

*Star Wars*

*Day of the Jedi*

The Jaden Korr Chronicles

Knight

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...

## *Star Wars*

### Day of the Jedi

Ten years after the Battle of Endor, the power of the IMPERIAL REMNANT increases. Though the EMPEROR is long dead, his military continues to spread war, misery, and slavery across the galaxy.

Jedi Master LUKE SKYWALKER has moved to restore the JEDI to their rightful place as peacekeepers of the galaxy at his JEDI ACADEMY on Yavin 4. But the revolts of the dark Jedi JEREC and Luke's renegade student DESANN have undermined his attempts. Luke and the remaining Jedi spread out among the stars in search of others like themselves. The power of their enemies grows.

Meanwhile, far beneath the towering spires of Coruscant, a teenage girl named JADEN KORR feels a hidden power growing within her....

# *Old Friends Long Gone*

Chapter 13 of *Day of the Jedi: Knight*

by

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## Preface to this novella:

*Day of the Jedi* is a hexalogy, a series of six novels relating the adventures of Jaden Korr, a young girl from Coruscant's Undercity, who has been recruited into the New Jedi Order by Luke Skywalker and trained in the ways of the Jedi by her master, Kyle Katarn. She is now a Jedi Knight, along with her friend, the blue Twi'lek girl Rotherron. The two Jedi girls have followed the Disciples of Ragnos and their allies to the planet Kailion. *Old Friends Long Gone* occurs after their adventures at Tanaab and several months before the Jaden's battles on Taspir III. Jaden was around sixteen when she was recruited. She is now nineteen. Rotherron is about two years older than Jaden. The story is told by Jaden. This is chapter 13 from *Volume IV: Knight*.

# *Knight*, Chapter 13: Old Friends Long Gone

## 1. One Word

Three-Eight told me this part a little later.

He and Six-Two were sitting in a roadside bar several kilometers from the outskirts of Kailion's main city. There were other cities on the planet beside Denerin, but none larger, all lesser. It was the capital city, the home to its culture and manufacturing. Its large spaceport and the orbital docks above it were the largest facilities in the sector. There was a chain of smaller towns, ex-urbs, villages, and smaller manufacturing hubs around Denerin. Out from that layer were yet smaller villages, farms, and forests. And ruins. Lots of ruins. Denerin used to be called New Denerin until about three hundred years ago — so said my old copy of the Zeratt Galaxy Guide. The original Denerin had been destroyed by orbital bombardment during the Mandalorian Wars, 4,000 years ago, give or take a few years. The remains of an Old Republic base was there, just a few kilometers away from the bar, the substructures still intact. I should say Old, Old Republic. The Republic before the Old Republic. Three-Eight

and Scorch were waiting for a man to show up. They were there to kill him.

The High Justice on Onderon had issued a death warrant for the former commander of the Spent Street Relocation Center in Iziz. The people who went there weren't relocated. The warrant was particularly valuable. Three-Eight and Six-Two were very good at tracking people like the former commander by tracking their families, their money, their drugs, their lovers, or their bodyguards. The target might be invisible, but those around the target never were. So they waited. They wore long thin gray coats over their old green fatigues, a middle-aged man with a scar across his cheek and very short hair sitting next to his brother, a man of similar size with long black hair. Small streaks of gray were in the hair. They had to be brothers, the family resemblance was too apparent despite the superficial differences. The long coats hid highly modified blaster carbines slung under their arms, the packet of sonic grenades hooked to Six-Two's belt, the hold-out blaster on Three-Eight's belt, stun batons in custom holsters sown into the coats, and the bulk of hardshell armor. I'd later learn about the left-hand gauntlet they kept in a pocket and the blaster carbine. It took them years of looking through the inventories of dozens of arms merchants to find them. A peculiar rodian arms merchant on Nar Shaddaa had several used in stock, human blood still on the gauntlets. The two brothers lovingly restored them. The carbine was the DC-17m, a variant of the DC-15 from the Clone Wars. I had fired the 15 at the Academy range, it was larger and heavier than the 17m. The attachments for the 17m, that was another matter. Those were very hard to find.

Most of the customers in the dim place were human, artifact hunters mostly, amateur archaeologists who rummaged through the ruins of the ancient city and the substructures of the old military base. Rotherron and I ran into a few of them when we were down there. Two were of some help, the third one was an idiot. He was a cute idiot, but still an idiot. Idiots can be cute sometimes. He had nice hair. A couple grans ran the

place, they were behind the counter, filling drinks and staring at everyone with their three protruding eyes. The grans were waiting, too. They had observed the two quiet brothers when they had entered the place and assumed they were more suckers hoping to strike it rich in the ruins. The grans bought and sold artifacts from the artifact hunters. They made money at it, a little, more than most artifact hunters. The grans were waiting for a private courier to arrive. Someone they didn't really know had paid them an insane amount of creds for the use of their cheap little roadside bar as a mail drop. The former commander of the Spent Street Center was slowly selling off his valuables, real collectible stuff originally owned by the people sent to the center, but he only sold through the most discrete channels. Not discrete enough.

It was afternoon. The troubles in the ancient base's substructure were over. That stupid kid, that cute idiot, the one who wouldn't run when he was told to, the one with the nice hair, he came into the bar. His buddy, the one in the green vest, was with him. They were rattled. The two went into the substructure for an afternoon of artifact hunting. No ancient trinkets for them today. They went to a table and began to tell their story to friends. A crowd began to grow as other patrons were attracted by the excited words. They bought the kid a few drinks to settle his nerves. I hadn't been aware that he was old enough to drink.

Certain words began to drift over the crowd and into the ears of Three-Eight and Six-Two. Words like "didn't touch them," "threw lightning," which was me, "immense leaps," which was Rotherron, "lifted into the air," and one word caught their attention, "lightsaber." It was followed by another word, one that pulled the two into the crowd: "Jedi."

"What did you say?" Three-Eight used his elbows to force himself into the center of the group. Six-Two was right behind him. They weren't big men, but still the patrons were intimidated by them.

Three-Eight was glaring at the kid, that stupid cute boy, the one who couldn't follow directions, the one I kissed on the cheek after I saved his life. His face held that same startled expression. He looked up from his

seat at the table. "I said, 'the Jedi killed them.' Not all of them. The district police caught a few of the ones who ran away. The nasty ones, the ones with the red lightsabers, the Jedi killed two of them and went after the others, the ones who got away."

Six-Two had muscled himself up next to Three-Eight. He almost punched the kid. "The last *real* Jedi died thirty years ago."

Their long coats gave them an almost official appearance. "No, sir, I'm not lying, really. They were really Jedi. Really!" the kid replied. "They fought with lightsabers, honest."

Three-Eight glared at those around him, daring them to correct him. "Pudu. The New Republic set up a commando unit named after the Jedi. They claim it was to honor their memory. Everyone knows that. There are no more *real* Jedi. What you're saying is just pure pudu."

"You fell for a lie," Six-Two emphasized. "What did you 'really' see?"

Only now, after it was no longer necessary, only now did the kid show a little courage. He didn't back down. "She pulled me up to the catwalk away from those red blades. It must have been fifteen meters straight up. And she did it without touching me. A giant invisible hand grabbed me around the chest and yanked me up. Both the human girl and her twi'lek friend carried lightsabers. We're not talking about those fake things you can duel with at carnivals, they were the real thing. Really! One had a glowing golden blade. The one, the one the twi'lek carried, that one had two blades, one at each end of the handle. Those blades were blue."

62 laughed. "How do you know they were real? I've seen all sorts of fake lightsabers in all sorts of colors."

"I saw her kill men with it. I saw them take off arms and legs. The human girl took heads, I mean took them right off of bodies. I saw them deflect blaster bolts with their lightsabers. They did a kind of dance when they fought with them, turning and twirling, those deadly things spinning in the air around them. The human one cut a man in half with her lightsaber. The other one, the Twi'lek, could throw that nasty two-bladed

lightsaber. It chopped men to pieces and flew back into her hand! I saw lightning shoot from human girl's hands. I *saw* it. No lie! I saw her kill men with that lightning. That's not normal. That's stuff out of legends. Nobody I know can do that, not even crack militiamen. It's the stuff heroes do in old stories. And I saw it. It really happened. It all happened right in front of me. What are they if they aren't Jedi?" The poor kid shuddered. "The Jedi aren't dead anymore. They're back."

An echoing shudder went through the crowd. The Jedi had become myth on the Outer Rim, strange creatures who fought demons or slew dragons. Three-Eight and Six-Two didn't shudder. They sighed. "They're back," they said in unison, echoing the kid. The crowd stared at them, two men who could be identical twins except for the scar down one man's cheek. These two became immediately, quickly intense, as if a switch had been flipped on in their hearts. The crowd backed away from them.

Three-Eight leaned over the table. "Where did you see them last?"

I imagine what that kid must have thought would happen to him if he didn't immediately answer. "They headed east, toward the city, in a beat-up sprint."

Six-Two and Three-Eight turned and left.

"What do you want with the Jedi? Don't hound them. The legends are true, those two are living death."

"They're old friends," Scorch said over his shoulder.

"They're teenagers, how could they be your 'old friends'?" the kid asked their departing backs. He looked around at his friends. "One of them kissed me."

— ◇ —

*Old friends.* Loyalty was a highly-valued attribute among the last of the Mandalorians, the ones who trained the Republic Commandos. They only gave loyalty to those who fought with them, who proved themselves in

the crucible of battle. Thirty years ago and far, far away from Kailion, three commandos waited in a hangar.

"Boss, why are we here?" 62 asked. The battle raged around the tree city and they cooled their heels in a hangar carved from the living wood of the tree. They had fought their way through two other similar hangars earlier. Wookiees liked their flying machines, so they had lots of hangars.

"Shut up Scorch," 38 replied. "Orders."

"Fek orders," 40 said to that. "We need to find Sev."

"This is what we are required to do at this moment, Fixer, so shut it."

Ordinary clone soldiers stood apart from the three, a little from awe and a little from discomfort. These three looked like pod brothers, but they didn't act like pod brothers. Something was different about commando units, something that disturbed regular army clones.

A Republic gunship pulled a sharp turn as it came into the bay. Clone soldiers jumped off, followed by a tiny figure in a brown robe and two others.

The commandos knew who it was. The three remaining members of Delta Squad took off their helmets and knelt. It wasn't submission, it seemed the polite thing to do for such an important figure who was so short.

Yoda *looked* at them. He looked at them the way Master Luke did to me years ago on Coruscant, just before he recruited me as a member of the New Jedi Order. Yoda saw inside them, and he smiled. "Faithful you are. Find your brother we will."

I've often wondered what Yoda saw when he looked into 38. Did he see me at the other end of 38's life? Is that why he helped them find Sev? Did he see what would someday happen?

"SigInt has reported a captured clone being transported to the rear of the Sep positions for detailed interrogation," a clone advisor standing near Yoda said.

Yoda's long green ears twitched. "Armas, help them you will."

"Yes, Master Yoda," the human Jedi responded. He was wearing the upper body armor of a clone. A lightsaber hung from his utility belt. He signaled to the thin near-human behind him.

She came forward. She was an Ogemite, her bright yellow skin and yellow feathery hair were revealed when she pulled back the hood of her brown robe. She spoke Basic in a trilling voice. "Master Yoda, these do not have the feeling of other clone soldiers."

"We're commandos," 38 said, as if that explained it all.

"Only 500 of them there are out of the entire army, Zessima. Strong they are, cunning they are."

"Loyal to us," Armas observed.

"Yes," Yoda agreed. "Felt that among them, Master Windu has. These especially are recommended by him. Took a ship from the Separatists, they did."

"This is Delta Squad," Armas told his padawan Zessima.

"Yes, we are," Fixer said.

"Unite you with your captured brother, we will," Yoda promised.

— ◇ —

The two brothers headed east in a dented Tracker, the old wheeled vehicle having seen better and younger days. It was something they had bought on the cheap from the same argumentative Sullustan dealer near the spaceport who had told me to get lost when Rothers and I asked for a loaner.

The last of the Republic Commandos, that's what they were. "He who sheds blood with me, he is my brother," that's what the Mandalorians used to say. The ancient warrior clan was near extinction thirty years ago — only a handful remained. Jango Fett was one of them. He was the genetic template for the clone army. To keep the ideals of his people alive, he collected the last of the Mandalorians on Kamino, to act as

teachers for an elite class of soldiers, selected from the most independent, the best of each clone iteration. They would be the Commandos. Their students came away not only with tactical skills, but the cultural heart of the Mandalorians. No Commando units participated in Order 66. Several units died to a man protecting their Jedi. *They* died with honor. I think that for many years afterward, Three-Eight and Six-Two envied the dead. They were all that remained of Delta Squad. Delta was off on a "wild bantha chase" when the order came down. Vader's favorite unit, the 501st, did most of the killing. The survivors of Delta Squad always longed to meet them in combat. It was an honor thing. Their Mandalorian teachers were big on the honor thing.

*Sa kyr'on Nau tracyn kad, Vode an.*

Forged like the saber in the fires of death, brothers all.

Their teachers even taught them the old battle language of the Mandalorians. Loyal, strong, and fearless — the Commandos were meant to fight beside us, the Jedi. When we were gone, something went out of them. Three-Eight and Six-Two told me the story weeks later, on the cargo ship back to Yavin 4.

"We lost Sev first, during the Separatist invasion of Kashyyyk," Three-Eight said. Rotherron was looking after all the new people in the front of the ship. The three of us had moved back into the cargo section for a little quiet. We sat on the cold deck plates, between dark crates full of power cells. I listened to them tell the story. "We found Sev with the help of a couple Jedi knights —"

"One knight, one padawan," 62 corrected him.

"— but then we lost him to the battle. Good to fight by his side one last time. We received bogus orders sending us off into the wilderness alone. That was when the Jedi were murdered. They were afraid of what

we'd do. Sev was eventually replaced by 9-9," Three-Eight continued: "He was a good sniper but not Sev. Sev was our pod brother."

"The best sniper there ever was. A real psycho."

Scorch's comment wasn't meant as an insult. It was a compliment. He later named me Psycho Jedi Girl. The other clones liked the sound of it, so that's how I was known from then on. Great.

"Fixer — 40 — was the next to go," Eight continued the story. "We were deployed to eliminate command and control structures on former Sep worlds. These were the so-called 'direct-rule' planets, under the personal control of the chancellor."

"Until he started to call himself 'Emperor.'"

"We weren't trusted anymore."

"Because of the other Commandos, the ones who died with their Jedi or deserted. We were too good just to throw away, so it was death by attrition, getting the most dangerous assignments, being watched all the time."

Scorch, 62, cut it short: "A homing missile got 40, Fixer, got him on Tarabba Prime."

Eight sighed and was silent. We listened to the laughter and conversation up forward. We three stayed for a time in a quiet, sad place. Eight eventually returned to the story. "He was replaced by 739. The new guy just wasn't up to it. He looked like us, but he just wasn't as . . ."

"Astute."

"Right, Scorch. Astute. 739 was an able soldier, just not very flexible, mentally flexible. He wouldn't have cut it under our old teachers."

"You could never talk to him about anything."

"Like Order 66."

Fatigue crept up on me. I leaned my head back against a crate and listened.

"Yeah. Fixer thought it was just so much pudu. 9-9 agreed, just feks thinking they could tell us any fek they wanted and we'd believe it because

we were clones. For the longest time we thought it was a Sep subversion op, you know, plant false information among your enemies, seed discord, that sort of thing."

I nodded, sleep right behind my eyes. Like what the enemies of the Jedi in the Senate did to me, calling me "Jedi Assassin," making me out to be a killer in a cult of killers. At least Lady Leia was able to keep my real name away from the media, at least my family was safe. A groggy thought came to me, how maybe this was connected to the Ragnos cult. But that was just crazy thinking, something a conspiracy nut would believe.

"But no — after the Chancellor declared himself 'Emperor, First Protector of the Republic,' we knew."

Scorch, number 62, nodded vigorously. "Power grab, Mistress Jaden."

"It's spookier than that," I replied sleepily. "It's all on file at the Academy. You can learn about the creepy truth of the Empire. You can learn about the Sith, that's what the Emperor was, really, a Sith Lord. If you want."

"We do," Eight answered. "We'd like to know the true shape of things underneath the shadows."

I got them both back to the story. "What happened next?"

"What were we to do? We were bred to fight. All soldiers in our line are sterile, not even the slightest interest in sex. We can't have families like wild humans can. It isn't like it's a choice. We're made that way. Still, we began to doubt many things, the three of us. We couldn't tell 739."

"He was soooo stupid. Bad shot, too," Scorch cracked.

"He wasn't that so much . . ."

"There's such a thing as being overly obedient. There's such a thing as being oblivious to betrayal."

"Then 9-9 and 739 were killed in a bombing during the riots on Commenor. About two hundred seventy civilians were killed."

62 smiled, a little inappropriately I thought. "It was a spur-of-the-moment sort of thing."

Three-Eight's matter-of-fact voice didn't waver. Even years later, I thought a little anxiety would have remained. No. Must be a clone thing. Worry crept back into my head. Master Luke had to say yes to our scheme. He just had to.

"A row of shops had been blown in. We had been chucked down the street, but our distance from the blast and our body armor protected us. The life-sign indicators for 9-9 and 739 were gone — they had been totally blown away. We went into the shops for check for wounded."

Scorch, 62, shrugged. "Useless when you think about it. It was a big explosion, probably an IED in one of the vehicles. We looked anyway. All dead, concussion injuries, clean, almost no blood. That's when the Boss here began to take off his armor."

"You started it, not me."

"No, sir, Fearless Leader. I followed your lead."

"Did not. You started it."

"Not this argument again! It wasn't me!"

"All right! All right. We swapped clothes with the dead. It wasn't your idea. It wasn't my idea. We did it. Scorch set off a thermal det set to 'slow cook.' The fire mired the bodies. No one checked who was inside."

"Our commander considered clones to be disposable. Why check? Here's the armor, must be them."

"We vanished."

"We were reborn."

"We've been thieves . . ."

"Though not by choice."

"Mostly we've worked as security guards, construction, lots of mercenary jobs . . ."

"All legit. Corporate Sector stuff mostly. More than a few bounty hunts. We had a kid with us for a while."

"But he was way too wild for us."

"He could do things."

"Spooky stuff."

I made a point of remembering this, to ask them later. It had been a long day, I was just too sleepy to think clearly.

Three-Eight continued to speak. "We should tell you about Sev, the battle of Kashyyyk, and Yoda."

"We met Yoda."

"There were two Jedi with him, they felt bad about Sev. A knight and a padwan, they went on a mission with us to find him."

"It didn't end well."

"But we did get to fight alongside Sev one last time."

So much, a lifetime of stories, they weren't going to tell them all right now, were they?

". . . after that, we were sent on a hunt for Sep leaders on the other side of the planet. The order came all the way from Coruscant."

"That wasn't a coincidence, Scorch."

"Of course not. If *we* had been there, no one would have laid a hand on them. They did miss Yoda, he got away. Here's what I think of Order 66. 'Fight with me . . .'"

Eight finished it, an ancient Mandalorian oath: "' . . . on the field of honor, and you have my spirit, my sword at your side.'"

The Mandalorians believed that battle was the only true test of character. I yawned. The anxiety over what Master Luke might say to all this began to push at me. Even Jedi worry. My stamina was consumed. My eyelids began to droop, I was so tired.

— ◇ —

"This is hopeless, Boss." Scorch stood on the roof of the dented Tracker. He was peering through a pair of electro-binocs down one of the narrow streets separating blocks of tall crumbling concrete buildings. It

was a bright-sky afternoon. The shadows from the buildings were sharply cut on the pavement. Everything was crumbling, it wasn't even permacrete, it was the cheap stuff. They were in the heart of the slums, which ringed Denerin with the city's poor. The juicy rich part was in the city's distant center, like one of those fancy sweets Rotherron bought me on Necht. I later learned they were her favorite kind, and she felt she couldn't buy one for herself without buying one for me. Derrn had enough money to buy his own that day. It wasn't until later he and I became sweet on each other. Rotherron taught me much that day about the true nature of Jedi — kindness is in our hearts, even when we kill. Even in Master Kyle's heart, and he's the most lethal killer of us all.

"We've asked everyone we've seen, 'Where are the Jedi?' No one knows!" he shouted down at Three-Eight.

"We know where they've been," Eight shouted back up through the top hatch. "That wreck on the highway, with the cut-up bodies and the scared cops pointing toward the slums, that's a good sign. Don't forget the habits of our old friends."

"Ha!" Scorch could smell the whiff of cooking meat from a nearby restaurant, and the faint scent of smoke. Something was burning. "Maybe this new crew isn't like the old crew."

"All signs point to 'yes.' Jedi are Jedi. You wait and see." They heard sirens in the distance, but the wailing noises always seemed to be traveling away from them. The bright afternoon sun poured through the front windshield onto Eight's head. He drummed his fingers on the steering controls.

