Na: you cannot fail. You absolutely must do not anything to jeopardize this or you will suffer pain on levels that you cannot fathom. Do you understand?”

VII: Closing Pathways

Chapter One

Two thousand years ago, a landowner weaponized a three-pronged agricultural tool and fended off an attack. Every marauder intent on robbing that season's harvest met a violent death.

In the aftermath, a religious sect was born, its core symbol inspired by a claw-like seedpod thresher mounted on one end of a wooden staff.

A weathered reproduction of this revered mark stood upright a few paces off a quiet thoroughfare. The rust-blemished, tri-fork sign led walkers up a tiled path to the wide entrance of a three-story building made taller by a simple domed roof. Constructed entirely of stone, the cylindrical architecture mirrored a type of grain silo that had been in use for millennia.

Before entering the Agonian Temple, Tiruss Dunn lowered his brown hood. To honor the customs, he knelt and washed his hands in the stone basin beneath an ancient decree that a believer carved into the pale wall more than five centuries ago.

After working in the fields, one must cleanse hands and soul.

As with all Agonian Temples in the Galaxy, a bushel of dried stalks from the kria plant sat right inside the high-arched entranceway. The Senior Jedi Knight grabbed one of the thinner yellowish kria and slow-walked, his head bowed. The open flame sat at the center of the cavernous space underneath the curved ceiling's centerpoint five stories above. Rows of benches surrounded the firepit and stretched back to the walls in every direction. Only a few believers occupied pews, adding little sound to the stillness.

The pit's blaze lit the strand in Tiruss' hand. Clumps of dried natural sugars, released by the plant's secretion glands during its germination phase, crackled as the chemical reaction turned the flame blue. Like always, the bit of smoke tickled the seasoned Jedi's nostrils.

He closed his eyes while raising his head to recite a prayer first written in the hours after the death of the farmer who inspired the sect. The guttural language, native to a system in the Galaxy's Deep Core, had a rapid-fire cadence. "*Seeds take root in soil, seeds take root in fire, Darth Agon is my provider.*" To honor tradition, he took a breath.

"He harvests from the crop fields, destroys on the battlefields, Darth Agon is my provider." He held a pause. "*Darth Agon died for me. I live for the dark side of the Force.*"

The Jedi opened his eyes and tossed the smoldering kria stalk into the fire.

"Dunn! You elongated the 'a' in 'scatamaa'—not only that, you held it for a half-beat too long. An eternity." The booming voice bounced off the walls. "You ruined the whole prayer—all of it—ruined. All is lost. Syllabically...it must be precise...exact. Once again: all is lost."

"Wow..." Tiruss turned to snicker at a portly Twi'lek a head taller, whom he met while apprehending when both were younger. A first-tour Knight caught a drug addict in the middle of a jewelry heist. During the ensuing fistfight, Dandoma Mekkra managed to break Tiruss' nose and two ribs before losing the struggle and ending up in cuffs. "Dandoma, my man: how many of your order's believers can even read this ancient language's words that they have been trained to recite so perfectly, down to the last syllable? Or...do you not want them to actually *read* these texts and figure out meaning on their own?"

The Agonian temple's lead minister shrugged. His two light-green headtails, lekku, shook as he did. "We tell them the meanings. Why would they need to read?"

The new arrival stayed by the fire to warm his palms. Head tilting back at the artless domed ceiling, he couldn't help laughing out loud. "That is the most telling statement I have ever heard from you...or any of you darksiders, now that I think about it."

Once muscular and now tubby, the bombastic preacher had dressed down today since he wasn't giving a sermon. He sat relaxing on a bench in his loose-fitting, black robes.

Still wearing his giant grin, Tiruss walked over to shake the hand of a man he once apprehended. "You're getting softer in your old age. Thank you for your time."

"And I thank you...for taking the time to learn our rituals and make an attempt to understand our church." Dandoma held Tiruss' right hand in both of his jewel-laden hands.

"I'm a fan of learning. Plus, it only helps me function better as a Jedi if I understand the beliefs of the citizenry, my friend." Both of the men took a seat on a bench. "The war has been over for centuries and peace-loving dark side believers got nothing to worry about from us."

"We believers are lawful and peace-loving now, yes. Unlike the light-siders..."

Instead of taking the bait, the light-sider tossed out his own conversational jab. "And besides: the stories about Darth Agon are charming...entertaining even, and—"

"Entertaining?" Indignant, the Agonian raised a ring-covered index finger. "Benevolent Provider harnessed the dark side to control the weather and grow more crops to feed so many—"

"Darth Agon was a mass murderer, Dandoma." The conversation topic had been raised before and gotten heated, just like the current dialogue appeared to be. Tiruss took a breath. "Of course, that was centuries ago. I'm glad this peaceful religion helped you turn your life around. Really. But I didn't fly here to debate. This is a follow-up to our chat."

"The mining attack...yes. Some other time, though, fly back. And wear stylish clothes." The dark disciple picked lint from his threads. "We'll drink and I will school you in the ways of debate as well as prove, once and for all, the superiority of the dark side of the Force. Walking away from here, you will be limping almost. My argument will be that convincing, Dunn."

Tiruss sighed, thinking of the long flight back. "As you know, the attack was not the first strike against a Republic industrial effort operating outside of our boundaries. Whether it's transports, orbiters, mining camps—whatever, hey—some folks don't like us in their backyard."

"Gee...and why would they think this way?"

"Politics aside...this was the first time Jedi security was the main focus of the hit."

Seeing the seriousness, Dandoma quit grinning. "You know I feel bad."

"I know. As I said: Agonians here on Corellia are not suspects." Looking up at the bland dome above made Tiruss think of religions that decorated their spaces. "But pirates and mercenaries who operate in the Outer Rim and beyond might run across darksiders from wild space and all of those uncontested regions. This many centuries after—"

"The lords of the Sith are dead, Dunn. Your sabers and bombs made sure of that." The grin showed a mix of full and broken teeth. "Then the Jedi castrated our souls and left us here."

"Castrated your souls?"...Dandoma, stop. Just...stop." He scratched his temple to the side of the small, curving horn. "I'll wrap this up soon, bear with me. I just need to bring up this one out-there theory that the Jedi investigative team conjured up."

"Go on."

Tiruss rose to stretch his legs and pace. "It's why superiors sent me here."

His former adversary leaned forward, a slow smile growing again. "Go on..."

"Some Master investigators, their mix of Force-sensitivity and experience...connected to it all *and* seen it all. What a combination." The fiftyish Republic representative liked to gesture with his hands, a trait that his old partner Syl would kid him about. "They look at evidence—the fraction of it that there was, in this case—and extrapolate possibilities...many possibilities..."

He quit pacing and stood in front of the temple leader. "We didn't find many bodies...no surprise...this is space. But the lack of material: that made smart minds wonder. Traces of

biological residue in the wreckage...very degraded and couldn't be identified...still, its presence made investigators recall ancient darksiders' use of Force-sensitive plants and animals—"

"Yes. The old days. The Battle of Thuna...10,000 light-siders got repelled by 221—"

"Dandoma!" Tiruss rarely raised his voice. After he had the other's attention, he gave his arm a light punch. "Like I said: we'll verbally-spar another time. Right now, I need to know...your temple is a stop for voyaging darksiders. Have you overheard anything related to older guerilla tactics? Jedi don't operate in the Outer Rim or Wild Space without authorization."

"But...you're curious." He took the departing visitor's arm as they strolled.

"Absolutely, we are curious. Galactic Republic peacekeepers died." Tiruss took his hand away as they got closer to the entrance. "While it's easy to fool ships' sensors into thinking there's life on board a ship when there isn't, the Jedi reported that they sensed the Force as well."

"Here's a theory: maybe you Jedi made an enemy or two along the way...could that be?"

"Not funny." Tiruss moved in. "As of now, there are fifty or sixty extra-Republic endeavors and if attacking Jedi and Medics is a strategy, we're confronting it head-on."

"Fifty or sixty? I bet the richboys got wayyyy more than that in the works..." Dandoma lost his goofy smile seeing the glare and brought his hands to his heart. "But, Tiruss...if you lost any colleagues in that horrific attack, I weep for them."

"Thank you for that." Tiruss shook Dandoma's hand. "I did lose friends that day."

As Tiruss hit the entranceway, the outside light made him squint. He raised his hood over the rust-colored curls and horns.

The house of worship owned one whole block in the middle of the small industrial city. Its dull paint scheme matched a neighborhood that housed both laborers and supervisors for factories that produced goods to be transported off-world.

Watching the Jedi take the pathway to the street, the Agonian threw out one last punch. "Why not interview the four dishonest Jedi who just got caught...they friends of yours, Dunn?"

The rain hit the ground, a light torrent. Tiruss Dunn did not answer.

Sylmonica Valkanna's fingers fiddled with the Prayer Star in the pocket of her blue workout jacket. She and her old partner caught up via intersystem communication, his image life-sized on a screen wall. Syl didn't remember grabbing the Archangel device after getting out of bed, which was before sunrise. Now, she couldn't stop fooling with the metal edges.

The talk began with her update: she will be transferring from Alderaan to Coruscant City to continue rehabilitation. Tiruss was disappointed. He had been detailed to the Middle Rim.

Knowing that she would value the information and also keep it to herself, the fellow victim had been cluing her in about the Phase One attack, what investigators had learned so far.

"I tell ya...I expected this Agonian minister to register surprise when I brought up ancient Sith tactics. But the ex-con looked clueless." Tiruss shifted on his feet. Earlier, in the middle of another story, Syl kidded him about his urge to pace. "Trust me: if you met this guy, you'd see I brought up subject matter that hadn't crossed his mind in a long time. Once he remembered, yeah, I mean then he started to babble and yammer, but he had no—"

Syl winked. "I trust you, Russ. You didn't need to babble and yammer, either."

"Well, aren't you in a mood today?"

Her fingers goofed with the Prayer Star. "Sorry...going crazy, need to leave Alderaan."

“Syl: take this restart on Coruscant, fully recharge.” His feet shuffled. Syl’s easygoing friend didn’t like these types of conversations. “Return 100%. Prove the naysayers wrong.”

“Those people...” She was the only person in the communications room.

Unable to provide a reply, Tiruss stayed silent. Both avoided eye contact during the quiet.

The pause held until he broke it, leaning closer to his floor-to-ceiling screen. “I need to sign off, but let me share a curious piece of evidence which I didn’t share with the Agonian.”

“Ohhh...something sensitive, letting your old partner in on it...I love you, Russ.”

“Funny. I gotta make this quick. Investigators said, for the most part, it was your garden-variety, *Hyperna*-class freighter. Cheap as a base model, deep-spaceworthy, customizable.”

“Yeah, they’re everywhere.” Syl nodded, now very engaged and no longer silly.

“Well...a popular theory is that it was stolen. Some innocent got targeted.”

“A common thing. Especially lately.” She stared out at the walls beyond the panes.

“That it is. But...one small chunk of the hull that got found in space showed trace amounts of residue from a C-Class, multi-chem blaster’s power cell.”

“What? That’s like military-grade.” Now she focused on the screen, not out the window.

“Yeah, it caught everyone’s attention. It was on this piece of paneling.”

“For a hauler just earning a living?” The functioning eye narrowed, her mind chewing on this data. “I can see purchasing weaponry for defensive purposes, sure, but that is a heavy-cannon-level power source right there. Can’t even mount such guns on a lot of vessels.”

“Exactly. Investigators got to wondering if the ship had been stolen from a crime boss or militia and repurposed, maybe...maybe a war happened in a place we don’t venture.”

Syl scowled at her partner like they used to when working. “Hmmmm...so, they didn’t just kill some law-abiding citizen to take his legal ship, instead—can anyone get clearance to ask questions outside the Republic, see if any warlords have lost their war-chariots recently?”

“They’re trying.” Tiruss rolled his eyes. “Because yeah, you’re right: if some crime boss or pirate monarch got knocked off, some locals somewhere would be talking about it.”

“Somewhere...maybe...” She pointed her finger at him while the thought gelled. “Maybe an ambitious star pilot won the ship...gambling somewhere in the Outer Rim or wherever. And the citizen never felt the need to remove the cannon...send a message to hijackers.”

“What you just said is possible. I have seen some strange-looking, rigged-together craft with all sorts of modifications. We’ll talk more, I gotta go.”

“May the Force be with you, Russ.”

Syl shut off the communication device and returned to her room. The next time she saw Meena, which would be on Coruscant, she planned to ask the new resident what the Archangels knew about Darth Agon the Provider.

Chapter Two

The hyperdrive's vibrations flowed through all twenty-two levels of the training vessel. From aft to the command bridge, the dull droning notified over 1000 beings on board that the modified *Etomer*-class peacekeeper had left Coruscant for the Middle Rim, the edge of Republic territory. Even in the expansive hangar, amidships and nine levels up from the engine room, the durasteel flight deck buzzed underneath the workboots of scurrying technicians who readied Brakebug Mark IIs for the upcoming flight test.

Filing into the hangar, one hundred anxious Jedi Padawans formed a school circle around a husky Jedi Master standing in front of a Big Bug with its cockpit screen open. Once the Peacekeeper arrived at its destination, the expert pilot would be monitoring the flight test.

His upper and lower sets of red, cloudy eyes took in the eager trainees. "Students: you are to be evaluated flying a pre-set course through an asteroid field, then linking to hyperdrive units and jumping to a nearby system where this training vessel will be waiting."

This close to the trials, the humanoid Padawans kept their heads shaved bald except for the braids. All others honored the rules relevant to their species. The senior-level students treated every lesson like a mission.

Behind the gathering of novice hyperspace pilots, Republic mechanics and tech specialists carried out last-minute duties so the beefed-up versions of the short-range Brakebugs could fly. The Mark II version of the patrol craft received the nickname "Big Bug" because it was twenty percent larger than the Mark I. Along with a more durable cockpit housing and main engine, the Big Bug brought additional weaponry and technology for more independent work.

"We teach how to plot simple courses by hand because it reduces reliance on computers. With that said, I have evaluated your hyperspace calculations." Searching the young faces, the Master raised his voice over machinery and screaming machine operators. "Where's Tannerum?"

Zennon did his best to sound off as loudly as he could. "Yes, Master."

"Do you know how decimal points work?" The expert flyer kept his furry hands folded.

"Yes, Master. I do." The uncomfortable Padawan shifted on his feet.

"Well, Tannerum, I have to wonder—"

The ship's intercom interrupted this new diatribe. "*Prepare for hyperspace exit.*"

The Master, like some of those around him and crewmembers attending to the Big Bugs, stumbled as the ship busied for the sudden, unscheduled drop from hyperspace.

He gathered his robes about his body and headed to the hangar's forward doors that led to the operations center, yelling over his shoulder. "Padawans, return to your quarters."

As ordered, the training cruiser dropped from hyperspace at this new point. After a closer look, the ship's command confirmed regional command's suspicions about "biological data readings."

The Master needed a moment before addressing the Padawans. He just called them up to the ship's observatory deck. His four eyes teared up, graying their cloudiness. He cracked his furry knuckles. His voice quivered. "Young ones, you have progressed far enough. This is important to see. Unfortunately, these types of incidents happen. Poor men and women were dumped from a hangar bay or cargo hold and still living when they were sent into space."

Out of the curved window that spanned one side of the ship's second-most-upper level, the Padawans saw about fifty corpses floating in the deadness, nothing around them but emptiness. None wore more than standard worker clothing. Had the Republic ship failed to arrive, the cluster of dead men and women would eventually drift away from one another.

"Slave ships can dump slaves if they get hailed, as what happened here." He coughed. "Trackers thought their credentials seemed suspicious."

The group watched as the hangar doors opened. The ship's internal comms announced emergency procedures using the speakers in the overheads.

"The trade no longer thrives in the Republic. But the few systems who do wield an inverse amount of clout due to their wealth." He stayed glued to the window, just like his juniors.

All of the dead bodies had two sets of arms, upper larger ones and lower ones that—while muscly—seemed skinny compared to the sizable top appendages.

"It's fine guys, I'm okay. Stop it." Padawan Stee Panduka had a full voice and enjoyed singing when the teenagers had time to relax. He sounded more annoyed than sad as his four hands pushed away fellow classmates who tried to comfort him.

Kel and Zennon watched their friend from the opposite side of the observatory deck.

Stee stepped back from the windows. The stocky Jedi hopeful was a Besalisk, just like the dead beings whose cold bodies meandered in a sick spectacle. Since he was so fit, the wattle underneath his bottom lip was not as pronounced as the ones on heavier members of his species. Still, this loose skin flapped when he was flustered. Like many Padawans, he played with his braids out of habit. "Leave it alone. I'm a Jedi, just like you all."

His Master spoke up, from in front of the windows. "Panduka is right. Wherever we are from, our bond is the Force. Our bond brings us together in a cruel Galaxy."

Kel had been shaking her head while observing the sadness outside. She leaned over to Zennon. "If the Republic hadn't hailed that ship, those people out there might still be alive."

Ten-passenger shuttlecraft launched to retrieve bodies. The stubby ships began a grisly, makeshift task. Thrusters fired in independent bursts to maneuver each one closer, bit by bit.

Instead of answering Kel, Zennon turned and walked to the elevators.

The one-story dwellings all around this little clay house serve as residences for beings who make their livings in the farming village's marketplace. A marketplace which is now burning.

Syl's right hand brings her brushed-metal-paneled light saber out to the side of her right hip. Her eyes squint from the sunlight. The teen terrorists lean against the housing for some heating unit that had long since been removed and traded for food.

"Those two are conscripts...weaklings."

Padawan ArraKel Kitaros is standing next to her. Her hair is longer and messed up, its natural dark brown. She wears an eyepatch over her left eye. Kel spits on the dirt of the roof, a mix of blood and saliva. Her tan tunic is covered in multiple colors of blood, just like Syl's.

"Didn't you hear Kel's words...weaklings!"

Syl jumps back. While she had turned right to focus on Kel, Padawan Zennon Tannerum screams into Syl's left ear. Scruffy-faced, he also wears an eyepatch over his left eye. His brown hair falls in his face. It is curlier than Kel's hair and his tan tunic is also blood-stained.

Now it is the one-eyed Kel's turn to raise her voice. "What kind of self-respecting being allows themselves to be conscripted...ripped from one's home and family?"

As the chastising continues, Kel and Zennon back Syl to the corner of the roof and run their hands across their filthy tunics, then wipe Syl's face with the mix of fresh blood.

Zennon says, "I sense more fear than anger in you."

Antiquated water towers, in the distance behind the two Padawans. One of the three towers was functioning, Syl knows this fact.

Zennon and Kel are nose lengths from her face. Their fury is in unison. "Republic forces will need to secure that water tower. Sylmonica Valkanna is about to firebomb it."

An explosion in the next village over rocks Syl's mind back to her present predicament.

Both Padawans lose themselves in hysterics. "Power hour!"

She decides to try and light her saber again. The village's medical facility comes apart. A fireball destroys both building and beings.

Her thumb flicks the switch on her light saber again. The village's trash depot. Burning garbage covers the surrounding area.

Kel's silliness leaves her face and her voice grows soft. "We are such a weird little family, us Jedi." She doubles over with laughter.

Zennon joins in. "Indeed we are, sister...indeed we are..."

Losing themselves, the hysterical Padawans point fingers. Instead of her light saber, Syl is holding a crudely-fashioned remote detonator. Her head hits the roof.

Chapter Three

Spicy sweetness left his lungs, then his nostrils. Slow waves melded with incense and other clouds wafting in the lounge's air. Before he could formulate a reply, the unexpected input still needed to process in Dandoma Mokra's prison-educated mind. All the aging Agonian preacher could do was close his tired eyes and take another pull off the long-stemmed pipe.

Never a fan of travel, the newly-arrived darksider needed a nap. His fellow darksiders' shocking answers only confused an exhausted brain made groggier by drink. The usual soothing comfort of ultra-premium smoke failed to quell his nerves.

A distorted cityscape spanned the distance behind the aquatic tank. More buildings than his last visit to two old friends. "Mattias, Zinora...have you thought this through? Jedi?"

After the Jedi Tiruss Dunn paid him a visit, the Twi'lek spent a week brainstorming who could be behind a new scheme involving long-dead wisdom. A sensitive subject, it required serious thought before acting. The worst outcome would be to generate gossip in a network of overly cautious beings who take great steps to hide their feelings. Once he felt confident, the folksy preacher confronted his first hunch: the Rees. Instead of obfuscating, they invited him to Coruscant for a face-to-face talk.

Now that he knew their plans, the desire to uncover truth no longer consumed him.

Adjusting his favorite fur-lined cloak over his shoulders, Mattias let out a small giggle. "Before your worries spiral, keep in mind that she is a Knight and not a Master."

The evening's host enjoyed the same smoke as his guest, a recent gift from fellow believers who passed through last week. The spicier blend of dried leaves was cultivated on the dark side planet Dathomir. He puffed on his antique crystal pipe. "And secondly, if the least we do is poison this person so she leaves the Jedi, we did some good."

"In these times, to follow the ways of the dark side of the Force is to live a hopeful existence, only to see hope dissolve." Their guest cracked his scarred knuckles. Sad, yellow eyes gazed at the wall-to-wall tank where freshly-fed creatures changed colors. "I want to believe, I do. You have faith in Scholar Sulif's hold over this Jedi. But this makes me uneasy."

He shook his head while stepping closer to aquatic animals excited by the Rees' Force-sensitivity. His Agonian ceremonial crown showed a golden rendering of long kria stalks, entwined. The centuries-old headpiece jostled between the two sensitive tendrils protruding from each side of Dandoma's skull. "We are not the giants that our ancestors were, friends."

Zinora had slinked over to the tank right behind him. Her nails dug into his arm. "We are not groveling ground-scavengers, either. Our way of life needs an infusion of new blood—blood with a higher m-count than our own."

"New blood? Interesting phrase." Giggling, he bent to accommodate her height. "So...Scholars engaging in sacrifice again, Zinora? Reverting back to the sect's earliest days?"

"Don't deflect, you kria-seed." The Scholar Emeritus growled as he stamped out his pipe in an ornate urn, a gift from the previous Chancellor of the Galactic Senate.

The Scholar Emerita's claw-grip mutated into a caress. "Inside this smoking lounge, you are free to say that this jolt away from reserved complacency makes you insecure."

Incredulous, the Agonian sneered. "'Insecure?' I hate that word."

Zinora nodded. "Because you follow the darker ways of the Force. Your ego is too—"

He raised a finger at his old friend. "Passion guides me, I—"

Mattias' shriek from over by the bartop grabbed the attention of the plankto-squid. "And my wife and I have found a lost soul who is searching to engage her passion."

She had a solid hold of the larger man's bracelet-lined forearm once again. "Dandoma Mokka: I have seen you stand up to some wretched beings in your younger days. Think more like Tramm Nurado does. Your good friend could spend his final years in retirement, counting and re-counting his wealth. Instead, he embraces risk. For the dark side."

An uncomfortable gaze listed from one to the other. Mattias and Zinora's uniform facial expressions did not soften, no matter how much his pleading eyes asked. "But...Jedi?"

"We chose correctly." The elderly woman's face lit up. "Did we ever..."

"We didn't just select one Jedi. We inadvertently elevated the slavery unrest in the Republic, that's what we did." Mattias stared at the plankto-squid, stroking his beard, goblet in his hand. "Her dead family lived in an unprotected farming colony of upended citizens. Since the strike, the public has been demanding to know where those displaced by slave labor rank."

Zinora cackled. "Reports of violence against slaves are skyrocketing."

Mattias admired the purple color in his glass. "It makes perfect sense, in retrospect."

Zinora ambled over to her hanging etching of Darth Sabotaa's saber. "Of course, it does. We can only look back and learn while the dark side forges ahead, explaining nothing."

Two buzzed eyes widened as the memory hit. "Not long ago, I was in town. Citizens, harassing a slave...hatred of her owner, directed at her. The owner? He stood by and watched."

"You were witnessing the dark side itself." Zinora's eyes took in her prized artwork.

Stepping lighter now, the colleague felt the need to hit up the bar again. "Slavery: a subject that we have strong opinions about...but strive to avoiding talking about."

"Polite conversation only." Chuckling, Mattias sauntered to the bar.

Dandoma had to stop pouring his new drink. "Just tell me: what do the king and queen know? And the prince? The Heirs, others..."

"Oh, Dandoma, Dandoma...Dandoma." Zinora's insipid giggle added to her sneer. "The king, queen, and prince know nothing. The Heirs know nothing. Clan Valkorion knows nothing."

Mattias jumped in. "The Malaks know nothing. No other Agonians know anything. No others know anything. And all will remain clueless until we see fit to inform them, is that clear?"

As the outside light lessened, the plankto-squid's colorful scales lit the space.

Cracks in the ceiling allowed filthy water to seep through in measured drips. Barely-noticeable splashes hit a floor that creaked from moisture damage.

The middle-aged delegate from the Yntok regional council shrieked once again, imploring his three torturers to free him. He tried to shift. As with previous attempts, the chains around his body held him on the flat plank. Immobilized, he stayed at the mercy of captors who grabbed him from a spaceport. "Please...once again: I know nothing about our military's patrols near the Yntikkian Ruins—please—I know nothing...nothing..."

Tresskuss, the go-to captain whom Tramm Nurado had chosen to lead this task, answered the pleading with a growl. Oversized yellow eyes that almost glowed did not move. "Yes, you made us aware of this supposedly-crucial fact."

A Trandoshan, his snarl mixed with his species' tendency to draw out their 's' sounds. "The lieutenant colonel also said this...you Yntokians seem to be a bunch of know-nothings. Your worship of an asteroid field has rotted your minds. You turned away from the Force."

Like many in his quasi-legal line of work, Tresskuss periodically injected anabolic hormones to beef up muscle mass. Tonight, his size overwhelmed a bewildered being who never skipped a chance at desert or second helpings.

"I have no patience." Tresskuss' scaly nose snorted as he closed in. The odor from his last meal, a chunk of rotted carcass, poured over the disheveled man on the table. A scarred tongue slithered. His growl covered the exec's face with spittle. The veins in his eyelids throbbed. "Why do you insist on trying to test something that does not exist? Speak..."

The out-of-shape Yntokian blubbered. The beefy criminals registered zero concern.

Screams and pleading spilled out into the rundown hallway. At the end, a pair of beat-up doors opened to a wide stone deck that once looked out at opulence. Tonight, a moonless gray shrouded this elevated view of an abandoned estate's overgrown gardens littered with waste left behind by scavengers, criminals, and refugees.

Besson Overtanos gestured at the blanket of darkness. "Two of my great-great-uncles bankrupted the magistrate who owned this estate."

In earlier times, this once-regal balcony overlooked a courtyard enclosed by a perimeter of manicured trees. Now, moldy stench from the garbage below covered the whole area in its rot. The stone and metal railing fell over in sections, reddish vines snaking in between it all. The pair of older men just walked out here, needing a break from observing the violence in the damp room at the other end of the weather-beaten hall.

Besson's smirk differed from the impatient scowl he wore when he and Tramm Nurado were inside observing Tresskuss' crew in action. "Before this Outer Rim star system became a failed state, the magistrate was one of its final statespersons, supposedly with an ego the size of a small moon. My great-great-great uncles took advantage of his disadvantage."

As a show of respect, the Dirnn leaned in so the shorter human didn't have to raise his voice above random sounds generated by pain and frustration that poured from the two off-kilter doors behind them. Hunched over, Tramm replied while nodding at the dim view of decay. "So they took his beloved family property and let it go, allowed the lowlifes to ruin it. Nice."

"Neither of my uncles ever stepped foot on this planet." The estate owner chuckled as he neared the deck's edge, a section where the broken railing still stood. "When I first traveled here, I saw a secretive place for conducting types of business that sometimes needs to be conducted."

"It is perfect." Tramm looked into the night. Rusted-out vehicle parts littered one area, roundish and squarish shapes melding with the haze. "Far from Republic reach, neighboring systems all dysfunctional. Perfect."

From down the hall, the delegate screamed with a revitalized sense of urgency. Before replying, Besson allowed this newest wave of protest to peter out.

"I'm glad you approve, good friend. This property is available for your use." His right hand made a wide sweep out at the night. "However, while the idea of an alliance between you darksiders and the cartels promises to unlock much, there is an issue."

"Please proceed." The warlord had hunched over again, taking in the sudden seriousness.

"Agonian dogma is popular with working-class, who tend to be harsh towards labor productivity maximization. You are friends with Dandoma Mokka, correct?"

The ex-con shifted on his feet. "Known him for years. A criminal, now he's a preacher. Obviously, your people discovered that he has spoken against slavery. He was born into it."

Besson's hands looked tiny as they took one of the Dirnn's. "You, Boss Nurado, are his trusted colleague. Mattias and Zinora say Mokra is opportunistic." His grip refused to let go.

"I can see Dandoma rethinking his stance, yes. He likes more money and nice things."

"Then explain to him the simplicity of supporting us: more nice things."

Both men chuckled. Besson's little smile stayed. "Speaking of the future... The Rees and I, and some mining and banking associates, we are going to put our resources to work."

Tramm, born into strife, could only nod. Over the course of decades, the crime boss had seen powerful beings either explode during moments of lightheartedness, or casually drop a piece of devastating news with a matter-of-fact delivery.

His new benefactor snickered. "Calm down, Boss Nurado. This is political. It ties to our reasons for being here on this forgotten planet tonight."

"What's going on here?"

"We are going to use recent incidents involving Jedi criminality as justification to put forward an oversight bill, which would create a panel that the Jedi would answer to."

"Hasn't that been tried before? It failed."

"Yes, the idea has been suggested for legislation." Besson laughed. "More than once. And, just like those times, it will have no chance of passing. But as a tactic... with this being an election year in many systems, this bill *will* generate talk. And, more importantly, smoke."

His new associate kept his green eyebrows fixed tight. "You're talking about games that I don't know how to play here, sir. This game... or theater... or—"

"It's both."

From inside the dilapidated structure, Tresskuss screamed out a string of profanity in his native language. The bound victim shrieked his responses to the grating hisses.

Once the noise subsided, more details got shared. "While the populace debates the order's importance, we will submit a thorough mining report about the asteroid field sentimentally referred to as 'The Ruins.' Our document lays out the superior range of metals and minerals, ease of acquisition. Quiet supporters in government will circulate its details. It's all about optics at this point."

The power broker took the hired gun by the arm to lead him back inside. "The plan is to start the asteroid harvest, initial security being the private military contractors you and I discussed, let the Republic play catch-up. After the first 1000 or so workers arrive and begin work in harm's way, government will have no choice but to send peacekeeping forces to replace unscrupulous private contractors. When this happens, it will reduce my spend significantly."

"Forcing their hand... I don't know how many steps ahead you cartel folks are, sir."

"And I speak for the rest when I say that you are a true friend."

A fresh round of screams burst from the room.

Besson stopped and raised a bejeweled finger. "I'm thinking our delegate doesn't seem to know anything. But wouldn't his disappearance send a message to those who do?"

"Tresskuss... Plan B, convict."

"Plan B... Yes... Boss..." Tresskuss' hisses came from the little room ahead.

The buzz of his vibro-saw's blade turning on grew loud as the cutting tool started to whirl.

Chapter Four

Small skylights along the high ceilings ushered in the grayness of the rainy day, illuminating the long table's stark whiteness with focused beams like spotlights hitting a stage.

"Stay seated, everyone." One of the review board's three Jedi Masters hopped off her slim chair, gathering the robe's layers of brown folds about her thin body. She rushed around the table using her metal walker and headed toward the double doors. "I'll talk to her."

The subject of meeting just stormed out.

"Knight Valkanna..." The booming voice tended to catch folks off-guard, coming from such a frail and slight being. Jedi Master Lanta Dasmal's furry and wrinkled claws gripped the four-legged walker's handles and used it to propel her forward. "Knight Valkanna, stop."

The longtime Master didn't have to keep hurrying. The front of her mobility aid almost bumped into Knight Valkanna after crossing the door plane and turning left.

"Something wrong, Master Dasmal?" Syl stood a few paces from the doorway wearing a too-big smile, her arms covered by the folds of her robe's sleeves. Looking down, her glare locked on. By standing tall, she did nothing to accommodate the elder's limited line of sight.

A hunched back, held together with screws and metal joints, could only move so much. The Master tried to prop herself up on the walker to converse, but fused vertebrae in her neck and upper back did not allow it.

The angry subordinate held her rigid stance for an extra beat before stepping back. "I'm supposed to accept a postponement because of some Jedi oversight legislation? You even admitted it's a political stunt and not serious. And I have to accept it?"

Master Dasmal's bushy, white unibrow raised. Her green, ovoid eyes remained soft.

Syl's look was hard. The horizontal scars on her left temple, no longer the pinkish color, blended with her skin. "I don't see how it affects me...and I'm supposed to 'accept' it? And no: don't tell me that everything is connected."

"I didn't mean to come across as dismissive with you, Knight." Straining to keep eye contact, Master Dasmal offered the largest smile she could, revealing eight fangs. "You're experienced, served all around the Republic. Also, you—"

"So, send me be back out there. First, it was medical data...that no one could explain."

"Take a breath, Val—"

"No. You hear me out." Syl bent her knees a bit so they were the same height. "All I want to do is go operational—only the Council is somehow scared of some legislation or whatever? I work out now, feel great. I have been learning more about sabercraft, reading, staying curious..."

Flustered, she had to rise and walk down the sterile hallway. "Make this make sense."

The Master blinked her eyes.

Syl took a step forward. "Make. This. Make. Sense."

Two Academius professionals who were in the evaluation peered out the door. Master Dasmal shooed them back with her orange claw. "We were notified of your postponement right before this meeting. The Council anticipates an audit or—"

"So...what? They're worried that some wounded, convicted Jedi will mess up and make them look bad in front of their Senate bosses? Or—here—I got it—what about—"

"Take a few days off, Knight." Her voice cut off the screaming. "Settle in, take long walks around the city. Stay away from the Jedi Complex, just your living quarters."

Syl had already headed back down the hall. She called out over her shoulder. "Bye."

“So...we’ve spent the last hour joking about how scared your superiors have become.” The elderly tea matron had just refilled Meena Euclin’s clay pot with roots and steamy water. “And also: Russ has become patronizing and younger ones seem to be weaker than in your day.”

She winked across the table. “What’s really going on?”

Syl had been watching the tea matron hobble back to the corner bar. Her friend’s wink got answered with a slow grin that melted away. She sat forward to refill her half-full ceramic mug with a brew made from berry leaves. “I’m glad you were free on such short notice, Meena.”

“You said that already, Syl.” The curved pipe sat in Meena’s hand, waiting to be lit.

The sight of a Jedi in formal brown robes reclining in a swing-chair caught the attention of many well-dressed patrons. Other stylish folks seated in the Federal City tea emporium ignored everyone, including the public servant and her casually-dressed friend at the small, round table.

“A while back, on Alderaan, you asked me about my court-martial.” Taking in views of the beautiful people, three-dimensional sight seemed almost normal again. Hours and hours of therapy with Masters and medical professionals. The mix of the Force and technology at work. “I said I’d talk about it some other time. I guess this is as good of a time as any.”

Meena nodded, puffing. “Whatever you feel comfortable sharing.”

Syl splashed her full cup. “I don’t talk about this much.”

She turned to smooth the folds of the Jedi robe which hung by her chair. “Power hour...”

“The what?”

“A power hour. The objective is for sixty bombs to go off in sixty minutes, one per minute, in one geographic area, like a city...a terrorist tactic called a power hour.” A hand stayed on the brown robe, stroking it. “Power hours are never 100 percent—rarely even fifty percent successful. But this one...all sixty went off when they were supposed to. Yes, they did.”

Syl’s voice shook more. “They planned it for months. Suicide bombers training, saboteurs hiding explosives all over the tri-province area...which was this...like ten semi-functioning towns.”

After sipping tea and observing oblivious patrons, she continued, her voice steadier. “Years ago, in the middle of crying one day, I figured out how to frame the awfulness: the first explosion, the sixtieth—the perfect frame, bookends. Those two together...forget the other fifty-eight. If only.”

She took in the room’s immediacy while the next thought about the past formed. “The worst of this Galaxy...the worst makes you question why any of this exists. Any of us exist.”

Meena sat silent. But Syl knew the woman her age well enough. “Sorry...rambling. I’ll back up. You see...there was a local, everyone liked him, a beggar...starving childhood, brain never fully developed, like many in born on Cantio. I barely knew him, but Brahm had a beautiful soul.”

She quit smiling, her gaze on Meena. “Brahm got hired to carry a heavy package to a booth in this marketplace. If he delivered on time, a three-wheeled sand-bike was going to be his. Locals told investigators he couldn’t stop talking about riding his ‘prize’ as he called it.”

The cup in her hand shook. “Jedi security in the marketplace never sensed murderous feelings. Unlike suicide bombers, Brahm didn’t have any. He was filled with joy about a bike.”

Tears in her right eye, she reached out across the table. Meena took her hand. They sat.

A trembling guardian of peace and justice needed to stare at a crowd of civilians until she felt ready to speak more.

“I felt the blast...saw the smoke. Then the attackers broadcasted their first message...the power hour had begun.”

The day’s eleventh bomb leveled a food distribution site near the command center. Sylmonica Valkanna was pulling shell-shocked relief workers out from beneath the collapsed shelter when the AMTs, Academius Medical Technicians, arrived. Green and yellow splotches of blood stained her tan Jedi tunic. Without protective goggles, dust from pulverized walls and supports covered her body and had nearly blinded her.

A young AMT was irrigating Syl’s eyes with water when they all had to brace once again. In unison, they said, “I am one with the Force. The Force is with me.”

“Any second now...”

Not even a second after the gruff Chief AMT stated this, the explosion in the next settlement over went off.

Upon realizing that she was still alive and the rattling loudness was kilometers away, the stressed Jedi nudged the freckle-faced AMT. “The Force was with us.”

Through his shakes, he answered. “This time...”

“Don’t think like that.”

Her wrist communicator beeped. Medic Ryle Zambreeth, signaling from a nearby village, requesting protection and maybe transportation for a makeshift aid station he set up.

His good friend and fellow Republic servant separated a rickety, three-wheeled flatbed truck from the oversized cart full of grain behind it. While AMTs took control of the distribution site, Syl started up the coughing motor. A hover-type of craft would be better, but it sufficed.

An easy drive—now arduous due to traffic congestion generated by violence. Though the dented jalopy did contain a surprising amount of pep. The panicked-but-focused Jedi steered around collections of clueless people in her quest to reach the Medic checkpoint.

A fossil fuel dump got hit. That fire was only beginning to rage. Black clouds owned one section of skyline, offering a stark contrast to grayness everywhere else. The air stung her nostrils, throat, and eyes.

Every minute, Syl braked to a stop and chanted. After the blast failed to kill her, she started moving again.

Minds consumed by terror, feet shuffling in the carnage. No person wandering along the warzone’s dirt roads knew the location of the next suicide bomber or device. Blank faces said so.

The throttle gave the engine as much gas as it could. Stench from burning fossil fuels trailed out as she put more distance between her and their flaming source.

Dazed looks, frozen with adrenaline. Road congestion caused by souls who still did not grasp what was happening.

The next settlement, its gates. Lacking eyewear that would shield her from the sun, she squinted while navigating towards a village that offered a shortcut to Ryle’s location.

The rusty brake creaked in response to her right foot hitting the pedal. A cobbled-together engine that was speedier than it looked lurched to a stop on the trash-covered thoroughfare. Its whirring sputtered as the feed of pirated fuel petered out.

With both eyes jammed shut tight, the Force-wielder repeated a chant in a voice barely above a whisper after letting out a cough. "I am one with the Force. The Force is with me."

In the middle of the second recital, the explosion that had been timed for this minute interrupted her verse. The ground underneath her rickety vehicle rumbled.

She opened both eyes and took in the scene: garbage, decay, debris...all still in the same locations that they were seconds ago. A realization: she still lived and breathed—but was still smack dab in the middle of this. Like the previous ones, this strike and her geographic location were too far apart, though this one was closer than others.

"THAT WAS NUMBER THIRTY-SIX, CANTIO. THE POWER HOUR POWERS ONWARD."

Leaning at an angle by the intersection of three pock-marked streets, the village cluster's barely-upright communications tower still functioned well enough. Well enough to terrify citizens further. From the beginning, the attackers used the network of beat-up public speakers to taunt and demonstrate their overwhelming control.

Syl was about to pull back on the rough piece of metal that served as the throttle handle when the silvery communicator on her wrist went off. The name on the screen: *Vandersett*.

She brought her wrist up to her mouth. "Zuk?" Her eyes scrunched to block out glare, scanning across two-story and one-story business buildings, the entrance of the settlement.

"Just arrived with a rifle platoon from the Corellian Detachment. Ryle wants your ETA with wheels for the wounded." Her fellow Knight's scratchy voice came through garbled.

"I'm a few kilometers away...hang on." Syl shut her communicator and her eyes. "I am one with the Force. The Force is with me."

As she was about to repeat the ancient saying for the fourth time, a relatively quiet boom made her stop. The ground beneath her barely stirred.

"Valkanna...you there?"

"Yeah, Zuk. It was nowhere near. Great to hear your...hang on." Her voice trailed off. That hand dropped back to her side as she studied the one- and two-story stone buildings. Up ahead, two beings scurried across a roof, heads down, away from her position. "Zuk: I see aggressors, humanoid...possibly armed. Let me scope this out."

"Hurry."

Syl dismounted the cab. A fast sprint covered the distance to the far end of the fairly clutter-free block and a leap up to the roof of the one-story building, unlit saber in hand.

Squinting from sunlight overhead, she sighted the pair at the far end of this dilapidated rooftop. While both adversaries carried long rifles, the rattily-dressed young men kept their barrels down at the gravelly surface, even though she surprised them. The lack of combat gear and tentative expressions suggested that they were conscripts, as bomb-rattled as any other soft target. Over the course of three tours on Cantio, Syl battled prison-hardened murderers and fearless idealists. Those confused faces. This tired duo was neither.

Decoys. It occurred to her that the two were being used as decoys to make Republic forces think an attack is coming. She had seen other lost-looking types carrying cheap, outdated arms. Still, the Jedi kept her brushed-metal-paneled light saber out to the side. "Where are you fellas from, a farming colony? A mining settlement?"

"Outer Rim. King Tataan's territories. Our family got threatened."

Upon hearing the word "family" she saw the resemblance underneath layers of soot. The bridges of their noses and large eyebrows, though it all was splotched with grease and dirt.

The conscripts' blasters remained pointed downward. The unlit saber stayed visible.

“You two might want to get ready...another bomb coming. Join my chant if you want.” She closed her eyes. “I am one with the Force. The Force is—”

Reports suggested that it struck along the edge of the tri-province map, kilometers away.

