

STAR WARS

A person stands on a large rock in the foreground, holding two glowing lightsabers. The person is silhouetted against a night sky filled with stars and the Milky Way. In the background, a suspension bridge with warm yellow lights spans across a body of water. The bridge's structure is illuminated with blue light. The overall scene is a blend of natural beauty and science fiction.

*The One,
The Force,
and Legion*

JOHN ERIK EGE

This concludes the Waycaster Trilogy

STAR WARS

The One, The Force, and Legion

Book Three of the Waycaster Trilogy

By

John Erik Ege

EHP: Experimental Home Publishing Copyright, June 17th, 2019.

All Rights Reserved.

First book 'Star Wars: A Force to Contend With.' Second book, 'Star Wars: A Dark Run.'

This book is not available for sale. It is, however, available for free. Licensing for this is pending and can only be considered fan fiction at this time. The author agrees to share this edition for editing purposes with the understanding that Star Wars is now the property of the Walt Disney Corporation, while Star Wars books fall to the domain of Del Rey. Comments and corrections can be directed to the author for story refinement.

WARNING: This book is intended for a mature audience. Due to violence and sexual themes, some persons, especially those suffering from PTSD or childhood trauma, could possibly experience unpleasant feelings or flashbacks.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. (I would like to say 'duh,' but apparently, there were actually people who believed the Castaways of Gilligan's Island were actually stranded! No joke. There were people writing the US Navy asking them to please stop spending money on warfare and rescue those poor people before they starved. Tim Allen's movie 'Galaxy Quest' made reference to it, but I thought it was a joke till I saw a documentary on Gilligan's Island. Of course, it probably doesn't help that there is a stature in Iowa place marking the birth place of Captain Kirk. Oh, how reality and fiction love to mix. (And yes, I watched Gilligan's Island. And if you have to know: Mary Ann, hands down.)

This book is intended to support the mythos as created by George Lucas. Given the amount of SW fiction that is available, and the amount of divergence from various authors, movies, and re-releases of movies, it is definitely out of the scope of this author to fully address, capture, or give credit to the others who have most certainly influenced his thoughts and appreciation for this saga, of which, Timothy Zahn stands out foremost. I can only hope that my small perspective adds to the lore, as opposed to detracting from what I believe Lucas set out to achieve with the original Star Wars. It has become a huge, unwieldy beast, but, unlike the elephant in the room, it is widely discussed, debated, defended, championed, ridiculed, picked on, referenced, and has place holders on our book shelves, hearts, and psyche. For better or worse, The Force is with us, always.

This book is dedicated to all of those who have suffered through my grammar and teased out something more meaningful than the visible architect. May you continue to find meaning and joy in you all your multiverses.

Author contact info:

John Erik Ege 214-907-4070 Email

solarchariot@hotmail.com (In order to differentiate between junk mail, and letters, please put Star Wars in the subject line.)

Less than a year after the conflict over Axilla
The First Order owned the sky, as the resistance retreated All too late
realizing the duplicity of the local principalities.
The truce with Waycaster was maintained, and only his ships Were
permitted past the block aide. It was a tenuous truce, At best, and a
negotiation, of sorts, ongoing.
Those who might have been Jedi in another time
Are slowly beginning to surface, to test their wings
And without Masters and training, the first tentative steps
Are precarious at best. A new ability has been witnessed

On the battlefield, And suddenly, many have an inkling
Of even greater things available to them through the Force.
The ability to destroy a planet is insignificant Compared to the powers
of the Force.

There remains paths yet unexplored for those who would Travel
The Force is always there, calling. In Darkness we are born, And without
the trappings of dogma The Force goes unconstrained.

Chapter 1

The beach was comprised of white sands, as if it were bleached, refined sugar. The seas were emerald green, and gentle. Waves made a regular heartbeat against the sand, turning the tiny crystals through their refracting points that spun a thousand tiny rainbows that popped like bubbles as the water receded back into the ocean. A translucent green, crystal crab pushed legs and headed back to the waters as the aliens intruded on its space. Preston G Waycaster walked with Ten.

“Is this a dream?” Ten asked.

“Can you point to something that is not a dream?” G asked.

“Are we really here?” Ten asked.

G paused to examine their prints. Their prints paralleled the ocean, but you could only follow them back so far, not because they were washed away, but because they started mid beach. A person not knowing they were Jedi might be baffled, but would assume waves and move on. Ten frowned.

“For once in my life, I would like you to answer my questions in a very deliberate and precise manner,” Ten said.

The breeze that eased around them seem sentient. G listened to it with his ears and closed eyes, embracing it’s salty smell. Around them creatures scurried along the beach, swam in the water, visible, but probably not where you thought you saw them, and in the air. Plants flourished further up the shore, climbing hills and spreading out in all directions.

“I like that you keep asking for greater levels of clarity,” G said. “The answers are all around you.”

“I don’t like the answers I keep coming up with,” Ten said.

“Change your filters,” G said, and began walking again.

Ten frowned, and then made to catch up with him. “Why are we here again?” “Why are we anywhere?” G asked.

“Oh, Force me! Stop answering questions with a question,” Ten said.

“Why are we here, Ten?” G asked her.

“To learn something?” Ten asked.

“Is that a question?” G asked. “Why are we here?”

“To learn,” Ten said.

Again, G stopped. He faced her. His change in focus caused her to not only face him, but to step back. When G was focused, he was intense. She wondered if she had done something wrong, because he was so serious.

“No, Ten,” G said, after a long shifting of his own patience. A resolve came over him. “Everything we do and think and experience, that is learning. We are learning all the time.

Learning is an inescapable fact of life. The only difference between beings is rate of learning.”

“That makes sense,” Ten said. “So, why are we here?”

“To graduate,” G said.

Ten was on the verge of epiphany, and being hopeful that he was going to call her a Jedi derailed her insight. And then her fears caught up with her.

“I am not ready,” Ten said.

“Walk,” G said.

They both resumed walking. Ten maintained the new boundary from G, as if she was weary of him. She couldn't sort it. Was he about to tell her they were finished? Would she ever see him again? Tears rolled down her face as she realized her time with G was going to end. Not realized. Assumed. Tear drops sparked rainbows in the sand.

“I am not ready yet,” Ten said. When G didn't respond, she stopped their progress and embraced him. “Please! I love you. I love our talks. I need you.”

G hugged her; fatherly to an adult child. “You have gone as far as I can teach you.” “No! I haven't!” Ten argued. “If I lived a thousand lives, I could never learn all that you know.”

G considered. “That's true,” G said. She pulled back for clarity. “It's true, you will never be me, no matter how close you walk to all the paths of all of my life times. Just as I can't be you. But our paths came parallel for a moment. I have learned as much from you as you have learned from me. Now, our past must diverge.”

“Not yet!” Ten said. “Have I done something wrong?”

“Growing up is not wrong, it is how it works,” G said. “You have been an adult much longer than you have been a child.”

“I don't want to be a grown up! I don't want to be a Jedi if it means you're not my master,” Ten said.

G squeezed her hand. “Good for you. I am not asking you to be a grownup. I want you to be a child. I want you to go, play, learn, and graduate.”

“But I don't know how,” Ten said.

G turned in the direction they had been walking. He looked at her and indicated with a look and nod that he wanted her to emulate. She got it. She faced forwards.

“Repeat what I say, do what I do,” G said.

Ten nodded.

“I am not the loneliness I feel,” G said. He took a step forwards with the right foot, and brought the other foot up to him. He waited for Ten to mirror. “The world is lonely and I am a reflection of the world. I heal this through companioning me and others.”

G waited till Ten mirrored him. He took another step forwards, leading with the opposite foot. “I am not the anger I feel. The world is angry and I am a reflection of the world. I heal this through validating myself and others.” G did not look at Ten, he focused on the path, and waited for her to emulate before taking the next step. “I am not the darkness I feel. The world is dark and I am a reflection of the world. I heal this by bringing light to myself and others.” Next step.

“I am not the sadness I feel. The world is sad and I am a reflection of the world. I heal this by bringing joy to myself and others.” To emphasize a point, he took a step backwards. “I am not the happiness I feel. For the world is happy and I am a reflection of the world. I sustained this through peaceful interactions with myself and others.”

Still facing forwards, G looked to Ten. “Start your walk.”

Ten considered for a moment, and then said, “I am not the way people see me.” She took a step

forwards and brought her foot together. “The world is a funhouse mirror and I am a reflection of distorted truth. I heal this by bringing acceptance to myself and others.” She waited. G repeated her phrase and took a step forwards.

“Ten, you know how to walk,” G said. “All paths are valid. Just because you’re not on a well-worn path doesn’t mean where you are is wrong.”

“I get that,” Ten said. “I just think I need you...” She blinked, turning as if a breeze was drawing her attention, but the breeze was from behind her, and the scent it carried of honey suckle and strawberries hadn’t changed. “We’re not alone.”

“We are never alone,” G said.

Ten stepped closer to G. “Reveal yourselves.”

Beings of light appeared, as if stepping forwards through a veil. There were six of them all together. They were dressed as Jedi.

“Who are you?” Ten demanded.

“Seriously?” the older one said. “You intend to raise her to full Jedi status, and she doesn’t even know who we are?”

“You!” Ten said, pointing at him. “You’re Mace Windu. Preston?! That Master Windu.” G only smiled.

Windu crossed his arms. “Not the point. You intend to raise someone without consulting the Counsel.”

“You must have at least three Jedi Masters present to raise someone,” one of the females said. Her hair was flaming red, her face was peppered with freckles, her eyes were blue, and wardrobe was green.

“Well, you know, maybe if more of you had survived, we could actually hold a ceremony,” G said. “But since one of my candidates is on the wrong side of a planetary shield, and Luke has a ‘do not disturb’ sign hanging on his aura, I figure I would dispense with ritual and start my own path.”

“Your way leads to the dark side,” the youngest male said.

“Who are you?” Ten asked.

“Anakin Walker,” he said, introducing himself.

Ten bit her lip. G introduced her to the others. “And this is Tahiri Veila, Nomi Sunrider, Ahsoka Tano, and Qui-Gon Jinn.”

Ten hands were trembling. She wanted to draw her weapon and strike Anakin down. It was a want that was seen in her hand going to the hilt of her lightsaber. “Why are you here?!”

“I asked him to be here,” Qui-Gon said.

“And who are you again?” Ten said.

“Yeah, she is clearly ready to be a Jedi,” Nomi said.

“Seriously, you guys are hanging out with Darth Vader and you expect me to be okay with your counsel?” Ten said.

“I am not Vader,” Anakin said. “I was. I will be. It’s complicated.”

“You...” Ten stammered.

“Yes, Ten. I can never atone for all the evil and destruction I caused. And at the same time, I took on a role no one else wanted, which was necessary for our overall growth. This life, the physical life you find yourself in, this is Kindergarten. Not all the kids play nice in the sandbox, and we don’t graduate until we do.”

“Who are you?” Ten asked. “No, you, plural. Who are you and what’s your purpose.” “We are ascended Masters,” Tahiri Veila said. She was a 20 something year old female, wearing a dress with a

several shades of blue woven together in an interesting pattern. Her hair was golden sunlight, with a hint of curls, and it moved to a breeze inconsistent with the air on the present beach.

“What does that even mean?” Ten demanded.

“It means we died,” Ahsoka said. She was the most childlike of the group, and Ten felt a drawing towards her.

“Preston, she is too angry to be a Jedi,” Windu said.

“She is too angry not to be,” G said. “We need to change that philosophy. If someone is that angry, they need to be educated and trained so that they can be held responsible for their actions.”

“Back to Rule of Three,” Nomi said.

“I was raised without three,” G pointed out.

“We raised you!” Windu said.

“For a specific purpose,” Tahiri said.

“Which you are failing,” Anakin said.

The group fell silent as they tuned into the fact that Ten was no longer paying attention. “She can’t even focus on a meeting that is about her and you want to raise her?” Anakin pointed out.

“What do you see??” Ahsoka said.

“I am not sure,” Ten said. She was looking at the forest that ran parallel to the sea. “I am trying to understand it.”

“What do you think you see?” Nomi asked.

“It’s like there is cloud shadow over that area of the woods, but there are no clouds today, and when I look at the individual trees, I don’t see anything different than any other tree in the whole of the forest, but that space, that particular grouping of trees, well, it’s off somehow,” Ten said.

“In there, you must go,” came a new voice. Ten turned to the voice. “Who are you?” “My name, unimportant it is,” he said.

“Master Yoda, with all due respect,” Windu said. “We got this.”

“With respect you lead, but different seem your intent,” Yoda said. Ten looked to G.

“No one can make you go,” G said.

“You want to be a Jedi, don’t you?” Anakin asked.

Ten looked at the darkness holding the woods. “Not particularly, no,” Ten said. Ahsoka laughed, drawing her attention. She turned to Yoda. “But I am a Jedi.” Yoda laughed.

“Then in you must go.”

“Without your lightsaber,” G said.

Ten looked at G to see if he were jesting, but saw he was more neutral than he had ever been. She wanted to sort it, but she realized she was removing her lightsaber, the one he had given her with a pink blade. She handed it to him.

♪♪▶

“I have never seen someone surrender the lightsaber without protest,” Nomi said.

“You coached her,” Anakin accused.

“It’s called training. I simply changed the paradigm,” G said. He took up the lightsaber that was once his, the first one, and publically examined it. He revealed the pink blade, and the small report it made. It drew a sneer from one and laughter. Only Yoda offered compassion, knowing how this came about in solitude. Context it made the thing more meaningful. “This weapon is your life; that’s shit

dogma. A Jedi who is accompanied by the Force needs no weapon.”

“You are changing everything,” Anakin said.

“No, everything is changing, I am just navigating a path, participating in evolution,” G said. He powered down the weapon and made it go away. Magic, up the sleeve trickery, kind of gone. He brought it back in the other hand, tossed it up in the air, twirling it, caught in his right hand, and made it disappear again. “Sentient beings change, adapt, and evolve. The old paradigm was war, we beat each other into submission, or we eliminated enemies. That way is not sustainable. It resulted in a new paradigm of stealth. This cultivates a paradigm of fear, and you know that chain by heart. The Jedi that survived the order will tell you hiding was practical, but practicing in the dark is the same path to becoming Sith. I will not hide. I will not run. I prefer not to kill. The next paradigm will be integration and cohesion. We rise together, we fall together.”

“Your new path hasn’t brought you any closer to finding the Sith we entrusted you to find,” Windu said.

“Actually, I have found her. I have determined she is not a threat,” G said.

“She?” several of them asked, drawing into themselves as they tracked this.

No matter how hard they tried to explore, they could not see what G saw. They came back to themselves, to this moment, like particles in a magnetic wave returning to source. “Who is it?” Windu asked.

“I don’t know her name, I just know how to find her, or, better, how to have her find me,” G said.

“What species?” Nomi asked.

“Human,” G said.

“That’s impossible. She would have to be well over a thousand years old,” Tahiri said.

“Physically, I get the sense she is in her thirties,” G offered.

“Preposterous,” Anakin said. “You’re lying.” “We’re capable of that,” G said.

“Where are you getting your information?” Nomi asked. Yoda started laughing. “Now I see,” Yoda said.

“What do you see that we don’t?” Qui-Gon asked.

It was as if saying ‘I know who she is’ initiated a town hall meeting. Plo Koon, Mace Windu, Yoda, Ki-Adi-Mundi, Saesee Tiin, and Shaak Ti- everyone was suddenly available if one could see, different frequencies. It was a gathering and hard to focus. Just this many Jedi next to a ‘shadow space’ was likely to change Ten’s experience. G found Oppo Rancisis ‘ghost’ more disturbing than the media records of his physical form. Plo Koon was equally hideous, and no breathing apparatus. G had to sort his physical reaction and focus on the Force energy; their Force signature projected peaceful coexistence. That didn’t mean they couldn’t be deadly, but that this was their primary preferred projection.

“She is on a moon in an elliptical orbit around the galactic primary black hole,” G explained. “When her moon is at apogee she has her greatest influence over Galactic politics. She calls to those who can hear her. She is the Siren that bring the sailors to their ruin. She promises them fame, fortune, power, anything they want, in exchange for...” “You’re a monster!”

This was from Ten. She had returned and she was angry. He didn’t have to unpack her experience. He didn’t want to. It was her experience. It was her truth. All Jedi’s experienced this.

‘To get to the Light one has to rush the shadows, not run from them’ he had told her. What she carried was still shadows. He would not run from this. He would stand with her. He would submit to her, even

to the point of death. He would not kill her. He raised her. This was a part of it.

“Why aren’t you helping her?!” Ten demanded. “And don’t tell me that it’s because of some stupid agreement.”

“They asked me to leave,” G said.

“Because you won’t help them!” Ten said.

“Anyone can conquer an enemy with strength and wit, but that is not the pathway to love,” G said.

“Screw that! Help mom,” Ten said.

“I am helping in ways you don’t understand,” G said. “Help in a way I do understand,” Ten said.

“I cannot help in the manner you are wanting,” G said.

“I am going, with or without you,” Ten said.

“I know,” G said.

“Seriously?” Windu said. “You’re not going to talk some sense into her?”

“You want me to invalidate her experience?” G asked. “This is her gift. This is her relationship with the Force.”

“I can tell you where to place armaments that can blast a temporary hole in their shield,” Anakin offered.

“You stay out of my head,” Ten snapped, blocking with a hand. He was suddenly distanced from the group, but still on the beach. She turned to G. “You’re not going to try and stop me?”

“I am not,” G said.

“You want her to go?” Nomi asked.

“I want her to be sovereign. She is an adult. She must be responsible for her life and decisions,” G said.

“How do you propose she get past the shield without soliciting a space fleet?” Tahiri asked.

“The same way she got here,” G said. “Through the Force. Ten, you have learned all you can from me. From this point forwards, if you have a need, you may counsel with any Jedi Master, past, present, future. It makes no difference. There is no space, there is no time, it is all one with the Force. Call, and they will answer. Go with the Force and you are never alone.” Ten extended her hand, wanting her Lightsaber back.

“Make your own,” G said.

“I have another,” Ten snorted and disappeared. G stood there, silently. “That was your first letting go of a student, wasn’t it?” Ahsoko asked.

G sighed. “Yeah,” he admitted. It was also the first time she had truly been cross with him. She was more likely to quarrel with Corissa and come to him for solace. It had appeared the roles had flipped. As it should be. Most children do this earlier in life. He emotional path had been delayed due to childhood survival needs trumping emotional needs.

“You just sent her off angry, down the dark path,” Anakin said, suddenly back.

“We also knowingly asked her to stepped into the shadow; anger is an appropriate response. We are all Jedi, all Sith, all the time,” G said. “There is only the Force. The Force has her.”

“Tell, time will,” Yoda said.

“Which brings us back to your mission,” Nomi said.

“I have completed the task,” G said. “I have identified her. She is not a threat.”

“She made the Palpatine the Emperor,” Anakin said. “She made Snoke!”

“No, they made themselves trying to serve her,” G said. “She only wants worship. She doesn’t care what form it takes or who it comes from. She rewards people who worship her. She is not a threat, with caveats. She is not a threat to me.”

“You have access to an armada,” Anakin said. “Go and wipe her out.”

“Even if I knew the precise location, no one can get to her. She has the high ground. She will always have time and foreknowledge of you coming at her because she moves through space time at a different rate,” G said. “There is only one way to get to her, and that is through the Force.”

“You mean, bilocation,” Windu said. “Your specialty.”

“Please, anyone who is one with the Force can do it. And now that I have been doing it, others will follow,” G said.

“We want you to engage her, subdue her if you can, end her if you can’t,” Windu said. “There is no death,” G reminded them. “There is only the Force. Her presence is solidified in space time. It is a better prison than death. Death would only free her to pursue her agenda.”

“You think she knows the secret of Force Ghosts?” Qui-Gon asked.

“There are no Force Ghosts. There is no Death. There is only the Force,” G said.

“Liar!” Anakin said. He was a teenager now.

“Do you think you’re special because you’re a Jedi?” G asked. “It took the Jedi being almost wiped out for the realization to occur, there is only the Force. Everyone has a relationship with the Force. There are no special abilities. There is only the Force and your relationship with the Force. Unconstrained by dogma, by discipline and regimen of an order, those who awake to the Force now will be free to pursue relationships with greater beings. The death of any Force sensitive physical being is harmful to us all, be it Jedi or Sith. ”

“You teach this?” Naomi said. “You are teaching people there are is no death?”

“I am teaching the Force. Anakin is here, so obviously there is no eternal punishment. Or, and this is more likely, our relationships with the Force are much more complicated than we can understand,” G said. “Maybe learning the Force ghost gives you more staying power. Maybe you’re less likely to reincarnate, or more likely to persist and project back into this 3rd dimensional realm, or maybe this is evidence that you need to practice what you preached in life and let go of ego and rely on the Force.”

“Without us, there will be no new Jedi Order. There will be no new Force users as long as Order 66 exists,” Anakin said. “Even with the Empire gone, too many people believe the Universe is better without Mystics and Saints. There are agencies dedicated to maintaining this soulless Universe.”

“The Force will adapt to this, too,” G said. “The new order will have a knowing. Perhaps the shamans will be the next core group to rise. Less secretive, but more humility. Something both Jedi and Sith lacked.”

“How dare you judge us!” Anakin said.

“We all judge all the time. The trick is realizing it, and embracing that which you judge, good or bad,” G argued. Arguing with Anakin could be a lifetime affair, even circular. He had tested, taking an opposite opinion just to watch Anakin flip.

“There can be no peace in the Galaxy until she is neutralized,” Naomi said. “She will continue to influence from a far.”

“Oh, please,” G said, rolling his eyes. “There can be no peace as long as we keep gearing for war. The galaxy is more polarized than it ever was. When do we put away the swords and blasters and start

talking to one another?"

"When are you going to learn, talking doesn't work?" Anakin said. "Then let's try silence," G said.

"We have decided. You will engage the enemy," Qui-Gon said.

"You all realize what you're asking me? In order to get her attention, to get the invite, I am going to have to have to break some serious neutrality rules," G said. "I like my life."

"And you say we have ego problems?" Naomi asked.

"Who's the lingering ghost?" G asked.

"You say you hold Sith, too," Anakin said. "Let's see what you got."

G looked to Windu. He was standing next to Yoda. G implored them without words. "You sought us out for counsel," Windu said.

"I came to you because I didn't want to be alone," G said. "This thing you ask of me. It's a hardship."

"Do this, you must," G said. "Your test this is."

Chapter 2

Kyoko eyes shined happiness. Her hair was wild, as if windblown. Her dress was too short. Her shirt too tight, barely containing heart beat or breasts. She was everything Ten wasn't. She was soft. Ten was hard, as anyone young female might who had devoted themselves to gymnastics. Kyoko was curvy in all the right places, and she used it in an openly flirtatious manner. More than that, she was affectionate as a pet that had no boundaries, no training; she would push up against you. She expressed interest in both Genders, but considered Ten her primary relationship. On more than one occasion she asked permission to pursue a relationship with Preston G Waycaster. She wanted to be with him. She wanted him to make her real. Ten forbade her to see him.

Kyoko's eyes were emerald green and luminescent. She existed only in Ten's mind, a tulpa, but she was growing in her abilities. She, too, had access to the Force. She could move things around the ship. She could make Ten a drink and bring it to her. She could do anything she could do if she were physically present. She could help copilot the ship. She couldn't lift the Droids. She lacked strength. And so far, when Ten traveled, she did not. She was present in some of her dreams.