Scorch, 62, peeked down at his pod brother. "You're more impatient the older you get."

"Just keep your eyes on the city."

Scorch went back to his surveillance. Someone shouted at him from below to move the tracker. "Fek yourself, bantha fodder!" He backed that up with an ancient gesture. Another one shouted. "You want me to come down there? Drive around!" He raised his electro-binocs to inspect

distant corners. "Let's move up a block," he requested of Three-Eight in a calmer voice.

"Are the sirens coming our way?"

"Not so far."

They moved up a block. Scared pedestrians rushed along the sidewalk. Several wheeled vehicles careened away, including a large panel truck, in such a hurry it almost overturned in front of them. A couple skimmers and a landspeeder flashed by. People were running from an area a few blocks to their left.

"Evidence at last. Ha-ha!" Scorch laughed in imitation of a holonet star as he jumped down through the hatch.

Eight pulled out into the oncoming traffic. He steered toward the danger.

Scorch ran his hands through his long hair, then checked the tibanna gas magazine of his blaster carbine. "Old times, Boss. Old times!"

"Show a little decorum."

"I gotta feeling we're going to rack up the kills today."

"Don't count your corpses till they've fallen."

"Heh."

Eight didn't act out so much. The same fire was in his heart. Redemption was just around the corner, just beyond the crumbling tenement highrises. It was, or the start of it. The street was vacant, if it could be called a street, more like an alley. It led into a broader avenue just beyond. A lower structure with a flat roof sat there, surrounded by taller structures. It must have been a garage from the wide doors on the front. Everything was closed up tight. Eight pulled over to the curb. They watched four armed figures at the front of the place, a rodian, a weequay, and two humans paced back and forth. Vehicles were parked at the front of the garage, a couple high-wheel haulers and an airspeeder. Several people left the garage by a door, only they didn't leave. They spread out along the alley. 38 and 62 recognized the behavior as that of

perimeter guards. The two humans in the group, a man and a teenaged girl, were dressed in the brown uniforms of the Vannt Mercenary Faction.

Shadows began to crawl up the sides of the corroded buildings around them. The alley was cast into shadow. Scorch and Eight heard a sputtering airspeeder engine. A beat-up old open cockpit sprint banked sharply around a highrise, to come in for a landing on the roof of the garage. The guards heard and turned to look.

"Did you see who was in it?" Eight asked. Something . . . something from their past echoed in their minds. They didn't understand it, though they tried to explain the feeling to me later. Eight and Scorch *knew* who was in the airspeeder.

"I didn't have to see them to know who they were." Scorch opened his door. "Here's where the fun begins."

Eight smiled. "We have a peculiar idea of what fun is."

"Heh."

They got out and walked through shadow toward the guards.

The girl noticed them first. "What group are you with?" she asked.

"Our own," Scorch replied, a big fat smile on his face.

She didn't get it until the clone's long coats flew open and she saw their blaster carbines. The clones fired and moved as they fired, to opposite sides of the alley. The girl got off a couple wild shots before the sharp multiple cracks of well-aimed blaster fire chopped into her. The human male was only in the process of bringing his repeater up when Scorch stitched a line of neat holes diagonally across his uniform. He dropped without a sound. The girl thrashed and gurgled on the pavement. The rodian made a dash for it. The weequay stood and fought, sending a spray of red bolts across the street in Scorch's direction. Eight drilled him right through his wrinkled head. Then he took aim and shot the rodian in the back.

They met up near the gurgling girl. No reaction came from inside the garage, only silence except for the girl. "Can't you die a little more

quietly?" Eight asked her, then put a blue accuracy bolt through her head. Nothing, not a sound after that.

"The Jedi went in, didn't they?" Scorch asked.

Eight shrugged.

Kaboom.

The front of the garage blew up. My fault entirely. More Vannt mercs and rodians stumbled out into the street, which was now shrouded from the smoke of the explosion. Eight and Scorch sent a spray of red bolts at them as the clones went to the wall for cover. A couple tried to shoot back. The clones' concentrated fire cut them down. The survivors dove into an airspeeder and took off, chased by more blue streaks from Scorch's carbine.

Eight heard the sickly engine of Mr. Thrombba's sprint as Rothers and I lifted from the roof. The tall highrises made an artificial canyon of the streets. A green airspeeder full of mercs roared over Scorch's head and around the corner.

"Don't leave us!" Eight screamed and ran forward, almost as if he intended to catch our sprint on foot. The thing stalled on me just after lift. I adjusted the power to the left engine and we were back in business. Three-Eight had rounded the corner by then, spotting three men and a weequay getting out of a cargo hauler. Our rusty sprint sped around the corner in pursuit of the airspeeder. One of the men in front of Eight raised a Merr-Sonn missile launcher to his shoulder.

"No, no, no!" Eight screamed at them, just as they fired. Scorch came up to his side. They watched the missile's short flight into the sprint. It went up with a bang. A cold river of despair flooded through the clones and spilled out their eyes. To find the Jedi again after all the lonely years, to see them killed now —

38 and 62 opened up on the launcher crew, cutting them down where they stood. The remains of the sprint crashed in the middle of the street. Their blue plasma bolts chopped the mercenaries down.

38's despair froze him to the spot. 62, operating on his training, ran to the hauler to check for anyone inside. Their dream had vanished. 38 stared into the burning wreckage. Tears were on his face. Tears from a clone?

Something made him look up the side of the decaying highrise next to him. That's when I saw him for the first time, when he saw me clinging to the side of the building like a bug. He smiled when he saw me. I smiled back. The moment his eyes caught mine, that's when clarity returned to his life.

62 stepped out the back of the hauler. He followed 38's eyes up to me. There I was, perched on the side of the building like a fly on the wall. A fire ignited inside 62. He sighed.

Rotherron could feel the power of their love across the street, from the window sill where she crouched. She began to work her way down, dropping from sill to sill, floor by floor toward the pavement.

The Force kept me stuck safely to the side of the apartment block. 38, 62, and I were frozen in place. I had never felt such devotion, such pure love from another human, not even from my brother. It kept me in place.

Rotherron made it to the street. She crossed to 62 and put a hand on his shoulder. He blinked and looked at her. They smiled at each other.

"We often meet good friends in the strangest places," she told him.

"It's a Jedi thing, Mistress," Scorch replied.

The spell was broken. I crept over to a windowsill and dropped from one to another as Rothers had. 38's eyes followed me down. I walked up to him.

"Jedi," he sighed. Tears were still on his cheeks. "Mistress, we've missed you so much."

"We're so glad you're back," 62 added.

"We know," Rotherron replied, patting 62 on the shoulder.

It was eerily quiet. I was drowning in the affection pouring out of 38 and 62. The streets were empty, almost as if we were the only living

beings around for miles. Violence can do that, scare off all the nice people.

"It's so nice to see you," 38 added.

Like we were all best friends from childhood. Like we had sent the best years of our lives together. Like we were members of the same family, parted by tragedy but reunited. But it was right. The emotions were right. Everything was right. How could it not be, in the glow of unconditional love? I couldn't find myself. I felt dizzy, almost as if I were drunk. I began to sway back and forth.

That big brain inside Rothers' naked blue skull was still working. Her head-tails twitched. My brain was trapped in the devotion that poured out of 38 and 62, like standing under a giant waterfall, thousands of liters of water hitting me all at once. I just stood there staring at them with an idiot grin on my face, two middle-aged brothers who happened to love me without reservation. The Force massively amplified their emotions, as if trying to tell me something important. I was in danger of falling over. Were there only two, or were there ten thousand standing before me?

"You've tried to alter your appearance, but you're clones," she said.

38 answered her while still looking at me. A little worry was beginning to creep into his expression. "Yes, Mistress, we're from the first generation, Commandos, the ones created to serve the Jedi . . ."

". . . to be our comrades," Rotherron finished for him.

"Yes, Mistress," he finally got out.

"I . . . I," I put in, dazed and confused. I fell over.

That did it. All three of them stared down at me.

"Jaden?" Rothers asked.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," I said, slowly getting up.

"What's wrong with her?" 62 added. "She get hit in the head?"

"She's drunk," 38 said.

"I am not drunk," I replied. I fell over again.

They watched me as I struggled back on my feet.

"What?" I responded hazily. "They . . . sparkle." I was so dizzy from the swirl of emotions, I could hardly stay standing. I swayed a little more.

38 looked me in the eye. "Are you high on deathstick? " He reached out to steady me. His hand gripped my arm.

"I — no. It —" I blinked.

Rotherron frowned. I was making her look bad. She shook her head, her head-tails rustling over her shoulders. "She is not intoxicated. This is a Jedi thing. Your emotions have overthrown her."

"Have not . . ."

"Jaden is a Living Force practitioner. They are more empathic than other Jedi."

"But . . ." My head continued to spin. "Something there . . . . They were created to be our companions, the Old Order's . . . fight-alongside-the-Jedi people." Why was I acting this way? I never acted this way around the other clones who had joined us on Yavin 4, never around 017, the Ankias, or the rest. They were my friends. Why was this so different, so . . . portentous? "Like, like, I don't know."

"Jaden!" She shook her head again for emphasis. "These aren't even the first clones you've met. What's the matter with you?"

I was so dizzy. I blinked several times. "I don't know. I'm going to fall down." Inside, where they couldn't see, the Force had me in its grasp, like a pet direfox with a stuffed toy, rattling me around to emphasize the importance of these two.

38 took control. "Careful," he told me, steadying me with his hand. He took a firmer grip on my upper arm. "Don't fall." Taking control, that's what he was created for. "We are out of our proper orbit. I am 38. This is 62. We are —"

"— were —" 62 corrected.

"— were Republic Commandos from the first generation of clones, the ones created to fight for the Republic alongside the Jedi. You are the

commanders, we are the soldiers. We are your comrades, *comrades*," he stressed for me. "We heard the Jedi were back, but —"

"— we thought it was New Republic propaganda."

"— pudu, bantha fodder."

"Until . . ." 38 glanced up the side of the highrise.

"We heard a conversation in a bar," 62 added. "About Jedi in the old ruins, from someone you saved."

"Was he cute?" I said, then realized how silly it sounded. "I mean, well . . . what . . ." I tapped myself on the forehead. "He isn't as cute as Derrn, but still . . . . That was stupid. What's wrong with me?"

Rothers knew what I wanted to ask. "Was he a tall, dark haired human, young?"

62 nodded. "Yes, and who's Derrn?"

"We remember him," she continued, the tips of her head-tails twitching a little. "He wouldn't run in the right direction. Jaden wanted him to go away from danger, and he went toward it." Rothers glanced at me. "My friend Jaden is a powerful Jedi, despite her addled state. She's a bit off because her strong empathic abilities have been overwhelmed by your admiration. Let's give her a break and focus on these people."

Rotherron gestured at the dead men lying next to the cargo hauler. "They are outriders for a convoy of armed men shooting their way through the city. They've been dropping off trouble makers and looting as they go."

"Which explains why the cops aren't here."

Rothers agreed with him. "Yes. The city's domestic police are overwhelmed by multiple calls right now. I'm sure they know, they just can't come."

38 plucked at his modded blaster carbine. "They're up to something else. The opfor — opposing force, I mean."

"One part of their plan involved the ancient ruins, searching for Force-enhanced objects from the old times. That was modified when they felt our presence, to lure us there and kill us. There is one final part,

which has not yet revealed itself to me. The chaos here isn't helping me in finding clarity on the matter."

38 and 62 just stared at her, puzzled by the Jedi-speak of one gifted in *Future Path*. All of Luke's students followed the *Future Path*, our name for it. The old Jedi called it the Unifying Force doctrine. Tionne thought that Kyle's *Now* teachings corresponded to the other major Force doctrine, the Living Force. Tionne lost me on a lot of things, like the Potentium Theory, the Gray Teachings, and a lot of other stuff from the old times. It was all weirdness, but 017 and the others had adapted to the strangeness around us. These two had an advantage, they already knew what we were like. They'd fit right in. I sighed and blinked. The redirection of the clones' attention was beginning to work. Rothers and I would have to speak later. I had never felt the Force take hold of me in quite that manner before. We had to get these two to Luke. He'd know what to do. "I'm all right now. You can let go." I blinked a few more times. My mental balance was slowly coming back. "Do you want to help us?" I asked impulsively. "We always have something to do, someone to save, governments to overthrow." I giggled. A little giddiness remained in me.

"What was that last part?" 38 asked.

I was embarrassing Rotherron in front of our new friends.

"Uh, Onderon," she replied. "Jaden and I, we . . . oh, there's no other way to say it. We overthrew a government and restored the queen to power. We will tell you later."

I smiled.

Our clones laughed.

"Will you?" I asked again, a little afraid they'd change their minds.

"I'd like to see you stop us," 38 replied. "You definitely are stranger than we remember."

"You think I'm strange, wait till you meet Daaden —" I felt something. I turned to Rotherron. "Where are they?"

She closed her eyes. Her head-tails, her *lekku*, swayed back and forth behind her shoulders. A few people were back on the street,

creeping out from doorways, poking at the rubble of our sprint. I winced when I thought on just how we'd repay Mr. Thrombba for the loan of his only vehicle. That kindly, shy Bithian, that poverty-stricken Bithian had put much time and effort into the repair of his aged sprint. It was all gone now.

Rothers spoke. "They are close. Five, maybe seven minutes before they're here."

"I can feel their worry," I said, feeling the faint tremors of their emotions in the cacophony of the city, and especially someone else, worried about her failure in the ruins.

"They have just heard from the survivors. These," she gestured at the bodies, "haven't called in. They are uncertain of who'll they'll face, or if any local police are here." Rothers smiled at our new friends. "They think you two are policemen."

"A promotion," 62 joked.

"Why are they coming here?" 38 asked. "They should evade us, avoid confrontation."

I knew only too well about that. "They always want to kill Jedi. Always. Their leader has told them to kill Jedi, even if they have to abandon their other missions. So wherever they find us, they always attack."

A change went through these two just then. A tough, hard core rose to the surface of their minds.

"Boss," 62 said. "I should get the tracker and pull back up that alley." He gestured with his free hand. The other one tapped on the barrel of his weapon.

38 agreed. "We'll block with it. You'll use grenades and a heavy weapon. I'll break out the repeater." 62 ran off to obey. 38 looked at us. "We have lots of toys." He pulled an armored gauntlet out of a pocket and put it on his left hand while he talked. "My Jedi mistresses, 62 and I have experience in these things. Please to climb up the walls and hide in the

window wells. You will attack from the front while we pin them from the side. Do you wish a couple seeker rockets?"

I looked at Rotherron. She knew what I needed to know. She shook her head. "We can deal with the air vehicles ourselves," I replied to 38. "You hit the rest of the column."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. And what's so special about that glove?"

He closed his left hand into a fist. A thrusting blade sprang out the back of the armored gauntlet. "It's a flexmetal vibroblade, for close-up work."

"Very sweet." I knew I'd like these guys.

A grim smile crept over 38's face.

Rotherron disapproved. She glanced around to hide it. More people had come out to look at the wreckage and the bodies. "We need to get the civilians off the street."

"That's easy." 38 pulled up his DC-17m carbine and blazed away, pock marking the walls of the nearby apartment block. The sharp crack of his blaster fire echoed in the artificial canyon of the street. Onlookers screamed and ran for their lives.

"38!" Rothers shouted, her head-tails flexing with irritation.

He stopped. "What?" He looked at us. "What?"

## 2. Girls' Night Out

We were ready. "They are traveling slowly," Rotherron informed us. "But they are coming, they'll be here in a couple minutes."

38's little ploy had made the street ours. Police sirens could be heard faintly from every direction. The cultists had stepped up their operations. 62 had already pulled the large-wheeled tracker into a blocking position on the far side of the alley. Its slab sides were marred and scratched by the previous owner's misadventures. 38 stripped off his long coat to reveal the dark gray hardshell armor he wore on his upper body. He popped the side door open and rummaged in a duffle bag, trading his DC-17 for what he found. He pulled it out.

I smiled.

"I think you're going to be Jay's new Best Friend Forever," Rothers joked at my expense.

38 turned around. He cradled an Imperial Heavy Repeater with an underslung concussion launcher. The thing had been rigged with a custom sling to swing it aside for movement. Great idea. 38 wrapped the sling over his shoulder, before pushing several thermal detonators and sonic grenades into the leg pockets of his worn fatigues. I saw a hold-out blaster in a holster at his back.

62 chuckled at Rothers' joke from inside the cab of the tracker. He had a Stouker Concussion Rifle, an SCR, laying across his lap. That fat deviant Rax Joris and my adventure on Dosuun came to mind.

"I thought you were using grenades?" Rotherron asked him.

"What do you think I have stuffed in my pockets? Green-skin pears?" He smiled to take the edge off the comment, and said in a soft voice, "38's got a girlfriend."

"Shut up, Scorch," 38 replied. "The girl's got good taste in firearms."

"They are only a few blocks away," Rothers warned us. "They are searching for us. We know they have standing orders to kill Jedi."

38 smiled. "We'll see how that works out for them." Confidence poured out his mind like water from a revved pump. "Let's teach them a lesson, make their eyes water. Shall we get into position for the party, my Jedi maidens?"

I blushed.

— ◇ —

Here they came, rolling slowly along, like there weren't any police anywhere, like they were the lords of the city. Sirens echoed from every direction. I could see the red-yellow glow of fires from my vantage point, looking between tall buildings in the gathering dusk. Two airspeeders were up front, slowly poking along at about 12 meters altitude, armed men leaning out the sides, peering down at every shadow in the street. The green one on the right was the one that got away. Four wheeled vehicles, boxy light cargo vans only a little bigger than 38's tracker rolled along on the street behind them, more armed men hanging from the sides or leaning out the windows.

— someone else, someone in the last vehicle sent her mind ahead, questing for us. We hid from her, making ourselves like the clear panes behind us. 'Enfolding in the World' was the term given to the technique by Teacher Yesh of the Matukai, who taught it to me to teach to my friends. The air smelled of fire. The sunset painted the western faces of the buildings in deep red. They moved forward slowly. It was a parade of menace, reminding me of the funeral procession I had seen on Corellia. One speeder was red, mine. The green one was Rothers'. Men and rodians leaned out, staring down.

— she was a human girl, I could hear that from her mind. She knew we lived.

They were close enough. Rotherron's saberstaff came alive with its deadly blue light. She spun it out and threw it as I jumped. The two-bladed weapon cut its way through the windshield. I could hear the screams of those inside as they were dismembered by its deadly flight. The staff's blue blades cut through the top of the speeder, back toward Rotherron's hand. She had jumped, too, to land on the hood of the vehicle. It started to drift, a dead man at its controls. The staff back with her, she somersaulted to the vehicles below.

I landed on the hood of the red speeder. The men and rodians inside stared at me, startled into inaction. Force lightning lashed out from my hands convulsing those inside. I didn't want to kill them, just disable them. It was not a well-thought-out plan, because the airspeeder was on manual operation. The thing began to sway under my feet as the operator thrashed around. Then the stabilizer processors shorted from my strike. Then the power regulator blew out — there was a small explosion by the right-rear engine — the speeder shot forward. I ran toward the rear and jumped off just as it accelerated. It glanced off a nearby building, spiraled into the sky, and exploded with a big red bang. This wasn't going to be my day, I knew that on the way down. I was in an uncontrolled fall.

62 was crouching at the back of his tracker. They had parked it at an angle where the alley crossed the street. 38 was waiting at the other end, hiding behind the slanting front of the vehicle. The fun began when the middle of the column was across from them. The Sith girl was so obsessed with us, she had ignored their presence. I'm guessing, maybe she thought they were civilians. Or maybe it's something about the freed clone mind.

62 stepped out from behind the tracker with that giant tubular Stouker in his hands. The men in the open doorway of the third vehicle gaped at him. He smiled as he pumped a couple concussion rounds into the vehicle. It blew men out both sides and shattered its windows. He dropped the Stouker, grabbed his modified carbine with one hand and

pulled out a thermal det with another. "Det!" he shouted. The det went into the shattered vehicle. It went off with a deep thoom! No one came out of that.

"Grenade," 38 shouted as he chucked a sonic grenade into the open window of the second vehicle. Those inside shouted as they saw it bounce at their feet. It went off with a big thump right before I fell on the hauler's roof. The bodies of men, rodians, and weequays scattered on the street. The vehicle continued to move forward to crash into the back of the first transport. It had stopped to spill out the mercs inside. They fired at Rothers. Her blue-bladed saberstaff spun in blaster suppression arcs, the bolts humming up into the air. She reflected several back at the gunmen, who screamed as their own fire hit them, cut them down.

That's when 38 opened up with his heavy repeater, the noise like a big blanket being ripped apart by wampas. The gunmen began to fall.