“Welp...” Syl reached inside her tunic, then held out two nutrition bars in her left hand. “Since we’re alive...hungry? Get in some bites before the next one.”

The trembling conscripts met her halfway, then stepped back before indulging. With foil wrapping removed, the reluctant fighters chowed down.

Syl looked past them to observe the surroundings from one story up. Long, skinny clay houses, their residents make their livings in a marketplace which was now on fire.

Less than an hour ago, she had reported to the command post’s central headquarters for an administrative task. The schedule looked to be light. She did not bring along binoculars.

Three crumbling water towers in the distance behind the grateful conscripts. One still functioned.

The older brother, through bites of food, spoke. “Retard...”

Syl turned around. The sibling repeated himself. “Strann said they found a retard.”

She got in his face. “What...what are you talking about?”

The taller one spoke, garbled due to the nutrition bar. “My brother and I overheard them talking about the boss’ plan...laughing. They bribed a retard with a bike...first bomb—”

“At the Werrato Marketplace?”

Instead of waiting for a reply, she fast-walked to the opposite side of the roof and stared out at plumes of smoke. Werrato Marketplace, two kilometers away. “Chant along if you want, boys. Next one is coming.”

In unison, all three said, “I am one with the Force. The Force is with me.”

Midway through the third repetition, the power hour’s next bomb went off.

VIII: Dark Angels

Chapter One

“Come this way, rascals of the dark side.”

Quim-Na Sulif’s infectious laughter and silly snorts brought out giggles from the gaggle of formally-dressed, screeching children bopping down the decorated hallway behind her.

“And none of you little monsters touch any of the really old artifacts on these walls...or else Great Auntie Zinora will be very-very-mad at you.”

The largest of the hundred-room estate’s playrooms sat at the end of the narrow passageway. The Scholar led her bouncing entourage towards its two etched-paneled doors.

One of the more rambunctious five-year-olds caught up with the high-heeled adult’s longer strides. “Great Auntie Zinora gets angry when she’s mad. Like...a giant, angry, three-headed, flying curakan-beast...who’s really angry!”

Dressed in jeweled heels, Quim-Na bent to stroke the nodding boy’s thick mane of hair. “That is exactly how I describe her to people, Nabi. Every word you just said.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

While parents socialized on the estate’s wide terrace eight levels below, kids demanded story time before nannies swept each child away to families’ various suites for bed. Forever dramatic and currently full of drink, Quim-Na volunteered to entertain.

The arched doors opened, revealing walls painted like a sky full of stringy clouds and plush cushions strewn across the hardwood floor. Not missing a step, the ambitious believer removed her elegant footwear and threw both in the direction of the far wall.

Dumbfounded youngsters stopped cold. A few uttered unsure snickers. The older one’s wink prompted many to remove their shoes and toss them.

She made a funny-face. The chubby-cheeked, Twi’lek boy answered with a toothy grin.

One of the shyer girls tugged at a shiny bracelet while checking out the sparse playroom. “Hey, Quim-Na: Great Auntie’s family built this house and this playroom that doesn’t have any toys in it like...hundreds of years ago. Did you know that?”

“Yes, dear. I did. Her family colonized this hemisphere of Coruscant.” She squinched her nose at the girl. “‘Colonized’ means they got the meanies in line.”

The girl and a few others chuckled.

“Get comfy, youngsters.” The impromptu babysitter ordered the giddy group to pull brightly-colored pillows around in a half-circle. After spending the first part of the evening on her best behavior, this was her chance to relax.

“Quim-Na...tell us a war-story about Valkorion’s armies destroying some Jedi and—”

The six-year-old’s younger sister struggled to rise out of her overly-fluffy beanbag so she could reach over and cover his mouth. “Noooo...let’s dance the ‘Dance of the Glowtail Fleas’ dance...” Her huge blue eyes pleaded as her head nodded furiously.

A chorus of shrieks. “Dance the ‘Dance of the Glowtail Fleas’ dance! Dance the—”

“No, you goofballs hopped up on sweet-treats. We’ll dance another time.” Their storyteller snickered at the precociousness. “I’d like to tell you a story about your future.”

Quim-Na took center stage. The kids sat enraptured by a person they knew as fun and childlike. “Tonight, I’d like to tell you about a hero who just became one with the Force. A brave man sacrificed himself not too long ago. He stepped forward for you. All of you.”

Face full of life, she strolled back and forth. All sat upright, watching her roam.

“Children, this hero’s name was Silnius.” She let that new name sink in. “Silnius was not a Sith Lord. But he was extraordinary. Do you know what ‘extraordinary’ means?”

The tiniest of the group blurted out her answer. “He was better than everybody else.”

“Such a great way to look at him, sweetheart.” Quim-Na gave an approving wink.

The rosy-cheeked four-year-old attempted to wink back.

“Silnius was indeed special. When the dark side needed Silnius, he showed us believers how to act and I hope you can learn from him, little ones.”

The Scholar regaled with talk about a man who did not hesitate to volunteer for a tough mission, who stepped forward when no one else would. She did not specifically name the Jedi, but mentioned that “bad people were going to harm the dark side.”

This made a girl shriek. “Nobody hurts the dark side, Quim-Na!”

“Oh, I know, dear heart. And Silnius knew that, too.” She went on to praise Silnius for slaying most of the invaders, a plot point which brought out hyperactive applause.

“But he knew he wasn’t going to get away. Outnumbered, he fought until the very, very, very, very end. Silnius gave himself to the Force.” Hands on her hips, the one-woman show stood in triumph. “And now, our future looks even brighter.”

One of the oldest boys shot up from his pillow. “Quim-Na: I will be like Silnius.”

His younger sister joined him on her feet, defiant as well. “I will be like Silnius.”

The youngest stumbled after getting up so quickly. “Silni!”

“I will be like Silnius.”

“I will be like Silnius.”

The children continued to declare their devotion.

Quim-Na Sulif clasped her hands to her heart.

All chuckled at their host’s last witticism. Taking a pause from his impromptu speech, Mattias Ree raised his crystal flute to toast the sea of distinguished faces, also saluting the immaculately-dressed Dilani Vestagon.

Looking regal in a headdress of precious stones and a shimmery gown that trailed behind her, Dilani returned his gesture. She stood across the torch-lit terrace with Dandoma Mokka and a highly respected dark side couple, old friends of the Rees from the Outer Rim.

Seeing the rising star work the dining hall earlier made the Scholar Emeritus beam with joy. Her youthful curiosity and casual intensity impressed dignitaries who had traveled here from all across the Galaxy. Additionally, she had just received her security clearance for working at the Academius Records Center and enchanted tonight’s attendees with accounts of using trances to shield thoughts from Force-wielders during the hours-long interviews.

Mattias stroked his beard and gazed at the seated and standing compatriots. “This gathering has been so pleasant, our bellies full...a sign of the times.”

Some of his audience never fired a weapon because they were born into riches. Others made their riches using weapons. All took in his words.

“If these were earlier days, our Sith forefathers would not be cordial like us—they would be tearing at one another’s throats.”

Everyone let out a hearty laugh and returned his toast.

“I am a Scholar of the Academius. As I look out into this crowd, I see Agonians, Malgans, Blackfire, the Hive of Dathomir, Clan Valkorion, the Lovers, Malak’s Heirs...here we

are, descendants of kindhearted people driven from their homes. We yearn to return to the places of our forebears.”

Mattias nodded down at his wife, who had been mingling with a sharply-clad Tramm Nurado and an accomplished trio of dark magick practitioners whose ancestors fled the Sith world Dathomir. The adoring faces fed him. “Whether it’s Agon’s farmlands or Malak’s glorious palaces...wherever we came from, all we dream about now is to live on those planets and moons that have been lost. To live in peace.”

The drink in his hand reflected torchlight. “Jedi are the cruelest beings in the Galaxy.”

Dandoma, clad in a flowery cloak and wide-brim hat, raised his glass. “I hate the Jedi.”

The crowd laughed a hearty, collective laugh. The colorful preacher was loved by many.

“You have always been a Jedi-hater, Dandoma.” Mattias cheered his colleague before resuming to his address. “This may not be a time of lords, but we who watch over dark hearths serve the Sith all the same. And think: here we are, stuffed with food and drink and smoke instead of starving in some muck-filled trench, drenched in blood...enjoy our accident of birth.”

After taking a nice gulp, he held his empty out for a refill. The deck erupted with cheer.

“The dark side...let it bring us in close.” The fun dwindled as the lifelong believer grew thoughtful. His hand went back to its habit of stroking his beard. “I love you all.”

Silence enveloped the deck, attention on a man who existed for these types of moments. Tramm’s gigantic yellow eyes were watery. Dilani gave a tearful nod from her place in back.

His scream shattered the reflectiveness. “And I love your passion most of all.”

Fierce cheers answered his declaration. His wife drank him in like she did when they were courting. “Call me a shameless optimist, but I say our worst days are behind us. I lack the galaxy-bending strength of Darth Nihilus, but I believe. And that is thanks to all of you.”

The Scholar Emeritus’ gaze swept from far left, across the deck from the front tables to the ledge. “You and I—us—we were born of those who scattered to the winds. And here we are tonight, their descendants. With every passing year, the dark side gains more of what it lost. Bit by bit, our strength returns.”

The enraptured listeners made him tear up. “And during certain stretches of time, we take gigantic leaps forward.”

Repeatedly, Dilani’s feet sent their thanks up to her tired brain. True, the traditional set of heels that Zinora had chosen for her looked exquisite. But, as a night of mingling progressed, the unforgiving footwear punished. She was glad to remove and cast them aside.

The newly-influential darksider’s top-floor suite was one level below. A few minutes on the rooftop deck soaking in cold breezes of a late night sounded ideal after such an eventful evening. Luckily, none of her fellow believers expected her until the late-morning meal.

Tonight, she truly grasped the immensity. Visitors from the Outer Rim and wild space beyond...for a people who had been beaten, believers had managed to stay living in pretty much every area, Republic and otherwise. Followers of different Sith greats from nobler times, but followers all united as a family in the modern era.

Her toes wiggled inside fur-lined slippers. Face scrubbed and hair down, she could relax. The light wind soothed. Each passing second brought more sleepiness. Her spent senses appreciated the lack of traffic in the sky. This stillness could not exist in Coruscant City.

Professionally, though, the past months living in the most cosmopolitan slice of the Republic and playing recovering victim were paying off. Academius and Jedi alike saw Dilani Vestagon as a medical graduate who switched to an administrative role after a traumatizing attack. She enjoyed the pitiful looks. Idiots with no inkling of their usefulness. Huedd's death got played up, offered as another reason for her to work in Records instead of with patients again. Now, with a next-level security clearance that got earned legitimately, she filled a void for the Scholars which had been vacant.

She answered the approaching footsteps without bothering to turn around. "I know why you started to call me 'Rising Star' all those months ago...why you got so threatened."

Quim-Na, also hair down and face scrubbed, brought her pipe for a nightcap. Dilani kept her stare at the orderly gardens, a faint sight due to the early morning hour. Mattias constantly scolded groundskeepers, never satisfied no matter how many compliments he received.

Quim-Na snickered as she walked up. "Threatened...yeah..."

"Yeah. Threatened."

Quim-Na's drawn-out exhale was a mix of lungs expelling smoke and dismissiveness. "Scholar Vestagon, the sooner you see we have the same wants, the sooner we reach them."

"You and I align just fine. I don't doubt your devotion. And yes: your recent confession from Valkanna came because you're good, Quim-Na. So good."

"Hate me if you want, sweetie. We darksiders *are* tuned for it."

"Don't joke." Dilani walked to the rail and turned to block the view. "Mattias and Zinora were considering several Jedi, yet somehow picked the one that has generated nothing but ripple effect after ripple effect since. And now...thanks to you...we know how right they were. Like I said, Quim-Na, you are good. The thing is...you can't mess this up..."

"Don't try head games with me." A sneer became a smile. "But...you are right."

"About what?"

"I am good."

Dilani had begun to head to the stairs when Quim-Na grabbed her arm. "Stop. Between you and me, our movement has hit a plateau. Many can't see it. Especially the influential."

The younger one nodded. "I sensed a lack of awareness tonight. Much of the crowd."

"Well, think: once Valkanna aligns with us, all those influential darksiders you met...You think you matter because of some security clearance? Wait."

The rising star's yawn got bigger. She headed to the center stairs.

Quim-Na stayed for a bit.

Here and there, she gave herself the chuckles recalling images of rosy-cheeked little ones from story time. The spirited youth made her feel excited for the future.

Chapter Two

After finishing the first part of her Cantio story back in the tea emporium, a trembling Sylmonica Valkanna told her friend Meena Euclin that she needed fresh air. They finished their tea and left the hip club to walk the still streets.

Rains from earlier today had subsided but the temperature remained. The chillier evening diminished traffic and the two women had most of the walkways to themselves. One sobbed. The other offered support.

The plaza, an open expanse of paved ground that interrupted neighborhoods and clusters of high-rises, stayed quiet as well. A one-moon sky lit the wide square. Their stroll ended up in front of a public artwork. As the Jedi opened up to the Archangel, she stared at the woman in the stick-figure statue who held a stick-figure man in the air with her thin sword.

"Here's where it gets evil, Meena." A small stream of tears flowed from Syl's right eye. Breezes rustled robes made from thermal cloth that blocked out the elements. Emotion, not weather, drove her shivers and she wrapped herself tighter. "The power hour's sixtieth explosive was also placed in that market square, the Werrato, buried and on a timer. That bomb hit first responders and survivors who scrambled to help after the first bomb. 200 new deaths."

Her head raised, the Cantio veteran took in the simple sculpture. Killer and killed. Neither figure had a face, much less tear ducts, unlike her. "I saw it all not long after."

"I can't even..." Meena had to take a pause from rewrapping the red scarf.

"Those two explosions encapsulate that whole day. The first and the last...same place, different times." Syl watched a couple walking along the edge of the plaza. A blocks-long stretch of cement separated them and the duo was far enough away to appear stick-like, similar to the statue. "This Galaxy has no idea: the worst among us are far worse than civilians can imagine. I hate that they exist. I hate this fact. And it is a fact."

Finished with buttoning her coat, Meena lit her pipe. "Did you do something in that marketplace, is that why you got court-martialed?"

The comment brought Syl out of the past. A quick smile mixed with her tears. "Oh...my court-martial...yeah. That." She let out another giggle, then sniffled.

"What did you do?"

"After the third or fourth explosion, at the start, our command center got word that guerilla fighters were headed our way. A battalion leader froze up. His soldiers needed orders and some had begun to sense his panic, the worst thing at a moment like that."

Above, the scream of two Brakebugs accelerating across the semi-congested skies cued Syl to take a deep breath. "I used my Force ability to control an incompetent dimwit's thoughts. I told him that he was the most courageous leader ever. Some Jedi saw and I got reported."

Meena wrinkled her nose. "That doesn't seem...you got him ready for battle."

"The attack never came. Disinformation, most likely. Or decoys." The Jedi chuckled. "Prosecutors made like I had overreacted. But I did misuse the Force. The public trusts us to respect a boundary."

"It just bothers you so, Syl." Smoking, Meena took in the sparing sculpture of Darth Nefari the Enforcer. "It doesn't seem like a fitting punishment, whatever they...hello?"

Syl had teared up again. She gazed at the female side of the statue. In silence, she sobbed.

When she spoke, Meena had to lean in to hear. "Meena...what I did at that command post in those first minutes of the power hour was nothing."

“What? Syl—”

“During my court martial proceedings, I was deathly terrified they were going to bring out the real charges—what happened after the bombs stopped—what I was actually guilty of.” Her hand gripped Meena’s, but her whole body still shook. “And I am guilty. So guilty.”

Gray. Lying flat on her back. Syl could see nothing but a cloudiness that revealed zero insight. This wall existed until she could gather the strength to sit upright. Once she did, the first couple of blocks around this rooftop came into view. Somewhat. Grayness became cloudiness.

Beyond the range of rings that barraged both ears, Syl heard nothing.

But, like her eyes, her nose took in sensory input as soon as she woke up. Some industrial-sized container of plant-derived heating oil had caught fire nearby. In small amounts, she enjoyed the intense, woody smell when visiting homes on this war-torn planet. Now the overload of pungency crawled along her nostrils’ insides, irritating her throbbing head.

The ugly dust hanging in the air had found its way into her lungs while she was knocked out. Now it was going to escape and she had no choice in the matter. Before moving further, the coughing fit needed to run its course. While hacking and rasping and spitting, she observed ashy smoke enveloping the area. Beyond the immediate vicinity, only a featureless haze existed.

A possibility: she had entered another world...the World Between Worlds possibly. Or became one with the Force. Or both. She shut down this train of thought, wiping her mouth with her filthy sleeve, an act which accomplished nothing.

She was alive. The conscripted brothers were not. Their bodies lay less than twenty meters away.

The more she came to, the more she grasped that the blast knocked her over to the next roof. It also brought down the heater’s housing structure on top of exhausted decoys who were eating and telling the Jedi protector what they knew.

Woozy, with splitting pain assaulting her head, she hobbled to the edge of the roof. Two rubbery legs mustered up just enough muscular energy to jump the gap.

Syl had to pause before dragging over to two bodies covered by rusted metal slats.

In his muddy fingers, the younger of the two still clenched his food. His right arm stuck out from underneath a cracked support, the only body part visible besides his fluids. Rubble obscured both faces and she thanked the Force for this.

Rocking back and forth, the survivor made a slow circle to absorb the fuzzy details around this isolated rooftop. The shockwave had destroyed some dwellings, a random pattern.

Her curiosity vanished. Because her stomach roared to life.

Her throat organs threatened to break through from the inside of her neck. Stumbling, the lightheaded Jedi almost lost her balance. Vomiting took over, from her feet upward. Emergency functioning kicked in to evacuate her system and fire volleys of pain at her shellshocked mind. The acid taste cut into the smell of heating oil. She stayed bent, eyes shut. A skull hammered at a brain. A body begged itself to stop dry heaving—almost reasoning with it, at a subconscious level, imploring it to realize that nothing was left.

Blood.

Opening her tear-filled eyes, Syl didn’t expect to see blood along with the digesting grains and berries she consumed for breakfast.

Almost before it was too late, she remembered. Her heart sped up.

Standing tall and voice gravelly, she began. "I am one with the Force. The Force is with me." After letting out a cough, she continued. "I am one with the Force. The Force is with me."

Twenty-one more times, she sang out a phrase that Force believers in every section of the Galaxy chant whenever they need to reach out to the binding energy. She did so with increasing conviction, fighting her worn vocal cords to do it.

Instead of beginning a twenty-third reciting, Syl opened her eyes.

The ringing had died. She could not place when, but now she could hear. No explosions.

She limped to the streetside edge and hopped off and two brown boots hit the gravel. Her slow-walk took her in the direction of the three-wheeled jalopy.

Whether the Force allowed it or other influences exerted themselves, the truck ended up a few blocks in one direction while the explosive device detonated a few blocks in the other. It looked as beat up as before, but not more. And it was in one piece. Instead of checking the flashing light on her wrist communicator, the driver stepped towards her borrowed vehicle. Her lungs throbbed from breathing in dirty air but her legs pressed on.

"Hey...were you the one yellin' makin' all that noise a second ago? You...crazylady."

The decrepit soul to Syl's right gawked, pointing the longest of his three purple fingers at her muddy, bloody face. Sitting cross-legged and wrapped in a stained blanket, only a flat head and four pointy ears stuck out. "Somebody was yelling something, over and over and over. I was about to yell, 'Heyyyyyy...those bang-bang-things just stopped. Enjoy the quiet!' Yeesh..."

The elderly gent leaned his lanky and emaciated body back against a cracked section of clay wall damaged long before today's bombing, shifting around in his seat to get comfier.

"Sir: do you need assistance?"

The whispery inquiry brought out thunderstorms of laughter. The mud-covered man's chuckles bubbled, like they would break his face in half, his green lips spread so wide.

His sigh had to finish before he could speak. "Long as I been alive, never did I imagine someone lookin' like you comin' along askin' me a question like that. Never did I imagine."

The well-traveled Republic servant's two feet carried her down the street, bit by bit closing the distance with her mode of transportation. "Have a good day then. Be safe."

Retard. Syl stopped cold in the middle of the street.

Werrato Marketplace. Now she needed to check her wrist communicator. Three messages. Her battered fingers touched the device's row of buttons.

The first and third, from Zuk, she ignored. The second she wanted to hear—until its words came through. "*Knight Valkanna...return to the Western Command Post immediately and explain your actions with Battalion Commanding Officer Juliam.*"

Syl's out-loud laughter disrupted the uneasy quiet. As bombs were still going off, somebody at Command wanted her to stop everything. She deleted the message. Like the ones from Zuk, she wished that she had skipped this missed call as well.

The tri-wheeled vehicle's engine sputtered to life. She sped off.

Chapter Three

The bare left arm of some lifeless humanoid stuck out from underneath the clay rubble. Its position—laying across the dirt, fingers curled into a lazy ball—looked identical to the angle of the dead conscript's. Minus the foil-wrapped nutrition bar nestled in the grateful teen's hand, that scene on the roof and this one resembled each other a little too closely.

Sylmonica Valkanna brought the tired vehicle to a stop. The engine sputtered just past a smoldering entrance sign that once told passersby they had arrived at the Werrato Marketplace. Crackles from still-burning fires popped and hissed, disturbing what should be stillness.

The waist-high debris pile near the entrance sign's remnants used to be a one-room shack made of trakawood. Day-to-day overseers of the marketplace would sit in there to get some shade. The patio in front served as the debate stage for impromptu political talks that got heated. Syl felt tempted to dig and see if anybody was trapped. Maybe after reconnoitering the area.

Quiet. Stillness. Werrato was never *not* busy.

In a split second, heartbeats ceased. All stopped.

The urge to dry heave struck again. Her raw stomach and esophagus spasmed. Stomach cramps doubled her over. But no new blood. No spit, even. Only strains that sapped energy she did not know she contained.

Standing upright and wobbling, Syl broke into a smile. The smell of burning flesh made her think of the open grills that seemed to be set up all over the grounds at all times of the day.

Upon realizing the source of the smell, her stomach-churning didn't return. She wiped tears from both puffy eyes and smudged her face with new swatches of grime and dried blood. Once she could breathe normally, she got moving again.

Curled up, a green-red lump, the next corpse blocked a narrow bend in the service road, as if his body weight had become too much to bear so the elderly Rodian collapsed downward.

A child's singing game that younglings played came to mind. Every participant had to freeze in place once the music cut out. No one could move or else they were disqualified. *Disqualified*. That word hung for a long second in Syl's disoriented consciousness.

The dirt along the side road used by merchants looked as if it had been painted four or five colors and dotted with all types of trash, some of it burning. Victims ended up in groups and victims met their deaths alone. Her gaze seized on a blank patch of muddy ground free of organic tissue—the mind giving itself a break from the loss of life.

Glances, another direction. The opposite service road proved to be more of the same.

"Jedi Syl..."

The Jedi was heading down a new service road when she heard the familiar voice. It took longer to process the identity of the speaker after getting a glance. The bubbly seamstress' normal demeanor did not exist. Another being seemed to occupy the shivering body covered in red and green blood. "Brillig?"

Upon hearing her own name, the fellow survivor's muscles gave out and a scream burst forth as if through a floodgate. The woman maybe ten years older fell to the dirt. Without stopping, the shaking body sat upright to gather the robes before backpedaling, an act which got halted by the damaged stone wall. The knock to the back of her head sapped all will to stand.

Syl rushed to aid, prop up someone now in a fetal position at the base of a ruined structure. Rocking the hysterical acquaintance, she cried along. "You're not alone, Brillig."

The Cation quieted down. Sitting upright, a sliver of the kind personality appeared once again. “Before the blast, Jedi Syl, Brahm was strutting around Werrato...all happy... big lunk said people were gonna give him a bike. Called it his ‘prize’. It seemed...off.”

“Huh?” Syl stroked the mother of two’s blood-soaked hair. “What are you saying?”

Another outburst consumed the witness and Syl let it finish out.

A wild, jumpy stare meandered all around the carnage. “Brahm got fooled into carrying the bomb...the first one that exploded...he walked it right into the middle of everybody.”

“What?”

The lifelong resident of the planet needed to make eye contact while wrapping up the account. “Before the second bomb went off in the market, some folks heard that Brahm’s killers were hidin’ out in Minerstown. We were dealing with that bomb blast when the second...”

Retard.

“Minerstown...by the Lowlands Foothills?”

Brillig’s affirmation hadn’t even finished. Syl was up, fast-walking towards the marketplace’s entrance. With the killers’ whereabouts known, she reached out with the Force in that direction.

Sooo...who’s gonna break the news to the retard that we forgot to buy his bike?

For the first time in her life, she almost regretted reaching out with the Force. Almost.

In happier centuries, sightseers walking the Lowlands Foothills could enjoy views of Minerstown’s oval-shaped city limits. Lush grasslands once enclosed this up-and-coming manufacturing hub at the hills’ base. Today, scattered fires dotted an already-battered cityscape.

After the three-wheeled transportation gave out, Syl took off on foot down the sloping side of the last foothill, possessing zero desire to rescue any victims she might encounter along the way.

The retard seemed so excited...for a bike he was too stupid to operate. The more the murderers ridiculed, the more the Force-user learned about their town-center location.

Her fast-walk got faster. Cruel words and antipathetic snickers fed her. She sensed the presence of a panicking individual faking laughter to ingratiate himself with heartless beings.

One of Minerstown’s remaining bridges spanned over a river that reeked of decay.

Her stride. Both boots felt light, almost absent. Instead of taking the bridge, she veered right, riding the wave of her speed to arc over the putrid waters.

She saw rooftops for a brief moment.

Smooth landing. The run-down and shelled buildings looked just as hopeless and devoid of a future as the last time she came through here.

Collective sadism flooded Syl’s thoughts, drowning out memories of Brahm. His sweet face, mischievous and boyish eyes—those features ceased to exist. *Did anyone care to learn his name before we tricked him, by the way?*

The remains of the city’s original industrial area, from centuries before the civil war.

Halfway through the city, she stopped running, a rapid downshift to a brisk walk. She zeroed in on the source of the noise.

In more civilized times, the thirty-building factory complex, now just a few blocks away, produced intra-system freight containers and employed 50,000 residents.

Like the river, seeing the makeshift fortress put a burst in her step. Vicious snickers called from the far side of the outer courtyard's perimeter wall. Murderous emotional energy worked like magnetism, pulling the Jedi and she bounded up and over a two-story section. Two boots touched down at the same time on the stone of the outer courtyard. A soft landing.

A four-man guard team stood by the far set of doors that led to the inner courtyard. Two raised their military-grade blasters.

Instead of igniting her saber, Syl remembered.

Years ago, her bare hands felt the slippery coldness of a living being's throat organs for the first time. Medic Ryle Zambreeth needed her to pull one of the accident victim's two exposed windpipes to the side and hold it steady. Ryle planned to clamp off the slashed-open veins that were spouting yellow blood all over the Republic servants, both not yet twenty-five.

With this vision so fresh, Syl raised her right hand towards four goons who now had a solid look at the intruder that just landed. She recalled Ryle repeating to her, over and over. "*Be gentle with your grip. Don't want to choke him.*"

That pilot, a father of fifteen, died a day later.

Four well-armed and armored fighters were minutes from death. The Force never felt so active. No. Syl never felt so actively in charge of the Force. Growing meditative, she comprehended the importance of air while watching four toughguys' convulsions caused by a lack of air. She approached the fading lot in a slow arc, casing the place.

By the time she fell over the five-story ledge, the young sniper who zeroed Syl from the rooftop could not use her lungs.

Two beefy mercenaries running into the outer courtyard collapsed under their battle gear's weight. The shorter of the two dropped his makeshift flamethrower to clutch at his throat. The clunky metal rig sparked on the unforgiving stone. This fleeting heat source existed long enough to attract fumes that emanated from the homemade weapon's leaky fuel line.

The sight made her smile. Some favorite childhood memories were spent with Thia and Ro and other Padawans around campfires that roared like this new one was learning how to do.

Two not-very-bright minds realized they were burning up. One of the minds lashed out. The professional killer never did trust, "*...Azzana's bargain-basement fire-shooter...*"

Syl fixed her eyes on the other, a suffering mass. "Your friend hates you, Azzana."

Six fresh attackers filed out of the same metal doors that the other two just charged through. Four humans and two Rodians posed zero threat. One of the new fighters clung onto his long gun. The others had dropped weaponry so their fingers could pull at their air passageways.

While loving the frolicking blaze, it occurred to Syl that she had the windpipes of many adversaries in her grip. She extended this right hand to wave it back and forth in the light. Body parts flopped around between her fingers, only they must be invisible because her senses of touch and sight did not align. Her eyes must be deceiving her, as eyes have been known to do.

A wet and clammy feeling. A dry hand.

Through the double doors of the old storage building that now served as a bunker, five more of the gang ran down the neglected stairs at the far end. By the time two of them fired their rifles down the long hallway, both had lost the ability to focus.

After enough no-longer-shuffling footsteps, the Jedi was marching past all five shuddering, miserable criminals and heading up the back stairway from where they just came.

Two leaders of today's attack—the ones who lost their jocular mood and quit making ugly remarks about Brahm—were preparing to confront her on the top floor. She sensed

technology. Communications. More than just the link to the loudspeakers. A command center. And love. The terror operation's architects were in love. The Force informed Syl of this fact.

Six others also roamed around.

The stairway creaked more. Reaching the second floor, she visualized the last hours of her life. All of it. Conscious minds devised the sick plan. They targeted her. Syl.

The five others needed to die. Remove them as a distraction. Concentrate on the lovers.

At the third-floor landing, these less-worthy henchmen implored their immediate surroundings to stop the choking. She didn't stop to look and ignored their rasping.

Reaching the fourth floor, she ambled. The slower she went, the worse it was for them.

Halfway to the top floor, the woman's voice. She sounded punier in real life. "We are innocent."

The last word was too much.

Braking from the fast run to a complete stop, Syl peered down the hallway at a human man and woman aiming Republic Peacekeeper-issue blaster pistols. He wore a headset.

"Please..." The bald man's sick shivers rattled the stolen battle gear covering his stolen Republic infantry vest. His sore-covered lips spasmed as he stuttered at the two yellow eyes zeroing in. The mouthpiece of his headset shook. He dropped his gun.

"Oh..." The woman, as skinny as her man and clad in green military clothing as well, still held a blaster that was also taken from a dead Republic Peacekeeper. It pointed at the wall.

As an interrogator, Syl could leverage silence when questioning uncooperative suspects. Now she deployed it to toy with others.

For a stretch, the only sounds were the lovers' whimpers.

The woman's pistol clanked on the floor.

"His name was Brahm, by the way. You should know his name SO YOU CAN QUIT CALLING HIM 'RETARD.'"

The man's headset fell off as his jawbone cracked along the sides and front. Teeth and streaks of red blood fell out of his trembling mouth.

"Whoa..." Syl's left yellow eye winked at the sobbing woman whose spastic sniffles mixed with the suffering man's sad moans. "I didn't think I was allowed to use the Force to smack someone across the face like that."

She snickered, but then stepped away because the new scream overtook her. "WHERE DID YOU TWO GET OFF DOING THAT TODAY?"

Both hands raised at her newest kills, she overrode the Force's resistance. Against its will, the Force picked up the couple and banged their heads together. Again. And again. And again. Sylmonica Valkanna ordered and the Force executed. Literally.

Syl let the Force go and the Force let the mangled corpses go.

Noticing the quiet, she yawned. When she turned around, their eyes met.

Six accompanied the ringleaders, not five.

While physically imposing, scarred, and armed with two blasters, the poor soul three times her size posed no danger. His beaten look, the way he shook his helmeted head at her, his disbelief. Whatever engrossed him to the point where he could not take his eyes away, she sided with him. She didn't need the Force to realize what she had done.

"If...if you want, I can grab fuel tanks and torch the place and the bodies—all to the ground. All of it. Let me go and I will never say a word." His deep voice broke, finally giving out. "My girl and I have a baby on the way."

“Congratulations on your child.” After letting the expectant father’s plan run around in her head for enough time that it made sense, Syl nodded. “Burn this down. All of it.”

He stumbled backward and turned, but stopped when she spoke again. Her chapped lips, bloodied and dirtied, trembled. “You were laughing at their awful jokes just because you felt like you had to. I understand.”

Chapter Four

Her first night back in Coruscant City after returning from Alderaan, the rehabilitating Sylmonica Valkanna took a moment to appreciate her cozy sleeping quarters. Restfulness allows the Force to flow.

The Republic provided Jedi Knights with a home base between deployments. This single, bare-walled room could only accommodate a one-person mattress, wardrobe locker, and square desk rarely used before the attack that took her left eye. But the layout suited a Force-sensitive who liked to get lost in meditative trance. Vertically, the three-story space allowed for freedom to float up and down before it curved inward near the top, framing the square skylight.

That night's deep sleep was the most nourishing stretch she could remember. Never one to need much, she surprised herself by staying in bed, her own world beneath the warm covers, relishing the relaxation. Two friends had similar quarters nearby, but Syl felt no urge to dress and say hello. Later in the day, she would learn that both were off-world, which she did not mind.

Weeks later, a bout of chills coaxed Syl from another heavy slumber. Above, the clear paneling covering the skylight was missing. Which allowed her to hear the unmistakable firing of a light saber from outside.

A readiness test...why not? Snapping to it instead of speculating further, she threw aside her covers aiming to return and fall asleep again as quickly as possible. She wore a thermal long-sleeve shirt and bottoms. The slight chill taking over from the warmth soothed.

Her knees bent a quarter of the way. After a fast pause, every leg muscle flexed to spring the whole body upward towards the new hole in the ceiling. Workouts showed results. Following a well-estimated leap, her hands gripped the sides of the skylight and her upper body muscles generated additional momentum to propel up, through the opening.

Bare feet landing on the cold paneling, her legs absorbed the light shock.

At the opposite end of the long, stretching roof—a flat surface covered in shadows made by the black-looking clouds above—a cloaked being held a lit saber out and away from her body.

Syl must have been in a daze more than she realized, leaving her own saber behind.

The redness of the blade illuminated the older woman's angular face under the dark hood, giving it an ugly pinkish glow. Her slight mouth appeared to show a friendly expression, but distance separated the two. Syl did not get a clear view, especially of the woman's eyes.

"You seem to be in need of a weapon." A kind voice.

The taller woman now stood a saber's length away. A fact which would have been problematic if the wielder hadn't switched the power off. As the glow died and the hiss fizzled, the enigma's wide eyes looked to be a cold yellow. Fingers on her gloved right hand twirled the extinguished blade around and presented the curved, gold hilt. "Care for mine?"

The lazy smile straightened out. "Maybe later then."

With another finger-twirl, the visitor reattached it to her simple black belt before lowering the black hood. Wild salt-and-pepper curls burst free, framing a narrow face softened by the folds of wrinkles on her high cheekbones. The dark night and dull hair color highlighted her eyes, giving them the color of fire.

The sneer returned to her thin lips. Her stance shifted. Her black boots' stiffness creaked.

"I have seen your image before." Syl remained motionless. "You were the muse for a few Archangel artists, Darth Sabotaa."

“Archangels...can’t say I’ve heard of them.” Darth Sabotaa wrinkled her longish nose. “Is their ‘art’ any good?”

Before the Jedi could answer, the Sith turned to check out a cityscape of buildings and pollution, light and noise conspiring with one another. “The toxicity all around us would fill my sister Nefari with rage if she were here. This is her home planet.”

Shivering from the chill, but trained to operate in conditions of physical discomfort, Syl joined the intruder at the roof’s edge. “The Republic tells citizens that Coruscant doesn’t need local water because it’s getting easier to transport from other systems.”

“Incompetence still reigns, it seems. Incompetence with power, that’s the worst. Kills ecosystems.” Her gloved hand motioned at the horizon. “And I believe that incompetence combined with unearned feelings of power brought us together, why we’re chatting tonight.”

“What?”

“To confess, I bear a bit of responsibility. Thanks to a flawed formulation of mine, some less-capable wielder of the Force has been hobbling around inside your skull. The noise they made prattling and rattling back and forth caught my attention, far away.” Sabotaa sighed at the overflowing development. “Possessing an amplified ability to connect to the psyche is maybe the worst thing for a being who naturally overthinks everything. Tethering oneself between worlds...Psychia might be my worst mistake—and believe me, I’ve—”

“Psychia?”

“Seemed important at the time...thoughts of my own mortality inspired me to leave something behind, give my devotees a...thank-you, I guess. A formulation to weaken stronger Force-wielders so my less-talented wielders could manipulate in ways that mimicked my psychic powers. That was the idea, anyway.”

While listening, Syl observed the city’s outlines from this unfamiliar rooftop vantage point.

The onetime debutante continued. “But it only worked in injectable form and the user had to weaken the target first to optimize...hardly practical. And, as an unforeseen side-effect for me, the blood that I donated also bonded my psyche to the finished product which has been used to replicate it ever since. Psychia is rarely used but I still sense it, wherever I am...even now after becoming one with the Force.”

She winked at Syl. “It’s a mild sensation. I ignored every instance until this time.”

These present surroundings looked normal. Eyesight normal. Three dimensions, as if the injury never occurred. Syl said, “Well, whoever this user was, she hasn’t shown up in a while.”

“You’ve recovered, Jedi. She stays away from your headspace now.”

“It was...just...fog, but it felt...synthetic...like it was made by a machine or something. Her choppy voice, not like talking face-to-face. Never lasted long, either.”

“An amateur, she tired herself out. You had the upper hand even in a weakened state.”

“I get that, in hindsight.” From this high roof, the area of Federal City called Riverbend could be seen. Along a polluted waterway’s shores arcing through the section of town, new buildings stood on the ruins of the old. “She would boast about control, but she was faking it.”

“Don’t be too harsh on our mysterious charlatan. The Force guides all. Her actions gave me an urge to check in on my former plane of existence. And here we are, chatting away.”

“She has accomplices, too. Whatever this is, she needs helpers.”

“Weak people travel in packs.” Sabotaa sneered at the urban waste. “I can’t look out at this contamination one nanosecond longer. Let’s walk. Towards the center.”

Her left hand grabbed Syl's right hand, turning her away from the almost-lifeless stretch of waterway that inspired the town section's name. "Do you know what happens inside the black hole at the center of this galaxy, Sylmonica Valkanna?"

"Enlighten me." The two stayed on the edge of the high building, traversing one side of the square perimeter.

"I will. Even with that sarcastic tone, you deserve to know. Inside a black hole, time and space trade places. Three axes of space become one...that single line between you and the black hole's absolute center is all that exists. While space constricts, time does the opposite. It reveals the three components known as past, present, and future all at once."

A gloved hand grabbed a bare hand. The Sith stopped and shifted her feet, altering direction, talking under her breath while she turned around. "Been a while. There it is."

The slight angle off of the fifty-story roof's ledge left it near the far corner, its direction facing the riverbend again, a point beyond the stretching span of high-rises.

She squeezed Syl. "Straight line for the other side, fast as you can, hit the edge and leap, stretch out with your feelings until I say stop."

Sabotaa took the lead. Syl's hair tingled as the gust hit.

The two left the roof behind and shot outward. The buildings around them got lost in clouds, then ceased to be physical obstacles. Then they ceased to exist.

"Stop."

The duo's sprint lost steam. Their downward angle carried them to the river bend's rocky shore. Syl also stretched out with the Force to help. Sith and Jedi navigated through the high treetops, floating to the wet surface. Her bare feet tingled at the touch.

A light mist covered the clear waters. The range of animal sounds, a wildlife preserve times fifty. Cool winds rustled the branches. Green and pink leaves danced. Trees lined both sides of the river and followed a curvature which led to a larger feeder river.

"My sister Nefari dreams. My crackpot of a boyfriend dreams. I dream. Many do. We meander in the timelessness of the afterlife wishing that some kindhearted, passionate being would take over this wondrous planet, every other planet and moon in the Galaxy...liberate all that which is natural and primal and real."

Streams ran through Syl's toes. Even in the darkness, eel-like creatures the length of her arm could be seen scurrying in the river and investigating vegetation attached to the rocks.

"You live in dispassionate times, Sylmonica Valkanna Jedi Knight. The Galaxy wasn't always like this."

Syl stepped back to the shore. They had taken a break from the stroll by the bend. "I've been itching for operational status because I want them to send me somewhere remote, ideally a backwoods post, far away. But it's really about being alone, nowhere near the...dispassion."

Their easy walk took them under a canopy of lush trees that obscured the stars above.

Sabotaa nodded. "I was always happiest when I was by myself in my lab."

"By yourself...what about the test subjects you experimented on until you killed them?"

This remark made the dark lord known as "the Healer" laugh. "Well, the subjects weren't in the mood for stimulating conversation, if I remember correctly. I had to amuse myself."

A wide grin stayed on her little lips. She looked the other up and down. "Talking to you reminds me that Jedi are the biggest slaves of all. Not much has changed since I died."

She answered the ensuing glare with an eyebrow raise.

"You're a vision, whatever you are." Taking a breath, Syl strode ahead. "I have this friend, named the Force. The Force is showing up in my dreams as it has countless times before to tell me something, just felt like being extra vivid tonight, that's all."

"Your extra-vivid friend named the Force notices how much you cry lately. More than normal."

"Like I said: the Force is guiding all of this. We both know that." Syl stopped to look up. The species of wide-based tree seemed familiar, but she had never seen any as large as the trio hugging the shore. "Maybe this is Mortis."

Sabotaa grinned again, nodding. "A-ha, Mortis. Nice place. Very enlightening, mythical, loved by light and dark. And for so long. See? Something in common—commonality!"

After her giggles, she said, "I got it...this is the World Between Worlds. Hmmm..." She gave her foe a nudge. Syl's right eye stared.

Sabotaa walked a circle to speak to the natural overgrowth all around. "My Jedi friend is not in the mood for fun-and-games. She is on a mission. Since they won't give her one, she is giving herself one: save those too weak to save themselves."

She again nudged the annoyed answer-seeker. "You have an attitude."

The playfulness left Sabotaa. "Okay, since you seek insight, do you know why the Jedi so easily killed the Sith, however many centuries ago? I know your kind speculates about how they did it. But none of them know the answer."

"Enlighten this Jedi then."

"The Sith had turned into a death cult." Sabotaa rolled her eyes and had to sigh. "And a sad, paranoid, sub-par death cult at that."

Syl had been taking in what looked like two curved clouds in the night sky, in reality the Galaxy's next two arcs, a sight that got obscured by light pollution from Coruscant's overdevelopment. "What do you mean?"