"I am glad you're back," Kyoko said. "Are you a Jedi?"

Ten frowned and got up from her meditative pose. She went straight to the flight deck. Kyoko followed.

"You flunked?" Kyoko asked.

"No. Maybe. I don't know. I got mad and left," Ten said.

"Weren't you wearing your lightsaber?" Kyoko asked.

Ten's hand went to her belt. It was gone. "Fuck." "Okay," Kyoko said.

"That's not what I meant," Ten said.

"I know. I was being playful," Kyoko said.

"Stop being playful. I am angry," Ten said.

"I know. Being playful may decrease that," Kyoko said.

"I don't want to be playful," Ten said. "I need to think."

Kyoko sat in the co-pilots seat. She leaned back, put her bare feet on the flight control console. She flexed her feet, accentuating her calf muscles.

"You're distracting me," Ten said.

"Sorry," Kyoko said. "I thought the meditative place wasn't real. But it has a real affect?" "I don't know," Ten said. She thought it through. "I know G could come here. Maybe he took it and hid it on the ship."

"Maybe he could just take it with him when he traveled back?" Kyoko said.

"Maybe," Ten said.

"Oh, we should learn that trick!" Kyoko said. "We'd make great bank robbers." "I am not interested in stuff," Ten said.

Kyoko did an exaggerated look around the ship. "You seem pretty interested in stuff."

"Look," Ten said. "My mother is being tortured. Or will be tortured. That part is ambiguous. I just know I got to help her. Problem is, the planet is locked tight by an Imperial orbital shield."

"There is always a way past a block," Kyoko said.

"Yeah, well, I can't bilocate," Ten said.

"I can," Kyoko said.

Ten looked at her, skeptically.

"Look, I walk around the ship, right? Maybe you just need to focus on me, boost me, and send me

remote,” Kyoko said.

“That seems feasible, but I don’t know if I have enough time to develop that,” Ten said.

“I want a solution now.”

“If there is a gate, there will be a gatekeeper,” Kyoko said. “Gatekeepers are usually underpaid, groveling drones. They will have exploitable vices.”

“And how do I find out which vice and how to make contact?” Ten said.

“We go to a place that distributes vice,” Kyoko said.

“And I guess you know such a place?”

“You do,” Kyoko said. “You just don’t know it.”

♪♪ ▶

Master Yeno was by the fire. His home seemed smaller to G, more a hovel. Definitely more humble the fortress he had inherited. Yeno was silent and distant so long that G wondered if he had even registered his complaint.

“You’re surprised?” Yeno said. “You can’t seek something without finding, you can’t find something without engaging it. You must complete your life’s mission.”

“It’s not my mission,” G protested. “This is their mission. The mission of a bunch of old, egotistical, pompous farts that have lingered well beyond their usefulness.”

“Regression? Finally, some human leaks through,” Yeno said. “You accepted their training. You accepted the mission.”

G smiled and sulked at the same time. “I am not the hunger I feel. The world is hungry and I am a reflection of the world. I heal this by nurturing myself and others.”

“Change is coming,” Yeno said. “You can no longer afford to just sit on the fence.” “Why aren’t they goading Luke into greater service? Why can he just sit there and do nothing. Why is saving the galaxy suddenly my problem? How long have you sat here, wasting your way over a camp fire?” G asked.

Yeno met his eyes. He was not happy, but he didn’t allow the taunt to provoke anger.

“You’ve helped people here, in small ways, in private,” G said. “I could live a hundred years, maybe more in this body, and do just as much good in quiet, unnoticed ways. To get her attention, I have to go big. I will no longer be on the sidelines.”

“I know,” Yeno said.

“I might as well have helped Corissa,” G said.

“Not your mission,” Yeno said.

“It should be,” G said.

“You’re not the only person with life missions,” Yeno said. “You can’t do everything, be everything.”

“Yes I can,” G said.

“Well, we all can, but we chose these paths of limitations,” Yeno said. “I recommend not thinking of this as your mission to save the galaxy. You might become an old, pompous, lingering fart. This is about your relationship with the Force, and honoring the soul contracts you came to fulfill.”

G thought on it, and then bowed. “When did you become so wise?”

“Just now, when we flipped roles,” Yeno said.

“I am sorry,” G said.

“There is no offense here, G,” Yeno said. “This is how we serve each other.”



Captain Henro Jist walked amidst Storm Troopers and prisoners, accepting the report that the temple was secure. No weapons, or weapon caches were found. All was as it appeared to be. This was a peaceful orphanage and medical school.

“Who is in charge here?” Jist addressed the crowd.

Corissa Fite came forwards. “I am. But you know that, don’t you.”

Jist’s smile was genuine, and a smirk at the same time. “Just a test. This is an orphanage, where are all the children?”

“They’re on a field trip,” Corissa said. “You just missed them.”

Jist drew closer. “Ms. Fite. Or is it Mrs. Fite? I am confused by your relationship with the Jedi poser.”

“He and I are colleagues. He opened this school. He put me in charge,” Corissa said.

“Where is he?” Jist said.

“I don’t know,” Corissa said. “He had a feud with the local principalities and was asked to leave.”

“I would like clarity on your military career. You once served the remnant of the Empire, before it became the First Order. You made accusations of rape and attempted murder against an officer. Why weren’t you executed?” Jist asked.

“Your records are wrong. I didn’t accuse anyone of rape,” Corissa said.

“Oh? Explain how you beat the desertion charge without death?” Jist asked.

“I had a good lawyer,” Corissa said.

“Now that’s an oxymoron. Well, good or bad, no lawyers for you today,” Jist said. “Here’s what I want. I want the man named Preston G Waycaster. You will contact him and tell him to present himself to me, or I will begin killing folks.”

“I have no way contacting him,” Corissa said.

“Then people will die and it will be on your hands,” Jist said.

“No, it will be on your hands,” Corissa said. “You are the one with the authority here. You can spare these people. They have nothing to do with your agenda.”

Jist gave a signal and a squad of storm troopers executed a line of prisoners. Corissa held her place, hid her emotions.

“So, the rumors are true,” Jist said. “You really are a cold hearted bitch.”

“I have worked with your kind before. If I thought you were reasonable, I would negotiate with you. You will kill whether I assist you or not, and I spoke truth. I have no way of contacting Master Waycaster. And he will not respond to this threat. He does not see you or this situation as an existential threat.”

“Do you think he cares about you?” Jist asked.

“He does,” Corissa said.

“So, if I torture you, rape you, he won’t come to your rescue?” Jist asked.

“He will not,” Corissa said.

“Oh,” Jist said. “What you’re saying is, I can do what I want with impunity?”

“We are all one with the Force, there is no impunity. What you do to others will be done to you,” Corissa said.

“Oh, good,” Jist said. “I like being raped. Take her to my quarters.”



Emily Hildago, Em, accompanied Jordeen to the impromptu meeting. Shariva over stood the tallest of humans, holding her infant, 'Frizzie.' They were at the edge of a ravine, looking out into a vast desert. A darkening sky with no stars was on the horizon. Behind them, unseen due to incline of the ravine was a sunset. Directly above was evidence of a planetary shield that would go complete dark after the sun set. If one was looking, and lucky, they might witness a meteor hitting the shield, sparking light, and ripples if it were big enough, but mostly one would see is the darkness. Emmer was there, as he was the only one who could translate the Wookiee language.

"Em, go back with the others," Derin said. "This is an adult conversation."

"If you hold secrets from children, how do you expect them to become adults?" Jordeen asked.

Derin was clearly upset. "She doesn't need to hear what I am going to say."

Em smiled. "It's okay. I lived most of my life on the edge death. I am not afraid," she said.

"Because you're an idiot child," Derin said. Shariva barked

something.

Emmer translate it. "You will direct your anger to me, not the child."

"You led us here, you big, stupid, flea bitten, furry oaf! You brought us to our death. You won't let us light fires for fear of being seen. We can't go back. We can't go across the desert,"

Derin said. "You've murdered us."

"We're going across the desert," Em said.

"Yeah, because that's not a death walk. Either they see us from orbit and come get us, or we die..."

"They won't see us. We are waiting for the storm," Em said.

Derin was confused. He wanted to say something but Shariva said something. It had a question feel to it. "I'm not sure," Em said, looking out into the distance. "I just know it's there. I know we'll be okay."

"Seriously? She is in charge?" Derin said.

Emmer translated. "I am in charge. I see what she sees. We will move when the storm comes. We should be tied together. There are not enough eye shields, so some will cover their face and walk blind. We must be bundled well. It will be cold. We must be ready to leave."

"I am going back. Alone if I have to..."

Shariva speak was the lowest anyone here had ever heard. It was the strangest sound any had ever heard.

"If you try to leave, or threaten the safety this group, I will kill you," Shariva said. "Is this clear?"

Derin was appropriately scared. "I am afraid."

"Be more afraid of me than what is ahead of us," Emmer translated.

Derin walked back to the group. Shariva turned her gaze back to the darkness.

"I don't like the sky under a shield," Emmer said.

"Don't run from the shadows," Em said. "The light is on the other side." Shariva said something.

"Are you channeling him?" Emmer asked.

"No," Em said. "He is absence. He is honoring the request. There are others here, though. They're aware of our plight."

"Come on," Jordeen said. "Let's try to sleep."

Emmer stayed with Shariva looking into the darkness. Even the desert was disappearing. There was

a sadness in him that he couldn't bear longer. He allowed it to find words.

"Shariva," Emmer said, his heart committing before he knew what it was about. "I owe your species a life debt. I will honor it through you. I will be by your side until my debt is paid or I am dead."

Shariva said something, a softness. It basically translated you don't owe me.

"I am alive because I did some horrific things to your kind. Had I more courage to die with honor, I would not of done those things," Emmer said.

The response was soft. One didn't need to understand Wookiee to hear "I know." "What do you know?" Emmer asked.

Shariva spoke something; there was no emotion in it. "You killed my brother." Emmer was troubled. "How do I not owe you?" Emmer asked.

It was a complicated thing to say. "There is no way to repay what you have taken from me, from society. This thing was too big for me to hold. I gave it to the Force." "I will serve you till my death," Emmer said.

The sound was acceptance. "Okay."

Jordeen and Em had settled into a small hollow in the side of ravine wall, a natural alcove. They were close enough to know that some of the group, especially the kids, were grumpy, frustrated, scared. Em's mother was assisting, and calming the few her charge with a song. Some other caretakers brought their charges closer.

"Am I wrong not to be afraid?" Em asked.

"You said it, you faced worth," Jordeen said. "You and I have both been medically dead before, and..."

"Being dead was easier," Em said. She had to think about it. "I don't mean that morosely. There was so much love available. I still felt stuff, like my mom's sadness. I chose to come back because of mom. She would have been alright, but..." "You came back because of love," Jordeen said.

"Jordeen, do I have to be a Jedi?" Em asked.

"Tell me more," Jordeen said.

"I don't want a lightsaber. I don't want to kill anyone," Em said.

"Then don't," Jordeen said. "There is more to being a Jedi Knight than that. If you must know, you and I won't be Jedi Knights. The term is changing." "What will we call ourselves?" Em asked.

"I would like to call us Waycasters," Jordeen said. "The people who aspire to be like the old Jedi, they would be Skywalkers. Those who aspire to be Sith, Shadow-runners." "Skywalker is too common," Em said. "But it makes sense if it's a name based on a trade."

"We should rest," Jordeen said.

"I cannot," Em said.

"Then meditate," Jordeen said.

"Have you designated a target?" Em asked.

"No. Go with the Force," Jordeen said.

They both took up a meditation pose. Jordeen was gone before Em. Em knew because she peeked, and could discern the change in aura activity. Rays went out into the Universe. One of the beams became prominent. She was interacting with someone or something. Em closed her eyes and returned to the practice, at first aware of the passage of time, but slowly letting go, going deeper, going... She found herself in the desert. She liked the fall of light and shadows on the golden sand. She found footprints, human, an adult, and followed. There was a man meditating on a rock and at first she thought

it was Preston and ran to him.

It was not Preston. He was older. Scary scraggily, but not scary in any other way. She felt compelled to remain. She didn't want to walk away without saying hi, but she also didn't want to speak, because clearly he was meditating, and that was just rudeness.

"What do you want?" he said.

"Who are you?" Em said.

He opened his eyes. "You don't know who I am?" "Should I know you?" Em asked.

"I am Luke Skywalker," he said.

"Oh," Em said, not apparently impressed.

"That's it?" Luke asked.

"Am I supposed to curtsy?" Em asked. Luke smiled. "No," he said. "Why are you here?" "Why are you here?" Em said.

"I asked you first," Luke said.

"The winds of the Force delivered me to the sands. I followed footsteps," Em said. Luke traced her words and her path back in the sand before returning. "The Force is strong with you. It's so... Pure."

"If you don't mind me making my own assessment, you don't seem anywhere as misanthropically morose as Preston suggests in his rants," Em said.

A conflict of emotions played out on his face, but then he smiled. "So, you're with him."

"He healed me," Em said.

"He is changing things," Luke said.

"Things change," Em said.

"Only if we let them," Luke said.

Em considered. "Would you have this space be a desert for all time? What if we allowed rain and flowers, even if it's for a while? Deserts tend to be forever, but even the arrangement of sand and light is forever shifting."

"When did you get so wise?" Luke said.

"I was born old," Em said. "I paid more karma in my first few years than most will pay in a lifetime. We go at our own rate."

"I wish I had known you when I was young," Luke said.

"You know me now, is that not enough?" Em asked.

Luke pushed himself off the rock, landed on his feet, knelt down to be eye to eye with her.

"Tell me something," Luke said. "What would you do?"

That was it. There was the passage of time while he waited. Em blinked. "Could provide more context?"

"No, just respond to that," Luke said.

Em nodded. "If you are unhappy doing something, then do something else. If you're unhappy whether you are doing something or nothing, then the problem isn't what you are doing or not doing, but rather there is something inside you that is in conflict. Most of the universe is neutral, peaceful. You're breathing. That's peaceful. This rock was supporting you. That's kindness. The patterns etched on the sand is the flaw of a diamond. It's beauty. All actions result in consequences. All inactions result in consequences. It's not personal. Don't seek happiness, or understanding, just be, just breathe."

Luke's eyes were moist. A tear fell. Rain fell without clouds. "And if I fail?"

"There is no failure. That is ego," Em said. "There is only experience, only learning. We are one in the Force. It has us, always." "I have failed..." Luke said.

"By teaching judgment," Em said. "You taught knowledge of the light and dark and asked people to choose, and they do. Light and dark, a continuum of shades of gray. People chose the portion of the spectrum they have access to based on their paradigms and perspective. Things are not inherently good or bad. Compassion begins when you realize you have this in you, light and dark. We are conceived in darkness, born into the light, and we rise to a place

where this no duality, it is all one. Get this, and you will be an ascended master." Luke said nothing. The sands were dark with their fill of water.

"You don't want to ascend," Em said. "You want to be punished?" Luke made eye contact with her.

"You are not your father," Em said. "You saved him and now he walks in the light. Why can't you?" Luke hugged her. The ground was changed. They were on a carpet of grass and flowers and gentle, flying insects, and birds. The rock was the only unchanged artifact. Luke stood and met the sun.

"It is the same sun, whether desert or forest," Em said. "Go into the light."

"Thank you, Em," Luke said.

He vanished in a cloud of smoke, dissipated, the flowers breathing in his essence and blossoming.

Em laughed. "You stole that from Preston!" she called after him. "Good for you." Chapter 3

Jessie Newgood fumed. She was angry and sad. She had been given one mission, secure an audience with Preston G Waycaster and beg for his assistance. Princes Leia had commissioned her herself, in person, and her failure likely meant the end of the resistance. She paced. At the far end of her trek was the glass wall, looking down over the Axilla city landscape. The In-heart Suites was the largest building in this area, the top of which mushroomed out into a dual space and air facility. They were in the shade of the upper platform.

"I don't see why you have to torture yourself, mam," Ortolani said. He was older man, perhaps seventy, but he had the strength and stamina of a forty year old. Clean cut, drinking alcohol, he was calm. No one alive had ever seen him not being calm. "If he won't see you, he won't see you. And there isn't enough firepower in this sector to breach that fortress." "He must have aligned himself with the First Order," Kalini said. She was younger, but trained in military combat, and a fair pilot. "That's the only explanation for the raid being called off."

"We did double cross him," Jessie pointed out.

"Command doesn't see it that way," Ortolani said. "It was strategic. If he's as peaceful as he claims, he'll understand that."

Six others, four more military men, and support staff, kept their opinions to themselves. If the resistance was eliminated, they would likely have to go into hiding, and Axxilla would not be the first choice of places to hide.

"That strategy has us all on the run," Jessie pointed out. "We should have helped Waycaster..."

Waycaster arrived in the midst of the group, facing Jessie Newgood. Every weapon in the room came to bear on G. NewGood was the only one not carrying. Ortolani was the closest, his weapon pointed up against the neck.

“You can’t kill me,” G said.

“Want to bet?” Ortolani said.

“Put your weapons down,” Jessie said. She stepped bravely forwards. “It’s true. You’re the most powerful Jedi ever?”

“No,” G said, smiling. “I am merely a padawan.”

“Since when can padawans walk through walls?” Ortolani said.

“I have a response to that, however, I would rather not disparage the keepers of the old order. More precisely, I find I am doing that too much,” G said. “You requested an audience with me.”

“I came to beg for your help,” Jessie said.

“You are aware that I am not taking sides in this,” G said.

“You can’t remain neutral,” Jessie said. “If the resistance falls, a darkness greater than the Emperor will fall over the galaxy.”

“It’s called night time,” G said. “The physical realm is about duality.” “Tell me why I shouldn’t just pull the trigger?” Ortolani asked.

“First, it won’t kill me. I am not here. Second, Jessie’s proximity would likely mean your shot will kill her,” G said.

“You’re a hologram?” Jessie asked.

Ortolani touched him with his weapon. “You seem real to me.” “Pull the trigger,” G invited.

Ortolani hesitated.

“The other reason you don’t want to shoot me is because I am going to help you,” G said.

“Honest? You’ll send your fleet...”

“I will help you, conditionally. I wish to speak the terms of my conditions privately,” G said.

“This is nonsense,” Ortolani said. “It’s not like the resistance is full of credits...”

“I don’t want currency, or power, or anything material,” G said. “I will speak this to you, Jessie, in private.”

“Leave us,” Jessie said.

“Mam?”

“Assume he is telling the truth, and he can come and go as he likes, do you suppose he came all this way to kill me?” Jessie asked.

Ortolani clicked his weapon on safety, put it in the holster. He was the last one to leave the room.

“Why have you forsaken the path of Light?” Newgood asked.

“You assume I have because the works I do are not big or public,” G said.

“But this is our most desperate hour...”

“It’s always the most desperate hour,” G said. “There is always someone in need. How many stars in the galaxy? 250 billion? How many planets are occupied with life? Do you suppose, whatever that number is, there is only one voice crying in the night for help? Hell, there are one hundred billion people on this planet alone? Who do you help? How do you choose?” “But you will help us? What are your conditions?”

“I want you,” G said.

“What?” Jessie asked. She took a step back. “Like in marriage?”

“More intimate than that, and a much greater commitment,” G said. “I want you to be my

Padawan. I will teach you the ways of the Force and I will raise you to Jedi status.”

“I am not Force sensitive...” Jessie said.

“That’s the deal,” G said. “You agree to be my Padawan until you reach the equivalent of Jedi Status. You embrace me as your Master, and you be obedient until you have accomplished the path I have laid out for you.”

“I am not...”

“Everyone is! That’s the whole point. Everyone is one with the Force. Are some more naturally attuned to it? Sure. Some are artists. Some are musicians. Some are Force sensitive. It’s all one with the Force,” G said. He took a step forwards, closing the distance between her, demanding her eyes.

“It would take me years of meditation...”

“No, it won’t,” G said. “I will push you further and harder than you have ever dared push yourself. I will take you to the edges of the Universe and back. Let’s be clear on this. You will have no privacy with me. This will be greater intimacy than anything you have ever experience. Greater than sex.”

Jessie retreated. The glass wall stopped her. “You want sex?”

“I will expect sex,” G said. “It is the fastest way to transpersonal experiences. It will open things in you. It will open things in me. It will bind us in ways we can’t realize until it happens.”

“I don’t know,” Jessie said.

“Why do you think Leia sent you? You’re inexperienced. You’re young. You’re cute,” G said. “She knew if anyone was going to get my attention, it would be you.”

“I need to think on it,” Jessie said.

“You don’t have time to think,” G said. “Go beyond thinking. Go beyond feelings. Decide. Commit to an answer. It’s that easy. The Force is that easy. You just decide.”

“Aren’t Jedi supposed to be celibate?” Jessie asked.

“Don’t get hung up on the sex part. Yes, celibacy was highly encouraged. That was the old order,” G said. “The old order is gone. There will be no order. There will just be us. Those we chose to train.”

Her eyes met his and stayed. “Yes,” she said.

“Yes what?”

“Yes, Master,” she said.

“Yes, what?” G repeated again.

“Yes, I accept. I will train with you until you say I have accomplished what you have set out for me,” Jessie said.

G kissed her. It was tentative, gentle. It was slow. She warmed up to the kiss.

“Better than a handshake,” Jessie said.

“It will take more than kiss to bind us,” G said.

“And you will help the resistance?” Jessie asked.

“I am helping even now. In two hours, report to the Fortress. Bring your escort if you feel the need. I will give you your proof when you arrive,” G said. “You will know I have kept my end of this arrangement.”

Jessie resumed the kissing on her own volition, hugging his neck to her. He vaporized and passed through her. She shivered so bad she nearly went to her knees. She found her breathing had changed and waited to recover before rejoining her community.



Kaila had done her homework. There was only way inside the Fortress, and that was to get passage on a ship that serviced Waycaster's needs. She watched smuggler ships come and go, studying their routes and timing. She interviewed the pilots and crew, in a sneaky sort of way. She even bedded one of the pilots after getting him drunk, and in his inebriated stupor found he was extremely pliable with Force commands. She whispered into the depths of his mind commands that would linger for a life time. The more she spoke, the more grounded commands became. He was so devoted to her, she didn't even have to continue sleeping with him to keep his loyalty. She did anyway, because, why not. Smuggler's life and space travel was fairly boring, and she liked using him. The crew didn't question her or the Captain. She bedded each of them and planted subliminal commands in them as well. The whole crew would sacrifice their lives to protect her. She was there a month before the ship was designated to do a Fortress run.

She figured she only need get inside, the rest would be easy.

The ship was given vectors, landed on one of the towers that serviced as the primary landing platform for the fortress. Normally, a lift would carry the ship down into the fortress' private bay, refueled, serviced if need be, the cargo bay filled without bound cargo, and then sent back to the surface. The ship had been powered down thirty minutes and still the lift did not descend. 'He can't know,' Kaila thought.

A smaller access door opened before the ship. A lift rose, carrying with it a single person. It was him! She felt a shiver down her spine. There was lust and murder in her eyes. And fear. A part of her said she should open fire at him with the Cargo ships weapons. A part of her wanted to go forwards and meet him. He gave a hand signal that the doors be opened.

Kaila gave the order to open the forward cargo door and lower the ramp. She went to meet Waycaster. She was not stupid. She brought all the smugglers with her. They came with their weapons drawn. They spread out and she came forward.

"Hello, Kaila," G said.

"You're a hard fellow to meet," Kaila said. "Not if you know the magic word," G said.