I had whacked my head hard when I slammed into the transport's roof. I moaned and rolled off. The impact with the pavement jolted me awake with pain. I'd have those bruises for days. A survivor of the sonic grenade stumbled out right on top of me. I stared straight up at him. He was a human boy whose face was streaked with blood. His wild eyes looked right into mine. He blinked as he reached for the holstered blaster pistol at his waist.

My mind slammed him hard, throwing him up, straight up. He howled as he flew into the evening sky. The boy might survive the landing. Back in myself, I rolled up. The gunmen from the last vehicle swarmed out. Rotherron was in among them, chopping them down with wide sweeps of her double-bladed staff. The weapon spun so quickly in the air, there were only ribbons of blue light where the blades moved.

38 shifted position to get at the last of them. A wounded merc stood up from the pile of bodies. 38 cracked him in the face with the butt of his repeater. The vibroblade snapped out of his glove with a little snicking sound. Eight cut the man open. He died screaming.

62's 17m opened up in short bursts into those who had dared to leave the vehicle on his side. Mostly head shots, they fell at his feet.

The one I was after, the Sith girl, she flashed out the top hatch. She ran back down the street, down the hill toward the distant lights. I caught only a glimpse of her long dark hair and dark tunic in the gloom. Men were in my way. My hand and mind *pushed*, a wave of Force power knocked them aside — and into 38's sights. He opened up on them as I flashed away.

I was gone down the hill and all was suddenly quiet. 62 ran around the back of the last vehicle. He and 38 watched Rotherron cut the last of them down. She took off the last gunman's legs with a low sweep, the counterstrike back with the other blade cut off his head.

"Didn't I tell you?" 38 shouted. "Didn't I? Just the same."

"Yes, you told me. Shoot the one over there, Boss." The one I hurled into the sky had sat up from his fall, trying to get his pistol into play. 38 cut him in half with a burst of his repeater. The two clones heard moans among the bodies and moved to stifle them. Rotherron was suddenly standing next to them, several blaster holes in the nice long skirt she wore over her skintight.

"Enough. Control yourselves."

Our new allies relaxed. 62 looked around. "Where's the other mistress?"

38 pointed. "She ran off that way. Should we follow her?" he asked Rothers.

Her head-tails wagged. Night was coming fast. "No. Let's get into your tracker. I know where she's going."

— ◇ —

The Sith girl was fast. I followed the fear in her after I lost sight of her. Once a Sith is broken, their lack of emotional control lets fear rise up, drowning their senses. It pours out of them. Their pride and

overconfidence are so powerful, it is sometimes hard to get to this state. Our ambush had broken her confidence in her Force abilities. It would return soon enough . . .

She was too far ahead. The girl gained a little on me because of my aches and pains and the throbbing in my head from the whack it had taken. I stumbled. My Force-speed had left me, I was back to a human pace. Police airspeeders whizzed by overhead. Their red and green emergency lights painted the darkening walls of the buildings around me. Up and down the hills of the city we went. The crumbling concrete towers of tenement apartment buildings were behind us. We were now among the nicer highrises of the middle classes. We kept going downhill, toward the light and color. People were on the street, looking around for glimpses of the trouble they had seen on the local holonet. They stared at me as I ran past them.

Up and down, up and down we went, on a descending path, each hill a little lower. Colored lights of the city's shopping district twinkled and gleamed below me. More people were out, curious and a little unafraid because the mayhem seemed far from the center of things.

The light drowned out the night's stars. Yellow, bright red, blue — big holodisplays and giant news screens towered over me. The streets were crowded with people and surface cars. Sprints and speeders buzzed around overhead. One news display showed the site of our recent battle, not too far away — yet far enough not to upset the evening's fun. In a city of many millions, the upset of a few thousand did not count for much. I could feel the worry in the crowd, but not enough to keep them home. Maybe if 38 were here with me, he could scare some sense into them. Their police were in mortal combat with the Remnant, their financial district had been looted — time to go out for a look. So maybe a little bit of my early life was making me bitter. Or maybe it was the pain in my head. People had a right to be curious, I suppose.

She was among the people here, slowing to a walk. She knew where she was going. The district was nice, it reminded me of Coruscant at

night, except we were on the surface of the planet. My inner eye led me through the lights and the nervous crowds. I could feel Rotherron somewhere nearby. She and the clones had already caught up. There was a small restaurant between a clothing store and a card parlor. People tended to clump together in familiar surrounds when they're afraid. The calm yellow light from the restaurant's open door welcomed me in.

Casual seating. Tionne had taught me about proper dining during my time with her on Commenor and Coruscant. There were stools along the counter near the door, tables in the space opposite. A small crowd was in the place, the tables only partially filled. The table seating was like an L stretching away from the counter, with an empty space in the center. The kitchen doors were next to the counter, human and zabrak servers going in and out. This was a world where the preference was for living over droid in matters of social interaction.

I took a stool. "Onna tea, chilled, please," I told the human behind the counter. I leaned over and whispered in the little Sith girl's ear: "You can never hide from a Jedi."

We sat in silence, the room chattering around us. Her skin color was a little darker than mine, her long hair was an almost translucent black. Rotherron would be here soon. "We missed you at the ruins. Where are your friends?" I asked. Time was now my ally and her enemy. Rotherron was close, nearly here. My tea came in a small white ceramic cup. I sipped at it. "Good tea." I lifted a hand for the server. When he came, I ordered several flavored rice balls. "Chasing people makes me hungry," I said as I munched on them. My mind began to poke and prod at her. "There's great hurt in you. You have listened too long to the pain." I took a sip of tea. "I know a place where you don't have to fear anymore. I know someone who can teach you how to put away the hurt." I picked up my cup with my right hand, to take another sip. I whispered to her: "Come with me."

She spoke at last. "The Jedi wishes to split me from that which makes me strong. Perhaps I should return the favor and split the Jedi." She punched out at me with a black-bladed knife.

I caught the knife hand and put it in a wrist bind. "You should listen to one who has been down your path." She grunted in pain as my left hand tightened the bind. I took one last sip of the tea before putting the cup down.

No one in the restaurant had noticed our under-the-counter antics. Someone's datapad chimed at a table behind us.

"Hello, hello," a chirpy teenage human girl's voice said. "Hi, Sai. I'm at the Tembeko Restaurant, with Le and Masa. What? Isn't it terrible, all the violence? No one knows what's going on. It's peaceful in my neighborhood, most of the shops are still open. We're safe here. Do you want to come down? You can stay at my place tonight if you don't feel safe."

The Sith girl continued to push back at me through the pain I gave her. I could feel her gathering herself for a Force-enhanced blow. I struck first.

My body rotated on the stool as my right hand came up in a violent open-palm strike right between her breasts. The loud smack of its impact drew every eye in the place. The power of the blow hurled her backwards off the stool and into the empty space between the tables behind us.

"Sai, a fight just broke out! Right here! Two girls."

The black-bladed knife fell from her hand. She reached for it. My mind snatched it from the floor into my hand. I placed it on the counter behind me.

The world exhaled. Everyone in the restaurant saw me for who I was. A little thing, like what I used to do to entertain my nieces, and it pulled reality out from under them all. There were two billion people on this planet, and not one of them had ever seen my kind before today. I was a creature of myth made real. Awe traveled around the room in one whispered word: "*Jedi*." There were gasps of disbelief.

"My Three Gods, Sai! You have to see this. It's a Jedi Knight!" the girl said into her datapad. She aimed it at me. A wave of adoration rushed out from her. I drew their awe and respect into me, filling me with strength. This was the Outer Rim, where the legends of the Jedi were the strongest. But I saw how this could lead to the dark side. The compulsion to be loved could lead to the need to control, to force that emotion out of others. It was not the way of the Sith, but it was a way into shadow. These thoughts stopped me from feeding on the crowd's affection. *I will be worthy of their love.* "I live in the Force," I whispered to myself. It was unintentionally loud enough for the datapad girl sitting nearby to hear. She gasped.

The Force came to me then, filled me to the brim. The Sith girl — and several others in the place, including a little boy sitting with his parents — stared behind me in disbelief. For a fleeting moment I was not alone. A multitude stood by my side, stretching back into a faded distance. Humans and many other beings, all dressed in simple brown robes.

The moment passed. The Sith girl swept her long black hair out of the way with one hand, drawing her lightsaber with the other. The silence of the place made the whoosh and pop of its ignition even louder than it was.

My mind cast my saber into my hand. Its golden blade leapt forth. The restaurant was filled with the hum of lightsabers.

She did not recognize me, but she did recognize the color of my blade. "You!" My Master has placed a special bounty on your head." She stood.

I laughed. The love of battle came over me, that I first felt on Hoth. It was strong in me on Zonju among the swoop gangs. It roared in my soul when I faced the Kothos brothers on Vjun. Ancient voices sang to me in my head. "There will be some trouble in collecting it."

She stepped forward, her blade up.

I slowly paced around her, my saber at my side, waiting. She turned to keep facing me. My joyous mind hammered at her. Wordless entreaties passed to her images of a right life, a life in the Force, fuller, sounder — I was an ocean pouring itself out to her. *Come with me. My master will give you challenges to fill a dozen lives. Come.*

There must have been spillover, because several in the crowd shouted at her. "Surrender to the Jedi, girl!" "Put it down, walk away." "Let go of the pain."

This one had never faced one of us before. Those she had killed suffered anger, fear, aggression. They were brave or foolish. But never joy. Joy in the battle, joy in the struggle. This new thing put anxiety in her step when she attacked. Her cuts and my parries were too fast for the untrained eye to follow. The flash and pop of the saber contact strobed through the place, painting the customers and staff in bright light and deep shadow.

That's when 38, 62, and Rotherron got there. Our two new clone friends raised their blaster carbines. Rothers was between them. She put out her hands, one on 38's shoulder, the other on 62's. "This is a Jedi thing." She drew her staff.

It was up to me. The space was too small, too crowded for Rothers to get in on the action. They watched me fight, 38 and 62 studying the action as if there would be a test later on the subject.

I was in the Fast Stance. Her saber licked at my sides, each time a parry from me. The Sith girl had a little training in Force speed, which she used to batter at me. Each time there was a slash, there was a parry and a counter-stroke. We came close in a lock, our weapons flaring at the contact. The girl never had an equivalent of Master Low — I put her sword arm in a joint lock, pivoted on my hips, and threw her onto the floor. The Sith girl hit the hardwood floor hard, but she still had her lightsaber in her hand. She slashed at my legs. A back somersault carried me away from her questing red blade, to land on top of the counter.

I killed my blade. She was already breathing heavily. We stared at each other. I paced back and forth on the countertop, my feet treading flawlessly among the cups and dishes. Two of the patrons were frozen in their places, staring at my feet as I paced around their evening meals. No secret lock presented itself. My shame had given Master Kyle and Master Luke a key to free me from my anguish. I reached into her mind in a last attempt to turn her. The outer shell of her thoughts crumpled when I pushed. What I saw made me gasp and step back. I knocked over a glass of water with my heel. She was chained inside, bound in service to the scepter. It glowered and gleamed in her heart. It laughed and mocked my attempts to free her.

62 glanced at Rotherron. She was kneading her saberstaff with her hands. She saw it, too.

I stepped down from the counter, from a stool to the floor. She waited for me, her bright red lightsaber at the ready, her mind a prison I could not free her from.

The golden light sprang up. I knew what had to be done. The hilt of my saber came up beside my head in our adapted form of the ancient Eight Phase Stance, Master Menkin's Strong Style. The rest of me settled into a crouch. Apprentices, especially that pushy little girl Bitters, had already taken to calling it the Crouching Strong Style. Some cuties even called it Jaden's Crouching Heart Attack.

38 knew. "Playtime's over," he whispered to himself.

The Sith girl attacked. I smashed her strongest blows aside. I hopped into a low spinning turn and slashed at her side. She moved in a circle in an attempt to keep me in front of her. I continued to attack, moving, chasing her around the floor with counter-feints and heavy blows to her lightsaber. Her back was now to the empty tables. She raised her saber for a descending slash at my head.

My empty hand struck outward. The great coiled snake of the Force that lived inside me smashed out. The crash and roar of Force lightning drowned out every thought. Thick snapping lines of bioelectric energy

punched out from my extended arm. They slammed into her, hammering her back.

The power of it blew her into the empty tables. Her dark jacket began to smolder. I could feel the desperation in her

She screamed incoherently and ran at me, her lightsaber raised over her head.

I thrust forward in an extended lunge, my left hand on the floor. My lightsaber speared her through the chest.

Her death startled her. I pulled my saber out as I stood, slashing upwards at her sword arm. I severed it at the wrist. The detached hand and lightsaber spun across the room.

She screamed once more, a bloody, gurgling sound. The dying Sith girl clutched at the stump of her arm. She slumped to her knees and fell backwards. Dead.

I looked down at her.

The scepter faded from her dying mind. Such a thing, only the ancient Sith could create it through their alchemy — an inanimate object empowered with the Force, that lived, thought, and had desire. My mind spoke a promise to it before it vanished. The timeless place held me, I don't know how long. I found myself still staring down at the dead girl. 62 had his arm over my shoulders. I guess he thought I was going to get dizzy and fall again. My saber was off and in its holster. Rothers was over in a corner retrieving the Sith lightsaber.

"Mistress Rothers explained what was going on, how you tried to turn her." He paused. "You can't save everyone."

These two adapted quickly. 62 was already using Rotherron's nickname. "I know. It hurts when I fail." I looked him in the eyes. "What do I call you?"

"Use my number, Six-Two. It is my name. Don't you call these others you've recruited by their numbers?"

"This is different."

"How is it different?" He really wanted to know.

How could I explain the Force-inspired hunches that had begun to flood my mind once I met them? "I can't explain right now. The Force is telling me something about you both."

"What is it telling you?"

"I . . . I'm not entirely sure. What do I call you besides 62?"

"My nickname is Scorch. Don't ask. 38's nickname is 'Boss.' I call him Eight or Three-Eight sometimes."

I nodded.

"We're clones. Numbers are our names." He moved his head in 38's direction. "I don't think he'd like you to call him 'Boss' anyway."

Three-Eight was covering the restaurant, but subtly, like he was just standing by the door. Nice. I could get used to working with these guys.

I looked down at her, her body folded back in an imitation of a stretching exercise. "She was going to meet someone here." The grief began to settle into me, like always, after the battle. Scorch's arm was still around me. He tightened his grip, almost as if he could see the remorse unfolding inside my head.

"Yeah," he replied. "Two of them."

He told me about it as I leaned against him, guilt and sadness over the Sith girl washing through me.

— ◇ —

38 drove like a maniac.

"Watch the cars!" Rothers shouted.

"I am!"

"Boss, turn here."

He turned the big tracker. It went up on two wheels.

"Pull over, I'm driving," Rotherron ordered. "You're going to kill us all."

"Like Hell." 38 rammed the acceleration to the max. "You said you wanted to get to the shopping district."

"In one piece!"

62 howled for joy from the back. They buzzed through traffic, barreling downhill like rocket-assisted boulders in freefall. 38 ignored all traffic. They side-swiped a land speeder.

"Sorry!" 62 shouted as they sped off.

Once there, they began to cruise. Rotherron sat in the seat next to 38, her eyes closed. "Turn here. Slowly."

"Where's the crazy mistress?" 62 asked from the back, amid the clutter of guns and bombs. Crazy? He meant it in a nice way. It was just 62's way.

"Still running on the hills above us. Here! The Sith will meet someone near here." She opened her eyes.

"What's a Sith?"

"Later, 38. They're already here."

The three of them got out into the colorful crowded darkness. They began to stroll up a sidewalk, Rothers in the lead. 38 and 62 were once again wearing their overcoats. She glanced behind herself. They had a natural swagger that parted the crowd. She turned and touched 38 on the arm, gesturing with her head. A large multiengine airspeeder sat by the curb ahead of them, just around the corner from the restaurant. She held up her fingers: two.

62 on one side, 38 on the other, they jerked the vehicle's doors open and pulled out two armed beings. "See? No one locks their doors when they're inside." The weequay under him struggled. He smacked the creature in the head. "Do you want a blaster bolt through your spine?"

"No, my pleasure not, do not desire that."

Rotherron was listening to the Force. "Jay's nearby, she's here. She's about to catch up to the Sith."

"What's a Sith?" This time 62 asked. The rodian knew it was up and quietly submitted to the barrel of 62's carbine pressed into his back.

"Later."

A small crowd had gathered. Several were on comlinks or datapads, trying to get a police response. "Lots of luck," 62 snipped at them. "What do we do with these?" he asked Rothers.

"Bring them," she replied. She pointed, then led the way up the block and around the corner.

— ◇ —

"Yeah," 62 replied. "A secondary extraction point for this 'Sith,' an emergency RV for her. We caught two mercenaries in an airspeeder around the corner. Mistress Rothers had us truss them up. We stuffed them into a changing booth at the clothing store.

"Oh."

62 laughed. "Rodian faces are so funny when they're angry. Then we went next door and saw you . . ." He paused. "What's a Sith?"

"Hum." I thought on an answer. "Long answer or short answer? I guess we only have time for the short answer." I tried to remember the quick answer Tionne once gave me when I asked her about them. "'The emperor was a Sith Lord. They are against life and light. They thrive on chaos and nourish a deeply rooted will to power. They are Force users, utilizing the dark side of the Force. The outer aspect of the Force can be dominated and exploited by those with the will to do so.'"

"Anti-Jedi. Jedi, anti-Jedi. The opfor commanders."

Rotherron joined us. "Yes. Run away from them for now. We'll teach you in the future how to fight them."

I craned my neck around to look at Eight. He heard. He nodded. Did the other people in the restaurant hear? Most of them were still frozen in place, staring at the dead Sith girl, silent at the presence of mythic beings.

Rothers had found the girl's lightsaber. The thing was black, made of molded parts, not at all hand-made like a Jedi's.

"Mass production?" I looked at Rothers.

She nodded in agreement. "I did not think that was possible, but, yes, I think so."

"That's just such good news." A vision of cultist armies waving mass-produced lightsabers spun in my head.

She looked down at the corpse. "You couldn't turn her. I saw it. It was the scepter Tavion has, isn't it?"

The savory kitchen smells were making me slightly nauseous. "It prevented me. I could hear it behind her, whispering to her. She was a captive in her own mind. The thing was living in her."

"Poor Rosh." Her head-tails sagged.

"We'll find him." I closed my eyes. "I will destroy it, Rothers, I promise." I opened my eyes.

Rotherron inspected my face. Her attention shifted to 62. The ends of her head-tails twitched. One of them reached out to touch 62 on the arm. "You and 38 have come into the middle of things. Everything will be explained soon. Trust us for now."

62 leaned in to whisper to us. "Jedi shed blood with us, in the early days. You lead, we'll follow."

Her head-tails wrapped themselves around her neck. "I'll search the body."

"Thank you." I patted 62's arm — Scorch's arm. He removed it. The grief passed but the nausea remained. I moved over to the counter, where the remains of my snack lay. Three-Eight moved up to cover my back.

I drank my tea. "More, please," I asked the terrified server. He ran to obey.

Not one person had moved or even spoken. Everything was a frozen stillness, everyone staring at us, and had been staring since it began. What a fine evening out for them this had been. There's a war outside, care for a meal and a body? The stares were more alarming than usual because of a large group of grans in the far corner. When grans stare, they use all three of their eyes. Since their eyes are on stalks, they also poke out at you. I stared back at them for a moment. The server returned with

more chilled tea for my unsettled stomach. I drank the tea and ate the last of the rice balls.

The stillness continued while I ate and drank, except for one. The little boy had left his parents' table to join Three-Eight and me at the counter. His parents stared with horror at Rotherron as she went through the dead Sith girl's pockets. A thousand years had passed since I killed her, but only a couple minutes for the rest of them. Scorch followed the kid over. The boy pulled at Eight's overcoat. "Why'd she cut off the bad girl's hand?"

Eight put his hand on the boy's head. "You don't really want to know."

The boy nodded.

"It's really gruesome."

"Oh, that's going to discourage him," Scorch remarked.

"Like you know so much about wild humans."

"Like you do."

"Why did the Jedi girl cut off the bad girl's hand?" the boy demanded. "She stabbed her, didn't that kill her?"

"Tell him," I said through a mouthful of rice.

Eight looked down at the boy. "We don't die all at once, kid. Some people, especially in a hard fight, can keep going for 20 or 30 seconds after their heart stops."

"Really?"

"Really," 62 echoed.

Cup in hand, I joined them. "It's true. Some people, very dangerous people, can extend that up to three minutes, maybe a lot longer."

"Really?" Eight, Scorch, and the kid said in unison.

"Really." I took a sip of the tea. My nausea began to let up. "There is a story from the early days of the Jedi, about a knight so in tune with the Force that when a Sith Lord struck off his head, the knight's body killed the Sith before collapsing."

All three of them stared at me, their mouths gaping.

"It may be a myth," I hurriedly added.