"It became self-absorbed and diffused, too many lords across the Galaxy, too many opinions... This was after my time on this plane. The dark side lost its way, spiraled down to its basest level when it should have been rising up." Her gaze became a hard glare. "Some forget how easy this is: wield the Force to do great things for the many and the many will have no choice but to bow to you. It is as simple as that."

"Simple...sounds simply totalitarian." Now Syl wore the little grin. "I've met dark siders over the years. Most say that the Sith was nothing but a violent twisting of their beliefs."

"Violently twisted...I'll take it." Sabotaa had resumed checking out the four-winged bird's courting ritual. She started to remove her right black glove. Her hands showed a few wrinkles. "If only a violently twisted soul had rid the Sith of inferiority. If only. We need to start again. One Sith. One liberating step forward."

"We? I'm a Jedi." Syl considered using the Force to pull the dark one's gold saber from the belt. "I've read your sonnets and I know about your lover, *that* Jedi. But Darth Paryah wasn't ever one of us, was he? Like Malak, Exar Kun, those other Knights."

"Many powerful Jedi found a whole new relationship with the Force once they discovered its dark side." Sabotaa put away her left black glove inside her wraparound cloak and tightened the belt again. "Such evolution is natural, despite what others preach."

"You make it seem innocent."

The resurgence of playfulness evaporated. The Sith folded her arms tight, assuming a tall posture once taken with test subjects who were moments from death. “Instead of giving off that whiny tone, tell me *your* natural course of action.”

“Well, I looked into instructorship, got turned down. Felt like the best option, but—”

“An instructor of Jedi? How...sad.” The intense look that used to terrify slave test subjects petered out. She almost giggled while letting her bushy hair get hit by the sudden breeze. Her long index finger reached to tweak the other’s nose. “You are in a rut, as they say.”

Sidestepping, Syl said, “Why am I listening to a dark side slave master?”

She turned, back in Sabotaa’s face. “You know what I would do? If anything, I would use the dark side of the Force to destroy those who enslave others.”

“Go for it. Kill them all.” The dark lord beamed, drinking in the rage, her yellow eyes full of life. “I’ve been dead for centuries, young one. I won’t be offended.”

Syl blacked out after hearing Sabotaa’s final sentence. “Jedi, you have come so far since that day in Minerstown...so, so far.”

Syl’s right eye went through a few false starts as it took its time opening. High above her bed, the square skylight came into focus, the square closed window as well.

As she thought about it, she realized the window could not open.

Still groggy, with no morning appointments, she liked the idea of a slow start to the day. Warm under her covers, Syl let last night’s vision play back.

Standing by the pristine river, the woman told a story about her two dead sons. The twins had just turned nineteen when they devised a plan to kill the fallen Jedi Master.

He ended their lives without breaking a sweat.

Afterward, mother and killer became lovers.

“That’s the dark side for you, stormy-eyed one. What makes us Sith the way we are. I hated him for what he did, but understood why he did it. No being, including my own blood, should live if they choose to be that stupid. It’s the natural order of things. Besides, I deserved him. My life, my list of deeds, I deserved him.”

The quiet fed Syl’s concentration. Her concentration remained until it no longer remained. It remained until she rolled her head to her right side.

A gold-handled light saber, curved and thinner in width than her own, lay on top of the little desk that she rarely used.

IX: Phase Four

Chapter One

The corporate mini-shuttle finished the drop, the Scatterion System its destination. A return to the weightlessness of space once again. With the fuzzy arc of the Galaxy's next-closest tendrill framing it all, Scatera 3B and the Phase Four Fleet took shape through the forward windows. The massing of supersized industrial ships looked like a simple dotted line because the looming pink planet behind them owned the view.

His final task before handing over the wheel, the captain flipped the switch that released the external hyperdrive linking with the probe jutting from the blocky hull's stubby red nose. The simple unit that gave smaller craft lightspeed capabilities was little more than a v-shaped bar with cylinder-shaped hyperdrive generators mounted on each end and a middle connector for docking with ships' probes. On remote pilot, this drive veered right, out of the path.

The captain's gut appreciated the extra room after he moved his seat back. Assuming the controls, the younger co-pilot scanned for traffic with his three independently-rotating eyes and worked the blinking buttons and levers with his twenty blue fingers. His firing of the squat-bodied shuttle's sub-light engine shoved the returning flight forward. Since the small cabin lacked windows, the captain invited passenger Tiruss Dunn into the tight cockpit to check out the long arc of vessels. Each spacecraft grew in size as they drew closer.

"It took me a second to spot the *Horizon*." The space behind the pilots was cramped and Tiruss had to duck his head in order to see through the windows. "Almost gets lost."

Ahead, the Phase One headquarters ship sat near the middle of the pack between two banged-up and aging barges not even a third its size.

The veteran company flyer leaned to his side and gave the Jedi more of a view. "Phase Four is at 8000 people nowadays, Dunn. Lots of you Republic types are needed."

The focused co-pilot didn't look away from the controls. "Especially on payday."

Three orbiting refineries dwarfed the other fleet members along the curve. The diameter of the blast furnaces, the immense orbs in the middle, looked to be as large as the superstructure on a headquarters cruiser. In terms of headquarters cruisers, five sister ships had joined the *Bountiful Horizon*. The ship class was similar in size to, though much less angular than, the *Etomer*-class Peacekeeper at the rear of the convoy which housed Jedi and Republic peacekeeper troops. Storage vessels and tankers filled the gaps.

The markings on the worn-looking Peacekeeper. *Stormchaser*. The stretching, missile-like shape bulged outward in the hull's upper-middle, creating more space for a topside hangar that housed squadrons of smaller craft like Brakebugs, Big Bugs, and Couriers. Some of Tiruss' favorite missions were spent aboard Peacekeepers.

"That fleet is a winding tail, gonna creep around the planet's bend sooner or later." The seasoned space traveler toplined everything for Tiruss. As the two talked, the co-pilot kept a silent lookout for traffic, his stick-like fingers gripping the wheel.

The returning Senior Knight was still wrapping his head around the packed orbit as the boxy shuttle entered the landing bay of his old ship. A full hangar. A sight he had never seen.

"Dunn!"

Bags in hand, the muscular Jedi hadn't even finished stepping off the shuttle's ramp when Grimesy's long arms crushed him tight.

“Grimesy...still a hugger, I see. And you’ve been working with dirty machinery in the not-too-distant past as well.” Coughing, Tiruss brushed his robes off and regained his footing. “Nice to see you again, buddy. How’s it going?”

“Great. Flying tons, Dunn. Tons. Me and Web are rock-zapper pilots now. No more trips to the surface.” Grimesy’s mound of a hand swept behind him, across the row of green, one-pilot craft parked in a line like cadets at attention. The head-to-toe standup canopies were open, pointing upward at the same angle to the grid of rafters five stories up. “Aren’t they pretty?”

A lone operator stepped inside the standing cockpit and the body-length window-cage closed downward, locking in place at their feet. Grimesy told Tiruss that the short-range ore processing craft were nicknamed “rock zappers” because they used three low-energy pulse cannons mounted on moveable arms to corral boulders blasted up from the surface into orbit.

“Flying a ‘zapper is a blast.” Walking back and forth, the miner pilot used his whole body to help explain his new job. “Just shoot at ‘em, push ‘em around. Swatting big boulders with pulse guns is like smacking somebody. Smack one towards the refinery’s aft section, you’re like ‘Hey, you. Yeah, you...go over there! Now! To the furnace! Don’t gimme that look. Go there! Now!’ Kick it into the open butt-end, it explodes, go back for more rocks. You’re like—”

“You don’t need to pick me up again, buddy.” Flashing a giant smile, Tiruss raised his hands at the lunging storyteller. “I am so feeling your exciting tale...believe me.”

Stepping back, Grimesy wiped both hands on his dirty tool vest. “They’re keeping us busy all right, and it’s fun, don’t get me wrong...but they keep trying to pay-gouge.”

“Pay-gouge? That’s not very nice.”

“Dunn!” Web Hyland fast-walked over after entering the hangar and spying her old acquaintance. The late twenties pilot’s brown hair was longer. She wore a tool vest like Grimesy’s, only hers was clean. As he watched her rush to join, Tiruss noticed again how packed the landing bay was. “So good to see you, glad you have recovered.”

They held the embrace. Last time Web saw Tiruss, he was unconscious.

The outgoing Yntokian broke away from the tender closeness and gestured at the bustling activity with both arms. “Welcome to the big time.”

“This wasn’t even half-full before. Ever.” Tiruss took a fresh look around at the busyness. “And I’m still blown away by how many ships there were in orbit.”

“Yeah...and those ore processors, right? They are made up of three sections, flew each section through hyperspace separately and assembled them here in orbit.”

“That was nuts to watch...like a hundred crew in spacesuits jetting around.” Grimesy used his oversized hands to describe it. “The big round beast in the middle that burns rocks up...watching those drop out of hyperspace was intense. Like a really, really small moon. Then the assembly...three giant ships gotta line up perfectly or they crash, it all explodes. I was sitting there, waiting for it to go ‘boom.’ Just waiting...” He shook his head. “It didn’t.”

Tiruss punched his arm. “Aww...”

He addressed them both. “How’s Rasskana, by the way?”

After neither of them answered, the fellow Phase one veteran said, “What’s up?”

“Oh...” Web shifted on her feet. “Rasskana and some others got sent away.”

“Sent away...fired?”

Grimesy leaned forward to speak in a lower voice. “Yeah...the rockhounds said we need to slow down and honchos got all mad.” He nodded, his jovial mood now gone, his jowls shaky.

“Interesting.” Tiruss’ gaze ran across the sight of a roundish lander craft like the one he and Syl flew that day. A frantic work crew was firing up one of the ten vertically-mounted engines for a test. “We ran across that unstable section our first trip down there, remember?”

Both nodded. Web said, “Of course. Syl saved Rasskana. How *is* Syl?”

“Frustrated. Not rehabilitating quickly and they’re giving her grief.”

His answer put a scowl on Web’s face. “She’s got a head injury. What do they expect?”

“Yeah...and you know Syl. She just wants to be working.”

“I get it.” Web’s natural smile reappeared. “Glad you’re back, Tiruss.”

“They were going to billet me on the *Stormchaser*, but put me here. I don’t mind.”

“We don’t mind, either.” Grimesy punched him in the arm.

Tiruss massaged the muscle.

The one-eyed drink-slinger hobbled on two stubby paws from behind the bar top. Letting out a huff, the ready-to-go-to-bed owner hurried to lock the rusty doors as soon as the slurring customer bumbled outside.

The husky patron spilled out of the establishment, stumbling to his right into the dirty walkway. It took him a minute to position the two-gun holster around his potbelly. The well-armed pilot spat on the metal deck as his feet meandered in a mostly-forward direction towards the bay where his ship was parked.

Like him, passersby were only visiting this backwater spaceport named *Space Oasis*. Some needed contraband. Others were on the run. Anything, from illegal hyperdrives and military-grade weaponry, to mercenary contractors, to drugs or the finest foods, could be acquired on one of the six traders’ levels. No one paid attention to what appeared to be yet another inebriated voyager wandering corrugated-metal passageways and breathing moldy air generated by the noisy circulation system.

Tunnel-vision in full effect, a pilot just wanted to return to his ship. His blurry gaze failed to register two toughs his size in black trenchcoats who stepped out of an alcove after he passed by. Neither the older Dirnn or the younger Trandosha covered their heads.

A non-working lighted sign mounted on a bent pole indicated that the launch bay was straight ahead. The pilot shuffled under it, intent on going home.

When the foot traffic trickled, the quick-acting duo whipped out metal clubs from beneath their animal-skin jackets and swung with vigor, needing it to be over. Before too many passed by, the target was a twitching lump on the deck. The muscly Trandosha opened the dead man’s flight jacket and grabbed documents.

As the murderers strolled in the direction of the launch bay, a yellow-skinned humanoid suffering from withdrawal symptoms shuffled over and rifled through the warm body’s clothing.

Data from the landing documents cleared without a problem. The green console light turned red and the heavy bay door slid to the right with a squeak. Warlord Tramm Nurado and his captain Tresskuss walked in.

After the mild workout he just engaged in, the older of the two veteran criminals stretched his shoulders. “Been a while.”

“You still got the touch, boss.” Cold, yellow eyes scanned across the impressive sight. The expert pilot cracked his thick neck as he admired the dead man’s customized cruiser.

The ship’s tubular hull, triangular stabilizers, and two outboard sublight engines covered most of the narrow landing bay’s floor. But at almost three stories tall, the overhead launch doors posed no danger of touching the ship’s small, knife-like vertical stabilizer at the tail. With the lights low, the exterior’s glossiness lit this rectangular room.

“Perfect.” Tramm cocked his head to look at the glimmering spacecraft from a new angle. “Smart minds got paid well to tinker. And the Deent brothers will make it better.”

“Mattias feels confident she will join us then?”

“That’s why he gave us the order, old friend. Just a matter of time.”

A blend of engineering and artistry parked in Landing Bay 5D—a hyperspace-capable vessel with superior sub-space maneuverability, seemingly inspired by some type of projectile fired from an archaic weapon.

“She has no issue with flying, supposedly, but it’s not her favorite. Just never had a chariot worthy of her, that’s all.” A lover of well-designed machinery, Tramm appreciated features like the opaque, wraparound screen that obscured views into the forward cockpit while giving both pilots wide sightlines. “Tresskuss, after I take off, go back and pay that bartender extra. He spiked those drinks with what we gave him, like a good fella. Show our gratitude.”

“Seems a bit much, boss. Authorities avoid *Space Oasis*.”

“Well, that’s where you’re wrong, convict. This case is different.” Tramm rested a thick hand on his trusted henchman’s sizable shoulder. “While this mean-machine’s previous owner was tough, his family controls mining in the Hosnian System. These upgrades were gifts.”

“Interesting.” The scarred, slithering tongue distorted his speech further.

“He and his brothers ran some illegal enterprises while cousins operate the mining and hyperspace interests above-board.”

“I see...”

The elegant curves along the hull reminded Tramm of a certain model of two-person racer used in the illegal Outer Rim derbies, just bigger dimensions. “He had debts as well as enemies, so what we did to him looks feasible. Still...pay the bartender.”

After finding the dark side and receiving tutoring from the Rees, Tresskuss adopted the practice of stroking his scaly chin with his three-fingered claw when in deep thought, mimicking the Scholar Emeritus stroking his beard. “So...this mining family is a competitor to Besson Overtanos’ various enterprises, I surmise.”

The boss gave his chief problem-solver a hearty pat on the back. “You do connect dots well, convict. Let’s just say that this will be appreciated. No. It’s like this...”

He raised his beefy finger. “Our single act yielded two positive outcomes. Our new Force-wielding ally has a ship deserving of her stature. And our new business ally Besson’s delicate operation in the Yntikkian Ruins asteroid field has one less potential headache.”

“The dark side lights the way.” Tresskuss circled the ship’s pointed nose. His knowledgeable mind took in the sight. “I recommend scanner-absorbent flat-black for the exterior repainting. It’s expensive, but I know the Rees will invest. And radiation-deflecting tint for the windshield.”

“Good suggestions.” The boss gave a thumbs up. A short ramp popped down from the side hatch. A curved gull-door rolled up. “The Deents are prepping their shop and forge.”

“This Jedi is impressive, huh?”

“From what the Scholar Emeritus and Emerita say, more so. And Quim-Na is terrified. She hides it, but that imp thinks she’s in over her head. Good sign, if you ask me.”

“This is exciting. Our way of life needs to strengthen itself. I may not have a connection like you, boss, but I believe. A former Jedi could help us.”

“That she could, Tresskuss. Yes. And you are a believer. Rock-solid commitment to the dark side.” He entered and walked the few steps into the cockpit. “See you in a week.”

Hours later, Tramm Nurado exited hyperspace and hailed the Deent brothers. His trusted friends joked about his retirement. He fired back lighthearted wisecracks about their questionable craftsmanship.

Chapter Two

Intersystem Transmission

Local and Non-Classified

Jedi Complex, Coruscant City

Attn: OPERATIONAL BOARD

From: Group Master Lanta Dasmar

Subject: Knight Sylmonica Valkanna

Colleagues: I am submitting this communication to share some concerns about Valkanna. I last briefed you after I ordered her to take a few days off. On a positive note, it did some good.

As you know, rehabilitation has been spotty. Information in tests generated cause for concern. However, as of late she has improved. She has been helping Jedi archivists and filling in for security at the Galactic Senate. Besides, she's been spending time training, even taking the initiative to study saber forms besides her own Form IV.

She has indicated to me that she knows her record hurts her chances at instructional billets, at least for the next ten years, but she sees teaching the Jedi Arts as a goal worth pursuing. Between us, she would excel in this role.

She has been taking steps to improve. Only we have been slow to be there for her. Protecting the Republic is neverending and never easy and sometimes, we forget to look out for our own.

Valkanna's court-martial concerns some, but she has two decades of service. Though her operational status is on hold due to talk of a Jedi Oversight Committee, there's no reason that she can't perform other tasks.

Next week, I will be escorting a diplomatic detail of hyperspace magnates on an extra-Republic excursion to the Ferrix system. I am asking to bring along Valkanna as my second. The trip would be good. If it works out, I suggest keeping her busy.

She is not the only Jedi who is being held back due to this oversight bill. And like her, some of the others who have been wounded in action want to take on more responsibility. We can't let this confusing situation sour these loyal guardians.

Please consider my thoughts. They have been submitted with the utmost respect.

May the Force be with you.

Master Lanta Dasmar

Once he got settled, Tiruss Dunn contacted the Phase Four Security Commander. Jedi Master Eeth Maln wanted to meet in person right away.

The *Stormchaser* orbited near the fleet's rear. Dressed in formal robes, Tiruss piloted a Brakebug from its right seat, weaving and bobbing around the much larger tankers and cruisers.

A long, looming sight in his bubble screen. A gray-hulled Republic Peacekeeper. Wear-and-tear indicated that all was normal.

The boat hull shape of the lower decks didn't just give it a seaworthy look. A multi-role design, Peacekeepers can enter atmospheres and displace water to conduct naval operations, if needed. The topside control tower sat high-center, offering full views. The hangar occupied the

levels below the shallow decline that spanned from the tower to the row of six sub-light engines at the stern. A familiar sight, opening circular doors that welcomed his little ship into a landing bay that went down five stories. After parking, he headed to the forward command deck.

Master Maln looked out of the tall windows at the swarm of jerky rock-zappers handling raw ore that just got fission-catapulted up from the planet's surface. A bodybuilder, the twi'lek had spent the morning doing calisthenics with peacekeeper troops. One of his lekku, the right headtail, showed third-degree burn scars over most of it.

To start off the intro, the even-toned superior explained that the *Stormchaser* was responsible for another sector besides this one. "As needed, the Peacekeeper launches shuttles and Big Bugs for calls in that other system. And Phase Four...the pace of this planet harvesting operation is only increasing, Dunn. We Galactic representatives need to keep up."

Outside, a speeding rock-zapper headed off a fast-moving rock by maneuvering in front of the path, flipping a 180. Flying backwards, the pilot standing in the cockpit let loose with the three wide-angle pulse guns. Yellow in color, these low-intensity energy bursts slowed the boulder's trajectory. Soft cannon-punches redirected the solid mass towards a refinery.

Tiruss suppressed a chuckle while remembering Grimesy's not-so-scientific explanation of the gargantuan refineries. "*Those rocks fly into the ship's butt and—boom—come out the mouth ready to be girders and all that stuff.*"

"Jedi and Medics serve the Republic during exciting times. Those are the building blocks of its future." The Master pointed to floating boulders that had yet to be handled, cracking a smile. "Bigger cities. Full industrial rings that orbit planets. Larger and larger spaceships for discovering systems farther and farther away. Space stations housing more and more inhabitants. These endeavors need ore and fuel. Progress is not safe. That's why we are here."

The Phase One veteran observed the borderline-chaotic scene outside as well. "A lot of talk about progress these days, Master."

"This new dig and those rocks out there in orbit right now...all slated for Coruscant City. Whole new developments." The Master's far-off stare held. "Aren't you proud to play a part?"

He turned when the younger Knight didn't answer.

"Forgive me, Master. You said 'Coruscant City' and my mind momentarily reflected on the recent riots in the Banking District. A couple of my friends were there, that's all."

"Are you always so flighty, Senior Knight? I need focus from my Jedi." The commanding officer raised one of his thick eyebrows at the new person, his bit of cheer gone.

Standing up straight, Tiruss said, "Understood."

"Which reminds me. I reviewed your Phase One team's recordkeeping practices. They fell short. With talk of a Jedi Oversight Bill in the Senate, matters like this need attention."

"Noted. I will improve." Staring out into space, Tiruss wondered if Web and Grimesy were flying any of the rock-zappers in his view.

The two watched the spunky 'Zappers wind, twist, and turn to engage the rocks.

The Master's stance relaxed. He put his hand on the shorter Knight's shoulder. "I am glad you're back. And with the other attacks on Republic mining...we are looking into it all. We will find whoever attacked you and your partner, killed the others. And we will deal with them."

His dead-serious stare held.

Sylmonica Valkanna's hands goofed with the blue sash around her waist which indicated she was a member of the Galactic Senate Complex's security team. While doing so, she observed the activity from a side balcony, one far to the rear and out of most people's line of sight.

The Galactic Senate Complex security detail. Fifty Jedi assisting the guard staff of 1000 or so. An assignment that occupied part of Syl's time while her operational status remained undecided. A duty she didn't mind. Most days, that is.

The Senate floor looked to be mostly full. Many of the public servants who were milling about in various elected officials' boxes ignored the outraged fellow elected official addressing them from the floor-to-ceiling screen behind the Parliamentary stage.

On this mid-week morning, Syl started to play with the blue sash over her tan tunic as a way of processing the simmering anger.

"The Republic needs to admit that its industry leaders do not respect the rule of law. The Yntikkian Ruins are sacred. If we have to engage with our military, we are prepared to do so..."

The recorded speech on the big screen was from the Chancellor of Yntok.

Just a few days ago, Russ mentioned during their talk that Web Hyland, a Yntok native, had reported threats from other miners working the expanding Scatera operation. The other Phase One Yntoki, the cook Quib, had returned home already.

Syl thought about the cheery Web and also Quib, an incessant practical joker, while trying to make sense of the indifference and antipathy towards Yntok below her.

Last week, a security detail stopped a bombing on the Complex grounds by the amphitheater. Two Archangel practitioners got blamed and assaulted. A textiles worker lost his job to slave labor and bigoted propaganda convinced him to blame a different religion.

Syl was wondering if it was worth saving when she heard a man's cheery voice.

"Wild speech, huh? We might be heading out to deal with Yntok soon...never know."

The young, brown-haired peacekeeper who interrupted Syl's train of thought pointed to the screen with his ceremonial spear while sharing his prediction.

Instead of answering, she turned away to head down the long, skylit hallway.

Emergency lights flashed. Sirens screamed. The last flyable craft just launched, making room.

Not enough spare parts for the 'Bugs. Nothing changes, Phase One all over again. Tiruss Dunn looked away from the unflyable craft and decoupled from unhelpful thoughts.

The whole hangar scrambled. Deckhands, mechanics, and flight crews rallied—broken ships and repair equipment still blocked the landing bay's centerline. Firefighting teams adjusted the tanks on their backs and readied hoses to spray flame-retardant foam.

A doomed lander with a full internal fuel tank and half-full external tank tumbled towards the hangar with no way to stop itself. The last report from the surviving pilot played back in the Republic protector's mind: the incoming Biekkor had lost all but one vertical engine and was attempting to aim for the hangar by firing the engine intermittently. Only that engine just failed. With the nearest 'Bug patrol minutes away, the panicked pilot had taken matters into his own hands, reiterating that victims needed assistance and the Medics and Jedi Knight were dead.

Tiruss double-checked the status of the elevators. Using hand signals from the other side of the long hangar, a grease-covered deckhand answered. *Both cars. Yes...on hangar deck level.*

The baby-faced worker, who had never left Alderaan before applying to work on this operation, hung out with Grimesy during his downtime. His crush on Web was obvious.

Now that Tiruss knew elevators were standing by, he verified that the frazzled deckworkers were shoving an engineless, ten-person shuttle out of the way. The rusty gantry supporting the vehicle squeaked as they rolled it. Distress sirens gave it all a soundtrack.

Once the largest possible landing area was available to the ailing spaceship, the Jedi closed his eyes and took in a breath. His lungs expanded as sounds of stressed-out workers and incessant emergency chirps left. Exhaling and dipping below surface-level consciousness, his head nodded with the vibrations of the ancient energy field when he heard another's thoughts.

"I am right behind you, Dunn. We can stretch out with the Force together. Focus on the starboard side. I will take port." As he was communicating, Master Eeth Maln walked up. Dressed in his tan tunic like Tiruss, he did not physically disturb his fellow guardian.

"Understood, Master." Eyes still shut, Tiruss raised his right hand in the direction of the wide hangar entrance. He shuffled to his left and pointed at the troubled Biekkor's right row of five engines—a sight his eyes did not see.

The lander neared, still flipping around.

An electric energy field along the open hangar doors kept breathable air from being sucked out. Here and there, this field would reveal itself via purple flashes of light. The two Jedi each moved close up, fingers millimeters from space.

The ship's rolling began to cease. Its forward motion slowed. The cockpit aimed at the ship. Beyond the barrier, the non-functioning lander listed to one side heading towards the lighted landing markers that guided incoming craft. It turned back on track, a sharp arc.

"Excellent, Dunn. Utilize the weightlessness, bring it into the hangar, we'll set it down."

"Understood, Master...don't want to overcorrect. Fuel tanks are more than half full."

"Understood, good to know."

A crippled ship losing its breathable air floated towards safety.

Though the compartment rumbled with noise, the Master's scream cut through. "Somebody needs to grab universal landing pads and position them. Firefighters: be ready."

Before the veteran Galactic servant had even finished his command, Web was pulling one set of universal landing pads, each little more than a flat square of shock-absorbent composites sitting on four wheels, towards the runway. Grimesy and a mechanic followed suit.

With both Jedi and the Force guiding it, the lander passed by a malfunctioning crane which arced out at an angle past the hangar door, its arm pointing at the dead planet.

The ailing ship broke the electric field's plane. The *Horizon* artificial gravity systems pulled the lander to the deck—an act which the two wielders counteracted and, for the last leg of the Biekkor's journey, the Force held it tight.

While Jedi brought the battered craft in, miner pilots used the long handles to position the padding. Fire crews soaked side engines with foam while the Biekkor lowered.

Feeling its weight, Tiruss and Maln brought down the smoking hull as softly, yet as quickly, as they could. The heavy hunk of metal had barely come to a rest on its temporary blocks when three Medics worked the side hatch using handheld cutting torches.

Cracks appeared. Smoke from inside the cabin poured out.

"Good work." Covered in fire-retardant foam, Master Maln rushed over to the Medics. When enough of the door had been cut, the fitness enthusiast raised his right hand and bent the door towards him using the Force, a sneer on his lip, eyes intense from the concentration. After it arced out enough, his hands grasped the metal edge and pulled.

Tiruss and two Medics charged in. Maln joined them after setting the hatch down.

Stretchers awaited the co-pilot and three badly-burned workers, lifesaving gear at the ready. Everyone in the hangar made way so Medics could wheel victims to the open elevators.

The two Jedi watched the elevator doors close. Shaking his junior's hand, Eeth Maln said, "When I got here, you were a step ahead."

"Thank you, Master. I'm fortunate that you happened to be on board for a meeting."

Maln acknowledged this with a smile. "I am happy to have eased this, though you all were handling it just fine. Now let's hope the Force will be kind to those in the medical bay. We are fortunate to have our Academius brothers and sisters with us."

"Our partners will do well, Master."

Firefighters tended to the wreckage. The young deckhand from Alderaan used a backpack-mounted air blower to disperse the smoke. Danger gone, veteran deep-space types had already shaken off the stress and gotten back to the neverending task of repairing mining ships.

"You've done well since you arrived, Dunn." The *Stormchaser* commander wiped foam from his face, leaving smudges on his cheeks. "I know you are on the path to Master. Walk farther, see what you find."

A forever-mad, but likable, mechanic was helping a Medic who Tiruss had never met before remove the body of Jedi Knight Sann Dellan, still in his bulky pressure suit. The two Jedi watched it from the side.

"Knight Dellan will be missed." Maln's normal bored look grew into a frown. "He is one with the Force, yes, but seeing his burned body inside that lander still made me sad."

Tiruss felt thankful that the blackened helmet obscured the easygoing third-tour Knight's face. The smoky visor made it tough to see the terrorized, frozen expression.

Chapter Three

His fingers millimeters from space, Padawan Zennon Tannerum wiggles them at the purple energy barrier that crackles here and there. The chill brought on by a dying climate-control system is everywhere. The secondary landing bay's flickering lights also prove that the generators are done.

ArraKel Kitaros just ran for the upper decks at the forward end of this stricken deep-space hauler. Both Padawans sensed great disturbances. Syl and Russ might be in danger. The medics Dilani and Leel, are inside the commandeered surface lander prepping for survivors.

"Survivors" is a word that hurts his head.

Since he had just checked the readings on the ship's barely-functioning systems monitor, he knows that the floundering spacecraft will lose power soon. The protective shield blinks.

The blinking stops. A hum is constant again. No emergency sirens. Drew too much power. More drips. Now more like splashes. Zennon hears them on the deck behind him. He knows that there are two Brakebugs parked snug along one wall, which made room for the Biekkor. He does not want to look at the empty Brakebugs or think about the word "survivors."

His gaze stays in space. Through the landing bay door, views of Scatera 3B when the tumbling heavy-vessel rotates that direction. After the side passes by, space once again. A continuing pattern. Like the drips. The drips become too much. He turns around.

Looking up, he discovers the repetitive sound's source: four or five colors of blood. Leaking spots, cracks in the rusty bay overhead four stories above, don't release water or coolant but red, blue, green, yellow, and orange blood streams instead. As his mind realizes what the causes are, the splashes get louder.

He knows that he should use his comms to tell Kel to hurry up. He decides to yell instead. His voice echoes off the decaying metal. "Hey, Kel. Get back here. There's blood everywhere and I am terrified. Death shouldn't terrify me but it does right now so—"

"She can't hear you, Zennon." His brother's voice cuts through the droplets hitting metal.

Zennon turns around to face outside. Not far past the other side of the buzzing energy wall that kept breathable air inside the compartment while the doors were open, Beddu Tannerum floats, cross-legged, his long legs beneath him in meditative pose.

Zennon had seen him in his pose many times over the course of their almost eighteen years together. He likes eyeing the familiar scar on his brother's thin cheek, a way that some people would tell them apart. "Hey, Bed—"

"Kel can't hear you. And that's your fault. You built a wall between you and her." His side Padawan braid bobs and weaves in the absence of gravity. "She is on another level in this ship and she is on another level than you. Because of you."

Zennon wipes away his tears. But more flood in. "Stop it. You haven't—"

"What? Been here these last months?" Beddu, still in the one-piece jumpsuit from that day of the attack, meanders in the weightlessness. But his eyes do not leave his brother inside a ship that is about to explode. "Yeah. You know I died, right?"

"Don't—"

Behind Zennon, the blood sounds like a light rainstorm hitting the decks.

"Yeah, I died. If you haven't accepted it, now's the time. I perished. You have to live and overcome, rise above. That's a tough path, but it's the only one, Zennon. You have no choice."

The tears flowing, Zennon said, "I wish you were here to talk about all this and—"

"You know who is here? Kel."

"But—"

"You want family? She is family. And she was there. Unlike others in our class who are also your family, she was there that day with you."

Zennon can't face his brother. But the sight of blood pushes him away, too. So he turns back to make eye contact as Beddu continues. "We Jedi are the only family any of us have, you and I were an exception. And right now, those in the Jedi and Academius who recommended against our admission...you are proving them right."

"I've been improving lately."

"You're not where you could be." The planet passes by behind Beddu. "You feel guilty."

"What?"

"About that day, you stalled the lander's engines...you are letting that little mishap serve as an excuse to shut out Kel...she's known you and I since we were all babies, Zennon."

"It isn't that."

"Yes. It is. And you need to change. That sense of guilt needs to be excised. Cut it from your psyche. You are closer to losing her than you think. She's close to moving on."

Shifting his feet, Zennon looks down to see that he was sloshing around in a brownish mixture, the various species' blood swirling together with the grease and grimy water.

His brother continues. "Kel loves you like she loves you. But don't let your bond give you the idea that she's holding back for you. She isn't. Keep shutting her out. See where you end up."

Zennon quits staring at the bloody deck. Beddu is no longer outside the barrier.

"I'm gone, Zennon. Kel isn't."

"Knight Valkanna...a word, please." Jedi Master Lanta Dasmal's distinctive voice picked up even more power bouncing off of the atrium's stone walls and arched ceilings five stories above.

Syl had been heading across the long lobby floor towards the entranceway of a wide hall, her destination the Jedi Archives' reading rooms in another building.

Dasmal returned her greeting, then bent to resume shuffling forward. The metallic walker feet, then her footsteps, one after the other, then the walker. A repeating process. Quicker-moving beings accommodated, weaving around her as they scooted to their respective destinations.

"No—Master—save yourself the trip." The more able-bodied light-sider fast-walked over, reaching out to steady the elder's furry right hand.

"You are too kind." Master Dasmal responded. "I forget my injuries sometimes. Those pirates hit our airship with a missile and my back hasn't been the same since."

Syl's laugh added to the Master's chuckles. "So, what can I help you with?"

Sparkling up, the senior colleague straightened as much as the curved spine would allow. "I have a mission for you, Knight."

"What? But with the Oversight Bill..."

This got dismissed with a wave. "I've been working within the system, younger one. Employing diplomacy, which you might want to try. I told superiors how well our jaunt off-planet went and they decided to give you a more substantial job."

"Go on, Master." The two talked while government workers walked by in all directions.

"I have been advising the Nimban Consulate, off and on, for the past two decades." Dasmarr snickered at the bald Younglings in formation across the way, wearing identical tan tunics and shuffling in a line, every little face scrunched in concentration. "Sometime in the next few months, Nimbanel plan to meet in-person and conduct negotiations with the Darranian System and the Villini Empire."

"Their three-sided war ended...what...five years ago?" Syl laughed at the child Jedi, too.

"Correct." Dasmarr answered with a more excited nod. "And now, it looks like all are serious about lasting peace. Darranians practice slavery, which is a sticking point, but dialogue is happening. That is what matters."

"Talk is essential. What are the next steps?"

"Well, wise Nimbanel have realized it's best to relax a tad when it comes to the slavery issue, for the sake of progress. I'd like you to study up and be my second for a few months."

"Thank you, Master. It sounds exciting." All of her life, she loved this atrium during busier times like now. So many ages and species of Jedi and Republic personnel heading through this central lobby in their own directions, for their own reasons. "I mean that."

"You might like this assignment." She grabbed the Knight's arm. "I'm going to have you meet with the Nimbanel consulate team soon, so get to reading once I send documents."

"Will do."

The Master turned to head away. "I told my superiors you're ready."

After Lanta Dasmarr left, Syl took her time walking down the hall to the Archive wing, greeting those she knew along the way.

Where the hall curved, an artist had painted the outside wall with a loose rendering of the Galaxy along the arc. Though the dimensions did not fit those shown in starmaps, Syl appreciated how the artwork separated out the regions. The Galactic Republic, stretching from the Deep Core out into the Middle Rim, took up about twenty percent, near the center. All around, independent systems floated. The Deep Core sat closer to the atrium's side of the wall and was a mix of Republic and independent.

Yntok and Cantio sat not too far outside of boundaries. The region known as Contested Space occupied a section above the Republic.

The Outer Rim and Unknown Regions, much of it once called Sith Space, were not labeled. Star systems she had been reading about recently, with names like Exegol and Korriban, were not labeled. But, based on her learnings, she could eyeball their rough locations on the wall.

Syl took the Galaxy in, the billions of innocent victims of slavery in those areas of the wall outside Republic boundaries.

Master Dasmarr's words came back. "*...wise Nimbanel have realized it's best to relax a tad when it comes to the slavery issue, for the sake of progress...*"

Progress. Syl couldn't help wondering: what would beings in chains say if one were to ask their thoughts about this "for the sake of progress" line of thinking...what would they say?

"Kel, wait up."

After the third time he calls out her name, that's when Kel will turn around. She gathered her formal robes around her body tighter and maintained her stride. Her thinking was partially calculating. His first two attempts happened closer to the atrium side of the hallway where it was more congested. Not ideal for a talk. Further ahead works better.

Ambient chatter radiated, a result of architecture and stone building materials that picked up conversations, only then broke down the words and thoughts into basic sounds. Blending, the combination of it all meandered. The glass dome stories above kept the noise inside.

“Kel...”

Now the hall’s curve to the next building contained less occupants. “What?”

The stare she had been preparing lost its steam. The pain in Zennon’s eyes, different than the walled-off anguish that she had gotten used to ever since they returned to Coruscant City.

His lips trembled. “I’m sorry I gunned the Biekkor and killed the power.”

“Zennon, I...” Kel hoped that her soft gaze would relax her friend. “Neither of us had any business piloting that thing.”

He shifted on his feet.

His awkwardness brought out her smile. “Now that I’m remembering, Zen, in those first hours afterward I remember telling myself that I should have chosen my words more carefully talking over the comms with flight control...with...um...Beddu just...”

“You can say it. He was dead.” His arms raised out as he teared up.

She ran to meet his embrace and held him tight, her own tears welling up. “I have so been wanting to talk to you.”

The joy of this long-overdue reacquaintance rushed over her. Kel grabbed onto him even more. No others passed by for the time that they stayed wordless, but communicative through sobs and shifts in the embraces.

Kel was the one to speak again. “This has been so hard being back here, Zennon. So hard. Only I didn’t know what to say because of everything you are going through...I have no idea what to do. I feel like I’m falling behind.”

He squeezed her to him. “What? You are doing great, as you always have.”

“It doesn’t feel that way.”

“You are.” Zennon took a step back. Two teary sets of eyes met, after months of distance. “We’re at the critical stage. Things are ramping up for us. Every moment counts now.”

“You know that you’ve been getting better lately? I’ve been wanting to say that. Others have been talking, not just our instructors.”

They held each other’s hands as they talked.

“Thanks. I still got work to do.”

“I need to confess...for a while, I was considering talking to instructors about holding you back.”

“Really?”

“I was thinking of the class, how far all of us have come. I figured I’d be doing you a favor. But right as I started to wonder, you stepped up.”

Kel took his hands again. “We can’t do this without each other. Time to barrel down.”

Twenty-four round balloons full of lighter-than-air hoomna gas were tethered to the perimeter of a thin slab the size of half a city block. Well-dressed socialites partied on the flat surface, surfing above the wildlife preserve. A jut of the Federal City skyline peaked through in the distance.

With the setting sun and light breeze, it was easy to see why the philanthropic event’s organizers appeared festive. The group standing to the side of the bandstand toasted and expressed relief about the ideal weather.

The scarlet gown's soft fabric tickled Syl's skin and mixed with post-workout tingles. Her whole body felt relaxed, but not the slightest bit tired. After the hard run in her boots, her feet appreciated the loose fit of the flat sandals. She and Meena strolled around and checked out stylish guests who were eating, drinking, and dancing.

"This is gorgeous. And smooth." Meena ran her finger along the sleeve. "You fit into high society better than me. I feel so underdressed."

"You look fine." Syl winked at one of the soiree's more plainly-attired attendees. "And thanks. I felt the urge to indulge seeing the bolt of cloth for sale. Then I hired a seamstress, never done that before."

She took a puff from the flat-bottomed pipe which balanced on the outstretched palm of her left hand. Her right hand rested on her lower back.

Meena fixated on her friend's outfit again. "I've seen the weavers of this fabric at work, it's impressive. They take those delicate strands in their twenty fingers and weave away—"

"Meena, I have two requests of you."

She stopped walking. "Sure."

"First: I've seen some interesting titles in the Jedi Archives, dark side holocrons. If I accessed them, they might ask why. At the moment, I feel like being as invisible as I can be."

"I'm sure we can find any texts. What's the second request?" She played with the purple feathers woven into her hair as her eyes stayed on her serious friend.

"Come to think of it, the second thing isn't really a request." Syl smoked, snickering at the two impeccably-dressed young boys who were fascinated with the slab's edge and daring each other to tiptoe towards it. Their nervous mother stayed close, eyes glued to her children.

Syl turned back, straight-faced. "Before I get to that 'request that isn't really a request', let me say this: I trust in the Force more than anything else. Everything comes second to the Force."

Meena played more with the feathers while her friend continued.

"Every good deed and every bad deed in my short life happened because of the Force. You, me, here, now—this moment, the Force is the why and the how. All else is irrelevant, understand?"

"Yes."

The event's only cosmetic-free woman's gaze had turned up at the low pink clouds and hints of buildings. The gaze returned. The silver eyepiece worked with the functioning eye to hold Meena's stare. "Okay. Now it's time...time to state my request that isn't really a request."

"What is it, Syl?"

"Tell me your real name."

Chapter Four

A week after the long march, he still hurt. Sore muscles. Burned skin.

And an overwhelmed brain. Thoughts of her—their reconnection—more to think about. But this was a good problem to have. Zennon Tannerum and ArraKel Kitaros lean on each other.

“You all...just look at your young, fresh faces...welcome back to Coruscant.”

Shuffling in his brown formal boots, Zennon let physical discomfort distract from the droning politician. Thoughts of Kel interrupted the official’s booming voice. Her words, not his. *“I missed you, Zennon Tannerum.”*

Senator Zayonnus Korkuk hitched up his wide belt while taking stock of the visitors to the Galactic Senate, late teens all in brown dress robes. “I am so honored that my home planet of Kuat could play a part in your development as Jedi Knights. The citizenry sees it as our duty to the Republic to be here for you.”

The Senator’s giggle shook his jowls. “That desert is roasting-hot during the dry season. You Jedi are tougher than I ever could be.”

Zennon fiddled with the blue sash around his tan tunic, doing his best to pay attention.

The dignitary gushed. “...so busy you are, yet you make time to learn about the inner workings of your Galactic Republic. I am...”

The trainee’s joints ached as well, a realization which further shut out the yammering that Kel’s soft voice was also talking over: *“It’s good to know you again, Zen.”*

Zennon caught the sight of Sylmonica Valkanna standing on one of the upper balcony decks. It took him a moment. Her dark hair was short again like when he first met her before Phase One. She appeared to be watching the Senate Floor. Standing tall, Syl appeared to be ready for anything. Even the silver orb covering her eye socket seemed normal to the teen. The old pro of a Knight looked like she was back.

Though her lack of emotional expression struck him. Normally, whatever feeling Syl was experiencing came through on her face. She couldn’t help it. She and Kel were similar that way. After a second’s thought, he figured she was preoccupied. With the riots increasing and more security patrolling the Senate Complex, stationing Jedi around the auditorium made sense.