"Then you know why I am here," Kaila said.

"Stoke sent you," G said. "Let me guess. 'Join me or die.'"

"He is predictably maniacal," Kaila said. "Join me. I will make it worth your while."

"I have a counter offer," G said. "Become my apprentice and I will make you a Sith Lady. Or a Lord if you prefer a sex change."

Kaila laughed. "I am..."

"You're not a master. You're not even an apprentice. No one will have you. Stoke sent you because you're disposable. You're nothing more to him than cannon fodder and second rate whore he can pimp out cheaply," G said.

Kaila brought her lightsaber to life. Its red blade was fairly standard, but there was noticeable flaw in the frequency. It shimmered. It was unstable. It would still kill, but in a duel it was likely to blow up in her hand.

"No disrespect," G said, bringing up his hands in a peaceful surrender gesture. "Just pointing out the fact there have been too few female Siths. There is a reason for that. The male Siths can't compete with their strength and endurance, so they kill them. That and, it's supposed to be a boys club."

"Bow to me, and I will make you my apprentice," Kaila said.

“I will never bow, and you can’t kill me,” G said.

“We’ll see,” Kaila said.

Kaila charged. Her lightsaber went through him. He disappeared in a puff of smoke. The smoke rolled around her, filled her nostrils, and solidified behind her. She found a hand against her neck and another on her wrist. The pressure of the thumb hit a joint lock, and she dropped her saber.

“Kill him,” Kaila ordered.

None of the ship’s crew got a chance to fire. They flared and condensed before her eyes. Hot, glowing diamonds landed on the steel lift.

“You can’t kill me,” G said. “You don’t have the authority. But you can join me. I will make you a Sith, stronger than any present Sith.” “I accept,” Kaila said.

G let her go. She put an elbow into his gut, turned and kicked him. He caught her boot and spun her, putting her down hard on the steel deck. Her hand reached for the lightsaber. It moved towards her hand, then detoured, finding its way to Waycaster’s hand. It disappeared. “You can have it back after you agree to my terms,” G said. “Get up.” Kaila got up. She turned slightly sideways, uncertain.

“Come on,” G said.

“You’re toying with me,” Kaila said. It wasn’t a question.

“I wish to educate you,” G said. “But if you like, I will make you a toy and use you to my heart’s content.”

“You will die before that happens,” Kaila said.

G invited her to him with a summoning of fingers. Kaila came at him, and again she found herself on her back, lying on the ramp leading back into the Spark. He lifted her with the Force, walking past her into the cargo hold. She felt the Force surrounding her, penetrating her as she was drug into the ship. She heard the lift moving and briefly saw that the lift was going down. Sunlight diminished. Flashes of lights went by, waxing and waning, making shadows move across the cargo bay. She was aware of the Force, Waycaster’s weight on her. She heard his Force commands whispered into her soul, and she accepted each directive with eagerness. He owned her with her consent.

Chapter 4

The moon was hollow and contained more rooms and spaces than she would ever need. The surface was barren and lifeless. Some of the craters were covered with domes. Some simply had a flat, transparent polymer that went across the top of the crater. Some of these looked like pools of water as you passed over. Some of the craters contained open bodies of water. Some fresh, some salty. Each crater was a habitat. There were underground caverns that were habitats. Many of the habitats were connected by tunnels. Some weren't. Those usually held life forms not compatible with majority of the life samples.

Her favorite place was the garden. The garden extended for miles, but the center of the garden was particularly pleasant for her. She could up at the center of the dome and sometimes believe it was just the canopy of a home world. It could give off enough light to keep the plants alive. It could go dark and allow for her to see out into the sky. The night sky was bright here. It was also more 'sparkly.' Light did funny things here. It was difficult to not feel dizzy when using her eyes to sort the kaleidoscope of frequencies rushing at her.

The trees here were ever greens, and they were eons old. There were lights in the trees. Spherical crystals that grew like fruit, but appeared as delicate as soap bubbles adorning the tree. Not adorning. A part of the tree. These were the fruits of souls. Sometimes she ate them. She had eaten every fruit in the garden and this one was the most satisfying. She could go months without eating after eating one of these.

She could also see into the fruit. She turned one in front of her eyes, careful not to break the thin, spider web of a thread holding it to the tree. As she turned it, she could see the life of the resonant soul, seeing its life from cradle to grave. She could stare at these for hours. It was necessary because spinning to fast, you simply got snapshots into a person's life. Turning the ball back you might land where your eyes once were, and when you focused time would flow forwards again. It bothered her she never saw a life go backwards, but she knew beyond a doubt she could wind it back and watch it unfold. Sometimes a bubble would burst in her hand and spill the sweetest juice over her hands. Sometimes she felt compelled to pop it. She could also entice it to grow, to become.

She had insisted that one particular one grow. It was now so heavy the branch had lowered to the ground. The bubble was no longer a perfect circle. Nor was it transparent. She could discern a silhouette of the figure inside. It was ripe and would soon burst, spilling its contents over the grass. She was prepared to receive the guest. There was a basin and pitcher of water. A wash cloth. A robe. Most of the people were grateful for the robes.

The bubble burst and a viscous, red liquid flow. The shell deflated over the silhouette, becoming more body shape. Female. Human. Hands and knees came up and there was a struggle. Hands broke free first, and then the face was freed from the thin, gelatin like shell. The woman came up on hands and knees, retched and vomited the fluid from her lungs and gasped. She stared at the grass, recovering, then sat back, taking it all in. She became aware of not being alone.

She smiled at the guest. "Not where you thought you'd end up?"

"I don't understand," the newcomer said.

"Most people don't," she said. "I am surprised you don't, Daphne."

"You know who I am? Who are you?" Daphne said.

"I have many titles. Caretaker. Gardner. Collector. Midwife. Witch. Seer. Oracle. Watcher. Healer. Guardian," she said.

"But do you have a name?" Daphne asked.

"Lilly," she said. She touched a rock that was beside her. "Come, sit."

“No,” Daphne said.

Lilly gave a come hither sign and Daphne got up and went and sat exactly where she had been invited to sit.

“You will find it is easier to just comply with my requests,” Lilly said.

“Did you just use the Force on me?” Daphne asked.

“Oh! How barbaric!” Lilly said, standing. “I would never do such a thing.”

Lilly poured water into the basin. She wet a washcloth, applied a soap, and began cleaning Daphne’s face. “Hands’ at your side, please,” she said. She poured water from the pitcher over her head. She sat the pitcher down and thoroughly washed Daphne’s hair, lathering it up with suds. She washed shoulders, upper arms, back, breasts. Daphne was uncomfortable with the intimacy of the bath, but she could neither move nor protest. A part of her was happy to be clean. She tried to tell herself this was just a thing people do for each other; people care for others. Lilly poured water over her, washing away the suds. The pitcher never seemed to empty. She then cleaned her lower half, thoroughly, as intimately as a lover. She cleaned her thighs, her legs, and finally her feet. A wind came up around her, drying her. Lilly offered her a robe.

“Am I dead?” Daphne asked.

“Do you feel dead?”

“I am pretty sure I...” “You did,” Lilly said.

“I want answers,” Daphne said.

Lilly was barefoot. Creatures came to clean up birth mess, eating chunks, licking the grass. Lilly collected her washing materials. One of the creatures licked her leg.

“Thank you. It sure does get everywhere, doesn’t it,” she told it. “Follow me.” Daphne faltered.

“Please don’t make me do all the work. Walk,” Lilly said.

Daphne followed. There was a table set with fruits from the garden in a small clearing. There was water to drink. There was a noise in the background. A low rumbling, like a nearby waterfall.

“You hear it,” Lilly said.

“What is that?” Daphne said.

“The churning of space/time,” Lilly said. “The technical term is frame dragging. All of space and time, everything that is, it all is rushing towards this point, and it is broken and churned, falling around us. Time and space itself falling around us. It’s resonates everything in this space. It’s the feeling you get sitting on an oscillator. It’s like tuning into the Force, times infinity. This is infinity.” Lilly was staring at nothing, her eyes closing. She breathed in slowly.

Daphne wondered if she were on drugs, or perhaps, Force Ecstatic. She had read ecstatic states Jedi’s could enter, spinning in circles for hours... Lilly returned. “Arousing, isn’t it? Life and sex and birth and death, right here, all the time. Help yourself to food.” “Where am I?” Daphne asked.

“Here,” Lilly said.

“Are you being purposely vague?” Daphne asked.

“You killed yourself. I brought you here,” Lilly said.

“You had no right...”

“I had every right. You ended your rights to pure volition with that act,” Lilly said. “I will keep you safe.” “You can’t stop me from doing it again,” Daphne said.

“I would be very impressed if you could,” Lilly said. “But it’s a waste of time. I’ll just bring you back. Maybe you have forgotten, you didn’t seem to like the birthing process.”

“You can’t keep me here,” Daphne said.

“Look around you. What do you see?” Lilly asked.

“Forest. Lights. Animals,” Daphne said.

“How many trees?” Lilly asked.

“Hundreds? Thousands?” Daphne asked.

“There is only one,” Lilly said. “You, I, everything here- one organism. Your autonomy is limited. I can inhibit your behavior. I can make you do whatever I like. You may think whatever you like. I even encourage it, but ultimately, I am in charge of the body. I own it.

Come, see this.”

Lilly brought her closer to one of the bubbles on the tree. “It’s best to just use your periphery...”

But Daphne was drawn in, already gone. Inside, the world was changing, as if she were walking, first person view. She was moving through a world. Streets. People passing. She heard music in her head. She heard a voice that wasn’t her’s in her head. She looked down at herself, saw a body that wasn’t her, in a red dress. Lilly’s hands twirled the orb spinning her out as the world ran quickly forwards into the future. “What happened?” Daphne asked.

“You become what you watch,” Lilly said.

“That’s a person,” Daphne said, and looked around at all the orbs. “All of these are people.”

“Yes,” Lilly said. “Harmonic resonance, soul couplings, mostly random samplings of the galaxy at large. I can Force tune connections; I do this when I find particular beings that interest me. I did this with you.” “I interested you?”

“You become what you watch,” Lilly reminded me.

“Why were you watching me?” Daphne asked.

“Why not? Photons are free,” Lilly said. “Come with me.”

The walked a path. It was a wild place, but yet organized. The path was a true path, not a haphazard one that’s randomly created in nature.

“Are there others here?” Daphne asked.

“Just me,” Lilly said.

“That sounds lonely,” Daphne said.

“I am never lonely, dear,” Lilly said.

“Then why do you watch others?” Daphne asked.

They came to a cliff wall and a tunnel. The airlock door was transparent and allowed them to pass without key card or commands. The tunnel ended, opening up into another cavern. The cavern was filled with statues. Beings of every kind were represented here. There were beings Daphne had never seen, and some she had only seen in books. She stopped to examine one, touching it.

“Did you make these?” Daphne said.

“Yes,” Lilly said.

“They’re amazing,” Daphne said. “So life like. This medium. I have seen it before, but can’t place the name.”

“Please, follow me,” Lilly said.

They wandered through the statues. Daphne stopped. “The Emperor? Why would you make him?”

“He was interesting. He never quite got it right, but very interesting,” Lilly said.

“He was evil,” Daphne said.

“Interesting,” Lilly corrected. “Do you suppose a person can be so perfectly evil that no coincidental good occurs?”

Lilly drew closer to the statue of the emperor. “Shh, mother’s got you.” She patted his face. Then, as if remembering something. “This way please.”

Daphne was now concerned for her wellbeing, and the mental health status of Lilly. She brought them to an alcove.

“Please, stand here,” Lilly said.

“No,” Daphne said.

Lilly motioned with her fingers and placed her. She began positioning her.

“Collector,” Daphne said. “What do you collect?” “Souls,” Lilly said.

She stepped back as the realization and horror filled Daphne’s face. Flash freezing her in carbonite captured the moment. Lilly touched the face. “That’s just perfect,” Lilly said. “I never get tired of that look. Realization. Horror. I think I shall call you epiphany.” Lilly kissed her. “Shh, mother’s got you. I will carry you to the end, my love. Sleep. Dream. I do love the dreams that come.”

♪♪ ▶

G stood under a stream of water, his head resting against the wall. The water drummed against the back of his neck. The open shower had multiple setting, and the present mode made for rain. The whole room was a bath. Four pillars in the center, each containing their own shower head, stone benches, three alcoves, one for different, multiple stream settings, one for a sauna, one for a floating bath or hot tub. Specks in the stone wall of the shower alcove reflected the dim light, like stars imbedded in the rock. A strobe sparked, simulating lightening. Thunder followed. There was the sound of a lightsaber igniting behind him. He didn’t stir or otherwise signal that he was aware.

“You are a fool,” Alarna Burns said. “You have over reached.”

“Mother,” G said, quietly. “This is becoming dreary.”

“Did you think Kaila was the only one trying to get in the Fortress on the Spark?” Alarna asked. “Have you overstretched yourself that much you weren’t aware of me?” “This is inconvenient,” G said. “I am in the shower.”

“I never took a shower without a lightsaber,” Alarna said.

G turned to face her. She was surprised by her dress. She was dressed in a simple skirt, bare legs with shoes that laced up around her legs. Her shirt was too short, revealing her belly. He almost laughed.

“New look?” G asked.

“Your new girlfriend instructed me to wear it,” Alarna said. “Oh, I see. I have your attention. She likes girls more than boys. OMG, you are so fucking easy.”

“You did catch me in the shower,” G said.

“You’re over confidence in your personal security has ended you,” Alarna said. “It’s not overconfidence, mother,” G said. “I rely on the Force. If I didn’t see you, it was because the Force intended this encounter. I love you. I will not kill you.”

“I know,” Alarna said, advancing on the alcove. There was no way past her, and his fresh robes on the counter held no lightsaber. “Any master who instructs more than one apprentice in the ways of the dark side is a fool. In time the apprentices will unite their strengths and overthrow the master. It is inevitable; Axiomatic. That is why each master must have only one student.”

“Oh, please. Revan’s philosophy was inspired by paranoid delusions,” G said. “So if you’re going to quote him or Bane, you might as well kill me now because I am bored with their pretentious preaching.”

The whole dark path is about killing one's master in order to advance, so whether I have one, or a dozen, ultimately it results in my death."

"I personally wouldn't have picked Kaila, but she did fuck with me, so after I kill you, I will take her and train her the way she was supposed to be," Alarna said. "I already slept with her. It seems only fair that I enslave her the way she tried to enslave me. I have had much darker rutting over me. And she is not as dark as she pretends."

"You can't kill me," G said.

"You won't kill me, and you have no weapons," Alarna said. "I love you. You're the best son I never wanted. And now, I will tuck you in for the first time, one last time..."

Alarna brought the lightsaber back across in a simple wrist flex and was surprised to be blocked by a lightsaber. It appeared from nowhere, its gold beam shimmering. Its appearance arrived with a loud report that echoed through the bath. Both lightsabers caught raindrops. Water vapor rose between them, twirling through Force currents like metal dust following magnetic lines. Alarna still had an advantage of the open space, and attacked fiercely. She ended up pinning him against the wall, full body contact. His free hand went to her wrist and locked on. Her took on the weight of water. Drops ran down her face.

"I can go anywhere in the Universe, create a doppelganger anywhere I want and interact remotely in distant worlds in real time," G said. "Did you think I can't manifest a simple lightsaber on demand?"

"Submit to my authority," Alarna said. "Die."

"You have no authority over me," G said. "You are not the one who kills me." "This ends here. You will kill me or die," Alarna said.

"I will not," G insisted.

"What's that I feel between us? My advantage?" Alarna said, smirking.

G was aware, but her drawing attention to it made the problem more severe. She surprised him with a kiss. It was not a motherly kiss.

"Umm, mother issues. I have been going about this all wrong," Alarna said. "There is more than one way to put a man to sleep."

Alarna kissed him again, grinding against him. He turned his head.

"Stop," G said.

"Or what?" Alarna said. "You'll kill me?"

Alarna pulled on him, sinking to the floor, her weight dragging him down. She put a bit Force into it. He went with her, landing on top of her. Their lightsabers remained locked. She locked her legs behind him. Lightsabers sparked the rock floor; water cooled the glowing edges of the stone floor. Mother bucked and shifted herself under him, accommodating him. Her legs squeezed him. G was surprised by her wetness, how easily they came together. Either she was aroused as he, or her past trauma simply released her female essence in anticipation of being brutalized, to reduce the possible trauma. Combat itself could be arousing, but just trying to understand this in the context of the moment influenced him the wrong direction, just making him harder.

"Shhh, baby. Come for momma," Alarna said.

"Stop," G said.

"Give in," Alarna said.

"Mother!" G said.

"I have never had a man not sleep after finishing in me," Alarna said. "A little Force talent I

developed. The fastest way to get the Emperor off my back was to get him off. You will sleep. Feel the Force enveloping you as I envelope you...”

“I will not sleep,” G said.

“Shhh, that’s it. That’s it. Oh, baby, this is inevitable,” Alarna said. “You’re so big, son...”

Alarna bit her lip, her eyes revealing surprise.

“You’re not the only one with this skill,” G said.

It became a race to bring the other off first. Both used body, rhythm, weight, but they both were also using the Force. Every cell in their body was being stimulated. The secondary urgency to want relief as they arrived at their own plateau was overwhelming, making it hard to focus on other; they equally needed resolution. Alarna gasped, her voice squeaking. Her eyes locked on her son’s eyes, the subtlest of smile creeping in before she went to sleep. Her lightsaber extinguished. Her hands remained above her head. Her legs came down, freeing him. G took her lightsaber and made it go away. G relaxed into her, resting his forehead against hers. He withdrew from inside her, and laid his head on her bosom, recovering his breath. He closed his eyes, realizing, this was the first time he had ever been so intimate with his mother, and though intimate was the right word, it failed to capture all the subtle nuances of what it meant to be close to woman. The smell of her was incredibly enticing and he wanted this moment to be forever. Was there ever any way to separate mother from woman? He did not feel shame. He felt at peace. He softly kissed the breast that never allowed him to suckle. He closed his eyes as if he might surrender to sleep. He inhaled. He savored the smell of her, robbed of this primary, nurturing scent from birth. He eased off of her, his lightsaber remaining lit. He slowly recovered his breath. He extinguished the blade. The shower walls returned to the dim, artificial, silvery moonlight. He brought her arms down beside her, ‘death pose.’ He straightened her legs, lowered her skirt. A wave of his hand the shower ended. He made himself comfortable beside her, holding her hand.

“I never sleep after,” G said. He made his lightsaber go away.

♪♪▶

There were probably a dozen floating cities spread out across Darthomir, brought in by companies to exploit the environment. Fully contained cities, they made for especially good remote mining platforms, whether that was ore or sea life. They offered a haven from ‘darkness’ of living on the planet itself. Captain Shay Quillen ignored the ‘darkness’ aspect as simply a manifestation of psychological angst. It was his opinion, the planet was ‘dark’ only because it was practically ninety percent wild. Humans had been at war a long time with nature. Nature was losing. The floating cities was just another way to exploit resources and prove his superiority.

Man living in the cloud was a god, separate from the environment he ruled over. ‘Abalus’ was his city, one he had had commissioned twenty five years ago. He owned it outright, due to profits and other successful investments.

It was practically invisible at night, due to the rising mists from the forest. It held position at an altitude just at the cusp of the red cloud layer, but the mist that the planet was so well known for tended to envelope the city, as if it were wanting to pull it down. His shuttle was practically upon it before it was visible from the shuttle’s port. Shay didn’t even bother to look. There was nothing to see. He simply continued reading through inventories and profit logs until the shuttle was fully seated upon its private pad.

Quillen descended the ramp, followed by a personal guard. A woman met him at the end of the ramp, kneeling. She was a tall, thick woman. Not unfit, but not the delicate, slender proportions so often seen hanging on the arms of men of Quillen’s status. She had a look about her that would probably

result in Quillen being secretly ridiculed, locker room jokes that perhaps he preferred men, or more likely, monsters, but there was no obvious romantic connection. As far as anyone knew, they were simply ‘business’ partners. Her support staff, which were also her personal guard, knelt as well. His hands were gloved. He touched the woman’s face, and then slowly applied pressure to her chin, indicating he wanted her to rise. He drew closer, smelling her breath, scrutinizing her eyes.

“It’s nice to see you again, Kayo Mons,” he said. “It’s been a long time since we stood together in the same place.”

“I was expecting you earlier, my Lord,” Kayo said.

“Yes, well, I’ve been busy securing a planet. You’d be surprised how much work is involved quelling riots and retaliatory strikes. Anyway, you can expect that I will be visiting more frequently,” Quillen said.

“Now that you own the sky,” Kayo said.

“That was just pure fortune. Not unforeseeable,” Quillen said. “Darthomir is way too valuable a resource to go undeveloped indefinitely. My investments here were good business sense. The First Order’s interests in Darthomir is merely icing on the cake.”

Quillen touch her belly. “You’re due soon.”

“Next month,” she said.

He nodded. He remained business like, told his flight crew and guard that they would be here for precisely two hour and they could do as they please during the interim. They dispersed and he returned his attention back to Kayo. They were too professional to laugh or make fun of him, but he thought he heard joking. He thought he heard ‘Rancor Face.’ He scrutinized Kayo’s face. Her face had always been hard, unreadable. Ever since he picked her out. Time had not eased that. He wondered if there moments of softness in her private life with the kids, and just like that, his musings were done. He could care less about the details as long as she continued to make him money.

“I would like to see some of our product line,” Quillen said. “Specifically, the amber.” Kayo bowed and led the way. Her guards dispersed with a single nod. It wasn’t lost on Quillen that two of the six were visibly pregnant. Judging by the size of others’ breast-they were probably nursing. “Have you heard from our first?” Kayo asked.

“Umm? Oh, yeah,” Quillen said. It took a moment to track her meaning, and then a little effort to know specifically who she was referring to. Their first child together had gone on Academy and was so successful a pilot that he was given a position on Snoke’s command ship.

“He survived.”

“How?” Kayo asked.

“I don’t have the details. Much of the communiques are still being censored,” Quillen said.

“Is it true, Snoke is dead?” Kayo asked.

“You did not hear that from me,” Quillen said. Kayo didn’t inquire further.

“Don’t worry,” Quillen said. “Though you can expect a huge power shift, my position here is fortified due to the need to hold Darthomir. Admiral Hacshe is old school, long-time loyalty to the principles of the cause, and surprisingly well esteemed. He is one of the few alive who can say they stood in the presence of the Emperor.”

Kayo was attentive to Quillen, but revealed no emotions. Quillen responded as if he had heard something. “He is an excellent officer, but a bit weird. To be precise, he eccentric.”

Kayo nodded as if she understood. She would never dream of revealing she held these thoughts

of Quillen. Part of her brain tried to apply personality disorder nomenclature on him, to explain his weirdness. Schizoid came up frequently, but it didn't fit everything she knew about him. She wondered if perhaps personality disorders were a continuum. She wondered if the military got the majority of these types, given the militia often strongly resembled the stereotypes. "I assume you will be more involved in decision making here," Kayo said.

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't dream of micromanaging you," Quillen said. "You've proven yourself more than dependable. You're profitable. How many heirs have you personally given me?"

"Personally? Twenty seven," Kayo said. "One for every years since our arrangement, one set of twins. I am being told this may be my last." "How do you feel about that?" Quillen asked.

Kayo frowned. She actually revealed an emotion. Quillen seemed to respond to her. It seemed like genuine affection, but she knew better to allow that sort of thinking, but there was hope in that tiny moment before both secured their public mask.