"Of course."

"Yeah."

"Huh."

A wave of relief passed through all three of them. The father snapped out of his funk and ran to grab his kid away from the strange mythic beings telling even stranger stories.

62 walked over to Rothers and knelt beside her.

"Who's Derrn?" 62 asked quietly. He glanced back at me. I was stuffing my face with rice balls.

"A human boy, a Jedi Apprentice," Rothers said. "Jaden's sweet on him. He's sweet on Jaden." Rothers had emptied a basket of rolls and used the empty container to stash the Sith girl's junk. She started checking for secret pockets. The Sith are like that. They even keep secrets from each other. "The rule is, two Jedi can't become . . . they can't become a couple until both are Knights. I think Jay and Derrn will become a couple after he passes his trials." The dead one had nothing else. She picked up the basket and carried it over to the counter. I put my cup down to rummage through the basket. Jewelry, creds, her lightsaber, a datapad – encrypted, I checked – a sheath for the black blade, and a small pouch. I picked up the knife and put it back in its sheath. I handed it to Three-Eight. "It's a cortosis dagger, resistant to lightsabers. You or Scorch might find it handy. The blade is very sharp."

"Thank you, Mistress." He clipped it to the utility belt under his overcoat.

Rothers poured out the contents of the pouch. Three gems were inside, shaped to fit a lightsaber. One was an iridescent white gem. It tingled my fingers when I touched it. The gem was attuned to the Force. It was light-side. Tionne had instructed us on such objects.

"We need to find out where these came from," I said.

"But not now," she replied.

I looked up at her. "Not more." There was just a little desperation in my voice.

"This place, it's what they were after all along." Rothers took my hand. "I'm sorry, Jay."

My friend's *Future Sight* revealed something to her. Something bad. "Where?" I asked.

"Something big to the northwest, at the far edge of the city."

We turned to Eight and Scorch. "You can't come with us," I told them. "Make your way to Yavin 4, Master Skywalker can help you."

Eight glared at us. "And why not? We were bred for war."

"We may not come back from this," Rotherron said in a quiet voice. "The other fight was different. This one —"

"If you leave us behind, we will follow you," Scorch told us.

I swallowed. "Would you die with us this day?"

"Nothing is certain in war," Three-Eight instructed us. "Having found you, we're not letting you go."

Rotherron's lekku draped themselves over her shoulders. "Still — remember what Jaden said about Yavin 4 and the Master."

Eight continued his instruction. He took her arm in his hand. "Do not assume anything, my Jedi. I care not for your spooky fortune telling. Never assume in war."

"Thank you," she replied.

"Now," he asked, "what's to the northwest of the city that had Jedi scared?"

"Many of the enemy," Rothers answered. She closed her eyes. "Many of them, and darksiders. I'm not exactly sure where, though. Machines, lots of machines."

"Hey, Scorch, what's to the northwest?"

Scorch shrugged. "Like I would know?" He turned to the servers behind the counter. "What's to the northwest?" he asked a zabrak waiter. He looked at the others. "Well?"

They stared back at him. Fortunately, they were all limited to two eyes.

"This is Jedi business!" Eight bellowed at the entire restaurant. "Your city is in danger and we are here to help, but we have to know what's to the northwest."

"Get what you need, stick it in the captured airspeeder, get it outside the door," I whispered to Scorch. He ran out.

A little girl raised her arm and stood, just like in school. Her parents stared at us. "There's a toy factory."

"Thank you very much," Rothers replied. "I don't think they are after toys."

"A plastics factory," a man at the counter added.

I shook my head.

Three-Eight centered their thoughts on the problem. "Come on, people! What would a Remnant strike team want to the northwest?"

Everyone present pulled back at the word "Remnant." Then a cacophony of voices assailed us with ideas. They all knew who the Remnant were.

Rotherron argued with the crowd while I pulled my small datapad from its pocket in my vest. The little apprentice Bitters had taken to putting tiny Jedi stickers on anything she found in the women's dormitory, including my stuff. A small green stylized tree was on the back of my datapad.

Three-Eight noticed the design when I held the 'pad up to look at the flat display. "What's that?" he asked.

"The symbol of the New Jedi Order. You'll wear one soon enough." I meant Bitter's obsessive labeling activities, but he took it another way. Pride and purpose lit up in him. He was a furnace of light. Rotherron turned to glance at him. Something, something was coming. She could feel it. I could feel it. A change, something . . . I briefly leaned against him as we looked at the display on my 'pad. Nothing. All it said was "industrial area." Eight turned to glance at Six-Two.

A little meaningless comment, that's all it was. What had I started? Customers and staff came up with lots of suggestions. There were government offices, food warehouses — further out a few villas. The plastics companies and the toy factory were already mentioned, though like it was a competition, several people shouted them out again. I wished the Remnant really were after toys. The voices listed a host of other things. They were all trying to help.

We had to go soon, time was short, an appointment to keep. And if we failed, people would die and something else would be left unborn. I wanted to get on with it.

"How about the fuel depot?" the datapad girl asked. The Sith girl's body was still sprawled on the floor. They all seemed to have forgotten that fact.

A gran-accented voice spoke from the back. Their throats didn't handle Basic well and my ears didn't handle their voices. "What?"

Rothers understood. That giant Twi'lek brain of hers, always showing me up. "The Tesevek Corporation?"

"Yes!" the crowd shouted.

"Where is it?" Rothers shouted back at the gran.

Eight whispered in my ear. "The gran says they are on the main road to the north. They make charge packs, droids, industrial supplies."

"Call them," I ordered datapad girl. I also tried.

Nothing for either of us. "No connection available," she read off her pad, puzzled, never having seen that before.

Others in the crowd tried, either on their 'pads or their comlinks. Nothing again.

"Jammers," Eight whispered. Rotherron heard.

"Call the police, anyone, please," she asked the crowd. "Tell them we're going there. Lives are in the balance, we'll need all the help they can send."

Datapad girl had already tried. "Jedi lady, all I get is a droid dispatcher."

Three-Eight nodded. "Just like I'd do it. Covert units in the city to disrupt police services, while the real action's somewhere else."

"Jedi lady," datapad girl said, "please be careful."

Others in the crowd echoed her plea.

"If we can," Rothers said. "Find help for us."

We left. Rothers grabbed the basket of Sith junk on the way out. Sorch was waiting outside. He had retracted the speeder's top. We piled in. The door crowded with customers and staff, they watched us leave. Datapad girl waved as we took off.

### 3. Travelers

We flashed north. I had tumbled into the front seat. Rothers was crammed in the back with Eight and duffel bags full of dangerous things. We buzzed our way through the traffic. I put my arm around Scorch and laid my head on his shoulder. My feelings rose up in, like the battles against the slavers, only worse. Something . . . "Don't tell anyone," I whispered to him as he drove. "Sometimes I'm not a good Jedi. Sometimes I'm afraid."

Rotherron could feel my worry. She spoke from the back seat, another of the ancient Jedi poems Tionne had discovered in one of our recovered holocrons.

We go where the Force takes us.  
Taking only what we need.

As we live,  
The life of the universe is in us.

Let there be no fear.  
Let there only be joy.

We give our lives freely to the Force,  
That the life of the universe will ever prosper.

By my life, I affirm this trust in me.  
By my death, I do affirm this trust.

Let there be no fear.  
Let there only be joy.

"What are you afraid of?" Scorch asked.

"Of failing."

"When a clone falls in service, he does not fail. He has succeeded,"  
Three-Eight quoted from the back. "That's a nice poem, Jedi Mistress. It  
reminds me of the songs our old Mandalorian trainer taught us. Fek, he  
was a hard ass."

"Please sing one, Eight."

Three-Eight started. He was joined by Scorch, then by Rothers and  
myself.

Kote, vode an!

Kote dara suum,  
Kote, dana suum kote!  
Te racin ka'ra juaan kote!

Glory, eternal glory!  
The stars pale beside our might.

We who serve the cause,  
We who give our lives,  
We who strive,  
We are loyal to the end.

To our brothers,  
To all who stand with us,  
We are loyal!

We pass beyond, but still we see

Those who remain.  
We stand with them still.  
Death cannot stop us.  
We are here still.

Glory, eternal glory,  
See us in its light!

"Our Mandalorian trainers called themselves the *Cuy'val Dar*, 'those who do not or should not exist,' because the clone soldier project was very secret. They couldn't even tell their families where they were going," 62 explained.

"Pains in the ass is what they were," Eight said.

I was in the Room of a Thousand Fountains, my shadow master Qui-Gon glaring at me as I sat beside a fountain. A spout bubbled in the middle, crystal-clear droplets splattering into the basin. The many ripples intersected each other in the clear water, making the shallow bottom twist and dance in my eyes.

"What is this? Fear? Do not be afraid of death, neither be afraid of acting in the face of death."

"I'm afraid of failing, not dying. All this . . . so much is in motion now."

Master Jinn sighed. "My treasure! Be mindful of the Living Force! What has your master taught you? What have I tried to teach you?"

"To stay in the moment, Master Qui-Gon."

"Recite it to them."

"Recite what?"

He gave me *that look*. "You know. As you do, concentrate on the Force, on the life around you at this moment."

"Yes, master."

I was back in the airspeeder, next to Scorch. "My shadow master has ordered me to recite an ancient Jedi chant to you."

62 turned his head to look at me. "Shadow master?"

"What? What kind of master?" Eight asked from the back seat.

"Shadow master," Rotherron repeated for me. "It's a . . . never mind. We'll explain later."

"It's a what?" Eight demanded.

The wide yellow line of the highway below us had emptied of traffic. A dark night, the stars were hard and bright.

"It's a type of Force ghost — "

"What?"

"Master Qui-Gon wishes me to recite something," I told them. "It is an old chant — it goes back to the first days of the Jedi."

They waited. The yellow ribbon of light below was devoid of any movement. We were close.

"Fear. Fear attracts the fearful. Fear attracts the aggressor. Fear punishes the innocent. Fear weakens. Fear corrupts. Fear is the great enemy. I must not fear. Fear is the great chain that binds the mind. Fear is the small death that brings total defeat. I will see Fear and recognize it. I will let Fear pass over me, through me. Fear will not diminish me. I will watch it pass. When it is gone, my strength will remain."

We were there. Vehicles on one side were locked in a massive traffic jam — the other side was barren. We saw wreckage in the distance, lit by the yellow highway lights and by burning cars. Crashed, overturned, hurled together in a jumble. There was blaster fire.

I felt the threat. "They're firing rockets! Evade!"

62 turned the airspeeder into a tight downward bank. "Hang on!" he shouted. We spiraled down into this yellow night of flame and violence. Missiles arced up at us.

## 4. Highway

It was one wild ride.

"They've got a lock! Turn! Turn! Turn!" I screamed in 62's ear. Each time I shouted he tightened the downward spiral.

38 was clinging to Rother's waist. She was facing to the rear, half out of her seat. Who knows what he thought she was doing at that moment, it didn't matter to him. He reacted to the need to keep her in the airspeeder.

My 62, my Scorch, he began to howl. I was startled to realize it was pure joy pouring out of him. Like the Mandalorians of ancient times, he was only truly alive when he was in battle. I began to laugh. I'd shout through the laughter occasionally for a tighter turn, a steeper descent.

One came close. Rotherron's mind *pushed* it away from us. It exploded, rattling the airspeeder.

Boom. Rattle.

"Yeow!" Scorch yelled in glee. "Back in action!"

"Shut up!" Eight shouted from the back seat, clinging to Rothers' waist as she *pushed* another rocket away from us.

Boom. Rattle.

We were down on the deck curving around piles of wrecked vehicles, three homing rockets still on us. 62 pulled even lower. He banked up and back, around a stopped hauler. The last missiles hit the hauler. It went up with a big bang, the pressure wave of the explosion slamming us into the pavement. The airspeeder skidded and spun. We braced ourselves.

No slam. It skidded to a gentle halt just short of an immense pile of smashed groundcars, landspeeders, and haulers. I blinked. Everything was a shade of yellow.

Rotherron's Twi'lek head-tails twitched as we got out. She ran her hands over the blue skin of her arms. I felt it, too. Fear. Fear was everywhere here.

38 and 62 were oblivious to it. They piled out, then proceeded to drag their toy-filled duffles from the back of the speeder.

Rockets arced overhead. Blaster fire echoed among the wreckage, and fearful people cowered in the wreckage of their cars. The crack of Imperial sniper rifles and fizzle of disruptors could be heard behind the blaster fire. Heavy repeaters, too. The Remnant had brought their best toys.

"You're safe here," a man called out to us from where he crouched in the wreckage. "But don't go beyond the big rig over there."

"Take cover!" someone else screamed. Another rocket shot overhead. It exploded in the distance.

"What are those?" Rotherron asked.

I turned to see what my blue friend was talking about.

Eight and Scorch had taken off their long coats and had begun to strap ammo and various widgets to their hardshell armor.

"This is a weapons system from the Clone Wars," Eight said as he worked. "Took us years to find all the bits."

They were both wearing their knife gloves. 62 explained: "Every arms merchant in two sectors knew us by name, fake names, before we found them all." He touched various items strapped to his armor and legs as he talked about them. "The canisters on my thighs are anti-armor 'nades. Here is the AA launcher adapter, clips to the blaster carbine. Here's the sniper adapter." He touched ammo packs strapped here and there to his torso. "Ammo packs for the sniper component. And of course 'nades and more 'nades here, there, and everywhere on me."

Eight chuckled.

"The complete warrior accessory package," I said, at that moment truly in love with them.

Scorch laughed. He handed Eight several ammo packs. "It's the DC-17m Weapons System, created just for us, for the Commandos."

There was blaster fire in the distance. I felt something . . . . I was away, springing over the wreckage, the gasps of huddled citizens following my departure.

Rotherron fired up one end of her staff. A ripple of awe washed away a little of the fear. Whispers of a word spread among those crouched in the wreckage, a magic word to them, creatures of myth come back in their hour of need. "*Jedi*."

"Come on," she said.

Metallic clicks from Eight and Six-Two as they loaded up fresh magazines. "Safety's off," Eight announced. They followed her into the wreckage. Several of the Kailionians present stood up and followed along.

— ◇ —

I bounced over the tops of stalled groundcars and around hauler rigs and gravtrucks. Someone on the other side tried to tag me, but I was moving too fast. The shots burned the air where I had been. A disruptor beam almost got me, but instead carved a hole in the side of a stalled landspeeder. Rothers and the rest would be coming the slow way, the safe way. I had no choice, I had to get there. He was in my mind, and he was about to get himself killed.

I landed next to a couple cops, their issue blaster pistols no use against the heavy guns arrayed against them. They started to crawl over to me. I started to smile at them faces when I felt him up in the sky.

"Watch out!" I pushed one back. The other one tried to aim at the creature roaring down on us from the night sky. My saber came alive. The creature's blaster fire cut down the cop. He tried to get me, but I deflected the rounds. The other cop returned fire. I lunged for the armored creature. It leapt back into the sky, its jetpack flaring.

"Oh great, they've got flying ones now!" the cop shouted as he banged away blindly into the night sky.

"Darktrooper. Cyborg. Warn the others. My name's Jaden, I have to go."

"Floran Nage, umm, what are you?"

"I am a Jedi Knight." I jumped over the wreckage. The darktrooper must have been spotting for the snipers. Shots and yellow repeater arcs flashed around me. I rolled over and dashed around a couple large cargo haulers and a couple Kailion militia light troop carriers and a cop landspeeder, their sides riddled with holes. Almost there.

I leapt over the carriers. Red blaster bolts rained down on me from above. The darktrooper was beginning to annoy me. I landed in shadow and waited a moment, but he was too smart to follow me down.

The one I wanted to save, he was about to do a very stupid thing. The Force entered my body. I *sped* around piles of junk and huddled Kailionians, who gasped at my passage.

He was crouched by an up-ended delivery van. He knew who I was the moment I touched his shoulder.

"I know what you want to try," I whispered into his ear. "But you're not trained yet. What you don't know is that you have been targeted by not one but three snipers."

He got a little pale when he heard that.

I smiled at him. "You know you can move faster than other people. You're not *that* fast, not yet. Other things, too. Things happen when you're around."

He nodded. He looked down at the glowing weapon in my hand. "That's a lightsaber, isn't it?"

I nodded. A tall skinny kid in a baggy uniform, probably in the militia reserves, probably on a short training mission, probably got a call for help before the jamming started. Part of a unit sent to investigate. He didn't panic when the others did. And those secrets about himself that he had kept from everyone, he realized their true worth during the battle. He

was clutching an incredibly long and incredibly old DCT-19 heavy blaster rifle, probably left over from the early days of the Empire, probably taken from an old Imperial depot and re-tasked to the Kailionian militia.

"You're a Jedi, aren't you?" He swallowed. Now he was scared, only for a different reason. The vista of his life opened up before him then. It frightened him and it thrilled him at the same time. He saw his choices. He saw the path he would take. He saw who he really was. "My name is Hapton Orr." He paused. "Can I go with you? Can I become a Jedi?"

"Yes, Hapton. My name is Jaden Korr. I am a Jedi knight. There are many people I want you to meet. They will train you. One will be your master, your guide to the Force. I will teach you what I can."

I slammed Hapton back against the van and spun around. The darktrooper landed in front of me and opened up. My saber spun in blaster reflection arcs. The Way of the Krayt Dragon, Shien, once again saved my life. Somewhere far away yet near, someone deep in the netherworld of the Force smiled. Atton Rand knew where I had first learned Shien. I learned it from his holocron, a life preserver that had been sent down all the long years from him to me. Red bolts flashed and ricocheted everywhere — off the wreckage, into the night air, around my head, centimeters from Hapton's head. It boosted up into the night again. I lunged, I couldn't quite put my saber on the creature.

"Who knew they could fly?" Hapton asked no one in particular.

I hopped back under the cover of the van. A disruptor shot sizzled the air where I had stood. "Cyborg, mostly machine. Not too many of them around anymore." *Just our luck to run into one.*

Rothers, 38, and 62 came sneaking up next to us. Several people, mostly scuffed and dirty commuters, were following them. One of them stood up to peek over the overturned groundcars next to the van. *Snap.* His head exploded. "Watch it!" 38 hissed at them.

I got a little angry. My grip tightened on my lightsaber. Its golden glow illuminated the desperate faces of those around me.

"Mistress Jaden," 62 said. "You gonna do something foolish?"

"Of course she is," Rotherron replied. She extinguished her saber. "62, would you like to do foolish things with Jaden?"

62 was smiling. It was not a smile of happiness. "Can I join in your fun, Jedi Jaden?"

I returned his humorless smile. "Sure, the more the merrier. Hapton, this is Six-Two."

"Hi, Hapton."

"Ummm, hi."

"That's Rotherron. She's another Jedi like me. And over there is 38. He's mostly in charge."

"Found another one, didn't you?" Rothers said.

"They have a darktrooper."

38 made a face. "62, remember them?"

"One of those feks? Urk." Six-Two patted his blaster rifle. It was different now, he had attached the sniper components. "You wanna play a game, Miss Jedi? It's a fun game. We'll invite the snipers and the darktrooper to join."

"Is it dangerous?" Hapton asked.

"For the Mistress Jedi, yes, but only a little, not much. I'm a good shot, it'll be fun."

I smiled again, that nasty humorless smile that once made Rosh shudder.

"Can we play?" one of the commuters asked.

"Sure," 38 replied. "Why not, fun for all. Besides, if I guess right, we'll need more weapons."

Rothers nodded to Eight. "Jaden, have fun, but not too much fun." To the gathering crowd crouched around us, she said: "Half go with her, half come with us. Eight, can we borrow a few of the toys you've brought along?"

"Why sure, Rothers. You can't play if you don't have the proper toys." He led the way. Half the crowd crawled after him. Rothers gave me a look before she left.

The dead man's body had been pushed gently aside. Several more survivors had joined our little group. "What should we do?" another one asked.

"Keep up," 62 replied. "Hapton, get over here next to me with that monstrous gun of yours."

Hapton shifted position.

Six-Two nodded to me. I jumped, up high. The darktrooper did not come out to play.

The snipers rose to track me against the night sky. Six-Two popped up — BANG BANG.

I landed on the roof of a crumpled landspeeder, its dead driver still inside, and leapt again from another angle.

BANG — followed by heavy blaster fire from Hapton. I knew they had hit their marks. Six-Two had pointed to the likely location of an Imp Regular armed with a disruptor rifle. 62 had killed the last sniper in that string, and Hapton had shot the Imp. It bothered him, under the excitement of battle, I could feel that from where I was in the wreckage.

Seven Imp Regulars came forward to rush 62's position. The stormtroopers were being held in reserve, I could feel their tightly disciplined clone minds now, back there, at the front of the building. We'd have to draw them forward somehow.

I hopped up on the cargo compartment of a stalled delivery speeder, keeping to the shadows there. They came forward. I waited until they were underneath me and rolled off and fell down among them.