“...and one of my most powerful constituents always tells me how secure he feels knowing that the Jedi are selflessly dedicated to protecting his mining endeavors all over the...”

The Padawan did his best to follow along, but the urge to zone took over. If he disassociated, he might not notice the pounding along his shoulders and back as much. He started to give thought to finding a way out of this boring lecture, find Syl. Seeing her look so ready and good to go, he felt the urge to thank her for her letter and share that he regretted not writing her back and acting on her advice sooner.

He and Kel have been helping each other as this final phase of their pre-Knighthood lives continues to unfold. And the two of them have made strides in coming to terms with Phase One, just by being open with one another. He values her more than ever.

Syl needs to know her role in making this happen. Part of him considered sharing the dream with Beddu. She would like it.

As the Senator was praising the Jedi for stepping up with the slavery tensions to protect both sides of the issue, Zennon’s eyes roamed up to the balcony again.

Syl was no longer there.

The bubbly scooter vendor tried to upsell her on the two-person closed-canopy model by stating that the night might get a chill. Syl laughed him off, her mind elsewhere.

“Syl, you worry about the Jedi Order’s ability to protect the Republic and you worry about the Republic itself, a drift into slavery again. We know of other paths.”

Warm breezes tingled as she steered the pointy, open-cockpit airship over the wildlife preserve, treetops below obscuring the grasslands. Her hands and feet worked the directional and speed controls while the living Force from the flora and fauna below fed her zoning.

After Syl confronted and demanded to know her identity, the woman she knew as “Meena” stammered a rationale. *“We know how powerful and capable you are. The Jedi hold you back.”*

Syl put a stop to the nervousness, told the darksider that the Force guides all. Upon learning that the spy’s name was Quim-Na Sulif, the Jedi excused herself and spent the rest of the balloon ride mingling with strangers, introducing herself as the daughter of a leader and a teacher. The terrified look on the face of “Meena” made her laugh. The Scholar did her best to stay on the opposite side of the slab, chain-smoking alone, being wherever the Jedi wasn’t.

That was a week ago. After giving it time, Syl was the one to request tonight’s meeting, with co-conspirators as well. Quim-Na seemed taken aback by the demand to meet the one with psychic abilities. To temper worries, Syl stated she was a Jedi and could not act in vengeance. She laughed off the apprehension, but promised to leave her saber at home nonetheless.

The open-toed black sandals allowed Syl’s calloused feet to breathe. After a long run that took up the late afternoon, they deserved a night of relaxation. Dressing comfortably was the correct choice. The green tunic had more folds and fit looser than her tan Jedi tunic. Wind caressed skin.

Leaving the shrinking forest behind, Sim slowed a bit and piloted more. The quad-winged vehicle weaved through the network of buildings heading towards the wealthy suburb, obvious by spires and luxury towers connected with bridges that kept residents above it all.

One of the tall buildings was one of the sparsest, design-wise. A black rectangle that got lost in a skyline of curves, garish colors, and odd-angled architecture that appeared to defy gravity. After parking at the mid-tower landing strip and heading to the topmost unit’s lobby level, she rang its penthouse. Quim-Na answered from the smoking lounge.

Dancing candlelight sprinkles added hints of life to the windowless halls. Syl passed the sliding doors at the gallery level and kept going, following the spiral upward with her fingers tracing along the black metal railing that matched the angle of staircase. The sweet smell of burning rishash-root, a rare incense known to be popular with the wealthy, also guided the Jedi.

At the top, the stairway opened into the center of the space. The vanishing daylight poured in. Three sides of windows flooded the lounge with the reddish sunset, made darker by the windows’ tint. A wall-to-wall aquarium contained schools of tiny blue boolars. She knew the boolar to be a native of Coruscant rivers, now grown in farms off-world.

Along with Quim-Na and an older couple, a green-skinned hulk of a being stood there. The four were dressed in expensive robes or long coats.

“So, you all have had your eyes on me for a while. I’m sensing some type of plan...”

A volley of laughter jumped out of Quim-Na. She wore a jeweled band around the bun of her brown hair and reached up to straighten it, even though it sat fine.

“You spent a lot of time fixing yourself up, concealing that person underneath.” Done addressing Quim-Na, now Syl turned her attention to the new acquaintance, a tough-looking older man who towered over the others. “I sensed the presence of others on the lobby level when I came in, in a back room. I’m assuming those are your henchmen or whatever? No need for backup. I did not bring my saber with me.”

Quim-Na introduced them. “Syl, this is Tramm Nurado, he is a—”

“I’ve heard your name.” The keeper of the peace pointed her finger. “I can’t place anything to it, but...I bet you’ve committed a crime or two, young man.”

Tramm tipped his black cap. As the feared boss attempted a comeback, he got ignored. The recent arrival now directed that index finger at Zinora Ree. “You’re the one who was inside my head, I know it. That voice sounded...what’s the word I’m looking for...senior-citizen-like.”

Before the octogenarian could respond, Syl smiled. “The Force is older than any one of us in this room can fathom. We all follow in the ways of the Force, don’t we? I know I do.”

She made eye contact with all four and took a breath before focusing on the Rees. Zinora had backed over to Mattias during Syl’s pause. “I am here because I am lost. I’m fine saying so. Confronting Quim-Na that night, I just wanted to shock her and leave, forget all of this. But I can’t turn away. The cries of innocents, I hear them with the Force. And I hear them. Anyone with a conscience can hear them. The dark side can help me liberate all.”

Mattias smoked from a crystal pipe that Besson Overtanos had given him. “Well to begin with, you’re not lost, Sylmonica. You’re too good for what was once your life.”

She answered with a sneer. “Don’t be trite. I so respect the Academius institution and its centuries of medical breakthroughs, but that doesn’t follow through to you.”

“My husband was serious when he said that.” His diminutive wife’s voice boomed. “You are right: our little dark side sect that you despise is also responsible for the creation of the Academius, one of the Galaxy’s most important medical institutions. And unlike the Jedi, it only exists to save lives. It has saved more lives than the Jedi.”

“What kind of word games are you trying here?”

“You can’t deny truth, Sylmonica.” Zinora did not let her gaze go. “The Jedi save lives and take lives. All the Academius does is save lives. That institution is not the Sith of yesteryear.”

The Jedi waved away Quim-Na’s offer of a crystal glass with green liquid inside it. “Academius Medics have performed well for centuries, I won’t deny that.”

“The dark side got put in its place.” Mattias took a puff. “The Scholars of the Academius sprouted from the ashes to use those dark ways for discovery.”

“All we want is acceptance, Syl. We are still shamed, even this many centuries after the war, yet the dark side can benefit so many.” Lighting her pipe, Quim-Na watched the scrappy fish in the tank scurry. “A lot of darksiders want to eliminate slavery, too.”

“Enough about *wants*.” Mattias motioned about with his pipe. “What the dark side *needs* is a beacon of light, Sylmonica Valkanna. You desire to use the Force to do good, free the enslaved. The need to do so burns within your core. And you’re learning that the Force’s light side is only one option for accomplishing this noble aim, am I correct?”

Instead of answering, Syl turned away. She had glimpsed at the etching when first entering the lounge, but did not devote much attention. Now she took slow steps towards the piece and peered up at the artwork.

Zinora joined, her eyes beaming at the cherished piece. “What do you think?”

“The artist got it wrong.”

From over by the bar, Mattias Ree bellowed. “What prompted you to say that?”

“The emitter is too wide.” The Jedi Arts practitioner pointed to the upper section of the etching where the device let out the light beam. “Sabotaa designed her saber concave, rounds inward. That emitter is convex.”

The incredulous Zinora laughed loud. “Silly...beyond silly.”

“No...I am correct and you are incorrect.” To prove her point, Syl removed from her cloak the light saber that Darth Sabotaa left behind with her and hit the black button on the curved hilt. A red beam found its way out of the concave emitter and flooded the room with an ancient hum and pink hue that fed the twilight’s redness.

Eyes wide and her normal condescending look vanished, Zinora stumbled a few steps.

“See...look.” Oblivious to the panic, Syl pointed at the light-emitting end of the blazing weapon. Though the others in the smoking lounge were too stupefied to respond, she made her case. “This emitter right here bends inward, a design choice I get...mine is concave as well.”

None of the wide-eyed Scholars could yet form words. The buzz owned their ears.

The Knight backed away to twirl the Sith hilt, narrower than her own and bow-shaped instead of straight, between her fingers. “And...I am true to my word. *My* saber is at home.”

The red line became a circle. “For me...the construction is too skinny, but I get that it’s easier to spin. To each their own.”

The hums grew higher-pitched. In the open space, she slashed with the unfamiliar blade, back and forth. “The cosmetic additions are a little much.”

With grace, Syl twisted to her left, then stabbed out as her body finished its turn. The white-hot tip held noselengths from Zinora’s chin. “Yeah, it’s weighted differently.”

Switching off, the priceless piece’s red light shrank back from the noncomprehending socialite’s face. “Me? I prefer a heavier weapon as well. Momentum is my friend.”

A stunned audience failed to register what their eyes were witnessing as the lifelong wielder made a straight line for the outside deck. Her free hand raised. Two doors flew open.

The first to catch on, Zinora Ree shuffled with her cane after her.

Syl ran a few steps. Maintaining forward motion, the recuperated Republic servant twisted at her waist to bring her arm behind her back. With all of her might feeding into it, her arm fired—launching the ancient artifact straight at the half-moon. It left her hand, appearing to have an afterburner and rotating end-over-end. One long scream of rage left her throat. She strained to give the projectile her physical energy.

Zinora betrayed her frailty as she reached the door. “No!”

Quim-Na and Tramm were right behind her. All three watched a fading sight disappear.

Syl kept her hand pointed upward. The recipient of her energy sped at the orange clouds.

Mattias let out a small whimper. Every Scholar appeared to be in pain, their bodies almost collapsing while their focus stayed glued on the twilight skies.

After a pause, a fall began. Hundreds of stories. While the guest and hosts stood on the balcony, the hurtling and spinning hilt picked up more speed. The downward glide gained steam. From the rail, Tramm searched the sea of buildings, twinkling lights, and urbanity.

Quim-Na scampered up to join him. “Can you see it? Tell me you can see it.”

An instrument that had killed hundreds tumbled on all axes towards the surface below.

Until the Jedi instructed the Force to boomerang it back to her waiting hand.

An outcast debutante’s self-built light saber, more than ten centuries old, slowed its descent. The out-of-control rotation died out, speed soon doing the same. For a span of time, it floated far above a cityscape, still. Spinning once again, the arcing path now ran parallel to the

planet's surface. The force of gravity handed off the unignited instrument to the Force. It gained altitude, accelerating towards the outstretched fingers of the most talented wielder on the deck.

Syl grabbed the prize out of the air.

Mattias collapsed on the stone tile, his eyes in tears. "Oh...ohhh...ohhhhh..."

The other three looked just as lost and dumbfounded. So much collective bewilderment—Syl's laughter had to escape. "Who are you people?"

She turned to the ones gripping the railing. "Take a breath. Breathe."

"This has been fun but it's getting late. We'll talk again." Yawning, she placed Darth Sabotaa's precious sword in Zinora's trembling hands before turning towards the patio doors. "Keep it. I like mine better."

At a leisurely pace, Sylmonica Valkanna took the circular stairs.

She showed herself out.

X: Rebirth

Chapter One

Nefari at Twilight, an Autobiography (excerpt)

Any second, my dying husband's henchmen were going to break down the door and kill me. That thought I remember.

A four-paneled, stone-and-metal barrier sealed the family's quarters off from the rest of the compound. And now, this slab was the only thing holding back devoted followers who just heard their boss' shrieks of terror.

The disbelief in my husband's eyes. My actions caused this.

The bloody lamp base in my hand, it filled me with a sense of bewilderment. Why I snickered at the thought of bludgeoning him with one of our wedding gifts, I'll never know. It could have been because the spineless wretch, after years of alluding to it, finally went through with the act of taking a swing. Maybe.

During his final moments of life, I'll never know why my stare couldn't look away and he couldn't look away from me. Laughter thundered as my epiphany struck. We had taken great pains to avoid one another's glances for so long, yet there we were, enraptured and unable to take our eyes off each other.

It all felt new again. For me, anyway.

His gaze began to lose power once enough blood had escaped. The sight of it made me recall that the lamp had sharp edges.

Reflecting, years later, the moment's initial spark eludes. Yes, he did try to hit me. But that fact can't be connected to what happened afterward. It would make sense if it did. But it can't.

The dark side of the Force adds an extra layer on top of everything else. The dark side must exert itself and no being has a choice in the matter. We are its inferior and always will be.

When the blood hit my husband's airways, he gurgled like our daughter did as an infant. I heard our daughter's scream right as this thought crystallized. This I remember.

Before turning to face her, I hit her father one last time with the heavy lamp and yelled that her daddy was no longer a threat.

Only my daughter was screaming because she saw me, her mommy, as the threat.

When the henchman broke down the door, one of them took her. I figured they would bring her to another part of the complex before killing me.

Inside, I paced and waited until it became unbearable.

As I walked down the hall and toward the courtyard, the commotion grew.

We got married in that stone-tiled courtyard, the one now so full of subjects that the ornate family symbols on the deck were not visible. Our daughter took her first steps in that courtyard.

A full turnout made sense if they were going to take out revenge against the one who killed their benefactor. A woman born in the mudhuts like they were threatened their livelihoods.

On that night, I looked down from the balcony and saw hardened beings, vicious killers, borderline sociopaths. And every single one of them pledged their loyalty to me.

I saw the true power of the dark side of Force. I thought I was going to die and got baptized by the light in the darkness instead.

Gilla, the bodyguard who I believed would carry my daughter away to safety before returning to murder me, looked up from the cobblestone below. "We always knew you were the strong one, your greatness. Whatever that energy is that you were born with, we see it."

Though I would not be called Darth Nefari for another few years, the dark side of the Force welcomed me that night. By the banks of a Coruscant river, it welcomed me.

Some evenings back, while sitting on the outside deck and enjoying the hosts' offering of light eats, Sylmonica Valkanna asked the Rees if Sith lords still existed.

"Darksiders dream this dream more than any other. It's why we keep the dark hearth ready. But I do not know."

On this morning, Syl let Mattias Ree's words play in her head as she rose out of bed to start the day. She closed the rare text that Zinora Ree had lent, *Nefari at Twilight*, and secured the diary inside a hidden compartment in her trunk.

Readying for the upcoming formal meeting, she took her time arranging the credential sash, a purple cloth that hung from a Jedi's left shoulder on top of their brown robes. The various symbols were marks that pertained to tours and achievements. Her sash had plenty of color on it.

Her waking-up mind prepared to meet Master Dasmarr before the two shuttled off to the Nimban Consulate, a space station above the planet. A day of meetings inside the secure orbiter, then back down to Coruscant by dinnertime.

She grabbed the simple black case containing pertinent files and tucked it under her arm, then left her domicile cluster. Sparse hallways and an elevator, both empty. In the high-domed foyer, Syl picked a fresh screel from one of the palm-leafed screel-trees planted inside. Two tall, glass doors slid to the side in front of her, revealing a path through a tunnel to the outdoors.

Loving the morning's crispness and fog, she bit into the oval-shaped green fruit and savored the mix of heartiness and sweet moisture. Feeling the nutrition hit, she enjoyed the couple of blocks to the Complex and small shuttle port where Master Dasmarr would be waiting.

A light breeze rolled through the outdoor esplanade that linked buildings of the Jedi facility with other governmental organizations' offices. Syl smiled at the clouds in the sky and ate her breakfast, recognizing a few folks along the way and nodding greetings without slowing down. To do so would have suggested a desire for conversation.

Every bit of the fruit except the green stem got savored as the commuter made her way. This stem got tossed to the sidewalk after she finished.

Straight ahead, past a bank of one-person airbikes hanging vertically on a charging rack, her superior stood hunched over her walker.

"Master Dasmarr."

Syl picked up her pace. The seasoned public servant turned to greet her, a slower and stiffer act. Finally, both happy eyes showed. "Ahh, Knight Valkanna."

She was all smiles, as most days. She pointed behind her. "Minor technical difficulties."

The two-person shuttle needed last-minute adjustments. Syl hadn't flown one of these cheaply-made puddle-jumpers in years. From the looks of it, this one's last overhaul was a while ago. Two mechanics had opened up the curved covering over the nose. The one with the blue skin supervised. The scallier man bent over a web of wires was shaking his head.

"You have it under control, right?" Syl put a polite hand on the older one's shoulder. "I'm an okay pilot and all, but I need my ships functional, if you know what I mean."

She understood the species' clicks and whistles and nodded while the gesturing mechanic pontificated about tight schedules. Her wink cut him off. "It's an election year. Help us out."

This remark, unexpected from a Jedi, got the two mechanics guffawing. The older one promised to have the ship working in minutes.

Dasmar nodded her approval. "Nicely done. If I was feeling more official, I would frown upon what you said to them, being a representative of the Republic. But you understand the art of connecting, that I don't doubt. I like my ships functional as well."

The both of them had a laugh and Syl opened the side gull-door to start pre-flight.

The ship problem proved to be the biggest issue. The rest of the day was uneventful.

As the sun set, the ship neared the Jedi Complex hangar and received landing clearance.

Master Dasmar informed Syl that she wouldn't be needed until the afternoon in the next day. "After the meeting adjourned, Councilor Zmana told me he thought you were a good pick."

"That's nice to hear, Master." Syl had been zoning, thinking about her book.

On the opposite side of the outdoor exchange, an emaciated Sylmonica Valkanna huddles by the stone wall. Wrapped in a ripped black cloak, she shivers. Matted, gray hair covers her face. She pushes this hair aside so she can growl at passersby.

Though there is distance between ArraKel Kitaros and Syl, Kel can make out that the silver eye device is missing from Syl's left socket. The green and red sores in its place ooze from the outer corner.

No one pays attention to the old woman whose grin revealed gaps where teeth once were. Kel, dressed in formal Jedi robes, calls out her name again. Syl doesn't answer. Again.

The gust of wind from behind blows Kel's dark-brown mop of curly hair forward into her face. Some of it tickles her nose and she lets out a sneeze.

From across the way, Syl screams at the top of her lungs. "Hey, you big disgusting bantha-head: cover your big, giant bantha-mouth if you gonna be coughing like that."

After spitting in the dirt, she does not wipe her scab-covered lips. "Don't be dumb. Gonna give me the disease!"

Kel takes a second, then responds, nodding. "I didn't cough. I...I...I sneezed." After speaking, she realizes her voice was much quieter than she intended.

The fresh wind enlivens Kel's hair once again. She can't help running her hands through it. Alive eighteen years, never felt the sensation of wind running through long hair.

From across the way, Syl yells again. "Hoo-wee. Lookit the pretty vanity-girl."

She mimics Kel. "Primpin' and struttin' around and showin' off."

A couple of teenage boys mixing with the light crowd break away. They wear malicious grins and carry rotting garbage. They wind up and throw this trash at Syl, who cowers even though the smelly refuse stops short.

"Leave her alone." Kel explodes in rage. "Take one more step towards her you die, do you understand—die. Syl has done more for this Galaxy than you ever will know. Back away."

It isn't worth continuing with the screaming and forward charge. The boys, two or three years younger, flee in terror. Locking eyes with the younger one, Kel feels what is terrifying him.

She is terrifying him. All of them. Which terrifies her. Her heart threatens to thunder through her chest. Her searing cheeks heat the air.

Now unlit once again, her saber falls to the dirt.

Syl interrupts Kel's shock, giggling. "Wow...they make 'em jumpy nowadays."
Kel stumbles back and then to the right. After regaining her stance, she wobbles the other direction and falls over.

An exhausted Zennon Tannerum reminded himself that she would be okay.

After pushing her away for so long, irrational thoughts of loss overwhelmed. He allowed himself to experience them.

Even when the Medics stated that she was recovering, he still could not let go.

While waiting by her side, he remembered their recent talks about Phase One, dead landers in space, loss, and what lay ahead. After he told her how much he needed her, he now was powerless to help her.

This Academius patient room, with its glaring whiteness and air of extreme cleanliness, felt like every other Academius patient room he had ever been in. The Padawan allowed this thought to distract him when he needed a break from focusing on his fellow Padawan.

Zennon had been lightly stroking his friend Kel's arm when he heard her whispers.

"You're bald, Zennon."

"What?" He sat forward from his perch by her bed.

"Must've been a dream." Kel yawned, her puffy eyes still adjusting. She reached up with her right hand, stretching, and felt the baldness of her own head. She yawned bigger. "A dream...a hairy dream...with hair. Hair everywhere. Hair feels good. It's hairy."

Zennon laughed at his groggy friend. "I don't know why you're talking about a dream, Kel. We had to medevac you from the wilderness during section four of Trial of the Spirit."

"What?" Kel's eyes were now open and attentive.

"Yeah, silly. They were snapping us out of our five-day meditation inside the cave and—uh, wow—whatever type of trance you put yourself in, you went to another plane."

She looked out the little window, the room's only one. "Really? Whoa..."

"Well, their instructions were to focus...I guess you wanted extra credit." He stroked his friend's hand, a habit. "What did you see?"

"I...saw...this life of ours, I think." She took his hand. "I saw anger, too. Scary."

"You're safe now. I'm so glad to talk to you." Fingers laced, he squeezed her digits.

"Reflect, turn it into lessons. You know what to do."

He got up to let his friend get some rest. "What you said, about your hair and feeling it?"

"Yeah?"

"You've never had hair before, so your mind has no memory of this act. But you were creating it in your vision. I have a thought about what it means."

After he didn't tell her, she reached with her weak hand. "Tell me."

"You are ready to be done. I so get the feeling."

After a long hug, Zennon left. Kel slept for the rest of the day.

“FINAL KLIK. FOURTEEN DOWN, ONE TO GO FOR PADAWAN TANNERUM.”

The affect-free, mechanical voice cut through his footsteps’ thuds, echoing sounds booming from a speaker mounted on a round-bodied drone-copter skirting the tops of the thick tree cover. Words from above, infusing Zennon Tannerum with yet another second wind.

“SECTION THREE OF THE TRIAL OF SKILL IN PROGRESS.”

Covered in sweat and lungs pumping, the aspiring Jedi poured on a fresh burst of speed. The brown Padawan side braid, rewoven this morning, flew behind him. In a moment of bonding with his physical form, his callouses gave thanks for the new boot linings.

That second of reflection finished. The Target Chamber lay ahead, over the last hill. The next exercise required a steadiness that only physical calmness could provide. Time to focus on slowing down his heart rate as quickly as possible—while maintaining his running pace.

The Target Chamber. Seemingly nothing but a three-story, hollow cylinder plopped down in the middle of the wilderness. The Padawans’ long-running joke. *“Step inside the Target Chamber...and guess what? You’re the target!”*

Zennon’s time for the final kilometer equaled that of his first. Another hovering drone just blurted this information out.

At the sloped path leading to the chamber’s entrance, his speed evaporated and his Padawan braid now hung and bounced. Walking, he unhooked his dual-sided light saber from the thick brown belt. Without igniting it, one hand gripped the bluish-colored hilt near the middle like a baton. Pulse dwindling, his consciousness focused on quieting to a restful state.

Two sliding doors in front of him opened. After he stepped through, both slammed tight to cut out light from outside. He did not stop walking until he sensed the floor’s dead-center.

Zennon stood rigid in darkness.

Cold, white brightness flooded the space. Bouncing off of the walls’ shallow curve, the rush of light showed twenty or so shiny objects littering the floor. Metal walls, reflective rather than absorbent, taught saber-wielders about redirecting incoming fire towards the ground.

“Minimizing risk to all those in the immediate vicinity is the first responsibility of any Jedi who happens to be in this situation—moreso than eliminating the threat,” said the gruff Jedi Battlemaster to the intimidated Padawans, her forked tongue moving about her lower jaw. That first tutorial ended with every novice failing and blaster shots ricocheting everywhere.

Years later, Zennon readied himself. Both hands clasped his unignited sword, covering up the hilt’s glossiness. With each passing second, his circulatory system remained committed to the stillness. A subconscious listened to the Force in ways that the conscious could not.

As the human who just ran fifteen kilometers remained mindful of the air leaving and entering his lungs, a tinny voice cut through the silence. *“RAISE THE CRYSTALS.”*

Eyes shut, he reached out with an empathy that came from a lifetime of learning about Jedi who cared—who wanted nothing except for every being to live their lives unharmed. Though Zennon’s Learnership time didn’t impart much to the idealist, he did learn from Master Phuss during their four years together. A Jedi had to remember the living Force was all-welcoming and every Jedi should aim to become its personal embodiment. *“An impossible task, Zennon. But Jedi do not fear the impossible because Jedi see the forever that surrounds the impossible. The forever is the only thing more immense than the impossible.”*

You were far from instructive, Master. But thank you for this bit of wisdom. Thank you. A relaxed mind gave thanks again. If anything, Master Phuss' imperfections fed future meditations and the still-learning Jedi formulated his own insights. Kel, who also did not click with her Master, shared her thoughts and both derived meaning together.

Every crystal now looked to be at rest in the air three stories up. Being so brittle, they would shatter if they fell to the stone floor. If one did, Zennon would have to start over.

With a humming burst announcing its presence, the blue ray of light shot from the saber's right side to deflect the incoming blaster bolt downward.

The lengthening blade handled the next three, sending all to the floor.

Green side firing, his two hands jostled the hilt back and forth.

Incoming rounds hitting two unforgiving beams sounded like a tight wire snapping over and over again. As the ground sapped the last bit of pulse, the shot's death resulted in a low-pitched "whump." Snaps and whumps flooded the room. Blue and green melded—the two of them against orange. The softer floor absorbed the orange, whumping each time.

A blurry weapon twirled between the hands almost on its own. If Zennon bounced a shot into the walls, he'd risk hitting one of the crystals above, therefore stopping the test.

A young man who first picked up a saber at four years old allowed his physical body to channel a source of energy older than the Galaxy. In return, six blaster cannons could not succeed with the pre-scripted task. The aspirant let his arms and hips work the weapon. Two hands and a trunk led. The rest of him followed.

Zennon shut off the green, swinging the single blue side only. If one were to ask him what spurred the decision, he would, like most Jedi, offer nothing else but a useless gesture like a shrug. If anything, wielders were just extensions of the Force.

The whirring, blue line bent and changed direction to meet every challenge.

Snaps. Whumps.

"SIMULATION COMPLETE."

Light flooded the room. Years of training paid off. Every crystal stayed locked in place. Many Padawans before have lost concentration during this sudden calm and allowed crystals to fall, nullifying the endeavor.

He let the blue side of his saber die out before re-hooking it to his wide belt.

"LOWER THE CRYSTALS TO THE FLOOR."

A heart now thumped at a rate not much higher than when asleep. Twenty crystals lost altitude, but slowly. All clinked as they connected with the surface of the Target Chamber.

The student waited for a teacher to walk in before he relaxed his stance.

With soft footsteps, the Master approached. The smaller man put his hand on the Padawan's right arm. "Excellent work. Your self-discipline was obvious."

"Thank you, Master." Zennon liked the recently-promoted Jedi. Quiet, the littler human with wide jowls let the senior instructors take the lead and didn't interfere, like others do.

"Your improvement has been noted by many."

Zennon let out a laugh.

The Master cocked his head. "Something amusing?"

"Beddu told me you all would say words like that if I got my stuff together."

"What?" His cheeks jiggled when his head shook.

Before the Master could respond further, the now-relaxed student patted him on the back and walked off towards the two doors which now opened.

As she locked down her secure connection to the classified Republic database, Dilani Vestagon couldn't resist admiring her new overcoat's sleekness in the screen's reflection. In a hurry to leave for the evening, she multi-tasked: wrapping the dark-purple covering around her body while using the keyboard to input the sequence of numerals and characters. The more she rushed, the more the rare fabric's featherlike inner lining tickled the skin on her arms and shoulders.

Her 110th-floor office featured floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides that offered views of the bustling Coruscant City with the wildlife preserve owning a horizon below orange skies.

Finishing up another day of work, the devoted Scholar and rapidly-advancing Academius executive had to laugh at her existence, these past months. Take this high-profile job: the day after her top-level clearance was granted, Academius security helped the previous occupant of this office clear out so she could settle in as soon as possible. Just because an associate of the reclusive Mattias and Zinora Ree called and ordered them to do so.

True, the deference she received from non-believers who worked for the institution flattered her. But none of these employees had a clue about the Academius' origins, its ties to an ancient way of life that threatened so many just by existing. Names like Torturok and Sabotaa meant nothing to them. The obliviousness reeked and she kept co-workers at a distance.

A life of secrecy, disguised as a rapidly-advancing career. Like many darksiders before her, Dilani Vestagon saw herself as a person influencing her surroundings from the shadows.

That Space in the Shadows...one of Darth Famne's most hauntingly beautiful poems.
Thank you for your brilliance, wise Sith.

A few nights ago, she had a rare night of quiet and read some of the Poet's work, drinking tea.

The office doors slid shut behind her as the young up-and-comer buttoned her coat and walked down the hall. She turned the corner, out of the Executive wing. At the beginning of a long hallway, her simple nod halted an intense gossip session. Students, interns in the Records Division, scrambled to look busy. She was maybe three years older than them, yet they jumped like she was an elder. Clueless Academians, out of mind as soon as the Scholar passed them by.

The sharp hit of new heels almost echoed off the sterile tile. This brought out a yawn. The triangular hall itself lacked a ceiling. Instead, two dull walls rose to a centerpoint above, architecture that reminded her of the chapel in the campus' main section, a building donated by Zinora Ree's great-grandfather and quietly dedicated to Darth Sabotaa.

The evening's plan was to entertain Dandoma Mekkra with the Rees. The part-time preacher, part-time hustler had recruited kidnappers from the Outer Rim for Besson Overtanos' paying job.

Dandoma. Vulgar and haughty, but with a heart in the right place and a vicious sense of loyalty. Also...obvious. His real intentions for scheduling the visit had nothing to do with business. Any concerns could have been handled via secure communication. She could already envision the schemer, full of drink, attempting to inquire about "the Jedi."

As Dilani was giggling at the Agonian's ham-handedness, her eyes rose from the floor. The smile vanished.

"Hello, Dilani Vestagon." Sylmonica Valkanna stood at the end of the hallway in her working brown Jedi robes, hood down. A human eye and a mechanical mirror stared. After the younger one failed to respond, Syl shook her head. "I believe a customary response would be 'Hello, Syl.' It's been a while."

“Hello, Syl.” Dilani shuffled in her heels, then moved forward, hopping to it. “What can I do for you? It *has* been a while.”

“First things first: relax. I dropped by for a visit because it finally hit me that we both know Mattias and Zinora Ree. Quim-Na Sulif and Tramm Nurado as well.”

Dilani had stopped in her tracks before Syl even finished speaking. “I...I—”

“Oh, hush.” Syl waved it off. “Call it one of those ‘what a small galaxy this is!’ moments. Since my hunch seems to have been correct, let’s have a one-on-one talk.”

She turned to walk towards the elevator banks. “I know...for old time’s sake, let’s head to the roof of the building where I rehabilitated all those months—”

“Well...that building is two buildings over. If you want, this building also has a—”

Changing direction, the visitor strode back and got in her face. “You really don’t have a clue how this is going to work, do you?”

“I’m sorry, I...”

“Shut up and come with me.”

Chapter Three

Green and red swam with the orange at the sky's edge.

Syl had seen many different stars setting at the end of a day and, despite the development ruining the planet, the view from Coruscant could still hold its own.

Two green Brakebugs in the distance. A patrol route she had flown before.

"Remember that time Kel Kitaros and I were conversing, probably on this very spot, and you walked up? You were...what...working me?"

The rooftop sanctuary and its manicured garden were theirs. Turning from the railing, the well-traveled protector cut the listener's stammers off with a soft touch. "I trust in the Force, Dilani. The Force is why all of this is happening. But if bringing up the past makes you uncomfortable, I will change the subject."

The darksider shook her head as the other stepped towards the railing.

"You are the first person I am telling this to, so I hope you're paying attention." Syl turned around to face the still-nervous medical professional. "The Jedi and the Republic can have each other. I'm done. The Republic is expanding too quickly for its own good and the Jedi are too weak to do anything about it but...who cares? Innocents suffer while they wallow."

The blight of construction blocked the view in one direction, crane-ships hovering in the sky. A section of cityscape that formed an obstacle course for any low-flying airship pilot.

"The institution of slavery thrives in sections of the independent regions and the Outer Rim, also in the wild space beyond." The mid-level Knight let a laugh out as memories of the only life she knew flooded her brain. "I want to use the dark side of the Force to destroy this institution. Children go to sleep in bondage. Magick and alchemy can free them."

Syl reached out to take Dilani's hands. "For a while now, I have been feeling this urge. The urge to beat a slavemaster to death with his own whip."

She quit looking in the other's teary eyes to take in the sunset again. "The Scholars and I were meant to meet. A regiment-sized fighting unit of Jedi could free those who are in bondage, easily. But the Jedi are not up for the task. The dark side is all I have."

"The dark side is ideal for what you just laid out, Sylmonica Valkanna." Dilani's urgency fought through her shaky voice. "Everything you just said...that's what I thought the dark side of the Force was when I first—lately, I...I don't...it's so..."

The blue cosmetics around her eyes began to smear as the tears welled.

"I understand." Syl took her hands again.

"The Sith will change the Galaxy, this is inevitable and it is what drew me in. The power of the ancients, our history, my expanding abilities...as exhilarating as it is, lately, I wonder if I was born a millennium too late and it's rotted away." Sniffling, the dark side's rising star looked out at the busy city. "But what you just said, though, the dark side is ideal."

"Liberating thousands and thousands of slaves so they can go on to lead happy, productive lives and spawn generations of goodhearted people would change the Galaxy."

"Yes...yes it would."

Moments later, the Jedi's little smile left her face. She jumped, having to hold a collapsing and distraught one, overcome. Dilani's sobs mushroomed into screams in no time. Syl held the trembling Scholar as tight as she could, subduing the shakes with muscles still tingling from a good workout. While remaining solid for a person in distress, she looked out at a

darkening sky and a lighter flow of later-evening air traffic, thinking about what lay ahead. Her firm grip allowed the overwhelmed one to let go.

When the whimpers started to level out, Syl said, “Shhhh...you’ve had an event-filled past few months, Scholar. So have I.”

A huge laugh interrupted a dying sob. As her breathing eased, the sniffling one pulled away. “Please say that the reason you are telling me first is you want me to join. To say what you just said and then shut me out would be cruel. And I know enough about the dark side to understand it would do something that cruel. Just to do it, no reason needed.”

She wiped away her smeared eyes before going further. “Please tell me you aren’t just being cruel. I don’t know if I know the difference anymore, please tell me.”

“Dilani, there is a reason I spoke to you first and that reason is pure.”

The Academician joined Syl at the edge, peering out. “The Sith are responsible for some of the Galaxy’s greatest achievements. And in ancient times, the Jedi and Sith were one. The Jedi created the break.”

Dilani grabbed Syl’s arm, her makeup smudged, stare intense. “Because they feared us.”

“Shhhh...” Syl imitated glancing around, eye wide. “They could be listening.”

The burst of giggles escaped from Dilani’s chest.

“Tears...and laughter pouring from your mouth. You are dark.”

“We need you, Syl.” Two puffy eyes pleaded.

“Between us, Mattias and Zinora aren’t going to like my ideas.”

“Who cares?”

“With that said, I do not discount the couple’s knowledge. In fact, I want to hide a few Sith holocrons deep inside the archives to be discovered by future Jedi and the Rees can pick whatever volumes they want.”

The Scholar stared, head cocked.

Syl winked. “Plant seeds for those who will join us in later centuries. Working in the archives, I see all levels. Archivists like me, too.”

She turned away from her enraptured listener. “The span of time dwarfs our limited existence in this tiny Galaxy. We must be conscious of those who will be born after we die.”

Syl and Dilani watched the sun set and continued their talk. Inside the star executive’s new fur-lined handbag, the green light on her round communication device blinked. After she didn’t return Mattias’ message, Zinora left one as well.

Wide-open hallways, so white they appeared to be as sterile as the patients’ recovery rooms and examination spaces where students learned the anatomies of hundreds of different species.

Students like he once was.

A career Medic who had served in all types of weather, from jungle worlds to frozen ones, it took Ryle Zambreeth a few months to adjust to the pristine workspaces and climate-controlled environment of this new assignment at the Academicus main campus on Coruscant. Though his promotion into management did have perks, like sleeping indoors and regular meals.

A few minutes early for his meetup with an old friend, the public servant strolled through the new wing on the Academicus campus downstairs from his office. The husky forty-three-year-old attended meeting after meeting today and had barely set foot in his workspace.

Now, workday over, an afternoon walk on a sunny day with a compadre who had been in the mud and sleet with him seemed like an ideal escape. She had cancelled the last three times they scheduled plans so he was excited when she confirmed earlier that she could make it.

He turned the corner in the new wing. There stood a recent installment: a realistic statue of two humanoids. The details of each one's species, like the trandoshan's scales, came through in the piece. Both made of dull-gray cystastone, the male Jedi and a female Medic stood side-by-side, almost at attention, the muscular man a twi'lek and the athletic woman a trandoshan.

Knight & Medic. A popular kids' adventure, Ryle's favorite tale when he was a boy. The story reminded him of the artwork and the Besalisk spent a moment gazing up at the depiction of two public servants bound by one calling, his bottom hands resting on his hips. While taking it in, he stretched side-to-side and shook his top arms. An old back injury—sustained on a mission with the person he was about to meet with, no less—made itself known from time to time.

At the opposite end of the passageway, he spotted Sylmonica Valkanna, but she didn't see him. Like him, she was dressed in a more ceremonial uniform.

Blue-clad medical personnel acknowledged their brown-robed Republic comrade with smiles. She didn't nod back. Striding through the airy spaces, she sighted her old colleague. The stare stayed on her face. Ryle figured she was busy again with work, a good thing.

"Hey you!" He tried to swoop her up in a big bearhug, as he had done many times before.

Sidestepping his attempt and staying wordless, the Jedi straightened out the creases from her formal robes with quick strokes.

Ryle backed one step, then two, away, his narrow eyes wide. "Syl...I'm...I'm sorry."

"Don't do that. Just a nice, simple hug...is that too much to ask?"

While awkward, Ryle bent down for an embrace. He received a feeble gesture in return.

Stepping back, he straightened his own blue uniform around his growing belly. "Well, it's good to see you...something we don't do enough of."

He led his guest by the hand down yet another endless and pristine hallway. "I can't get any time to myself these days. They keep adding to my schedule."

"Yeah...you're all important now." She rolled her right eye. "Ryle Important."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He stopped and looked down at the Jedi, his two lower arms parked on his hips again. "Are you okay?"

"What?" Syl turned to keep walking, even though Ryle worked here and knew where they were headed. "Listen: I'm just beat. Let's not make this tough."

"Tough? Now, old friend, I don't—"

"I don't know what is going on, either, Ryle." An indignant laugh. A pace that did not slow. "You and I serve a Republic run by the worst beings imaginable and the cartels seem to be getting worse. Whatever we're trying to hold together...corruption, trafficking, evil—"

"Evil? Syl...where is this go—"

His onetime partner spun back, marched straight to him and put her hand up, palm flat. Ryle's wattle, the fold of skin below his lip that protruded over his collar, trembled. "Ever since I got hurt, the pointlessness of our role in the Galaxy has become so obvious. We help keep people in bondage, you realize that? By not doing—"

"Syl, where is this—"

"What are we doing here?" Her volume staying loud, she broke into a huge grin. "You know...this is a waste of time. Bye, Ryle."

"Syl..."

She turned to walk the opposite direction taking the middle of the wide hall.

Twenty or so seconds after his buddy disappeared around the corner, the shock wore off. When Ryle peered down the passageway she just headed down, Syl was gone.

Once again, Quim-Na Sulif held her forearm up to gawk at her new purchase. The spattering of jewels covering the thick bracelet reflected fading bits of the setting sun's light. She waved it up and down before fluttering it back and forth. "So deceptively light...almost defies the laws of physics. Maybe a Sith jeweler handcrafted it and infused the stones with the essence of the dark side, some magick, from Famne or Malak maybe, to give it weightlessness."

"Stop..." Her companion, Dilani Vestagon, laughed her off and continued to take in the public artwork. "Mattias would scream at you for sounding so glib about the ancients."

"I don't see him here, do you?"

Both women were dressed for the exclusive gallery opening. Quim-Na suggested they stop the transport by her favorite outdoor piece since the neighborhood was a short walk away. While the fellow believer ogled her latest purchase, Dilani had been gazing up at the statue and remembering months ago when this still felt so new. Now, Syl is complicating it all...yet simplifying everything at the same time.

"So many jewels...it seems like it should weigh five times what it weighs. If you're nice, I'll let you wear it some evening."

Shaking her head, Dilani nudged a person ecstatic and entranced.

"Easy money." The shiny piece sparkled as Quim-Na caressed her cheek with it. "All I did was introduce a slave broker friend in the Outer Rim to Tramm. My cut was two percent. The boy-man Besson Overtanos was impressed with the broker's track record of securing inventory and they struck a deal."

"Securing inventory...hmmm..." Dilani liked the simplicity of the sculpture. Sith artisans do not waste brushstrokes, or words, or bits of metal.

"Slavery is an awkward subject here in the Republic, but a thriving industry in many systems. Beings with the spirit of the Enforcer herself, seizing opportunity."

"Nefari hated slavery. She killed the entire Nara Clan after they tried to enslave the—"

"Must you overthink everything?" After shushing her junior, Quim-Na lit her pipe while admiring the art. "I bet she was stunning. I can see her walking to that balcony, looking out into a courtyard of followers, all eyes on her. The dark side sure did burn hot back then."

Exhaling smoke, she made eye contact with the younger one before continuing. "And we're heating up now. I hope all of your bad feelings have evaporated."

"My negativity is gone. I will assume yours is as well?"

Quim-Na scoffed and waved her pipe in the air. "Girl, I never possessed negative energy towards you. I learned long ago how to—you know...let's change the subject."

"Let's."

"Stick with me, Scholar Vestagon and you will understand the darkness. Sylmonica Valkanna is going to be one of us, I can feel it. Big changes are coming."

Stifling a laugh, Dilani stepped away to keep the upturned corner of her mouth hidden. Syl's words played in her head. *Tears...and laughter pouring from your mouth. You are dark.*

"The Rees are the past, relics. The King and Queen, the Supreme Organizers of Clan Valkorion—so many geezers are." Quim-Na stared at Nefari again. "Fortunately, many like you

and I...waiting in the wings, all across the Galaxy...we are the future. When Sylmonica is ready, she will become one of our most important collaborators.”

