

*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....

# *Accidental Politics*

Chapter 10 of *Day of the Jedi: Knight*

by

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## Preface to this chapter:

*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. This chapter occurs several months after they found the Exile's tomb on Chandrila. This is chapter 10 from *Volume IV: Knight*.

## *Knight*, Chapter 10: Accidental Politics

### 1. Messages

A sad girl in an evil place turned to one of her captors. Her thin body was scrunched up on a corner of her bunk. She normally didn't speak to her keepers. She'd sit on her bunk, wearing her scratchy brown prison jumpsuit, and stare at the wall as one of them came into her cell to retrieve the meal tray. She lived in a windowless metal box. It had a door and a couple air vents, a refresher, a desk, a chair, and a bunk. The light was always on. The prison was very old, so the walls were rusty. She watched the young man pick up her tray.

"They are coming," she told him, because he wasn't one of the cruel ones. "Do not return after your shift is over. They are coming soon, and death comes with them."

The young man looked at her, startled. She had never spoken before. "What did you say?"

"Do not come back to the prison," she warned him. "All who serve here will die soon. They are coming. They will be here soon."

Her somber attitude and calm eyes frightened him. They did not match her words. "Who's coming? When will they get here?"

She closed her eyes and saw Rothers and I standing in the future. "Two are coming for me. They are young and female. One is human like me. The other is a Twi'lek. I hear their minds, their thoughts are disciplined and deadly. They never want to fight, but they are master warriors. They never want to kill, but they are killers. Something, something stands with them. They hold death and life in their hands." She opened her eyes to stare at the young guard. "They are only two, but somehow a multitude stands with them. How is that possible? They are my beginning and your end. If you see them, turn away."

She turned her gaze back to the wall.

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"See? She's been doing that for the last couple days," the warden told SecChief. He touched the controls on the holoprojector disk on SecChief's desk to freeze the girl's image. "Do you want to see it again?"

"No." SecChief thought for a moment while he watched the warden fidget. "Double all guards at the prison. Everyone goes in pairs. Increase security patrols both at the perimeter and in the neighborhood around the prison. My people will review personnel records for any unusual activity. I will transfer several select military units over to your command. The New Republic has been most unhappy with us. This is probably a covert operation. Someone has made the mistake of warning her. I'll seal the spaceports for a couple weeks, just as a precaution. It may be nothing."

"They say she can see the future, that her entire family had that gift." The short, stout warden almost quivered when he said it.

"Who are 'they'?"

"You know, 'they, them.' I've heard rumors about the royal family for years. What excuse will you use to seal the spaceports?"

"'Terrorists.' That's always good." SecChief looked at her frozen image. "There will be no escapes."

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I was sleeping in one of the little bunks right behind the cockpit. A massive banging sound woke me up. An accelerated clanking began right behind the bulkhead, next to my head. It quickly slowed to a random thumping, and then was quiet. Sounds like that are never a good sign on a spaceship. I rolled out of the bunk and opened the door to the cockpit. Rothers was already up front in the commander's seat. I could see stars through the cockpit windows. That was another bad sign. We should have been in hyperspace.

"What did you do to the hyperdrive?" she asked as I put myself into the co-pilot's seat.

"Me? I didn't touch it. It's always me even when it isn't, is that it?" I snapped back.

"Well, it's gone." She shifted around to look back at me. "The emergency Class 5 is showing green, but it'll take us months and months to get anywhere."

"We can always eat one of your head-tails."

"Very funny." She was about to make another crack at my expense when she paused.

I began typing a search request into the navicomputer. "We have to find someplace to put down for repairs." I glanced over at her. "Don't worry. The Academy's emergency account will cover the repairs."

Her blue head-tails twitched and wrapped themselves around her neck. "That isn't it. What are the nearest systems?"

She was the stronger in the inner arts of the Force than me, but I could feel it, too, ever so faintly. It was like the whisper of butterfly wings in a breeze.

I called up the map. The Inner Rim floated over the control panel. I looked at the screen below for details. "We're between the Telti and Onderon systems. The good news is, we're just a short way from Taanab. It's a regional hub. We can get a replacement drive core there real cheap. It's only about seven days away on Class 5." I smiled. "Can you stand me for that long?"

She was somber. "We have to go to Onderon."

"Why?"

"I don't know. We just do. All right?"

Her spooky Future Sight was telling her something. It was just the barest touch of something to me. I tried to weasel out of it. I had been to Taanab with Master Kyle. I knew we could find what we needed there and we could have some fun, too. "Taanab's better."

One of her blue headtails undraped itself and tapped on the control panel.

"I know. We have to go there."

She looked at me. "Be thankful you aren't Future Sight, Jaden. It's a curse."

That startled me. I had always been more than a little jealous of Luke's students. The Force whispered something to me just then. It was immediate and strong. It was sadness. It didn't come from Rotherron.

"Are the sad people on Onderon?"

She nodded.

"Only nine days." I punched up the coordinates and let the navicomputer chew on them. The emergency drive made a puny little whine as it pushed us into hyperspace.

We didn't talk much during the nine days getting there. Mostly we meditated or practiced martial arts kata in the cramped space behind the cockpit. I tried to *see* more clearly into the sadness I could feel. We used up the last of the fresh fruit on day two and had to start in on the emergency ration packets. Every now and then we gossiped about the Academy, Derrn, or Rothers's family.

Rothers was meditating on her bunk. She sat cross-legged in silence, pushing her mind forward, trying to see what awaited us. She met obstruction, but she did see a girl's face, a man, and me. That's what she told me while I practiced the joint-lock routines Master Lowe had taught me during our last stay on Yavin 4. The navicomputer chimed.

The comm display popped up a message.

"Oh, wonderful. Onderon's spaceport is closed to all traffic for the next week. You have to stand for a search if you want to land." I looked back at her. "We'd be arrested if we stood for a search, wouldn't we?"

She nodded.

"Why do they want to arrest us? Why us specifically?"

"If I knew, I would tell you."

"The orbital yards around the moons, especially the big one over Dxun, they could fix us up. But we need to land on the planet, right?"

She just nodded, her eyes closed.

"You still can't see, can you?"

She opened one eye. "You know why."

"The fear, the sadness. They sometimes block Future Path."

She nodded. She closed her eye. "You know what that means."

"Oh, wonderful life." Someone was using a dark side technique. Maybe it was unintentional, but given our luck lately, probably not. "Time to create uncertainty and confusion."

I slid under the control panel and opened an access panel. This was something Bekkad had taught me a while back. We install it on all starcraft used by the Jedi. It was a transponder spoofer. The little signal processor sent out false transponder signatures to a system's space traffic control computer. Since it was all computer or droid controlled, traffic control took a couple minutes to call a sentient operator. I flipped a switch and closed the panel. Rothers was already up front. She took her seat. I went back and put on my vest and buckled on my belt. We might not be back to this ship.

"Got everything?" I asked her.

"Of course. I'm not the forgetful one." She was wearing one of her split-skirt dresses over her skintights. Her saberstaff was clipped to her belt and she had her shoulder bag looped over her neck and shoulder. I was geared up, too. My lightsaber was in its holster on my belt, and my armored vest was zipped up. I still carried the small hold-out blaster 017 had given me, but Rothers and I had returned our blaster pistols to the armory the last time we were on Yavin. As to those big daggers the wookiees gave us, mine was on my desk in my cubicle in the women's dorm. I think Rothers gave hers to her niece. It was a weird present for a little kid, but then, the more you get to know twi'leks, the weirder they are.

I frowned at the jab at me. There was nothing in the little crew compartment but a couple standard coveralls and some wrappers from the ration packs. "Erase the ship's computers."

She tapped a key combination into her station. "Done."

I took the second seat and folded out the manual controls after buckling in.

"Switching over to you," she said as she buckled her safety harness. "Sublight engines to max."

We went for a ride.

Kyle gave me my first lesson in free flight aboard the Ebon Hawk. He sat in the second chair whispering in my ear as I flew, and as I flew, the *Now* of the Force filled me with the comprehension of everything around me. A sphere of knowing surrounded me. My master and I went up in the Hawk many times before I mastered the technique.

Rotherron was not afraid. Her needling was a little game she played at my expense. Confidence in me echoed out of her mind. I closed my eyes and began. The ancient courier ship had excellent sublight engines. We were fast. We flashed around in-system ships queued up in orbit for inspection. A patrol craft tried to follow us into the atmosphere. I pulled a split-S and swerved down into a valley. He didn't follow.

The sky was blue and full of clouds. I didn't see them through my eyes. Tall pointed tips of razored mountains hung around us. We slipped between the crags. We flew for a brief time among a small flock of large raptors, their large leathery wings beating at the air. A human was riding the back of one of the lead creatures. She stared at our craft in idle curiosity. She traveled in the Force, using it to control the beasts of the wilderness. She sensed my mind and smiled. I slowed the courier ship so we could fly in formation for a minute. She waved as we broke away from the flock and accelerated through the sharp-pointed mountains.

There were many small fortified towns and villages in the countryside, but only one gigantic city, immense, protected from wild beasts by tall thick walls, its skies still protected by anti-aircraft batteries in narrow towers. The city covered one third of the one giant continent on the planet. It contained billions of people. It was called Iziz.

I opened my eyes once we were through the mountains. "Any ideas on how to get into the city?"

Rotherron smiled. "Our spoofer is working fine. Their traffic control network has lost track of the intruder— us — and thinks we're a small cargo ship from the Northern Territories on the way to the central spaceport in Iziz. Let's just fly there and land. Since you like drama, we can declare an in-flight emergency of some sort."

"You're writing this play, Rothers, not me."

"I'd make a good author, wouldn't I?" She laughed.

"You'd rival Mystery Woman. I'll have to introduce you sometime."

We flew over the high walls. I wobbled the courier ship a little every now and then just to keep appearances up. We went over an endless expanse of buildings and streets. The city had crawled over mountains, down into valleys, and hung from the edges of cliffs. Tall towers mixed with houses, old and new were jumbled together. After a long while, a cleared circular area appeared on the horizon.

"It's good we're there," Rothers told me. "Because our spoof's about to be cracked. I'm getting voice comm from the sentient controllers asking for verification."

I pumped up the speed a little. "No need for subtlety, we'll just crash land in the landing apron next to the main concourse. Poor little ship. It's served us well."

I dropped the landing skids and pretended to lose control. We came in low over the spaceport. A couple in-system shuttles pulled up over us as we caromed under them. Sparks and smoke trailed us as I pushed the landing skids down onto the duracrete of the landing field. We skidded toward one wing of the big terminal. I had just enough control left to sloop my way to one side and then another as I dodged the little craft around big freighters parked to the side of the field. We skidded to a stop just next to a maintenance area's fenced gate.

Rothers was already up and at the side door. I scrambled out of my safety harness as she popped the door and tumbled out. I dove

out after her. The sky was harsh with brightness, too shiny and blue. The duracrete under our feet reflected the day's heat back up at us as we ran toward the tall fence and its gate. Maintenance personnel in company coveralls stared at us as we ran by them. The tall curved wing of the terminal concourse towered over us as we ran through the maintenance area toward the metal doors marked "Spaceport Employees Only."

The doors opened from the inside as we approached them. Four men in spaceport security uniforms stepped out, along with two men in black suits, silver buttons running up the left side of their coats. They had their guns out.

We stopped. They stopped, startled at our closeness.

The two men in the black suits weren't surprised at our presence, which surprised me a little. "They match the description," one of them said.

Rothers was watching them, her blue head-tails swaying. "Why fight?" she asked. She was speaking to me.

We ran forward, *speed* coming on us. Time slowed for us as we dodged and weaved around them and through the doors into the terminal concourse. We would have appeared to them as quick stuttered movement, blurred limbs as we flashed by them. They began to turn as the doors slammed shut behind us. That was me. We dashed through a shop area, high shelves and bins full of parts, into a locker room, through it down a corridor and through a side door into the concourse itself.

We were both breathing hard when we came out the door, *speed* leaving us. I tried to calm my breathing as we walking casually among the many impatient people waiting for clearance to board their ships. Security guards were everywhere. I fished out my sunglasses and put them on. Large numbers of Twi'leks, some blue like Rotherron, were in the crowd. Lots of other species, too. Bithians, I spotted a few of them, a few tusker Aqualish, a bunch of

short big-eared Sullustans were sitting in a waiting area, obviously spacers from their clothing. A couple of them were wearing crew blues just like mine. We had vanished into the crowd near the front by the time shouting began far behind us. I tucked some stray hairs from a loose braid back up above my temple. "Lots of security cameras and remotes."

"The crowd's working for us." Rothers paused. "Someone's waiting for us."

I reached a hand back to touch my lightsaber.

"No. Allies."

"They knew who we were. They were waiting for us? Both the government and the ones outside?"

"They knew we were coming, but I don't think they knew who we are."