Imperial Regular Army, I suppose everyone should call them Remnant Regular Army, but no one does that. They're Imps to the rest of the galaxy, men and women recruited or conscripted into a Remnant faction's fighting force. Not clones or stormtroopers. They wore open-face long-backed black helmets and gray or black body armor. They usually carried more heavy weapons than clones did.

My lightsaber sprang to life among them. I stabbed the first through the chest, then withdrew the blade and slashed another's head off. They

screamed. One tried to point a heavy repeater at me. I cut the weapon in half and *pushed* him into the pile of wrecked cars surrounding us. I cartwheeled over the remaining four as they tried to bring their weapons to bear on me. I stepped around the piled wrecks. The four charged around in pursuit, but I had already leapt back over the pile. I closed my eyes and *pushed*. The wreckage surged forward over them. Their screams were cut short by the crash of metal onto the road surface.

The only remaining one had stood up. He was trying to get his blaster pistol out of its holster. My mind snatched it from him. I was a little angry. My thoughts reached out to him, my free hand gesturing in a pantomime of what my mind commanded the Force to do. *Force grip* it's called by my masters. I lifted him off the ground and pulled him toward me.

62 and the rest had crawled and sprinted forward. Even he gasped at what they saw under the yellow flickering highway lights. My golden lightsaber fiery hot, my left hand held up in an empty fist, and the unlucky Imperial soldier suspended in the air over my head, the life choking out of him.

My mind brought the Imp close to my face. "Be afraid," I whispered to him. He let out a choked scream. I dropped him and he ran away, ran for his life.

— ◇ —

Rothers shuddered. She and 38 stood at the core of a group of survivors, some had armed themselves with metal bars, others were policemen and militia. They were waiting for direction.

38 saw her shudder.

"Jaden," she explained. "She's having her usual effect on our enemies."

Eight understood. "They fear her."

"She does her best now to increase that fear." My friend Rotherron saw something then. A shade from the future passed before her eyes. She blinked, then caught up Eight's gaze. "Among my people, among the Twi'lekki, there is a goddess in our mythology. She is Kellesha, the two-faced goddess of life and death. To those who embrace life and light, she presents the face of spring, of nourishment, kindness, and mercy."

38 knew where this was going. "To her enemies, she is implacable, a horror."

"Yes. She must always be restrained, Eight. Do you understand? She must always be reminded of the merciful aspect of her nature."

"We're not talking about goddesses anymore."

"No, we're not." She looked at the anxious faces surrounding them. "We will take advantage of the fear my Jedi companion gives our enemies," she said in a louder voice. She could feel the hostages up ahead of us, just like I could. We both knew what would happen to them if we did nothing. "They have your friends and neighbors up there. When they leave, they'll kill every hostage. We're not going to let them do that, but we need your help if we are to succeed. So we must draw them out into the highway."

Eight took the hint. He also spoke in a louder voice. "Any competent commander will send reinforcements if his forces are in trouble."

She nodded. "We will further encourage this perception." She looked around. An improbable glow of confidence caught up her mind. Rothers gestured toward an overweight commuter wearing a scuffed and dirty business suit. "Our goal here is not to defeat them. Our goal is to rescue the hostages inside from certain death. What is your name?"

"I'm Sosur."

"We can't do this alone, Sosur. My Jedi companion ahead of us has made them afraid. We must feed that fear. But we'll be needed elsewhere."

Sosur looked around at the other survivors. Most were humans, but there were also grans, several zabraks, a chiss, and even a couple gungan businessmen. Many were women. Each met his eyes, each assenting. He turned back to Rothers. "We won't fail you."

Eight clapped him on the shoulder. "We won't fail *you*."

— ◇ —

Two people were in front of me. I jumped again. 62 sent his crowd of followers scrounging in the wreckage for Imp weapons.

"Um, 62, shouldn't we — ?"

"Don't worry about her, Hapton, keep your eyes on the night sky for that fekking darktrooper."

"But — "

"She's in her element. Our psycho Jedi girl's safer here than we are."

Thus began my fame among our clones. Not that I liked it much, but sometimes you just have to put up with things. I landed next to a commuter bus, its repulsorlift coils kept the back floating just above the surface of the road though its front had been crushed as if by a giant hand. It was a missile hit. Two were still alive inside. I began to pry and poke at the vehicle with my hands and my mind. He was up there, I could feel it. Others were coming forward. But they weren't scared enough, not yet. The Imp I had frightened had run off into the wreckage somewhere, he hadn't made it back to them. "Are you able to move?" I said softly.

Dets began to rain down on me from above. One bounced at my feet, I *pushed* it away. It skittered into the wreckage and exploded. The two people inside the bus began to scream. The darktrooper dropped a couple more down on me. I saw them glint in the yellow light from the highway light poles. I *pushed*. One went flying up into the night. The other I *pushed* over in the direction of the second wave of Imp soldiers. More explosions. The darktrooper was still there, moving. I was tired of this.

Metal screamed and shrieked as I *ripped* off the side of the bus. My mind reached out through the Force and threw the slab up at him. The wide flat slab spun up into the night and disappeared. A moment later I heard it crash to the pavement.

I dove into the bus, my thoughts heaving aside seats and bodies until they found the two, both breathing. They must have been married. I laid them carefully in the shelter of some wreckage. The woman touched my cheek. "I have to go. Others are following me, they'll get you out."

I jumped.

A moment later, 62 and Hapton came up. "Take those two back," Six-Two ordered. He was obeyed without question.

"What now?" Hapton watched the sky. The darktrooper swooped down, dropping a thermal detonator on them.

"Scatter!" 62 yelled. Everyone dove for cover. Hapton snatched it up and heaved it into the open side of the bus. There was a big thump as it went off.

"Hapton!" 62 shouted. "When I say 'scatter' you scatter. Don't play the hero with me, boy."

"Yes sir."

"I'm not a sir. Let's follow our Jedi friend. Look for weapons," he instructed the others.

I came down in a roll, right into a sniper squad taking position. I chopped a long sniper rifle in two, my golden blade weaving around me as they tried to kill me with their blasters. The red bolts reflected back at them and up into the night sky. There were only four. I severed an arm and two legs and a head. The last one I *threw* up into the air, screaming and alive. His path arced over and down among the Imperials. A little more fear for them.

When the darktrooper attacked my friends again, he swept down on the back of the line. One young zabrak grunted and died as the cyborg's blaster fire cut him down. Hapton banged away at the man/machine as the creature swept up again into the night.

"Fek!" 62 shouted to himself.

Something was up. The Imps coming forward stopped their advance. Now the darktrooper hung back. Someone was telling them how to hunt me. I waited, breathing hard. My friends came up on me after a short wait.

"There you are," Six-Two commented as he crept around an up-ended airspeeder, the holes in its body indicating just how it came down. He said it as if we were at a shopping galleria and I had stepped away for a moment. I extinguished my saber and sat down. The others scrounged for weapons while I rested. Silence. One of them handed me a water packet. 62 and Hapton sat down on either side of me.

"What now, Jedi maiden?" 62 asked in his cheerful voice. "They're up to something, that's for sure."

I closed my eyes to *listen*.

"Should we attack?" Hapton asked.

"Too many questions," 62 came back. "Let the battle shape itself. Don't worry about things. So what should we do about their scheming?" he asked me.

"Hey, you said — "

"Shush," I whispered lightly at Hapton. I opened my eyes.

"Remember what I said about them."

"They always want to kill you," Six-Two replied.

"Let's give them the chance." They were nervous. "Watch your fire, you two. More survivors up ahead. Hit the right people, all right?"

"Have I ever missed?" 62 reproached me.

— ◇ —

Rotherron had her eyes closed, listening to the Force whisper to her.

"What's Jaden up to?" Eight asked. He and Sosur had energized the survivors. Floran Nage, the cop I had saved, came back with others. He told anyone who would listen about me. They crawled over the wrecked

cop cars and militia vehicles, digging out anything they could use as weapons. 38 had already given out his toys. An impromptu honor guard had formed itself around Eight and Rothers, armed with Eight's toys. Small groups, on their own initiative, were going out into the vast traffic jam to search for survivors and weapons. Rothers tried to put a little order into it by directing the groups. Eight instructed them in the operation of their weapons. In the few minutes he had, he tried to push a little tactical sense into their heads.

"First, always duck. You hear something, you duck, take cover, right?"

They nodded.

"Next, fight in groups, concentrate your fire, move together. Don't travel in bunches, but don't travel alone." He glanced at Rotherron. She had her eyes closed.

She shook her head, then opened her eyes. "You'd better send someone to call them back."

He smiled. "Getting a little too aggressive, is she?"

"Something's up. Something is frustrating her. She can be very stubborn."

"I'll send Floran, she saved him."

She agreed, then stepped forward to restrain a few of the over-eager members of the group. "We attack when the time is right. Don't listen to your anger, listen to me."

— ◇ —

I leapt and ran through the yellow light. There were a couple distance shots at me, but otherwise the guns were silent. Three-Eight, Hapton, and the rest stayed a little behind. I'd go forward, wait for them to get into position, then slip forward again. There were people trapped in vehicles or scrunched up behind wreckage. They'd be sent to the rear as I found them. The enemy was gathering before me.

There was the trap, there was our counter to that, and then the trap in the trap for us. They wanted me. To get me, they would have to kill my friends. To do that, they would need the darktrooper, which was what I wanted. I crouched behind an immense pile of boxes. Some had broken open, there were children's stuffed animals scattered all over the place. The yellow light muted their garish greens and reds and blues. Hapton and Six-Two crawled up to me. The rest of the crew had by this time learned to crouch, they were behind us.

The boxes had come out of the storage compartment of a giant repulsorlift hauler, tipped on its side in front of us. I told 62 what I thought of the trap waiting for us.

He just smiled and said, "Oh, I kinda guessed that, since we are under that flying fek's eye."

"We're in it. He'll come for me. The darktrooper is using the survivors as bait. He threatens them to draw me out. He's getting this from the others. The ones like the girl, darksiders."

"I know."

He saw the surprise on my face. He tapped his forehead. "Obvious to someone like me. Years of experience in this, remember?" He glanced upward. Most everyone in the group was looking up into the night sky. "How high can you jump? Higher than those light poles?"

"These lower ones around here? Yes."

"They won't be able to spot you easily above the lights. You'll have enough time if you can scare him a little. We can give you the time you need. We have a large number of dets from the Imp bodies we've scavenged. We'll chuck 'em all at once. Our 'nades will keep them down long enough for you to settle accounts with that fek up there." He looked up. "Stamp him 'Paid In Full' for me."

"I'll get him this time," I replied.

"You need to, for this to work. They know about that pushing Jedi shove of yours, so no 'nades or missiles."

Hapton was silent, listening, as if he were in class and we were his teachers.

62 continued: "They'll try to hit us from three different directions at once. They'll time the attack on you to the rush on us." He paused. "Is this what you're afraid of?"

"If it happens, it'll be later." I smiled. "I'm just angry now."

He chuckled. "Me, too." He turned to Hapton and the others. It was a motley crew, dirty and torn and armed with the most bizarre range of weapons — a living history of weapons from the recent past. One of them even had a short vibroblade clutched in his hand. "Everyone gets a 'nade. Share 'em up." Dets and a few sonic grenades changed hands. "Throw 'em at anything other than us, but not until I say." He smiled at them. "It's been a pleasure leading you. Let's make their eyes water!"

"Yeah! "Get 'em! Make them whine!" came the affirmations back at him.

He turned back to me and smiled.

"Come up after my next jump." I closed my eyes and waited, listening to the living Force around me. The small animals who lived in the green zone around the freeway had been deeply disturbed by the racket. I could feel the fear in the hostages. I could feel the deep pulse of hate in the darksiders. They watched me through the Force as I watched them. "Gotta go!" I jumped.

The darktrooper's attention was on me. I could feel his presence. He was up in the air again, coming down for the attack. I landed by a cowering girl. She stood in a small clear area next to a smashed airlimo, its dead driver still behind the wheel. She had been on the way to a party, her beautiful dress was now torn and burned. Her horrified eyes pleaded with me for the restoration of order to the universe. "Behind me!" I shouted. My mind pulled her away, back into the pile of stuffed animals behind us.

He came down out of the night sky. Red bolts from his weapon buzzed by my head. My saber came alive. It swept them up. He was going

to swoop down and up, then down and up, pinning me in place. It didn't work out the way he thought. I wrapped my mind around him. *Grip* held him in place, then slowly pulled him toward my burning golden blade. Panic took him. He squirmed to free himself.

The girl screamed. Imp soldiers came charging around an overturned freight hauler. Roars of anger came from 62's people as they charged around the pile, firing wildly. The night was crisscrossed in red blaster bolts.

The darktrooper boosted his jetpack's output. I helped him along a little. A Force *push* sent him tumbling up into the night sky. The second group of Imp regulars came charging in from the other direction. I saw the party girl rush out to grab a blaster pistol from a fallen Imp.

"Nades!" 62 screamed. They were suddenly bouncing everywhere. Raining 'nades.

I crouched and leapt. *Speed* was upon me.

We hovered in the darkness above the lights, removed for a moment from the fury below us. Faint yellow light reflected off his armor. He was shocked at just how high I could jump.

Speed slowed every second into an eternity. His blaster carbine was coming up.

My arm came forward in an accelerated motion as I *threw* my saber. The momentum of the movement spun me slightly to the side. Several blaster bolts burned by my head.

It was a good throw. The darktrooper's partial machine life was extinguished as my golden blade sliced him in half. He never screamed.

Time snapped back to normal. My blade snapped back into my hand. I landed in the middle of an Imp unit. They were just rising from the cover they had taken during the 'nade barrage. I stripped a head from its shoulders as I landed. I crouched and cut through several pairs of legs. The screams began. I jumped.

I fell from the night to the rear of my people. My golden blade spun in blaster-reflection arcs in front of them. Then the Force told a hand. I

dropped my saber and unleashed its power. Out of both hands poured its fury, crackling and roaring. Unseen by others *drain* ripped the life away from the soldiers it touched. The screams continued. I was doing some of the screaming. My people fired into the Imps as they were being struck Force lightning. They died to a man.

My saber snapped back into my hand and came alive. I jumped again, back to the first group. I threw my saber as I was coming down on the them. Two died. It was back in my hand when I landed. I heard 62's voice, as if through water: "Come on! She can't do all the work herself!"

They charged. Hapton and 62 led. The fight was short and sharp. Point-blank blaster fire cut men down. 62's vibroblade glove-knife was put to use. He punched one Imp right in the forehead with it, splitting the guy's skull open. The party girl shot two men, screaming incoherently as she fired.

The Imps broke and ran. I trimmed away one soldier's legs as he tried to flee. 62's voice called the others to heel, but not me. I ran after them. Another voice stopped me.

"Miss Jedi! Stop! Stop! Come back!"

It was the cop's voice. What was his name? I came back to myself when I remembered. It was Floran Nage. I stopped my charge. Breathing heavily, I extinguished my blade and walked back. The fear was among them now. Doubt had entered into the darksiders's thinking.

Floran was standing next to 62 and Hapton. They were waiting for me. "Thank you, Floran," I said as I passed him. He walked on one side of me. 62 was on the other. The rest looked at me in the strangest way.

"What are they looking at, 62?" I was breathing so hard, I had to stop and catch my breath. I leaned over for a moment, near to vomiting.

62 put a protective hand on my shoulder. "Mistress Jaden, they are looking at a Jedi Knight in the full possession of her powers."

I glanced up at him.

He smiled. "Remember, I've seen the Jedi in action before. You are as I remember you. You're back."

I straightened up. Floran was concerned. The rest, including Hapton, I recognized the expression. Awe. I felt I had to say something. "I am a conduit for the Force, without it, I am nothing. The Force is with us. We will not fail."

They did something unusual just then. They cheered.

— ◇ —

Floran led us back. "I told you I could find her," he bragged to Rothers.

She smiled. "I never doubted you." Rothers and 38 were at the center of the crowd. She spoke in a louder voice. "They are sending in clone units. They think the vital battle is here. They're wrong, but we have to keep them thinking that. Most of us will have to stay. You must draw them out. You must make them think they are winning."

38 spoke. "Remember what I've told you. Stay in your units. Do not bunch up. Hit them, pull back a little, hit them again. You want to pull them deeper into the wreckage and away from the central building. Do not engage in sustained firefights with them. Use 'nades and dets whenever possible. Support your heavy weapons men so they won't be flanked. Back, back, back. You are fighting for the lives of the people inside."

Then it was Sosur's turn: "Be cautious, be brave. We can do this. The longer we keep them out here, the better change the Jedi have of saving our friends and neighbors inside. Help will come. This is a holovid with real blasters. We have to pretend to be afraid of them. We have to make them follow us." He looked at Rothers. He looked at me. "The Force is with us. You've seen what they can do. We give them the time, they can do the rest." The overweight office manager clapped his hands. "Let's do it, people!"

They began to filter forward. Floran stopped by me for a second. "I want to come with you, Miss Jedi, but I think I'll be needed here."

"There will be other battles for us, Officer Floran."

He smiled and walked forward.

Rothers grabbed Sosur by the arm as he passed by. "Remember to fall back. Let them follow you. Do not be drawn into a firefight. Lure them out into the wreckage. Try to survive."

His face solemn, he nodded. "I will try Mistress Rotherron."

"See you soon."

"See you after." He walked forward with the others.

No time for sadness. Rothers and 38 had already set up our rides, a couple repulsor-lift delivery vans pried out of the wreckage. I noticed the party girl, still clutching a blaster pistol. I gestured to 62. He went over to her.

"You don't need to accompany us. You can head back up the highway with the wounded."

She wouldn't say anything. She shook her head and pointed at the distant factory complex.

"All right. Stay close to Hapton."

She nodded. 62 looked at me and shrugged. Those going to the company spaceport behind the main building boarded their van, cramming themselves into the back.

38 and 62 glanced at us before getting into the cab of the van. We smiled. No need to say goodbye. My new friends were in my heart, no matter what else happened, they would always be there.

"Come on," Rothers said. "It's that time."

## 5. One Brief Moment

"Just whose plan was this?" 62 asked as he peered through the shattered windshield at the bright white lights of the small spaceport. Hapton's legs were between them. Rotherron had cut a hole in the roof of the cab for that purpose. He was sticking out the top with his ancient and gigantic blaster rifle in his hands. Three-Eight drove the van up over a low hill. He crashed it through a perimeter fence.

"Partly Mistress Rothers, partly me," he replied.

"Mostly Rothers," Hapton shouted down at them.

"Hey! Don't be a smart-mouth!"

62 chuckled.

"Hey, smart boy, the Jedi still behind us?"

Hapton turned to look. "Yep, though their van's wobbling a little." He looked down through the hole at his new clone friends. "Jedi know how to drive, right?"

— ◇ —

I drove through the hole 38's vehicle had made in the fence. The van's auto-hover wasn't working right, it would bang down on the ground at random moments. I fiddled with the knobs on the dash, but nothing helped.

Rotherron's sarcastic side came out. "You do know how to drive this thing, don't you?"

"Not actually. The joystick I understand, but the other controls, no, not very much. We're falling behind."

"What are those?" she gestured one of her blue tinged hands at a row of buttons just above the joystick.

"I don't know. Let's try 'em and see."

"No, wait, just — No!"

"Yeow!" One was evidently pulse overdrive. Vaaaroom! We shot off at an angle to 38's van.

— ◇ —

Hapton turned his head to follow our rapid departure. "I thought they were going to follow us," he shouted down at the two clones.

62 leaned out to look back at our rapidly departing van. He watched as it shot straight toward the side of the main building. We crashed headlong into the wall. "Do you think they meant to do that?"

38 clicked his rear-view monitor to get a glimpse. "They're getting out. Hapton, can you see?"

"Yes," he shouted from above them. "They're fine. They've jumped to the roof of the van."

"Heh," 62 said as he watched. "Nice way in."

"Wow! Rothers can jump high, too."

"What?" 38 asked.

62 pointed up with a finger. "They went vertical."

— ◇ —

We balanced on the ledge as Rotherron burned a hole in the upper story window with a blade from her saberstaff.

We looked around once we were in. It was someone's luxurious corner office. The giant polished stone desk looked more like a sacrificial slab in some ancient temple than a corporate executive's workplace.

Rothers spoke in a soft voice. "I sense confusion. The tumult of emotions is hiding us from them. They cannot decide if are still on the highway or not. Let us go stealthily. Can you do stealth, Jaden?"

I frowned at her obvious sarcasm at my expense. Now that we were away from our new friends, Rotherron's nasty side came out. "Don't start," I whispered back. "My empathy overwhelmed me. Besides, I taught *you* to be stealthy."

"Just checking. With all the goofiness this evening, I thought maybe you had reverted to Initiate status."