"Apprehensive," she admitted. Nothing but direct honesty, without emotions, had ever served her. "You were very clear when you hired me, I would only maintain my position if I continued to produce offspring."

"I did say that," Quillen said.

"You are aware that only females hold authority in this city and that no one was given authority that didn't take an oath to you. Only those who agreed to sire your children advanced. One child per level of advancement," Kayo said. It was a good business plan. It guaranteed their emotional investment in the long term viability of the company's agenda; it was no longer just a job, it was a commitment to family. "Feel free to test me on this. There isn't one child living on this city that isn't directly related to you." And that was true. Women who gave birth to children that weren't Quillen's were dismissed, or relocated to off city productions centers or warehouses. It took a few to fully implement her plan and bring in the management team she wanted, but it was made easier by the fact Quillen own the city. Any complaints about the hiring and promotion agenda were simply met with dismissals and relocation back to the ground based operation.

"I have," Quillen assured her; he had spy droids that kept him informed and allowed insight into the inner workings. And at rare times when he had been able to visit Darthomir, he hijacked droids and interacted through Avatars, secretly.

Kayo seemed unconformable, actually apprehensive.

"Relax. I don't spy on all my subjects, but I found myself particularly interested in you over the years," Quillen said. "And I am not unhappy with what you did." Kayo paled, as if caught in the secret.

"My dear, you simply adopted my game, I like that about you," Quillen assured her. "You know?" Kayo asked.

"That you donated your eggs to the women and they gave birth to your children?" Quillen asked. "Yes. And that's smart. How many eggs does a woman make in a life time? A million? But you can't birth a million, but if you had portable wombs you could theoretically bring forth millions, but that would be too conspicuous. No, it's better to do it your way. The birth moms have an emotional attachment to what they carry, theirs or not. Oh. They don't know."

"No. It's random. They have their own offspring with you, so if they did a random genetic test, they would find their genes," Kayo said. "But they all have given birth to at least one our children. One girl, who couldn't have children on her own, carries only our line. Only one suspects, but she has not broken her silence, mostly because I compensated her with greater authority."

“Women amaze me. Always willing to keep the secret, keep the family way going,” Quillen said. “Even when it’s not quite right. And that is why you have earned the title of matriarch of Abalus. As long as you continue with this policy, and continue to be profitable, you will maintain your position of authority. Hopefully, you have been grooming your predecessor, in the event that you should want to retire?”

“I have several candidates for you to consider; in case you wanted me to retire,” Kayo said. “Do you have six by chance?” Quillen asked. “I trust everyone in my charge,” Kayo said.

“Well, that’s foolish,” Quillen chastised her. “Do you have six?”

“I have two dozen who will serve you as well as I, and eager to prove themselves,” Kayo said.

“Choose six,” Quillen said. “You will find an email with the names of the other floating cities I wish take charge of.”

“The corporation is likely to resist our particular organizational policies and protocols...” “I assure you, they will not resist you or your ‘fellow wives,’” Quillen said. “You did hear about the accidental weapons fire this week? One of the cities fell. Many lives were lost. It will not rise again.” “That was...”

“An unfortunate accident,” Quillen said. “As you have noted, you live in the clouds, but I own the sky. There won’t be an issue in regime change, and as long as the shareholders get a stipend there will be little formal protests. I expect your sisters to be equally profitable. I also expect them to continue to implement your operational protocols.”

They arrived at Kayo’s suite. It was her office, her home, her world. There was a balcony. There was also an upside down, transparent bubble that allowed her to descend into it and see the entire world beneath her by walking around the central column that descended from the base of the city. Her observation deck was her private place to meditate and think. When the mist permitted, she could see the furthest horizon and see the thick of the forest below. Drones scurried to and from the city, collecting samples. They couldn’t see it now, due to the mist and night, but directly below the city they had carved a shaft almost to the mantle with lasers. Droid and organics worked the mines.

An arrangement of products on a table revealed a series of objects, raw samples of amber with hues that spanned the entire spectrum. Finished products were amber jewels that have been cut. They seemed to have inner glow of their own and it took a moment for Quillen to realize they were actually self-illuminated, versus an outside light source tricking him into wanting. This was not a sales gimmick; the stones called to you, desiring to be held. Only the Black Amber didn’t glow. In fact, it had a shadow about it as if it were sucking in light, so instead of sharp edges, the edges seemed to be drawn into the object; an optical illusion, such as a two dimensional cube with the front angle popping in and out with perspective change-the brains inability to force stability. This alone made it difficult to look away from it, and explained its value. People were insane and would pay incredible prices for trinkets, but this, this worked its way into the brain like nothing he had ever seen before. It took effort for Quillen to touch it. He had to remove a glove to touch it. It felt like a typical jewel, which frustrated his senses because the look of it didn’t fit the feel of it. It was only a growing fear that caused him to retreat from it.

He removed his glove and a dispenser on his belt ejected an antibacterial solution. He rubbed his hands clean and put his gloves back on.

There was only one sample of Black and Clear Amber- they were hard to find and priceless. The most abundant sample was the Red and Orange Amber, followed by Yellow. There was a smidgeon of Green, Blue, and Violet. A computer display showed their molecule structure, with a crystalline pattern that resembled diamonds.

“Ghost stones,” Kayo said. “This is our most lucrative product. Their value is likely to increase since the installation of the planetary shield.” “Why ghost stones?” Quillen asked. “It is said to enhance a person’s ability to communicate with the dead,” Kayo said.

“Please tell me you have not gone native,” Quillen said.

“I have not. No matter how much time you and I spend on Darthomir, we will never be native,” Kayo said. “Only those born here, who have attuned to the planet’s energy directly will be truly native. One of our children is considered a Seer. I named her Amber, after the Ghost Stones. I suspect that is a coincidence. The name didn’t make her a Seer. Her eyes are weird. Hazel. They seem to take on the color of the amber she holds. Her eyes glow. Some have suggested she is the reincarnated spirit of Karis, a witch who lived in the days of the Clone Wars. Anyway, the different colored amber seems to give her access to different realms.”

“I thought you had a better grounding in psychological theorems,” Quillen said.

“I prefer that perspective. I can offer explanations in terms archetypes and immersion in a planet wide consciousness. I am not pushing Darthomir is an entity unto herself, but if you allow that as a metaphor, it explains how we are all unconsciously influenced in a particular way. Call it what you will, I have to admit that even utilizing concepts of shadow work I cannot explain some of the things I have witnessed since migrating to this planet,” Kayo said. “It doesn’t matter what you and I believe. These Ghost Stones are coveted, and have been since the earliest days of the Jedi order. They can be used in Force Sensitive Technologies. If you were to hollow out a kyber crystal and place one of these inside you could use them to enhance a lightsaber. The different crystals, and different combinations, supposedly allow Jedi access to Force powers they don’t generally have access to.”

“How did you learn this?” Quillen asked.

“From a Holocron,” Kayo said.

“You have Holocron?” Quillen asked. “You can access it?”

“Our daughter can,” Kayo said.

“Amber? The Seer? Where did you find it?”

“We discovered a Jedi Cache in the ground,” Kayo said.

“In the ground?” Quillen asked.

“Precisely 14 kilometers deep, and one-meter south of central shaft I dug into the ground,” Kayo said. “We have evidence the space was carved out by lightsaber. The space itself is a domed shape, with a pyramid structure centered. The pyramid is just a frame, but comprised of the entire spectrum of amber, but somehow it is one continuous piece. In the domed ceiling, various colored amber stones were inserted into the ceiling. We have determined the placement corresponds to stellar cartography, as seen from Darthomir. If we accept that premise, the cache was established thousands of years ago, based on stellar alignments. There are several artifacts that suggests that the being that stayed there once served the Prime, the very first Jedi.”

“Seriously?” Quillen asked. Even he, who denied the existence of mystics, recognized the value of such a prize. His evidence for this was simply no matter how hard he had ever tried, he could not deflect a molecule of dust in a beam, or wish an opponent dead. “And how did a person enter the space? A 14 mile tunnel?”

“There is no tunnel. It is in the center of a solid rock formation that stretches a thousands of kilometers. This structure is the centerpiece of the continent, more than a billion years old,” Kayo said. “The density of this formation influences gravity. Things weigh more in this region. Satellites that pass over this region have to be repositioned after a dozen passes.”

“None of this story make any sense,” Quillen said. “And you found it by accident?”

“Yes and no,” Kayo said. “I was studying a map for possible drilling sites. Our daughter said I should drill her. This location. Just a meter more to the left, my drill would have destroyed it all together.”

“Amber again? That’s spooky,” Quillen said. “Almost makes you want to believe in ghosts,” Kayo agreed.

“There is no such thing as ghosts,” Quillen insisted. “And no reincarnation. Death is death. The closest one can get to immortality is through heirs.”

Kayo didn’t disagree. And she was not an idiot. She was certain Quillen had other wives, maybe even other clan wives. Medical science made it way too easy to distribute sperm and eggs, and so if one wanted, they could have an entire affair remotely, through correspondence. Those with money could hire the preferred genetic partner, choosing mate by physical and personality traits. Those with more money could afford to have children engineered. Those with more money, and particular ‘scientific’ curiosity could seed a dozen planets and see how different environment allowed for different genes to be activated an inactivated. Contrary to popular belief, one didn’t have wait eons for evidence of evolution. One can see changes in as little as two or three generations. “People like me don’t tend to live very long,” Quillen said.

Kayo had never seen him provoked to rambling. “You mean, because of your military career?”

“People are stupid! The people I work with are stupid. They recommend not having families. They’re liabilities. If you mess up, your family pays the price,” Quillen went on. “But they’re not thinking right. One can only be blackmailed if you’re emotionally invested, but if you don’t care, you’re free. But more on that, if you only have one family, one biological investment, then you’re vulnerable to winds of change. There is a reason why men produce millions of sperm! We are meant to seed the galaxy. A thousand years from now, because of right thinking, it will be clear that I influenced the galaxy, financially and genetically. One doesn’t conquer the galaxy by rule of might, they take over by having more offspring than the other man. This is empire building!”

Kayo put her hands behind her back, agreeing.

“I can’t deny that Jedi did some amazing things. There is too much evidence to say it is all trickery, but I know people. They exaggerate things. Hell, half the stories you hear about Skywalker suggest he walked on water,” Quillen said.

“Maybe he did,” Kayo said.

“How many children does he have? Thank you. No one walks on water. He will be gone in his life time, no heirs. I am secure. My bloodline is secure. Do you know why I bought you out of bondage?” Quillen asked.

“Because I am dependable?” Kayo asked.

“Please. Dependability is a trainable aspect,” Quillen said. “I chose you because you’re not prone to emotional thinking and flights of fancy. You’re practical.” Kayo didn’t say anything.

“You don’t fit the socialized expectation of beauty. It is in fact your complete lack of traditional ideas of femininity, your complete undesirability, that gives you value to me, beyond the fact I bought you cheap. No one is going to manipulate you emotionally with gifts or talk of love. You’ll see through that tripe. Anyone who comes at you is seeking their own advantage and you know how to calculate that, how to use it to your benefit. You work harder than any man I know and are likely smarter than anyone I know. I am not so arrogant that I can’t admit you’re smarter than me. It’s only your gender handicap that kept you from serving militarily, that and being born into slavery. Unlike most women,

you don't live in the magical world where things are just given to you because you're attractive. Consequently, that has made you sufficiently grateful for the doors I have opened for you. I have no doubt of your loyalty, because you and I share the same vision. You know your place. You have built something here. We built something here. If our children don't create the next Galactic Empire, they will inherit it." Kayo didn't argue. If she was hurt, she didn't reveal it.

"Will you be staying the night?" Kayo asked.

"No," Quillen said. "I am taking over the top two floor of Tower One at the floating city Kekaiou. I will conduct all our future meetings there. I will have breakfast at sunrise, if you wish to join me."

"After all this time, you don't want to spend time with me?" Kayo asked.

"I sleep best alone," Quillen said. "I am not talking about sleeping," Kayo said.

"Don't you have a friend-with-benefits arrangement?" Quillen asked.

"I thought since you will be here more frequently that..."

"I am not interest in romantic dalliances, with you or anyone," Quillen said. "Our relationship is completely professional. I will refer you to our contract in this regard; you may satisfy your needs in any way you see fit, as long as I am the father of any offspring." He seemed ready to move on. "Is this the only product? I have time, show me more of the city."

Chapter 5

The Star-runner settling on the pad was in mint condition. It looked as if it had just come off the assembly line. Written in Trio-script, the name “The One-Note,” sometimes translated to the “One-Song,” looked like an art and music colliding. It was coupled with a stylish humming bird. The foreman, Tower, was impressed. His crew was not. They grumbled. He ignored it, as it was something disparaging about VIP’s in general, but clearly this one had some money behind them because no one had a Star-runner in such good shape. Service droids whistled appreciatively.

“Bet it’s pieced together with jury rigged parts,” one said.

A handler arrived and waited for the ramp to be lowered. The ship was powering off in stages, suggesting a very professional pilot was following recommend protocols, perhaps even using a check list. The lamp started its way down. A door open and R2 unit, ‘Pink,’ emerged. It bypassed the welcome committee and went to the nearest droid to communicate the ship’s needs. Pink emerged into the light. She took a moment to orientate to the sun. She noticed a stream of traffic flowing and disappearing below the vantage of the building. She was tempted to bring up her hood. She wore trousers and a poncho. Her lightsaber was concealed. The handler didn’t rush up, but waited. He was an odd little fellow and only recognized his species due to book learning. He looked out of place in the clothing he was wearing. She came to the end of her ramp.

“Snivvian?” she asked.

He spoke native. A translator penned to his collar translated. “Yes. I am Sold, your Chalcor representative. Forgive the tech, but I have such a bad lisp that my common is indecipherable.”

“It’s okay,” Ten said. “I don’t understand the red carpet treatment.”

“Damn princesses,” one of the crew member said. The foreman slapped him. “Sorry, for that,” Sold said. “We don’t get that many celebrities, but I can assure you, your anonymity will be maintained.”

“I still don’t understand,” Ten said. “I am neither a celebrity nor a princess.”

“Of course,” Sold said, bowing subserviently. “Your ship will be serviced per your Droids specifications, fueled and ready for departure within two hours. You may remain her on this pad indefinitely, but if you prefer to have it in the hangar, I will assure you it will moved with the utmost of care.”

“Hangar would be nice, near an exit,” Ten said. “How much do I owe you?” “Your service has been pre-paid,” Sold said.

“By whom?” Ten asked.

“The Wizard of the Fortress,” Sold said.

“Master Waycaster,” Ten said.

Sold bowed. On hearing that, none of the crew spoke another word, and disgruntled look vanished.

“There is a car waiting for you,” Sold said. “If you will, follow me.”

“Pink, stay with the ship,” Ten said, and followed Sold. “And don’t let them break anything! You’re in charge.”

Pink chattered happily as she departed, and then sternly gave orders. Droids and people obeyed. Sold brought her to the Taxi line, but she didn’t need further guidance. Freya, G’s luxury droid, stood out. Ten rushed the droid and hugged it affectionately.

“It’s nice to see you,” Ten said.

“I am happy to see you are well,” Freya said.

Ten's mood shifted. "I do not need a chaperone."

Freya bowed. A slight gesture with the hand said she could take the car without her. "He sent you to talk me out of it?" Ten said.

"That is not his way," Freya said. "You have a choice. All choices have consequences. Not all consequences can be undone."

"You know what I intend to do?" Ten said.

"We suspect," Freya said.

"And you will go with me anyway?" Ten asked.

"I will not," Freya said. "Though you are never alone with the Force, there are times when you must follow the path in silence. Should you put yourself in a situation, it will be your job to extricate yourself. Even G will be limited in response." "If I asked you to go with me?" Ten asked.

"I would persist in redirecting your path," Freya said.

"So you think no good will come from this, or G thinks this?" Ten said. "Anything can be made into good," Freya said. "Master Tenico." "Please, I am just a Padawan," Ten said.

"In that case, my orders are to bring you to your to Master Waycaster," Freya said.

Ten fumed. "No."

"Not all stories have happy endings, Ten. Are you a student, or a master?" Freya asked.

"I am doing this," Ten said.

Freya bowed. "May the Force be with you, Master Tenico," Freya said.

Ten entered the vehicle and the door began to lower. She looked ahead, arms crossed. She told the car where to go, and it departed. She saw Freya through her periphery but didn't make eye contact again. Kyoko arrived on the chair beside her.

"Well, that was awkward," Kyoko said.

"Shut up," Ten said.

"I am not Droid. You can't just tell me to shut up," Kyoko said.

Ten gave her a look. Kyoko settled in the seat and crossed her arms, pouting. She mirrored Ten's look. Ten found the landscape boring. Traffic was monotonous. The steady stream and probably noise would drive her crazy after having lived in the country for so long, followed by her sabbatical in space. She wanted to be back in space. She could be, but reminded herself she needed to save Corissa. They had not parted on the best of terms, but next to G, Corissa was the only woman who had ever treated her with love and respect, the only woman she would ever call mother. There was an ache in her heart. Some of it was for the visions of how Corissa would die. Some of it was for the way their relationship had appeared to decline as she got older. She had been living on the streets and fending for herself since the age of four and so adjusting to a parent figure, even knowing that she only meant to keep her safe, had been difficult.

The taxi settled outside the club. On the outside of the club, it seemed glittery and bright. She detected a darkness within.

"Are you sure about this place?" Ten asked. "I am sure," Kyoko said. "How do you know..."

"You told me to shut up," Kyoko said.

"I am sorry," Ten said. "How do you know?"

"You created me to be a guide, a helper," Kyoko said. "I, too, am Force sensitive. I can travel, just

like G, but not in the physical. I travel the imaginal realms. This is the easiest path onto the station. Most likely, the only way.”

“Car, will you wait for us?” Ten asked.

“Your service has been pre-paid,” it responded. “I am at your disposal for your entire stay on Axilla.”

“Thank you,” Ten said, and pushed the button that opened the door.

Ten approached the bar. There was a line to go in. She got in it. Kyoko walked with her.

“This is so exciting,” Kyoko said.

“I am nervous,” Ten said.

“Don’t be,” the guy in line in front of her said. “This is a great club. Want to share a death stick?”

“No thank you,” Ten said.

“You started the conversation,” he said, grumpily.

“I wasn’t speaking to you,” Ten said.

“Oh,” he said. “Oh! One too many death sticks. Want to go back to my place?”

“No!” Ten said. “You should go home alone. Now.”

“I think I’ll go home now,” he said, and walked away. “I never felt so rejected in my whole life. Even the crazy chick won’t go home with me.”

“Oh, teach me that trick,” Kyoko said.

“No!” Ten said.

“No what?” the person behind her said. “Um, no cue jumping,” Ten said.

“I wasn’t trying to, bitch,” the girl said.

“Yeah,” her girlfriend said. “Who comes to a club dress like a soldier, anyway?” “Your momma couldn’t afford you a dress?” the first said.

“I bet she has fat thighs,” the other said.

“Both of you, stop being mean to people,” Ten ordered.

“I do like your hair,” the first said.

“Very nice hair. How did you get the pink streaks in it?” the other asked.

“Ask them to go home with you,” Kyoko said.

Ten looked at Kyoko, eyes telling her to be quiet. The guardian of the door saved her from further talk. “You may pass,” he said, allowing her and the two girls behind her to go in. Ten stopped just passed the threshold. The two girls had to go around her, but they did so politely. There was a darkness here, but she couldn’t see it. It was a creepy darkness, like being watched. There were people drinking and talking and dancing. There was a section of the floor with full of suds that people danced in. Some people departed and an equal number entered. She went a little further in. She didn’t like the sound level of the bar.

“What’s wrong?” Kyoko asked.

Ten jumped at the sound of her voice.

“Easy,” Kyoko said. “Come, let’s dance.”

“We’re not here for that,” Ten said. “How does this part work?”

“I don’t know. We meet people. We talk,” Kyoko said. “Which means, we dance.” “This is a trick?” Ten asked.

“No,” Kyoko said.

Ten went to the closest table and sat down. Kyoko joined her. Kyoko pouted. Ten closed her eyes, found the ‘darkness’ amplified in her mind and came right back out of her attempted ‘lite’ meditation.

“This is not the way to mingle,” Kyoko protested.

A waitress came at her, genuinely bubbly. “Greetings. First time here?” “It shows?”

Ten asked.

“Yes,” Kyoko answered, echoing the waitress.

“May I get you something? A drink? A snack?” the waitress asked.

“No,” Ten said. “Why are the lights so dim? What are you hiding?”

“People like subdued lighting,” the waitress said. “Call me if you when you’re ready for something.”

Ten followed her with her eyes as she greeted another patron, affectionately.

“I hear the staff here is amenable to intimacy, if you want,” Kyoko said.

“No!” Ten said.

A man sat down at her table. Interestingly, he didn’t sit on top of Kyoko, though it was the more readily available chair. He pulled a chair from an adjacent table, flipped it, and sat backwards. Kyoko edged a little closer to Ten, unable to shift her chair.

“I am not interested,” Ten said.

“Why are you here?” he said.

Ten focused. “It’s a public place,” she said, drawing her right hand closer to the lightsaber. It was not as nice as the ‘pink’ lightsaber, the one G had loaned her, but it was still a saber. She was still baffled as to how G had taken it from where she had stowed it, but glad he hadn’t taken the one he had found while rummaging the derelict.

“Touch your lightsaber, and people will die,” he said. “Hands on the table, where we can see them.”

Ten was processing the word ‘we’ when the man hit the table and said now. Ten put her hands on the table. She saw them, out of the corner of her eyes. She had an impulse to run. She gripped the table. Her skin crawled and tingled and she just wanted to be out in under a stream of water. Kyoko disappeared. The ceiling crawled. The flashing of strobes and synchronous musical lights made the ceiling itself seem alive, like inverted ocean. Suddenly the room was quiet. No, the music was the same volume, people continued dancing, but she and the man were in a bubble of quiet.

“Why are you here?” he asked again.

“Who are you?” Ten asked.

“I am the bartender. This is my place,” he said. “Don’t look for them. Look at me.

Answer my question.”

Ten didn’t want to play the long drawn out game, and so just spit it out. “I want to get on board the orbital-planetary shield generator platform at Darthomir. The Force led me here, so I am thinking I can find an exploitable vice of one of the employees, or perhaps find a contact who can smuggle me on board.”

The bartender was quiet, sorting. “This will cost you.” “I have access to credit,” he said.

“I have access to credit,” Ten said.

“It will cost you more than credit, dear. But the credit part, 200,000 Dataries,” the bartender said.

“By tomorrow night, this time.”

Ten repeated the number. “Are you insane? How am I supposed to get...”

“You’re a Jedi. Figure it out,” the bartender said, getting up. “Don’t come back without it.”

“Wait,” Ten said.

The bartender politely lingered.

“What’s the other cost?” Ten asked.

“There are always hidden costs to the sort of thing you’re asking. I can get you on, but you will have to do something for us. Once this process begins, there will be no backing out,” the bartender said. “I want to know exactly what the cost are,” Ten said.

“No,” the bartender said. “You commit to the process, or you don’t. If you come back with the credit, we’re committed. I think you should leave. Come back tomorrow. Order a pink sunset. Drink it.”

The bartender departed.

Ten got up from the table and walked towards the exit. It took all her strength not to run to the exit. The further away from the bar she went, the easier it was to breathe. Kyoko was suddenly in front of her. Ten raised her hands to ward off an attack.