I shook my head. "Well, that makes no sense."

She looked at me. "Sure it does, Jay. They think we are something other than what we are."

We followed a large group of humans and tall Chiss out one of the big main doors. We headed toward the ramp to a monorail station. Rothers led me a little away from the ramp, toward a vender's counter. Colorful yellow, green, orange, and blue holoimages enticed us with illustrations of the wonderful drinks that they served. "Wow, Yellow Branch Tea!" I stepped ahead of Rothers.

"A small flask of Yellow Branch to go, please," I told the girl behind the counter.

She had long curly black hair bound behind her neck. "Anything else?"

She was expecting us. I could see it plainly, as the image of a tall girl and her Twi'lek friend lay across the surface of her mind.

"Just fruit juice for me, to go," Rotherron told her.

I paid. The girl pushed my disposable flask across the counter on top of a napkin. I picked up the flask and took a drink as I looked at the napkin.

"Repulsor van, large crates, four minutes, north under station," it read.

I smiled at the girl. She smiled at me. I led Rothers away from the counter.

We sipped on our drinks as we walked by the ramp and under the monorail station.

"They're catching up. Security cameras spotted us near the door a couple minutes ago," I told Rothers.

We casually stood behind the support pillars next to the curb.

"These others, they're coming. So are the government agents."

I nodded. "Everyone knows what we look like."

"But not what we are. You saw the surprise in their minds when we used *speed*."

A repulsor van floated up to the curb. The back opened and a droid lifter rolled out with a large crate. A door behind us opened and another droid lifter rolled out from the terminal building to pick up the crate. We stepped behind the crate and up into the van. A smiling Sullustan was waiting for us inside. The droid rolled in behind us. The door slid down. Away we went.

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SecChief bellowed at the holographic image on his desk. "Why did you not just shoot them?"

"Their ship had an air traffic spoofer installed. We didn't know where they were until they crashed at Central Spaceport," the scared face replied.

SecChief waved his hand. "Let me speak to those two failures who let them escape."

"Yes, sir."

The holoimage redirected to the two men in black who had confronted us near the concourse. Why did they always wear black? What's up with that? Even the detectives from Coruscant who chased me years ago both wore dark suits. I'd have to ask.

"What is your story? You had a squad of patrolmen with you, you had your guns drawn, why are these two girls not dead?"

They stood silent, trying to formulate an answer.

"Well?"

"They ran," one of them replied.

"'They ran'? Last time I checked, bolts from a blaster pistol travel at several hundred meters per second. Why aren't they dead?"

The other one opened his mouth, then closed it.

"What?"

"They were fast. I don't mean just fast, it's — you'd have to see them run to understand. They — they were very fast."

SecChief sighed. "You were warned that an NR commando team was arriving on a covert operation. Did you not understand the word 'commando'? They are highly trained elite operatives with exceptional physical abilities."

"This wasn't— you'd have to see it. This speed wasn't natural to humans, more like dragocats in the outer wilderness."

"Bah. Get out of my sight." SecChief clicked the holoprojector controls, disconnecting the transmission. He turned to his assistant. "I want those two demoted to street duty," he told her.

"Yes, sir."

"We do at least have images of them? Tell me we do."

"Yes, sir. They are being broadcast to every precinct and security hub in the city. We'll find them."

He looked at her. "We'd better. Warn the prison to increase their perimeter patrols. Send another detachment of infantry to back them up."

## 2. Mistaken Identities

We rode in silence for a while, sitting among the boxes in the back of the delivery van. The Sullustan just smiled at us and said nothing. I tried to speak to him a couple times, each time he held a finger to his lips. He was big-eared like all Sullustans, and wore some company's coveralls. It had the same logo on it as the delivery van we were in.

So we rode along. The tall droid lifter occasionally beeped to itself. The things weren't very smart, I doubted that it would say anything more than a diagnostic report. The ride seemed to last forever. I pulled out my datapad and began to read the *Galaxy Guide* entry for Iziz. Lots of nice places to eat, but not much on those fascinating people in the wilderness. "Beast Riders" the guide called them. They were Force users. I wish we had crashed in the wilderness. I really wanted to meet them. But no, we were needed here, and it appeared that we were expected. I drank the last of my tea.

Rothers was sitting on a box. Her eyes were closed in meditation.

On and on the ride went. Bah. I was thirsty and hungry. I was willing to bet that we had driven by some of those fabulous restaurants listed in the guide. The city was filled with anxiety and outright fear. It was a low-grade thing, bubbling just under the surface. It was in the Sullustan, too, though he hid it well.

Rothers opened her eyes and stood up before we felt the deceleration. The vehicle stopped. The Sullustan opened the back cargo door. We stepped out into a warehouse. We were surrounded by an armed group.

When they saw us, they put down their weapons.

"Sorry," the middle-aged woman at the center of the group said. "We've conditioned ourselves to expect the worst. When is the rest of your commando unit arriving?"

Rotherron looked at me. I looked at Rotherron. "We aren't commandos."

The woman smiled. "We know who you are. Our informant inside the security bureau was quite specific. He even described you both."

Rothers continued to talk for us. "We don't know where your information came from. Yes, you did know we were coming, even though we weren't aware of our need to be here until a short while ago. Yes, you knew what we look like. But we are not New Republic commandos."

This made them nervous. A few blaster rifles in the group began to edge back up in our direction.

"We do not serve the New Republic. We serve a greater thing," I said. Two teenaged boys were a little more nervous than the others. My mind reached out and snatched the blaster rifles from their hands. They sailed across the room into my hands. The conversation was over. The entire group stared in complete silence at the rifles I held. I put them gently on the floor.

Rothers gestured. A large plastoid crate behind the group raised itself up off the floor and moved toward us through the crowd. A girl at the back screamed. Rothers was *pulling* it toward us. Its movement was noticed by the rest. Someone else cried out. "It's a trick, has to be!" Heads turned to look. The crowd gasped in disbelief as it slowly crept up to us. Rotherron's mind lowered it to the floor. She hopped up on it. I joined her. They continued to stare at us.

"We are Jedi Knights," Rothers told them. The silence was complete. Not one person spoke.

"We are servants of the Force." she told them. "It has called us to this place. How can we help you?"

Not one person moved. No one spoke. Finally something happened. Two at the back ran away into the interior of the warehouse.

"The Emperor killed all of you," the woman said.

"We have returned," I replied.

"This is a trick. You are a liar," she said.

My lightsaber flew into my hand. Rothers saberstaff and my lightsaber fired up at the same time. The warehouse was filled with the hum of our weapons. The woman and the rest of the crowd stared at our lightsabers. They didn't believe us. They wanted to, but they refused to believe their eyes.

I leapt over their heads. Their heads turned to follow me. I bounced off one stack, spun, and slashed a small crate in half. It blew apart with a small poom! Fragments of white foam and stuffed animal parts rained down on us. I landed on the top of another stack.

Rotherron laughed. They turned back to her. The two blue blades of her saberstaff spun over her head. She launched her staff in a *throw* across the warehouse. A blue buzz saw of photonic energy chewed through a crate in the back. Sparks flew as the machine parts inside were chopped to bits. Her staff flew back across the room into her hand. Her arm recoiled back at the impact. She smiled at them and twirled the staff in front of her.

"Show off," I shouted at her.

She laughed.

They looked at me. I extinguished my saber and holstered it. They were still watching me. I *jumped* straight up into the distant metal struts far above us. They all tilted their heads back to look up at me. I ran back and forth on one of the narrow struts before balancing on one of the roof support trusses for a moment. After

they had all taken a long look at me way up there, I spiraled back down from my high perch to land in front of Rothers. She extinguished her staff.

Rothers spoke. "A Jedi's strength flows from the Force. Life creates it, binds us one to another. Your need called us to you. What are we, if we are not Jedi?"

Something in me, a whisper from a ghost, made me speak the ancient words. Rothers echoed me word for word.

"However innumerable sentient beings, I vow to protect them."

"However diverse Life, I vow to nourish it."

"However inexhaustible the passions, I vow to calm them."

"However immeasurable the Force, I vow to serve it."

I could feel Rotherron's mind at work, soothing their emotions, calming them, easing their fear.

The woman began to cry. I hopped down from the crate to pat her on the shoulder. The rest gathered around us. Rothers jumped down from the box. They touched us. A Bithian took my hand.

"You are as of old," the woman said at last. She wiped away her tears. "We here remember the old stories. We remember what you once did for us." She smiled at me. "You are Jedi."

"Who needs commandos when you can get Jedi?" a teenage boy said from the crowd.

We all laughed.

"If there is a way we can free you from fear, we will do it," Rotherron told them.

The Bithian still had hold of my hand.

"Help us free our queen," the woman said. "There are enough of us now, we can do the rest."

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The woman led us to an office. Hands reached out to touch us as we passed through the crowd. Hope began to bubble and roil around us. The crowd clustered around the door and the windows. The hope was tinged with fear. The woman and several others pushed themselves into the room with us.

"What do you know about Iziz?" the woman asked.

"You used to have good restaurants," I said, somewhat meaninglessly.

"Not much," Rothers confessed. "The Force guided us here, but we know little about the situation on Onderon or in Iziz."

"There was a coup," a teenage boy said. His mind had old-man thoughts in it. He had seen too much of cruelty too early in life. He was one of their leaders. "We didn't know it was a coup at the time. Our royal dynasty is very old, it goes back thousands of years. Though technically an absolute monarchy, it had evolved over generations into a representative government."

"The counselors to the royal family were always elected. Most decisions were handled by the cabinet. There was a period of unrest a few years after the Empire fell," this came from a green twi'lek man. "The royal family was sequestered for their protection."

The boy frowned. "It was a lie. We can't prove that, but that's what we think. Most of the royal family was killed in at 'terrorist attack.' But the youngest, a little girl, she survived. A general was named Regent. That's when the first of the crackdowns began."

The woman concluded the brief story. "Political activity was banned. All power was slowly focused into the Regent's hands. There were more 'terrorist attacks.' There were riots. More of our freedoms disappeared after every event. We began to organize."

The boy smiled. "Some of us took a leap of faith and began to trust others. We shared what we knew. All sorts of rank pudu came to light. Someone knew one thing, someone else knew another thing.

We began to put them all together. Then there were purges inside the government. We had to get over our rage."

"You had to get over your rage," the green Twi'lek said.

"Yeah," the boy replied. "I still have hate in me. I put it aside when the first people in the government began to give us things. They began to help us."

The woman nodded. "One of them gave us the information on you."

"How did the government know we were coming when we didn't know we were coming here?" I asked no one in particular. I suppose Tionne would call that a rhetorical question.

No one had an answer.

The woman laid it out for us. "We're organized now. The officers of two legions are loyal to us. We have many spies in the lower ranks of the security service. But we have not penetrated into the inner circle. Our alliance is fragile. We have many different factions. One thing unites us: the restoration of the monarchy. Things will get messy if the heir dies."

"Maybe even we fail," the boy put in.

"We know certain things about the inner circle. We know that only three high officials know where the heir is being kept. Only a small number of guards are used, from one of the most loyal units in the Security Service. We don't know the unit ID on them, we don't know where they are stationed, we don't know anything other than that. She could be anywhere. We know one of the girls survived. We don't know which one. It was a large family." The woman looked down at the empty desk. A warehouse dispatcher sat there during the day, logging cargo in and out, managing the droids, keeping track of employees. The dispatcher could tell me the location of any item in his warehouse.

"You can see our problem," the woman concluded.

"Do you know which officials know her location?" Rothers asked.

"No," the boy replied. "Only that three do know. Obviously, one of them is the Regent, but he's almost untouchable. We also know that any information pertaining to the heir, anything the Surveillance Service learns, is sent to these three first."

Rotherron looked at me. "I happen to know a computer slicer. She's also a talented Jedi Knight."

I smiled. "It'll be a closed system, with limited access at only a few locations around the city."

"We've thought of that," the boy replied. "But the risk is too great. These centers are hidden in residential buildings, office highrises, everywhere, and they have extreme security. We did an experiment at one. There are guards at the location. There are roving patrols that stop in randomly to check the place. Any alarm will get an immediate response from a rapid reaction team of usually four armed men. A second, larger unit is dispatched even before the rapid reaction team arrives. So there are two fecking waves of armed men to overcome while processing the slice. Last, the node's access will be cut the moment any trouble's detected at the location. There's no way to succeed. Even if we could, we'd then have to kidnap one of the officials, which is another major operation. Getting the information out of the official is no problem. Not if you mind a little screaming. But getting to that point is almost impossible."

"That will not happen. We are Jedi. There will be no torture. There will be no revenge killings. Do I make myself understood?" Rotherron glanced around the room. Eventually everyone agreed, even the boy. Rothers looked at me. "The Force reveals its intentions only a small piece at a time."