"Pay attention, I will demonstrate the art of stealth for you. I doubt you remember when I taught it to you the first time." Just then I realized how insufferable she'd be as a master. And how proud of her I'd be when she was elevated. "Let's go."

"Lead on, Initiate."

"I will." The darksiders had been so sure of themselves, there were only a few guards in the corporate levels of the building. They stood out like little bonfires of anxiety. Stormtroopers routinely refuse to guard hostages, so we were facing Imps and mercenaries. Which was good, stormtroopers were a greater challenge.

"Well, go on then."

"You'd better watch carefully — sithspit! Our friends have been spotted."

— ◇ —

The hover van's exterior began to ping and pop. It was incoming blaster fire.

"Hapton!" 38 bellowed.

"I see him. I see him," the kid shouted from above. His ancient rifle began to crack, spewing out red bolts.

There were shouts from the cargo compartment. "What's going on? We can't see!"

Crack!

More pings. A red bolt punched a hole in the windshield.

"Another one, Boss," 62 said. He attached his sniper barrel.

"Hapton!" Eight bellowed again.

"I got him!" the kid yelled back. "There are a couple more!" Hapton opened up again with his rifle — crack! Crack! Crack!

"What's going on?" someone shouted from the back.

Bang! The windshield was holed again.

"We can't see!" another voice bellowed from the cargo compartment.

Crack! Bang!

"Another one!" Hapton yelled excitedly. "I'm on it!"

Two more holes appeared in the windshield

"Hapton!" 38 shouted.

"I'm shooting!"

"Shoot more accurately! Any more holes and this thing's gonna fall apart!"

"Boss?" 62 asked.

More shouts from the rear: "Are they shooting at us?" "We can't see!" "When are we getting there?"

"If you would help out just a little 62. That's a nice clone."

62 smirked back at Eight. "Just jealous cuz I'm ahead in kills for the day."

"Shoot!"

"When are we getting there?" someone else yelled from the back.

38 banged on the rear wall with his free hand. "Be quiet! We'll be there when we're there!"

Crack! Bang! The sharp snap of 62's sniper-modded 17m added to the cacophony.

"Are they shooting at us?" the voice from behind asked again.

"Yes! Be quiet!"

Bang! Yet more shots caromed around in the driver compartment. Eight bellowed somemore: "Hapton! 62! Hit something already!"

"We're on it, Boss." A rapid snap, snap, snap came from 62's sniper rifle. The crack, crack, crack came from Hapton's aged rifle.

"There, those crates and containers and stuff in the middle of the field."

"Perfect!" 62 replied. He fired again.

The landing field was perfectly lit by bright white lights. A dropship and a bunch of cargo ships were on the field. Droid loaders were busy roving around among them, shifting cargo on board from various piles set up around the field. "All the best stuff laid out. Stashing it now. They're getting ready to go."

"Yep." 62 fired. A distant figure convulsed. His side of the vehicle began to clank and bang, as if a horde of foundry druids were pounding on the side of the van. "Yipe! More of them, Boss!" He returned fire. Snap, snap, snap!

Two Imp Regulars in front of the van were trying to kill Eight. Several rounds burned through the windshield and buzzed by his head. "Hapton! You missed two of them!"

"There are more to the left!" I'm trying my best!" he replied between loud cracks from his rifle.

"62?" Another round whizzed by his head. There were more shouts from inside the cargo compartment.

"I'm busy right now, Boss."

"Fek! Never mind." Eight swerved to the right and hit overdrive. The two Imps tried to run around a shipping container. Eight pulled the joystick tight to the right. The van banked sharply. There were shouts from the back.

"Boss!" 62 almost fell out.

Wham. Both Imperials slammed into the front end. Their bodies flew up and away, somersaulting crazily.

"A little warning next time, Boss."

"That officially puts me ahead in the body count."

"We'll see who's ahead at the end of the day."

"Can I get in on this game?" Hapton shouted down at them.

"Only if your aim improves," Eight shouted back. He yanked the joystick again, whipping the vehicle around a pile of crates, then slammed it to stop.

"Are we there?" they asked from the back.

"Yes! Everyone out! Last time I drive."

— ◇ —

The Vannt recruited young. Two of their new people, hardly more than boys, stood at an intersection of hallways. I crawled into their young minds. *You need to find your commander. You need to see him now. Now. Now.*

"We have to find the CO."

"We need to do it now."

"We could use the comlink."

I frowned. *We have to see him. See him. It's too important for the comlink.*

"It's too important for the comlink."

"He's at the front of the building. They're hunting Jedi."

"We need to see him now. Come on. Come on!"

They ran away.

We sprinted down the deserted hallway.

"Nicely done, for an Initiate."

"Shut up."

"Nice retort."

"Didn't I tell you to shut up? Shut the fek up already."

She stopped smiling. "Three more ahead. One is very strong-willed."

The light panels in the ceiling were set to a natural sun emission. It was quite pleasant after the bright yellows of the highway. "I'll take the two. You take the hard one for a change. Do some real work."

"It's real work repairing all your mistakes."

I glared at her. "I don't make that many mistakes."

She realized she had gone a little too far. "Not too many. Always the excitement when you're around, Jay. Never dull."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

We were silent after that.

— ◇ —

"I'm sure they're having as much fun as we are, Scorch," Eight replied.

62 had his 17m set to burst fire. His picked off three Imps trying to rush their position by the stalled loader. The hover van, full of holes, had gotten them all to the cluster of containers, vehicles, and crates in the middle of the field. The van had blocked a droid loader. Its simple mind couldn't handle the obstruction, so it shut down. Every few seconds it made a plaintive sound as it called for assistance.

"This is a major raid." Several blaster bolts hit a nearby cargo box. 62 pulled back a little. "I count ten cargo ships and three dropships."

Eight was sprawled out next to the loader's big fat tires. A pile of duraplast loading pallets several meters away rattled when a det exploded by them. Eight zeroed his scope on an Imperial helmet. "That's not counting all the shuttles and transports they have scattered around." He fired. The impact of the compressed plasma accuracy round blew the helmet and head off of an Imp officer's body.

62 switched subjects. "Who's this Derrn Rothers mentioned? Is he Jaden's boyfriend?" Do Jedi have boyfriends or girlfriends now?"

Eight rolled over to look up as 62. "Scorch, let's not ask, all right? The old ones didn't, but the new ones might. We don't want to embarrass anyone."

"Especially . . ." 62 chucked a det over the shipping container to their right. A satisfying set of screams accompanied its explosion. Over

to the left, they could hear Hapton's ancient rifle cracking out bolts. The rest of their motley band was banging away, too. "Especially a girl with a big gold lightsaber who chops people in half."

"She really chopped that fek darktrooper in half?"

"Yep, saw the pieces fall."

"Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy."

— ◇ —

A young zabrak woman named Bedeptra cowered behind a desk. There was no protection from the gaze of her captors, one stood just a few meters from her. This was the main shipping and receiving office, the windows looked down on the immense warehouse below. Catwalks, staircases, and lifts linked the office to the warehouse floor. Black-clad Imperials and Vannt mercs stood in the doorways and on the catwalks outside. Ten were in the large room, standing on the main counter and the desks. Over three hundred people had been stuffed inside and made to sit on the floor. Bright overhead light panels eliminated all shadows from the room.

Zabraks were near humans, derived from or branched off humans long ago. Some zabraks had hair at the back of their heads, below their spikes. Zabrak women often braided and bound their hair with thin gold chains. It was that way with Bedeptra. She had pulled her ponytail to the front and stroked it nervously. She was a Force-sensitive like Hapton. I could feel her presence. The dark auras had left, going toward the front. Cunning 38! He and Rothers had known that our enemies would focus there or back at the landing field.

We were on the catwalk, back in the only shadows present. A side door from a storage room had led us there. Far below were tumbled and stacked shipping containers under bright yellow light. At the other end was a partially open bay door, slid back on either side. Flashes came from the darkness outside, a sign of our friends at work.

The guards watched those flashes. Their eyes were drawn to them, the distant action pulled at them. It was only a little work to slowly creep into their minds. Our minds whispered to theirs.

"I have to see the commander," one Vannt merc shouted to no one in particular. Another one joined him, their brown uniforms blending with the catwalk shadows as they ran across and back into the building behind. One passed by me.

"Come on!" an Imp said to his buddies. "Let's watch the action. The men inside can cover for us. Come on. Come on!" They ran for the nearby lift like an unleashed pack of Kath racing hounds. The action outside was irresistible to them, stoked as it was by Rothers' powerful Jedi skills.

The way was clear. Only the ten inside were left.

Bedeptra stared at an open doorway. She knew we were coming.

"What are you looking at, girl?" the black-clad Imperial behind her asked.

The other Imperials paid no attention. They were so drowsy . . . .

"What do you see?" Fear was in his voice. He hopped down from the desk and pushed the barrel of his heavy repeater against her neck. "What do you see?"

"She sees me," I replied.

His mouth gaped in utter surprise. The hammer of the Force hit him full on, he screamed as he was slammed into a far corner of the room. We ignited our lightsabers. Their hum filled the place. It was over in a moment.

Over 300 people stood up. "We need to go down. Safety is down there. Let's go!"

I turned to Rotherron. "Is the way clear?" The crowd surged around us as they ran for the lifts and the stairs.

"Yes, everyone who'd oppose us is out on the field in the fight. Help is coming for us." She closed her eyes for just a second. "We have to stay at the rear."

"I know."

62 peeked around the fender of the cargo loader. "Fek."

Eight shot a clone trooper as he was trying to get an angle on them. The armored body tumbled down the side of the nearby dropship. "What? What?" He rolled over to Scorch, then took a peek. "Fierfek." He leaned back against the loader's oversized tire. "Had to be spider droids, just had to be."

"Yep — and not the usual kind, the armored variant we faced on Kashyyyk."

38 took another quick look. "Yeah. The ones with the red optical sensor. We aimed at that. It had a tiny shield door, when it was down for a look we could hit the sensor, burn through to the ammo storage. Where did they get all this old junk?"

"Such fun!" Eight picked off a black-clad Remnant NCO who was climbing the side of the dropship. "Get Hapton, the kid's gonna get an education." He sighed. "This will take a little doing . . . to get it done."

Six-Two came crawling back a moment later with Hapton following along behind.

The armored spider droids slowly marched across the brightly-lit night, leisurely pacing across the landing field. They had been kept on the dropships as a backup weapon.

"Hapton, see the one on the left, the one out in front of the other three?" Eight whispered to the boy.

"Yes, sir."

"Quit saying that. None of us are officers here, boy. I'm not a 'sir.' See the shipping containers next to the gray cargo ship?"

"Yes."

"Take your people around the other side. That will give you cover. You'll have to fight for it, there are Imps and mercs all over." Eight

pointed again. "And once you've knocked that one out, open up on the others."

"I'll . . . I'll do my best. I won't fail you."

"I know kid."

Hapton crawled back around the loader.

"He's got heart," 62 said to Eight's glance. "He'll get it done."

"Here they come. At least they're coming two-by-two. That gives us a chance. Let's get set up. You remember where to shoot, Six-Two?"

"Like I'd ever forget that little red sensor. Two of us? We should have kept a couple people."

Blaster fire echoed among the shipping containers and cargo modules. Eight shook his head. "Hapton will need them. Now let's kill a droid."

"Heh."

They crawled away from the loader into an angle between tilted shipping containers. Scorch scrambled up on top. Eight went around the side. They could hear the massive stomp of its feet as it marched toward them. The thing wasn't too smart, but it could see their infrared signatures and knew they were enemies. Did it know in its central processor that its kind had faced these two before?

"Fek, is it ever going to get here?" Scorch bellowed down at Eight.

"Oh, it'll get here," Eight reassured him. The sound of blaster fire came from the direction of Hapton's group.

Once it was close enough, it opened up with a big bang from its heavy blaster cannon.

The hit shook the container. The massive metal box shuddered, a hole appeared near 38. My friends began to fire, their blaster fire hammering away at the sensor assembly low in the front. Its cover would open for a glance at them, a small red eye glaring out, then snap shut. It drew the durasteel armor plates on its front legs together.

Up on top, Six-Two smiled, clicked his AA launcher into position, and fired. "That's for making me wait!"

Eight chucked det after det at the thing. A rolling thunder of sound from the explosions covered the excited shouts coming from across the field, where Hapton's group blazed away at their spider droid.

Sustained fire from the clones cracked the brackets on first one, then the other armor plate. They went flying. They began to hammer at the sensor with their fire.

More blasts from the cannon. The thing's simple mind had decided to demolish the massive cargo containers as the best way to kill those hiding among them. It began to bang out shots.

A big whoosh and bang came from over by Hapton. One of the captured Merr-Sonn rocket launchers had been put into service as an anti-tank gun. There was a large explosion.

"They got it!" Scorch shouted down at Eight. "The other two are moving toward them!"

"Kill this one!" Eight shouted between explosions from the thing's blast cannon. They were on full-auto. Shrapnel from hits on the shipping containers buzzed around their heads.

"Boss! Boss! Look up!"

A larger darkness moved in the night sky above them. Eight later told me that at that moment he lost hope. He thought it was another Remnant dropship come down from orbit to help out. The ship's big heavy turbolasers fired, hissing and cracking as they sliced across the landing field — into the droids.

"Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!" Eight shouted. He stood up and fired full-auto into the thing's eye. Above him, Scorch howled with glee. A bright green beam of coherent light sliced off a couple of the things legs. Just then, the sustained fire from the two pod brothers burned into the droid's ammo storage bin. It went up with a roar.

The big frigate belonged to the Kailionian militia. It had been on a wild chase among the moons of Kailion, running after a stolen freighter. Someone, someone I'd meet, figured out what was up, landed at a depot on the other side of the district, picked up a company of marines, and headed

over the city. Another person, a chatty teenager of my recent acquaintance, had called a friend who called a friend, who called her daddy in the government, who sent a message to the starfrigate to check out the area northwest of the city, an area whose telecommunications were being jammed. "There are Jedi on this planet?" the man in the big armored frigate said. "They've asked for help?" He remembered a long cold day at Ord Mantell, and the young blond-haired kid who came to save him. And he acted.

The droids returned fire on the frigate. Its shields flashed as the plasma charges from the droid heavy cannons impacted. The turbolasers lashed out to burn at the spiderdroid armor with fierce green light.

Eight and Scorch were up and running. Scattered fire from Remnant infantry nicked the permacrete around their feet. Hapton had his people were up and running, too. Everyone was heading toward the open bay doors on the main building, the light from within beckoning them. Even the Remnant wanted to get inside. A mixed group of stormtroopers and Imp infantry tried to stand against them. Hapton's ancient blaster rifle popped and cracked. 'Nades were in the air. Boom and crackle from the big war machines on the landing field accompanied the quick short fight. The Imps withdrew as someone on the ship noticed and targeted them with a blaster turret. The big open bay doors were theirs. Eight and Six-Two led the way in.

— ◇ —

"They're here," I said. Rothers and I were down on the warehouse floor. We looked up. Shadows came down on us from above. They came tumbling down from the catwalks and stairways far above, spiraling and somersaulting as they fell. They bounced off the top of a cargo container — five of them landed in front of us, their red sabers already lit and shining with menace.

We walked toward them through the last of the fleeing hostages. This was the moment I had dimly seen earlier. Now that it was here, I was no longer afraid. I was the one to speak first.

"These are ours, you can't have them."

"Jedi, always taking what doesn't belong to them," one of the two Sith adepts said. These were Reborn, the leftovers of Desann's failed attempt to eradicate the Jedi. They served Tavion now. They and the cultists watched us approach. The Reborn had taken these cultists as apprentices, I could feel the connection between them. All were armed with red-bladed lightsabers. Their hum echoed off the giant cargo containers stacked around us. We stopped and ignited our sabers. Rotherron spun her saberstaff into the high position, her staff, its blue blades gleaming and crackling, above and to the right of her head. I shifted my weight to my back leg and held my saber to the rear, in one of the ready stances from the Fast Style.

The surviving holocrons told us about the many saber fighting styles of the Old Jedi. My shadow-master Qui-Gon was a practitioner of Ataru, the Way of Aggression. The Old Jedi were fond of naming things after animals, so they called it the Way of the Hawk-Bat. But Fast is more than Ataru. It also contains elements of the Way of the Mynock, what I'd call the Way of the Wind, Soresu. It swirls next to the body, whirling and spinning to protect and strike. It was also called the Way of Resilience. The holocrons called it "Dwelling in the Eye of the Storm." Then there was Shien, the Perseverance Form, the Way of the Krayt Dragon. It was the primary blaster deflection style. My early study of it had saved my life many times. Most of this wasn't known until just a couple years ago. What the masters and Luke cobbled together was revealed to be a compressed mash of many styles – "Forms" the old ones liked to call them – which contained individual elements from many of the ancient forms. We liked it. I liked it. It suited the New Jedi fine. They were built up from real-world fights. Real need caused us to innovate. Fast, Medium, and Strong have the one attribute I find most compelling. They are useful.

Students and masters have added to them. I believe Dal Konur was the first to use the rear Fast stance. Then there was the falling out after Desann and he became a leader of the grays. Everything leads back to Desann in one way or another.

The rear or back stance was good when facing aggressive or inexperienced duelists. It called to them, they'd run forward every time.

"This is Katarn's little brat," one of them said to their apprentices, "the one with the bounty." The other Sith looked at Rotherron: ". . . and Skywalker's Twi'lek whore."

"Send your students away," Rotherron replied calmly. "There's no reason for them to die."

"Soon the Jedi will be no more," one of the cultists shouted. The other apprentices laughed.

"Desann tried that. Where is he?" I asked.

One of the Dark Jedi made a gesture with his hand, a signal to their apprentices. The three students charged us. Their red lightsabers held over their heads in preparation for a killing stroke. Two were in front, one behind. They all wore masked hoods. I could see only the anger in their eyes.

One came at me. I brought my golden blade up as if to parry his blow, then crouched and swept the blade low, stepping quickly past him. I stood when I was beside him, my blade cutting through his chest. He did not even scream. There was no need to look behind me. I heard the body fall. The other one ran right into Rother's spinning saberstaff. He screamed as her blue blades slashed him to pieces in an alternating passage of blades.

The third student saw the fate of the other two and came up on his toes in an effort to stop his forward rush. Rothers and I ignored him. We watched the two Sith adepts. The student ran back behind his masters. They laughed.

Rotherron now assumed the saberstaff stance known as High Tower, the weapon held at a slant over her head. She's the one who named it because she invented it.

My mind noted the essential cruelty at the heart of the dark side. Two students cut down before them and they laugh. Evil is assumed one small step at a time, not all at once. These two were once like us, not so long ago. Desann taught them their first steps. Tavion continued that instruction. They both wore bulky red and black jackets. I suspected their clothing hid hardshell armor or even Cortosis weave plates. Like their students, they wore masked hoods. Do they wake up in the morning that way? I could sense their power. This would be a hard fight.

Rotherron's man had a single red lightsaber. Mine was a two-sword man. The student cowered at the back, crouched against the giant stack of cargo containers. Maybe there was an awakening in him. The student was not bound to the scepter, nor was he as dark as his two masters.

Rotherron and her opponent came together in a crash and crackle of light. My man spun through a two-saber kata. He laughed at me.

I recognized the kata. It was variant of one Master Menkin used. One I had trouble defeating. "Oh, great," I whispered to myself. "Has to be a two-blade man." Master Menkin's instruction echoed in my head: "No saber locks with this style. Ever!"

He came at me, fast cuts to either side. I parried as I backed up, crouched low and hacked at his legs. He somersaulted up and back, laughing as I cut at him. Why was he laughing? Oh, I felt it. I could sense the minds of stormtroopers racing toward us – lots of stormtroopers.

We were in a kind of artificial canyon formed by the towering stacks of cargo containers. The containers were to either side and in front of us. Calm descended on me. Rotherron's mind was humming in battle mode as she danced with her opponent, slashing at him when he drew too close. He responded with waves of *push* and *pull*, which washed over her and splashed me. There was no way we could defeat these two in time to flee

the approaching Imperials. I ducked under one slash and backed away from the other. My opponent's eyes glistened in the certainty of victory.

Rothers spun her staff in a broad arc. Her man backed off. She crouched, closed her eyes, and shot into the air – to pivot at the top of her towering leap, landing on the uppermost cargo container. "Jay!" she shouted down at me.

I slashed at my enemy's legs again and he retreated. The other one charged me. The coiled snake inside lashed out at them with a roar. Jagged white lightning caught and danced on their light blades. The two Reborn paused. I crouched, then flew into the air, doing a side cartwheel onto the top container in the stack. Rothers was at the other end of the artificial canyon wall. Stormtroopers were near.