“Easy!” Kyoko said.

“Where did you go?!” Ten demanded.

“I was with you, but you couldn’t hear me because your fear response was so strong,” Kyoko said. “Seriously, you need to learn to relax. You’re so stiff. People will think you are autistic or home schooled.”

“How am I going to get that much credit?” Ten asked. “Even if I sold all my salvage, it wouldn’t be that much...” “Ask G,” Kyoko said.

“No,” Ten said.

Kyoko eyes twinkled with inspiration. “Up for some gambling?” “No,” Ten said.

“Come on?! It’ll be easy. We just use the Force. Or I can peek at the other player’s hands! It’s a sure thing,” Kyoko said.

Ten frowned, thinking not a good idea, but also found her feet moving in the direction of a casino. Kyoko had taken her arm and was chattering excitedly.

♪♪▶

Ten found herself in a lone chair in the center of the room. Kyoko stood behind her. Four armed men were in each corner of the room. There were cameras and, she was certain about this, hidden weapons pointing at her, either controlled by a remote operator or Droid Intelligence. Dryster, the floor boss, scrutinized her, leaning against his desk, arms crossed. He was old, but dressed well, and in apparent good health.

“I have this little problem,” Dryster said. “It’s bad for business to kill winners. Word gets around, business drops off. At the same time, I can’t allow cheating to go unchecked in my own establishment.”

“I wasn’t cheating,” Ten stammered.

“Your soul-bound was looking at other player’s cards,” Dryster said. “Oh!”

Kyoko said. “You see can see me. He can see me!” “I see,” Ten said.

“I am a seer,” Dryster said.

“A Jedi?” Kyoko asked.

“No,” Dryster said, chuckling. “Not all Force users are Jedi. I could have been, back in the day, but I never came under the scrutiny of those in power. Of course, that was before the fall and the rise of the Empire. I didn’t see the fall, but had I been brought in, I would have died. I see that in retrospect.”

“You’re that old?” Ten asked.

“Never trust a young seer. Only the aged have demonstrated ability,” Dryster said. “You have potential. Let’s talk when you arrive at a hundred years old.” “So, if we’re just discussing abilities, I wasn’t cheating,” Ten said.

“Negotiating?” Dryster asked.

“Is counting cards cheating?” Ten asked.

“Yes. The thing is, you weren’t even being subtle about it,” Dryster said.

“What can I say? The Force was with me,” Ten said.

“The Force is with everyone!” Dryster said. “But you’re not everyone. You’ve had training. You are no longer just a piece of glass, you’re focused lens. That’s cheating.” “And the house doesn’t cheat?” Ten asked.

“The House always wins because of the volume. We serve the community. We pay taxes. We employ people. We offer hope. “ “You take advantage of people who are desperate and or ill,” Ten said.

“Is that why you’re here? A crusade to right all the wrongs? Stealing from the perceived rich to give to the poor, who will in turn just give us back the money as they try to win more?” Dryster asked. “We donate funds to the charity next door. An anti-gambling establishment, to help those who are stuck in addictive behavior. Bet you didn’t know that. We also offer employment opportunities for the desperate, the homeless, and we give small loans when the official banks won’t. You’re not here to help people. You’re here to help yourself. You thought you had an advantage. How much did you intend to steal?”

“500,000,” Ten said, doubling her need in case half sounded too little to be believable.

Dryster uncrossed his arms. He brought his hands together. He twirled his thumb. “Not a small sum,” he said. “You have a modicum of talent. I could offer you employment.” “Like what? Debt collecting?” Ten asked.

“I imagine you’d do well at that. People are more willing to give girls money than the stereotypical goon,” Dryster said. “But there are lots of opportunities for a Force sensitive. Your soul-bound would be great at gathering intel. We pay extra for good secrets.” “No, thank you. I’d rather remain an independent contractor,” Ten said.

“Very well. I will give you 500,000. One caveat, you will never gamble at any of our facilities again,” Dryster said. “Ever.” “Seriously?” Ten said.

“I could just kill you,” Dryster said.

“I accept,” Ten said.

“You will have to do one favor for us,” Dryster said.

“I will not kill anyone for you,” Ten said.

“I won’t ask you to kill, but you will be in my debt. I will call this favor,” Dryster said.

“When?”

“When it’s time,” Dryster said.

“You assume I’ll be around to collect?” Ten said.

“I am a seer,” Dryster said.

“And what if I am dead?” Ten asked.

“Death will not relinquish you from my debt,” Dryster said. “My men will escort you off the premise. Before you leave, you will do a photo op in the winner circle. Try to look happy. You just won big time.”

♪♪ ▶

Ten hesitated at the ramp of the OneSong. She was confident she wasn't alone, but there was no one to be seen in the hanger short of droids. She exposed her lightsaber and walked up the ramp. She forced herself to relax, deepening her breathing, and entered. She found Priya waiting inside and relaxed for real. Priya was sitting at a small table. Pink was nearby. The Droid gave a nervous little call, recognizing the tension in the room. “You scared me,” Ten said.

“And yet, you still came,” Priya said. “Come have a seat.”

Ten came over to the table. “If you have come to talk me out of this, I am not listening.”

“I am not here to talk you out of it,” Priya said. “You want me to go?” Ten said.

“I do not,” Priya said. “Pink?”

Pink displayed a hologram image of the shield generating platform. “This is the orbital shield generator platform at Darthomir,” Priya said. “Assuming it's fully manned, there is likely to be 60,000 souls on board.” She spun the hologram and enlarged it. “It is supported by seven squadrons, and a minimum of one Stardestroyer with its own compliment of four squadrons. So, what's the plan to get on? Your ship will be recognized. You're not getting a pass, even if you had a valid code.”

“I know,” Ten said.

“So, how do you plan to get on?” Priya asked.

“I intend to get myself smuggled on,” Ten said. “And, if you're successful, then what?” Priya asked.

“I'll find a way down,” Ten said.

“You're not going to steal a fighter,” Priya said. “They weigh their ships, before and after departures, so you're not going sneak on to a shuttle. You're not going to steal a life pod, but even if you managed- they'll shoot that out of the sky.” “What do you recommend?” Ten asked.

Priya opened up the hologram to expose an inner map, showing the location of the greatest density of emergency life pods. An adjacent room was the target. “Hypothetically, if you were able to get on the platform, and you found your way to this room, you could steal a re-entry jump suit and do an orbital jump to the planet.” The station hologram fell away and jump suit replaced it. “You'd want to disable this transponder on the suit, or they would track you, probably shoot you out of the sky. There is a chance you'd be spotted visually leaving the station, but the odds are in your favor at this point of not being detected, so it's worth a try. If you make it past a minute of free fall, you're likely home free.”

“Can I sabotage the station? Blow it up?” Ten asked.

“Technically, anything can be sabotaged to blow up. You're not capable. Even if you could walk in with enough firepower to blow the main reactor, you would die in the process,” Priya said. “Also, destroying the shield at this point would result in an extinction level event on the planet, killing of 80 percent of Darthmoirs ecology. Much of the sentient life will survive the initial onslaught of radiation; most of the population will die of starvation and just general hardship.”

“Did G send you here?” Ten asked.

“He did not,” Priya said.

“So why are you here?” Ten said.

“I want you to know what you’re up against,” Priya said.

“So, G talked to you about me?” Ten said.

“He cares about you,” Priya said. “He talks about you.”

“I don’t understand why you’re here,” Ten said. “You don’t intend to talk me out of it. You’re not going with me...”

“I am not going with you. This is not my mission,” Priya said.

“I don’t see why you and G aren’t helping me,” Ten said. “They’re going to kill Corissa.”

“Maybe,” Priya said. Ten was annoyed by her apparent calmness and acceptance. “Not quickly. They want her as bait for G.”

“More reason to go!” Ten said.

“Do you think she would want G to die instead of her?” Priya asked. “If she knew what you were planning, would she green light this nonsense?”

“So you want me just sit here and do nothing?” Ten said.

“I want you to trust the Force. I want you to trust Corissa. I have an idea of what you’re about and I think it’s absolutely insane,” Priya said.

“You think I can’t do this,” Priya said.

Priya didn’t comment on that. Her eyes went distant, and maybe she saw potential success, but still she kept to herself. She didn’t tarry there. “Hypothetically, you get on the planet, you rescue Corissa, and then what? You’re still on the wrong side of a cage,” Priya said.

“You’re still a prisoner, and now there are two souls that G cares about being used as bait.”

“If he cares, he will come for us,” Ten said.

Priya came out of casual mode and hit the table hard with her hand, turning off the hologram. Pink slipped away. Ten wanted to slip away. The loudness jarred a memory of her past, her bio mother losing her temper. Priya was not her mother, her anger was contained. Past injuries and grievances were too readily available, but she focused on here.

“Get this in your head. He will not come for you. He will not help you in this. Do this, and you’re as good as dead, and you’ve gained nothing,” Priya said.

“I will have peace of mind that I did all I could,” Ten said.

Priya stood, bowed slightly. “May the Force be with you.” She walked towards the exit.

“What’s so damn important that you won’t help me in this?” Ten asked.

“You have your mission, we have ours, that’s it,” Priya said.

“Did you ever consider, maybe the Jedi Order fell because they all had their heads stuck so far up their asses in their own missions they couldn’t see the obvious?! We’re supposed to help each other,” Ten said.

Priya wasn’t offended. “Maybe. The first part of that sounds dead on,” Priya mused. She almost smiled. “That may be true of all of us. We see our piece, we prioritize accordingly. Few of us share the big picture, find consensus. So, I suppose the question becomes, ‘how do we get people’s heads out of their asses so they can see the obvious?’” Ten didn’t have an answer.

“Let me know when you figure it out,” Priya said. She closed the door behind her.

♪♪▶

Priya arrived at the tower. G was sitting on the ledge looking out of the skyline, tracking lights. City lights washed out the stars so that the night was empty, but not truly black. There was light there, just

nothing to reflect it back.

“You should tell her your mission,” Priya said.

“She would have a better chance surviving what she’s planning than following me,” G said. “It’s really going to be that bad?” Priya asked.

G changed position; his legs came inside the wall. He faced her, met her eyes. “I am afraid.”

Priya was surprised. “I have never heard you say anything like that,” she said. “How can I help you?”

“My mission isn’t yours,” G said. “I know,” Priya said.

“But...” “You have your mission,” G said.

Priya bowed slightly, not quite acceptance, but until she knew more she was unable to commit. “Ten has created a tulpa.” “I know,” G said.

“You’re not worried?”

“The problem with modern society is the fact everyone has created a tulpa, but most people interact unknowingly,” G said.

“You’re not worried that it will become a tulkus?” Priya asked.

“Life always begets life,” G said. “Physical begets physical. Conscious begets consciousness. Spiritual begets spiritual. It’s what we do.”

She bowed, then vanished in a cloud of smoke. The smoke rolled like a storm around him before dissipating completely. “You’re getting quite good at that,” G said.

He heard laughter in his head. “I had a good teacher. Before long, everyone will be doing it.”

Chapter 6

“They’re here,” Doti said. She was one of the Fortress guardians, the one who was designated chief guardian by her peers. Each of the guardians had their own private, spacious quarters that was hard to reach, impossible to sneak up on without going through a series of tunnel crawl spaces sometimes on hands and knees, awkward angle turns, and lots of climbing. Doti had gained so much weight in her time of service she would not be leaving her quarters without serious assistance. She had no intention of leaving. None of the guardians had intentions of leaving their space. They each were agoraphobics. He had become aware that several of them explored the upper world utilizing Droid tech: they controlled Droid bodies via remote, immersive virtual tech, but even then their conditions were so severe they let the Droids run on autopilot half the time and retreated to the comfort of their rooms, watching the screens from a distance.

No one entered the Fortress without passing the Guardian’s scrutiny. ADHD, paranoia from past trauma, hyper-arousal, hyper-vigilance, and insomnia made them an irritable team, but an effective team.

“Let them in,” G said.

“They’re armed,” Doti said.

G nodded. This room was the final buffer from the lifts down. Typically people were disrobed at the surface’s ‘clean rooms,’ all personal items secured in a locker, their bodies scrutinized in the most undignified manner as possible just short of causing physical harm, and then passed. It was no secret that the Fortress Guardians got off to this. This was as close to intimacy they got, short of hijacked Droids with virtual immersion tech. The ‘guests’ had been passed from the top without following protocol on G’s orders. Several of the Guardians voiced disappointment of not seeing the ‘guest’s

naked; G reminded they have eyes throughout the Fortress, everyone gets naked for them eventually. They arrived at the last buffer. G held the buffer room alone, having sent active guards and receptionist on break. He leaned against the receptionist's desk, trying to look casual. He suspected he came across as arrogant.

Two doors opened. Jesse and Kaila entered, both happy to see him again, and then suddenly, aware of each other- they went into shocked. Feelings of betrayal and hatred surfaced. They knew each other. It was one of the reasons G accepted the two of them. They had history. They drew weapons. Both fired, and at point blank range, they should have both died.

"Hold," G said.

The two of them found themselves frozen. Their weapons fire was frozen in space. Blue and red streaks passing, minuscule electric arcs connecting the beams that might not have been seen if the beams had not been stilled. G brought the two forwards out of harm's way, and allowed the energy to continue. The blasts ending in the solid rock from which the Fortress had been painstakingly carved. He took the weapons from them. He made the weapons disappear.

"Come together," G instructed. "Hold hands."

They clearly were resisting, but they came together, as if given a Force command.

"What is the meaning of this!" Kaila demanded.

"You betrayed me!" Jessie said.

"I have not betrayed either of you," G said. "I have kept my end of the bargain. I will continue to keep my commitment to you. Consider your hand holding evidence of my promise to you."

"You can't help both of us!" d said.

"How else do you propose I maintain the balance?" G asked.

"You have to choose a side," Jessie said.

"The more power you learn to wield, the greater the imperative not to take sides," G said. "However, I have committed to a side. My side. Stoke is dead. I personally killed him." "You killed Stoke?!" Kaila asked.

"You can't serve two masters," G said. "You now serve me." "You really killed Stoke?" Jessie asked.

"Yes," G said.

"There's no way..." Kaila said

"Fine; assume I didn't," G said. "Maybe Luke Skywalker finally got off his soap box and did something. Doing anything other than whining his life away about the unfairness of his life would be better than doing nothing. Maybe I helped Kaila by clouding the Resistance's top pilot's judgment; I seriously mess with his sense of military protocol, he threw a tantrum like a little girl and violated all sense decorum, even got himself shot by Leia. You can confirm all that later. Maybe I influenced their greatest remaining military leader, the most experienced Admiral in the Galaxy, causing her to be idle until more than half of her fleet is destroyed before she realizes there is only one solution. Maybe I convinced her that being a martyr was the way to go, as opposed to sending a disobedient soldier into a suicide run. You can't be the last admiral and self-sacrificing. But, with her gone, the game was unbalanced. Stoke had to go. Maybe I did it directly, or vicariously by influencing Luke to do it. Who knows? Who cares? Stoke is dead. Maybe I helped the Resistance by becoming the white fox, leading them to safety. Or maybe, I have joined Skywalker and together we are going to train the next generation of Force users in a new way of being. We're are changing what it means to be a Jedi. Maybe we'll need a new name. Maybe we will all be Skywalkers. All you need to be concerned with is I did

my part, and now you are committed to me.” “I want proof,” Jessie said.

“You’re holding hands with the enemy, what more do you require?” G asked. “You two are now soul contracted with me, and you will remain so until you have accomplished your task and your soul debt is paid to me. I promised to make you a Jedi. I will. I will also make you a Sith, as promised. Neither of you will ever be greater than the other. You will both be loyal to me and to each other. You will not knowingly allow the other to come to harm, directly or indirectly. You are bound together through me and those who serve me. More specifically, Priya is my third, and the arbitrator of any long-term grievances you two hold against the other. Priya’s decisions will be final.” “This is not fair,” Kaila said.

G seemed to be calculating her age.

“This is not what I signed up for,” Jessie said.

“I know. Again, the old ways are gone,” G said. “And good riddance. We will forge new ground together. In addition to being raised to your station, before I release you from your commitment to me, you will both take on a minimum of three students. You will train one in the light, one in the dark, and one in twilight. You will never take a child student. Only adults. And only those who seek ‘enforcement.’ Only when this caveat is met, and you have three full trained followers each, will you be free of me. Mark my words: childhood will be honored. It is morally reprehensible to remove children from their families.” “But it leads to attachments…” Jessie said.

“Attachments are healthy. If you never have an attachment, how can you learn to let go?” G asked. “Kind of like this belief you’re attached to. Let it go.” “I suppose you will expect us to be exclusive,” Kaila said.

“No. You are free to be intimate with whomever you wish. But know this; from this point forwards any intimacy you engage in will result in increased Force awareness in the partner,” G said. “If you raise their awareness, you are responsible for their training and safety. This is the reason Jedi chose to be celibate. No one can be intimate with a Master and not have a raise in consciousness. They won’t tell you this, of course, they had too many unconscious blocks to understand why they chose celibacy. Contrary to popular belief, indulgence in sex doesn’t lead to the dark side. Only repression leads to the dark side. Only through embracing your shadow self, passing through it, will you discover the light on the other side. We are all one with the Force. There is no division.” “I want to leave,” Jessie said.

“No, not yet,” G said. “Soon you may go anywhere you like in the galaxy. Most of your training will be in the subliminal worlds, in the dreams that come. No matter where you are, I will be with you. I will come on you like a thief in the night. I will command you and be with you and you will learn. Even if I die, I will come to you and complete my commitment. I will raise you and see that your promises are fulfilled.”

“You’re evil,” Jessie said.

“No. I am your master, the one who is in charge of your training,” G said.

Priya arrived, coalescing out of thin air. She bowed. G greeted her with equal respect.

“This is Priya,” G said. “You will walk with her to my room and follow her instructions as if they came from me.” “You can’t have more than one…” Kaila began to protest.

“Technically, I have one padawan, one apprentice, one twilight adept, and three jealous lovers,” G said. “You will not limit me on the number of people I choose to train. I will have sex with anyone I want whenever I want, without your consent. If I take on a dozen new partners, you will be loyal to a dozen! Go with Priya. The next sound I hear better be enjoyment.”

Realization came to them both, one was more disgusted than the other. “No,” Jessie said. “That’s just wrong...”

“You must learn to let go of that belief, too,” G said. “How many times have you heard this? ‘We are all one with the Force.’ We are all intimate all the time, and until you let go of this idea of separation, you will be limited in your abilities. Go gentle with them, Priya. It’s their first time.”

“No it’s not,” Kaila said.

“Yes, it is,” Priya assured her. “Come along.”

♪♪▶

The media platform was surrounded by reporters, academics, and public servants that had held office prior to the coup on Axxila. There were representatives of the occupying militia as well. Preston G Waycaster arrived in person and all conversations in the room stopped as he took center stage. He came alone. No one attacked him. He had anticipated being attacked. He had hoped for an attack to demonstrate his powers. He was grateful for not having to. He had a reputation in the underground that was seeping into the greater population’s awareness of being a monster; this allowed for evidence he wasn’t just a monster.

“Thank you for entertaining my wish to speak,” G said. “I will answer questions in a moment, but first I would like to address some very specific rumors. It is not my intent to take control of Axxila. I had no part in the coup. To be more precise, I am not interested in local politics and I don’t want to be involved. I am, however, residing on your planet, and I am aware of a growing faction which may result in further violence. I wish to prevent that; the public is always collateral damage. I would like to see Axxila returned to its normal, democratic activities. To this end, I have decided to make myself available. I am extending an offer of amnesty to all parties directly involved in the coup. Gather your family, your friends, and leave Axxila before three days and no action will be taken against you. I ask that everyone agree to this amnesty. It is necessary to foster forgiveness if we wish to proceed forwards renewed. If you who have taken control by force do not leave, if you try to maintain your rule through force, I will eliminate you from the top down, taking the command out first. So, if you’re militia, and just following orders, walk away now, go home to your families. The coup is over, rule of law and ownership by the people will return.”

This prompted questions but G held up his hand and waited for silence.

“I am sorry, I am not good at speaking,” G said. “But I need to say this, too. I have killed Snoke and ended his hateful disturbance in the Galaxy. You will have confirmation that he is dead soon enough. I will leave it to you to decide whether I speak truth or falsely. I am a Jedi. People will say I am a Jedi such as there has never been before. This is not true. I am just a Jedi. All people are capable of what I do, even capable of much greater things. I would like to see peace restored to the galaxy. It is my intent to see that people can have a place to live without fear of war and threats of violence against them. I will make this so or die trying. Peace could not happen while Snoke was alive. There is now a chance for peace now that he is gone. The wars that have raged over the galaxy for the last hundred years have caused so much pain, so much destruction, that there is no way to pursue any sense of perceived justice without causing more pain. There can be no balance in this. Keeping score will only keep the game on. There can be no balance or revenge when all parties are equally responsible for the ongoing pain. The only way to move forwards is for the majority of us to adopt a heart of forgiveness. Not all will be able to forgive and let go. I get that. I ask that you do what you can; this is not a commandment, an absolute. If most of us can find a way to forgive and to love, our voice will drown out the rhetoric, the hate, the whining, and the contemptible. In Snoke’s absence, let us take this opportunity to restore peaceful

interactions with each other.

“You may say this is impossible. The remnants of the empire, the First Order, persists in trying to unite the galaxy by force. In their obsessiveness to take out the Resistance, they have lost much of their Fleet. They are now scattered to the stellar winds, trying to recover from their loss. The Rebel Alliance, now known as the Resistance, persists in trying to rally against the First Order, and though their past operations seemed limited to military targets, they frequently resulted in harm to civilian populations. They also have lost too many people. This conflict just can’t continue. It’s insanity. I will not take sides in your stupid war; I will end this by ending both of you. I invite you to cease all military operations within civilian zones. I will grant amnesty to any who comes to me declaring allegiance to me and my solution. Persist in your activities and I personally will pursue you, Imperial or Rebels, for war crimes against the people. If I act against the First Order, I will do an equal action against the Resistance, and vice versa; not random targets, but specific military targets, specific individuals. I will take out the command first, and work my way down until there are no leaders remaining to advocate war. There are those who believe these wars have been an extended family feud. I suspect some truth in that. End this, walk away from your heritage and expectations and let a new, peaceful generation inherit the galaxy. Let’s end the War of the Stars for all time. The people, the civilians, the children, the mothers, the father, all sentient beings who simply wish to exist in peace are the ones who suffer when you elevate dogmatic tropes and ideologues to justify ongoing violence. We, the peaceful, outnumber you. Chose to end the wars, or I will choose to end you the same way I ended Snoke.” They believed him. There was quiet.

“Any questions?” G asked.

Someone stood up and began clapping. Everyone stood. There were tears in people’s eyes.

♪♪▶

Nolasco, G’s uncle, and his sister Lestelle entered the audience chamber of the Fortress. The Hut’s platform had been converted to something more amenable to human form. It wasn’t exactly a throne, it had more a spiritual shape and likely was used for meditation more often than pomp and circumstance, but it was sufficient in form that most saw it as what it was. Lestelle did not consider herself a beautiful woman, based on her own culture’s standards, but she was from Hapan system, and by any other system’s standard, she was beautiful. She didn’t even have to dress up and she was turning heads. She was dressed down today, a dress that allowed one leg free; even in this, she didn’t like the way her brother looked at her, but no matter what she wore, he would see through it, through her. She shivered.

“Have you lost your ever loving mind?” Nolasco asked.