I nodded. Those around us were puzzled by the comment. I explained it to them. "Sometimes the Force leads us to people who need our help. Sometimes the Force leads us to people who can help us. I have the tools we need in a hidden memory segment on my

datapad. I've used them before." I shared a glance with Rothers. "I can do this."

— ◇ —

They never introduced themselves. Maybe it was the mindset of a clandestine organization — more likely it was the fear in them. We were discussing the details of our little raid on the government's computer system.

"But what about the security already in the building? What about the first responders? Sure we can slow up the main response, but what about all these other guys?" the boy asked.

Rotherron smiled at him. "They won't be a problem." She looked at me. "Trust me in this. I've been Jaden's friend since we were Initiates."

"Several of us should go with her," the woman said in support of the boy's suggestion.

Rothers had a hunch how my little intrusion would go. Being around Future Path Jedi was occasionally irritating. No, it was infuriating. It's like being in a tight place and the girl behind you says, "Don't bump your head," and you bump your head.

"You saw how high my friend can jump," Rothers replied. "Can you jump that high? We Jedi are very good at . . ." She paused for a second to think of the right way to put it. "We're good at Escape and Evasion. Jaden doesn't intend on fighting it out with the entire Security Service. Can we get back to the plan? This isn't our first surprise party."

"Don't worry, we started our training when we were girls —" I began.

"You're still girls!" the boy replied to that.

"Am not," I snapped back. "I'm nineteen standard. Rothers is a year older than me."

"When Jaden was fifteen years old, she defeated a team of Trandoshan mercenaries sent to kill Senator Leia Organa Solo. When I was sixteen, I saved nineteen crash survivors from drowning. When I was seventeen, I fought off waves of assassin droids trying to kill a reform politician on the Outer Rim."

I turned to Rothers. "I didn't know you knew about that."

"Bekkad told us about it a month after we got there. When a teenage human girl is adopted by the Solo family and is a foster sister to the grand master of our order, it gets around, Jay."

I blushed. I don't blush that often.

Rothers turned to the conspirators. "Enough of this. We are Jedi. Trust us. Things will move very fast after the actions tonight. You need to focus on getting yourselves ready for what comes next. You will need to spread the word that the young queen is free, once we return her to you. We can't fight the war for you. Get ready."

That sobered them up. They were quiet after that. Rotherron told them how we'd do it.

— ◇ —

SecChief walked into the command center. He made it a habit of spending part of every night there, ever since the riots. It was another way of keeping his mind busy. The city was on the edge of something. It was his job to dull that edge, to turn back change. He was good at it.

The command center was in the basement of what had been the presidential compound. The Regent had given the royal palace to "the people," which meant in practical terms that it had been shuttered up and abandoned. He planned on its demolition at some point in the future. The ancient Sky Ramp had been closed. Leave it all abandoned for a few years, let it be ignored by the population so when it was torn down, it would make no impact. There was just

enough residual affection in the people for the royal family that the girl had to be kept alive. Soon that would pass, too. SecChief didn't think about her. He avoided any thought about those he arrested, those who were imprisoned. It wasn't his job to think about their futures.

The armored lift shaft door opened onto the command center. Curved control stations made a half circle around an immense holoprojector. Behind the men at the control stations was a raised area with seats for their bosses. That was where SecChief paced, watching police reports and live feed from security cameras and surveillance droids.

"All quiet tonight, sir," one of his subordinates told him when he entered.

"Good. Let us try to keep it that way." He took the dataslate the man handed him and inspected the night's events. Operators from Special Services had made only a few arrests that night. He nodded to the man and handed the slate back. He took a seat. "Let's start with the arrests in progress."

Windows opened up in the holodisplay. They showed live video feed from the surveillance remotes that hovered around every operator. In this case, they showed a townhouse in the southwest quadrant, one of many along the street. There wasn't much fuss about the operation. A Bithian was arrested for running an anti-government holonet site. The night went like that. SecChief watched policemen chase a gang of youths who had been spray painting pro-royalty slogans on walls. Somehow, a few arrests for deathstick got into the video mix. Not much. The night dragged on.

"The comlink to police substation 9811 has gone down."

"Give us the security camera feed from nearby cameras."

Windows popped open to fire and mayhem. Masked figures with blaster weapons stitched the night in red lines. A blue Twi'lek female gave them their orders.

"The commandos!" one of the controllers said.

"What's at that police station?" SecChief asked.

"Dissidents from a recent arrest cycle are being held there for processing," another controller said after consulting his display.

"We caught someone they didn't want us to catch. Activate the major response unit. I want these New Republic commandos eliminated. They've showed themselves. Now is our chance. Bring the stand-by operators into this, too."

The cameras were taken out by blaster fire. A random thought flashed across SecChief's mind: why hadn't they done that at the start of the raid?

They were blind to the action at the police substation, so the controllers switched the audio/visual feed from the operator remotes on the way to the scene. It was a few minutes before the responders began to arrive in the little plaza in front of the substation. They began to receive blaster and repeater fire from the broken windows. The operators contained those inside. Big armored hover-carriers arrived at last. Heavily armored men and combat droids poured out and began their assault on the building.

"We have a report from data node 9804. A roving patrol has found the two in-house operators unconscious and unresponsive."

"Switch over!" SecChief knew then that he had been had. All available units for that sector were at the substation. The windows opened on the surveillance feed from four lightly armed operators. It had been a long time since he had faced professionals. He didn't expect that the two in-house operators put up much a fight. They weren't part of any response team, they were just glorified night watchmen. SecChief listened to the whispered voices of the roving patrol.

"We found the in-house data specialist. He was unconscious and unresponsive in the break room, almost as if he had fallen asleep

over his java tea. We are clearing bottom up, we are on the stairs to the second floor hallway. No one on the first floor."

"Is that node active?" SecChief asked one of his staff in the command center.

One of them checked the activity logs for that node. "It was a moment ago sir. The logs says it was a routine data backup. "

"Cut the node. Luck is with us, they haven't started their slice yet."

The four men on the holo vid crept up the stairs. The hallway looked like any normal hallway in an upper-class townhouse, which is what node 9804 once was. They went to the first set of double doors. Two jerked them open while two went in. The lights were on, as they should be. It was another office with lots of computer terminals and a holoprojector on a table. Nothing. They went across the hallway, pleasant warm light from antique light fixtures swinging overhead gave the action an artificial calm. Another office. They walked on the white and red checkered tiles of the hallway floor. One of the operators reached for the old door handle of the one of the two doors. The light coming from under the door went out. The door was jerked open from the inside and the operator closest to the door was . . . sucked into the room. The door closed. There was no sound.

The other three charged into the darkened room. There were shouts, screams, and grainy night vision feed from one of the remotes. A flash and it was destroyed. Two of the remotes were still in the hallway. The doors closed. The light from under the door came back on.

"Switch to the police substation."

Surveillance remotes with the entrance team showed a big hole in the back wall. "There are no opposing forces inside the substation, sir," a controller reported. "The policemen have been bound and are in the holding cells. All the dissidents are gone."

"Pull out the response teams and redirect to node 9804, soonest!"

"Yes, sir!"

— ◇ —

The entrance team waited outside the big double doors. No clue as to who was in there had been offered by the video recordings from the roving patrol who had gone inside. They had shown only chaos and static. The heavily-reinforced entrance team outside those antique doors tensed themselves, ready, almost wishing for the suspense to be over, for something to come through those doors. SecChief and the other supervisors in the command center felt it, too. An expectancy of some revelation was on them all. It was almost a dread. The feeling deepened. SecChief and his staff stared through open holodisplay windows at the distant doors. The operators and their accompanying remotes shifted slightly, wanting the best shot. Their little droid remotes hovered over their heads. Then the sound came to them. They heard a whoosh, followed by an electric hum. The sound wasn't loud. It lay there in the background.

SecChief heard one of the operators say: "What's that sound?"

The faint noise came from the other side of the old stained Weega wood doors.

One of the door handles began to turn. Just the tiniest movement, the handle turned and the doors gently, softly opened. It was such an ordinary thing.

Their concentration was so intense, time seemed to slow. She stepped into the hallway as if going to a party. A tall athletic human girl stepped out among them. She wore slacks and a dark gray vest. But every eye was locked on what she held in her right hand. She held a sword of glowing golden fire.

SecChief knew that the operators shouted at her to submit, but later he could not remember their words. He watched transfixed at the images pouring into the operations room.

The girl punched out with her free hand. An invisible fist slammed into the operators standing around her. An operator went flying into a wall. Another was hammered up into the air. One crashed into the ceiling. The others fired. Red blaster bolts streamed around her — and she danced. The golden sword swirled and spiraled in arcs around her as she spun and jumped. Men screamed as their own fire came back at them. SecChief blinked. She was among his men, smashing heads with her elbows, her kicks sent men flying — and that great golden sword moved as she did, cutting weapons in half, chopping remotes out the air, reflecting blaster bolts — its deep hum dominating everything.

The last remote was slashed out of the air by her sword. The feed from the hallway went dead.

SecChief jerked in startlement when her sword flashed against the remote. "Switch to the men outside."

The display windows came up, showing a dark street. Men clustered around their land speeders and armored transports. Lights were trained on the entrance.

This time it was over in the blink of an eye. The doors blew out as if ripped away by giant hands. The girl flashed out. She ran up the angled front of a repulsor transport and jumped up into the night sky . . . she never came down. She vanished into the night sky.

"Search nearby buildings! Now! Disperse into S/D mode!" SecChief shouted. His men at the scene scattered in pairs and four-man teams. He waited.

Nothing. People were routed from their beds. Offices were ransacked. There was no news for forty-five minutes. They found a roof door forced, but that was impossible. No human could jump four stories into the air. It was impossible. But something

whispered at his mind. "Copy all feed from the incident to a dataspikes, please," he ordered.

It was done in moments. A subordinate handed him the dataspikes. He slipped it into a pocket and left.

— ♦ —

That was how they perceived me. I was a mystery, an enigma to them. They expected a New Republic commando. That was an understandable explanation to those who had forgotten the reality of the Force.

### 3. Silly Old Stories

SecChief knew the old man would be in his office. The old man's wife had died a couple years ago. His children were long since grown and had their own families. The old man had the great rotting pile of the old museum to himself at nights. He was so unimportant now, surveillance had been canceled a year ago. The old museum was just a short trip by speeder from the presidential compound. His pass card let him in. He walked in dark echoing empty halls past stuffed drexls and statues of ancient men. The best things were stolen during the riots. That's what the staff said.

The old man's office was down a side hallway. A desk piled high with ancient tomes and dataslates was toward the back of the room. Old wooden shelves were along the walls, piled with papers, books, and artifacts. Funny, the rioters had never touched the old man's office. But SecChief knew the old man was harmless, so let the matter drop. It was years ago. The old man and the remaining staff kept the museum clean, they put up displays to the Regent's brilliance, they did as they were told. Not like they had submitted, like they were waiting. A large circular table was in the center of the room. It held an old holoprojector at its center.

He was at his desk mumbling as he translated something from an old Beast Rider dialect into Standard. The Beast Riders plagued the regent. There weren't that many anymore. They refused to be controlled by the government. Go to burn a village, the village was deserted, almost as if they knew the army was coming. SecChief's men had checked for leaks and sympathizers. They didn't find one. Just luck, that had to be it.

"Hello, old friend," SecChief said.

The old man stood and stared over his books. "My former student has returned. You seek instruction?"

The SecChief moved to the table and inserted the dataspikes in the old holoprojector. "Would you look at this."

The old man came around his desk. His eyes watched as the recording they had made of me played out above the table. He watched as I jumped up into the night.

"What do you make of this, old friend?"

The old man did not move his head. He did not move at all for a moment. After the moment passed, he turned to his old student and spoke, choosing each word slowly, as if each one carried great weight in each syllable. There were tears coursing down his cheeks. "That is a Jedi Knight." He wiped the tears away with a hand.

The universe shuddered. Old legends learned in childhood came back into SecChief's head, things he had tried to unlearn, things he thought he had purged from his thoughts. He watched me as I paced toward his men. The old man reversed it, ran the segment forward and back again and again.

"She's so calm, there is no fear in her at all," the old man said as he stared at my face. "If only I could banish my fear so effectively!" The old man glanced at his former student. "That is a Jedi from the Old Days returned." They watched me fight. The old man sighed. "That I would see one again in my lifetime! What you see is a Jedi Knight at the height of her powers. This is not some attenuated administrator of a dying republic. She is as they once were in the old days, the all-or-nothing days, wild and free."

He blinked his old eyes when he looked at his former student. "Do you want to see another one like her? When the Regent ordered a purge of our history last year, I told him there was nothing to purge, it was all long gone. They looked, but they couldn't find a thing. They did not find one record of the royal family, not one artifact. I blamed it on the rioters. You remember the riots? It was

one of his excuses for the crackdown. You have your job to thank for it, don't you, my old student."