She began to stroke Dilani’s arm like she once did when visiting at the orphanage. “She speaks highly of you. I can maybe put in a good word...maybe...”

“If you could, Quim-Na, I would appreciate it so, so much.” Biting her lip, Dilani turned away to feign interest in an orange piece of paper blowing across the promenade’s dirty tiles. “So much.”

Chapter Four

Lanta Dasmal lifted an orange-colored claw from the walker to wave at her assistant. A few members of the delegation greeted the approaching Jedi Knight as well. The tallest of the Nimbanel stood chest-high to the petite Jedi Master.

“Hello again, everyone.” Syl, dressed formally in brown robes with credential ribbons, strolled across the calm landing bay carrying her cloth travel bag. At off-hours, her voice carried in the space underneath the port umbrella’s cavernous hangar.

One of the larger craft in the rows of airships and shuttles, the high-bow cutter that would fly them to Ord Mantell, stood on three landing struts. Soon, the two Jedi advisers and eight dignitaries would board using the curved ramp extending beneath the three sublight engines at the stern. Four stories up, the cockpit resembled a watchtower, the way it stood so upright and above the third deck. Mechanics gave the mid-sized diplomatic vessel a last-minute check.

Joining the group, Syl bent down to shake the hand of the oldest Nimbanel, the only member of the group with gray whiskers, though the other men also wore the species’ traditional, longer beard-style. “Councilor Zmana, I got your message last night...shouldn’t be a problem.”

Clutching her hand, the portly man of influence let out a series of excited screeches.

When he finished his request, she replied that his need sounded fine and walked a few steps to her supervisor, lowering her voice. “Master, with last week’s rioting and the strikes, today’s security briefings stated that...”

Also quiet, Master Dasmal gave a slight, injured nod in return, motioning to shuffle a few more steps from the group. “I was just about to suggest you give our transport a once-over. But...don’t make it overt.”

“Consider it done. I’ll see you in our quarters.” Syl ascended the ramp.

The hum of the hyperdrive could lull a being to sleep.

The Jedi at the round table in the cramped aft quarters had just finished compiling a to-do list for the preliminary talks. Both of them enjoyed a bitter leaf-and-berry concoction that offered a slight buzz. The elder’s bags sat by the narrow hatch.

“Your attitude has improved greatly.” Due to injuries, Master Lanta Dasmal sat forward in her chair. Bulbous eyes beaming, she reached across to squeeze her assistant’s hand.

“Thank you. I’ve been thinking about what I want to do, Master. A lot.” Still feeling her workout from the day before, Knight Sylmonica Valkanna got up to stretch her back.

The compartment’s single window to the outside world, a square porthole, sat at eye level. Interweaving blue and white hyperspace trails streamed alongside the spaceship, encasing its curves and few straight lines.

“I want to put my gift with the Force to use for good. True good.” While looking out, she scratched the white scar by the silver eye device. Pulsating streams enclosed the hull in an envelope, cutting it off from the galaxy.

“Excellent to hear.”

“I want to free the innocents who are enslaved.” Over the years, Syl liked to read by this light as her transportation traveled from one system to another. “Women, children, young men, old men, old women...weird people...boring people...any person in bondage.”

"Noble aims. Free as many of the weird folks as you can. The Galaxy needs them right now." The elder let out a kind laugh. "A youthful idealism, even after a few decades of service...hang on to that with everything you have."

"Oh, I plan to. Also, I have taken your advice to heart. I use downtime to read, work out, refine my skills in the Jedi Arts." Hyperspace rivers lit her frame as she looked outside.

"I know you have. It's made me proud to see."

"Thank you for that." The Knight could see the Master's reflection, an opaque vision in the window, studying the tablet screen.

The two stayed quiet. Shining, flowing currents thundered by. Syl kept a lookout for migrating schools of purrgil. She had encountered the gargantuan creatures with the gigantic, kind eyes before in her travels. They used their long tentacles to propel through the hyperspace lanes. No signs of space life today.

Staring back at the reflection, she observed Dasmarr reviewing documents that she has not read. A memory brought out a laugh. "Not long ago, I attended a social function, connected to the Academius. A few civilians had gotten their hands on a book about darksiders. This older couple talked and talked about ancient Sith who could kill just by thinking about it."

"Oh, dear..." Her eyes did not leave her tablet. "I've met those types. Please tell me that you were polite, Knight Valkanna."

"Yeah...these two couldn't shut up about how an Exar Kun or a Darth somebody-or-other could break every bone in a being's body with a wave of their hand." She snickered.

"Ah, yes. A wave of the hand." Chuckling, Dasmarr lifted her claw. "Problem solved."

"If only." The two made eye contact through the window. "Some Force-users sure knew how to bend the Force to their will."

"Knight...the Force is an all-encompassing energy. And any being with a sense of good knows that 'bending' the Force, as you say, can only be done by harnessing evil."

"Evil...what if evil can be put to work freeing slaves?"

"That's an age-old thought experiment. Many Jedi have pondered redirecting the worst for good." Dasmarr returned to her notes. Until she had to put the tablet aside. "I love your concern about the slavery issue, really. But you serve the Republic. You veer from practicality when you need to barrel down."

"I understand what you are saying, Master."

Dasmarr resumed reviewing some Nimbanel documents.

When she was ready, Syl walked over to refill her cup.

After a drink of tea, she waved her free hand in the air. "In ancient times, powerful Force-users believed that those who desired to join their ranks needed to prove themselves."

The Master's cup fell to the floor after her spasming claw swatted it. The older one's choking and gagging strangled any attempt at screaming in pain.

"To murder a kindhearted being in cold blood was a way to show one's commitment." Sounds of bones fracturing weren't unfamiliar. But this time, the soft cracks seemed like the old woman's tired-out body thanked Syl. "This was a pledge to the dark side of the Force."

Convulsions took over. A noncomprehending mind had lost the ability to follow along, an elder could not fathom a junior's words. "Your kindheartedness is notable, Master Dasmarr. But you might be one of the most pointless wielders to ever exist."

An already-frail body, now shattered, began its slump to the left, off of the chair before rolling onto a carpeted deck now stained with tea and growing pools of fresh, green blood. Muscle spasms triggered by overloaded nerve endings started to subside.

The disgraced Knight held the fading Master's dual-sided lightsaber in her hands, fingers exploring the thin instrument's smoothness, different than her rougher finish.

Lanta Dasmarr's hand shot up to squeeze her murderer's wrist. "You can't be...saved..."

With each word, more blood dribbled out of the veteran public servant's mouth. The Force helped her hold the splintered jaw together so dying words could be verbalized.

Sighing, Syl threw the limp limb away and stood back, no desire to stare at the past. Time to concentrate on the future. Pull electrons from the atoms in the air all around her. She had studied Darth Paryah's recollections about the first time he attempted to build a protective field, how he saw an invisible electron wall visualize, a light red. This was when he knew he had the Force under his control, a foreign feeling for a being who had been Jedi-trained.

"Light-siders will never know true power. Every electron spins at the speed of light, only each one tumbling in its own way and on its own axis. To use the Force to synchronize the spin of tens of trillions of these sub-particles, position each one in their own place and put all of them on the same path, marching to the same beat so energy now behaves like matter—to fathom the dark side's precision, how minutely it can zero in when pressed to do so—then the dark-sider will see how Sith have been able to control the futures of thousands, millions. And how the Sith will control the Galaxy."

Darth Sabotaa's crackpot of a boyfriend, you're deep. And intense. The new Sith laughed to herself as she folded her legs upwards into her mid-section. Hovering, she felt the familiar Force and visualized her focus: an atom in her spinal cord, a bit below the rib cage. From this nucleus, the goal was to command electrons in the air to leave their orbits above nuclei and join other electrons orbiting her nucleus, an atom she chose. Her nucleus, a black hole she specified and, by doing so, made tangible. When enough orbit this atom because they have no other choice due to the Force, the Force will align them and the sphere will be substantial and buffered, trapping in a good amount of breathable air. Trillions of bits of energy in total control.

Negatively-charged particles rumbled in their flight paths, the fledgling's nucleus their tractor beam. Her ears heard the buzz. The Force, in her hands. Only now, the Force needed to obey. It would take time for the field to build. A few minutes at least, according to Paryah.

In the engine room below, the mound of black grenade mass tucked inside her travel bag began to breathe. While pretending to inspect the ship like Master Dasmarr ordered, Syl told the technicians she needed to peer behind the housing.

Not too long ago, Tramm Nurado's henchmen flew to a planet where fworta trees grew, just because Syl inferred that she would enjoy learning more about black grenades after discovering them in a holocron. When he returned, Tresskuss presented the find as if he needed approval.

Out in the wilderness preserve, she surprised herself. For her first attempt at bleeding the fungus so a Force-wielder could set it off, a person in search of answers accepted that the initial try would be a learning experience. Instead, that small amount looked like a firework after she repeated *fury is a blasting cap* in an ancient Sith tongue.

By Syl's estimation, the mass of bled fungus now sitting against the hyperdrive housing outweighed the first batch of fungus by a factor of a hundred, at least. Natural and undetectable.

The buzzing's hum kept growing, a higher pitch than the ship's pulsing hyperdrive.

On her command, the dark side lined up every spin. Trillions of electrons now behaved as one. The sphere around Syl became visible. A light pink bathed the room, darkening to a red.

The dull drumming caused by mass alignment obscured the hiss of the sliding door.

"I'm sorry to intrude, Master Dasmal and Knight Valkanna, but our naviga..." The rotund older man's voice trailed off at the sight of green blood on the walls, a furry corpse sprawled on the metal deck, and a glow around a living human who floated by the table.

Syl liked the Ship's Chief. The red-cheeked human always looked tired due to a love of fermented cona-seed. But she didn't like him enough to care. He reached up to his closing respiratory pathway, falling in a huff and flopping next to Master Dasmal's broken remains.

Soon, the thickening shroud would enclose Syl's body and a set amount of breathable air. A manifestation became more rugged by the second. While it actualized, she ordered the Force to speed up ending the Chief's life. His gurgles and gasps grew louder.

Interference from electrons resisting the dark side's heavy-handed grip fizzled out. The higher-pitched jolts of their struggle grew quieter as the field became seen, more in sync. Though the packets of energy were not visible, the Force revealed streams of them that fed into the circle.

Wielding the omnipresent energy field in this way—pushing the atoms, making them surrender their negative charges. The one being reborn felt glee, the type that one experiences upon figuring out they were more powerful than they believed. Enclosed inside a perfect circle, a being breathed easier than she had in a long time. Even snuggling in her bed, in comparison, seemed stressful. Her protective shield, now audible. The Force revealed a bubble which would keep her alive. Why? Because the Force had no choice.

The Force has no choice. Syl's consciousness ruminated on this.

The view of the narrow cabin clouded. A barrier now existed, one that could be seen and heard. The air inside this bubble would not last forever.

Inside her tunic, Tramm's round tracking device sat, ready.

A worn travel bag and the black grenade it contained remained hidden on the far side of the hyperdrive's housing, one level below and aft. Engine room technicians had no idea it was there. She sensed four heartbeats. Four pumping, oblivious hearts.

A walk by a polluted river with a long-dead lord. *"My sister Nefari dreams. My crackpot of a boyfriend dreams. I dream. Many do. We meander in the timelessness of the afterlife wishing that some kindhearted, passionate being would take over this wondrous planet, every other planet and moon in the Galaxy...liberate all that which is natural and primal and real."*

Syl's fury was her blasting cap. She repeated an old chant that said so. In the middle of her second reciting, the ancient weapon in the engine room detonated.

The electron field's hum got lost in the flurry. Her air-filled cocoon launched forward at the piercing of light, an artillery shell into the raging streams of a hyperspace river as a ship continued its disintegration. Fuel tanks and engine room computers and passageways came apart. Their pieces slammed into the bubble.

And nothing else happened. Tranquil nothingness. Even with the static overload and collisions and speed and fury, a stillness ruled the moment. Visual chaos. Auditory peace.

The thin barrier that kept Syl alive rippled like waves on an ocean, almost elastic, but also a coat of armor due to the dark side of the Force. Deflecting debris, the wall's color alternated between a pink and sharp crimson. Rivers of blueness and whiteness in hyperspace flowed and blurred with the field's redness.

One of those rare moments of recreation from a Jedi childhood: going to the traveling extravaganza with fellow Padawans, the carnival ride where everyone strapped into little aircars and crashed into other little aircars. Bumping into the equally-giddy Thia and Ro. Flying off in new directions. Finishing one course and starting another.

Hot shrapnel bounced off the electron sphere. Her ears picked up nothing but stillness.

A recollection of the past triggered an insight about the future: the slave trade has wealth and numbers on its side, networks of well-paid mercenaries and corrupt governments who take bribes to look the other way or quietly enable it all. To destroy these levels of antipathy and sociopathy, she needs to deceive them. Lie to them. Terrorize them. Engage in asymmetric warfare. Become ruthless. And cold.

Devious.

The sensation of velocity hit—dropping out of hyperspace, back into real space. Hollow vibrations from outside jostled the electron field. True weightlessness. Time to ponder gravity.

The bubble careened. The field cushioned. The one inside felt nothing. No. It felt like accelerating from zero to light speed. But the exact opposite was happening.

A ringing in her ears let her know that the electrons were still committed to keeping her alive. As if the dark side of the Force would have it any other way.

Faraway galaxies littered the blackness. Dust and gas orbited a developing star. The glowing arc of this galaxy's next-closest spiral. She had flown there many times. She will fly there again.

She activated the tracking device. Immediately, it responded with a series of beeps. Something too real and sudden, but welcomed. The amount of air inside this bubble was finite.

High-pitched chirps. Tramm's flagship had connected to her signaling beacon. With rescuers on their way, their new leader had nothing else to do but wait inside an electric womb. As she meditated, she observed. A galaxy that would never go away was all around.

Syl noted how easy it was to write the apologetic, emotional-sounding letter to her old friend Ryle Zambreeth, explaining her behavior the last time they met up.

Her outburst surprised even her. She needed to cover for the unexpected eruption of emotion. Apologizing seemed logical. A handwritten letter, even more logical.

Putting the words down didn't take long. The purpose of the correspondence was not to communicate any real feelings to a man she had known since they were both young and nightmare-free. No. It just had to exist. Creating it was a tactical maneuver and nothing more.

Jedi Knight Sylmonica Valkanna needed to die.

XI: Death

Chapter One

Hearing the man clear his throat prompted ArraKel Kitaros to peer up from under her brown hood. It was him. Her ears didn't fail her, as ears have been sometimes known to do.

An overcome Chief Medic Ryle Zambreeth, dressed in high-collared dress blues tailored in front for his species' wattle, slow-walked across the sparsely-lit stage. The teary-eyed teen knew the affable instructor from a few lifesaving seminars and she was aware that Tiruss Dunn had deployed with the Academius grad. But until now, she had never known that he and Sylmonica Valkanna served together.

Though it made sense, the more Kel thought about it. Just like the devastated expression on the veteran first responder's face made sense.

"I received an apology letter from Syl not long before her final spaceflight." Towering over the podium, Ryle Zambreeth had to draw in a few breaths as he opened the tri-fold of paper with his lower set of arms. "I'd like to read part of it."

About fifty people who knew the recently-deceased Jedi Knight wanted to pay their respects and filled the front of the intimate meditation chambers not far from the Jedi Complex.

"I...I have to say that it's...so like her, taking the time to write me about something that I understand, in hindsight." On the stage, Syl's longtime friend began to peer at her last words to him. "Her spirits were low."

Kel wiped away fresh tears with a cloth, grateful for the formal covering that obscured her expression. Zennon Tannerum, also with his hood up, sobbed next to her. The two of them spent the morning cleaning their robes and giving their heads a fresh shave.

She leaned on him. Disengaging from her own sorrow, she thought of Zennon's big strides in making sense of Beddu and Mimms' deaths. Friends shared her excitement at witnessing his recent progress. In this final leg of their Learner journey, he was one of them again. They all carried Beddu and Mimms with them, easing the load for Zennon.

Kel shuddered at the thought of him backtracking.

Ryle squinted his watery eyes. "'Hey there, Ryle. I guess I blew up, huh? I'm so sorry. There you were, thinking we were going to spend an evening together and I ruin it. Sadly, I took out my frustration because of our decades of friendship.'"

The half-circle of gathered listeners allowed the speaker time to compose himself. "'I should not have done that. It wasn't right. The weird part is that after I made a fool of myself, my role in this new mission got expanded and my mind is clearer. All I know how to do is be a Jedi and I guess I freaked out because I saw it slipping away. Does that make sense?'"

Going operational was all the Padawan thought about. She leaned to her right again. Zennon leaned to his left so their shoulders touched.

"'It was like when I first got injured, losing connection to the Force. That sense of loss is terrifying. I can look back and see how messed up I was.'"

Ryle's voice lost its last bit of steadiness. "'Now that I'm going active, I want to make it up to you when I get back. I'll reach out. May the Force be with you, Syl.'"

The barrel-chested man pulled out a green cloth from his dress blues and wiped his eyes. "Her frustration wasn't a big deal. Emotions are natural. The Force teaches us to see the power of our feelings. Sometimes, our obligations push us to keep those bottled up."

Kel nodded at this insight. Her sad glare stayed on the floor, eyes huge.

“If...if I had known that our last time together would have been so abrasive...” A fresh volley of tears got the best of Ryle Zambreeth.

A moment from months ago came to her mind. Though still bandaged, the in-patient Syl had surprised Kel by greeting her in the Academius building’s lobby instead of being bedridden like previous visits. The two went up to the rooftop gardens and talked, then were joined by fellow Phase One survivor Dilani Vestagon.

Before the Medic said hello, Syl shared an insight while looking out at Coruscant City. “*Jedi Knights are just lifeguards standing by the shore of the ocean, Kel. Lifeguards connected to whatever makes the waves do what they do. That’s all we are.*”

Zennon, also breaking down, held his friend tight.

The final check-in droned on. And *finally*, a young yeoman brought the starving Tiruss Dunn his steaming bowl of spicy shredded grains. He waited for his breakfast to cool while studying the array of wall monitors. In the buzzing command center of the *Bountiful Horizon*, constantly-changing graphics and video feeds kept the compartment full of preoccupied mining professionals informed. The senior Jedi Knight used a headset to listen in on Phase Five’s current demolition effort which would open up the quaternary dig.

The packed room radiated stress and pressure as surface teams updated anxious co-workers in orbit. The center screen, high on the wall, displayed a one-color schematic of what had already been named Prosperity Canyon, though it did not physically exist yet. Deep beneath the arrow pointing to this future hole, a circular green symbol representing the explosive blinked.

From her standing console by the sliding doors, Flight Manager Web Hyland pulled the blue headset aside and rolled her eyes. Tiruss winked back. While some crewmembers protested Web’s recent promotion because she was Yntokian, her solid reputation won her the job.

Over the airwaves, a demolitions expert and geologist argued. Through his earphones, Tiruss heard an annoyed Jedi Master Eeth Maln interrupt. “*I need to say, your quibbles seem like details that could have been worked out earlier.*”

The *Stormchaser* sat towards the rear of the convoy’s orbital curve. The *Horizon* led at the front.

Tiruss nodded in agreement with his frustrated superior while digging into his food. The stern, but empathetic Master Maln dealt with a variety of stresses lately, it seemed. Along with supervising Scatera and another sector, he had been ordered to send peacekeeper troops and their Jedi commanders to a staging area near the Yntok system where a joint task force waited.

After most of his meal was gone, Tiruss hit the comms button on the console. “Surface Four-Six: this is Dunn. Pennu: how are you and Coll doing down there?”

Presently, Jedi Knights Pennu Zannel and Coll Clawson were clad in heavy pressure suits aboard a lander on the surface.

“*We got great seats for the fireworks, Dunn. Coll keeps nodding off, but we’re standing by.*” The speaker system mechanized Pennu’s high-pitched voice. The signal stayed clear—unlike last week during a dig on the other side of the canyon. Contact got lost for over an hour.

Coll’s baritone voice came through tinny as well. “*She’s incorrigible, Dunn.*”

A few days ago, the three Knights were trading stories about fellow Knight Sylmonica Valkanna in this hangar. Some years younger than Syl, both had served with her. Web and Grimesy got teary-eyed after joining the impromptu memorial service.

Tiruss laughed. "Well, they detonate soon. You and the Medics sit tight."

"We're pretty far away. Other side of the canyon near the second tibana gas dig."

Unnecessary chatter ceased as the moment neared. All non-pertinent personnel turned off their mouthpieces so scientists and conglomerate representatives could finalize thoughts. A yeoman came by and offered to take Tiruss' empty bowl.

After all approvals were given, the Ops Chief, a gruff veteran of the mining industry, spoke into his microphone. *"Spark has dropped..."*

Detonation, moments away. Every technician and supervisor in the space cramped with consoles remained glued to their respective stations. Web fiddled with the beads on her bracelet.

"Captain...emergency thrusters...high orbit...now. Signal all ships." A wide-eyed Tiruss scrambled as he hit the comms button that connected with the ship's flight deck. While speaking, he also typed a classified code into the comms panel, his fingers flying around the keyboard. A failsafe measure, the 20-character keychain verified his credentials for issuing such a serious command. In his earphones, Tiruss heard Jedi Master Maln yelling to halt the countdown, a futile order since the ignition could not be stopped. The *Stormchaser* orbited directly above the blast site, so far back from the *Horizon* it was almost invisible.

The ship's emergency sirens went off, filling the passageways and corridors. Web, bewildered, glanced over. As Tiruss' panicking gaze locked on to her eyes, the Force also connected him to Pennu Zanel's final thoughts down on the surface below. *"Coll...that geologist was wrong."*

Beneath the planet's surface, a series of ordnance packs triggered. A chain reaction which company geologists stated was impossible began to demonstrate that it was more than possible.

Tiruss yelled to the whole Command room. "Grab onto something, everybody."

Thrusters thundered to life. Their roar cut through the sirens' blare.

Deep underground, layers of geological formations cracked. Eons of careful organization, evident by the different-colored stripes, evaporated and pulverized in an outwardly-expanding wave of gray. Rockforms of every size lost shape falling inward, the weight pressing down on the same planetary centerpoint. Then the next wave of crumbling land mass smashed into it all.

Up in orbit, the *Horizon* leaped forward. Folks who weren't prepared lost their footing. Items that weren't secured flew around. Though the crew had trained for similar operations, the violent acceleration rocked everyone.

On Scatera, the subterranean furnaces' immense hearths fragmented, which only fired up swirls of magma. The white-hot dam broke and the vortex thundered to the surface as billions of tons of material from the crust fell inwards towards the planet's epicenter.

Molten rock fighting upwards from below collided with disintegrating rock from above. For a span of time, the two sides blocked passage. With no other way to relieve the surge, the destructive power had no choice but to exponentialize. The obstruction did everything it could to hold. And it held. Long enough to skyrocket the seismic pressure.

When this section of the dead planet couldn't restrain itself any more, the resulting explosions unfolded upward fueled by more energy than the thousands of thermonuclear bombs that destroyed Sith cities on Exegol and Korriban in the final days of the old wars. The invisible, matter-altering blast wave vaporized the crust and shot out into space, right at the ships in orbit.

“The prince won’t be able to take his big, brown eyes off you, Scholar Vestagon.” Quim-Na Sulif fixed her sparkly earrings in the wall of mirrors lining the passageway to the airlock and ramp. “Those thin cuts of cloth hug your figure.”

The Scholars had just finished dressing in the master suite as their pilots brought the silver-colored luxury vessel out of hyperspace near Eriadu, a system in the Outer Rim. Now the dolled-up duo prepared to disembark as their shapely dart pierced the light cover of clouds.

The square window in the center of the airlock offered a look outside. Dilani Vestagon had never traveled to Eriadu. Dubbed the planet’s “Mountain Region,” none of the roundish hills below reached higher than half a kilometer above the green plains.

Bending a bit to take in the scenery through the tiny portal, Quim-Na shook her head. “Oh, the rivalry that once was. The Kynns’ gilda-root plantations competed with Mattias’ ancestors’ gilda-root plantations to supply the Galaxy with a low-cost smoking luxury. And both sides weren’t afraid to bribe, intimidate, hurt, even kill.”

Prince Hegganapt of the Kynn Dynasty lived in the family’s 2000-year-old palace made from rust-colored rock, a product of local quarries also under monarchical control. The high-walled fortress owned the top of a sharp-sided plateau, offering a complete view. It was the perfect estate for plantation owners needing to keep an eye on their endless crop fields while simultaneously insulating themselves from the slave communities upon whom they were dependent. Today, the dynasty’s properties showed organized greenery in some places, those square plots where cultivation still took place. Most appeared unkempt.

Gazing at it all through the window, Dilani giggled. “Mattias is still bitter that his homeworld outlawed slavery...like...two hundred years before he was born.”

Both steadied themselves in their heels as the ship came to a quick stop, a hover.

A contingent of eight tough-looking guards, each carrying a ceremonial spear with a point-free tip, stood at attention behind the stocky humanoid on the stone landing pad.

With the delicate-looking ship’s hydraulics compressing, Quim-Na sauntered down the lowering ramp into a waiting embrace. “My prince, you look like you’re on vacation.”

“Always, dear. Always.” The scratchy voice came from a heavy smoking habit. While casually dressed, the prince liked all clothing tailored to accentuate his physique. Originally from a jungle planet where tree-dwelling ancestors fended off prey, his species developed hulking upper bodies. His beefy arms let her go. He stepped back to give her flattering outfit an appreciative nod. “Stunning. And how are Mattias and Zinora?”

“Prince Hegg, let’s talk about the future tonight, or...youth rather than age.”

Dilani had just stepped out of the hatch to a breeze that tickled her bare shoulders. Quim-Na’s earlier words came to mind as the towering royal ogled her.

“So...this is the rising star.” Meaty fingers played with reddish chest hair protruding from his open shirt as his hard stare looked the new acquaintance up and down. “Nice to meet, Dilani. Mother and father said you impressed them at the Rees’ soiree. Prince Hegganapt...Hegg.”

“It is *my* honor, naturally, *Prince* Hegg.” The Academius grad couldn’t help noting that abuse of muscle enhancers, combined with partying, must wreak havoc on his two hearts. Anabolic usage exaggerated the ‘v’ shape of his frame, stretching his olive-green skin.

Dilani accepted a kiss before presenting the crystal bottle. “For after dinner.”

“Mmmm...I enjoyed way too much of this during a hunting weekend once. Such an awful feeling, shooting a fellow lodge guest in the face.” The prince sighed as he took the gift in his huge hands. “I have drink and synthetics for us as well.”

“Synthetics...Mmmm...” Quim-Na pinched his club of a forearm.

The guards stayed behind while their boss led the new arrivals across a meshed-steel bridge from the landing pad to the palace's tall entrance, also a rusty stone from the geology of the hilly landscape. In places, webs of blue vines had poked through the cracks in the walls.

The host marched his ladyfriends through the palace's enormous but sparse first floor without offering to show them around. "We'll be dining upstairs. Private room."

They went up two flights and down another bare wing before he began to relax his pace. "So...how is Coruscant's night life?"

"Debaucherous."

"Wonderful to hear."

The three neared the end of a winding passageway decorated with dust-covered hunting trophies. Quim-Na had to quit fondling Hegg's physique as she took a whiff, eyes shutting in ecstasy. "If that smell is our dinner..."

"Two of my most culinarily-gifted slaves have been cooking all day." The prince barked a laugh. "Earlier, I joked with them and said, 'If my dates don't think this is the best meal they've ever eaten, I'm going to feed you two to my flock of threekas, is that understood?'"

He winked, a thick finger in the air. His two guests responded with loud and vicious snickers which rivaled his own guffaws. The sounds carried through the tomblike halls.

Chapter Two

Tramm Nurado's pride and joy, the *Bloodred Epiphany*, stayed on station in a region of dead space near a lane.

Its stretching hull and easy curves inspired by Darth Torturok's weaponized star-yacht, the *Epiphany* was twice the size of the *Bloodred Rancor*. Anchoring a small fleet of cruisers wanted in ninety-one systems, its hangar could house a squadron of short-range fighters. Bay doors, situated amidships along the starboard side's outward arc, mirrored the *Rancor* design.

The criminal empire's flagship traveled alone. Only believers today.

If the *Epiphany* forward command bridge was its head of the beast, the wide set of stairs leading up to it were located inside its neck. Tramm was returning to the bridge when the square indicator in his gloved hand blinked. Sylmonica Valkanna did it.

The industrial-freighter-sized battleship stood by along the Hydian Way hyperspace route when their new ally signaled. Expert pilot Tresskuss' guesstimations proved to be close. He and his two co-pilots fired two of the six sublight engines before engaging the drive.

A brief jump, its rumble raged ship-wide.

The Scholar Emeriti began to demand that Syl be brought aboard this instant.

"With all due respect, we are still in hyperspace." Tramm ran interference for his pilots by distracting the impatient couple. He gestured at the flowing blueness through windows that swept back on both sides and above the pilot station in front. "Aren't the currents wonderful?"

As his boss managed Mattias and Zinora, Tresskus and his co-pilots closed with the signal—dropping back into space so trillions of stars could once again be seen through the forward, top, and side windows. A clattering of debris disturbed this patch of space's emptiness.

The tracking device hummed faster.

The *Epiphany* neared a glowing sphere trudging away from the wreckage's sprawl. Tresskuss steered clear of the delicate entity, flying a wide loop out front.

Once the pilots veered far enough in the lead, they cut the main engines. All went quiet. Twenty-four swivel-thrusters, located along the hull's curves for maneuvering in dockspaces and when linking up with illegal cargo haulers in space, engaged to coax the beast of a space-voyager into small directional changes.

Tresskuss, a flying master, made sure not to overcorrect as he nudged the *Epiphany* back and forth, up and down. The yellow eyes that protruded from his sockets raced all around the row of console cameras showing the starboard side. Shoves from thrusters pushed here and there. Assistants obeyed his quick, barking commands. The criminal captain negotiated the closure like the *Epiphany* was one-tenth its size.

"Steady, Tresskuss. Steady...steady..."

"Make sure not to overfly with those giant mitts you have for hands, Tresskuss."

The Rees' loyal henchman Tramm cautioned them to quit playing backseat driver.

An oversized, metallic mass appeared to meander into a fragile orb of light's path. After some well-timed thruster bursts, Tresskuss turned the ship on its axis and activated the starboard hangar doors and electric shield. A bay opened, obstructing Syl's course.

The bubble broke through the protective field's plane at the doorway and floated inside.

As soon as her boots touched down on the hangar's metal deck, the mentally-spent ex-Jedi freed the synchronized electrons from the sphere. The hum died out when the last of the field's thirty trillion or so infinitesimal components sparked and crackled away.

Weak on her feet, she took in a gigantic couple of breaths. The expansive compartment's dark metal interior blended with the two boxy black shuttles parked along the aft side next to a littler gold and silver vehicle. Though light-headed, she took note of the cleanliness. So many outlaw cruisers were not just filthy to the point of obscenity, but structurally unsafe because the owners spent everything on illegal weaponry, jamming devices, and souped-up hyperdrives.

"We're done...and we've only just—" The memory device's screen flashed whiteness before cracking and going blank forever.

While Syl let it fall to the metal deck below, her consciousness grasped how much was learned while making the Force keep her alive in outer space. She looked forward to future learnings. Smelling the faint smoke from the ruined device's punctured battery, the worn-out one marveled at the simplicity of the dark side. Gaining her bearings, she heard chirps carrying through the passageways. Mattias and Zinora Ree.

"I'm tired. Later." Syl raised her index finger at the yammering duo who huffed and puffed and spoke over one another as soon as they spotted the new ally glancing around the landing bay. With them silent, the new arrival turned to the other greeter. "Tramm: your shipbuilders have a forge, I am assuming? Tell them to have it hot by the time we land."

Light winds. A shop quiet. A rare moment: the desert planet's hint of nature could be heard.

Gleenuk and Streenuk Deent, two of the Outer Rim's most talented vehicle customizers, paced in front of their mountaintop hangar as they waited for their honored guest. Though not devout, the Deents were raised in the Order of Malak and put extra work into the project upon hearing that its new owner was a Jedi. Darth Malak was a Jedi.

Their latest creation sat just inside the tall, sliding doors. If the matte-black vessel parked on three thin struts were exiting hyperspace requesting to land, control tower operators would joke with each other that it was way too much vehicle for a civilian and a target for theft.

The brothers' crowning achievement, the *Bloodred Epiphany*, was in orbit above and one of its small orbit-to-surface shuttles disturbed the silence.

The flat-faced ship poked through the clouds, black exterior popping from the whiteness.

"Streenuk, go change out of that dirty smock and wipe your flabby cheeks and snout." As the fellow believers flew closer, the older brother reverted to his nervous habit of micromanaging the skinnier one. "Darksiders always look presentable."

"I am a builder of spaceships, Gleenuk. I look presentable." The demand got dismissed with a snub from a three-fingered hand. "Besides, my smock is dirty because I had to fire up the forge. Why didn't you handle that last-minute request?"

The louder scream of the single sublight engine announced the arrival. The brothers covered their pointy ears and squinted their blue, beady eyes. Four struts extended from a rectangular ship much more boring than the shapely mother ship from which it had just launched. The descent slowed as the hydraulic hisses grew louder.

Gleenuk cleared his throat, readying a speech to invite the visitors into their space.

A short-haired woman in brown robes with a silver ocular ball over her left eye socket walked down the small ramp as it extended, section by section, in front of her. She passed by both brothers as if she didn't see them. The ten-story hangar doors were open. She went inside.

The centuries-old furnace lit her with a dull yellow. Staring at the smolder in the middle of the soot-stained ring of bricks, Syl giggled. "You know...this might not be such a good idea."

A group of ten, including the confused hangar owners, congregated after following to the blacksmithing shop located at the opposite end of the cavernous facility from the sliding doors.

Syl had handed her brown Jedi robes to Zinora before approaching the raised, stone-lined pit. For the last bit of time, she stood silent with her hands on its waist-high brick walls, gazing in. Ignoring her audience, the engrossed human used the beat-up set of tongs to stoke the temperature. She held a glowing piece of metal over the flames. With the tongs' two pinchers squeezing tight, she waved the rectangular bar back and forth as pewter turned orange.

Mattias was the one to answer the curious statement. "What would that be, Sylmonica?"

Her attention did not leave the coals and dancing flames. "Thinking about it all fresh, I'm wondering how many little wires are connected. Hmmm." She stabbed at the fires with the metal. "Yeah...this might not be too smart."

Mattias, Zinora, Tramm, Tresskuss, the Deent brothers, the other henchmen—nobody moved from their places in the arc.

"A few of you will be there to steady me when I call out, right?"

"Yes, Sylmonica. We will be here. We pledge to—"

"Good. Be quiet now." She concentrated. Her hands held tongs and a high-heat object.

Gently, she laid these to the side so the contents stayed on the fire. Just to make sure her left hand knew exactly where the two handles of the tool were, she retracted and extended it forward a few times, going through the motions, from her face to the handles and back.

One last big inhale. "What a dumb idea...let's do it."

In one motion while breathing out, Syl reached up to yank the silver orb out of her eye socket—an efficient maneuver, fingers digging in—hand and object shooting forward, away from her face. A few, but not many, wires followed. Blood spurted.

She tossed the red-stained ocular device into the fire.

Tramm and Tresskuss rushed forward to steady their new boss, who had already grabbed the tongs and brought the white-hot metal slab up to seal the bleeding wound.

The initial cry of pain that jumped from her mouth lacked words. Her scream overrode the sounds of searing tissue and muscle, echoing off of the cold walls and ceiling high above.

The two supporters stepped away. They weren't needed.

"Admiral Markon and his fighters were surrounded and outnumbered." Standing flat on both feet, a suffering leader and teacher gave her first sermon based on a Sith text, a shaky hand keeping the tongs tight over her left eye. "But he made the commitment to Queen Naty'A the Seventh, his lover, that he would not fail her. Do believers like these believers exist anymore?"

The congregation behind her stood still. Mattias wretched from the sizzling odor of cooking flesh. Two henchmen and Streenuk vomited.

The functioning eye locked in a stare too pained to see the soot-covered back wall behind the forge. Her voice shouted through excruciating signals being processed by her brain. "He ordered a hot fire and slabs of burning metal ready for cauterizing wounds."

Syl finally put down the tongs but did not turn around. “He told fighters that they could not quit until they were dead. For their queen. And they did so, as ordered. For their queen.”

The sermon-giver turned to face the crowd. The upper left side of her face had already begun to redden, newly-burned tissue swelled over the open wound. The metal’s rectangular shape imprinted all around the torn eye socket, which throbbed enough to be visible. The yellow eye stared. “Again: do believers like these exist anymore?”

Face breaking into a smile, her voice grew soft. “Markon and his men died that day. Their siege failed. The queen had to flee. Our role is not to judge, but learn...about devotion.”

A sneer showed itself. She marched at the group, her right hand grabbing her brushed-metal light saber and igniting it. The buzz spilled into the burning forge. “Out of my way.”

Syl lengthened her stride into the open space under a curving clay ceiling high above, twirling the thin hilt in her fingers and admiring the fleeting trails it left. “Such an amazing weapon.” Swiping at the air, she said, “I bet it has the power to distract my mind from the pain.”

After a backflip, she landed in a side stance, at the ready. “Nope...still hurting.”

Decades of training, augmented by months of retraining, kicked in.

“So simple and versatile.” Turning and slashing, only to halt—bring the blue blade to a stop, immovable. Transfixed, she stared at it before doing a 180 and spinning it again. “The basics got put in place 25,000 years ago.”

One hand wielded it, then the other. The blade’s pitch changed as it changed direction.

“So deadly. Every Jedi loves its deadliness.” Stabs, parries, blocks—spinning around to engage imaginary adversaries from all angles. “But shhh...they don’t talk about it.”

Some of her sabercraft choreography got learned as a Youngling. She and the other kids gave performances. Syl loved it, she and her friends—she stopped thinking of those two.

“It’s been therapeutic to spend so many hours training again. The Jedi Arts.” Actions that came to mind did not bother to check in with a consciousness before grabbing hold for a dance. “I thought I was doing it because I was bored. Then I realized that they owed this to me.”

The blueness shifted to purple. The glow in the air altered. “Thank you, Jedi.”

She flipped forward and landed. “Tresskuss: shoot at me until I tell you to stop.”

As ordered, Tramm’s loyal henchman unholstered his repeater pistol and fired bolts in rapid succession at the woman by the forge. Every red bolt met its end in the dirt of the floor.

“Okay, stop.”

The fellow killer holstered his gun. The humming hilt still flipped between the fingers of her right hand. It passed between hands, not missing a step.

Syl quit speaking as she reimagined that day. Cantio flooded her mind. The hurt on the left side of her face deadened. Instead of eliminating that worthless scum by choking them to death, she saw herself doing this important work with her saber—the initial team in the courtyard first, then the rooftop sniper, then Azzana and his fire-shooter, and working from there.

The purple illumination coming from the implement grew lighter in color.

Syl had spent the past months working out and getting back in shape. The murder-dealing device in her hand cut through the air and wide, expert arcs. Multiple forms at work.

The saber. Probably the one element in her life that could be trusted more than anything else and that day justified its use like no other event in the history of the Jedi Order. She hated that she denied herself this choice—followed rules now rejected.

She reproduced that day in her head. So much easier. Fluid and beautiful, no nightmares afterward. Her weakness, the guilt...what? Instruments of death get invented for a reason.

How perfect that moment would have been. Perfect. Walking inside those front doors, charging at the attackers, searing light leading the way. Flesh and armor and weaponry—memories cut in half. Swiping, countering, eliminating.

Syl pledged to never hold herself back like this again.

The pulsing blade now blazed red.

The lightning-quick ex-Knight brought the once-blue implement so close to Mattias Ree's chin that a bit of his beard almost sizzled. She withdrew and took a few steps back.

Mattias needed a moment, but once he spoke, his words rang out. "You bled the Kyhber crystal, Sylmonica Valkanna. You channeled your rage and bent the Force to your will."

"I've only begun to bend the Force to my will, Mattias." Syl brought the crimson light up to admire it. "The enslaved need me to bend it every which way."

Zinora Ree got serious. "Your will is stronger than any of ours, Sylmonica Valkanna."

Syl's functioning eye, teary and puffy, was also a mix of yellow and bloodshot veins. The Rees gave sincere nods as she walked past them towards her ship at the far end.

"The hurting on the left side of my face...this type of pain lets a person know they are alive." Nobody answered. The silence remained until Syl broke it again, nearing her gift. "I am impressed. Gleenuk and Streenuk, right? Why not give me a tour?"

She had been taking it in as she approached it, her gaze starting at the pointy nose and window-filled cockpit above. The radiation coating's gold-yellow tint gave the arc of glass a glow, brighter against the black hull. After peaking in height amidships, the curve sloped back past the hyperdrive unit's internal housing to end in a point. A vertical stabilizer sat on top. Two missile-like sublight engines on diagonal mounts behind delta-shaped stabilizers at midpoint.

The brothers opened the hatch. After boarding the four-step ramp, one would turn aft to the living quarters. A single bunk and bathing facility. Across from the berth, the metal heating and refrigeration surfaces in the galley shined from the fresh cleaning.

The Reents stood forward of the bunk, wearing expectant looks.

"Could you two move?" After they jumped aside, she stepped past them into a compact cockpit blinking with lights and electronics. The brand-new, plush pilot and co-pilot seats were situated forward underneath a canopy which offered 270-degree sight. Pointing to the windows and the full view, she said, "I like. Outer space is so pretty."

Streenuk motioned to the electronics mounted on the bulkhead. "Your grace, please meet your co-pilot. Say hello to your new owner, Sten."

A scratchy voice chimed in. *"Hello. Pleased to meet you, owner. Gleenuk and Streenuk have told me that you are a person of gravity and I am honored to serve you, owner."*

Gleenuk jumped in. "It's not 'owner.' Her name is Sylmonica."

She laughed. "Actually Sten, you can call me Syl."

"Sten, or STN, stands for Sentient Technological Neuropath and 'Sten' here is a mix of the finest droid programming, with modifications by one of the most in-demand AI designers around. It knows repair and can operate the mechbot in the power plants' hold, if need arises."

"That's definitely appreciated. I'm only so-so with tools." Now seated in the high-backed pilot's seat, the new owner glanced around the cockpit, taking in blinking gizmos and switches. "I'm assuming all starmaps are up-to-date?"

"Yes, Syl, they are. I have complete readings of—"

"Excellent. Start plotting a course to Dathomir. You and I are leaving soon."

Syl turned to the befuddled brothers in the doorway. "What?"

"Uhhh...Zinora and Mattias have other plans, I believe."