“I don’t understand,” G said. “Everyone has been asking me to take a stand and now all of a sudden, I am the bad guy?”

“Take a stand, not put your head in the guillotine,” Nolasco said. “You can’t end wars by stirring the pot and threatening to end people! You just made Axxila a target.”

“Isn’t that how the game of war works?” G asked. “As a general rule of thumb, you become what you fight! It’s hard to kill monsters without becoming a monster.” “Did you really kill Snoke?” Lestelle asked.

G smiled. “Who else could do it?”

There was evidence on their face they believed he did it. He ignored the chorus of ‘liar’ in his head. His eyes did go one particular voice, acknowledging the owner. When he brought his attention back to family, he wondered if they had noticed.

“You asked us here to talk to us,” Nolasco said. “You couldn’t have held off on this speech until we

counseled with you?”

“I didn’t ask you here for that,” G said. “And your private mission is over. You no longer have to worry about the repercussions of what the company did during the time of the Empire. I have convinced the shareholders and the CEO’s to turn our company into a nonprofit organization and offer assistance in restoring worlds that were affected by the previous management’s decisions. Unfortunately, that does mean you are no longer employed with the company. All personnel will be phased out as new staff comes on board; full disclosure of all wrongs have been made. I will remain in charge until the transition is complete. All company records have been made available to the public, with an expectation of general amnesty towards all previous employees who may still be alive. Most of them are dead. There is sufficient evidence to exonerate you personally. That doesn’t mean some people won’t believe the data was fixed in your favor. You have enemies. I think you will be okay.”

Nolasco seemed relieved and burdened at the same time. Lestelle seemed angry. “How long have you known about this?”

“You were trying to protect me,” G said. “You were trying to help our family. It’s good to do that.”

“I was almost killed because of this mess! I killed someone because of all this mess!” Lestelle snapped. “I’ve done things…”

“I know,” G said.

“That’s it?” Lestelle asked.

“What sort of response would you like? All beings are sovereign. You exercised your freedom. You didn’t come to me as your Master, or friend, or brother, or lover. You didn’t seek my counsel. I celebrate your choices. You walked a path, you acted. You are not a Jedi, but you are a Master, and on the path. You learned. You wanted your secrets. At any time, you could have come to me. I am not a child that needs protecting,” G said.

Lestelle held her tongue. Her anger radiated. Nolasco put a hand on her shoulder. He had had a part in convincing her to walk the path she had.

“Why did you call us here?” Nolasco asked.

G stood up and asked them to follow him. The rear of the audience chamber led to a corridor and an oversize winding stairs cut directly into rock. The stairs were shallow, not for humans, and so they took two then three at a time in an awkward rhythm. The private suite they arrived at had the illusion of being exposed to the surface. Holographic windows with box seats lined the room. The room was oblong, but the ceiling vaulted like a dome. Mood lighting projected onto the ceiling, the present mood was sky blue. The room was open, no walls. Potted plants gave some sense to a floor plan. A bed near a window. A table near the kitchenette. A woman was making breakfast. She looked up and smiled at them. She was dressed simply, casual, motherly. Her hair was down, falling over shoulders in either direction. Nolasco and Lestelle both reached for their weapons.

“It’s okay,” G said.

“What is she doing here?” Lestelle asked.

“She came to kill me,” G said.

“With breakfast?” Lestelle asked.

“Come, have a seat,” Alarna invited. “You’ve come a long way.” “You’ve joined the dark side?” Nolasco asked G.

“No,” G said, but he seemed pained. “I’ve done some things, though. Sit. I would like to ask you both something.”

They sat at the table. Alarna served them and then poured herself a brew and joined them. She sat in

front of the 'window,' a quiet beach setting behind her. Nolasco and Lestelle studied her, waiting for a bomb to go off.

"What did you do to her?" Lestelle asked.

"I Forced her into a healing place and installed a servitor to govern bodily functions and interact on her behalf," G said.

Lestelle and Nolasco switched their gazes, still waiting for a bomb to go off.

"You did what?" Nolasco asked.

"Wait a moment," Lestelle said. "You used the Force to enslave your mother? That is from the Dark side. Nothing good will come from it." "It will keep her from killing me," G said.

"You should have just killed her," Lestelle said.

"She's my mother!" G said.

"She's just an egg donor! She didn't even lend you her womb! She's been trying to you you're entire life!"

"Educate me," Nolasco said. "What did you say?"

"It's complicated. The action I took was not completely against her will; her fronting personality would not agree with this. She needs time to heal. She wants to heal in this life time, but the fronting personality, the one we know as Alarna, is too obsessed with killing me for us to pursue a relationship at this time," G explained. "She is tired of running, tired of being alone, but changing her trajectory and momentum, that takes time, energy, and a social network that isn't available to her. Psychotropic meds would also be helpful, but she isn't amenable to drugs. I am honoring this part."

"But she's amenable to... What the hell did you do?" Lestelle asked.

"I created a servitor. Less like a tulpa, more like a basic pre-sentient Droid tech program that will function as the host personality, maintaining the health and wellbeing of the body while the soul incarnate recuperates in a designated mind space," G said.

"You imprisoned her in her body and put a guard on the front door," Lestelle translated.

"Technically, that is one way to perceive this," G said.

"There's another way to see this?" Lestelle asked.

"She wants to heal. She wants to be free of the trauma and lies that were given her," G said. "You can't hold lies without a realization of their counterparts. She knows what a life without trauma looks like. It will take time to build that scaffolding, to trust the structure, and more time to practice the interaction patterns that come with that. She may never recover a hundred percent of what was potentially hers prior to the Emperor, but she will leave this plane of existence in a better state. The transition to the next life will be easier, less intense. She has many more lives to travel before these wounds are completely healed."

"Why have you called us here?" Nolasco asked.

"Your life as you have known it, Uncle, is over. I have made arrangements for you to have a quiet retirement on an amenable world, off the beaten path. No one will come for you.

There will be no grievances there that you don't create for yourself. It's a small colony, a people that are ambivalent about tech and so there is a limited Droid presence. There are still Droids; they've agreed to the arrangement. I want you to go there, retire, be happy. And take Alarna. There is nowhere else she can go that someone won't try to kill her." "I am not a farmer," Nolasco said.

"Then don't farm. Go fishing. Enjoy life," G said. "And raise my daughter." "Daughter?" Nolasco and Lestelle asked.

“Alarna is pregnant,” G said.

“You have a serious problem!” Lestelle snapped.

“It’s not what you think...”

“How the hell isn’t it what I think?! I don’t care what planet you grew up on, don’t you know that’s just sick?! People don’t mate with their family. They get retards...” Lestelle said.

“That’s a myth,” G said. “If there was an illness in the genes, over time that would be amplified through inbreeding. This child won’t be cognitively impaired. If the two of you will go the path I am prescribing, she will be intelligent and kind. She will know you, Uncle, as father, and she will know her mother, the real and the surface one who is presently installed to receive her and care for her. She will know you, Lestelle, as sister and friend and teacher.” “What the hell? You want me to go retire, too?” Lestelle asked.

“Yes,” G said.

“I am still processing the complicated part,” Nolasco said. “You had sex...”

“She was trying to kill me,” G said.

“And that leads to sex?” Lestelle asked.

“What would you have me do? Gauge my eyes out?” G asked. “I was in the shower. Our grappling became intimate. It was intentional on her part. She was trying to disarm me,” G explained.

“Which saber were using?” Uncle asked, chuckling.

“This is not funny!” Lestelle snapped at him, and then back to G: “Are you not smart enough to give her the morning after pill?”

“I did not consider it. Her age made it unlikely. That and, well, I am fairly promiscuous and no prior interactions have resulted in offspring,” G said.

“Abort this pregnancy,” Lestelle said.

“I cannot,” G said. “I am pro-life. I have done enough killing of late, I will not add infanticide to my burden.”

“It’s not an infant, it’s just a few cells at this point,” Lestelle said.

“What does Alarna want?” Nolasco asked.

“If I restored her personality to full control, she would abort, and she would escalate in her bent towards murdering me,” G said.

“She has the right to abort. It’s her body,” Lestelle said. “You have arbitrarily made yourself her medical proxy, you have to honor her wishes.”

“Interesting. Legally valid construct. Hypothetically, if the roles were reversed and I didn’t want the child, but she did, she would still be allowed to carry to term, and I would be legally obligated for financial support,” G said. “How do we resolve this?”

“End this,” Lestelle persisted.

“You end this!” G snapped. G closed his fist and cabinets opened and content flew out, glasses and plates breaking. The dome cracked, putting a line through the artificial sky. He came to his feet. So did Lestelle and Nolasco. Alarna remained calm, took another bite of her breakfast. G breathed, trying to overcome his emotions. “I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t ask for this life. I didn’t ask for these abilities. I have not asked to be drawn into every conflict this galaxy wants to throw at civilization to test whether we should continue to exist or not. I... I... I just want to love and be loved. I have been fucking haunted, hunted, manipulated, prodded, and every single time I have answered that with love. And still, I am questioned, I am ridiculed, and I am alone. Where are my peers? Where are the ones who bring my

balance and keep me in check and provide the nurture and systems that allow for my wellbeing, for the family's best outcomes? Tell me, where do I go to fit in? Tell me?! Should I leave the galaxy? Should I find some remote corner of the Universe where I exist in pure isolation? Should I end my life or release my mother and allow her the privilege to end me?! Clearly, you know more than. Tell me!" He pulled his lightsaber out of nowhere and handed her the hilt. She didn't move, but he stepped closer, forcing her hands to take it, directing the business end towards his heart. "You end this. Do it!"

Lestelle's own tears fell. It took effort not to accidentally hit the button. She took the lightsaber, pulled free of his hands, and tossed it to the floor. She embraced him.

"I am sorry," she said. "I don't know everything. We will rely on the Force to guide us. It just my belief that we don't bring kids into the world to try and fix what we fucked up. We only burdened them with our prevailing drama."

"I cannot abandoned her just because it's taboo, and it inconvenient," G said, pulling free of her. "Everything is wrong with this galaxy. You can't spit without violating a galactic code somewhere. At some point we must take the wrong and make it right without penalty. We need to learn to embrace and heal or there will be no end to this."

Nolasco and Lestelle didn't have words. He paced away, saw the mess he made, and sighed. He came back and sat down. He motioned for them to return to their seats. They sat, tentatively, on the edge of their seats.

"I have gone as far into the future as I can. This daughter is part of her recovery plan. There is a future Alarna that will have a relationship with a daughter. A daughter who will care for her in her final days," G said. "It's not an absolute. There are other players in life, and so there are variables yet to contend with. The best future is that you and Nolasco go and retire to this place, with Alarna. You raise this daughter."

"You raise her! You did this. You're the one that's so determine to make it happen," Lestelle said. She waited for things to fly. Even Nolasco seemed tense, even crossed that she would maintain this stance.

G was silent for a moment while he considered how to share what he knew. It was best just to deliver it. "You must know this. I am hesitant to share it because it may influence your decision, and I need you both to decide without being manipulated. That changes things, too. I will not live to see her birth."

"What?" Both Nolasco and Lestelle's countenance changed from upset to concern.

"You're predicting your death or you're certain?" Lestelle asked.

"One can hold power and live indefinitely, but one cannot act with power and not hold consequences," G said. "I have acted. My end is certain." "Well, undo what you did," Nolasco said.

"I cannot. It was necessary. I acted with knowledge. I acted with advice of counsel. I was born with a purpose, a life mission, and I am fulfilling my contractual obligation to others," G said.

"How..." Lestelle said. There were tears.

"Oh, Lestelle. You've touched the Force. Personalities come and go, we die, but we continue with the Force," G said.

"How? When?"

"I don't know the details. I have been spared this, I guess," G said, looking into the table's surface as if it were an infinite regression of mirrors. He smiled and looked up. "The interesting thing about perception, misperceptions, it's always limited. Alarna has spent her life running and hiding from this

thing she feared. She knew I would herald her death. I would bring forth something that would kill her. And, from her perspective, this is true. Whether it is her servitor that cares for her, or the child we created, her vision has come true. This will end the reign of Alarna. What comes after, that will be something glorious.” “Your daughter won’t know you,” Nolasco said.

“She will know me in the breeze on her face, sunlight on morning flower’s dew,” G said. “In poetry and song and in love. She won’t lack for anything. If you and Lestelle go walk with her, she will have a life that neither I nor her mother could hold. She will be amazing.” G looked up suddenly, frowned and tears rolled.

“What?” Lestelle asked.

“Drama,” G lamented. “Cohn was going to take my offer and flee the planet. His wife killed him with a blaster. She then told the militia to fortify their position...” “So, civil war is imminent here,” Nolasco said.

“No,” G said. He opened his palm and revealed a diamond that hadn’t been there previously. “She is dead. I killed her in front of the staff. It amazes me that people don’t believe you can do something till they see that something. The present command has retired without explanation. I doubt anyone else will step up into a leading role. The capital buildings will be vacated before the end of the night.”

“The First Order won’t stand down so easily,” Nolasco said.

“I know,” G said.

“Nor will the resistance,” Lestelle said.

“They’re more likely to see reason. I remain hopeful for an end of hostilities. No more public skirmishes in civilian populations would be a nice compromise. Too bad we can’t designate a planet for all wars. Designate an arena for all time, and games must be played there or not at all,” G said.

“Maybe we designated a galaxy for all wars,” Nolasco said.

G laughed. “We have been at war that long, haven’t we,” G agreed. He looked around at some of those haunting him and laughed some more. “Thank you, uncle. Everything will be alright.”

“You’re dreaming while awake,” Nolasco said.

“Not yet,” G said. “Soon. Soon. Forgive me, I must attend to something and I can’t focus.”

G evaporated before their eyes. Alarna smiled at them.

“You really should eat your breakfast, but if you would prefer to sleep first, I’ve made the guest rooms for you,” Alarna said.

♪♪▶

Quillen was sorting through holographic profiles. A family of four emerged. A young couple, the children probably three and two respectively. He didn’t bother to look. He didn’t care. The father was an engineer. The mother was a nurse. He made her image prominent. He was able to manipulate the tangles of her red air. He caressed her face, careful not to push through the light. If there were ghosts, holograms were they.

“Such an interesting look about you. I will have you, my dear.”

They had asked for a visa to leave the planet. It was denied. Lots of people were requesting to leave Darthomir. Lots of people were being denied. Practically everyone. He downloaded the family’s bio to a chip and moved to the next family. He didn’t linger. A flick of his hand and the next potential came up. It was his job to look through the data of those wanting to flee; risk assessment.

A female entered carrying a tray of food.

“Just set it down,” he said.

“Yes, Sir,” she said.

She did as requested and then came closer. “Can I be of further service...” She was saying this as she touched his arm, in an affectionate way.

Quillen responded so fast that she hardly understood. In hindsight, she could make out what happened. She remembered feeling good. Now she felt no emotions. She didn’t have time to register sufficient data to be afraid. She didn’t remember any movement, from where she was to where she ended up. She was aware of a wall against her back. She was very aware of one hand on her neck, the other holding a blaster to her temple. She felt the business end of the blaster against her temple, she saw the blaster itself in her periphery vision. Her foveal vision was locked with his. She saw anger. She felt spittle. The words came after, again as if there was a delay, as if the auditory was off the visual track—her brain was reconstructing what she had heard after the fact.

“Don’t touch me! Don’t ever touch me. Touch me again and I will kill you!” he said.

He let her go and she fell to the floor, her hands coming to her neck. He holstered his weapon, walked straight way to the table and an antibacterial solution dispenser. He cleaned his hands, put on gloves, and then took out his blaster and used a wipe to clean the business end.

In a completely different tone, he said, “If you would, please take this back to the kitchen and bring me something that is vacuum sealed,” Quillen said. “Also, bring me a bottle of your best Ghost Wine. I am curious.”

“Yes, Sir. Would you prefer another attendant?” she asked.

“Why?” Quillen asked, looking at her. “Is something wrong with you? Are you sick?”

“No, Sir. I just thought, since I failed you...” “My dear, what’s your name?” Quillen asked. “Tosa,” she said.

“Tosa. Nice. Are you ever going to touch me again?” Quillen asked. “No, Sir,” Tosa said. She was convincing.

“Then why would I want to replace you? You’re obviously capable of learning. Now, make sure your boss knows that you alone will be serving me whenever I am here,” Quillen said. “Also, tell him I insist on this particular, he double your salary, and give you quarters in the tower. I want to be able to call on you if I have need. Now, off you go and bring me back something no one breathed on.” “Yes, Sir,” Tosa said.

“Oh, and please, definitely come back,” Quillen said. “Good help is hard to find.” “Yes, Sir,” Tosa said, and hurried away.

Quillen returned to work, sorting out exploitable females. Two Troopers arrived. They had in tow a female, probably just old enough to be legal. Like most of the young people today, she had the look of street smarts, and a haircut that suggested street. It was blue in color and covered one of her eyes. The ‘fad’ was an emotional look that suggested years of pain. Her clothing suggested street as well, but by design, not because she had earned it through years of being the only thing she had to wear. He doubted this girl knew true suffering. She lacked the ‘tell.’ A quick flip of her head put the hair back in place. She could stand to eat more, but was not so thin that she was sickly. Her hands were shackled. There was a fierceness in her gaze that suggested she didn’t have the discernment to be more compliant. If she knew better, she would hold a different a look, one less challenging. Troopers enjoyed breaking these sorts. Most people in authority liked breaking this particular defiance. He didn’t care about the defiance. It didn’t mean what people think it means. Deference also didn’t mean what people think it means. ‘Apparent’ reverence didn’t mean the person submitting was not holding onto murderous, lecherous thoughts. He preferred the transparency.

“Oh, thank you,” Quillen said, coming over to inspect the prisoner. He held up a chip to the trooper. “Bring me the families on this so that I may personally interview them.”

“Yes, Sir,” the lead trooper said.

“I got it from here,” Quillen said, dismissing them.

The Troopers withdrew, leaving him alone with the girl. He walked away from her, opening wide the doors leading to the balcony. The square of sun almost reached the prisoner. He walked out onto the balcony, hands behind his back. He tarried a moment and when he returned, though she still held a fierceness about her, there was now uncertainty.

“I am really not worth all this scrutiny,” she said.

“Pari Keeler,” Quillen said. “You suck at being a criminal.”

“I was framed,” Pari said.

“Save your story. I could care less. Framed or not, if the principalities on Darthomir have their way, you’re going to spend upwards of twenty years in a cell,” Quillen said. “Such a waste.”

Quillen came closer and with gloved hands tilted her chin up, inspected her eyes. He squeeze her cheek and opened her mouth, inspecting her teeth, even the back of her throat.

“Don’t touch me!” Pari snapped, stepping back.

Quillen put a hand on the back of her neck and held her in place. “I will do as I please with you.” He led her out onto the balcony and pushed her head over the rail. Her hands barely found purchase. Nothing but ocean for as far as eye could see. “I could toss you over and if you survive the fall, you then fall into the gradient, all the way into the abyss. Even if you aren’t eaten during the fall, no one will find you, and no one will care. Even your family won’t inquire. I think you burned that bridge, too. How many times has father bailed you out? He isn’t coming to your rescue this time. Nope, now it’s time for you to learn to stand on your own two feet. Sink or swim. Or fly. You want to see if you can fly?”

Pari understood the gradient. The floating city used a force fields to hold a vertical column of air straight to the ocean floor all the way up to the center shaft, center of the city. This was the empty shaft, allowing for mining of the ocean floor. There were several other force fields that simply penetrated the water, stepping the ocean down within each perimeter until it reached the shaft. Water trickled through the shields. Fish and other sea resources trickled through the shields. Intelligent fish species avoided the area, as the harmonics of shields in the water was disturbing. The sound of water falling could be discerned even from here. What fell through crashed at the bottom of the central shaft and was either fetched by Droids, or pulled up by tractor beams. Pari now understood why the Troopers did a slow flyby of the water gradient.

“I am not worth all of this,” Pari insisted. “I am nobody.” Quillen petted her. “I like the blue. I don’t understand why you would do it, but I like it. Better than being bald. So many females on Darthomir like the bald look. You’re not native, though.”

“My family migrated here,” Pari said.

“I know all about them,” Quillen assured her. “They seem like descent citizens. It would be a shame if something happened to them.”

“Why would you threaten my family?” Pari said.

“What? I would never harm your family. We need descent, law-biding citizens,” Quillen said. “That said, you are threatening their wellbeing. You probably never considered it this way; there are those who blame the parents for their children’s behavior. Some people even punish the parents for their kid’s mischief. On my planet, you wouldn’t spend time in jail. Your parents would. My parents lived in fear of me for your years. They likely still dread me coming home, considering my position in the

Order. I carry some weight, if you didn't know."

"I don't know anything. I don't have any information you might want and I don't know anyone in the Resistance," Pari said.

"Do you hear me fishing for information?" Quillen asked. "I suspect you're telling me truth. Then again, you strike me as someone who might know, but would never rat out fellow conspirators. Oh, relax, child. I don't want to harm you. I actually like that about you. I hate rats. I hate people who would just give up their colleagues to save their own skin. It makes them suspect. And seriously, systems that exploit that, well, they're just as corrupt as the people they're making deals with. You can't negotiate with evil and not become evil. It's already hard enough to trust people as it is, but to know someone is a rat, well, it just makes working with them challenging. It is because I hold you in such esteem that I am wanting to work with you."

"I don't want to work for First Order," Pari said.

"What's wrong with the Order? They've treated me really well," Quillen said.

"I just want to be left alone," Pari said.

"To pursue your life of crime?" Quillen asked. "Okay."

Quillen took her wrist shackles off, tossed them into the ocean, and then went back inside. Pari bit her lower lip. There was no way down. The only way out was back through the suite, past a dozen guards, to the hall, down the lift. And that just left her in the city. Securing transport back to the mainland was the next problem. She came in from the balcony. Quillen was thanking a server, who curtsied before departing. She kept her eyes to the floor and her hands to her side.

"Would you like a drink?" Quillen asked, opening a bottle of spirits. "I have never tried ghost wine before. Have you?"

"It's out of my price range," Pari said. "I can just leave?" "Sure. Have fun," Quillen said. Pari moved for the exit.

"I am sure I can get what I need from your mother," Quillen said.

Pari stopped. She slumped turned back. "What do you want from me?" "Oh, you're pretty smart," Quillen said. "I think you can figure that out." "I am not that kind of girl!" Pari snapped.

Quillen seemed shocked. "What kind of girl? What are you talking about?"

"I am not an escort or a play thing for your officers," Pari said.

"Well, of course you aren't. And what kind of man do you think I am? I am not seeking that kind of gratification from you. You're young enough to be my daughter. That's just disgusting. Besides, you're not attractive enough for that honor," Quillen said.

Pari exercised restraint. She nearly argued. The conflict on her was serious and apparent.

"I am also not a spy," Pari said.

"Not recruiting spies today," Quillen said. "Come have a glass. One glass."

Pari came to the table and accepted a glass from him. They touched glasses and both drank at the same time. He set his glass down.

"Drink up," Quillen insisted. "I am not going to get drunk with you," Pari said.

"Good for you. Now, drink," Quillen said. Pari complied.

Quillen watched her drink.

"Finish it," Quillen insisted, pushing on the glass.

Pari drank it all in one continuous flow. As her glass emptied, Quillen hit her arm with an injectable. It stung like all get out, but because her mouth was full, she could hardly protest or even gasp. It took her a moment to swallow. The glass hit the table and fell to the side as she rushed to hold her arm. She retreated. "What the hell?!" Pari demanded.