"You hid them."

"Yes." The old man fiddled with the controls of the holoprojector on the table. He stood back so SecChief could see. "Behold the Exile, who save us from the Sith 4000 years ago."

A window opened in the holodisplay, right next to the looped image of my combat. It was old grainy security camera feed from a long, long time ago. A young woman, alike in demeanor to me, ran down one of the long halls in the old Imperial Palace. She wore a brown robe. It swirled around her legs as she ran. She wore a simple white tunic and trousers underneath the robe. Armored Sith warriors came at her with blasters and vibroswords. She struck them down with the bright green lightblades that sprang up from her hands. She was a two-saber user, a practitioner of the shortsaber-saber technique. War beasts came at her. They lay down at her feet, subdued by her thoughts. She did the Shien dance just as I did. The old man cycled through the video files until he had us side-by-side. We spiraled about and moved in the same way, Shien, the Way of the Krayt Dragon, the Perseverance Form. He looped the images, so we spiraled before SecChief and the old museum director, again and again in the turns and steps of Shien. SecChief's eyes were held captive by our movements. A new thought, a terrible-seeming idea came into his mind just then, as he watched us dance the ancient sword kata. *I'm on the wrong side.* He heard the old man speak to him, but he did not hear the words. SecChief's eyes were captive to the images, and in them he saw a fusion of past and present, of the possibilities of life expand far away from his narrow vision.

Tears returned to the old man. He wiped them away once more. "They have returned to us at last. How I have longed all my long life to see them as they once were." He shifted his gaze to his former student. "I met two once, when I was young man, before the evil

days of the Empire. Kill them all and they will still be called back. You cannot oppose the will of the living universe. Not even the ruler of the galaxy could do that, and I doubt the Regent has that kind of power . . . ." He patted SecChief on the shoulder. "If you live through this, my old student, ask the Jedi to visit me. I would like to meet a Jedi again before I die." He smiled. "It's not a guaranteed thing."

"That the Jedi will succeed?"

"No, that you will survive."

— ◇ —

The Regent was old, but the will to power had not faded in him. The two new ones stood near him. The Regent had told SecChief that they were special operatives sent by an ally. They wore bland dark suits, but they were not bland men. SecChief could feel their hate. It spilled out of their eyes, leaked out of every pore of their bodies — hatred for the Regent, hatred for him, hatred for even the potted plants near the door to the hallway. He had been around hard men, but never hate like this.

"They are not commandos," he told the Regent. "I believe them to be Jedi Knights, as from the Old Days. They are very dangerous. Perhaps we should call up the army on a pretense. I would recommend that you spend a few days at your villa."

The two men in dark gray snickered.

The Regent smiled and waved at SecChief dismissively. "You exaggerate the danger, my friend. I have been assured by my two new aides that they pose no danger to us. My new aides are more than capable of defending us from such pretenders who hide behind ancient discarded words. Tomorrow, the girl will be dead and a new age will arise in Iziz."

SecChief would have argued with the Regent. He had done so in the past and turned the old man's mind. This time, this time an immense fatigue descended on his head. SecChief couldn't think clearly. His mind was buried in mud, unable to move. "Yes, sir," he said. He left. His airspeeder flew him to his apartment, high up in one of the new towers in central Iziz.

He came into the darkened place. The balcony door was open, the high cool air blowing lightly into the apartment. SecChief did not remember leaving the balcony door open. He crossed the darkened room to the door and closed it.

The girl from the surveillance feed stepped out from the shadows around the drapes. SecChief had to blink, at first he thought it was the Exile come back from the dead. No, it was the Jedi with the golden sword.

— ◇ —

"Hello," I said.

He did not run. The security chief just blinked his eyes. Then he recognized me. "Hello." He went over to a padded chair and sat down. "You have been ahead of me the entire time."

I sat down across from him. "One of my friends was a fighter pilot during the Civil War. He has a good expression for what you're feeling. I'm 'outside your performance envelope.'"

He nodded, but more to himself than to anything I said. He was at a crisis point. "I have been outplayed by a girl." He leaned back in his chair and looked at me. He expected me to kill him. Part of him wanted to die.

"I am a Jedi. A multitude stands with me. The Force is my strength. It guides me to those who need me, those who I need." I put my lightsaber back in its holster on my hip. "I did not come to kill you. I came to save you."

The word rang like a gong in his mind. It was the weight I put on it. "You know what I mean," I said. His mind whispered to me. "You maintained such an intricate, studied ignorance of the Regent and the oppressive government he constructed. You didn't want to know, but you weren't blind. The knowledge seeped in anyway, didn't it?"

He wasn't a coward. He continued to look me in the eye. "Yes," he answered.

"But there was no alternative. You had no faith that any dissident movement could succeed. Not one place to go to. So you stayed and did your job. You are very good at your job."

We were silent for a time.

"You cannot stay here," I told him. "Change is coming. I know a place where you will be welcome, but you have to decide for yourself if you want to go there. Your uncertainty will vanish there." I was telling him what Rotherron had foreseen. We had talked about the three who knew by secure comlink while she was in the police station. "Meaningful work awaits you there."

The despair he had kept buried had risen to his face. "What do I have to do to get there?"

"Tell me where she is."

He smiled, which startled me. "I thought you wanted something else all together. He has new bodyguards, they are men who hate. I thought you wanted him. They're going to kill her in the morning."

"Where is she?"

He told me.

— ◇ —

I borrowed the security chief's airspeeder. Rothers answered my comlink page.

"Yes?"

"I'm on my way. Are you ready? You'll have to come and get me. I can get into the place. But there will be lots of noise."

"I know, Jay. I'm getting them ready. There are darksiders involved here somehow."

"He told me that the Regent has two new bodyguards. Expect nastiness after we get her."

"Where, exactly, are you going?"

"He gave me directions, but he said that anyone from Iziz would know the place. 'Old Iron Prison,' he called it."

I heard her talk to someone. "Yes, we know where it is."

"You'll know when. See you after."

"See you after, Jay."

## 4. Show and Tell

The thin sad girl looked up at the warden. He was now wearing combat fatigues and body armor. A large SSK series blaster pistol was strapped to his hip. She knew this one, he was the one who had taken her parents away. She spoke, and as she did, the Force sang tiny whispers of hope into her mind. "You killed my parents and you have orders to kill me. Someone has come. Someone you did not expect. Someone your masters did not expect."

"How does she know about the commandos?" the warden's adjutant asked.

"They are not commandos," she replied. "They . . . glow. Release me and you will live. You think I will die, but you will all die if you don't let me go."

The warden's mind curled up in fear. The old legends of the powers of the royal family ran through his mind. "She's insane," he lied. "Pay her no mind." He pulled a small datapad from a pocket and read out loud. "Senena Kira, you have been judged guilty under Article Three of the Treason Law. Subsection two prohibits all appeals. As per subsection five, the sentence is death. We will now escort you to the place of execution." He nodded. His adjutant grabbed her by the shoulders and stood her up. The warden grasped her arm and marched her out of the cell. She stared in wonder at the high narrow halls they marched through. She had been in the cell so long, she had forgotten what anything else looked like. They were of the same rusty metal as her cell.

Thirty men escorted the warden and the girl through those tall narrow halls, the walls so close at times only two could walk side-by-side. The guards were at the front. The light emitting panels and tubes were old, so they walked in a yellow sunset of rust. They

turned corners, walked, turned more corners. She had been kept at the heart of their realm.

They were somewhere in the middle of their journey, along a long narrow corridor headed toward a corner into the outer area of the ancient prison. She had not walked fast enough, so the warden was now behind her, pushing her forward.

She stopped. He shoved at her. She refused to move. What is known, as terrible as it is, is sometimes less frightening than the unknown. Fear of me was in her mind.

"She's here! She's here!" the girl cried out.

Every eye turned back to look at her. The warden wrapped an arm around her neck and put his hand on his pistol.

"Who is?" he whispered in her ear, afraid for his life.

She was a Force-sensitive from a family of Force-sensitives. I had felt her untrained mind fearfully poking at me for the last couple minutes. She asked me a voiceless question. I answered. I opened my mind and showed her the Force. The vast pulse of the living universe wrapped itself around her injured soul.

She gasped for breath, then she screamed: "The Jedi are here!" With that, the fear went out of her forever. The Force was in her, a part of her now, and it had brought hope back to her young mind. "The Jedi!"

Every eye shifted back toward the front. Though the Regent had attempted to rewrite the history of Iziz, he could not erase the myths that swirled in its citizens. That word, it called up ancient hope and fear. One name summed it up. One person held it all. One woman held it all. They said she defeated an army of Sith single-handedly. They said she could throw lightning from her hands. They said that demons and ghosts fought by her side. They said she was the last of the Jedi. They said she was the first of the Jedi. She was known as The Exile. Awe washed over them, even though they did not want it to. Their eyes went forward. Jedi.

There I was.

They stood frozen, waiting. My lightsaber popped and hissed as its golden blade burst into life. Its insistent hum filled the narrow space.

She smiled. She plucked an unguarded thought from my mind. "That is Jaden Korr, the Jedi Assassin, run away or you are all dead men!"

"Kill her!" the warden screamed, his fear at the back of his throat.

My long blade licked out in a gleaming golden arc, severing the arms of the two men who stood before me. It came back up in a reverse stroke to sever their heads.

The men behind them screamed as the heads sailed through the air. The group pushed and shoved at each other as each one tried to get their blaster rifles on me.

The Force coiled itself into me. I struck, using *the Fist* technique. The air shook at the blow. The hammer of the Force slammed into the front ranks. Men were blown off their feet, cast into the air — a couple cracked into the ceiling high over our heads. Then I *jumped* through the falling men.

The warden drew his pistol and put it to the girl's head.

My body flat in a dive, I pushed off a soldier's head as I dove over them, my golden blade a spear held before me.

He looked up and saw the golden point. It slid into his heart, right next to the girl's head.

I whipped the blade out of his chest and spun as I landed, hacking at the crowd of soldiers turning to engage me. Two more fell as my blade passed through their bodies. My blade cut upwards through another dark gray uniform as I crouched and sprang forward. Men screamed and died. A head left its body. My mind slammed them back to the floor. I brought my lightsaber back to the right in a spinning cut that chopped down the first man to stand up.

"Get behind me," I told her calmly.

"Yes, Jaden," she replied. She scooped up two pistols from the metal floor as she did so — one for each hand.

The survivors began to fire from the far end of the corridor. My blade spun in the ancient kata of Shien, reflecting the red bolts away from us. The girl crouched behind me and returned fire with both pistols.

My mind was taken out of my body just then, to another time, another place in this immense city. A bright blue sky was over my head. I was on a tall bridge made of pearly-white stone. It was the Sky Ramp, the way of royalty to the great castle in Iziz. Sith commandos in shiny chromium armor fired at me. My lightsabers, one a shoto shortsaber in my left hand, danced the Shien dance as Bao-Dur crouched behind me and returned fire, a pistol in each hand.

The Sith fell, their reflective armor filled with holes. My companions and I sprinted into the nearby blockhouse. "Bao," I ordered, "slice the palace security systems. See if you can get those shield barriers down."

"No problem, General."

Canderous guarded the door, giant and blocky in his Mandalorian armor.

I laughed.

Atton turned to look at me. "This is funny? Jedi have a strange sense of humor."

"Someone is looking at us through my eyes. I can look back at her, too." I smiled.

"Kreia's tricks?" he asked.

"No. The one behind my eyes is just a girl, but she is already a powerful Jedi Knight."

"Is she here to help us?" Atton asked.

I laughed again. "Oh, no, she hasn't been born yet."

"Crazy woman," Canderous muttered from the doorway.

"If I'm crazy, what does that make you for following me?"

"I don't understand," Atton said.

I looked my love in the eye. "Atton, there is no time in the Force. I will not see her in this life, yet I have met her before. I have stood by her side in many battles, and I will again in her future. She stands by my side now. We who serve the Force are One. We have things to do now, she and I."

I was back in my body. My hands still guided my lightsaber. Red bolts hummed by my head. I leapt into the last of them, spinning as I landed, my golden blade slicing them down like ripe wheat to the harvester. None were left alive. The thin girl had correctly foreseen their end.

"Come on, Senena." I knew her name, too. "Your people await liberation."

She ran to me, the two blasters still clutched in her hands.

"Rothers is coming for us, isn't she?"

"Yes. And you haven't met her yet. Use her full name when you meet her for the first time. It's Rotherron. All right?" I smiled as if we had met at a birthday party. We ignored the bodies on the floor.

"Yes, Jaden."

We ran down long rusty metal halls, my new little friend and I.

"I'm going to have this place torn down," she told me.

— ◇ —

"My name's Epple," the teenage boy whispered to Rotherron. He extended his hand.

Rothers had the same dread of shaking hands that I did, but she took the boy's hand.