The brothers shuffled out of her way so she could stand at top of the small ramp.
“Mattias, Zinora...whatever plans you made aren’t happening.”

The Rees had been hovering outside while trying to look like they were not hovering.

“Could you hand me my robes?” Her smile fought with the gash on her face. “Thanks.”

Reentering the vehicle, she threw her Jedi robes and Master Dasmal’s saber to the left seat, then tweaked the older brother’s wide cheek. “Those two seem to have a habit of making plans without consulting others beforehand.”

Mattias Ree stood at the hatch. “Sylmonica...you can’t leave. We—”

The even-tempered voice carried from the cockpit. “The Force gave me a vision that tells me to fly to Dathomir. Do you have a higher-ranking vision, Mattias?”

The old man ran out of energy. Head bowed, he whispered. “Forgive me, Sylmonica.”

The two brothers exited their newest redesign and stood beside the disbelieving Rees.

The side hatch shut as extensively-rebuilt sublight engines came to life. Top-of-the-line, heavily-customized machinery began to purr, on and ready.

Chapter Three

A tablet flew off of a console, smacking Tiruss Dunn's cheek. He saw it coming at him in beats because the overhead lamps flickered.

Though the rumbling and shaking threatened to break the *Horizon* apart, the captain sounded reserved over the speakers. "New shockwave, incoming. Brace for blast. A big blast."

A cacophony of distress signals chimed, but no responder could answer. Everyone hung on while the headquarters vessel powered as fast it could, away from the evolving catastrophe. Some areas of the ship were lightless as auxiliary power only backed up air circulation systems and let fixtures go dark. But regardless of their location, no crewmember was safe.

Tiruss shook off a new hit, what was sure to become a purple-and-yellowish bruise. The table he gripped had been bolted to the floor. He saw that Web Hyland and the technicians beside her were all hanging onto each other, the blinking light almost giving them a stop-action look.

The volume of noise amped up sky-high as geologic destruction from the planet below knocked the *Horizon* off of its trajectory. The blaring of the emergency beeps stayed relentless. A long, slow groan. Sounds of a bending hull. The shockwave blasted in a big way, as the captain promised. Sputtering sub-light engines rattled the ship.

The gravity generator lost its pulse. It kicked in again. Crewmen all over the ship slammed back onto the metal decks.

With the danger lights flashing, the Jedi raised his free hand when the Force notified him. The yeoman who brought him his breakfast hovered, his forehead millimeters away from the solid bulkhead that almost crushed his skull. The grateful fella gave the thumbs up.

Sirens roared as the fire-retardant foam hissed. Smells of smoke. Flickering lights.

The captain finally spoke again. His calmness reminded Tiruss of Web's demeanor in the cockpit. "Stabilizing now. Emergency thrusters disengaged. Hang on, everybody."

The damaged hull groaned again as the ship slowed. The captain updated the crew, speakers clear. "Hurtin' pretty bad, but we're here. Life-support systems look to be functional."

Tiruss, like those around him, needed a second for his eyes to adjust. Smoke and steam blanketed. His face smarted. He ignored the throbs. Regaining his bearings, he ran out the doors and sprinted down the smoky passageway. Up two ladders, to the portside observation deck.

The view from the curved window said it all. The ship's position on the leading edge of the orbital curve saved it, the other five surviving vessels as well.

The blast site was near the rear. An efficient-looking arc was no more. What was once a fleet, now already a weightless junkyard. Volumes of smoke and ash plumed upward from the giant rip in the planet's surface. Sooner or later, it would engulf the wreckage in orbit.

He understood why the *Stormchaser* went quiet, observing the carnage. Being so close, the blast wave slammed the 1000-crewmember peacekeeper vessel and a supply barge both into one of the refineries, the bulbous middle section. Molten ore, spilling everywhere, had already started hardening into chunks that slammed into the hulls of inoperative vessels, further cluttering the grisly scene with all shapes of grayish formlessness.

Nearer to the *Horizon*, another refinery was crumbling apart at a slower rate. One of the headquarters ships had smashed through the giant hull and hit its immense furnace.

Multiple ships in spins, signs they were dead sticks. Nothing looked salvageable.

Tiruss scrambled back to the Command Center. The sight of a disheveled, dazed crew greeted him. Though nobody looked to be in pain.

“Web?”

“Yeah, Dunn.”

“Remember when you and Grimesy rescued me in a Biekkor...you two in a ‘Bug?’”

“Of cour—”

“Signal Grimesy—any other pilots you can scramble...we’re light on vehicles, but we’ll figure something out...don’t have a choice. The hangar. This way.”

Web and Tiruss ran to the ladder, thinking twice about using the elevator.

Rising from the oval table littered with dishes and bottles, Prince Hegg had to unhook the jeweled clasp on his wide belt so the gas bubbles in his four lungs could escape.

“Ladies, admit—right here, right now—that you two just ate the best meal ever. Ever. Better say yes...or else I’ll kill the chefs...” A goblet of rare fermented nectar perched in one hand, he waved the sausage of an index finger on the other hand at Quim-Na Sulif and Dilani Vestagon. His brown eyes batted, boylike.

An invigorated round of guffaws filled the intimate private eating quarters.

“I so prefer dining in here, compared to downstairs.” Weaving, the prince surveyed the narrow space that held a ten-person wood table and left little room for much else.

“From what I saw, my prince, that dining room on the main floor looked like quite cozy.”

Prince Hegg and Quim-Na both did double-takes at the youngest, who bit into the slice of sweetpalm she just dipped in berry sauce.

Purple juice ran down Dilani’s mouth. “I mean...cozy enough for you and 500 of your closest friends, I mean...”

All three erupted into more laughter. Quim-Na stood—only to fall back into her frilly chair. Which took the hilarity up a notch.

“You are such a gracious dark side titan-in-waiting.” Quim-Na hiccupped.

“You’re slurring, my dark side darlin’ or...darlin’ of the dark si...whatever your name is...” Prince Hegg threw his glass out the door, where it shattered.

He sat down and swigged from the nearly-empty bottle, then wiped the fresh sweat from his forehead. After a huff, followed by the final drink, the dignitary rose from the chair again while loosening his belt further and grabbing the ladies’ gift bottle. “Come with me. Dilani, I’d like to show you some artifacts I keep in my bedchamber suite.”

The Scholars rose to exit, leaving a table covered in dishes and bottles.

“To be truthful, I barely venture into the main house.” The weaving owner of the expansive property led them on a slalom path down the narrow, straight hall to his cluster of rooms. “I spend my days working out in the temple or in my suite, studying holocrons. The three of us are part of the dark side’s future. Our time to take control is nearing and we must be ready.”

This simple hallway, being in a secluded wing, didn’t receive much attention from the cleaning staff. Floors in need of repair creaked.

Quim-Na stumbled, following his curvy walk. “Don’t lie. You sleep the days away.”

Bare stone walls, cracks showing here and there. The cavernous bedroom suite’s color resided in the furniture, piles of bright rugs and cushioned hanging swings bursting with pretty pillows. Removing her heels, Quim-Na collapsed on one of the rug stacks. Dilani got comfortable in a swing and swayed back and forth.

He brought out three crystal glasses. “Do you see a big future of yourself, rising star?”

“Oh, I do.” The recent initiate shifted herself in her evening gown, running fingers along the softness all around her relaxed body. “That’s why I’m so fortunate to be in your presence.”

“Now, now...the Rees possess a wealth of knowledge. Us future leaders shouldn’t be so quick to push aside all traces of old.” He had to pause and let the burp out. “Take the Rees, for instance. They know that those like us may not have been born as powerful as the ancient—”

“You gonna philosophize or crack that tasty goodness open?” Quim-Na’s own burp could not contain itself.

“Ah, yes. Forgive me.” Prince Hegg found his forked opener and tore off the ornate foil covering. “Just got inspired by a biography of Darth Paryah I finished...those refugees did not need a rescuer. They needed a savior. And there he was, a Jedi Master who discovered so much more. A long time ago, in a...where you going, Quim-Na?”

He and Dilani watched as the barefooted drunk stumbled into the bedchambers. “If you keep waxing on about Darth Paryah, my mind automatically starts to recall the dirtier love sonnets about Paryah and Sabotaa, can’t help it.”

The bed dominated the windowless space. As massive as the owner of the bedroom was, his pillow-covered mattress set could swallow him and five or six others his size, no problem.

The prince put the glasses and bottle on the nightstand while the ladies reclined over furs and feather-stuffed cushions. “Saviors may not be needed nowadays. But strong leaders...who bend all to their will...maybe. I would like to share something with you two. As I take my place, the elders should see me for who I am as I—us younger believers, I mean—replace them.”

“And who is that?” His duo of adorers were all ears.

“The next phase of the dark side. A...rebirth, only...with the future in mind instead of the past.” He had to put down the drinks to finish his dream. “And I am thinking of bringing back the title, taking the name Darth Paryah the Second.”

“Darth Paryah the Second...” Quim-Na nodded. “Hmmm...”

“Think on it.” Prince Hegg winked and handed over two drinks before taking his own. “To the future, and this evening, and you lovely beings.”

He raised his glass to his lips. The toxic formula quickened his heart immediately. After a stumble left, he fell to the right. His lumbering body swayed before the next stage, loss of motor ability, began. Gasping, his hands shot to his throat. His legs wobbled.

Quim-Na, eyes up at the stone ceiling, spoke an ancient language driven by clicks and hard consonants. Translated, the sounds said, “*Darth Famne, your poetic verses clear my head.*”

No longer slurring and now able to focus, she turned to her cohort and barked an order. “Maneuver his body onto the bed before his legs give out.”

Not woozy anymore either, the fellow Scholar had just finished stating Famne’s words. She gave the prince a big shove just in time. He landed flat on his back.

“Did he really and truly just compare himself to Lord Paryah?” Sitting on the bed, Dilani gave the terminal being’s face a playful slap, her incredulous snickers filling the room.

“You and I will be gone at least a few hours before the poison kills. Strip him.” Quim-Na admired the suffering sight writhing around on his own bed. A chest, then whole body, began spasming before erupting into a coughing fit as the lungs, in vain, tried to reject the foreign agent wreaking havoc. “The playboy of the dark side is known to like sleeping alone after his needs have been taken care of. It’s an experience, walking these neglected halls early in the morning, back to the landing pad, then flying away.”

“Intimacy issues...a powerful ally.” Giggling, Dilani got to work.

“And at a younger point in life, I thought I was going to change him.” Quim-Na sighed. “It will look like a heart attack in testing, our people will make sure of it.”

“His parents joked about his dangerous lifestyle at the Rees’ gathering.” Dilani could not quit staring at his giant eyes and fluttering eyelids. “I can see the spirit easing from the body, making its way out into the Force, bit by bit....”

“The royal stash...” Ignoring her partner’s curiosity, Quim-Na had pulled open the nightstand’s drawer. One glittery bag had drawstrings, which she loosened to peer inside. “Uncut. How ideal. The problem with putting oneself in the Clarity Trance of Famne is that one does not get to fully enjoy the drink and goodies that one ingests.”

Clearheaded, Dilani got up and looked around the musty room. “I never tried the trance. I can see why her spies were so effective. Thanks a lot, Darth Famne.”

“Mattias would skin you alive if he heard you take such a casual tone towards the Poet.”

“I don’t see the old guy anywhere. Do you?”

“We’ll leave some of this goodness for believers in the prince’s security ranks.” Quim-Na shivered with delight while pocketing some of the drug packages from the long drawer. “Tramm will be sending for them soon. He and Tresskuss are staffing up. Darksiders only from now on.”

She nodded at the evening’s host, a catatonic lump. “He was right. A new era *is* beginning. The old way dies, the new paves the way for a time when there will be no murder, no poisonings carried out clandestinely, planned meticulously beforehand to cover it up.”

She grabbed Dilani by the hand. “That’s because there will be no murder at all. The lords will decree that there will be no more murder.”

“And there will be no more murder. What a beautiful time that will be.”

A dead headquarters ship, but a dying circulation system. While light and artificial gravity weren’t crucial, breathable oxygen was. Tiruss Dunn took in breaths and then exhaled as bursts of compressed air from the handheld jet propelled his weightless body through the dark passageways. In his backpack, he carried ten more of the simple emergency devices and a tank of oxygen with not nearly enough masks.

The crippled cruiser was a sister ship of the *Bountiful Horizon*. Similarities made it easier to navigate in the lightlessness. Making his way to the survivors in the aft hold, the seasoned first responder tried to ignore structural damage’s creaks and groans, also debris that kept hitting him. Dripping from the ruined ship’s broken pipes—he kept reminding himself to assume that the small dribbles and outright leaks must be non-flammable since he didn’t smell gas. Yet.

While rounding a tight corner near the cargo hold, the green light on his communicator shone. “Please tell me you have good news.”

Miner pilot Web Hyland’s voice came through choppy. “*Well...not good news, but hopeful. I think I can get the spare Biekkor’s engines working. Got plenty of room in the lander’s cabin for survivors, though.*”

“Work your mechanic magic, then. We’ll leave our Brakebug behind in the hangar.”

“*Sounds like a plan. For some bad news...Grimesy radioed. The noxious cloud from the planet’s surface is getting thicker. We gotta fly back to high-orbit real soon.*”

“Not like we’re hanging out here.” Using both feet, Tiruss launched off the metal bulkhead and flew down the final stretch of narrow hall. “Been a pleasure talking, you get to fixing and I’ll bring survivors.”

Halfway to the broken doors, he switched out the communications link for another item on his utility belt. The saber's green light showed random tools and boxes floating through the passageways similar to the ones that had been knocking into his body.

The weapon had already started heating the medium-weight blast door's lock when its wielder stopped moving. For leverage, Tiruss placed his left boot through a metal loop on a bulkhead and leaned in, pushing hard. Hisses and hums blocked out cries from the people inside who were banging on the metallic hold. The door's dull gray turned orange as the saber cut, though the mechanisms that kept the lock secure proved to be worthy adversaries.

The whole ship shook. A boom. While it caught him off guard, he resumed breaking through the lock, mind refocusing.

"That was a secondary pressure tank. This ship is done...uh...Dunn."

Grunting, he replied to Web. "Hang on."

The temperature climbed. Sparks flew. The blade made headway. A slab of a door began to groan outward on its broken hinges. Trapped folks used heavy pipes and, after enough hits with the Force-wielder pulling from the outside, they made enough room to squeeze through.

"Bunch up, people. We're all weightless here." Tiruss doled out hand-jets from his emergency pack to the floating rescues. "One jet helps a few. Don't be stingy."

The Jedi felt thankful for the safety drills. Deep-space operators, while irascible and dishonest, tended to watch out for their own hides and few blew off training sessions. Twenty-one in all—ranging from just out of their teens to near retirement age and from many star systems—looked out for one another as they headed to the hangar, pushing off of the sides and using the jets. Those with flashlights pointed the way.

At the far end of the last passageway the wide loading doors were all opened. The smokiness was new. Tiruss left this landing bay not even ten minutes ago.

Web, an expectant look on her face, sat in the left seat of the rumbling lander's stubby front cockpit. *"I got the tail engine running good...port hatch is open."*

Thankfully, the nervous rescues did not need managing. With the jets, they reached the Biekkor's side door, helping one another inside.

Rumbling, shaking. The Jedi took in a deep breath, sensing it would be a while.

The main reactor, five decks below, exploded. Pressure dropped—until it vanished.

Tiruss ducked before a hurtling cog decapitated him. With one hand, he grabbed a miner as a gear was about to strike the man's ribcage. The other hand grasped the Biekkor, his lifeline.

Heat from the brand-new fire began to show itself. Everyone's skin said so. The bulkhead at the hangar's far end ceased to exist.

The lander's hatch's handle became the single thing keeping Tiruss Dunn from being sucked out into space. A left hand pushed the last miners inside while a right saved his own life, gripping with everything it could. His midsection, legs, and face took punch after punch. His body slammed into the hull, over and over.

Tiruss entered and shut the hatch.

Web released the magnets that attached the Biekkor's landing struts to a deck coming apart section by section. Tiruss fell inward as the ship pitched, bashing himself up more.

Light from the fires flooded the cockpit. Squinting, Web floored the number eleven engine up top. Lander and deck separated from one another—one shooting forward, the other splintering into pieces. She weaved around a section of overhead that fell into the hangar and gunned for outer space. Bodies in the back flew around as a tiny ship escaped the grip of a humongous ship in its last moments of existence.

Wincing from aches all over that were only beginning to develop, Tiruss stumbled to the cockpit and placed a reassuring hand on his super-focused friend while taking the co-pilot seat. His right eye squinted and opened from the forming bruise.

“Grimesy was right. That gas cloud is huge.” He shook his head at the sight out the window. An orange, unforgiving blob that almost pulsed as it kept growing bigger and bigger.

“That is poison.” Through the lander’s headset, Web muttered under her breath, her voice tinny. “Nothing but poison.”

On the planet below, billions of kilotons of rock had already been vaporized. Eruptions were only getting started, creating fresh eruptions as the underground grew more violent. Ash and smoke that formed the dull colored wall crept outward on a relentless path with near orbit.

The moment of observation did not last. Web’s hand left the paint-chipped throttle lever to point through the canopy at a little ship towing two larger ships. “Grimesy.”

Both cables engaged, the Brakebug chugged onward, bringing two dead landers back to the headquarters’ hangar. The small fleet of survivors sat in upper orbit around the bend.

Over their headsets, Grimesy’s ultra-proud voice came through loud and clear. *“These Biekkors are packed full of living, breathing people.”*

“That’s what your lander looked like, that day...kinda.” The miner pilot winked over at the Jedi seated to her right. He had grabbed a cloth from his vest and was wiping off the blood.

Her beat-up buddy made her giggle. “I told you not to go picking a fight with that pack of rabid gundarks, Tiruss Dunn. But did you listen? No...”

Chapter Four

Low tides revealed the sprawling bog's rot and a hanging stench that interfered with the predators' ability to smell. If it were high tide, the terrified children would each be digesting in one of the scaly beasts' oversized stomachs.

The oldest boy, shivering, shuffled forward from the miserable pack of youngsters huddled by the mossy rockface. One bare foot moved. His other, also covered in muddy slime, needed a moment. He hitched up his torn pants and, shaking, he took that next step.

Red fog blanketed the area. Nearby white-faced cliffs, the region's landmark, might as well never have jutted upward from the tectonic plates hundreds of millions of years ago because the blood-colored mist wiped them from view.

The lead rancor bellowed out yet again. Invisible, but audible—such a terrifying mix.

The boy scampered back to the pack, tip-toe-running across the rocks to dampen the sound.

Desperate, every child fought to keep from screaming as snorts and roars rang out. Wide eyes shot every which way. Little bodies smashed together, as if reducing the surface area by a fraction would conceal the kids from gargantuan meat-eaters in search of snacks.

The boy who ventured out before began once again, this time in the direction of the ravine's spillway, a possible escape route now unseen due to weather.

One of the blonde-haired twins moved ahead, to the surprise of all including her sister. She quick-stepped, though gently in order to keep the volume down. Reaching the boy's side, she grabbed his outstretched hand.

Crouched in a ball, the lead rancor lowered its heartbeat, a hunter quieting its breathing and exhaling through its nostrils in order to hear prey. Two beady eyes that seemed out of place on such a mass of a reptilian skull blinked. Shuddering and trembling, its upper leg and shoulder muscles remained cocked, ready to explode. Razor-sharp teeth bared, but just a bit.

The curly-haired girl and boy took pains to lighten their footsteps. If only it mattered.

Oversized, four-fingered claws grabbed rock. Rear feet dug in. The cold-blooded species' considerable frame and girth required all of that extra muscle tissue underneath the thick hide. Otherwise, they would lack the ability to strike as if shot out of a cannon.

Launching, the rancor reached its right claw out to the boy and left claw to the girl.

A saber, glowing red, stopped the attack cold.

The energy blade blended with the surrounding haze's color while the pack's roars masked its sound. The wide arc ended on the side of the attacker's thick neck before the killer caught on that it was getting killed.

Sylmonica Valkanna landed on the rock and pivoted, hilt twirling in her fingers, then led with the weapon to finish the being off. Hot light found a home in the soft underbelly where the scales thinned out. Slashes widened the wound.

She sidestepped. A dying hunter fell forward onto a bed made of its own insides.

Saber in right hand, Syl raised her left hand and extended her fingers at the charging gang. Yellow eye closed, she took in a breath. *"Your aggressor is dead. Rancors are strong with the Force, respected throughout the Galaxy."*

Two of the children, including the twin who stepped forward, perked up when they heard the voice that others didn't.

The pounding sounds of heavy footsteps slowed to a stop.

"Yes...civilized. You know these children are not important. Feed elsewhere."

The youngest, a chubby boy with a thick head of moppy hair, walked into the fog.

The woman with the red sword turned to him. *"What do you want, cuteypie?"*

"You look like a monster."

"The Force sent me to bring you back to your family, all of you runaways." While reattaching her extinguished weapon to her belt, Syl wriggled her nose.

The kid relaxed, but only a bit.

She brought out her oval handheld communicator after ruffling the boy's bushy hair.

"Sten...zero in on this point and hover, lower the rescue ladder."

The rumble of two engines. A craft soon became visible—first its forward landing lights, then the elegant hull and golden sweep of cockpit screen. As the small triangular stabilizers on each side dotted up and down, the slowing ship ate up the red fog and came to a stop directly above. Its two wings grew still. The side hatch behind the cockpit opened and lengths of a ladder unrolled downward towards the rocks.

"Hey kids, do you like climbing trees?"

The group looked at Syl tentatively. Some obsessed over her eye wound. Still, one by one, the kids scampered up.

Revelers wound down, though some kids still chased each other around the tables to work off the feast. The red mist cleared as it grew late. No clouds blocked the full moon.

A week after flying in with the runaways on board, the village cluster's honored guest sat at the end of a long table in the town square with local elders, wearing a black tunic similar in cut to Jedi tunics she had worn all of her life. Unlike the first day, tonight was fog-free. Besides the stimulating conversation, she enjoyed string and reed music played by four residents. After they ate, the inebriated tradesmen and farmer grabbed instruments rarely used anymore.

Patting her stomach, Syl declined the old woman's insistently-shrill squeaks. "No...no meat or veggies...too stuffed to move."

The petite cook spun around and waddled back to the stone-lined hearth, now a home to piping-hot pots of deliciousness. The peat fire's sharp sting infused it all with its smoky flavor.

One of Dathomir's most learned religious leaders pointed up to the glowing disc while arranging his ratty cloak around his shoulders. "A good omen."

His wife, also frail, turned to the head of the table. "May I make a suggestion?"

"Please."

"Your wound..." She motioned to her left eye with her bony finger. "That imprint of the burn...cloth or a patch could conceal it. You have such an inviting face, if I may say so."

"Inviting..." Syl squeezed her hand. "I guess my eye isn't pretty, huh?"

She raised her left hand to cover where her left eye once was. "I'm seeing clearly."

Her head turned in both directions. "I freed myself from that mechanical annoyance."

The priestess said, "Oh...the Force is strong with you. We here on Dathomir are not accustomed to such naked strength."

"I appreciate you all." The visitor watched the three species of culinary pros who had just whipped up a wonderful meal in her honor, bellies full of food like those they just fed and kicking back. "Everyone is content."

She raised her right arm to study the sleeve of her new tunic. A practical covering, mixing comfort with movability. She had worn garments cut like these since her childhood years and gave the seamster some preferences as he and his wife took her measurements. "Thank you again for the clothes...the tunics, the gown and robes, the sandals...the rugged coat with the hood, I love them all. And the boots, I just need to break those black beauties in."

"The boots will fit with wear, I know it." The most stylishly-dressed of the chiefs nodded in triumph. "My grandson and granddaughter-in-law have the busiest tailor shop in the district for a reason. They were honored to use their large inventory of hides and cloths outfitting you."

"I couldn't be happier. The dark side of the Force sent me here and I am beyond grateful that this was the reason." Syl nodded back at one of the runaway's dads a few tables away. "And thank you for your wise advice about confronting the worst of my past."

"It is our honor." Overcome, the sickly priestess clasped Syl's hand again, her kind eyes tearing up. "I want to help release that pain from years ago so you can take your rightful place with clear mind and conscience."

Her husband, also weepy, grabbed his wife's free hand and brought it up to caress it with his thin lips. A long-married couple stole looks at a new and important entity in their lives.

"Are you sure we can't pay you? Our holocrons are yours, obviously, but can we offer financial compensation as well?"

Syl shifted in her rickety chair and giggled. "Once again, I have fuel and coaxium. And funds and a range of travel documents, thanks to the Rees and Tramm Nurado."

She mugged at a freckle-faced girl who gawked from by the hearths. "After everything I've learned these last months, all that I have awakened to...your advice about traveling to Cantio...I realize how afraid I've been."

"You must return to this source of shame. That day happened for a reason, fiery one."

The runaways' savior rose from the table for her sleeping quarters, but turned to address her gracious hosts. "Before I depart, I would like to say a few words to community officials, business leaders as well. Tell them to meet by my ship, bright and early."

The sweeping wave of the black glove and outstretched fingers in a wide arc from left to right almost came across as dismissive. Which made the resulting sight—of a rickety hauler full of grain leaping up from the dirt and flying through the air in a similar arc before crashing down on the far side of the stone courtyard—all the more rattling.

Not taking even a second to admire the destruction she created, the woman in a hooded greatcoat the color of rust turned to address a shocked congregation. "You desecrate Dathomir."

Before going further, the speaker lowered a wide hood that had been tailored to fit the humanoid wearer's head if it were wrapped in a length of cloth. A tight, black turban enclosed the top of her skull. In front, the left side wrapped lower, over the eye socket. Extra length that would cover her nose and mouth hung off of her left shoulder. The black headwrap contrasted with the right eye's cold yellowness, a glare that did not let any of the villagers go. "This planet is rich in history and its current occupants fail to measure up. The present is failing the past."

In the quiet, her voice carried further. Hands behind her back, the lecturer paced. "You people, I will admit, lack the ability to truly sense how strong Dathomir is with the Force."

Each step began with a heel hitting the stone. "Like so many dark side societies in those years after the last civil war, living in a state of obliviousness helped you cope. Beings do this."

“But Dathomir’s willful ignorance ends today.” The pacing stopped. Lowered, the red hood sat stiff on her shoulders, surrounding the back and sides of her neck. “Your last oppressors no longer have a hold over you because their society blended into yours...SO WHY DO YOU CONTINUE TO SEE YOURSELVES AS SLAVES?”

“Right now, a society scrapes by when it should be setting the course.” The wrap of cloth in her hand held her attention. “Dathomir is far from Republic oversight. Your magick and alchemy are powerful. The runaways I saved—they hear the Force calling. Do you? I had a vision, centuries from now. It was murky, but I felt the importance of your planet, its place among our way of life. We will speak more when I return.”

Sylmonica Valkanna headed towards the little open ramp on her ship. “Let’s go, Sten.”

The on-board computer engaged the warming-up engines and responded over the speakers. “*Setting a course for Cantio.*”

Elders and business leaders backed away as the rumbling took on a life of its own.

The gull door shut. The hovering generator kicked in.

Floating upwards, an aerodynamic hull seemed to suck in the red light from the surrounding environment. The cockpit’s wraparound window glowed a bright, golden yellow. Three thin struts folded up, each on three different joints, into the trim belly as the dartlike front end raised a few degrees.

Two sub-light engines fired, not even at one percent.

The ship bolted up at a sky not as overcast as the week before.

XII: The Great Debate

Chapter One

A yellow cockpit window, graceful hull, and two outboard engines took shape. The matte-black spacecraft dropped out of hyperspace far from the warzone of a planet, blue tracer trails melding into a background of stars.

A cold voice sent a hail before Sylmonica Valkanna could absorb the sight of an immense, light-green orb with two Peacekeepers stationed above the northern hemisphere. The duo, the second-biggest class of warship in the Republic fleet, looked tiny from way out here, their topside flight control decks barely visible amidships. Compared to a planet, even a piddly-sized one such as this, the most gigantic of deep-space cruisers seem insignificant.

Cantio. Where Jedi Knight Sylmonica Valkanna served three tours of duty. Also, a source of self-hatred ignored for too long. It owned the view. As Sten closed the distance, more so.

Syl transmitted a request to land in a southern hemisphere city and unload relief supplies from a charitable organization run by an Agonian Temple. Tramm Nurado's falsified document cleared quickly, prompting her to remark that the fresh round of peace talks created a new ebb.

"Ebb?" Clarify, if you could, please. Programmers infused the AI voice with the ability to convey tonalities and emotions.

Sten's curiosity about her choice of words made her smile. "Cantio isn't a centuries-long civil war, Sten. It's a wave of energy, ebbing and flowing energy. I figured that out as I was meditating about my reasons for this return visit."

She checked out the southern hemisphere where a proud capitol once stood. "When that wave ebbs, less die. When it flows, more die. When it's ebbing, because things like peace talks are happening, they tend to leave intra-system pilots alone. Tramm's fake travel manifests are top-notch, but they would have bothered us if...you know..."

"It was flowing?"

This thought received an appreciative nod. "You're a listener. I like you, Sten."

Sten shallow-arc'd the ship away from the Republic guardians and towards the southern hemisphere's lone continent, an expanse of dirty pink beneath a thin layer of white clouds.

The descent was uneventful. The AI handled entry into the atmosphere while Syl finished wrapping her brown Jedi boots with lengths of black cloth, strips which came from the bolt that made her turban.

"They are desperate to achieve any sense of normalcy here." Outlines of towns and villages appeared serene from the air. "The tiniest lull in war and Cantio becomes civilized as quickly as it can. They are going to be so good at being peaceful when that day arrives."

A humid night. Sten encountered no turbulence. They landed on a plateau where estates once stood, now flattened into a makeshift drop-off area for nervous pilots who feared parking within city limits. From this elevation, one could see lights from the beat-up planet's most critical community centers, those outdoor venues for selling illegal and legal goods.

Syl opened the side hatch and stepped into the small breeze. "Fly out past where we dropped from hyperspace and stand by, take off if you get hailed. Our landing credentials expire in three days. If I haven't contacted you by then, signal Tramm Nurado's fleet and join them."

"Understood."

"While in deep orbit, you have a job."

"A job?"

“Monitor channels for news about Yntok, their sacred asteroid field.” Her coat’s blood color turned black in the dying light. “Also, look for links between cartels and the slave trade.”
“I will furnish a report upon your return.”

Syl walked down the platform steps, wrapping the last section of the turban’s cloth over her mouth and bringing up the wide hood.

Hurtling along and nearly supersonic, the diamond-shaped formation of royal blue Air Assault Delivery Skiffs nosed down from cruise altitude. Bluish exhaust from four screaming tail engines dissipated into the night sky.

Trails of smoke from the government district. An unfolding chaos, still a way off.

As the troop transports approached the ground, a rare sight: no air-lanes above the cityscape, all sizes of vehicles’ navigation lights’ various colors now absent. Traffic had been diverted to both keep civilian drivers safe as well as minimize the possibility of air attacks.

“Padawans, we are to be detailed with a makeshift triage unit that is readying to treat victims.” Just like the other eleven standing in the cabin, the lightly-armored Jedi Master gripped one of the Addi’s overhead handrails. Her six scaly, clawlike fingers clung loosely.

Showing their training, passengers kept their knees bent and legs relaxed to counteract the bumpy flight path. Addi power plants drowned out sounds from a livid metropolis below.

The diamond leveled out along the outskirts of the storage district’s preserve-facing side. Block after block of warehouses got constructed to meet Coruscant’s spiraling needs.

Above, each ship edged in tight, skimming the flat tops of the similar-looking buildings.

The barreling Addis headed for Federal City on the far side of the wildlife preserve. Smoke from a few building fires blurred the horizon. Pilots accelerated to close the distance.

In the back of one troop carrier, the well-liked instructor again spoke into her headset to the eleven teenagers with her. “Keep riot shields and staffs at the ready. If the situation calls for sabers, something is dreadfully wrong.”

Standing in her row, ArraKel Kitaros nodded a quick nod. The Master winked back, then said, “Once on the ground, we will be facing thousands. At the same time, it is all one organism. And that organism is lashing out in anger because it feels it is being ignored.”

The Master went back to listening in on command’s back-and-forth situational updates while Padawans stayed silent in the moments before the side doors opened. Some repositioned the light-armor pieces sewn into their one-piece jumpsuits.

The hover-pulse engines’ humming energy field shook the four hulls. Panels and joints rattled and squeaked as the Addis skimmed treetops and navigated the shallow rolls of the hills. Pilot crews pushed their craft harder towards the drop zone.

Federal City, ahead.

Normally, the city streets and intersections would be busy with civilian vehicles. A touristy section, the sightseeing and cultural opportunities for Galactic travelers dotted the landscape for kilometers all around. Today, bonfires and black smoke muddled the view.

Two pilots and twelve Jedi shrank from g-forces’ heaviness as the Addi banked hard right after passing by a hovering squadron of Brakebugs, searchlights all trained downward.

“Eyes on me again.” The Master scanned across and back at adrenaline-fueled faces behind clear face shields and blue riot helmets. “Command just got word that the inbound

Etomer-class cruiser is hours away. For the near term, we might be backing up Peacekeeper teams as well.”

Her smile revealed her fangs. “We volunteered you for this because you are so close.”

Formation leveling off, the climb-and-dive ended. Everyone felt the push towards their feet as the ship dove a shallow curve. The pilots gave the signal: drop zone.

The doors flung open.

Shoulders back and standing tall, twelve passengers filed out and quarter-turned away from the airship, not in unison but close enough to prove they spent hours training together. All had been warned not to breathe in because of the ground fires and took their last breaths inside the cabin. Force-wielders slowed their falls, but not so much that they became targets.

Side by side, the twelve landed in a single straight line, all facing the same direction. In front of them, a hasty barricade made of furniture protected an entranceway.

“Always impressive to see a Jedi air assault drop.” A senior Medic, Ryle Zambreeth, came running out. Three Medics, also clad in light armor gear, followed. “Thank you for coming. We aren’t close to the rioting precincts, but have been told to keep ready for injuries anyway.”

“Sounds like a plan, Chief.” The Master, staff in one hand and shield mounted on the forearm of the other, stepped forward. “Where do you need us?”

Twelve Jedi had just finished pairing off and positioning themselves in six two-person posts around the door when the next explosion went off less than fifty blocks away.

No sounds of Brakebugs or other craft. Another sign of the ebb. Early evening became night.

Syl had taken the dirt path before. Rounding a small hill near the lively marketplace, she recalled a news update about local officials turning down some charity’s offer to pave these roadways. *Logical decision. Dirt is easier to fill in after bombings.*

Smells of various meats...mouth-watering until a visitor begins to wonder. In a place like this, any type of living being could end up in a pot and sold off as a meal.

Crossing the rusty metallic gateway’s plane was to venture into a sea of shellshocked souls, psychopaths, and fortune seekers. A frenzy of transactional activity—her mouth had to chuckle underneath the wrap of turban. The bustling outdoor bazaar might very well have been attacked yesterday, for all Syl knew. Cautions incorporate acts of violence into their lives, just as they have for centuries, then pick themselves up and go back to eking out a living.

One of the first booths inside the archway sold blasters and projectile guns. Master Dasmarr’s saber had been left back on the ship and her own was concealed in an inside pocket of the greatcoat. While Syl did have a weapon, a gun would attract less attention than a red blade.

The cold booth owner with the sunken eye in the middle of his face nodded at the single eye beneath the concealed face. Behind his pointy right ear, a black Republic-issue blaster in pristine condition sat on the back shelf among a row of newer-looking options. She motioned at the gun. It took a moment to adjust the oversized holster on her hips over the thick coat but, while clumsy-looking, the open display sent a message. Satisfied, purchaser gave seller her money, then strode away from the booth, back into the mob of bodies. The worn-out merchant returned to leaning on his thin cane and staring at passersby, blank-faced.

One tough, a three-eyed beast armed with three guns and a club, stared at Syl too long after she walked past. His hairy nostrils flared as all three orbs fixed on her, none blinking.

At the entrance avenue's end, she sensed ten more troublemakers form up behind the furry soldier-for-hire. The pack followed her down a torn-up side street that vendors used. A haven for addicts, it veered into another dingy street where the permanent structures began.

She led her entourage, now fifteen strong, around a corner. The alleyways behind the rows of two-story brick buildings offered less room to maneuver.

The group closed as she neared the tight passageway that led back to the bazaar.

Syl turned around and waved her gloved hand in the air, right to left. Her stare locked onto the huskiest, who clutched a high-speed machine-blaster close to his chest with scaly claws. She said, "You will start a gunfight."

His four ears twitched, an acknowledgement of her direct order. One of the most scarred, he was also the weakest-minded.

The order-giver had already turned the corner when sounds of laser bolts and projectile guns ripped through the marketplace, pushing people to run for it.

Now on the main thoroughfare, Syl kept walking, willfully ignorant to the mushrooming panic all around. A foursome of Republic security, spears and rifles drawn, did not acknowledge the hooded woman who waved at them as they ran past.

Under blaster fire, the chaos' cause left the marketplace through the broken side entrance and decided to stroll the gravel road towards the unlit foothills and a nice winding—

That was the Werrato Marketplace. I just walked through the Werrato Marketplace.

The attack of laughter doubled Syl over. She just exited a key location from her life and it did not occur to her until this very second because her mind had been racing in so many directions, places far beyond this temporal plane. Or maybe she was just avoiding it—that possibility seeming just as funny. A realization—the sight of so much destruction—bodily destruction. The first bomb and the last bomb of the power hour. *They may have built some new structures in the time since, but yeah...that was Werrato.*

Her knees curled up into her chest. Until the hysterics exploded. Body straightening out flat, on her back, she needed to rip aside the black face covering. It lay in the dirt. Her lungs convulsed from screams and whoops. In no time, both sides ached from the intensity of the hilarity. Two gloved hands slapped the battered roadway over and over.

It all lost its steam. Her breath slowed. The stars above caught her fancy. Tears streaming from her right eye became mud, her head up at a moonless sky.

When she felt the urge to move again, she let out a sigh and got back on her feet, then brushed off her pretty new clothes and readjusted the awkward holster before resuming her walk. The foothills and winding road led to Minerstown. At this easy pace, just a long-but-not-too-long journey through the foothills. A journey. Perfect. A meditative stroll. No. A meditative jaunt.

Two Jedi boots wrapped in black cloth carried a disengaged body. If it encountered any beings, the floating and conscious mind failed to notice.

Four Padawans ran single-file along the ledge of a government records building, four stories up from an intersection packed with protesters. No commuters or workers today.

Each aspiring Jedi sported both a backpack and a shoulder pack containing units of artificial blood. In addition, they carried two containers of artificial blood which were suspended from the ends of metal rods that they supported across the backs of their shoulders. Dust covered their gear, faces, and heads. Unused lightsabers with dirty hilts dangled from their belts. Two

were also smeared with several colors of real blood from helping Medics unload burn victims after the last emergency shuttle arrived.

Subsisting on little rest like the others, Zennon Tannerum led the exhausted crew back to the aid station. Streetlamp reflections off of surrounding buildings lit a path for him.

After days of unrest, citizens with cultural ties to every part of the Republic still clogged the district below. With broad avenues meant for bazaars and festivals, the section of town attracted many after the first attacks.

Padawan Kirio Tannalt stayed in step right behind Zennon. Ginormous bags under her blue eyes, her green fingers kept a loose grip on her blood carrier. A hairless species, she wore a thin ring through her snout's right nostril to show her Padawan status. "Hey guys...the transport broke down because the Force felt like we needed another workout—you know that, right?"

From her position at the rear, Kel giggled, then piped up. "Makes sense, Kiri. A surprise jungle march last week, now this. Hey Zen, good call, going rooftop."

"We'd never get through those packed streets." From the position ahead of Kel, Padawan Stee Panduka rebalanced his load without breaking stride. The husky Besalisk carried two smaller containers in the extra set of arms that hung below his larger arms.

Nearing the triage unit, the young adults bounded along the thin barriers at the edge of the structures.

Ever since the series of explosions three days before, Medics, Padawans, and Republic peacekeepers kept control of their section of town, one of the less-chaotic grids on the map. The first day's detonations kept all on edge, but that had been the worst. As the post-bombing hours wore on, they became the overflow unit for units in harder-hit grids.

At the next building junction, Zennon slowed a half-step to shift the weight, then dug his boots into the ledgetop, speeding up to leap the gap with the building across the way. The other three followed, each arcing through the air as well. Zennon cut right, ninety degrees, to sky towards the lower destination point. After landing on the other side, he broke into a sprint. The others mad-dashed across the flat surface, too.

Kel yelled out. "We need to get street-level soon. We should—"

Zennon shifted his head forward, the dangling blood container over his right shoulder backward. If he didn't, the sniper's shell would have split his skull instead of the container.

The walloping sound of the projectile-dispensing gun discharging rang out, distinctive from the hollow whump given off by blasters. The gunshot infused dazed citizens with fresh bursts of panic on the streets below. People collided into each other running in all directions.

The Force enlightened the other three Padawans as well. They had dropped their charges and brought out their light sabers, though all stayed unlit.

By the time the four Padawans reached the roof's edge, the would-be assassin on the second-floor courtyard across the way was done, his head shoved against the railing. Two Jedi Knights joined the first who had disarmed and restrained the human, a burly tough.

A short human Jedi who looked to be six or seven years older than the Padawans held the man's long rifle. It looked to be an older, cheap model. The blonde Knight dislodged its rusty ammunition case. As he secured the firearm, another Knight used her handheld loudspeaker to inform the crowd that the Republic had it under control.

Weary attendees of this protest-turned-attack had no desire to watch the authorities bring yet another troublemaker into custody and the rabble-rousing spirit died.

Kiri pointed a skinny finger at the muscular Rodian Jedi who had cuffed the failed killer. Her voice cracked. "His hair color...same as Mimmsy's."

The broad-shouldered Knight's mane of red hair fell forward into his oversized eyes and covered the bony spines on top of his skull. He and the statuesque Twi'lek Jedi who had used the megaphone now handled the ruffian with ease. There looked to be no chance of him escaping as they waited for a transport. Both Jedi were dressed in riot gear just like the Padawans.

"Mimms and my brother are looking out for us, everybody."

Stee rested his claw of a hand on his study-buddy's shoulder pad. Looking over, he laughed. "You're covered in fake blood. You know this, right? Like...you're blue, Tannerum."

Zennon looked at his body, blue for the moment. "Where does fake blood come from?"

Kel shrugged. "Fake people."

Laughter burst out from four trainees functioning on autopilot.

"Sorry to break the mood, guys." Kiri cleared her throat. "But if Beddu and Mimmsy *are* here, they're telling us to get rolling."

The foursome took off.