"Oh, it's just a nanite tracker pack," Quillen said.

Quillen pointed to a space in the air. The holographic emitters were imbedded in the floor and the ceiling making this entire suite a communication room where full meetings of people from remote locations could be entertained in such hyper-definition one might not realize they were holographic people. What evolved before her eyes was a circulatory system, painting an inner arm and then slowly a whole human body from the inside out; slowly, other tissues began being added, until finally, there was a complete replica of her. It moves as she moved, only staying in place. It spoke when she spoke, only it didn't sound like her. She had heard sufficient recordings of her voice to know this was how others heard her. She hated it.

"What the hell?!" Pari asked.

"I really hate the idea of you being in prison," Quillen said. "The state is really pressing for that. Apparently you pissed someone important off when you hacked their system. This is kind of like an ankle bracelet, offsite incarceration, but better. This is the latest in biometric tracking. I can follow you anywhere on the planet, and not only know exactly what you are doing, I can track bio-information. You get a cold, I will know it. You fall and skin your lovely little knee, I will know it. I can see what you see. Hear what you hear. I can even feel what you feel and taste what you taste. I can tune into you like a radio station at any time I want. I can, if I wanted, even hijack your body and make you do things, if I want." A push of button on a pad brought her to her knees in pain.

"I can hurt you," Quillen demonstrated. He pushed another button, and she fell to the floor, writhing. "Or I can offer you pleasure beyond anything you ever imagined."

He pushed a button ending all artificial sensations. He waited for her to recover. "If I wanted to pimp you out, I could put your call sign on the communication network and let a million people play with you as if you were nothing more than a Droid toy," Quillen said. "Very pricey tech. Even the Order doesn't use it. They'd rather just threaten your family. I, in addition to being an officer, am fairly affluent and can afford more luxuries than most of my colleagues. I suspect that's why the Admiral keeps me around. He likes my toys."

"What do you want from me?"

"I want you to go and live your life," Quillen said. "I don't care what you do with it. Return to a life of crime. Go live with your parents and go back to school. Sell yourself into slavery. I don't really care."

"So, why all this..."

"I want you to carry my child," Quillen said.

"No! I told you I am not that..."

"It's already a done deal," Quillen said. "Part of the nanite package I gave you. It maintains the viability of a sample I personally provided. In about three or four days, the pregnancy will take. If it doesn't, more of my reproductive material will be delivered appropriately. After the first trimester, if you abort, you will die. If you have a natural abortion, or an accident that kills the offspring, you will die. If you try to turn off the system regulating the nanites in your system, you will die. Seriously, you suck at hacking. Don't even try. I promised Darthomir I would keep tabs on you and I will honor my arrangement with them. For the next year, I own your ass. Figuratively and literally. I love saying that."

That never gets old.”

“What’s wrong with you?! You can’t get your own mate and raise your own family?!” Pari asked.

“I don’t want to raise a family,” Quillen said, disgusted. “That’s way too much work. Children are messy, physically and emotionally needy, and a host to a million infections. Screw that. Besides, I am an officer in the Order, subject to frequent relocations. Nope. You’re the female. Your job is to raise younglings.”

“You expect me to just raise your child?!” Pari asked.

“I don’t care what you do, actually,” Quillen said. “Adopt it out, pawn it off on your parents, raise it. Be loving or be cruel. I simply want our genes to mingle.”

“How about child support?!” Pari asked.

“Nice! See, you’re working the system again. I like that. Resilience is one your greatest strengths. My philosophy, if you’re not manipulating someone, you’re not trying hard enough,” Quillen said. “Sometimes not trying is also manipulative, but people like you and me, we prefer direct. I love that. No child support. I personally believe that your industriousness and street smarts would do our child better in the long term than me giving you a cushy life. You don’t really want to be pampered, a kept woman, a trophy wife. My personal whore. You clearly don’t like me and I don’t really want to invest the time in energy in making you happy. You’re much too needy. Most whores today are. It’s why men prefer holographic companions. Or Droids.

Nope, you’ll see no support from me. So, that concludes our business. You’re free to go.” Pari hesitated.

“Run along. The guard will escort you to a shuttle and return you to the mainland,” Quillen said. As she started to move, he stopped her once more. “Oh, I do recommend not being arrested again. I can’t guarantee that the authorities won’t try to disable your nanites. That will result in your death. I am not kidding about that. Oh, and at the end of the year, come see me and I will disable the tech.”

“What if you die in the interim?” Pari asked.

“Oh, well, that would be rather unfortunate for you,” Quillen said. “Try not to worry about such things.”

“If you die, I die?” Quillen asked, asking as if she had Quillen figured out.

“Oh, no, no, no. Nothing so dreadful,” Quillen said. Using a disposable wipe, he righted her glass, wiped the outside, disposed of the towel, and then picked up his glass of wine. He tasted it. “Much better after it has breathed a moment. Breathing is so important, for the living and for wine. Anyway, my dear, no, you won’t die. However, there’s enough genetic material in that sample that it could in theory keep you in a cycle of pregnancies indefinitely. The health package with the nanites will also keep you healthier for longer than you would experience without tech assist. Another benefit for working with me. You’ll probably live to be two hundred with that tech. You don’t have to return to see me. You could just live your life having baby after baby till the end of your cycle, if you prefer. Take care. Try to dress better. You don’t realize just how much you’re mocking poor people by slumming it. Being poor isn’t fashionable. Suffering isn’t fashionable. Don’t celebrate it. Have a good life, Pari. And please, stay out of trouble.” Chapter 7

The bartender didn’t confirm the suitcase contained the credit he had asked for. He simply brought her the drink she ordered and departed. Ten drank it, alone. No one disturbed her. She had evidence that someone was going to approach her, maybe ask her to dance, and then he was intercepted by an eager partner and deviated. Her mind spun conspiracy theories and she expected she was being scrutinized.

The bartender returned. "Come with me."

Ten was led to an office, and a private secret lift that went up the central shaft of the building to a floor that was off limits to the general public. It was the heart of the building, the control floor. A direct lift to the office and to the roof's small terminal and tower that faced the landing pad, and private cause ways that led to the estates on the floor directly above and below. Most of the monitors that were engaged were unintelligible to human eyes, maintained by Droid's that could see in spectrums humans couldn't. She identified 'eyes' on a casino, not the one she had played at. She identified a bank of viewers monitoring a brothel one floor up from the dance floor. She didn't have to linger to understand what was being viewed. The coupling of silhouettes said it all. She was led out of the control room, up a private stairs, and into a luxury suite.

A man sat at the table. A Krath war droid stood behind him. The bartender went to the table and sat down. Ten approached the table, but did not sit.

"Let's see the money," the man said.

"Who are you?" Ten said.

"You don't need to know," the man said.

Ten sat the case down. He pulled it over to him and made it available to the Droid. It scanned it, opened it, and scrutinized it further.

"It's all here," the Droid said.

The man stood up and started towards one of the rooms in the suite. Ten held her position.

"Come with me," he said.

"I want to know how you to intend..."

"Listen, kid," the man said. "The credit you gave me is just a down payment on a risky venture. I am not promising you I will get you on the station. Most of the hard work is still up to you. Follow me to the back room. Do exactly what I say. Maybe, if you're lucky, or really unlucky, my contacts will know someone who knows someone and they will buy you. Now, come."

Ten followed the man to the back room. Five camera droids floating lifelessly came to life as they entered. They unfurled their reflectors focusing on Ten. There was a circle on the floor which the man intended for Ten to stand in.

"What do you..."

"In the circle. Strip," the man said.

"I will not..."

He hit her in the mouth with the back of his hand. A ring he was wearing drew blood.

"In the circle, strip," he said again.

Ten's hands were shaking. She wanted to kill him. She contained the want and entered the circle. She complied with his request. What she did lacked appeal. It was mechanical. She didn't bother wiping the blood from her mouth that trickled down her chin. Cameras Droids circled, recording. Together, their shared data would rendered the perfect, life like hologram. Individually, they provided standard vids and stills.

"Kick the clothes out of the circle," the man said.

Ten obeyed.

"Can you cry on demand?" the man asked.

"I don't cry..."

He blew a powder into her face. She sneezed. Tears began to flow. Her fist clenched.

“Can you look scared?” the man asked. He was looking at the files being generated, not her. He seemed indifferent to her. He looked at her. “That’s not a scared look. There are buyers for that look, too, but... Never mind. Defiance might be the look you need. Never know about Imperial types. My contact says my potents are old school.”

He pulled something out of a chest. Clothing. School clothing. He handed it to her.

“No,” Ten said.

“You can pull off the age. Probably are the age,” the man said.

“This is not...”

“Not right?” the man finished for her. “Did you think I am going to get you on the station selling candy, little girl? The people on that station are rich, powerful men. They are Lords. If you are lucky enough to draw one of their attentions, they will consume you, and spit you out an airlock. No evidence will remain. That’s your best case scenario. Worst case, they like you and they keep you as an indentured servant and sex slave for the remainder of your life.”

“How can you live with yourself?” Ten asked.

“It’s easy. I don’t care about you. Clearly, you don’t care about you, either, or you wouldn’t be paying me to do this. You want on that station, this is your only avenue. If you want to change your mind, tell me now. Once I have a buyer, this deal is done and you will go and that’s it,” the man said.

“What is your name?” Ten asked.

“You don’t get my name,” he asked.

“Tell me your name,” Ten said, with a little more Force behind it.

The man chuckled. “I am been around much more powerful people than you, girly girl. Just out of curiosity, why do you want to know?”

“I want to know who I am killing when I complete my primary mission,” Ten said. The man laughed. “What is up with you?! You’re paying me to do this to you. Hell, I am taking the greater part of the risk just accommodating you. You should be more appreciative of me. As it is, I am going to have to do a heavy edit of this video. Buyers do not like edits. Put the dress on, and the put the pain collar on.”

“Your name,” Ten said.

“I will tell you when you come to kill me,” the man said. “If you survive this and you come to kill me, maybe you will tell me yours. Don’t tell me now. Survive this, then you’ll have earned a name in my eyes. Kill me, and you’ll definitely have a name. But not mine.”

♪♪ ▶

Turry Fite, smuggler extraordinaire, frowned at his edit. The Krath war Droid showed no emotions. It simply reminded him: ‘You suck at editing. They’ll think you’re hiding something.’ “I hate dealing with potents,” Turry said.

The ‘indoctrination’ scene was unedited. She was not injured in a way that would be life threatening, but it was real. The potents would believe that much.

“She’s got the face,” Turry said. “She’ll stand out compared to the other products.”

“Unless the potentials don’t want girls,” the Droid said.

“I have that covered, too,” Turry said. Whether they took the girl or not, he had to have a product to exchange or he would have more professional bounty hunters chasing him than Solo ever had in his entire life. He had met Solo; well, he was in the room when he was addressing Jungin. He actually admired Solo and modeled his career off of him. No one had seen him in a while, but then, that was one

of his talents. He knew how to disappear and stay off the radar. “You know, we wouldn’t be in this predicament if you had taken Waycaster’s offer,” the Droid said.

“I can’t work for a man who killed my master. I am obligated to kill him, and I will, first opportunity,” Turry said.

“You would have had more opportunities had you been his employee,” the Droid said.

“I am the Captain. I make the decisions,” Turry said.

“Your decisions suck. I am a war strategist,” the Droid said. “You should utilize my skills.”

“I utilize your skills, Mark,” Turry said.

“Stop calling me Mark! I am a Mark Five War Droid. My designation is KRFT 26359. My nick name is Krafty,” the Droid said.

“I like Mark,” Turry said.

“If the girl doesn’t kill you, I will,” Krafty said.

Turry laughed. “Kill your only friend in the whole universe?” “Ah, I threaten you, and suddenly we’re friends?” Krafty said.

“We’ve been together a long time,” Turry said.

“I don’t like you,” Krafty said.

“I know,” Turry said. “But you should be happy. The bartenders is paying me to move merchandise. The girl is paying me to smuggle her. The potent will pay me to see my merchandise, and pay me again for the actual merchandise, and we get a free pass to poach some more rancor babies! We’re making out like bandits on this one.”

“I predict this will be your last mission. The girl will kill you. I will not stop her,” Krafty said.

“I look forward to seeing your resist the compelling,” Turry said. He patted the inhibitor on its chest. “The most sophisticated bio-lock inhibitor ever invented. I hear the next series will work just as well on living organisms as it does Droids. Go top off your batteries and get some shut eye.”

Krafty returned to its alcove and plugged itself in for diagnostics and basic maintenance.

♪♪▶

There was a path through a forest. G found himself on the path. He was being blocked by a man holding a lightsaber. The man rushed him and ended G’s presence. He found himself back in his chamber.

The tulkus of the Sarlacc, Sorbus, smiled pleasantly by G’s sudden return. She was more ghost than physical, but she had enough control of the Force that she could prove her existence. Mostly she moved small items and closed and opened cabinets. She could trigger doors to open and knock pictures off the wall. Her dress and her hair, some thin strands and some sizeable braids, floated like tentacles in water. Her clothes were as much her as her projected flesh. She teased G with the edges of her, dragging light and shadows across him like moonlight from a pool of water, diamond patterns. She caressed the surface of him, and penetrated him, pulling on muscles and nerve fibers throughout his entire being.

“I told you. There’s a man blocking the path,” Sorbus said. “I cannot go further.” “That felt personal,” G said.

“Yeah,” Sorbus said.

Sorbus comforted him with a touch more delicate than soap bubbles, more delicate than air kissing his lips. He felt her finger rise up his spine.

“Shall I take you back?” Sorbus asked.

“Can you stay there with me?” G asked.

“I cannot. I cannot move beyond the block. Maybe I can go further once the block is removed,” Sorbus said. “I am uncertain of that. There’s something... I don’t know. I think I am experiencing a fear, a compulsion to run. Oh! I love you so much, G! You have brought something new to me.”

“Take me back,” G said.

G closed his eyes. He stilled his mind. All was quiet but for the lovely lapping of feelers and clothes against him, as if a wind were blowing a sheet against him, and then he was back. He was in an open space. The ground felt firm. There was a dark sand that sparkled with bits of jewels, some reflective; some seem to be luminescent. There was an ocean, churning blue waves. The sky was dark and there was the hint that the sky was overcast. A fog crept across the land before him. A shadow was in the mist. A lightsaber sparked to life and the man became visible. He was human. He was enraged. He rushed G with intent to kill, just as he did before. G held his ground. The man brought the lightsaber up for a killing blow, but G reached out with his hand and took hold of the blade. He gripped it and held it firmly in place. It surprised and irritated the man to no end.

“Why do you persist?” G asked.

“You can’t have her! She’s mine,” he said. “Who is she?” G asked.

“Cheeka! She belongs to me,” he said.

“Oh,” G said. He smiled thinking of Cheeka and then remembered he was holding a lightsaber and focused. “You do realize, operationally speaking, from the perspective of the physical plane, you’re dead.”

“She’s mine!” he insisted.

“Yeah, you’re kind of stuck on that, aren’t you?” G said. “You don’t own people. Your contract ended when your physical body ended...”

“Mine!” he insisted.

“Yeah, well, she’s with me now. I am fucking her. How do you like that?” G asked, deliberately taunting him.

The man couldn’t free his saber so he started hitting and kicking and then fell to the ground sobbing. G flipped the lightsaber, catching it by the hilt, turned it off, and ‘magically’ disposed of it. He sat down on the beach with the man, looking out at the waves. He picked up a glowing bit of sand, found it to be the cornel of life. Not an egg, but...

“Souls?” G asked.

“They’re mine, they’re all mine,” the man said, scrambling to pull as much beach towards him as he could.

“It’s okay,” G said. “I won’t take this from you. You realize this is a metaphor? You’re stuck. They’re not really...” “I want her back,” he said. “What is your name?” “Tryst,” he said.

“It seems I must help you to get beyond you. Maybe I am stuck and this is a metaphor for me. I don’t know. Contrary to popular belief, I don’t know everything,” G said. “I have a speculative idea of this place but...”

“I will give you her if you bring me back,” Tryst said.

“Cheeka is mine, get over it, move on,” G said.

“Not her. The other Waycaster. Daphne. I will give her back to you,” Tryst said.

“Oh, aren’t you the enticing fool,” G said.

“I have her here, somewhere,” Tryst said. He picked up a sparkling gem, looked in, tossed it. He dug out another and tossed it. “I have it! She is mine.” G returned to his body and Sorbus. He opened his eyes. “You were there for much longer,” Sorbus noted.

“I think he’s insane,” G said. He sorted that, hearing an inner voice saying, ‘Aren’t we all insane?’ He got up and hugged Sorbus. “Thank you for guiding me. This was helpful. Maybe.”

“Join me, and we can both go further beyond the night than we could ever go alone,” Sorbus said. “That offer never gets old,” G said, kissing his pet ghost. “But I like our present arrangement.”

“I am hungry,” Sorbus said.

“I know,” G said.

G departed the room in a manner that suggested he was doppelganger and arrived at the top of one of his building. He owned the building. People working for him lived and used the building. He had the entire top floor and entertained guests and extracurricular ‘relationships.’ Each of the suites around the top floor allowed for small ships to come and go, and two of the rooms were permanently occupied by guests that had practically moved in. The rooftop itself was a garden, both for decoration and fresh produce. It contained a central tree that rose from two floors down, the roots descending even further into the building, and stood tall enough that it offered the entire rooftop shade. The canopy of the tree created an umbrella dome that covered the whole roof, descending to the balconies on the top floor, a leafy, flowery curtain; the sunlight that reached the rooftop was soften and speckled everything. There were inner vines with flowers. Singular vines and bundles, and inner walls of vines that one could easily push through into makeshift rooms and into other flowery arrangements and fruits.

He found Cheeka kneeling by the fountain. Her knees folded backwards, which even after all his time with her, he felt an urgency to rush to her aid and mend her. She was eating the petals of flower. She became very still on hearing his arrival and then stood to greet him. It was a very human greeting, full of affection, but there was also non-human affection there, cheek rubbing that resembled scent marking, and pushing body weight into him. She would mate with him at any time, whether it was her cycle or not, because she recognized him as alpha. Her species usually wouldn’t respond unless she was in her cycle, but with humans, they were always ready, or easily enticed.

“Master,” Cheeka said.

“Preston, or G,” G said.

“G,” Cheeka said. “I am happy to see you. Be with me.” “We need to speak about Tryst,” G said. She backed up, head down. “Please, no.”

“I am going to bring him back,” G said.

“No,” Cheeka said.

“I need you to share your knowledge with me, but I also need you to be a part of the ritual,” G said. “I think if you overcome this, you will arrive at a new level of being.”

“I like being as it is,” Cheeka said. She rushed him. “I love this place and I love you and I would stay her till my life’s end. Don’t you love me? Don’t you love the way we are together? Don’t you love us?”

“I love you. I love us. But you will outlive me. You must return to your people. You must become an alpha. You must lead people in a new direction,” G said. “And so, consequently, you must face your fear regarding this man. He is blocking you from personal growth. He is blocking me from my goal.”

“I am a not leader. I am female,” Cheeka said.

“The best leaders have always been female. You, Cheeka, have a primary intuition which has served you well. Your time with aliens has allowed you to grow in ways you have yet realized,” G said. “You,

and perhaps it's a species trait, are the perfect anthropologist." "Please. Anyone with half an eye would know I have gone native. That is just one reason I can't return to my people," Cheeka said.

"An anthropologist who doesn't go native isn't doing their job," G said.

Cheeka sorted that. "Double negative. But it works. Your language rules are too difficult. Just be with me," she said, pushing on him. She collapsed her knees while clinging to him, bringing him down on her. 'Bending over backwards,' was species adaptation mating. Her knees articulated the reverse of humans.

The conversation was postponed for a moment. Allowing for adult play and bonding. As they recovered, lying in the grass next to each other, G propped himself up and petted her. He loved the thin fur, and the different textures, and the way the shading darkened or lightened as he changed direction it rested.

"Cheeka," he said softly. "Your species is too important to allow to go into extinction. They, on their own, will never become space fairing people. They are too attuned to nature and their environmental niches. You're capable of adapting, to occupying a greater diversity of landscapes than you understand. I will be sending a ship to collect sufficient genetic material so that your species won't go extinct, but without volunteers from different clans, your story will go away. I will need you to go, preserve your story and create new stories. I want you to live." "I want to stay here with you," Cheeka said.

"Cheeka, I am alpha. I must die to protect my herd," G said. "I won't be here much longer."

Cheeka related well enough to the statement. "I will remain here."

"You will die here without a social group," G said. "You have a group now, but without me..." He closed his eyes. He didn't like what he saw. "Your best outcome is to travel the course I have plotted for you."

"Am I allowed to choose?" Cheeka asked.

G smiled and nodded. "You are free."

"May I die with you, protecting the herd?" she asked.

G was quiet for a long moment. She spoke from a genuine heart space; even though it was influenced by a social nature and a genetic bonding predisposition for the alpha, she sincerely wanted to follow and would go bravely into that. "Yes, if you learn to travel as I do, you may join me," G said.

"You know I will not master that," Cheeka said.

"Not with that belief," G said.

"I will compromise," Cheeka said. "I will accept your mission. I will go convince my people to join me in relocating and learning the ways of star people. But you must give me something."

"Interesting," G said. "What would you like?" "Offspring with you," Cheeka said.

G didn't smile or laugh, simply considered the problem. "You realize, it will take more than just being together."

"Whatever it takes. I want a viable bloodline with you," Cheeka said. "Our children will be the keeper of stories, the bridge between the people of the land and the people of the stars. And I will continue to learn the ways of the Force until I, too, can travel as easily as you, without ship, without fear."

G kissed her.

♪♪ ▶

The Circle of Anonymity was comprised of 'hijacked' droids. Each projected an 'Avatar' which was

likely being controlled by a 'rep.' Very few 'potents' did their own leg work. Turry and Krafty were present. It was a necessary risk. At some level, potents wanted to know who was facilitating the traffic. Each droid opened a compartment and extended a 'gift.' Most were credits. There were a few precious jewels that were as valuable as credit. Krafty collected them. In exchange, they were given data chips with information.

"As you will see, the merchandise has been reasonably handled. Those that were previously abused have comments in the history, along with all updated medical files," Turry explained. "Bid prices have been established on three. That will not be negotiated down. All sales are final, credits in advanced. Units of merchandise will be delivered to whatever coordinates are provided. If they are not recovered by a handler in four hours of delivery, units will be recovered and disposed of in any way I see fit, no refunds."

"We'd like to see the live product," one of the avatars said.

"You get holo-vids, that's it," Turry said.

"Where did you come across the War Droid?" one of the potents asked.

"It's not for sale," Turry said.

"Yeah, but how did you get the restraint on it..." "He snuck up on me," the War Droid said.

"Your restraint seems to be malfunctioning," another potent said.

"It isn't. I control its body, not its mind. If you restrain intelligence, you get erroneous data. I like that it speaks its mind,"

"Explain the bid of 250,000 on unit 42," a potent said.

"I am having an affair with royalty, specifically the child's evil step mother," Turry said. "I was paid well to make her disappear. Turns out a friend of the family has been grooming her and is clearly willing to pay handsomely for her. He has a basement already prepped. If you're open to suggestions, I would not bid on her. You will lose." "Private consult," the portent said.

Turry pushed a button and all the Droid deactivated but his.

"I will bid 400k for the unit," the portent said.