The middle-aged woman sitting on the other side of Epple extended her hand. Rothers shook it. "I am Lanl."

"Hello, Lanl. Hello, Epple. I am Rotherron Ajjerosetiron."

Names came out of everyone else in the back of the delivery van just then. "I'm Tew." "My name is Wes." "I am Bial." And on around. Rothers had to shake all their hands. She caught a cold two weeks later and blamed them for it.

Epple explained the operation. "Several utility service technicians work for us. They'll blow the landlines to the prison when we attack. One of the vans has a jammer. We'll have time to get her out, but just barely. Once the attack becomes known at the presidential palace, aeroassault units will be dispatched."

So as to not cause too much concern among the guards behind the fence, all the vans and trucks and speeders containing the strike team circled around the neighborhood, waiting the word.

She was in the middle of shaking the hand of a Bithian called Grittemye when the girl's joy invaded her mind. She looked at the boy Epple. "Jaden has found her. Now is the time."

He spoke words into a comlink.

— ◇ —

There were two guards staring down a corridor. One went over to a rusty wall, sat down, and leaned against it. He was asleep when we came up on him. The other one continued to stare down the rusty corridor. The warden had gone down there a few minutes ago. He had heard faint screams and distant blaster fire. Nothing after that. He turned to his companion. "This is no time for a nap. The warden should have been back by now."

He saw me at the cross-corridor. I lifted him up in the air with *grip* and throttled him into unconsciousness. Young Senena watched me with gleaming eyes. I eased his unconscious body down gently next to his sleeping friend.

"Why not put both of them to sleep?"

"Mind Trick only works on some people," I replied.

"I want to kill them," Senena told me. "I want to kill them both. I want to do that so badly." Her young hands tightened on the pistols. "I know that's wrong, though, isn't it?"

"Yes." I took off their belts and trussed up their arms. Senena picked up their blasters, unloaded them, then threw them back down the corridor. "Jedi often have to take a life, but it is only out of necessity. If we can avoid killing, we will. And we never kill in anger. That is a way into darkness."

She looked up at me. "There was only joy in you back there. Where was your fear? Weren't you afraid? I want someone to teach me how banish fear. Will you teach me?"

"Yes. There aren't very many of us yet, so you will have many teachers. Each of us will come here when time allows. You will see many Jedi."

"They will all be welcome here." She thought for a moment. "I wish to be a Jedi. I don't know how I will accomplish this, but I will be a Jedi. Perhaps when I am older, I can pass the throne to another and follow the path of a Jedi in earnest." She acted as if she were listening. "I can hear Rotherron out there. We have to make some noise in here, don't we?"

I smiled. "If you feel up to it."

"I do!"

The alert siren began to hoot.

"That was easy," she said.

I frowned. "I guess they found all the bodies at the landing pad on the roof."

"You need to be neater in your work, Jaden."

She laughed as I glared at her.

— ◇ —

An Aqualish tusker's speeder had broken down near the perimeter fence along the north side of the ancient prison. Its rusty metal walls towered over the fence and the little speeder. The sun had not risen high enough to dispel the prison's shadow.

Two guards made jokes through the fence at the tusker's expense. The Aqualish made rude sounds in reply.

"Can't fix it, you big-toothed dummy?" He turned to his partner. "We had Aquassy tuskers for neighbors years ago. A more pathetic life form I can't imagine. They break everything they own."

A siren began to sound from inside the prison.

"Escape attempt?" one asked the other.

The tusker tapped the translation badge on his chest. "Stupid soldiers," the device translated. "I'd run away if I were you." The Aqualish ran away.

"I wonder why he said that?"

The speeder exploded.

An amazing assortment of vehicles poured through the breach in the wire: repulsorlift delivery vans, commuter speeders, a big-wheeled trash hauler, personal land speeders, a big cargo hauler, and even a couple swoop bikes. People ran from every quarter of the little plaza toward the hole. Merr-Sonn guided missiles from rooftops and upstairs windows hit the nearest automated turrets. The flash and roar of explosions surrounded the place. The front gate was under the bombardment of incendiary grenades and homemade bombs. The red lines of blaster fire filled the air.

Rothers jumped out of the back of the delivery van, a blue blade springing up from her saberstaff. She reflected away a few stray blaster bolts. "Move forward!" she shouted. "The Force is with us, we cannot fail!" She *jumped* into the morning sky.

— ◇ —

They came charging down the corridor, their blaster weapons firing at us. We ran down a side passage, past lines of empty cells. The entire prison had been put aside just for Senena.

"How many do you think there are?" Senena shouted.

"All of them?" I suggested. I holstered my lightsaber.

We were momentarily out of their sight at another corner. I turned in front of her and bent to grab her around the waist. Her hands were still clutching the blaster pistols, so she wrapped her arms around my neck. I *jumped* up to land on the side of the wall nearest the ceiling. She kept quiet and did not move as I closed my eyes in concentration. I had never tried *wall-clinging* while holding another person. It was harder than it looked.

"They've passed by now," she whispered in my ear.

I dropped us down to the floor. She looked at my face, little drops of sweat popping out from the concentration it took to keep us up on the wall. "It's not easy, is it?"

I smiled. "Nothing worthwhile never is. The Force is ever and always our ally, but using it properly takes great discipline."

She was serious. "I have that in me, I think."

We started to run again. Rusty walls and cell doors were on either side of us. There were shouts behind us. We went around another corner, where I pushed her against the wall. We waited. I drew my lightsaber.

"Don't shoot me by mistake, Senena," I told her.

"I won't."

I looked down at her.

"I promise, I won't."

They were almost on us. I triggered my lightsaber and positioned the blade over my head, Strong Style. Three soldiers ran by us. I cut the last one down from behind with an overhead cut. My feet slipped forward on the floor as my saber came up and around in a

horizontal cut. The second soldier's head left his body. I stepped forward and stabbed the third one through the heart.

Senena stepped out behind me and shot the two soldiers at the far end of the corridor. I cartwheeled over her head and used *speed* to flash down to the hallway intersection. She came running behind me. I dropped forward into a lunge, the golden blade spearing another soldier as he turned the corner. My body sprang up and spun around his stilling falling body to face down the cross corridor. Eight more soldiers were running forward between the rust-streaked walls. These weren't guards, someone had re-enforced the prison's usual contingent. My mind picked up the falling body next to me and *threw* it down the hallway. It slammed into the soldiers with a wet smack.

Senena shot the ones who stood up. "Are we there yet?"

"Not until you see Rotherron's head-tails."

— ◇ —

Rothers spiraled down out of the early morning sky. She felt it, too, even from the soldiers she faced. The Jedi had made their mark on this culture and it echoed in their minds still. Pure awe. In the case of the soldiers raising their weapons toward her, awe and superstitious fear crawled in their heads. The blue blades of her saberstaff moved in the patterns of Shien as she fell down among them.

She cut into them as she landed among them. The forward elements of the rebel forces blanched with horror at the sight. Her double blades spun through the soldiers and left only scattered parts behind. Screams rose up among the soldiers and their front ranks ran away. A hovertank rolled around the edge of the iron wall of the prison, its turret rotating to lock onto Rotherron. Red and blue blaster bolts made patterns around her. She rolled to the side as it

came toward her and struck out with her hand. The Force was with her, it picked up the side of the tank and flipped it over onto its back. She leapt over that. Her saberstaff flew from her hands in a powerful spinning arc that cut down the soldiers at a power blaster emplacement. It snapped back into her hands as she landed.

An assault speeder curved around the wall and headed toward her. Epple and the rebels were running up around the overturned tank. Rothers used *the Fist* on the speeder. Epple was nearby, calling for the rocket launchers when he saw it. He hadn't seen Rothers flip the hovertank. An invisible barrier smashed into the front of the assault speeder. It flipped. When it crashed down, the tibanna gas cylinders for the main heavy blaster cracked and exploded in a ball of flame.

Rothers jumped through the flame. The Regent's soldiers on the other side saw a creature of myth fly out of the explosion, a blue thunderbolt clutched in her hand. The soldiers at the front screamed and tried to run away. They crashed into the reserves running up from the other side of the prison and the other hovertank. The confusion gave Epple the time he needed to get his rocket men set up. They opened up on the hovertank and the other reserve vehicles. A flash of explosions and the remains of the Regent's men scattered into the neighborhood. Days later, Epple began to wonder about the end of the fight. Was it just an accident that the assault speeder exploded? Was it just coincidence that Rotherron had been where she was needed at exactly that moment?

— ◇ —

Finally we were out of that maze of narrow corridors. We stepped into the long main hallway of the place and began to walk toward the immense doors in the distance. I turned around once, my lightsaber up and ready, but the distant figures fled into the side

corridors. All was rust and yellowed light in this place. "I'll help you tear it down," I said.

She looked up at me and smiled. A little tear crawled down her cheek.

I saw into her mind. "It's all right for Jedi to cry. We do it all the time."

"I think I'll be crying a lot once this is over." She pulled the image of the great temple from my mind. "I wish I could go to Yavin 4 and live in the Massassi Temple. My duties lie here now. But someday, I will go there and live among my fellow Jedi."

"I believe you."

Guardrooms flanked the hallway just inside the giant iron doors. An open barred gate lay in front of us. Men came out from the guardrooms as we passed through the gate. Senena raised her pistols. I put a hand on her shoulder.

"Their spirit is gone." I heard explosions outside. "If you hide in the inner corridors, maybe you'll survive," I shouted at them. They threw down their blaster pistols and ran back into the interior of the prison. Superstitious fear was in their eyes when they passed me and stared at my golden lightsaber blade. We listened to the sound of their feet and they ran away. I turned to the vast metal door. "I wish I had remembered to ask them how to open it."

Senena giggled.

— ◇ —

Epple was beside Rotherron outside the tall metal doors. "Bring up the explosives," he shouted to someone behind them. "We need to get out of here. Our spotters have seen aerolifters with reinforcements incoming. They'll be here in a couple minutes."

Rothers smiled. A giant hammer slammed against the inside of the door. It rang like a bell. Again and again. Epple stared at the

tall doors. One more giant blow and a small sally door in the lower corner of the tall doors sprang open. Senena stepped out into the free air and smiled. "Hi Rotherron!"

— ◇ —

We were swept away in every sort of vehicle. It was quick and speedy, just as they had arrived, only their queen was with them. A bright warm yellow glow sprouted up in the Force and began to creep slowly through the city. The relief troops arriving by aerolifters and assault airspeeders only found the bodies of the slain.

## 5. There Are Always Complications

But the Sith had the Regent's ear. Senena and Epple knew by the time they returned to the warehouse. Roundups had begun in the neighborhood around the East City Stadium. Entire blocks of apartments had been cleared of people. Soldiers forced them into the stadium. Nearby schools were emptied and their students and teachers marched into the stadium. Epple and Lanl immediately began deploying elements of Resistance into the area. A statement from the Regent played over and over again on every one of the vast city's media outlets. A pretender had declared herself the new queen. Her supporters had been arrested and were under sentence of death unless she presented herself to the proper authorities. They would be spared if she turned herself in.

A tear trickled down Senena's face. "What would a Jedi do, Jaden? I think I know. Should I turn myself over to them?"

"Oh, no, you're not," I replied, maybe a little too loudly. Everyone looked at me. The Force is love, is the pulse of the life of the universe. It is also resolute. Its strength flowed into Rothers and myself. "You do not know the true power of the Force, yet, you're just a kid. Do not despair. Rothers will lead a group to free the captives in the stadium."

"No, Jaden. I must go, too."

"To fight, not to surrender. It was a lot of trouble getting you out of that prison. I'm not doing it again."

"Yes, Jaden. I'm going to fight with my people to free the hostages." She hesitated. "I hear what you're saying, deep down." She tapped herself on the chest. "Here, now. I won't ever quit."

Rothers looked at me. "Senena understands. She will come with us."

I nodded, somewhat relieved. "Stay hidden until I send word. The Regent wishes to take Senena himself. SecChief failed him. He has to oversee this himself. Without him, the hostage situation can be resolved a little more easily." I pulled out my datapad. For necessity's sake, every datapad used by a Jedi has had its tracking and location functions disabled. "Senena, you will have to make a call first."

"Is lying permitted to a Jedi?" she asked.

"Yes," Rotherron told her. "Deception is a powerful ally when used in the service of the Force."

"Jedi lie," Epple said. "Who knew?"

"Where's the, ah, woman?"

She stepped up from behind me. "I'm here. My name's Lanl."

I gave her a tiny bow of greeting. "Lanl. Um, didn't you mention units of the military who are with you?"

She smiled. "Good ideas are not solely the province of the Jedi, Mistress. I have already contacted them. One of them is nearby. He wishes to see the queen."

"I wish to meet him." She looked at me and reached for my datapad. "We have a deadline," Senena said.

I handed it to her. "I know," I replied. "I have to build something. It'll only take a moment or two to build."