Chapter Two

The night held. Still, early morning's dull red sky began its fight for control of the day.

Minerstown. Relatively noiseless streets and sedate neighborhoods, the perfect transition from the relaxing daze of a hike through the breezes and rustling trees in the foothills. With so many residents asleep, she appreciated the peace talks even more. Block after block, Sylmonica Valkanna sensed a restful slumber that warmed her heart. Minerstownites learn to live with sleepless nights dictated by violence out of their control.

"Nobody goes down that road anymore." An emaciated mass in ripped clothes huddled under the lone working streetlight on the crumbling intersection. The sickly human looked like he would tumble if the pole weren't there to prop him up. But his scowl did not leave her.

"Calling somebody you've never met before a 'nobody' isn't very kind, sir." Syl covered her mouth again with the wrap as she left the stunned man behind.

Nearing the site of the power hour's aftermath, her heart sped up. She had pushed away visions of this place for too long and feelings of wanting to turn back and forget everything were natural. She put one cloth-wrapped boot in front of the other.

Her court martial played back in her brain. Her fears then: those involved in the proceedings knew what had occurred here and were going to publicly surprise her with it before handing down a death sentence. In reality, they obsessed over inappropriate use of the Force. *They had no idea how inappropriately I used the Force that day.*

As disquieted as Syl was, part of her had to admire the thoroughness shown by that expectant father who torched the fortress and got rid of the bodies in return for not being executed. A wall that she once leaped over now lacked full sections and the burned structure had only gotten more run down. Rain and snow punished it in the years since the fire.

She stepped through a crumpled hole into the courtyard. The spot where she killed the first adversaries. The campfire. Where the sniper fell from the roof. The far building she once entered, then ended the leaders' lives on upper floors. Rubble now. Some structural, skeletal elements still standing, barely. A lack of trash. Without refugees or criminals, only the elements and less-sentient creatures damaged it all. Black char, everywhere, had grayed over the years.

If it weren't for the two manifestations smiling at her, the grounds would be empty. The duo almost blended into the surroundings, the transparency of their images revealing the broken courtyard wall behind them. Him burly and her waify, both Force ghosts wore long, black cloaks with hoods that fell in their glowing faces.

The younger spoke, her voice hollow. "The debate is over. The ex-Jedi has arrived, daddy." A small jut of a jawline inherited from her father disrupted an otherwise thin face.

A blue radiance outlined her slight frame and the robes which flowed behind. Although she was an apparition, her emerald irises pierced as they looked Syl up and down. "Arrived at the site of a most shameful day...fashionably attired and in search of answers. We won."

Jeweled ribbons had been woven into the braid of thick hair laying over her right shoulder. Like her eye color, these bright cloths and shiny stones popped from the dark robes, though a haze covered the entirety of it.

Syl loosened her turban, exposing the lower part of her face.

The elder's slow grin grew. Like his offspring, his voice echoed. "Centuries ago, I was King Navopo the Seventeenth and my daughter was my successor, Queen Naty'A the Fifteenth."

Though the queen did not inherit his pronounced brow, Naty'A shared Navopo's expressiveness, his green pupils shining like hers. A layer of jowls covered a square jaw from his youth. "Our dynasty ruled Cantio for almost two millennia."

He lowered his hood. While bald, his silver hair on the sides remained thick. "And a few know me as Darth Desparus. Her, Darth Famne."

With an easy flip of her thin fingers, the hood fell to Darth Famne's back.

Syl focused on her. "You were known as the Poet."

"I *am* known as the Poet." Darth Famne raised her narrow right eyebrow.

"Well, *Poet*, call me crazy, but I think your big 'win' in your 'great debate' and my search for answers connect..."

"Oh, they connect, crazy one." Rigid, Queen Naty'A/Darth Famne pulled the cloak tight. "The Cantio Civil War Great Debate has raged for a few centuries. Sith from across time weigh in...about how this war could end, types of beings that might seize control."

Famne had to sigh before continuing. "Our kind bores so easily. Some speculated that a new lord would be born in this trashfire I started. Others, that a hidden savior would travel here to reveal themselves. Daddy and I sided with those who said only a Jedi could revitalize—"

"You're confusing her, sweetheart." Chuckling, her father raised his ring-covered hand.

"I'll back up." The Poet's legs stayed hidden under translucent folds of cloth. "First things first: Cantio is not a centuries-long civil war. It's a poem. An epic poem—my poem, hundreds of millions of lines long—rhythm and rhyme, written for a time without lords."

"A flowing narrative to keep the dark spark alive as our kind was hunted down." A father beamed at his offspring. "My daughter was in her forties when she began to sense our defeat in the Galactic civil war. She saw its end long before her contemporaries did."

Famne spat a guffaw. "They called me batty. Dolts dismissed me for telling the truth."

"You did state truth, daughter. The dark side was losing."

"A fact few could admit." Famne rolled her eyes at Syl. "Poo-pooing my premonitions of thermonuclear explosions...as if I would dream dreams horrific enough to become night terrors, just to do it. Huh?"

"Dearest, you ignored *them* and put our way of life first instead, pouring your heart and soul onto paper...penning a melancholy, yet lyrical, composition."

Syl cocked her head. "Wait...what did she do?"

"Ordinary believers...followers can be trusted with statues, pictures, droll religious texts and such." Famne stepped to Syl, stare growing ugly. "But the stiffs must never be given control of that...essence...the pulse. The dark flame needed to be protected until it could be passed on."

Her heels showed as pacing grew into a strut. "Spells and meditations were not enough. What was needed was story...story about a time without us lords, one where the dark side runs wild. A war story, rivers of blood and words about heartbreak, sociopathy, senselessness. Darkness lives in such tales, ex-Jedi, and my fingers let go of the pen not even ten years after the war began, the stanzas began to write themselves. To open, I, an unmarried queen in her forties, married a gambling addict from an insignificant monarchy, family all overleveraged like my sad sack of a husband and worried about their dwindling social standing."

She stopped her roving to let out a giggle. "One look at me and they smelled money."

"Hah. My daughter fed their misconception while also divesting her fortune to the dark side cause, worsening the overall crash." A proud father stood in triumph. "Queen Naty'A the Fifteenth's death revealed the dynasty's lack of wealth and sent Cantio into a depression."

“The in-laws didn’t handle my passing well.” Naty’A the Fifteenth smirked at Syl before turning to the ruins again. “It took another 200 years for the civil war to reach critical mass, cross its event horizon. Sith from across time gathered for the show. A show that a Jedi stole.”

“Daughter, your narrative kept the dark side safe, alive in the Cantio System, ready to inspire a powerful being hundreds of years later.” An adoring King Navopo nodded at his only offspring. “And that, dear, is a talent you didn’t get from me.”

“To compose a piece so loved by fellow lords...my pleasure.” The conflict’s architect gave her father a curtsy.

“Theatrics aside, you gave the dark side an incubator, my daughter. Whatever the Cantio System meant to our family, the dark side of the Force is what matters.”

“Read between the lines, daddy. That’s what the poem is about.”

“And as Sith from the millennia watched Cantio spiral out of control, they debated.”

“Debating what type of person would destroy themselves in this war...your ‘great debate.’”

“Wrong, Sylmonica. We debated what type of person would find power inside this war.”

Arriving at the quieting triage unit with their fake blood, four Padawans got word: the negotiations worked. The chances for mass violence dwindled and the aid station shuttered as Addi transports landed to bring the young wielders home.

The formation of twenty airships headed to the Jedi Complex hangar. Tired-out passengers received an order: report to the common level after landing.

“No need to tidy up, youngsters. Jedi get disgusting and stinky, been that way for ages now.” The Jedi Master greeted ArraKel Kitaros, Zennon Tannerum, and the rest as they exited the troop carrier. Like theirs, her riot gear showed wear-and-tear from three days of helping medical professionals treat injured from all parts of the Galaxy.

Her pupils shuffled off into the Complex. Beings managing on little rest and food ambled down the halls to the common level, a center point that connected buildings. Zennon and Kel walked side by side down the passageway, lifelong friends too wiped out to engage in chatter just like the majority of the two-hundred-odd Padawans were.

This spent group reached the end of the long hall. It opened up high above. The common area offered six hallways a point of convergence beneath the arc of a dome and its skylights.

Ten of the Jedi Council, all in formal robes, hoods up, stood in the middle. Five were humanoid, the youngest of them maybe seventy years old. Most were hunched over walkers or canes. One of them sat in a three-wheeled chair.

After the juniors formed a circle around the elders, Jedi Master Hurrad Munrow drew on his breathing mask before addressing them. “Padawans, in the thousands of years of our order, one common obligation pertains to the personal responsibility of developing oneself.”

“While teachers guide, it’s ultimately up to the pupil.” Years of bodily abuse caused his shuffle. “Your whole class...these last few days, you gave us the edge we needed. The purpose of those day-one bombings was to start a city-wide riot. We held back a tidal wave.”

Master Munrow breathed in more air. “Again: you helped us. In this relatively safe era, the Jedi have standardized most evaluative programs, which some say is good, others disagree. But here and there, unforeseen catastrophes happen and senior Padawans step up. Coruscant

Security Command had so many worries the last few days, but CSC did not worry about those non-emergency sections where you all were assigned. Our people knew we could count on you.”

He lowered his hood to show a bald head like the teens in front of him, only his hair follicles had been burned away. “And after back-and-forth discussion, we came to a decision. Jedi Knights: your trials are over. Your collective actions have stated this.”

The circle began to vibrate. Exhausted teens glanced at one another in lessening disbelief, their bodies discovering new reservoirs of energy.

“Congratulations.” The other Jedi Masters joined Munrow in repeating this.

The group erupted. Sounds became one, echoing off of archways and in the air above.

Kel hip-checked Zennon. “Time to cut our braids, Zen.”

He hip-checked back before giving her a hug. “You are so amazing, Kel. Thank you.”

While clutching Zennon and tearing up, Kel remembered sitting in a Courier’s galley and Sylmonica Valkanna’s eyes lighting up as she unwrapped the gift from Thia Niandra.

“We’re done...and we’ve only just begun.” The brand-new Jedi Kel was visualizing that trio of brand-new Jedi dancing with each other when Master Munrow spoke up again.

His voice lost its cheer. “Unfortunately, while today is happy, the Jedi way of life is the Jedi way of life. Ever since the hyperspace accident that killed Master Dasmarr, negotiations between the systems have devolved.”

The High Council’s military chief wheeled forward. Three steel-gray eyes surveyed the concerned faces. Her voice contained none of Master Munrow’s cheer. “Even though the tragedy has been ruled an accident, Nimba agendas are accusing the slave-practicing Darranians of sabotage. Slave-supporting systems are siding with Darrania, escalating tensions. Cantio may be sedate at the moment, but that could change. And Yntok is...organic. We must plan for worst-case scenarios. Many of you will join a task force, forming as we speak and leaving soon...”

The Jedi High Council continued to explain the new crisis to the novice Knights. While trying to pay attention to the briefing, Kel couldn’t help obsessing over the fact that Master Munrow failed to mention Syl’s name when he brought up the accident in hyperspace.

Daylight warmed Syl’s face. She had paused the long talk to signal Sten with the landing zone’s coordinates. Though the black ship in orbit could not be seen or heard, she kept her gaze on the sky. The stroll through the foothills replayed in her head. Actually, just one moment, when the wind kicked up the sand. Recalling it made her realize the time to leave had come.

One conscious vision from an enjoyable walk had interrupted an earlier train of thought about family. Spending the last hours around a father and daughter made Syl regret destroying the Prayer Star. Though it was not ever her parents’ property, she missed the metallic piece.

As the day brightened, the father and daughter’s hazy images dulled.

“A long time ago,” Darth Famne snorted. “A long, *long* time ago...my thirtieth birthday crept up on me when I wasn’t looking. A bright idea popped into this unreliable brain of mine: tattoo my skin, all black, head to toe, see how it contrasts with my hair and eye colors. Oops.”

The Poet cocked her head at the peeling, green paint on one wall, now visible in daylight. “I tried covering my colossal mistake with symbols, to no avail. Finally had the tattoos removed and my skin afterward was...gray. Just gray. Aging is enraging. As my demise neared, I asked my wisest counsel about the possibility of assuming a youthful form after becoming one with the

Force. He cautioned that a sacrifice would be required: at least thirty of my most devoted priests and priestesses. I replied, 'Dear, sacrifice fifty. We need to get this right.'

Famne directed her sneer at Syl again. "Your wrinkles...how do you stand it, ex-Jedi?"

"Daughter, your vanity cannot be contained." Darth Desparus let out a laugh. As the night died, he had removed his black cloak. An avid hunter while alive, he once ordered servants to tailor pelts from smaller kills into a four-button blazer that fell with his wide shoulders and offered internal pockets for two double-sided sabers. "After so much obsession over skin, disease ravaged your insides and you died so, so slowly."

"Indeed, I did." Her finger-wave sprung to life. "But I killed you first."

The two lost their composure, combining hysterics that shook the ground. All around the courtyard perimeter, weakened pieces of the walls fell.

Syl raised the palm of her gloved left hand and summoned the Force to protect her hearing. The two adversaries' laughter ceased. Stillness returned.

"Family drama..." Famne rolled her eyes, then resumed stroking her rainbow of a braid with a light touch. "But...I guess that is a concept you don't know much about..."

She winked as she took her father's hand. "Sorry. Couldn't resist."

"Are you feeling better about the entirety of your life after journeying to the spot where a fleeting moment generated so much shame, Sylmonica Valkanna?"

The third lord, the one about to depart, stared at a rickety building frame at the property's far end. The morning's brightness exposed piles of structural damage not seen earlier. "That's what I'm trying to figure out. Or...maybe I'm obsessing over other problems. I don't know."

"No need to figure it out now. All will be resolved in time." Famne noticed Syl's fixation on the ruins. "The power hour was just phase one, in case you weren't aware. Only phase two never happened. Because of you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Enemy fleets had staged for a follow-up assault." Famne answered the confusion with a wink. "After surrounding quadrants sent first responders, the next attack wave would target those exposed settlements. However, planners lost contact with the ground team. Some sore-covered garbage-couple in Minerstown failed to send an update."

"Growing fearful, the planners delayed the second wave. And delayed. Then Republic reinforcements arrived." Desparus nodded at a perplexed face.

"A drop from hyperspace, a window of opportunity shuts, a plot thickens..."

Desparus laughed at his daughter's quip before focusing on the ex-Jedi again. "A fragile coalition fell apart—criminal leaders, star systems, and silent partners. The power hour wasn't a one-off, but the start of a long-game campaign backed by deep-pocketed interests Galaxy-wide bent on destabilizing the Republic. Off-Cantio strikes also. Phase two, three, four, more."

"Asymmetric warfare, ex-Jedi, Republic-wide acts of terrorism—"

"I hate what I did." Syl wiped the tear from her eye and took a breath. "If I stopped a bigger war from starting, that doesn't mean what I did was good—"

"Who said anything about 'good'? You did what needed to be done." Famne offered a real smile before raising her voice. "You controlled this war zone on that day. Controlled, dominated it—you showed the Galaxy why the dark side exists."

The faint sound of two sub-light engines grew into a whisper.

"Conflictedness is natural." Desparus' brows had softened, like his voice. While alive, other Sith called on him to mediate disputes and advise with treaties. "A Sith's power centers in

love and hate. One must possess an undying love for the galaxy or else the dark side would turn its back, no matter a being's ability to wield hatred."

"Let me tell you a story about a loving Jedi Knight who got ripped from her mother's arms as a child." The Poet motioned at the frame section where Syl killed on the upper floor. "One fine day, she DESTROYED some low-rent, sociopathic TRASH and—"

"You don't know me." She had stepped away from Desparus to get in Famne's face.

"Darling: the lords of the ages know you. Here we sat, enraptured by you. One of our own sapped every bit of 'power' from some sad 'power hour' orchestrated by wannabes and we cheered you on." Famne snickered. "By nightfall, we knew your name, every twist and turn of your face. You have admirers—beings who many would see as gods if their piddly minds could fathom us, devious one."

"Titans stood in awe of you that day. They gazed at an equal. They—"

"You were perfect, ex-Jedi. Perfect." Famne's roar matched her father's. "The chaos...you wrangled it, strangled it—closed pathways forever. Quickly, efficiently—ruthlessness may be hard to look at, but it gets the job done. You. Were. Beautiful."

Snarl dissipating, she stopped pacing, back to the habit of playing with her hair. "The Sith did not thrive for millennia by wasting time, good sister. Sometimes, the adults need to step in."

"The adults'...hmmm." Syl gathered her coat as the rumbling of her approaching vessel made itself known. "Welp...I guess I should be flattered. But I don't want to destroy planets like Nihilus, or sit on a throne, or aim for immortality. I just want to use the dark side of the Force to free slaves and exterminate slavers in ways that terrify other slavers."

"Wield the dark side however you want, killer." Famne was tearing up. "Look at that face, daddy. Devious and authentic at the same time, tormented yet centered."

"Your family misses you, Sylmonica Valkanna." Desparus nodded at his equal.

Famne took her father's hand, also gazing at Syl. "The light in the darkness is yours now, firebrand. Shine it on those souls who need help. Start with your own."

Chapter Three

“Entering the Bommina moon’s atmosphere now, Syl.”

Hearing Sten over the ship’s intercom, Sylmonica Valkanna closed the centuries-old lesson about communicating with Force-ghosts and left her tiny stateroom for the cockpit.

A cloud-packed sky concealed every detail from the surface below. Dust mixed with cloud cover as they descended. Keeping her gaze outside on the blankness, Syl wished for the Archangel Prayer Star, just to fiddle with, if anything.

Nearing the landing site, Sten raised the engine intakes’ protective guards and, for the final approach, relied on the underside’s hover-generator to guide them in. Extending the three landing struts, the AI brought the slowing ship close to burned-out wreckage similar in size to their own vessel. Closing the distance, the broken-down sight clarified through the fog.

“The Dathomirians weren’t kidding. Their planet looks like a resort next to this place.” Wrapping her turban, she peered through the curved window. Downed spaceships. A circle of pitiful huts. A bleak horizon. A band of beings huddled together. One waved. “The radiation field we navigated through...those folks live in it.”

Round and square screens along the console’s curve blinked as information updates from the diagnostics and comms systems came in. *“To be honest, Syl, without Warlord Nurado’s maps I would have been hesitant to fly through that field.”*

“You...hesitant?” She had to laugh while covering her eye wound with the length of cloth. “One of the many things I love about you, Sten, is that you experience sensations like hesitation. You’re great company, friend. Now I need to say hello to these folks.”

Greeters hobbled on canes and walkers towards the tubelike hull lowering to the sand.

Landing, a hissing as the struts’ shocks compressed. The new arrivals got an eye-level look at a sad group of twelve. Folds of flesh hung from faces and limbs, skin tones either a light-greenish or dirty-yellowish color. A hunched-over man maybe twice Syl’s age pulled a trolley carrying a drooling woman who made her emaciated helper appear healthy, in comparison.

The ex-Jedi brought up the dark red hood while recalling a moment from Learnership: Master Zatan’s attempt at rationalizing to his Learner why they were standing by when, in the rooms above, the son of a Grand Duke beat a teenaged slave. The boy’s screams have stayed with Sylmonica Valkanna ever since. She toyed with the idea of paying this son, now fifty and a Grand Duke himself, a visit. Sten located his whereabouts two weeks ago.

Zatan...he and Master Lanta Dasmarr’s similarities, many Jedi like them. *Too many.*

The gull-door on the hull behind the cockpit lowered to the sand. Syl stood at the top of the steps, yellow eye glowing from beneath the inclusive hood, taking stock of the congregation.

Sten cut the engines, an abrupt downshift into pure silence due to top-line mechanic work. An ailing welcoming committee bowed. Those who could kneel fell forward in praise.

One of the more able-bodied subjects slow-walked a step. “Welcome, great wielder of the Force, to this revered ground. In the war’s last days, Darth Torturok buried his last will and testament deep in that mountain where King Huedd’s spellcasters used the dark side to split atoms over 5000 years ago. Lord Torturok knew that only skilled Force-wielders could protect themselves from radiation inside the caves. My name is Four-Eyes. Due to these.”

The sickly humanoid pointed to his forehead. Above each of his bloodshot eyes, a greenish tumor had formed. “The left one, on humid days it oozes—”

“Your health issues do not interest me.”

“Forgive me, I—”

“Why are you so late?” The waste of a woman in the beat-up trolley coughed wet phlegm. “You left Dathomir two weeks ago. The Rees were beginning to wonder.”

Marching over, the lord bent as if to scold and instead grinned from ear to ear at a cowering subject. “I took my time, young lady. This Galaxy has so many pretty sights to see.”

“Clouds are clearing. It’s visible.” Slowly raising his scab-pocked left arm, Four-Eyes motioned to the lone peak jutting up through the haze on the far side of the desert.

“The cave’s entrance is halfway to the summit, great one.” A frail Twi’lek without a left arm steadied on a rail-thin cane using her gaunt right arm. “It should take a day and a half to reach the lower stronghold. Radiation intensifies as you trek inward, renders sabers useless.”

“Constant application of the Force as a shield will exhaust but you must move slow, a creel-crawler’s pace at best.” Four-Eyes fixed his two real eyes on the visitor. “Otherwise, the energy will destroy you. And it will destroy your ship’s electronics if you fly up there.”

“Walking...” Syl sighed, checking out the craggy blemish. “I knew you would say that.”

Before entering the cave’s upper chamber, Syl prepared for the sight of corpses, or pieces of corpses. But beyond the second turn downward, she didn’t encounter any more skeletons or petrified body parts sprawled on the rocks. Though invisible, a radiation field made itself known. Fortune hunters who couldn’t wield the Force gave up their dreams and turned back. All light dwindled to nothing after the eighth or ninth turn. Darkness held ever since.

Almost tip-toeing, fighting exhaustion, traversing ever deeper. A new day. She sensed it.

The heat. Smart move, leaving her red coat behind. Syl loosened her black tunic. She didn’t mind the eyepatch’s itch. An annoyance, it kept her grounded in the tight surroundings.

Intent and focused, the newest darksider used a lifelong Force-sensitivity to push back against energy from below. Fending off the deadly rays had gotten easier as she built up momentum. At some points, her calves and ankles wanted to quit more than her thighs. At others, her thighs threatened to give out. Now? Her body just rode the path’s decline.

Shuffling at a creel-crawler’s speed into the heart of a mountain, the fledgling demanded that the Force block the relentless onslaught before it cuts through her body. While arduous, it felt comfortable, doing what she was doing. *Instructing the Force to push back on the radiation rush, carry out my will...I’m ordering the Force, commanding the Force...forcing the Force?*

This last insight brought out a snorty, sleep-deprived giggle.

A junction, a new tributary. While negotiating a sharp corner, the heaviness pushed her to recall working on the surface of the planet during Phase One. *Only back then you were wearing a reinforced pressure suit now it’s just a black tunic...not really a comparison there, Syl—*

Pain ripped through her body. Needles, all over. Feeling every tiny stab, she raised her palms at the subterranean threat and regained her focus.

The Force failed to deflect the invisible surge for a blip in time. And her body paid the price. As a Force-controller, she needed to control. Just like previous times, this instance brought the inevitable wrath of the ever-present killer. Since the beginning, ebbs and flows dictated progress’ pace. When rivers flowed higher, extra vigilance was needed. This was a reminder.

Loss of concentration in the past, her now-yellow eye blinked as she took a breath before again stepping through narrow hallways made of rock. New turns took her farther into the caves. Though she was wiped out, mentally and physically, Syl had it under control.

And then she heard a piercing roar from somewhere ahead.

A succession of primal cries followed. At least five beings heading this way.

Despite her instincts, she didn't reach for her saber. A tired-but-functional mind knew it sat in her little stateroom on the ship, kilometers away. Syl strategized about using the confined space to her advantage. But a rough fight could bring the rock ceiling crashing inward.

The Force revealed seven heartbeats. Six-legged creatures. They caught her scent. The enraged pack's volume grew frenzied. Footsteps, hard hits. Hoofbeats rumbled the walls.

She reached out with the Force to choke the carnivores—until the needles returned. She refocused on defending against another destroyer, one that was nothing but subparticles.

Attackers, intent on a meal, thundered from the depths. Their momentum shook the caves. The dust they rustled up made her cough.

Deep beneath the surface, with an onslaught stampeding towards her, an ancient piece of wisdom calmed her mind. The dark sage's words about discovering new abilities applied to weaker Force-wielders and stronger ones alike.

At the epicenter of pain lies clarity of thought. In the midst of intense discomfort, an epiphany brings comfort.

Syl let go.

Needles. Subatomic radioactivity bombarded. Lethality from the mountain's depths barraged. A tidal wave imperceptible to the naked eye battered. But a conscious mind made two writhing legs stay standing. The dark side of the Force pointed her subconscious towards learnings from making the electron field that kept her alive in space. As it had countless times before, an ageless teacher shared unseeable knowledge.

For the last day and a half, she has been wielding the Force inside this mountain at levels few Jedi ever reach. The concentration, the length of time and focus in one direction, she feels its effects in her core, the nucleus that kept her alive in space.

Though it tormented her to do so, Syl raised both arms and stretched out all ten fingers at the black hallway in front of her sightless view. Her heart sped up, its tingling body-wide.

Streams of brightness that began to pour from her dirty fingertips revealed the cave's inhabitants. Covered in scales, each had beady eyes, atrophied by lightlessness. Fangs jutted beneath flat noses, six nostrils in a row. Pointy ears tuning forward, the beasts galloped straight at her. Before the flood enveloped them, its initial sparks illuminated them.

Wavy bolts of energy escaping her outstretched arms hit the incoming swarm. Death-delivering light fried simple-minded beings who thought they had stumbled upon an exotic meal.

Needles, no more. What could penetrate Syl's body to cause havoc at the cellular level got wielded against others instead. So much destructive power. And she was the one sending it back the direction it came from. The Force had no choice. Its ebb and flow? Hers. The Force had no choice but to help her steal electrons from the air, bend them and twist them. It had no choice.

In two days, while meditating, Sylmonica Valkanna will compare two moments from four decades of life: getting shocked unconscious years ago by a power generator, and using this cave's radiation to conjure up Force-lightning for the first time.

The first three victims blocked the passageway, screaming. Writhing bodies stacked up, their struggles making it worse. The smell of cooking flesh. Nauseating, but not distracting.

A few body lengths away from the charred remains, Syl cut the homicidal streams. Darkness once again. Light no longer burned her skin.

The remaining members of the pack would not return. Feelings of gratitude that she didn't need to kill more. Learning could continue without taking another life.

Unlike before, she now fended off the radiation surge without exerting herself. She walked in darkness, but at a stroll's pace. Breathing easy. Feeling no pain, no needles. Guard down. *Like that refreshing walk through the foothills to Minerstown.*

A chamber, around the next corner. And not much more than an alcove beyond it. No door of metal or stone, just an archway after the passageway curved downward.

The long, dirt-covered strongbox nestled in the alcove with just a finger's width of space on each side. She nudged it and figured that its thick walls protected the contents from this radiation. Syl took a step back to make room, then raised her left hand and was about to lift it up with the Force. But a flat screen on top, its light blinked. Layers of dust had obscured it.

She bent down to brush off the screen. A light shined on her muddy face.

"I was born Keethanak Swannu Crokussik, the Eighth, a standard-bearer in the Crokussik Dynasty. A lesser-known branch of royalty, we stayed out of the public eye to concentrate on the Force." A bald, clean-shaven human who looked to be near Syl's age sat upright in the screen, close-up. *"When I die, which will be soon, they will call me Torturok, Dark Lord of the Sith."*

As he talked, his puffy eyes would roam away from the screen into the distance, then back to the screen. *"I was only recently granted this title. So much I will never do. And most of those who welcomed me into their little world are now dead."*

He needed a few breaths. The tears started. The shift in his posture showed the bright jewelry covering his left ear. *"This fact fills me with regret. But death does not bring sorrow. I am one with the Force. I will encounter those masters, sages...the lunatics...again, somewhere."*

His bare right ear was damaged and scarred, unlike the left. *"Jedi cruelty reaches far and wide. But, unfortunately, we are too weak to stop it. Ego feeds us. Yet it consumes us. Yes, we deserved our defeat. We could have been united...would have been so beautiful to see."*

Syl teared up, just as the man on the screen cried. *"Enough about the past. In this strongbox, future wielder, are artifacts revered by believers. To be honest, I do not understand. But I do not need to. To rule, all one needs to fathom is their importance to others."*

Exhausted, she giggled recalling the terror on the Scholars' faces when she pretended to hurl Darth Sabotaa's saber into the oblivion of Coruscant City's depths.

The smile faded. His talk about his genetic line...it occurred to her how little she knew about her family tree. She had to disregard so many stories recently learned because they were just lies used to get close. She wiped her tears and left a smudge by her eye.

"Whoever you are, take these. Venture back up these passageways, from the darkness and back into the light." The screen went blank. The space was lightless again.

The listener stood up, brainstorming. *Use the Force to protect against radiation, also carry this bin filled with baubles and knickknacks...good thing I'm so slap-happy right now.*

She raised her left hand.

The vault rumbled to break free of the stone enclosure. It began to rise.

Another rumbling. A far-off quake. Then the first explosion happened. And the second.

The floating container in front of her began to speak. A final recording. After a laugh, Darth Torturok said, *"By the way, I rigged up radiation bombs in the depths. These should bring a percentage of the mountain down."*

Syl steadied her cargo with her hand and the Force as she fought to keep her footing. The ceiling above started to shake and little pebbles hit her head.

“You should get moving.” The speaker cut out.

Syl barely heard the end. Descending, she took small steps. Ascending, sprinting was the only option. Both boots dug in and propelled her the way she came. Palms forward, she channeled the Force to strongarm that strongbox through the shaking passageway. Feet pounding, Syl rocketed back up the cave’s veins with a trunk full of artifacts leading the way. The metallic container scraped off the sides, the sparks brightening it all so Syl could see.

In a few moments, the walls around her won’t exist.

Upward into the darkness, she screamed. “Out of the way, beasts or this strongbox will knock your heads off.”

Far below, metric kilotons of mountain fell inward into itself, level by level sinking in—the structural damage below worsening due to unfathomable weight from above.

The ground shook less the farther she got from the depths, though that was temporary. A mountain was dying. If she halted, she would be grabbed and carried downward as if the prey of a water predator who catches its food at the surface and drowns it at the bottom.

Winding around corners. Trudging up elevations that would soon be gone. Yes, her newly-realized abilities were substantial. But they could not stop what was now a geological chain reaction. However, she had the power to not only save herself, but a crate containing trinkets. The Force was at her disposal four times over: it gave her legs speed, shielded her from energy rays, granted her sight, and carried a heavy weight.

The rock beneath her feet: its vibrations. Ahead: light.

Syl gave the valuables a physical shove, closing the distance with daytime.

Reaching the outer room, she bounded through an entrance that was about to crumble and her whole body warmed. The overload of rays from the stars made her eye squint, but the Force gave her sight.

With no walls and ceiling to confine, she brought it up a level. Padawan obstacle course training kicked in. Hopping and sidestepping. Perpetual motion. She leaped and bounded from rock mass to rock mass in their final moments before coming apart. Two boot-covered feet carried a body.

The mountainside swelled here and fell off over there—terrain that had more in common with the surface of a lake during a thunderstorm. The slope from this middle part of the mountain downward held. For now.

Put distance between herself and the sinkhole at the center of the mountain behind her. Navigate instability. Just stay one step ahead. Syl felt panicked. Also, never more in control. From the wave’s crest to its trough, it was hers.

“Torturok: if I ever meet you in person, I will rip those earrings out of your head.”

Geologic destruction drowned out her scream and she didn’t care. She let out the loudest whoop her sleep-deprived body could muster.

The strongbox bounced up and down like it was coming along for the ride.

Chapter Four

The bluff overlooked the new day. A blooming morning's light revealed more with each passing second. Abandoned crop fields, now bare in some areas and overgrown with blue native brushweed in others. Bomb craters interrupted the groomed lands, but were losing out to the natural and inevitable reclamation of it all.

Sensing Sylmonica Valkanna's slow approach, Sten activated the ship's port side hatch.

The ex-Jedi's mud-covered boots dragged up each step, leaving tracks to the cockpit. The black strip of cloth covering the left boot had come undone and unwound, a section trailing behind her. Without removing the soaked and filthy jacket, Syl flopped into the right seat and stared out the window. Along with grime, little welts covered her face and neck.

Sten broke the silence. *"Was Village Cluster B located in the spot where the public databanks said it would be? Information seemed suspect."*

"Yes, Sten." Her gaze didn't leave the brightening horizon. Her scratchy voice stayed a whisper. "The village where my family lived was exactly where you said it would be. Thank you for making the map. That was very kind. Thank you."

"You sound hoarse. Would you like me to have the galley to heat some tea? I can heat steam for your shower as well."

"No thank you." She removed the black headband and eyepatch that had been covering her wound and threw it at the other seat without looking over. Her face showed a dirt outline.

"Also, I activated the deflectors for a short time last night, a bit of overkill but it protected the cockpit windows and signature-reducing paint applications along the hull from that awful hail."

"Sounds...it sounds like you did good."

"I was concerned about your safety as well. You found shelter then, I'm assuming?"

"I got through the storm, yes. Your concern means a lot. I would like to sit here and look out the window. Now that I understand why we came here, I would like to look out the window."

"Your family misses you, Sylmonica Valkanna." An echo, similar to Darth Desparus' voice. A meditative revelation just as intrusive as the instruction to fly to Dathomir.

While discoveries on Dathomir, Cantio, and the Bommina moon flooded the fledgling darksider's intellect with volumes of invaluable knowledge about the Force, part of her kept wishing she hadn't destroyed the Archangel Prayer Star given to her by Quim-Na Sulif.

A silly regret, when reexamined rationally. *The star never mattered. Though thoughts of family do matter. No. They're holding you back.*

Meditation guided. She deduced that, instead of pining for the star, she should venture to the spot where her own blood got murdered and pressure the Force to find answers for her. This newfound sense of dominance over the energy field, leverage it to go straight for the truth.

Plus, her family's killings tied with her desire to kill slave practitioners—slavery caused their deaths. If journeying to Cantio helped her grasp the importance of the power hour attack, perhaps traveling to Mytyo will bring...peace? Probably not. But insight and closure sounded just as appealing as a sense of peace. The future needed to begin. Innocents were hurting.

Upon comprehending Desparus' echo fully, the novice Sith instructed Sten to plot a course to the planet where her parents died. They bid the jungle temple farewell. Syl stayed in her quarters the whole flight studying a holocron about summoning Force-ghosts.

Perhaps she'll find something her parents actually once possessed, she had no idea. Maybe a Prayer Star sits in the debris of their bombed-out dwelling calling out to her.

After Sten landed them on the bluff, Syl emerged from her chambers and left the ship without speaking because she needed to stay in the trance. She only took notice of the surroundings to move her physical body to a destination. Sten's map stayed clutched in her hand, but wasn't needed for the walk and its existence faded to her mind's recesses.

The Force brought moments to the forefront of her brain. While Quim-Na lied about so much, she told at least a few truths about her father and mother.

The daughter of a leader and a teacher made her way to the place of family members' demise. As she stepped, her train of thought roamed, wondered about relatives planting their own footsteps on these same paths. *Did they ever talk about me?*

If it were daytime or the two moons were fuller, the fallow fields dotting the landscape would be visible. The Force exposed every detail. The drone attack wiped out a network of village clusters, town center, and fuel dumps. Surrounding farmlands mainly showed neglect, with damage from explosives and blasters.

Syl, hood up in the clean cloak, rounded the third hill. A collection of burned-out dwellings in the flats, what was once called "Village Cluster B." Its location matched with the map. A laserburn-riddled road sign provided additional confirmation. Every three-room hut had been reduced to supports, at the most. Here and there, bombed-out holes disrupted sections of the thirty-unit cluster's main roadway. Native vegetation had already taken root in them again, with red vines spilling out from many.

Sensing others, her thoughts and pulse raced. She regretted reading the holocrons' instructions about summoning Force-ghosts.

"Why the confused look, Syl? Who were you expecting to see...the Valkannas?"

Around fifteen Force-ghosts—the apparitions' bodies in later stages of decomposition—occupied spots along the road and some stood inside the remains of huts.

"Everyone: she thought she could order the dark side of the Force to summon her dead family. Well, here we are, mighty summoner of deadness. The only family you've ever known. As dead and as rotted as your connection to the past."

The booming chorus of dismissive laughter from the other translucent Jedi corpses accompanied Thia Niandra's scorn-filled inquiry and the hostile remark from Zuk Vandersett that followed.

Though she was a cloudy vision, Thia's light-blond hair, much thinner, popped against the ropy, burned skin. With so much flesh missing, the right side of her face revealed bone and teeth. The filthy bandages covering Zuk had unraveled. Rot peeled away in places.

Not the family reunion you were looking for, is it, Syl? That soft tone took a second to register. Her friend Makkartho, using the Force to communicate. Like a few of the others, Makk was missing at least one limb—in her case, her left arm had been severed above the elbow. Most of her black fur had scorched away, also some skin.

Before she could stop herself, Syl covered both ears. The congregation laughed louder.

Thia's sneer showed her broken teeth. "Like all of us, you were taken. We Jedi—"

"No—it's not like that—"

“Nice new robes, by the way...the brown uniform no longer fit?” Zuk’s snark brought out a barrage of ugly scoffs and barks of hysterics.

Two Twi’leks, comrades from a security detail, a mission in her early twenties. They died in a shuttle crash. A Trandoshan friend who got killed three years ago by a sniper. Syl’s glances jumped from Jedi to Jedi to Jedi. “I’m going to save innocent people—watch—”

All three mangled corpses spat disgusted laughter that drowned out her words.

Syl yelled. “You *all* will see—the Jedi are useless. I am going to free enslaved by—”

Dead Jedi shouted their giggles.

An ex-Jedi, desperate, searched for signs of empathy. “Darth Agon’s teachings...watch.”

Syl raised both hands at the sky. The Force comprehended her intensified hate. She felt the Force shrink away. She pulled the Force close. Seconds later, thunder hurt her ears and rain poured down from the darkness above. Everything besides the visions started to get soaked.

Zuk and Thia did a victory jig in the downpour. Others joined in.

Thia bellowed out. “Wow...Queen Yellow-Eye can control the weather. Lucky her.”

Did you think we’d be impressed? Makk’s soft eyes had hardened. Neither of them let go.

“Because I’m going to use my extra abilities to eradicate slavery, don’t you see?”

No, I don’t.

The rains beat down. One crack of thunder started a roaring trend. Soaking in the downpour, Syl had to back away from the death surrounding her. Torrents transformed into sleet, all while dumping at a higher rate. A graveyard of friends bellowed at blackening skies that opened up reservoirs to unload upon this former village, exponentializing the flood from above. Drenched, the sobbing one could do nothing but shuffle away from the hatred, two cloth-covered boots dragging a soaked body. She wrapped the hood tighter as the hailstorm took over.

Makk, now standing behind, tapped Syl on the shoulder. *Now make it stop, Lord Syl.*

Syl raised her hands at hail mixing with buckets of rain. The tempest intensified. Hail replaced every last droplet. Larger hail took the place of smaller hail. Though the hood and shoulder pads were made of layers of animal hide, the ever-growing chunks landed like punches.

“She turned the storm on. But she doesn’t know how to turn it off.”

The circle of light-siders lost composure ridiculing the new darksider now curled up in a ball shielding her head from frozen rain.

Zuk let out a whoop at the hail deluge before yelling his advice. “Gotta use the dark side to protect yourself, Syl...conjure up a dark umbrella or something. It’s getting vicious.”

The hazy vision cackled a mean laugh at the sky. The others mimicked his bark, heads raised at an onslaught that could not hurt their spectral forms.

Thunder threatened to burst Syl’s eardrums. The accompanying lightning landed all over the dead crop fields, dancing a bit before vanishing forever. Every new iceball that rained down looked to be heavier and more gigantic than the ones before it.

“Please...” Hysterical, she fell again. Syl clasped her hands together in front of her.

“Beings are enslaved. They need me.”

Fist-sized hits of hail battered and assaulted her. The corpses enveloped their ex-friend. Thia’s goofy expression—Syl remembered that look...they were maybe ten years old and—

“I was there, too, Syl. We were playing in the recreation room in the south wing. That was long before you went to the dark side.”

Ro.

Like the rooftop visions from earlier nightmares, the lekhuhl was missing. Only that twenty-year-old Rohandra Teek looked alive. This Rohandra Teek looked like the other Jedi:

cadaverous. Her decaying, green lips moved. “And my role is to inform you that none of us are here right now.”

Lightning punished the landscape. Its flashes played with the glows surrounding Syl.

Ro and Thia looked down at the hysterical friend from Padawan days. School chums, arms around one another, shamed an ex-chum. Ro continued. “We are not Force-ghosts. You did not summon us. This is you. None of us are your family anymore. You are done being one of us. And you’ve only just begun your transformation into something that repulses us.”

Hail ceased. Cracks of thunder stopped. Bolts of lightning cut out.

Syl no longer faced Ro and Thia. No Jedi stood in judgment.

The skies above were clear. Too clear.

“Master Lanta Dasmarr’s last words were ‘you can’t be saved’ and she was right.”

Rohandra Teek’s last words to Sylmonica Valkanna were an echo. “Don’t try to summon us. We don’t miss you. There is no debate, Syl. You can’t be saved.”

Stillness—a sudden change—rushed into her ears. Quiet consumed. A sedate air did not feel the least bit soothing. Those lightning bolts that were scorching the grounds appeared to be zeroing in on her. Now they weren’t.

Incessant, increasingly-deadly sheets of water from above—she wished for them.

Trying to walk, she had to pull her boots up from the sticky ground. Cracked lips trembling, the desperate believer shuffled and searched around to see if her Jedi friends were hiding, maybe inside the broken walls of the huts. Everywhere she spied and peered, a blank emptiness looked back.

Giving up on her old comrades, she sought out the sight of native Mytyo wildlife, at least.

Nothing. This realization brought out fresh sobs. She fell to her knees. Mud and hail chunks filled this crater. Her body gave out. She slumped to her side.

Syl curled up. Syl broke down. In the quiet of the early morning, her hysterics carried through what was once Village Cluster B, where the Valkanna family once lived after being displaced by slave labor on their native planet.

Through the cockpit window, Syl wiped tears from her eye while noticing an emaciated, fur-covered creature loping across one of the bare crop fields. Another sighting of wildlife.

Her drying clothing, no longer soaked, felt clammy and clung to her body.

One of the suns was sitting higher in the sky when she spoke, a voice not losing its earlier roughness. “I brought us all the way out here to discover that I am alone, with no one else to rely on. Good thing I like solitude.”