The last of the hostages ran toward the open hanger doors of the warehouse, past heaps of scrap from earlier combat and hills of droid parts from cracked and tumbled containers. Bedeptra was the first. She sensed our danger and turned to see the stormtroopers. She glanced up at Rothers and I on the stack of containers. "Save the Jedi!" she screamed. Another voice joined hers. It was a gran. He was in a company uniform. Something, something coming from Bedeptra, made him stop and point his three eyes back at us. This wasn't something conscious she did, the echo of her personality sent ripples through the Force. The gran shouted something to three others nearby. I didn't hear what it was, besides, I was busy. The Sith hurled themselves up at us. The fight was on – red lightblades flashed before my eyes.

Bedeptra and the gran saw stormtroopers and Vannt faction mercenaries running from the front of the building. The gran began to shout, too, first in his own language, then in accented Basic: "Kukumu Jeedai! Save the Jedi! Save the Jedi!"

Two humans and a Rodian turned, saw the Imperials, and took up the shout. The message passed from one to another to the front of the escaping crowd, who were already outside. They came running back. They clambered over the spilled hills of droid parts, arming themselves with

droid arms, legs, support rods, manipulator effectors – anything they could find.

"Push people too much, they push back," Master Kyle's voice whispered in my ear.

The crowd of freed hostages pushed themselves forward, like a slow tide rising. They began to roar, building, building, louder. The Imperials and their buddies charged toward them. Rothers and I were forgotten. Like two natural enemies, once sighted, each attacking the other, a mountain of sound building up in front of them as they ran forward. Above them all, our sabers flashed, red and blue and gold. They crashed together. Waves of men and nonmen rammed and slashed and shot at each other, screaming in anger or pain.

Rotherron and I danced atop the apocalypse. The Sith backed off, then one leaped to my side. I leapt over to Rothers. The Sith apprentice craned his neck to watch us, until three company men beat him senseless and took away his lightsaber.

The two Reborn glared at us. They were fully Sith now, since they had joined Tavion's spooky cult. They hadn't started out that way, just adventurers lured into Desann's plot, given the power of the Force in the Valley of the Jedi. Nobody ever talked about that part, how it was done. I have asked Master Kyle a dozen times. He always frowns and tells me to shut up about it. The place is hidden. The planet it is on is guarded by a host of orbital mines. The system appears on no chart, no database, no map. By picking at the subject, I did learn one important thing, something I keep buried, hidden from the universe. Old saying from the holocron: "Only a Jedi can keep a secret." Only four people in the universe know the location of the Valley of the Jedi, Master Kyle, Jan Ors, Master Luke, and Admiral Antilles.

Rotherron stepped back from the edge. I used *speed* to shoot around the top of the containers toward them. Rothers leapt. Our blades met theirs at the same time. Then they discovered what a Jedi fighting pair

can do. It was the good game, the one we played against Rosh and Derrn, Qwint and Qwant – Rothers named it Anchor and Chain.

Her saberstaff spun in her hands, making a circle of blue-bladed death around herself. I cartwheeled over her head to land behind the Sith. When they turned to attack me, she attacked them. Rothers would leap over them to land behind me. Then I would leap behind the Sith again. Blaster fire, screams, and the sounds of blows to the body and head echoed up from below. The Reborn jumped away from us, then one here, one there. This was how it would end, as two single duels. I was back with the two-saber man. An image of Rosh came into my mind. He was in pain . . . whether this was true or not, it was an old Sith trick. I ignored it.

— ◇ —

Three-Eight and Scorch led the charge from the bright fires of dying machines into the shadows of the warehouse. The militia starfrigate's heavy turbolasers had cut the last of the spider droids to pieces. It was landing, the assault ramp sliding down.

Three-Eight and his men weren't watching that. The chaos of the fight they saw froze them to stillness for a moment. The local militamen and cops snapped out of it first. This was their planet, their people who had died, were still dying. The rage they felt at this violation spilled out as shouts of anger.

"Wait, wait . . ." Three-Eight said, trying to maintain unit integrity. They wouldn't hear — they charged into the mass of struggling figures, firing as they went.

He and Scorch just stood there, awestruck by the mayhem. Men screamed and died. Gran and human went against blaster fire with improvised clubs. Scorch nudged Eight. "Boss," he gestured with his head toward a tethered service lift in a corner.

"Right!" Eight pulled out his weapon's sniper attachment and clicked it into place. Scorch did the same. They ran to the lift, jumped aboard, and dialed up the repulsor controls. The thing had been floating just above the floor, now it raised itself up to the distant ceiling.

My clones began their deadly work, picking men out of the struggling mob and killing them. "There, by the edge of the far container, a trooper with a Stouker."

"Got it."

That man died.

Eight chuckled as he singled out the Imp Officers in their black or brown uniforms.

Snap. A trooper went down.

Snap. An officer in black went down.

Snap. Another officer went down, his head blown off.

They had a perfect view of our duel from their sniper's perch. Rothers in her tattered blue dress over her tights. The blue and charcoal gray of my trousers, shirt, and vest. Around we spun, blue and gold against the dark red of Sith lightsabers.

Scorch paused to watch us.

Three-Eight stopped firing.

"I love them, Boss. I do. I'd die for them." His eyes glistened as he watched us.

"Me, too, Scorch. Kill the trooper over there, the one with the repeater."

"Sure, Boss."

The balance was tipped when the marines from the frigate poured in. An officer was at the front of the group. They stopped, stunned by what they saw. A voice from above snapped them back.

"You idiots!" Three-Eight shouted down at them. "Get in the fight!"

"You heard him!" the officer yelled. "Let's go!"

The sound and fury of the battle was like a great wave. It reached up from the floor to pound Rothers and me. The Force roiled and foamed around us.

"Katarn's other failure!" my man shouted at me. "Whelp! Pathetic child!" Tavion's mouth was contagious among her followers. She hated my master, and because he was my master, she hated me. I did not hate her. I did not hate the man in front of me. They were threats to the well-being of the universe, I would deal with them the best I could. A nexu tiger is a dangerous creature. Hate would only restrict my ability to control it or defeat it. The Sith think hate is fuel for their desire, when in reality it restricts their choices. But hate is seductive. I know.

Saber blades buzzed the air around my head. My man threw one of his sabers at me. I knocked it aside and charged him. He barely escaped my head cut with a parry by his off-hand sword. The red and gold blades cackled and roared as he pressed in, hoping for a saber lock. I somersaulted backwards, kicking him away from me as I did so. He grunted in pain. I landed on the far edge of the shipping container. His other saber flew back into his hand. The dark brown and red of his clothing was so much like a uniform. His head was shrouded in a cowled mask. Who was he hiding from? He was wearing old battle armor under his jacket – bulky hardshell stuff from the Clone Wars or even earlier. A faint taint of the grave was on him – maybe the armor was looted from a tomb. Tombs, old corpses, and sand came to mind. One good thing, he wasn't laughing anymore. He had knowledge of all the tricks. Thin red lines, invisible to anyone but a Force user, lashed out at me. *Drain*. I struck back with *lightning*. The crackle and boom of it echoed in the vast building.

The fight had gone out of the Imperials. Three-Eight and Scorch stopped shooting. They watched our duel with concerned eyes. Down below them and us, the riot was over. A stormtrooper dropped his weapon and raised his hands to a marine. He took off his helmet. I knew from my clones that this was the traditional signal of submission among them. His

eyes, dark brown like all clone eyes, caught the flash of sabers clashing above him. He stared up, pointing us out to the marine. Together, they backed away to get a better view of the top of the containers. Others joined them.

"Fight! Fight! Keep fighting!" a brown-uniformed Imperial officer shouted. He looked up at us and saw a shot. He raised his blaster pistol to fire. A stormtrooper saw him take aim. He shot the Imp officer in the head with not the slightest hesitation. "Don't interfere." He looked down at the corpse. "Oh yeah, and shut your mouth." He noticed Kailionian marines staring at him. He threw down his rifle. "I won't even try to explain." He turned his attention back to the top of the container stack, to us. The others followed his gaze. "Just watch," he told them.

The other dark adept pressed too closely on Rotherron. She spun her staff into a gleaming blue defensive spiral. The Sith leaped back, worrying too much about her blades. Kyle would have reprimanded me severely if I had lost situational awareness as he just did. He forgot where the edge of the container was. He wobbled in a precarious balance when his back foot touched air. He hung over the edge of an artificial precipice, faces staring up at him. Rothers *pulled* him forward onto her outthrust blade. Those watching below gasped. She bounced back away from him, but he was dead. His body collapsed onto the metal roof of the cargo container. She was drenched in sweat, gasping for breath.

So was I. I was covered in sweat and breathing hard. The Reborn watched me from the far end of the container we were on. Rothers watched us.

"Jaden," she said softly.

I heard, but she already knew — I wanted to turn him. There was a flicker of the man he used to be down inside himself. Rotherron knelt as if exhausted from her fight. The Force was alive in her mind. I could feel her battering away at his hate, like waves splashing against hot lava. The power of her mind washed over us all. Voices began to call up to him from below, begging him to stop —

"Stop it!" "The fight's over!" "Give it up!"

Both the Sith adept and I were breathing hard. The fight below us dimmed and died from our awareness. I could sense Rothers near me, pouring herself like water onto his hate. The scepter did not dwell in this man's heart. He had been corrupted by his own anger and hate. He charged me, his lightsabers spinning in red arcs. I rolled, dodged, and parried. Outwardly, I was on the defensive. The exterior appearance was contradicted by the interior reality. He was weakened, his Force abilities declined. Mine had strengthened. I hammered him to the far end of the cargo container with a massive *push*. He charged again. I held him still for a moment with *grip*. He *pushed* free of it. We exchanged blows and parries, the flare of our touching lightsabers flashing in the gloom. He could sense Rotherron in his head. He jumped back. Now we would try. Rothers prodded at him with voiceless questions.

My voice echoed in the new silence. "It is never too late to turn away. You hear it, you see it in the distance. Don't let your anger blind you to it. Move toward it. I know someone who could be your guide. Come with me. I'll take you to him." The sense of a hidden multitude at my shoulder came to me.

He hadn't moved. He was listening. His chest rose and fell as he gasped for air.

"Listen to your inner self, your true self. Remember back before the hate. Listen."

The mob below had backed away from the stacked cargo containers so they could see. The victors and their captives stared up at us. I could feel Rotherron's growing mastery of the Inner Art as her influence poured out into the minds around us.

They shouted up at him. "Listen to her!" "Don't throw your life away." "Let it rest." "Stop." One heartfelt voice shouted "Please" over and over.

I stepped back into my Strong stance. He didn't have to say it. I knew. His stupid pride held him back, stupid human pride. He charged. The room held its breath.

*Speed* is more than running fast. It can fill the limbs for piloting ships or lightsaber duels. I knocked his blades aside with a power stroke and shoved the point of my saber through his chest. We stood close, in a mockery of an embrace. I looked into his eyes. He was no longer a Sith adept, a Reborn in Desann's army, an agent of evil. He was just a man. "I'm sorry," I whispered as he died. The room ceased to hold its breath. There was an exhalation of sorrow from below.

I eased his body down. How long I sat there, Rothers waiting patiently for me to come back, I do not know. Words from below brought me back. "Jedi, please come down," from an unknown voice.

This was repeated by Three-Eight. "Mistress Jedi, it is time to come down."

My glance caught up Rothers. She smiled at me. I smiled, a touch of sadness still in my heart.

"We lived through it," she said.

"So we have."

"Let's go down, Jaden."

I nodded.

— ◇ —

Only when we were down from the top did we notice the media remotes buzzing around. Someone must have found and disabled the jammer. Our clones came over to us, pushing aside Kailionian admirers.

"That was a near-run thing," Three-Eight told us. "Are all our fights going to be this way?"

"So far," Rotherron replied. "They were good," she said to me.

I nodded. "Tavion's skill has increased if she is behind it. They were very well trained."

"Who's Tavion?" Scorch asked.

"Later," I whispered, aware of the crowd around us.

We stood aside and watched as the people sorted themselves out. Maybe it was end of the fight that gave my mind clarity at last. Maybe because of the events on the Kril'dor gas platform, or maybe it was 017 and the other clones who had already joined us. Because of it all, I suddenly knew what the Force wanted. It spoke to me at that moment, informed me, whispered its desires to me. Now, it was now. I could see it sitting in Three-Eight's head. I could taste it, it was now. At that moment, I knew his deepest wish, I saw into his heart. I grabbed his arm and pulled him close. "Now. It has to be now. If you're going to do it, if you're going to say it, say it *now*."

He turned and shouted to the multitude. "We are the . . . we are the Cuy'val Dar, Those Who Should Not Exist! We fight for the Jedi!" Everyone began to listen. "We are clones. One day we realized the truth, that we had been betrayed, our true place in the universe taken from us. We were created to fight at the side of the Jedi. We have returned to them, as they came back for us! To my brothers," he bellowed, "be something greater than you are now! Come with us. Take your rightful place!"

## 6. In Flight

The inevitable hisses and profanity poured out. Rotherron touched Three-Eight's arm and pointed. "Over there." Her awareness could see through the clutter of thoughts. The crowd blinded me — she could *see*. Scorch pushed through them, gently nudging aside Kailionians, militia, and disarmed Remnant. A younger version of Scorch stared at us, his hair still black. "I will come with you."

"And me!" someone nearby shouted. Curses and blows followed. I knocked aside two grans and a human getting there. Five troopers were piled on the floor, throwing elbows and fists at each other. The one I wanted was on the bottom. Those nearby gasped in astonishment when I tossed the troopers into the air with a *throw*. They tumbled down, bruised by the fall. The one on the bottom stood up. It was the clone who shot his officer. He was another young Scorch. I'd say Three-Eight, but his close-cut hair made him more individual.

"I am Six-Seven-Nine. I will serve the Jedi."

Three-Eight was beside me. He made a gesture. Nine fell in behind us. It went like that as the prisoners were sorted out. They came to Three-Eight in ones and twos. We had twenty-four recruits by the time order was restored.

The Kailionians had sorted their prisoners according to affiliation. The Vannt mercs were in one area, the Kailionian criminals who had joined in the fun in another place, the various Remnant Imperials and Imperial military in another, and the clones separate from all the rest. Only the one cultist survived. He'd be coming with us. The Kailionian marines paid a special compliment to the clones, guards on them were more numerous and more heavily armed. The clones had removed their

helmets, a forest of Scorch-heads confronted me. The militia commander ended up standing near us. Our clones formed a loose ring around Rotherron and me. The recruits had snagged weapons from the floor. "He fought with his men," Scorch whispered in my ear. He nodded toward the commander. That meant something to the clones.

"We need to start interviewing the Imperials," Rotherron said.

I nodded. "Three-Eight, you need to go with Rothers. Maybe you should keep everyone together, to avoid misunderstandings with the recruits."

"Got it." They moved out, our clones guarding Rotherron without appearing to guard her.

The commander spoke to me. "I met the master of your order a few years ago."

I moved over next to him. "You've met Master Skywalker?"

"He never said anything about these . . . clones of yours."

"It's a new thing." I didn't tell him just how new. "They really were created for us, at the beginning."

"Do you think that was a good idea?"

"Probably not, but I wasn't there."

He smiled, but without warmth. "Neither was I. What do your clones call themselves? I didn't quite understand it."

"Cuy'val Dar. It's old Mandalorian," I said, repeating what 38 had told the recruits just a few minutes ago. "The last of the Mandalorians were hired in secret to train the first generation. 'Those Who Do Not Exist.' We didn't give it to them, they chose it."

"What would you have called them?"

I pondered this. "Something a little more uplifting."

He nodded and looked out over the sea of Scorch-heads.

After the awesome exertions of Masters Tionne, Kyle, and Master Luke, I finally knew a little history. It had taken them several years to get it into my head. It had been much more fun for me to train with

lightsabers or repair droids. Today I hoped their instruction would help me save a few lives.

The fall of the Empire had left a chaotic mess, something the New Republic still had not remedied. Many planets and systems had set up their own militias, even small system alliances had sprung up. Most remembered the Clone Wars and the kindnesses of the Emperor with great clarity. They refused to disband even after joining the New Republic. Splintered responsibilities developed, which meant that the New Republic had jurisdiction in some matters in some places and not in others. It depended on the situation. I'd now play that "situation." Right now, this man next to me was the one in charge. The prisoners were in his custody.

"What's going to happen to them?" I asked him, gesturing vaguely toward the captives.

"The laws of Kailion are very severe in regards to insurrection and banditry."

"Um . . . how severe?"

"Death."

"Do they get a hearing?"

He looked at me. "Miss Jedi, we are not barbarians. There will be a trial."

Media remotes were high above us, near the distant ceiling. I could hear them buzzing around. "My name is Jaden Korr, Commander." I put my palms together and bowed my head in greeting.

He smiled again, this time not so grim. It was a small crack in his cold exterior. "We touch hands on Kailion." He extended a hand. I took it. "It's Colonel, actually, Colonel Bett Tameran."

"Greetings, Colonel. Did you know that the old agricultural colony of Secundus Vaccans has been set aside by the New Republic as a settlement world just for clone soldiers? I did not know that until recently."

"They violated our laws, they must come to judgment here."

"Technically — technically . . . I don't know anything about your laws, or the law anywhere. They are all guilty of banditry. Will all these men die? Several hundred men, all of them die?"

"If it is the judgment of the courts."

"Anger is high. Because of that, shall so many be lost?"

"Did they show us mercy, or you? Have we interfered with this 'recruiting' so far? You can take the ones you want. The rest will answer for their crimes." He tried to walk away. I followed him to the edge of the seated crowd of clone troopers. They had been herded together and forced to sit on the permacrete floor with their helmets off. All had the face of the same man, some older, many younger, many my age. The militia had searched them and now watched them with loaded weapons. Everyone knew the old story about stormtroopers captured during the Battle of Bespin, how they killed their guards and stole a transport ship. An older face glared up at us from the edge of the crowd. He was a trooper master sergeant, the orange chevron on the right shoulder of his armor labeling him for me.

Rotherron and I did not win this fight to preside over a legalized massacre — to serve up victims to show trials and executions, fodder for a grasping politician's bid to be seen as "tough on crime."

The trooper sergeant stood and drew a hidden weapon in one flowing movement. He aimed at the Colonel — or was it me he was trying to shoot?

I remember Master Kyle trying to his best to explain the doctrine of no-mind. I was not a good student. Constant practice and deep meditation, the devoted instruction of Kyle, Jan, Mara, and Master Luke were necessary before I understood. The imaging techniques worked best for me. I could see in my mind the concept of action without thought. Again and again, over many months, I would imagine a situation like this one. I would try to eliminate mind from action. To do what is right, what is necessary, without hesitation or conscious thought.

The Force snatched the weapon from his hand and cast it into mine.

"You idiot!" I shouted at him. "I'm trying to save your life!" Several media remotes zoomed over in our direction, their tiny cameras seeking us out.

How those words touched him, I do not know. They did. His mind turned to glass. "I'm sorry Miss Jedi," he replied. He sat down.

"Eight!" I shouted, but he and a couple of the recruits were already running toward us. I pointed at the sergeant. "He's coming with us."

Three-Eight reached my side. "Are you sure, Jaden? He tried to shoot you."

"Not me. Yes, I'm sure. Pull him out." Other minds revealed themselves to me. "And the one next to him." I pointed. "And that one there." I pointed deeper in the crowd. "And that one." I pointed again.

Three-Eight waded in to yank them up. The guards did not interfere. They held Rothers and me in awe. It was good they didn't know me a little better. That awe would vanish right away.

Colonel Tameran had not moved. A brave man during the fight, this unexpected attempt on his life had turned his face pale, in stark contrast with the dark brown of his militia uniform. I handed the sergeant's weapon to him. "It's a hold-out blaster, sir. Please keep it as a souvenir."

He turned the thing over in his hands. He inspected it as if he were planning on buying a dozen of them. The Colonel had taken hold of himself, using the excuse of the pistol to take a moment to calm himself.

Three-Eight dragged the sergeant and the others by us.

"Nice mod," he told the sergeant as the trooper passed us.

"Thank you, sir," the sergeant replied. The anger and shame of defeat were gone. The sergeant was ready. What would Three-Eight do with him? Or the others?

Colonel Tameran was ready, too. "It really is nice, a professional job," he told me. He put the modded blaster in a pocket. The identical black-haired heads were spread out before us. They drew his eyes.

I gave him a little final push. "Let's leave the emotions of a hard fight behind us. Mercy is the better part of our nature."

He was still looking at them. "They came to our planet, raided a factory complex, looted in *my* city, attacked police stations, killed *my* citizens — and you ask for their lives to be spared? How many of them did you kill today?"

"I lost count."

Scorch heard that from where he stood. He nudged Eight. "Me, too," he whispered. "I lost count."

"I didn't."

"All right, hot shot, how many?"

"That's for me to know."

The colonel watched his captives, thoughts bubbling in his head. I helped them come out. I leaned close and whispered to him. "Have you forgotten the ways of the Emperor? We must not emulate that evil even in the slightest."