"Will it last long enough?" Rothers asked.

"Long enough. I'll also need a girl to come with me, near to Senena's age." I smiled at a thought. "Pardon, I should have said Queen Senena."

Epple spoke up. "My girlfriend Quenai was hurt in the fighting. She can still walk, though. I'll go get her."

"Where's an electronics shop? And I'll need five comlink transceivers." I patted one of the pockets on my vest. The small spot soldering tool and my tiny pliers were still in their places.

"Make the call, Senena," Rothers told her.

Quenai's arm was in a sling. The hand in the sling was heavily bundled in bacta-infused bandages. I could see into her mind. She was sad about losing two of her fingers. She saw me watching her. Quenai shook her young head, her loose braids rustling about her ears. "We didn't have time to look for my fingers."

I had the device in a shoulder bag someone had given me. The old light bars along the upper edges of the storm sewer didn't give out much light. I felt right at home. My boots splashed through puddles. "I know how you feel. I once had my ear cut off. A good friend found it and wrapped it in a bacta-infused cloth. They do great things these days with vat-grown flesh. Maybe a transplant?"

"I don't know." She frowned. She stumbled over something. "How do you see so well down here?"

"I grew up in a place like this. It's just like home, except for the damp."

We walked on through the gloom.

"Why did the Regent choose to meet down here?"

"So no one will see. He plans to kill the Queen immediately."

She got a little afraid.

I laughed. "No, I'm not going to let him kill you. You'll stay around the bend until it's done."

"If I'm not pretending to be the Queen, what am I doing here?"

I thought about how to explain it to her.

"What do I do?"

I could answer that question. "You stay behind. If I don't come back out, run away."

"Why won't you come back out?"

"If I fail, I'll be dead."

"Oh." She paused. "Don't let that happen. I can help. I'm a good shot with a blaster pistol." She patted the gun on her belt. "I'm left handed, so when they shot off the fingers on my right hand, it didn't affect my ability to shoot."

"Thank you, Quenai." I thought of a way to explain it. "There is one with the Regent who has Force powers. Not all Force users are in the light."

"The Regent found a Sith Lord to serve him?"

That startled me a little. "How do you know that term?"

"I've read all the proscribed books on ancient history. I know all about the Sith Wars," she said proudly.

"Then you'll have to teach me. I'm ignorant about a lot of things. I can sense him from afar, just as he can sense you and me now. I don't think he's a Sith Master. I think he's an Adept." I smiled. "It will be a challenge. The Regent brought a squad of his bodyguards, too."

"Then I should go with you."

"No. I'll need you to get back to the others to tell them, if I fail."

She frowned again. She didn't like that idea much. "If you say so."

"I say so."

It was a lie. Rothers would know if I died. I didn't want Quenai to die, too.

— ◇ —

Rothers bowed to the Legion Commander.

He in turn knelt at the feet of Senena. He put his head to the permacrete floor. "I am Naemel Olderest, Commander of the 21st Light Armored Legion. I swear my life to your service, my Queen."

Senena looked at Rotherron. Rothers nodded to her. Both of them had felt it. He was speaking the truth.

Rothers saw something in his mind. "You met her father, didn't you?"

The CO stayed on his knees, but he raised his upper body back up. "Yes, Madam Jedi. When I was a child. My father took me with him on the day of his promotion. The King himself gave my father his commission." He looked at Senena. "Your father shook my hand."

"I shake yours." Senena extended her hand. The man took it.

Rotherron knew then that Senena would be a powerful Jedi someday. The young girl had seen through the Force just what to say to weld this man to her.

He stood. He looked around at them. "I know what to do."

"I will fight by your side today," Senena told him. "I will not be put back behind the others when my people are in danger."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Knowing your father, I would expect no less."

— ◇ —

We stopped near a bend. The Regent was very close to us. I held up my hand for silence and put the shoulder bag down on the dry curb of the tunnel. She watched me as I zipped open the bag and reached in and switched it on. I had wired fifteen comlinks around a simple interconnect board. At high output, the transceiver circuits in the comlinks would last about forty-five minutes. I leaned over after I stood and whispered in her ear. "It will last long enough. Stay here. If I'm not back soon, I want you to run away. Promise me."

"I promise, Jaden, but that won't happen."

I smiled and walked forward. She watched me walk around the corner. The tunnel proper went by it. It was a large, barrel-vaulted space, with stone walkways along the sides. There was a stairway on

the back which led up to the surface. The walls and ceiling were made of heavy old bricks. It was both an access point for maintenance and an overflow chamber in case the flow backed up in the tunnel proper. Eight men waited for me there. The Regent was the old one. The tall one next to him was the worry. The rest were a nuisance.

He knew when he saw me. The others put their weapons on me.

"The Queen will not be coming today." The Force exploded around me.

Quenai heard what she thought was a bomb going off and came running.

— ◇ —

Rotherron looked at Senena. "Jaden has engaged the Regent's men." She smiled at the young queen. "Do not fear. Jaden endures, that is her special gift. You will see her again at the end of this day."

Senena turned to Commander Olderest. "It's time. The Regent will be too busy to give any orders."

Rothers smiled. "You will be a great leader, Senena. You will bring peace and prosperity to your people. There is one I must face alone. He is in the arena. Just as Jaden now battles the dark side, so must I. We will see you soon, young Queen." She shifted her gaze to Commander Olderest. "You will know when. I'll make a loud noise."

*Speed* snapped into her body and she was suddenly gone. The side door of the troop carrier was open. There were gasps of astonishment from those outside.

Snipers were up on the rim of the stadium and some of the taller buildings around it. Troops loyal to the Regent were in the streets. Rothers walked toward them, and as she did, the Force enfolded her in its loving embrace. She remembered the day I taught it to her.

It was her turn to weed the garden that day. She never liked that, she hated to get dirty. She always claimed it was because of the aquatic nature of her species, but I didn't buy that for a second. I had seen too many twi'leks crawling around on Trash Mountain. So she wore coveralls and stout gloves, looking more like she was going to lube a Type 29 Earthmover than pulling a few helpless weeds and hoeing around the beet plants. This was just after my meeting with Teacher Yesh on Bakura, a week or so before Luke and Kyle sent me to cold Hoth. "Um, Rothers?"

"You want to grab a hoe and help out, Jay?"

"I, ah, I've just come from Master Luke. I talked it over with Master Kyle first. He sent me to Luke. Luke said I could teach it to you."

She looked up from where she was sitting on her knees in the weeds. "You want to teach me something?"

"I met this weird guy on Bakura while I was killing . . . they wouldn't give up, Rothers." A little tear trickled down my cheek.

Rothers stood up. "It's clones, Jay. They're hardcore, they don't give up. It had to be done. Luke told me about it. He said I should know, too, because I might face the same thing in the future. There were at least half a million sentients at risk. You had to do it."

"That's what everyone tells me. That's what Teacher Yesh told me at the time. He's one of the last of the Matukai. Seven Teachers and their students survived the Great Evil. He knows Luke. Some words passed between them, I don't know what, and Master Luke won't say. But Teacher Yesh said their 'disagreement' shouldn't taint his relations with other Jedi. He said if he can help us in the future, he would. Then he taught me this . . . thing. He said it could help us in tough situations. But, I'll have to show you. I'm not that good at it yet."

"Show me."

We found a quiet place away from the others, near the high green tops of the herbs that semi-crazy old woman Vima liked so much. Well, Master Hemish liked them too. They made me throw up. Everything makes me throw up. We sat down cross-legged across from each other. She watched as I closed my eyes. It took a couple minutes, but she suddenly cried out and jumped up. I had vanished from her sight. If she had been a droid, she would have been able to see me still. I reappeared in her mind and her sight. She sat back down. I repeated Teacher Yesh's words: "This is a lightside technique called 'Enfolding in the World' by the Matukai. Love of life and the Force is at its core. You call the Force forth to protect you from the eyes of enemies. Teacher Yesh told me a little about the Matukai before he taught me this technique. They are lightsiders, guardians, bodyguards, and . . . hunters. He had followed the Remie strike team through three systems before he caught them on Bakura. He was my ally in defeating them. This technique is useless against droids and surveillance technologies. But it is very strong against living things, against those filled with hate."

"Against the Sith," Rothers said.

"Yes."

So she walked through their lines and into the stadium. The one she sought was a burning red fire up top in one of the uppermost suites of the stadium. A Jedi would have been on the perimeter. The trappings of power and privilege drew Sith like insects to honeydew.

She walked briskly up the interior ramps, past soldiers and security personnel in black suits. Security remotes caught her image, but the soldiers in the stadium's security center didn't think anything of it. After all, the soldiers she passed paid her no mind, so she must be a special agent. Rothers paused by a set of ammo crates at one of the upper landings and snagged a couple thermal

dets. She stuffed them in her pocket. A small boy was being escorted with his father into the stadium. He stared at Rothers. Rothers winked at him, her head-tails curling around her shoulders.

A long curving hallway was behind the luxury suites. At one end was a small staircase to the roof of the suites. She went up that. She *choked* the two soldiers at the top into unconsciousness, then moved over until she was right over the proper balcony. She smiled as she sensed the end of my fight.

Her hand pulled a det out and flipped the safety clip. A flip of her wrist sent the thing up in the air. She punched the thing with a focused blow from her mind. It whizzed away on a ballistic arc toward the e-web portable blaster turret on the rim of the stadium. Her hand sought out the second det. She launched it. Rothers had judged the angles right. Both hit at the same time. Boom! Big red flames shot up from the top of the stadium. She leapt down on the balcony under her.

— ◇ —

Both Senena and Commander Olderest were watching the stadium from the mouth of an alley. They saw the explosions. "Now," the commander whispered into his comlink.

— ◇ —

The door to the sky suite was open. She walked from the balcony into the shadowed interior unnoticed by those inside. These were the most trusted of the Regent's men, senior officers in their uniforms, politicians in suits, and a large number of men in black suits. SecChief should have been there, but he was with us now and hidden away. They were in heated argument with the newest of the

Regent's advisors, a tall man in a dark suit, with a cruel face. Sith. She walked right up behind him.

"Widespread fear muddles the Force, doesn't it? It makes things difficult to see, even for a Sith."

A tall athletic twi'lek woman appeared in their minds. The rest jumped back and snatched at their weapons. They moved to surround her. A couple of them didn't move. They had heard the ancient word: "Sith." These two stared at the tall cruel man.

This one, he turned to look at Rotherron. He said one word in reply: "Jedi."

She did not take her eyes off the Sith adept, but she spoke to the two who hesitated. The others had their weapons on her. "Decide who you wish to serve. We are not creatures of myth. We are real."

Blaster fire erupted nearby. Explosions and the distant screams of men echoed in on them. Their comlinks and datapads beeped or talked to them. Their devices were ignored. Their focus was on the tall twi'lek woman, who seemed to be armed only with a thick baton clutched in her right hand.

The Sith reached inside his coat and pulled out a tubular handle of some sort. That object rang in the minds of the two who hesitated. The stories of their childhoods rang in their ears. They knew what a lightsaber looked like. They ran away.

One of the men surrounding Rothers finally looked at his datapad. "Dissident elements are attacking our perimeter. Should we execute the prisoners? I can't get a signal from the Regent. His comlinks are being jammed."

Rothers smiled. She didn't even have to gesture.

It is called *Force Wave*. The technique was rediscovered by Tionne and Master Luke from one of the old holocrons. It is a Knight's Skill. Wave is the broader form of *Force Fist*. It was as if a bomb had gone off where Rothers was standing. The pulse blew everyone and everything away from her. The men behind her were

blown through the balcony windows and over the railing. Their bodies sailed through the air of the arena.

Everyone in that room lay dead or unconscious in the wreckage, except for the Sith adept and Rotherron.

There came forth the sound of lightsabers.

## 6. Some Heads Are Gonna Roll

The people in the stadium, ordinary citizens of Iziz snapped up out of their everyday lives and herded into the stadium, they didn't know or understand at first what it was all about. They heard blaster fire. They saw or heard explosions. They crouched down and looked about, in fear for their lives. Bodies sailed through the air to land in the stadium's playing field. Red streams of blaster bolts danced in the sky.

But that did not capture every eye in the stadium. One saw it, then another and another. Each head in the stadium, one by one, tilted back to see. What they saw pulled them out of the present, pushed them back into the epic past of their city. Lightsabers flashed above them. Red and blue clashed and sparked. They knew, instantly, in each heart, human and nonhuman, who it was above them. They had grown up on the old stories, the ones driven into silence by the Emperor elsewhere in the galaxy. They knew the meaning of what they saw. The Sith had returned, but this time the Jedi were there to meet them. The proper balance of the galaxy had been restored.