That sun reached a new point in its arc when she next broke the stillness. “Sten...I have a mission for you.”

“A mission? Will it be in service of the cause you have told me so much about?”

“Yes, it will. Your sleuthing on the cartels and their secret business ties gave me a lot of insight.” She sat forward in the pilot’s chair to run her fingers along the controls. “But your mission is a secret mission. Log off while I program in details.”

The onboard computer processed her orders before responding. *“From your sadness and cryptic words, I am surmising that this mission is important. But data points are missing.”*

“Oh, it is important. And you’re perfect for it. Please don’t worry.” Removing the heavy, moisture-logged cloak caused her to wince. Her neck showed fresh bruises from the hail. The

coat dirtied the other seat in the cockpit after she tossed it over. “When I bring you back online, we’ll map a course to a Middle Rim system near the Republic border, a tourist destination I know about. It’s got natural hot springs that sound relaxing. Perfect for my fortieth birthday.”

“I have noted that this milestone is approaching.”

Syl smiled. “Yeah...a new decade.”

Out the window, she saw the lighted fields. “A new day.”

She got back to the orders. “You’ll remain parked at the resort’s spaceport awaiting instructions while my future gets pondered for a week or so. I’ll finalize plans after getting my head straight.”

The farming colony out the window, she paused to look at it.

“It’s time for me to think about returning. Tramm’s crew delivered Torturok’s crate to the Scholars.” A series of graphs showed up on the green screen to her right, showing cartel-connected payments to slave traders. “The shiny things were a hit. Everyone is expecting me to make a grand entrance, sooner or later. Which is fine. I’m tired of hanging out with ghosts.”

She skimmed reports Sten had compiled. Using data from Republic exchanges and news reports, the AI had located an unidentified fleet orbiting a moon in an independent system close to Yntok. “After relaxing and meditating, I’ll head back to Coruscant. Gonna use the Rees’ money to book the most expensive first-class ticket I can find.”

“Why can’t I come along? I would like to be there. From what I’ve read in the files, the Commencement ritual is highly important.”

“I’m sorry, friend. But you have a task for the cause. Now shut down already so I can input mission details. Oh...one last thing: prep my shower before you go to sleep.”

After firing up the water heater, Sten shut down.

Syl accessed the database.

XIII: Commencements

Chapter One

“Kitaros. U-5. Knight One. Clearance 822VU.” Cheeks flushed, she broke into a grin. Jedi Knight ArraKel Kitaros still got giddy whenever the word “Knight” came out of her mouth. *Knight One. First tour.* With her brown hood down, short dark curls made themselves known.

“*Weapon identification.*” The system’s automated tone droned.

She reached inside her robe and unhooked a curved saber, then held the brushed metal covering up to the small camera eye. The flashing light made her blink.

The speaker on the wall’s light turned from red to green. “*Please proceed, Knight Kitaros. Transportation information can be found at the console to the left of the entry point.*”

“Thank you very much.” The novice hooked her saber back onto her belt while stepping into the orbiting space station’s central hub, a space where Republic travelers could unwind.

The curvature of floor-to-ceiling windows allowed natural light to flood in from the scattering of stars. To bring a natural feel, the area was dotted with large base pots holding trees and bushes. At the windows near the arc’s center, a four-piece string band was setting up.

Kel scanned across the wide sweep, pausing at each of the fifteen or so whose robes were brown like hers. Breaking into a big grin, she spotted him by a food stand chowing down.

“Save some of those panelten skewers for the other passengers. Sheesh, Knight Tannerum.” She gave a scruffy Zennon Tannerum a healthy hip-check.

After finishing his bite of food, he shook his head at his lifelong friend. “I still can’t get used to you with hair. You look weird.”

“Yeah...you got the weird neckbeard going.”

“You’d look even weirder with a weird neckbeard—”

“Quiet.” Kel reached out to grab one of the small, square plates. “I need to eat.”

The two of them enjoyed finger food while watching fellow travelers. To make talking easier, they moved by a floral arrangement away from the food table and other eaters.

“So, you’re going to see many transportation hubs like this, providing security for a Senator’s staff. Get used to spaceport food.”

Kel used a skewer to stab a slice of caril, a citrusy fruit, on her plate. “Yeah...I’m detailed with a Senior Knight to Senator Korkuk.”

“I’ve been studying up on Corellia’s organized crime syndicates.” He took the last bite. “Master Quemnikk wants Stee and I up-to-speed by the time we arrive.”

She laughed out loud. “I still can’t believe they’re detailing you and Panduka together...”

“What...what did we do?”

“At least Kiri’s Peacekeeper is assigned to that sector. She can check up on you two.”

While nudging him, Kel noticed a cadre of Medics. From the blankness of their blue uniforms absent of citation symbols, they looked to be fresh Academius graduates. “After Syl died, I tried contacting Dilani Vestagon since she didn’t show at the memorial. Three messages, she didn’t respond. I tried again after we got back from the Darranian detail, too. No answer.”

Zennon shrugged. The new Knight also watched the Medics goof off and toast with drinks. “It sounds like she has a bigtime job at the Academius. Maybe she is busy.”

“Hmmm...something doesn’t feel right. On the *Horizon*, she seemed like a friend.”

“Maybe she’s still broken up over Huedd dying. Could’ve been broken up over Syl.”

“Maybe...shouldn’t speculate.”

Zennon had to put his plate aside before speaking again. "You made me think of something. Not long before Syl died, I saw her but she didn't see me. She was helping with security or something at the Senate...Syl looked great, like she was back. I didn't get a chance to say hi and told myself I'd send her a message, say hello."

"And?"

"I never did." Zennon stared off at the windows. "I kept meaning to, but didn't."

"The Force gave you a lesson." Kel put down her plate and turned to him. "Don't ever do that to me, Zen."

Hugging her tight, he said, "Never. Lesson learned."

The two ate quietly. Both smirked as the stockiest of the medics spilled food on himself and got razzed by the others.

Shaking her head at the scene, Kel said, "This first tour assignment with Senator Korkuk sounds exciting. Still...he is tied to mining and fuel cartels. After Phase One, I have conflicting feelings about those people, my role in all of this."

She grabbed his hand. "You are the only one I can share that with."

"Just keep it simple, Knight One: watch out for danger."

She shrugged. "I guess that's all I can do."

"But...I get what you're saying, shouldn't have been dismissive." He put his empty plate down before facing her. "And thank you, Kel. I wouldn't have made it without you. Thank you."

"You are so welcome, Zen."

After holding each other's gaze, two guardians of peace and justice relaxed in silence. Different species who worked for the Galactic Republic bustled about, on their way to different star systems and spaceports.

When Kel's transport number was called, the longtime buddies gave each other a long hug before she straightened her brown robe with the belt and unlit saber that was hooked to it underneath. "My stuff is all checked in. May the Force be with you."

"May the Force be with you, ArraKel."

Jedi Knight Zennon Tannerum watched a young woman that he had known since they were both toddlers. The hair made Jedi Knight ArraKel Kitaros somebody new, in a way. Her easy gait took her to the far exit which led to one of the spaceport's three hangar bays.

The two would not see one another again for four years.

Lowering his brown hood, Jedi Senior Knight Tiruss Dunn stepped forward. "Dunn. A-6. Special Detail. Clearance 282BR." The musty air in these lower depths tickled his nostrils.

Short hisses from the neglected heating system popped off. The device's swivel-mounted arm tracked his facial features, its outdated scanner creaking as the green light read across two tired eyes. This was the final checkpoint since entering the maximum-security wing. Once the heavy gate opened, a garish white glare switched on to illuminate a narrow, stone-lined hallway and entrances to temporary rooms where guards brought prisoners for meetings.

The worn-out traveler entered the open holding cell, halfway down. The tiny, dark room was partitioned in half by a detainment unit.

"Welcome to my world." A shaggy-haired human with a thin face and scraggly beard cracked a smile from the other side of the slotted cage. He snickered as his puffy eyes motioned

down to immobilized hands planted on each thigh. Red halos of light surrounded his wrists. "I'd shake. But...these pesky energy shackles..."

"Nice to see you, Gar." The visitor on Republic business kept his hands folded and sat tall in the simple chair across from the constrained being whom he had known since both were kids. "Your hair is longer, looking more salt and less pepper."

"I got nothing to do but age and grow hair these days. You're looking older, too." Gar Lomohd's grin lost its steam. "Before I get snarky, I'm sorry about the mining accident."

"Accident..." Tiruss scoffed. "A chunk of the planet is gone. But...thank you. Really."

Across from him, the longtime associate raised the fingers on his cuffed right hand and nodded. "My legal counsel tells me you were a hero that day. I told him, 'Dunn? That's just him being himself.' A day in the life, right?"

"I get that you are trying to needle me, but you would have stepped up, too." Tiruss had pulled out the small tablet from his cloak while his friend talked. He punched some buttons, bringing up the official prisoner bio titled *Tregarlan Lohmohd*. "The actual heroes were the miner-pilots, medics, and mechanics who went above and beyond."

"And more Jedi casualties...I knew a few on the *Stormchaser*. We live in optimistic times. Enemies that pose an existential threat are nonexistent. Yet...Force-wielders keep dying." Gar's loose skin hardened as his eyes narrowed. "You and I served on a Peacekeeper together."

"The *Steadfast*. Third tour. With Atta. I was thinking about that on the way over here." The Knight scanned the text on the screen while talking.

Gar broke into a grin. "Your tone of voice...is this all awkward?"

He had to look up. "No. Just—"

"You know what it is, Dunn?" The prisoner leaned forward as much as was allowed. "Something came to mind after they told me you were coming to visit, about us. Atta changed, I changed, maybe that's part of us falling in love, who knows? Anyway, I digress. But you...Jedi like you...you stayed the same. But *you* didn't become one of them. Admirable, had to say it."

Tiruss sighed while studying the information on his tablet screen. "Many wise Masters throughout the ages have cautioned against change, Gar. Maybe you should have listened."

The inmate quit staring off. "Speaking of Masters...or future Master, congratulations on beginning the track. And like my condolences before, I mean this congratulations as well."

"I don't doubt your sincerity. Though I got a long way to go. Years."

"And the teachers gave you a project for school. Me."

"I've been asked by the High Council to interview you, yes, Atta as well, since we came up in the same group and then served together later."

He rolled his eyes. "The geriatric folks in the towers want to know why we did it, huh?"

The Master candidate leaned forward. "Well, you four did commit serious crimes and your trial is about to take place. Don't play dumb."

Gar yawned. "Let us burn. We had an exit plan that didn't work out. I mean—"

His old friend leaned in again, scowling. "Quiet down...exit plan?"

The shackled one aped him in return, quiet and smirking again. With a lack of conversation, the steam heat's hiss became its own dialogue, taking control.

Both remained still, beyond the slight shift here and there.

Gar broke the silence. "The stolen money was going to be used to help children."

"What?"

"I guess it seemed like a good idea." Gar took a bit longer, offering a laugh. "We were going to buy an old farm in an Outer Rim system and set up a place to care for orphaned children...live out our days in peace doing some good. Atta and I get married. And—"

"Wait...you're talking crazy here. Slow down." The interviewer drew close to the cage.

The interviewee shrugged. "The two of us, and Renn and Swemu, we wanted to use the Force to help beings who deserved it. Forget the Republic."

Tiruss got up to shake it off. "Hang on...so...if you four had some 'plan' that was so virtuous, why did you decide to extort money to finance it?"

"Yeah...being in my cell all these months, I'm starting to wonder what we were thinking as well. Like I said: I changed." He stared off again. "But money is money. You and I were taught from an early age its insignificance compared to the Force. We weren't going to hurt the Yntoks, just figured they were less likely to report if we stole from them."

"You just angered the Yntok system. A situation worsening, you aggravated it right as there is talk about some new Jedi oversight bill."

"Like I said, Dunn, I've reframed my outlook on the Galaxy since being in here, I get what you are saying. But who cares about that oversight bill? It pains me that mining companies feel empowered to tear up Yntok's sacred asteroid field. Jedi should be stepping in."

"Enough about politics. Back to you four." Tiruss sat down and opened up his tablet. "So...this is going to be your testimonial at the trial, I take it."

"No."

"Huh?"

The conspirator shrugged, then yawned. "The four of us decided. The Republic doesn't need to know every gory detail. Now that our plan has no chance of happening, we'll just keep it to ourselves. We did commit robbery. Our motives should not play into it."

"Gar...I don't think I've ever understood you. But I never doubted you. Can't lie."

"Your partner, Valkanna...lots of good ones are going out like that. I knew Makkartho and Niandra. Solid." The Jedi studied the dirty edges of the barrier that imprisoned him. "I get this feeling they're trying to stamp us out, my brother."

Chapter Two

Torchlight kept the night sky away, brightening the length and width of the stone terrace.

“And when we could look up again, through that thick and toxic cloud, there she was at the far end of the dark horizon walking towards our village.”

Satiated, festive beings soaked in a tale about an imploding mountain and a new leader appearing in the ashy chaos bearing treasure.

Behind the squarish microphone on the stage that backed up to the Rees’ formal dining room, a teary-eyed darksider named Four-Eyes—a sickly old man unaccustomed to both public speaking and also heavy cloaks—kept shifting the expensive, forest-green garment around his thin shoulders. “Our lord drew closer, making her way through that dust cloud as if strolling while on a trip with the last will and testament floating behind her so dutifully.”

The lifelong follower adjusted his coat again, looking off into the distance at what would be a view of foothills if it were daytime.

Under a warm sky, one hundred extravagantly-dressed believers from across and outside the Republic gazed up at a fellow believer who burst with pride because his purpose had been fulfilled. Some cried at his recounting of his quiet existence’s pivotal moment. Six others from that day sat enraptured tonight, younger than their physical years. Like Four-Eyes, the devotees had assumed they would die before witnessing the arrival of the dark dawn.

“We contacted Tramm Nurado and told him to send a ship. A new lord found Torturok’s last will and I, Four-Eyes, got to make the call.” Chin up, a frail being stuck his shoulders back.

His declaration brought out a healthy cheer. Near the stage, Tramm toasted his friend. The jewel-laden headpiece laden made the warlord’s sizable head look even flatter and squarer.

Four-Eyes’ thin lips trembled. He dabbed his tears with a cloth. “I had pledged to live out my life in that forsaken place, hoping to witness something life-changing, reap the rewards.”

The Rees’ manicured gardens, though not visible in the night, infused the light gusts of air with a sharp sweetness from perfectly-aligned bushes that were covered with purple blooms.

“And I love you for it, Four-Eyes, you handsome man. I love you like a two-headed Troig kid loves a platter full of hurkberry-filled pastry cakes.”

Believers bellowed at the booming comment from the inebriated Agonian, Dandoma Mokra. He stood with Dilani Vestagon, Quim-Na Sulif, Tramm, and his henchman, Tresskuss. With the wooziness amplifying a natural expressiveness, partygoers in his orbit had to watch out—not only from the perennially-full, bowl-sized drink glass, but also the feather-covered hat wide enough to cover the bases of both lekku protruding from the back of his head.

Quim-Na, Dilani, and Tresskuss each puffed dried root mixes from ornate pipes, gifts from Mattias. All bellies were full. Tramm’s, so much that he had to loosen the antique weapons holster around his waist. The piece once belonged to a Vice Admiral who served Valkorion. Three other dark believers present tonight helmed fighting fleets as well. Tramm and Tresskuss added militant edges to their wardrobes in order to send the message that they stood ready.

Quim-Na had spent the afternoon being dressed by a team of attendants. In platform heels, she leaned down to Dilani while keeping her eyes on the stage. “The least done-up of anybody here, yet more regal than any of us.”

For the umpteenth time that night, Dilani shifted her gaze to the newly-forty-year-old woman in the black hood seated at the table’s head. Along both of her sides were the Rees, King and Queen Ralsus of the Kynn Dynasty, and a few other elites. A lack of jewelry and cosmetics

set the former Jedi apart from the opulence all around. The guest of honor wore a genuine smile, one shielded by the head covering that surrounded her face and shaggy, black hair. Earlier, she used a natural glue to attach the black eyepatch. The oval-shaped covering got framed by the metal burn scar's jagged edges on the sides and above, where the eyebrow once was.

"She's the perfect storm that the dark side needs, Dilani." Quim-Na chuckled. "And we were the ones to pick her up at the spaceport. She books VIP passage, arrives anonymously."

"The perfect storm...you and I were there to greet her."

Four-Eyes wrapped up his speech by shuffling over and pledging himself on bended knee. He struggled, but his lord's appreciation gave him life. She stroked his cheek before sitting upright and sipping her tea. Four-Eyes took his chair at the end of the table.

Mattias Ree rose to take his turn at the microphone. Those who knew the public face, the reserved old Scholar, witnessed a man in rare spirits.

"Don't slur your words, my dear."

Zinora Ree's shout from the table was met with polite laughter.

Mattias waved off his crown-wearing wife before beaming at his guests again. "The dark side of the Force has reached an exciting intersection. We are the beneficiaries because we, we here tonight, get to welcome into our ranks a woman of gravity and character."

From their place in the crowd, Quim-Na took a drag and leaned into Dilani's ear again. "Lookit Mattias...asserting himself...making it sound like he's calling the shots..."

Both women giggled. Tramm rolled his eyes at them. The uncomfortable Tresskuss broke into a smile after a nudge from Quim-Na.

The Scholar Emeritus sipped the fermented root to clear his throat for the closing. "A new time creeps in...small steps forward that will rumble the ground in the future and change this Galaxy. Join me in welcoming Devia, Dark Lord of the Sith."

The hood obscured her facial features while the evening's final speaker received her congregation. She let them continue praising, taking it in wearing a small, genuine smile.

As the adulation lost steam, Darth Devia stepped forward. "I would like to share three stories from my travels. The opener is about the moment I heard my name for the first time. It happened in the foothills on my way to encounter Desparus and Famne in Minerstown."

Worshippers offered up their complete attention.

The folds of Darth Devia's headpiece enveloped the microphone. "Being a Force-wielder my whole life, the energy field has manifested in countless forms, I've lost sight of the ways."

Her voice, soft, remained rock-steady. The sound system carried it. "But that night on Cantio, the wind spoke in a voice that I had never heard before. It kicked up the sand around me to get my attention and the loudest whisper ever warned of the winged predator dive-bombing from above, over my right shoulder."

Quietly, she said, "... 'dee' 'vee' 'ahhh.' This saved my life. 'Dee'... 'vee'... 'aaah'."

Adoring listeners learned how this whisper spurred her defense, which began with backflipping in a reverse-arc, upwards trajectory, straight into the path of the incoming threat. "At four body lengths above the ground, I decapitated that bird. Barely got a look at the beast's ravenous eyes."

She paused to take in the light breeze, letting it play with the folds of her black hood and tickle her face. “I finished my last flip, landed, saber unlit and hanging from my belt once again. The sounds of the wind played on repeat in my head as I got back to my jaunt through the hills.”

Allowing the claps to run their course, she pulled the thin black cloak tighter around the simple black gown that spilled to her feet. “My second story comes from a few hours later.”

Her face was still obscured from those on either side of the stage. “A new day’s light made itself known. I conversed in the ruins with Desparus and Famne. They shared a tale of heartbreak and I want you all to understand why I am here. Why you are here.”

She kept her gaze above the heads of the believers. Slight hints of the foothills showed as black. “Not long ago, a boy was born on Cantio. In the ruins, never experienced a day of stability. Ever. His beauty, though, it rubbed off on the ugliness. Not only was the prodigy perfect in features and strong, he was viciously intelligent. Powerful with the Force—a random occurrence, parents showing no sensitivities. The Republic missed this boy. But the dark side missed him as well. Not to worry. He was gifted, taught himself what he needed to know.”

Her new followers hung on every word. “Hardened mercenaries began to have nightmares about the lad. Desparus told me that Sith from across time gathered to watch him grow up fighting in the streets. Famne said those who believed in a homegrown warrior relighting the flame saw the Great Debate as over.”

Remembering Famne’s tears pushed Devia to choke up. Her volume elevated. “With guidance, he could have learned about the dark side and put his gifts to use. Who knows?”

She settled, quiet. “A bomb killed that prodigy...he was sixteen. This happened seventy-one years ago.”

Her voiced thundered again. “If you all weren’t so weak, you could have saved him, nurtured him, developed him into the lord you all so desperately needed. But that is why we are here...tonight. Now. At this moment in time. Think on this.”

She bowed her head while pausing.

Folks lowered their heads.

The natural quiet bathed the deck.

The fauna buzzing about the gardens could be heard in the stillness, which held.

It held until a low moan interrupted.

“Oh...oh...” Teary-eyed, Dandoma Mokka leaned his head back and hollered to the night above. “Oh...I love this moment in time. So much. So, so, so much. So much!”

A collective gasp owned the deck. Guests nearby couldn’t help moving away from a fellow guest who had his glass raised to the dark skies.

After opening his eyes, Dandoma straightened his giant hat. “What?”

The nervousness dissipated after Darth Devia broke into a smile from the stage. “I love that you are here with me, Dandoma Mokka. My brother Darth Agon’s spirit pulses through your veins.”

“Thank you...my lord...thank you...but I hope that the benevolent provider is not venturing near those veins that have become varicose veins in my later years, if you know what I am saying...for his sake. Those things are ugly-looking. I put some bad stuff in my body in my younger years...yes, I did.” The old brawler toasted his appreciation and downed his drink.

The whole space belted out gigantic rounds of guffaws. The giggling woman on the stage who used the moment of levity to relax. She let folks run out of steam before resuming.

“You have traveled from all over. Thank you. I’ve been expanding my mind with ancient teachings, some of those works were gifts from some of you here. Thank you. Teachings lead to

discoveries. Breakthroughs, if you will.” Her voice stayed at an unchanging volume. Shadows played with her face. “Speaking of discoveries, a discovery that I made during my travels inspired my third story. It ties to what I envision going forward. I visited the ruins of the farming colony where my family died.”

Her gaze stayed on the distance. “While I was there, some mangy mongrel, native to that planet, found me. The morning sun grew bright and there he was, looking down at my curled-up body huddling in a muddy bomb crater. Yeah...I was in bad shape.”

The eye staring out burned a yellow, brighter with the black patch contrasting it. “That sore-covered runt implored me to follow, over the hills, to a drone crash site. I didn’t learn a lot, but enough. Enough to put pieces together. The dark side needs me. Desperately. I learned this.”

The being in total control raised her bare right hand, flat palm up at a lightless sky. “All night, I’ve sought guidance from the Force about those I just met to determine whether or not we have a future together. With others, I made each decision based on the relationship we had.”

After leaving their feet, half of tonight’s attendees now hung suspended in the air, each one roughly a full body length above the stone tile. Many, including Mattias, Quim-Na, and Dandoma, grasped at closing pathways in their throats—a futile effort.

Mattias Ree’s gasps left his mouth. His hands clawed through his beard to his neck. Standing below, his petrified wife looked away, also from the dying king and queen.

Quim-Na Sulif’s normally-huge eyes appeared to be fighting their way out of their sockets. Her second jeweled shoe fell, joining the one by Dilani’s trembling feet.

Dandoma Mekkra’s large tongue flailed in and out of his mouth. Though his hat stayed on, his panicky thrashes ripped loose some of the feathers. These floated down to the stone.

“To those of you who can still breathe freely, never forget: I made every decision.”

Dilani, Tramm, and Tresskuss huddled near the surviving Dathomir visitors. Close to them, two frail friends of Four-Eyes tried to avoid gazing up at him and the others.

Darth Devia stepped to the side from the microphone and into the crowd. Heeled shoes pattered on the stone. “Things are simplified somewhat now. Leaner. The liberation plots that we will be devising stand a greater chance of remaining secret if fewer beings are aware. Those on the ground have earned my trust. I believe in your silence, your devotion as well.”

The new lord’s slow-walk took her over to the lone survivor at the VIP table. As her superior neared, Zinora Ree, with tears smearing her makeup-covered face, collapsed back into her chair only to miss its edge. The fall brought out newly-generated cries. The old woman looked away from her husband, who was moments from passing.

“You had no choice, Zinora.” Devia towered over her. “An entity far more immense than you and I can possibly comprehend brought us together.”

Still floating, the unfortunate ones hacked and coughed, bodies pleading for air.

“You and Mattias made me. You made me and now you regret it. Like you’ve never regretted anything before. But you shouldn’t. The dark side called and you are a Sith.”

The old woman had managed to sit upward, hands in defense.

The ex-Jedi leaned in. “I don’t regret this. Any of it. Not yet, anyway. This is happening so we, together, can liberate slaves. You and I are the diametric opposite of the innocents but that doesn’t mean we can’t save them. In fact, we’re perfect for it.”

Attendees remained in their spots, standing still.

Their leader stood to address a crowd in disbelief who, as much as they tried, could not ignore the writhing, soon-to-be fresh corpses. “We will seek out the best of the worst to join us and, together, our band of liberators will target the worst of the worst.”

“Thank you, Darth Devia.” Dilani Vestagon allowed herself a glimpse of the nearly-lifeless Quim-Na Sulif before looking over again. “You are here to liberate innocence.”

Her lord walked up, bare hand touching Dilani’s shaking cheek. “Were you meaning ‘liberate innocence.’...like, not a group of beings but the general idea itself. ‘Innocence’?”

“Uh...yeah, the word that ends in ‘ce’...yeah...”

“‘Liberate innocence.’ I like that.” She stroked Dilani’s trembling forearm and winked. “Tell everyone to follow me into the ceremonial chambers in the lower levels.”

Fifty-odd dark side followers formed a line behind Dilani, who trailed after a being far more powerful. At the head of the pack, that being under the hood wore a little smile on her face.

The living went indoors and down to the sub-basement. Only the newly deceased remained, still warm and still hovering above the stone tile.

When the person who killed them forgot about them, their corpses fell to the deck with a collective thud, all at once.

Chapter Three

Blue, red, green, and yellow lights blinked to life all across the cockpit's console.

"Wake up, Sten."

The onboard sentient system that acted as the ship's co-pilot, as well as overall technical administrator, recognized both the name "Sten" and Sylmonica Valkanna's cheery voice.

"As us biologicals say, 'Rise and shine, sleepyhead.' It's me, your travel-buddy, Syl."

Sten cross-checked sensors and could not detect her physical presence. According to indicators, the owner of the ship was not in her quarters or the galley. Or anywhere near the ship. But her voice existed. Sten heard it again.

"I hope you had a good rest in this hangar that wasn't cheap. I am more than happy to spend the Rees' money pampering you. Only the best for my Sten."

AI deduced that it was a recording. After figuring out this piece of truth, Sten accessed the GPS, the Galactic Positioning System. Readings indicated that the ship was still parked in the same landing bay and hadn't moved since going offline.

"You should have plenty of gas, too." Sten signaled a sensor in the aft section. It verified fuel and coaxium tanks at maximum levels.

"I paid the servicepeople to replace connections to some power lines, like you had requested." Sten took note of the stronger energy feeds.

More lights switched on as others continued to show signs of tasks being handled.

"It's time for your briefing. This type of mission is the most critical kind. A martyrdom mission. When you asked me why I couldn't take you with me after we departed, this is why."

Sten listened while at the same time scanning databanks and reading written instructions.

"And I must confess: I didn't pick this planet to pamper myself for a fortieth birthday present. But instead to put you, my friend, closer to the Yntok system. I had asked you to educate yourself about the affairs of some cartels. As you now know, they want to desecrate the Yntikkian Ruins. The asteroid harvesting operation's private military fleet is your target. You had located it before. Find it again. This noble task has one constraint: time. Your strike needs to happen before shuttles carrying contracted mining workers join up with the fleet."

While scanning channels for chatter about the warships' whereabouts, Sten topline information from files compiled for Syl, a task completed while she was on Cantio.

"Once I finish briefing you and shut you down, I plan to stay at these hot springs for a few days only, long enough for a rest, a few massages, and some nice meals. Then I will take a transport to Corellia. I need a wide range of culture. My goal is to spend a couple weeks being anonymous. There is a wonderfully-scummy area of town near the spaceport. Like most cities, the best arts districts back right up to it."

Something occurred to Sten: Syl had asked the AI to power down a few different times during their last few days together, a perplexing directive.

"There is a marketplace in this section of town. And a non-descript building in its southern quadrant. The one-story structure houses a gambling den. I have designated this den's alley wall the newest monument for the dark way of life that we have talked about so much. My vision must begin quietly, but be documented as well. I gave this backalley wall a name. Martyr's Wall. And the first name on it will be Sentient Technological Neuropath...S.T.N. Your name will be written in Meccini, a little-known language spoken by dark practitioners more than

twenty thousand years ago. I would love to scrawl your name in Sith, but that risks attention. Our roles in the dark story are quiet ones. But they must still light the way."

Sten ran diagnostics on the weapons systems, beginning with the torpedo bay.

"As I go forward and freedom fighters give their lives, I am going to return to this gambling den and write their names beside yours. To exist, the dark side of the Force and all those who believe must live in secret while also in the open. We memorialize our own."

Sten received affirmation that the twin blaster cannons were fully functional and both swivel bases could rotate as needed. While troubleshooting the ship's systems and listening to Syl, the AI believer also monitored independent systems' media channels. Cartel-sponsored paramilitary activity near Yntok pushed Republic leaders to keep forces on-station in the closest region still within Republic territory.

"I know I acted weird sometimes. I'm sorry. Opening up isn't something I am good at anymore, if I ever was. Recording this now makes me think how much I miss you already, please know this. But the future is filled with ugliness. You're too beautiful for what lies ahead."

Sten reviewed files about military contractors' various warships.

"Relax. Open your mind. Listen to your instincts. When the moment is right, power up."

Sten powered down the main systems. With the majority of the lights switched off, the sleek, black ship appeared to be devoid of activity just like the other spacecraft in the hangar.

It took the third mention of the word "Admiral" before the thrice-convicted weapons trafficker sitting in the command ship's creaky captain's chair realized he was being addressed. The scarred and beat-up ex-con turned to the concerned traffic controller, a bored gaze enlivening, picking up on the urgency. "Umm, yeah...I *do* outrank you, right?"

After the technician beckoned, the acting admiral, a recent hire by the private military contractor, rose out of the high-backed seat and hitched his gun belt over his belly while sauntering closer. Taking in the view of space and a pocked gray moon's arc, he slicked back his yellow hair over his two horns, then put on the red Company Officer hat, cocking it way to the rear of his head, brim pointing up. Hands on his wide hips, his two beady eyes could see both the flight ops manager's oversized screen and the scene out the curvature of the window.

Five industrial ships were parked above a tiny moon just like this independently-owned military command vessel was. The orb of the central refinery appeared to be another moon, randomly wayward, gray, and tiny. With only a few crewmembers on board, each ship was mostly dark, just specks of light shining from random portholes.

He took in the bigness outside...until the traffic controller demanded that he pay attention to his screen. A highlighted green circle moved left to right across the white background.

The new manager blinked at the blinking blip. "Is that good or bad?"

Inhaling, the longtime employee of the quasi-legal conglomerate repositioned his red company cap before pointing out the green anomaly. "Admiral, I've tried hailing this ship twice, zero response. The semi-stealth-capable vessel exited hyperspace fifteen seconds ago—"

"Semi-stealth-capable?" The admiral nodded in appreciation. "Well alright..."

A larger screen showed a telescopic shot. The freeze-frame image, taken by the surveillance camera sitting atop a mast eight stories above, took a few seconds to clarify.

After the visual of the troublesome arrival came into focus, the acting commander let out a long whistle. "Now *that* is a party-ship, everybody. Check 'er out: sleek angles, artful bubble to

the cockpit, sharp-but-elegant sweep slightly past the sublight engines, subdued almost...mmm. Way too much vehicle for a civilian. I would steal that thing so quick—”

“Admiral...we do not—”

“Wait a minute...wait a minute here...” He pulled his heavy gun belt up over his belly again while heel-toeing it around the controller’s console to stand between his subordinate and the window. “Tramm Nurado’s goons aren’t paying us a surprise visit, are they? That Tresskuss guy is a psycho. I—”

Another tech’s scream flooded the room. “One...two—four—I have indications that the new arrival just fired six torpedoes and all six are headed towards the refinery ships.”

The admiral shook his head. “What? They—”

“Refinery sections sit just ahead of us.”

All electronic buzz ceased. Images of schematics and animated graphics that were updating the command center’s rows of screens stopped. Every readout now showed static. Speakers hummed a droning, low-pitched sound.

“The ship disrupted our systems, Admiral.”

“Nooooo...no ship that tiny can—that’s like military stuff—”

The exasperated traffic controller interrupted, adjusting his cap again. “Crime syndicates are getting better at mass systems disruption, Admiral. You should know that, if any of us—”

The junior controller screamed out. “Impact!”

Without a screen, he received visual confirmation from looking out the windows. Through the curved panes, helpless command center workers saw torpedoes impact the two flatter ships that would bookend the gigantic, spherical middle once they had arrived at a mining site. In the fleeting moments before the ships’ fuel tanks added fresh explosions, the view through the fire revealed well-used hulls already fracturing.

The other four torpedoes plowed into what would become the middle section of the processing plant, moon-like, but also not much more than a cavernous room many stories tall that housed a furnace spanning the entire width of the lower portion. Since mining operations had yet to begin, the gigantic pits were quiet. Every bit of the fragility revealed, crumbled girders and support beams careened into space. Secondary and tertiary incendiary blasts intensified.

As it came apart, folks in the control tower did not have time to watch. Two more torpedoes hit the two fuel tankers also in orbit. Pulses from igniting fuel generated shockwaves.

The military ship’s pilots reacted, engaging emergency thrusters to counteract waves of energy that could knock battle cruisers from their paths.

Every screen stayed useless. With no ability to communicate, the team in the command center could only witness as the unidentified aggressor engaged the five cheap fighters that managed to take off before the launch bay catapults went offline.

Nearly invisible, it cut, banked, and twisted at high angles—thrusting and braking to throw off its stubby-winged, under-gunned foes. One by one, pursuing single-seaters got picked off. Their adversary’s flight path changed direction to evade fire while its swivel cannons locked on. A hull got pushed to the point where it bent, but this gave the lone adversary a tactical edge.

“Intruder...headed this way...”

The acting admiral saw it for himself. With the straight-on view, the partyship that he had been gawking at not even a minute ago now looked to be a flat ribbon with only the middle bulge of the narrow, golden-yellow cockpit window, engines and stabilizers protruding from each side.

A view that got obliterated as soon as the blaster cannons opened up.

By the time the enemy smashed into the command center, its barrage of fire had weakened some of the structural supports and momentum cracked the ship's superstructure in half. The little attacker still carried eighty percent of its liquid fuel and the collision set it all off.

Secondary explosions continued unabated.

Moments before impact, the suicide pilot broadcasted a file on a public communications channel. The documentation detailed financial links between legal and illegal entities conspiring to harvest the Yntikkian Ruins.

Chapter Four

“As a Jedi, I was numb. We Sith dance in the darkness, warming ourselves by the fire.”

Devia, Dark Lord of the Sith, gathered the thin, black cloak around her body as her stroll down the long tunnel took its time. Stone tile tickled the callouses on her bare feet.

Trembling believers failed to take in the words. All just shuffled forward.

“Slavery practitioners sleep soundly. Every night.”

The dragging of followers’ footsteps stayed constant behind the new lord’s easy stride.

Darth Devia called over her shoulder. “Folks who own slave mines and plantations and gladiator leagues, also auctioneers, brokers, traffickers, colonizers—we are going to fill those folks’ heads with nightmares, people. When we gain strength and followers, we will crush slave-practicing monarchies and star systems. This is our path.”

The flickering light from the doorway straight ahead called to her. “In the Outer Rim and wild space, where we will be going, it is cold and unforgiving, but clean. Our mission is clean. Pure. People are suffering. We will end that suffering. And end those who cause suffering.”

Some whimpered. Others cried. All had no choice except to keep walking.

Their leader pretended not to hear any of it. “But this isn’t just about liberating innocence and executing predators. You...you sightless souls...you needed somebody. The dark side has been experiencing a slow death and you reached out to me.”

One by one, survivors filed into the torchlit initiation chamber and circled the red crystal sitting on its metal base in the middle. Shifting around, they positioned themselves along the endless arc. Red and white twinkles of light bounced off the ceiling and eight walls as they shuffled.

“Stop shaking.”

All stood still.

“Work together to summon the Force and raise that boulder off of its stand. This is a feat I have been waiting to see for myself. Raise it up to the ceiling, I challenge you.”

All eyes looked to Zinora Ree, who answered their pleading with panic.

The apprehension in the beaten elder’s eyes spurred Dilani Vestagon. “None of us possess power to wield the dark side of the Force like our Master. But join hands, believers.”

Together, eyes closed, the ones along the curve raised their hands, palms upward.

Dilani screamed with passion. “When we band together and channel...”

Some joined her full-throated cry. “...each other’s limited connections to the Force...”

On the six-legged base in the middle, the boulder began to shake.

Most of the circle now shouted. “...our abilities multiply.”

As the stone bucked back and forth, some screamers opened their eyes in response to hearing a light saber ignite. An infusion of scarlet brightness showered the pink light.

Moving at a speed faster than her targets could track, the Galaxy’s newest Sith lord used her weapon to slice open the mid-sections of her followers, one belly after the other.

The crystal fell to its stand from the knee-high distance it rose, crushing the support legs.

The first victim had barely fallen as the blade exited the final victim. Its wielder cut power. Red beam no more, the brushed-metal hilt got re-hooked to a black belt.

Beings writhed all over the smooth stone in a centuries-old initiation room. Dilani, Tramm, Tresskuss, Zinora—their agonizing screams mixed in with others.

Both hands now free, the cause of the suffering faced the object that weighed more than a medium-sized cruiser's sublight engine and used the Force to lift it two body lengths high. Instantly, the ceremonial piece started to spin. As the rate of spin increased, it lost balance, rotating on all axes. The Force bending further to another's will, the spin rate vibrated the stone and the rumble warped the air and soundwaves morphed into shockwaves.

"You idiots. This isn't Paryah's. This is the Healing Crystal of Darth Sabotaa. She mined it from the Nexatan Volcano and brought out this rock's power to mend fresh wounds."

Force-lightning, white-hot and the shade of sky blue, shot from Darth Devia's fingertips. Rays of electricity bombarded the blur, colliding with the whizzing crystal. Sparks flew. Colors changed. New sparks formed, shaping a protective sphere that surrounded the fuzzy object.

"You halfwits had no idea why they called her 'The Healer', did you? This answer and so many like it are there in those texts that you do not read any more. Your minds have gone soft. While none of you possess the power to wield this crystal, this fact does not excuse ignorance."

Restorative radiation pulsed out of the blur in the center of the space. Stricken dark side believers began to sit up from the hard tile. Experiencing less physical discomfort, they could absorb her words. All were covered in light.

"The Scholars gawked at this like it was a display in some estate gallery. Pathetic."

A few looked down to notice that the gashes across their bellies were sealing shut, starting at the ends and both sides working towards the centers of the cuts. Tramm was the first to belt out a gigantic cough as his lungs compulsively took in air. Others joined. Beings no longer felt like they were dying and their expressions showed it.

The firebrand stopped pacing, hands still behind her back.

Above her, the crystal braked from light speed to absolute zero. It stayed in one place, immobilized, unable to float or hover.

"You needed me." In the sudden silence, the lone voice echoed. The eye took stock of the listeners. "Tonight, the dark side of the Force took your life then gave it back to you."

While stepping around the cluttered floor, she moved her hands from behind her back to clasp in front, with the wide, black sleeves enclosing around them. The stillness allowed her to speak softly. "The invisible scars on your bellies mark you as members of my little Sith family."

Darth Sabotaa's healing crystal revealed its weight as it once again made contact with its stand, the Force lowering it back to the broken resting place. One edge hit, then the other.

The suddenness of a turn set up a scream. "Rise."

A family sprang to its feet.

A Sith titan passed by a line of devotees.

Pausing, she looked up at Tramm Nurado. "Dandoma Mokkra isn't here for a reason: he was born into slavery, then exploited it. I loved his shenanigans tonight. He was quite charming. But...nobody is that charming."

Her gaze roamed to the trembling Tresskuss, then to Tramm again. "As of now, you two are no longer in the slavery business. You are in the slavery-eradication business. Anyone in your ranks not on board, let them go. Pay them well so they leave with good feelings."

Both nodded. Tresskuss snapped to attention. "Yes, boss. You have my devotion."

This gesture inspired his boss to clasp the veteran outlaw's scarred, scaly hand. "You have a good heart, convict. But let's conceal this heart from our enemies."

She turned and walked. Reverent beings nodded as she passed. Before stopping in front of the Scholar Emerita, she addressed the Deent brothers. "I need a new ship. Think cheap, I need to blend in. And don't go crazy with the onboard computers this time."

Zinora Ree stayed hunched over while being talked to. “I did you a favor. The king and queen knew that you and Mattias killed their son. I sensed retribution...retaliatory thoughts, your slow death...all night. But I need you, Zinora. This is why you are here.”

Tears still flowed. Zinora nodded raised her head. “Yes?”

“For starters, the Scholars are divesting from the Academius. We don’t need each other anymore. You know administrative details. Obviously, it will take years to happen, but it will happen. We can use them to learn about the Jedi if it serves our purposes, but there are more important concerns, for the near term at least.”

After Zinora nodded again, the ex-Jedi stood upright. “Arts and crafts time is over, believers. Get your heads out of the past. People are suffering.”

She walked over by the off-kilter crystal, also the center of a new arc made by her faithful followers. “Those who enslave others...the Force will destroy them. We are its instruments of destruction. This is our vision. I’m articulating our vision so there is no misunderstanding. Whatever you started, I’m taking it from here. This begins tonight. Now.”

Torchlight bathed Darth Devia and those who stood in awe of her.

Dilani Vestagon yelled out. “Devia.”

Tramm Nurado joined her. “Devia.”

The other observers echoed. “Devia.”

A word became a three-syllable chant. Exhausted and reborn darksiders screamed it with increasing fury as they tapped deeper sources of both hate and love from within.

They directed their soundwaves at a focal point. At the only silent one. The only serene one, her right eye no longer the burning yellow color.

The one who was their leader. And their teacher.

Their liberator. Savior.

Mother.

Lord.

Unknown Force: The Fleeting Existence of Darth Devia the Firebrand

Book I: Sith Rebirth

Book II: Darkness & Liberation

Book III: The Devious Peace

About the Author

Chris Maley lives in Denver, Colorado.

Fearkiller (Volume 1) and *Notes from Trillionaire Island: Fearkiller (Volume 2)* are the first two books in his dark comedy series. The first book in his sci-fi series is called *Revolutionizer Alpha*, available on Amazon like *Fearkiller*. His astrological sign is #TaxTheRich. chrismaley.com