"I hear Skywalker in your voice," he replied quietly. "I will do what I can for the mercenaries and the Kailion traitors. The New Republic can have the clones and the Imperials."

We watched the captives. There was something else he wanted to say to me. "If there's time," I asked, "could you tell me about serving with Master Skywalker?"

He smiled. "Gotta get the goods on Teacher? If there's time. Tell Luke . . ." He hesitated. "If I can ever help the Jedi, I will."

This wasn't said lightly. He meant it. The colonel did not expect to be asked to pick up the bill in a restaurant.

"Thank you."

"The cameras are here," he whispered

"Please do not use my personal name in the media," I whispered back.

"Of course." He spoke louder for the media remotes. "Honored Jedi, in accord with our support for the New Republic, we will turn over all Remnant Imperial forces to New Republic custody. As to the rest, those who took up arms against Kailion will be judged, individually, in open

court as our laws require. You have been of great service to my planet today. You did not have to fight for us, but you did. Grants of captured goods on the battlefield are part of our military tradition. What is your desire, Jedi?"

"Could we have one of the captured cargo ships?"

"It is so. You will stay and enjoy the hospitality of our people."

"As you wish." I had a hunch that just now, the idea of a political career had popped into his head. Maybe it was the hum of media remotes.

— ◇ —

Thirty-one clones heard the call of the Cuy'val Dar. The recently former Sith apprentice Gir decided to travel with us to Yavin. So did the scrawny kid Hapton Orr, and Bedeptra. We gave Mr. Thrombba the tracker and the captured airspeeder in compensation for his blown-up sprint. Feg and Jeson, our helpful if clumsy artifact hunters, our guides to the Ancient Republic base, got our almost equally ancient packet ship. The people of Kailion stuffed us with good food and the factory gave us crates of hardware, including vast numbers of those precious power packs.

Floran and several of the others who fought that night still weren't out of hospital yet. I visited them regularly. I was there the day Floran received his new prosthetic arm. The party girl's name was Awen. I went to visit her at her home. She still wouldn't speak, but at least she smiled at me. Everyone attended Sosur's memorial service. It was carried live on the planetary holonet. Rothers and I borrowed formal military jackets from the Colonel.

A New Republic assault ship stopped by for the Imperials and the clones. I managed to sneak a few of the mercenaries into the mix. The colonel took us to his house for a fine meal with his family. The teahouse invited me back, but I sent Scorch and Eight instead. The memory of the little Sith girl I had to kill there was too much for me. We let our clones collect the Spent Street bounty. Justice always has to be served.

We left after the official investigation into the raid, so we missed the trials. The colonel was as good as his word. He spoke out against vengeance in the media and he appeared at the trials, his presence a reminder of the grace of mercy. He often spoke of us. Only eleven of the prisoners were later executed. Which was bad enough, but also good. The number could have been much higher.

We sent regular reports to Master Kyle, Master Skywalker, and Master Tionne. Rothers spent most of the time before the government's investigative hearings interviewing prisoners and Gir. She sent and received a vast number of messages, mostly to and from Tionne and Hemish. Gir had only seen Rosh once, briefly, and had no idea where he was being kept.

It took three weeks for the government to have its hearings. After that, we crammed everyone and all the goodies and gifts into a shrouding freighter the government had given us, and headed back to Yavin 4. I sat back with the crates so not to spoil the mood of the rest. Three-Eight and Six-Two kept me company.

"There is no doubt, there is only certainty. We are doing this, we've already done it. Even if he wants to say no, it makes no difference."

"Master Skywalker can be very persuasive."

"He won't talk us out of this. I even found precedent on the holonet. They were called 'free companies' and they fought for the Old Republic, back a few thousand years ago, during the last of the Sith wars. Then there were the Antarian Rangers. The old Jedi disbanded them about three hundred years ago."

I didn't know what the Master would say. Kyle would be there. My master had influence over Luke, maybe that would be enough to sway things our way. Rotherron couldn't see the outcome, it was 'murky.' That's the word she used. We'd know when it happened and not before.

But before the trip home, there was the official investigation, all formal and legal and everything else I had no experience with. Either Rothers or I had to testify before the planetary senate. Media hosts and remotes would be there. Rothers was doing an important thing in talking to the prisoners. That left me. Kailion's government was kind enough to give me a little bandwidth. I called Master Kyle from our rooms at Government House. He was on Coruscant of all places — though his holoimage stood in the center of the room.

"What is it, Jaden? You need my help with something . . ."

"It's not bad, it's a good thing — only, it's better if I show you. Will you be back in a week or two?"

"I think so. Another crook, more assassination droids. Our police friends have been helpful. I'll wait to hear, if it's a good thing."

"It is, it really, really is. Though . . ."

"*He* might not think so."

"Rothers can't tell."

Kyle nodded, then scratched his short beard. "Tionne once called Luke a 'nexus,' whatever the fek that is. You and I are in the *now*, we don't have to understand it, but a 'nexus' is hard for *Future Path* users to look at. Did you know he can't see himself in the future? He knows he's there, but he can't see what he'll be doing. Weird pudu. There's something else, isn't there, partly why you called."

"There are these court thingies — I have to give a sworn statement. The Colonel told me that street clothes are a sign of disrespect to the court. I have to dress up. I've never dressed up before in my life. Will I have to wear a dress? Should I wear the formal military jacket I borrowed for Sosur's funeral? I don't have to wear a dress, do I? I've never worn a dress."

Kyle laughed. "I'm the wrong person to ask. Luke will know. I'll message him. He has to wear formal clothes when he meets with senators and such. He might consult his sister."

"I can't wear dresses. I've never, ever worn one. They won't make me wear one, will they?"

"Don't worry. What's with this fear of dresses? You've seen Tionne wear them. Others have. Even Jan used to, back before."

"Don't worry? You should talk, master. I've never seen you in anything other than that old Special Forces sweater."

"It's comfortable."

I changed topics. "How's Hansho?"

"He's progressing nicely. I made him an apprentice. Lon's doing well, too."

"I always ask, wherever I go. It's one of the first questions Rothers asked the prisoners."

"We'll find Rosh, Jaden, we'll turn him back. It's the scepter. We felt it on Vjun."

"I want to tell you about a girl I killed, but not now. And something else that happened. When I see you."

He nodded. Kyle pulled a datapad from the side pocket of his trousers. "It's afternoon at the Academy," he said after glancing at it. "Luke's been home for a couple days. He ought to get right back to you. Don't do anything clothes-wise until you hear from him."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't call me 'sir.'"

— ♦ —

To: Luke Skywalker

From: Kyle Katarn

Jay has to give evidence at a formal hearing on Kailion. You've dressed for these things — what should she wear? Two times I've had to put on a

formal tunic or a dress uniform. You advise her. But I'll put in one thing: remember what we talked about three months ago? Is it time?

To: Kyle Katarn

From: Luke Skywalker

Let us test the waters. I'll send her a clothing file with the specs. I think I'll need you back here in a few weeks.

To: Luke Skywalker

From: Kyle Katarn

Be open to whatever she brings. I'll be there to help.

To: Jaden Korr

From: Luke Skywalker

A clothing file is attached. When the tailor's droid assembles it, use stayclean fabrics and make sure the tailor adjusts the fit. Do not wear it in the street, only to formal appearances. Remember who you are, Jaden. Always act with dignity.

— ◇ —

The walls of the big interior amphitheater were of white stone, gleaming pure and sterile. Formal testimony in the matter of the Remnant attack on Kailion was held in the planetary senate. I had never been in such a place before. Somehow, it didn't make me nervous. I thought that I should be nervous, but I wasn't. Media hosts and their remotes were there from all over the planet and the sector. Remotes hovered everywhere, pushing at each other for the best shots. The balcony at the rear was crammed with people — every seat on the main floor was taken by a local dignitary. Large holodisplays were posted to the sides and over the three-judge panel at the focus of the room. Colonel Tameran had just

finished. I waited in the shadows under the balcony. I had changed my clothes in a storage room in the lobby.

"The Honored Jedi is now called," a distant voice said.

I stepped forward. The people nearby gasped. When I stepped out of shadow, my image appeared on the giant displays overhead. Then everyone gasped.

The long outer robe rustled quietly as I walked. These garments felt strange and familiar at the same time. An invisible multitude walked with me, I could feel them present beside me. Images of beings in long brown robes flickered at the edge of my vision. What I wore had special meaning to every sentient in the galaxy. Until they were taken away. Most thought such things would never be worn again. To those present, I was a ghost from the living past, a reminder of what was and what might be.

The Colonel stood up. His wife stood. His men stood. The senators stood. They all stood. I walked to the witness stand in silence. The court auditor walked forward. "The Jedi does not need to be sworn," a voice said from the judge's bench. "The Kailion government inquiry welcomes the Jedi to these proceedings. Please, sit, and tell us what you saw."

I sat in the chair, pulling the brown outer robe around my legs as I did so. The green-tree emblem of the New Jedi Order had been stitched into the left breast of my white knight's tunic and the robe over it. A great calm descended on me. What was only on the inside was now out for everyone to see.

One of the judges asked me a question. "Mistress Jedi, how did your involvement in this matter begin?"

"On Tanaab, honored judge. As many of you know, a new cult has arisen from the wreckage of the Empire. It has allied itself with a Remnant faction. We do not know their true purpose at present, only that they spread hardship and violence wherever they go." This was not entirely true. We knew Tavion hated the Jedi and wished to destroy us. We had our suspicions. Those were not to be spoken of with outsiders. I would tell them what I could, what they would understand.

"How did you trace them from Tanaab to Kailion?"

I told them. Not all, but enough. I told them about the mutant rancor, the supply raids, the terrorism, the slave raids, and the Disciples of Ragnos. I was as truthful as I could be.

— ◇ —

To: Luke Skywalker, Grand Master of the New Jedi Order

From: Colonel Bett Tameren, Kailion Defense Forces

My government has asked me to express thanks for the aid your Jedi gave us during our recent confrontation with the Remnant. We honored their request to keep their personal names out of the media. You will shortly receive a formal letter of thanks by packet courier from our high chancellor. She asked me to tell you this: If you ever need our help, we will do what we can. We were all deeply impressed by the young Jedi Knights who fought for us and with us. This offer applies to me, personally. I offer you my services, so long as they do not conflict with my service to Kailion.

You probably don't remember, but we met briefly during the Rebellion. I was in an infantry unit you and General Solo rescued. Our opponents that time were mercenaries. It was on Ord Mantell. The Emperor threw just about everything he had at us, didn't he?

To: Colonel Bett Tameren

From: Luke Skywalker

I remember. You must come to Yavin 4 sometime, we will argue over old times. There may come a time when I will call upon you. For now, please keep us informed of any cult or Remnant activity. I include an encrypted attachment with subspace transceiver registries and encryption keys. Jaden speaks highly of you.

Thank you. May the Force be with you.

— ◇ —

We came home on a sunny morning. The forest below was bright green and glistening in the sunlight. Mistress Tionne always used the word "verdant" about the forest on mornings like this. She very quickly became tired of explaining to me the meaning of the words she used. The interactive dictionary on my datapad was her invention, something she sliced together "to save my voice from the constant demands of explaining ever single last syllable coming out of my mouth." Three-Eight was up in the cockpit with us as Rothers brought the shroud-wing in low toward a landing at the main pads. I suppose we could have landed at the small pad outside the temple's hanger doors, but why rush to an uncertain fate? I said those exact words to Rotherron as we entered Yavin 4's atmosphere. The closer we got to Yavin, the worse the haze was for Rotherron's Future Sight. I took Three-Eight's hand like he was my father.

"Calm yourself, Jaden. Aren't Jedi supposed to control their emotions?"

"Ordinarily," Rothers replied from the pilot seat.

"The Cuy'val Dar already exist," Eight said in an attempt to reassure us, to reassure me. "Never fear, we will hold by you." He leaned close. "You have fought with us."

The black freighter settled on the main pad, near the pre-fab hangers. I expected to see more people around. We lowered the rear ramp and came out with the rest.

"Quiet day," Rotherron commented. Her head-tails twitched.

Birds called their greetings to us from hidden places in the forest. The mournful sounds of hoot sloths echoed faintly. Master Kyle came up off the path toward us.

My master's presence always calmed me. I sighed. He looked over my ragged group as he walked toward me. Gir the former Sith apprentice, now in a New Republic flightsuit a size too big, the scrawny kid Hapton Orr still in his militia fatigues, the clones in various combinations of armor, militia uniforms, and New Republic duty jackets — Scorch and Three-Eight beside me back in their long coats. Rotherron was in a generic flightsuit, her usual dress and tights being torn or full of blaster holes. Bedepra was the one who stuck out. Before she felt the call, she had been in the plant's Management Training Program, a real job. She was wearing a very handsome business suit with a long black skirt. She knew a lot of things about dressing well and . . . things not in my 'experience package,' as Master Kyle would put it. Me, for once I didn't have a scratch on me. Even my clothes had come through unscathed.

"Kid, are you up to no good?" He smiled pleasantly at the clones.

"Master Kyle, I'd like to introduce you to the survivors of Delta Squad. This is Sixty-Two, also known as Scorch, and this is Three-Eight. Please *look* at them."

He *looked*. If it were obvious to me, it must have been like Coruscant at night to him.

Kyle nodded to himself. "They'll do. Three-Eight, would you and Scorch please accompany us? Jaden, come along. Rotherron, please escort our new friends to one of the guesthouses. Call on any Initiates you see to fetch tea." He pointed to Gir. "You are the former Sith apprentice?"

"Yes sir."

"You come along, too."

"Bedeptra, my wife's name is Jan Ors. Your first task as Initiate is to find her. You'll train with her until your new master returns. "

She gave a little formal bow. "She's not far away, is she?"

"No, she isn't. Did you bring work clothes?"

"Um, these are my work clothes."

He smiled. "They aren't work clothes here. Jan will take you to the women's dormitory, get you sorted out. Go find her."

Bedeptra picked up her bags and walked away.

"Hapton, is that you over there?"

Hapton Orr spoke up from the edge of the crowd. "Yes, sir." He had a duffel bag at his feet.

"Have tea with the others. Master Low will come for you in an hour or so. He'll settle you in."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't call me 'sir.'"

"Yes, sir."

The clones laughed.

"You've spent too much time with Jaden, Hapton."

Kyle led the way. The birds sang to us as we made our way along the path.

"Master," Gir said, "There are charges on me in three different systems. One is a death penalty."

"Stop thinking in old ways, Gir. This is a new life. Maybe you need a new name. Tionne will help you, she is waiting."

"And another," I added.

Kyle glanced at me. "Yes. Mara will help as well. She's off-planet right now, but she'll be back in a few days. Rest that troubled mind, Gir."

We entered the temple through the hangar bay doors. Scorch and Three-Eight stared up at the massive stone pile we were about to enter.

The old sergeant, Bekkad, and Avve were working on one of the x-wings kept in the temple's hangar. Avve had his Twi'lek head shoved up a

service hatch, but Bekkad saw me and waved. I returned the wave. "Hurry back, we have work for you," he shouted after me.

017 was in the distance with one of his clone-brothers, I think it was Ninety-One. They were arguing with a repair droid.

"Sev!" I shouted.

Three-Eight and Scorch jumped a little at the name.

Sev returned my wave. It was Niner, he waved as well. "You'll meet him later, " I told Eight.

"Jedi do repairs?" Scorch asked me.

Kyle answered. "Imagine an army with no officers. Didn't Jaden repair anything on Kailion?"

"Not that we saw. Eight and I just assumed it would be like the old days. Jedi were the generals during the Clone Wars."

Kyle laughed. "No generals here. We all work for a living."

"Even the big boss?"

"Especially him. Half the droids here were rebuilt by him."

3PO was holding a lift for us. "Welcome home, Mistress Jaden. Welcome gentlemen."

"Thanks, 3PO. Anything happen while I was gone?"

"Quite a lot, Mistress. Three of the R5 units were wrecked when an old transport crashed on Pad B. We had . . ."

Kyle shut him up. "Not now, 3PO. Is the boss where I think he is?"

"Yes, sir. Master Luke is in the Audience Chamber."

Scorch and Three-Eight looked around the giant cavernous hangar, then up at the lift columns extending into the stone ceiling. They shifted their focus to follow Sev's distant figure.

"Lead on, metal friend."

3PO took us up. We swapped lifts at the training level. Tionne was waiting by the lift when we stopped at the library level. She smiled at Gir as he stepped off. "Welcome, Initiate."

"That means you're a Jedi now," I explained.

Gir started to cry. Tionne took him gently by the arm, her long silver hair swaying with her movements.

"What did I say?"

"He'll be fine, Jaden," she said. "I'll look after him."

We left them, the lift taking us up. Kyle looked at me. "'What did I say?' You damn well know what was wrong."

I glanced away. "The same thing that was wrong with me."

"Not quite, Jaden, but close enough."

"I'm satisfied with what I am. Rothers, can you feel it, Master? She'll be one of you soon."

He nodded. "Your inner eye serves you well, Jaden. You are correct. I feel it whenever I'm near her."

I could feel puzzlement from the clones. The conversation had lost them. "This is what I want to be, all I want to be." I met his eyes. "Am I failing you by not wanting more?"

He laughed and gave me a gentle shove. It was all the answer I needed.

"I think Mistress Jaden worries too much," Scorch said to Eight.

Kyle led us off the lift when it stopped. He looked at me outside the sliding doors to the chamber. "Jan and I are going to practice deep meditation before evening meal. You are to join us. You need to help Bekkad before noon meal. I want you to pick up a training saber and fight a few of the Initiates after eating. Also, the food-prep droid in the kitchen needs servicing. Hansho will help you with that. He and Lon are among those I want you to fight. Take care with Lon, she's much better than she was just a month ago." He inspected Scorch and Three-Eight. "Are you ready to meet the Boss?" He didn't wait for an answer, but instead walked over to the door's control panel and tapped it. It slid open, one half folding away to each side. We went in.

The morning sun was bright through the high narrow windows. We walked across sunlit streaks toward the raised platform at the front. The gray stones contained a hint of green, faint echoes of the forest below us.

A single black-clad figure sat on the stones there, meditating. We reached the steps leading up to him. He rose and came down to us.

Luke smiled. "There are few coincidences. The Force guides us toward those we need, those who need us. The New Jedi Order welcomes you as friends and allies."

He glanced at me. "You and Rotherron have been away too long. Both of you have work to be done here, for a while. It's good to have you back." He shifted his gaze to the clone brothers. "You, too."

"Thanks."

"You feel at home, don't you?"

Both Scorch and Eight were startled by the question, or maybe by the answer. "We do," Scorch said for both of them.

"We really do," Eight Echoed.

"The holocrons we have salvaged tell us that such alliances existed in the past between certain warrior groups and the Jedi. The last of these was abolished about three hundred years ago. Perhaps this was a mistake. Perhaps we should return to the ancient ways. It is too soon to recruit at Secundus Vaccans. However, a New Republic squadron caught a Remnant force near Gorgi, about a battalion of clones, among others. Go there, my friends. Take a couple of the new recruits. Naan, a zabrak Apprentice, is in the library. You'll meet her at noon meal. She'll go with you. It will be good training for her. Neerna and Raded, two twi'lek Jedi, will be on-planet by this afternoon. They will accompany you as well. Take the new cargo ship, the one you came on — only unload it first, all right? Jaden will need the parts. We'll all eat noon meal together. You'll go after Neerna and Raded arrive. Bring back as many as you can. Yes, Jaden?" Luke looked at me.

"Um, shouldn't there be a ceremony for them?"

He turned to Eight. "Do you want a ceremony?"

"Not right now," Eight replied. "But we'll need one eventually for the new recruits."

Luke nodded in agreement. "There's an old stone road south of the temple, it leads eight kilometers through the mountains to low hills opening onto a plain. A ruined city is there. The wells still flow with clean water. The Light Side of the Force is strong there. Rotherron will take the rest of the recruits to the place, along with a few construction droids. If Jaden can get them running. The — how you say it again?"

"Cuy'val Dar, those who do not exit," Eight answered.

Luke continued. "The Cuy'val Dar deserve a city of their own. We have stacks of stuff from the Rebellion Era lying around the planet. That includes a fair number of prefab housing kits. Rotherron and your new men will put up a few in preparation for your return. The prelate of Ord Siniir owes me a few favors. We'll see if we can't get a shipment of speeders and land vehicles in, maybe build a small spaceport there eventually. Try to get as many as you can, Eight."

"Yes, sir."

"Jaden, you have things to do. Kyle, we'll see you at noon meal. These two gentlemen and I have old times to talk over."

And that's how it went. I thought it was a little anticlimactic after all the worry I put into it.

"You looked good in the robes," Luke called after me as I left. I went to the women's dorm and put on an old pair of coveralls before joining Bekkad and Avve in the hangar. Bitters poked me in the ribs as we passed in the hallway. It was like I never left.