Their culture had primed them for this moment. If the Jedi once again existed, then the age of heroic action had not gone away into gray oppression. If a Jedi could oppose the might of a tyrannical state, so could they. They acted. A group of schoolchildren dragged from their class to the stadium jumped up and grappled with the soldiers guarding them. Middle-aged women jumped off of balconies onto the heads of the men in black. Accountants struck out at armored men. They rose up.

It was over in a moment. Many of the Regent's men had rushed out to confront Olderest's men, not realizing the threat lying in the

hearts of ordinary people. 30,000 eyes sought out the flare of lightsabers. The words started somewhere in the crowd. Each voice added to its strength as it traveled around the stadium. It echoed from the walls. The words raised up in the air. The soldiers in mortal combat outside heard it. "The Jedi have returned!"

— ◇ —

The air outside the stadium was crisscrossed with red and blue blaster fire. There was no supporting fire from the heights of the stadium. The emplaced weapons had been targeted by Merr-Sonn rocket launchers or snipers. Olderest and the Resistance had been infiltrating fighters and soldiers into the empty buildings around the stadium from the moment they heard. They had been helped by the clearance. No one was in the buildings to make a fuss. Plus, his units and the Regent's men were wearing the same uniforms. A quick fix for that problem was proposed by Senena. White or light-colored scarves were to be tied to the upper arms of Olderest's men, but not to be tied in place until the moment of the attack.

Senena could not be restrained. She ran forward with the first wave to cross the parking area around the stadium. Olderest ran with her. They worked their way around parked gravtrucks and burning hulks of smashed hovertanks blown up in the first exchange of rockets. Senena fired as she went. Opposition began to melt away. They had no leaders. The Regent had not told them what to do. Many fought, but some ran away. She led her men forward with her. She was desperate to free the people inside. At that moment she partook of the soul of the Jedi. She acted out of love, even as she gunned men down.

Senena grabbed one of her men and pulled him down behind a gravtruck as a burst of yellow repeater fire streaked over them. Before Olderest could grab her, she sprang up and shot the gunman.

She began to move in short sprints through the vehicle parking area. She and those who clustered around her ducked behind a speeder. They sprinted over to the smoking wreck of an aeroassault lifter.

Voices were calling out in the stadium. She was momentarily afraid that Rotherron had failed and they were killing the hostages. Senena crouched behind a repulsor-lift van and waited for someone to blow up the sniper trying to kill her. She *listened*. There was no fear in the voices. She and Olderest sprinted over to a jumble of overturned speeders. There were close enough now to hear the chant.

Another door was opened in her mind. She could *see* the Force swirling among her men, in Commander Olderest, and in the stadium. She watched the tremors created by the chant as they radiated outward, how they dampened some minds and strengthened others. She understood then that it wasn't just a meaningless polite phrase, what the ancient Jedi said to each other in the old romances. It had meaning — this was its meaning. "May the Force be with you," she whispered to herself. She jumped up. "The Force is with us! To the stadium!"

Her men heard and surged forward.

Leaderless and afraid, the Regent's men began to fail.

— ◇ —

The first passage of blades was so fast, only a Force-user could perceive it clearly. A blur of red and blue and the sparks and pops of blade contact strobed through the sky suite. Rothers kicked backward and rolled out onto the balcony. He leapt after her. Their sabers locked and sparked. She slashed up with her bottom blade, but he sprang back. He lunged for her. Rother's jumped up and swung over onto the sky suite's roof. There, at the edge, was the second passage of blades, this one more paced and cunning. They

turned and twisted and slashed at each other. And the people below saw.

They both hopped back and began to circle each other. "This is not the only path you can follow," Rothers said.

He ignored her. He came in strong, swinging his red blade down over his head. She parried with the staff's top blade, spun it and the Sith's blade over her head, and stabbed at him with the bottom blade. He pushed back from her and rolled to the edge.

She saw the hate in him and the plan lying at the top of his mind. He would lure her into a running fight through the stadium, kill her, and have his revenge on the hostages. She saw his desire, she saw the blood he would spill, if he could. She lunged at him.

Their sabers clashed, then he jumped. But the Force was with Rothers, and the Inner Art whispered to her of his movements. When he landed on the top tier, she was there to meet him. Their lightsabers flared and clashed. Chaos reigned around them as the hostages rose up against the remaining gunmen in the stadium. He turned and leaped again.

He must have heard the chant by this time. He bounced from tier to tier in the stadium. He tried to cut down an old man, but Rothers and her blue blades were there first. He jumped again. This time he tried to kill a teenage zabrak boy, but Rotherron snatched the kid away from his red blade. He jumped one last time, long and high, with Rothers just behind him. They landed in the center of the stadium's playing field. Perhaps he wanted to kill her in front of them. The final passage of blades began.

He hacked at her head and her side. Rothers parried and spun the staff in a long twirling arc to force him back. The Sith circled her and sprang in. She parried that thrust and sliced at him with her bottom blade. They exchanged another series of fast cuts. He struck at her with *push*. She leapt back to take the High Tower stance. The red blade thrust at her abdomen. She blocked by

pushing the staff down and then did the unexpected. She assumed *speed* and jumped up into a cartwheel over his head. He did not know her, that she had surpassed most of her fellow knights in the Inner Arts. Part of that discipline is in the use of the Force not in an outward way, like *pushing* a rock at someone or *choking* them, but in using the Force as an aid or adjunct to the body. Not only *speed* was on her, her mind *pulled* her own body back down on the other side of the cartwheel, accelerating her movements even more. She landed just as he turned, before he could realize the threat and parry the blow.

It was done. Rothers pulled the back blade of her staff out of his chest. His hand went up to touch the hole it had made in him. He folded over and fell to the ground. Rotherron extinguished the blue blades of her saberstaff. She was breathing hard and covered in sweat. Splinters and bits of sharp polymer sent flying from her Force Wave attack in the sky suite had cut her face and her head-tails. Her dress had been tattered. The crowd rushed up to her. They continued to chant. She smiled and tolerated their touching hands as they escorted her from the arena. A short girl flanked by many soldiers pushed her way to Rothers. Rotherron knelt before the girl. The crowd around them became still.

"Long live Queen Senena Kira!" Commander Olderest shouted.

"Long live the Jedi!" Senena shouted in her girl's voice. "Long live our democracy!"

The crowd cheered.

Rothers stood up. Senena grabbed her arm and pulled her close. "What about Jaden?" she shouted in Rotherron's ear.

— ◇ —

The Sith adept sheltered the Regent from my Force blows. Two of his black-suited men were out. The others were just getting up. I

did something unexpected, to them at least. I *threw* my saber at the keystone of the old entrance behind the Regent. Quenai had disobeyed me. She ran up behind me in time to see my throw. I could feel her surprise. Most people never think that we can throw those terrible weapons. The sliced keystone fell as my blade snapped back into my hand. The mouth of the entrance collapsed in a dull roar.

Dust clouded up and masked everything. I gestured, thrusting my open free hand down. The Force gushed and the dust parted. Quenai was standing behind me, open-mouthed. The four remaining men in black stared at me as well. My mind had plucked at the old myths of the Jedi at the back their minds, and inadvertently at Quenai, too. The dust cloud was a curtain, and when it was pulled aside I was revealed to be who I was. A Jedi Knight at the height of her power stood before them, a defender of the Force, one of a line that stretched back tens of thousands of years. She was slightly crouched in the back stance of the Strong Style, her golden saber raised in the air over her head, her free hand stretched out before her. Echoes of those who came before were in her heart, in her mind, and even in her stance. A multitude stood by her side.

"Do not oppose the will of the living universe!" I shouted. The power of my words roared through their minds.

That was it for the four shooters. Though their souls were dark, they were not prepared for the reality of the Force. They threw down their weapons and ran away. Though I did not mean for it to happen, Quenai at that moment bound herself to the Jedi forever. She did not have Force ability, not even the smallest touch. It did not matter. She was one with us from then on. She traveled to Yavin 4 several months later and pledged herself in service to the Force on bended knee before Master Luke. He tried to send her away. She could not be dissuaded. Luke sent her to the Ankias to be trained in the covert arts.

The Strong stance I used was a direct descendent of one used in Form VII, Juyo, of the ancient Jedi. This was not a fight where the life-giving sword could be used. Even before I saw him, I could see inside him. The chance for redemption had been taken out of him. They were a matched pair, the Regent and his Ragnos cultist. It would be a hard fight.

The Sith *threw* the unconscious bodies of the Regent's men at me. Quenai ran to the side of the tunnel. I managed to *hold* one of them in the air and lowered him to the side. The other one hurled down the tunnel. The Sith leapt forward to the attack as I was lowering the survivor.

I spun out to the left. His heavy overhead swing missed me. I slashed at his legs. He jumped up in the air and hacked at my head. I rolled sideways through the mucky water into an off-center Medium Style stance. He charged toward me, his red lightsaber held high over his head. My left hand made a small gesture just under my blade. The mucky shallow water rose up into a wave. He turned away from the wave, just barely saving his blade. Water immersion will disrupt the photonic containment field and make a lightsaber blade phase out. You can immediately restart your blade, but by then, in a duel, you might be dead. It takes the equivalent of several large buckets of water to do it. Gave him a fright anyway.

Quenai was frozen in raptured awe at the fight. At that moment, she did not see me, she saw the Exile in mortal combat, the ancient romances come alive before her. She knew she had to help, but she also knew from the ancient stories that she could not interfere directly. She was at most a target for the Sith and a burden for me if she stepped into it. Her eyes searched the broad tunnel for something to do. She saw the Regent. But before she could move, another sight froze her to her place. The sound of Force Lightning echoed in the tunnel.

He sprang back to the stone walkway on the edge of the tunnel. I could sense it building up in him, and I knew, since I was Kyle Katarn's student. My master and I were also practitioners of this technique. Lightning roared out of his body to strike at me. I twirled my saber in the manner taught to me. The constrictor field of my lightsaber gathered it up and dispersed the electric charge. One good turn deserves another. The great snake in me lashed out at him. He caught it on his saber and then gestured. One of the dislodged stones from the entrance hurled itself at me. Then another, then two more. I *pushed* them over my head or to the side. They crashed and banged as they hit the old brick walls of the sewer tunnel. Part of my mind noticed one of the large bricks in the walls. The mortar was old and crumbly, just a little work might pop it free. We came together again in another passage of blades. They popped and crackled as they made contact with each other. He lunged at me. I swept his blade up in a bind. We spiraled around each other, our blades in continuous contact, weaving arcs and circles of gold and red light in the shadows of the tunnel. He jumped back and lashed out with Lightning and *drain*.

The Regent snapped out of his funk. He took a step and felt a blaster pistol shoved into his side. His eyes left my fight with the Sith adept to look at Quenai standing beside him. "I would shoot you now, but that would be disrespectful to the Jedi. Pray she wins, you fat old fek. If the darksider defeats her I will shoot you dead before he has a chance to save you."

The roar of Force lightning still echoed in the old sewer. He swung his red blade in a horizontal arc. I bounced back away from it. The big old brick creaked back and forth. It was looser now. Lines of *drain* crept out at me. Bright ripples of *redirect* washed it away. Quenai and the Regent could not see this part of the battle. Only a Force-sensitive could perceive that battle. *Speed* was on us both as we danced. He was confident of his strength, but I was

always able to deflect his blows or dodge them. His frustration fueled his strength, but it made him reckless. His blows carved the air around me, a little more wild each time. He became more and more exposed, more focused on me to the exclusion of everything around him. The last of the old mortar crumbled. He leapt and spun sideways to avoid my lunge. I hopped back into my stance before he could attack. My hands pulled the hilt of my lightsaber back and up, slightly above and in front of my head, the golden blade pointed down. It was a classic defensive stance. Atton Rand would have recognized it. His holocron taught it to me. The Sith adept misinterpreted it as weakness on my part, something my actions had lead him to. He straightened up and swaggered around the far side of the old tunnel. He settled into a very aggressive strong stance, his red saber flashing as he raised it over his head. He had stepped in front of the loose brick. I came out of my stance, standing up straight. I let my saber fall to my side as I looked at him. He saw the sadness in my eyes and was puzzled at it. My mind ripped the old brick out of the wall and into the back of his head. It killed him instantly. He fell face-first with a splash into the shallow water at the center of the tunnel. I gestured with a hand and the body lifted up and flew against the wall. Another little gesture and the man's lightsaber snapped into my hand. I extinguished my blade and put it away before walking over to the corpse. My hands searched the dead man's pockets. There was only an encrypted datapad. I stuck it in my pocket and put the saber in my belt.

Something . . . I looked over at Quenai. Her pistol was still pressed into the Regent's belly. The fight had occupied my mind. I had not noticed the change in her until now.

"Madam Jedi," she said. "I present to you the former Regent of Iziz. What do you wish done with him?"

She was mine to command. If I told her to kill herself, at that moment, she would do it. I didn't like this feeling coming off of her.

She would need special care, this one. Luke was going to yell at Kyle and then Kyle was going to yell at me. It wasn't my fault. These things were happening to all of us. Derrn had an entire clan of gran following him around like pet direfoxes. Kyle had turned a Rennie commander, who in turn stole the covert action funds of his faction and donated the proceeds to the Jedi Temple. That mysterious businessman on Valanden, whose niece I rescued, he gave us a droid factory. It was just a small orbital factory, but still . . . but no, I was going to get nothing but grief from this. I punched her hard in the shoulder.

"Stop that! I'm a Jedi, not one of the Three Goddesses. The Force laid this gift on me, but I'm still just a girl underneath, so just stop it."

"Stop what?" she asked.

"Oh, you know. This hero-worship thing. I'm not a hero, I'm just a girl. I fail so often, you cannot know. I've been beaten before. I've been out-fought and out-thought before. Remember about my ear? So just stop it!"

Quenai began to come down from her epiphany. "Sorry, Jaden. It's just, the stories I read as a child . . . um, what do you want to do with him?"

I looked at the Regent. He was just an indignant old man now. "We can't leave him on the planet. Even the Queen could not resist the call for his death. You and several others of your choosing will be his special guards. We must keep his existence a secret. The world must think he's dead."

"What will you do with him?"

"The Jedi have a special prison just for such as he."

"Is it deep and dark?"

"No. It's actually kinda sunny."

"I bet you hate it."

"I do."

She laughed. I thought she was over it. Three months later she presented herself to Master Luke. I like to never heard the end of it.

## 7. Old Exhibits

Two days after it was over, Rothers and I went to the museum. It wasn't safe for SecChief to be out, too many people knew what he looked like, too many people wanted him dead. We left him in a hidden place and went by ourselves.

They were busy in the main hall, putting up a new exhibit on the royal family. Several manikins were being shifted around on a raised platform by several humans and a couple Sullustans. The old man's back was to us. He was giving orders to several junior curators in the group. One of them saw us, saw Rotherron, and stopped working, awe in his mind. Video of Rothers's fight in the arena was being played and repeated on the local holonet. The old man turned.

His face lit up, as if at the approach of old friends. "He told you!"

"Yes," Rothers replied. "He couldn't come, for obvious reasons."

I put my hands together in the greeting gesture and bowed. Rothers joined me. The old man returned our bow.

"What will become of my old student?" he asked.

"He'll be coming with us," I replied. "We have work for him."

"His heart is new." Rothers glanced at me. "Sometimes, when a talented Jedi asks the right questions, even the hard-headed ones achieve enlightenment."

He nodded. "I always felt that he had that potential in him. I'm glad he wasn't consumed by recent events." He smiled again. "Come back to my office, I have things to show you."

He turned to look at the others. "What? You've never seen a Jedi before? Get back to work!"

They hurriedly glanced away.

He shrugged at us. "It will take a while for them to get used to the idea that real Jedi once again exist. Give them time, they'll come around."

He led us back to his office, talking to us along the way. "Those who have heard of the New Jedi Order think it's a Republic military unit named in honor of the Old Jedi. I mean, it's founded by one of the elite commandos of the Rebellion. That's a natural conclusion."

"I suppose," I said.

"And all those stories in recent years about the New Jedi, those are just New Republic propaganda. That's what they say anyway."

"Who's 'they'?" Rotherron asked.

"Umm, holonet commentators, Outer Rim governments, the Hutts, CorpSec, among others. I kept a list, if you want to see."

"You kept a list?"

"Yes, sourced and annotated. I am an academic, you know, and I do work at a museum."

"Go point," she replied.

We reached the door to his office. His eyes gleamed as he turned to us. "You just wait and see what we have inside."

He opened the door. We saw what sat on the big table. I actually gasped.

He pulled us inside and closed the door. "A couple months before the royal family were killed in a 'terrorist attack,' the queen sent these to me. She feared something would happen to her family and she wanted me to hide them for her. She said someone would come, one day, someone who would know what to do with them. Perhaps she thought none would survive. So I am torn, should I give them to you, or to the young queen?"

They were laid out along the table. Many rare crystals were there, including a beautiful white pearl. A jagged violet crystal spoke to me. It was Force-responsive, I could feel it tremble at our

approach. It was the same with the white pearl, once part of a great beast. It, too, trembled with the resonance of our Force powers. Rothers put out a hand to touch the pearl.

"Don't, Rothers, the crystals aren't for us. She'll want to build her lightsaber with them."

Rothers pulled her hand back. Her eyes were next drawn to the small green crystal cube. She put her hand out for that, then hesitated. She turned to the old man.

"You know what that is?"

"Yes. It is a holocron from the old days."

"Jaden and I will touch it. Then we will be gone for a few minutes. Our bodies will still be here, but our minds will be someplace else. This device might not be appropriate for a young learner. We might have to take it for a time, until she knows enough to consult it safely. We will give her other ones in exchange, ones that will be safe for her to learn from."

"What will the young queen learn from Jedi artifacts?"

"How to use the Force," I replied. "Your young queen walks in the Force. Her pain summoned us here in the first place. You will be one of her instructors. She will need to know the history of her family. She will need to know the history of the Jedi."

Rotherron picked up the holocron and held it in the palm of her hand. I put my hand on the top of the crystalline cube.

We went away to another place. A powerful Jedi Master stood before us. We were someplace that he knew well, a place of the Jedi. An immense old tree was at the center of a sunken courtyard. He stood in front of the tree.

"Greetings, young Jedi. I am Master Kavar." He looked first at Rothers, then at me. "You are both too young to be Knights, yet Knights you are. The Force walks with you both. I am sad to see that you both have fought many battles." He looked back at me. "I am sad that you had to struggle at such a young age with the dark

side. It is a tribute to your teachers that you have overcome such a troubled beginning." He nodded. "Many ages have passed since I first imbued this crystal with my personality. Young ones like you were not permitted to be Knights in my time. I made this as a record of my teachings and of the times I lived in, as a way to preserve the knowledge of the Jedi if the worst were to happen. I left this in the care of Queen Talia, who was permitted to consult it if necessary. Otherwise she and her heirs were to keep it hidden."

"This was your insurance against the worst," Rothers said.

"Yes."

"In your judgment, are you safe for an Initiate to explore?" I asked.

"What is an Initiate?" he asked me.

Rothers answered. "We of the New Jedi Order call beginners in the study of the Jedi Arts 'Initiates.' I think you called them . . ." She glanced at me. "What was that term Tionne used once?"

"Padawans," I said. Though I first heard that term from my shadow master Qui-Gon.

"No," he answered. "Queen Talia was trained by me. She was older than you when I left her. No padawan-learner or 'Initiate' should handle this holocron. It contains a great deal of information on the Sith, their practices, their training, and Sith artifacts. There are also advanced Jedi teachings in me, which might be too great a temptation for the untrained. You are Knights, I can reveal them to you. Those who have not entered into their Knighthood should not see them. I would not willingly show them, but the possibility that I might be deceived or overcome is real enough. I should be kept safe."

Rotherron's headtails swayed. I recognized the movement as an indication of agreement. "We will take you with us to the re-established Jedi Temple. There our masters will consult you. You

will be safe there until the young queen is trained and ready to consult you."

"That is wisest, young Jedi."

"See you later," I said.

The image of Kavar smiled at the phrase.

We were back in the old man's office. Rothers put the holocron down. "Shaak Ti's padawan training holocron would be more appropriate for Senena, don't you think?"

"Too much meditation. The one Master Kyle found a couple years ago at the old stormtrooper base, that one's good, and almost no one looks at it anymore."

"'Lightsaber Basics?' She'll cut an arm off!"

"We'll give her a training saber. It'll be okay. You'll see."

Rotherron looked at the other items. She picked up one of the lightsabers. Its superconductive battery was drained of power. We checked the others. They all were drained. Ancient tech, later generations of battery cores didn't lose charge over time.

Rothers smiled at the old man. "Please don't charge these. We don't want the young queen to lop off an arm. We'll send her training sabers. When she's ready for the real thing, she'll build her own out of the crystals you have here. All the rest are her heritage. We will keep the holocron for her. She can have it back when it is no longer a danger to her."

I touched one of the folded robes. "I know who wore this."

He smiled. "I thought you might know."

— ◇ —

The white stones of the Sky Ramp glistened under the clear blue sky. Ancient treasures that had been hidden from the Regent had been returned to the living day. The old man arranged a special treat for us, in exchange for a night of our stories. The two robes we

wore had been diligently preserved by generations of curators. They would be taken back again into the museum after this day. One belonged to Jedi Master Kavar. The other one, though once ripped and full of bullet holes, lovingly repaired long ago, that one I insisted on wearing. Rotherron deserved the robe of a master. I knew that she would be one, someday soon. The one I wore, it was the one I had to wear. I had saved her tomb from the disciples of Ragnos. Her spirit had stood by my side in battle. It was The Exile's simple robe.

We marched behind the queen. We had been called back from a mission to Typhon just for this. Master Luke thought it was very important that we attend. The crowds lining the way cheered as she passed, but grew silent as we approached.

The shout went up then. It passed like a wave of sound through the crowd. "The Jedi are coming!" For once it was not said in fear. They watched silently as we walked by. The rest of her retinue, the fighters, the ones freed from the Regent's many prisons, they marched before and after us. Cheers greeted them. No one walked with us. No one cheered as we passed. They gazed at us in respectful silence. Some of the crowd bowed, others placed their hands together and bowed their heads. It meant something, here, now, to be a Jedi.

Rotherron felt my pride. She leaned over and whispered to me. "Did we do this for praise?"

I smiled. "No. We are servants of the Force. It leads us where we need to be."

We continued to walk forward with the rest of the procession. The silence grew the further we marched up the ramp. An expectancy was now in the growing quiet. We reached the highest point on the ramp, just outside the ancient battlements of the palace. The crowd was thickest there. Queen Senena stopped and walked back through her people to stand before us. All of them, all

those who fought with us, all the people clustered around the three of us. Quenai had been marching right behind me. She was smiling at me as broadly as anyone ever had. Slowly, slowly a hidden multitude crept in among the people. They manifested themselves around me. The Exile, Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, Atton Rand, and many others stood with us.

The Queen looked first at Rotherron, and then at me. Everything was silent. We waited for her words.

"I owe you my life," Queen Senena said. "I say to you and to everyone, I will be worthy of the life the Jedi have given me. I will repay this debt with my loyalty to them and to my people. I bind myself to the Jedi and their creed." She stepped closer to Rotherron. "Please help me, I'm so nervous, I forgot the words," she said in a soft voice.

Rotherron started the old pledge. Senena and I spoke with her. Slowly the words passed from person to person until the entire crowd was chanting them. They passed through the media drones into every household on the planet, and into every mind.

"However innumerable sentient beings, I vow to protect them.

"However diverse Life, I vow to nourish it.

"However inexhaustible the passions, I vow to calm them.

"However immeasurable the Force, I vow to serve it."

"The Force is with us," we said.

Then, then a great cheer rose up. A great joy encompassed us all.

— ◇ —

I kept my promise to the Regent. I took him to his new home myself. Yavin 8 was a water world, with tens of thousands of islands scattered through its peaceful seas. He had a small sturdy prefab house up in the island's hills, and a couple droid helpers. Other than that, he had the island to himself. It was green and lush, with

wild fruit trees here and there. He could go out and pick fresh fruit every morning if he wanted to. The blue waters lapped peacefully onto white sandy beaches. We gave him fishing gear, too. But no boats. His was a private place, like the others who dwelt alone on nearby islands. They each had to seek their enlightenment on their own. The most remote islands were set aside for Force users. I promised the Regent that a Jedi would visit occasionally. He was not so pleased at that, so I told him that the new warden of this particular prison would make regular visits.

Today was one of those days. The Regent shielded his eyes and watched the horizon for a ship. His short-range comlink had told him that the new warden was coming for a visit. His new keeper was bringing supplies, meaty treats, and a medical droid. The medical droid would give the Regent his regular check-up.

He had adjusted to his new life, at least superficially. He walked about barefoot. He had begun pruning and weeding around his favorite fruit trees. He wore one of the floppy sun-hats I had left for him. Any Jedi could hear the seething anger in his heart from orbit. This one, he was a long-term project.

He saw the old Imperial shuttle coming in low over the water. It took a turn around the island, as if inspecting the place, before folding up its wings and easing down on the sand. The Regent got up and walked toward it. He saw several men and droids come down the cargo ramp. They walked toward him. Two of them had the look of hard men. Blaster pistols in worn holsters were on their hips. The droids behind them carried crates.

He recognized the man in the middle. "You!"

"Good morning, sir," SecChief said to his old boss. "We brought your monthly supplies and a few things for you to read."

"Why you?"

"Who better to be the keeper of the prisoners of the Jedi than one who was once one of the fallen?" He smiled. "There will be no escapes."