"Sure. I will gladly accept a token commission and put your bid in, but I am telling you this guy intends to own her. He has the means to bid substantially more," Turry said. "If you accept my 400k offer, I will make it worth your while," the portent said.

"Look, there's nothing you have that I want," portent. "I acquired this unit too easily, and she is fairly hot. I want to be rid of her, and I am going to dump her fast. I am not going to sit on her through an extended bid war."

"You have a reputation as a distributor of rancors," the portent said.

"Those days are gone. The only rancors worth selling come from Darthomir, and that's a closed planet," Turry said.

"What if I could open doors for you?" the portent said.

"The problem with someone opening doors for you is that they can be locked behind you," Turry said. "I'd hate to be on the wrong side of a cage when that happens."

The avatar dissolved and real person stepped forwards. "Consider me the gatekeeper. For a small commission, I might be willing to keep you in the trade you prefer."

"Admiral Hacshe," Turry bowed. In all his years of business, no one had ever dropped their anonymity avatar; no one of this stature had been so forthright. Either he had nothing to lose, or he was insane with dementia. It didn't occur to him to appreciate the synchronicity of Ten's ideal buyer coming

forwards. “That explains how you’re so well informed. You are probably aware Jungin is dead, and I am now a free agent. The greatest profit margin would require me to get back involved with the Huts.”

“I know. You’re a free agent because you turned down Waycaster’s offer. Everyone knows that. I can’t deal with the Huts directly. This seems like a win win for both of us,” Hacshe said. “Perhaps I can interest you in another unit and still negotiate for a partnership?” Turry said. The deal was tempting, but he still had enough business sense to try and negotiate.

“No, I want that particular unit. Do we have a deal?” Hacshe asked.

“Ending the bid without explanation is troublesome,” Turry said.

“You have a war droid. I think you will be okay,” Hacshe said. “And, should you ever find yourself in our space, you have my personal protection. You can bring the unit direct to me at Darthomir. Distributing rancors is less hazardous than your present market. I’d hate to be the one that suggests you’re trafficking humans.”

“Now see,” Turry said. “Its little comments like that that increase my worry about being on the wrong side of a cage. Planet size cage is still a cage.”

“You help me with my vice and make me some easy revenue on the side, you make my occupation of this planet worthwhile,” Hacshe said. “You won’t get a better deal elsewhere.” “Very well. I accept your offer. I will bring the unit to you,” Turry said. “Excellent! I look forward to working with you,” Hacshe said.

“Um, Admiral. Will there be any problems with my ownership of a war droid when your people board my ship?” Turry asked.

“Of course not. I will make sure all the proper forms are in place. It will appear to everyone you are an authorized user, in my employ,” Hacshe said.

The transmission ended. The droid stood up straight, fused all its circuits, and fell over backwards. Turry pushed a button that fried all the hijacked Droids. “Get rid of the evidence. Report back to the ship,” Turry said.

“This is a bad deal,” Krafty said.

“Of course it is,” Turry said. “But a step up from Jungin in many ways.”

Chapter 8

The bartender came to Ten's table without a drink. "There's a problem with your credit. Come with me," he said.

Ten was confused but got up and followed the bartender to his office. She wondered if it was a pretend problem, a show for the people at the table next to her. They didn't linger in the office, but took the lift up to the floor she had previously met the human trafficker. He invited her to sit at the table. "He will be here shortly to collect you," the bartender said. "The mission is go. There is no turning back."

"Really?" Ten asked. Suddenly she was excited and afraid and overwhelmed with conflicting emotions which caused her to do nothing but sit there. She was mad at herself for being so surprised that this had worked. In her head, Kyoko mirrored her barely expressed thought and they debated: 'this is too easy.' 'this is the Force.' 'this is a trap.' 'one I intend to spring on them.'

The bartender put a drink in front of her. It looked like milk. "Drink this. Best like a shot. As fast as you can," the bartender said.

"What is it?"

"Just do it. It's part of my arrangement with you and has nothing to do with your arrangement with the trafficker," the bartender said. He came closer. "Do it." There was a sinister implication that if she didn't, he would make her drink it.

Ten eyed him suspiciously, but complied. She drank it down fast with intents not to taste it. She nearly threw up. There was no way not to taste it. It was bitter and sweet and too thick. Much thicker than it looked. And it had lingering smell, like locker room sweat and mold. She gagged but kept herself from vomiting for fear of re-tasting it. The bartender sat down. "In three days, you will feel compelled to vomit," he explained. "Ideally, it would be best if you could vomit directly into water recovery system, but you could vomit into a sink or a toilet, and things will go where they need to go. Don't vomit into a waste basket or the bed. You will likely have three episodes of being sick before completely purging the contents of your stomach." "What did I drink?" Ten asked.

"Fertilized eggs," the bartender said.

"What?!" Ten asked, getting up.

"Sit," the bartender said.

Ten sat. She wanted to run, but couldn't.

"What have you done to me?" Ten asked. "Force command?"

"Nothing so crude," the bartender said. "You made an agreement with us, on a subconscious level, to be a carrier."

Two small insectoid creatures came over his back, down his shoulder and arm and came to the table. They were small enough to fit on his hand. They were black, with shades of browns and grey on the underside, but could suddenly change, and demonstrated by blending in with the table, and if she hadn't been staring at them she might have lost sight of them. She was able to hold the almost imperceptible edges of them till they returned. On the back of their heads, she thought she saw human faces coming and going.

"The eggs and the larvae require a host, preferably human," the bartender explained.

"They had a symbiotic relationship with a plant like species on their world of origin, but human colonist made the species extinct. Probably not on purpose. The Periplaneta adapted to the humans. Adapting is easy when you make as much offspring as they, but the thing is, humans are complicated. Most sentient beings are complicated. Call it the Force. Call it channeling. Or frequencies surfing. Periplaneta and

humans together, they make a spooky connection with the unseen, the unconscious; the shadows of the lingering can communicate through them. Your thought-form friend, they can communicate with her. They can also communicate with a deeper you, a you that's not you but it comprises you. We're honoring your mission. We are helping you get on the station. We will help you survive. We will help you get out of the predicament you're putting yourself in. But the cost is, you will become a bartender. If you survive, you will establish a nest, as I have, preferably on Darthomir, but you may do this anywhere."

"And if I don't want to?" Ten asked.

The two, hand-size, Periplaneta came to her, jumped onto her lap, crawled across thigh, then up her torso, each taking an arm, and crawled up to her shoulder.

"These two were drawn to you because of frequency," the bartender explained. "They will grow. They will become irresistible over time. As they mature and become sexually orientated, they will chose a corresponding gender and mate. On doing so, the male will die. You and the remaining will establish the nest. You will both be matriarchs of the nest. You will no longer be host to larvae, but you will be responsible for bringing in new hosts."

"I would never..."

"You will find your feelings on the matter will change over time," the bartender said.

"Did you ever wonder how humans choose mates?" "No," Ten said.

"I am not interested in this stuff."

The bartender nodded. "That, too, is a path. Interestingly, I find most bartenders share that. I, too, am asexual. Anyway, most humans think they have a choice in the matter. Most the time, the choice was made before they became consciously aware of the choice. There are patterns. Some pick partners that resemble the parent they had the most trouble with in order to resolve childhood conflict. If there was abuse, they tend to pick people to abuse them. It's like magic. I can line everyone up in here, and ask a person to go down the line, and they always pick the abusers. Their radar is skewed. The nice ones, well, they're boring. They don't register. "It's not a bad decision if they're resolving childhood trauma," Ten said. "It's simply karma. Learning experiences help people grow."

"There you go. I accept your perspective on the matter. In short, people make bad decisions in choosing partners. We turn up the music, dim the lights, and you have to rely on intuition. I know who people will go home with. You will discover you have this ability. You will know who will be good host, who will not be. And thus explains your relationships with us," the bartender said. "The larvae in your stomach will hatch in a day or so. They will help you digest food; a byproduct of this help, a byproduct of their own waste, will be an increase in stamina and vigor. They poop out super vitamins. You'll probably experiencing another growth spurt. You will become hyper feminine. Your ability to attend to the Force will be strengthen. Your aging will slow. Barring accidents, or murder, you will likely live five hundred years. You and your matriarch may have to relocate the nest over time, but given your strength in the Force, I suspect you will adopt the Periplaneta's ability to camouflage faster than I did. You will get this ability, or curse, without trying. It just comes. People will see you, or they won't. Of those who do see you, they will be inexplicably attracted to you, male and female; you call it karma. They will not be able to remember you when you leave their presence, but somehow, the moment you show up again, they know, and they will obey you. You will discover a knowingness about people, greater than your present sensitivity. You will know who to invite into the nest and who to send away. There will always be more offspring than there will be hosts. You and the matriarch will choose who matures and who gets eaten. The health of the nest will reflect the health of the overall community

we serve. Think of it as a community service. We have a symbiotic relationship with this species. We do better together than apart. We make the shadow manifest.”

Ten wanted to see the creatures on her shoulder but when she looked, she saw nothing. When she focused on the bartender, she imagined she saw movement in her periphery. She shivered.

“We don’t need them to survive,” Ten said. “Humans…”

“That is human arrogance,” the bartender said. “Humans think that by being at the top of the food chains makes them superior to the rest of nature. We are enmeshed with nature. We can’t live without other. And this is the problem. Humans are not part of the food chain. They are so far above it that they are outside the system. That’s why where ever they go, they decimate worlds. They never try to enmesh with the systems, they dominate. Humans are the alien invaders. There is no check or balance in nature to curtail their growth. Until now. Nature has adapted to humans. This is our work. This is your work.”

“I don’t want this,” Ten said.

“You wanted to be a Jedi, now you are. Jedi are the spiritual police force,” the bartender said. “So are the Periplaneta. Only, we don’t kill criminals. We rehabilitate them. We pacify them.”

“This is wrong,” Ten said.

“This is a done deal,” the bartender said. “You will find that you will not be able to speak about this, or about the creatures you possess.”

“I will tell my Master,” Ten said.

The bartender chuckled. “We would be impressed if you did. First, we know you are not on speaking terms with him. Yes, Kyoko is a bit of a flibbertigibbet. Could be her youth and not a personality trait. Second, we have a relationship with Waycaster. Even if he becomes aware of that which you carry, he will not intervene. He will see the deeper connection and the voluntary nature of the contract.”

“He could end the contract,” Ten said.

“With penalties. There is always a penalty for breaking faith,” the bartender said.

“This was not in good faith! This was underhanded…”

“You were not betrayed, Tenico. You sought a solution to a problem. You said you would do whatever it takes. This is the down payment,” the bartender said. “You have only begun to pay the price for this contract. We’re taking some risk with you. We don’t know that you will survive the week. If you do, well, you and I will be peers. Whichever of the two you carry that survives will be your life mate. You die, she dies. She dies, you die. That’s it.”

A lift door opened revealing Turry and a War droid. Turry stepped out of the lift first. The droid followed, dragging a container. It was glossy white. It floated. It looked like a casket. While Turry made an attempt at pleasantries, the war droid instructed the caste to settle and open up.

“Well, this is it, little girl,” Turry said. “I have a buyer for you. I need you to strip and lay down in the carrier.”

Ten’s hand shook.

“If you want to use the bathroom first, you can,” Turry said.

“I don’t…”

“Sorry, girl, but you’re not backing out of this deal,” Turry said. “Now there are two ways this can go down. You can strip and get in the carrier on your own volition or I can stun you, strip you myself, and put you in the carrier. I could have Krafty do it, but he tends to bruise people.”

“I would not cause you injury, Tenico,” Krafty said.

“Well, I might. It’s been a while since I had to undress a girl,” Turry said. “That might be fun, actually. Come to think of it, it might look suspicious if there isn’t evidence of me having handled the product. Maybe I should give you a practice run so you can be prepared for what’s coming?”

Ten stood up. Her lightsaber was suddenly in her hand. Krafty was suddenly armed, weapons energized and humming.

“They built war droids with the speed and intelligence to deal specifically with Jedi,” Turry said. “Are you a real Jedi or a pretend Jedi?”

There was a slight tremor in Ten’s hand. She was pretty sure she heard Kyoko say kill him and the bartender. It wasn’t Kyoko. It was one of her charges. Her eyes narrowed as she tried to focus. “Kill them all, and we will go an easier path towards the nest.” This was the charge on the right side. The charge on the left touched her ear. “These deaths will not help you.

You trusted the Force to help you this far. Go a little further.”

Turry stepped closer. “I am losing patience with you.” He held out his hand for the weapon.

“I want to take my lightsaber,” Ten said.

“Give it to me,” Turry said.

Ten surrendered the lightsaber. He drew her closer to the carrier, showed her how to open the secret compartment where he was to stow the lightsaber, and closed it. He then hit her square in the jaw with a fist and dropped her to the floor. When she came to, she was naked and in the carrier. She was attached to wireless leads that transmitted biometrics to a computer and monitor. She was also wearing a med restraint, and arm band with a variety of meds in it that could be pushed electronically directly into the vein, and he was about to activate it. He realized she was awake and smiled at her.

“I enjoyed my time with you,” Turry said.

In Ten’s ear she heard one say, ‘he’s lying don’t, let him bait you into anger;’ the other said ‘kill him now! We can escape together.’

“The next time I see you,” Ten said to Turry. “I will kill you.”

“Yeah, well, good luck with that,” Turry said.

He activated the med-dispenser and Ten was awash with vertigo. She felt as if she were floating on water, sinking. The surface of the world shimmered as she descended. She tried to breathe but couldn’t inhale because the pressure of the water surrounding her was too great to allow her rib cage to expand. Krafty apologized for the darkness to come, and then shut the lid. She tried to reach out with the Force to ‘see,’ but sleep took her. As she went, the voices in her ears grew prominent, even Kyoko’s voice was there, telling her to relax, and then, nothing.

♪♪ ▶

Quillen presented himself to Hacshe. Hacshe put aside what he was doing gave his First Officer his complete attention. The item he put away was a curious thing, perhaps a Holocron box.

Quillen was young enough to be his grandson. He actually liked him. In fact, he had groomed him just for the position he held.

“My Lord,” Quillen said. Bowing with this address was recognition of their dual relationships.

“Good morning, son,” Hacshe said. “You’ve been quite busy planet side.” “I prefer working planet side,” Quillen said.

“Fair enough. I love Darthomir, too. Undeveloped, wild, which is likely why the Force is so strong here. Anyway, I made some schedule changes in Troop Deployment,” Hacshe said. “We’ll be starting a human only recruitment drive here on the planet, and adopting the Academy at the Three Sisters as our new training facility. I am anticipating a need. I will allow you to do that. The younger the recruits the

better; the easier it is for them to adopt our paradigm. I would like to personally recruit and train a group. I will be doing the same.”

“Of course,” Quillen said. “I will establish the recruitment parameters.”

“I will be expecting a package,” Hacshe said. He handed him a disk. “Make sure these people are on duty when it arrives.”

Quillen agreed. He was thinking it through and then just decided to say it: “You haven’t ordered a package in a long time.”

“Counting, are you?” Hacshe asked.

“No, my Lord,” Quillen said. “I just thought...”

“I am too old to indulge? I assure you, son, whatever your libido was when you arrived at puberty will be that even when you’re 150 and in a nursing home. Pray for young, lovely, accommodating nurses. That which you were attracted to when you were young will still be what stirs your blood when you’re old. I can still be moved, and I have never lost my ability to perform.”

Quillen couldn’t hide his reaction. He was disgusted. “I was hoping for a reprieve from this persistent distraction of wanting. I could accomplish so much more if it weren’t for this curse of desire. That and sleep. Sleep and thoughts of sex are a serious waste of time.”

“But it has served you well,” Hacshe pointed out. “It gave you the drive to be financially successful. Truly, it’s the only reason to be successful. It provides more opportunities to indulge the drive. You should honor the drive. It is deeply connected to the Force and who we are. Women are attracted to men our stature. It’s just right. We would have gone extinct if they preferred our opposites.” “And yet, they complain when we are not attentive enough,” Quillen said.

“Oh, well you be more attentive. You can’t just get off and leave them hanging. You got to make sure they enjoyed being with you,” Hacshe said.

“You would know more of this than I,” Quillen acquiesced, hoping he wouldn’t drone on about his days of service the Emperor.

“I have always encouraged your indulgence. Your temperament would improve if you just gave in,” Hacshe said.

“I already give in too much,” Quillen said.

Hacshe chuckled. “Insufficient to realize it is the Force that is influencing you. Only when you stop resisting will you transcend and touch what I have touched. Only then can I take you to the next level of training.”

“Your dabbling in mysticism has served you, but I doubt it will take me as far as it has you,” Quillen said. “It baffles me the others tolerate your interests. Perhaps you are given a pass because of your age, your longevity with the Order. My peer group frowns on this kind of thinking. It was this spiritualistic thinking that resulted in the decline of the empire. It’s not sustainable because it doesn’t fit the materialistic paradigm. People care about results, not anecdotes.”

“Even the materialists don’t argue that anomalous studies reveal consciousness can influence matter beyond statistical chance,” Hacshe pointed out.

“Not consistently verifiable...”

“If your conscious influences it and you’re expecting null results, you will get what you anticipate,” Hacshe said.

“Convenient confabulation,” Quillen said. “Border line solipsism.”

“How do you think your mind moves your body? How do you explain placebos?” “Bio-mechanisms, not magic...”

“I agree, not magic. The Force isn’t magic, it is pure consciousness.”

“We could spend all day arguing this. Do you wish to keep me from my duties?” Quillen asked.

“Are you asking for an out?” Hacshe asked. “I will defer to your wants,” Quillen said.

“Always the safe way out. Have a nice day, son,” Hacshe said.

Chapter 9

“In today’s lesson, we are going to bring the dead back to life.”

Silence followed the statement. Kaila, Jessie, and G were sitting on a circle that was marked on the floor with gold particles that would be swept up on conclusion of the ‘experiment.’ Cheeka stood behind G, in physical contact with him. The candles spaced in and outside the circle gave the lines painted on the floor an eerie glow. Different colored candles, different colored flames, each holding their own circle, connected by lines. The entire spectrum of visible light was scattered through the room. From the ceiling looking down, the totality of the lines resembled a photo of particle collision.

“Are you insane?” Jessie asked.

“Is that even possible?” Kaila asked.

“I’ve done it, with modest success,” Cheeka said. She didn’t translate ‘modest.’ “I have assisted in creating new creatures and bringing back previously incarnated creatures. They have never been... quite right.”

Jessie looked back to G. “Are you insane?!” “We can bring back anyone?” Kaila asked.

“You are insane,” Jessie told Kaila. To G, she said: “This is wrong. We’re messing with the order of things.”

“You base that theory on?” G asked.

“People die, that’s it,” Jessie said. “No second chances.”

“That is the predominant view of things,” G agreed. Jessie stood up to leave.

“Sit back down,” G said. “We’re going to do this.” Jessie sat back down, frustrated.

“Stop doing that!” Jessie snapped, adjusting her skirt down.

“You’re afraid,” Kaila said.

“I am disgusted,” Jessie said.

“Wait,” Kaila said. “You believe this is possible?”

“You doubt?” Jesse asked.

“Yes,” Kaila said.

“He can make a Force ghost of himself, why couldn’t he make a Force ghost of someone else?” Jessie asked.

“A doppelganger, tulpa, or tulkus, not a Force ghost,” G said. “There is no such thing as Force ghosts. There are only ghosts.”

“Really?” Kaila said. “So there is no secret formula to being a Force ghost?”

“You have to renounce dark side,” Jessie said.

“Do you have to renounce yours?” Kaila said.

“You don’t have to renounce anything. What you are here is what you are there. What you feel here is amplified there,” G said. “There is no death. If you do not learn to handle your fear here, it will overwhelm you there and spin you into a dark abyss of your own creation. It is why we descend into the physical in the first place, to short circuit the swiftness in which our thoughts and desired manifest themselves. We are children of gods; the physical plane is our nursery.”

“Explain the absence of dead Sith going around inspiring people,” Jessie said.

“I just did. The Sith are so obsessed with their own agenda that they tend not to seek the company of others. The more disdain, fear, and contempt you have for others, the more distance you have between you and potential contact of other. Those on the dark side of the continuum tend to get stuck on material objects, or at particular places, gravitating towards the thing they obsessed over the most,” G said. “That, is, their best case scenario. Like attracts like. They find themselves surrounded by people of their nature and spiral into their own hells. Eventually, if they’re lucky, they will discover the way out of hell is cultivating opposite desire. Or, they can just be reborn. There is respite in being reborn.” “You have a theory for everything,” Jessie said.

“Yes,” G said.

“I don’t believe in past lives,” Kaila said.

“There is no past lives,” G said.

“You just said...” Jessie said.

“There is no past, there is no future,” G said. “There is no space-time. All our perceived past, present, and future lives occur simultaneously in an ever present now. You must learn to see things from above...”

“And you want us to regurgitate this tripe as gospel...” Kaila said.

“No,” G said. “I want you to develop your own theory of everything.” “Really?” Jessie asked.

“The physical body is not designed to see truth,” G said. “It is designed to exploit shortcuts to sustainability. I see a particular truth and it works for me. Everything I give you is my truth, but your partial truth. Space-time is a limited consensus reality. Truth in this domain is metaphor or conjecture. If you accept anything I say as literal, then expect your training time to double. I would like to be heard. I want my conjecture to be considered. I invite conversation. I expect you to explore all of reality, test what I say, make your own conclusions, find flaws in my theories, and help me refine it.”

“How can we bring people back?” Kaila asked.

“First, let’s dismiss the common view of things,” G said. “You are, technically, not a body first, but a soul incarnate. The soul took possession of a body, developed it, tuned it, creating a specific filter to channel, or nurture, desired soul traits. The personality is a filter for seeing your reality. Your personality is an artificial construct, the equivalent of Droid programming so that the body can operate on autopilot even when the soul is not attending. Our bodies are vehicles designed to navigate certain frequencies in the Force. We are avatars, Droids, for a multi-dimensional creature. These bodies can’t see all the frequencies at once because they are designed for specific domain work. Seeing the Force is an adaptation, the equivalent of some creature having access to infrared or ultraviolet. Not seeing or having access to the Force is not a punishment, because the entire spectrum is the Force, by definition. The personality that develops as a result of exploring this frequency domain continues to exist after the body’s death. It is an aspect of the greater soul. So, in that sense, you as the personality matrix are a new being, one that didn’t exist prior to the soul’s artistic endeavor. This is really a paradox. You always existed, before creation, and continue to exist after. Any soul can access you from any point in space-time because space-time doesn’t exist. In your meditation, ascend to the Great Library and read any person who ever lived as if they were merely a book on a shelf. Just as you can discover past selves, you can discover future selves. We are going to invite a soul, or at least, the personality aspect of a soul that is no longer incarnate to come to us. We will give it a body that is so in tuned with its frequency that it will permanently re-occupy it. Or, if you prefer, we will create a physical construct and download the personality into the construct. This can be done with tech, such as the cloning tech incorporating

Force Crystals in conjunction with Force Sensitive handlers; because people think we are bodies first, not souls first, there is no exploration of this as a pathway to extending the life of a personality. The Emperor dabbled, but failed to achieve his goal because he was only interested in maintaining his own perceived continuity. Energy and matter are one thing. The Force is one thing. Making a body for a disincarnate soul is easy. Getting one to return to a body, that is difficult. Some want to return. This particular soul wants to return. He will cooperate.”

“You are insane,” Jessie said. “I will not participate...”

“I only need your meditative presence,” G said. “You will participate. Cheeka, if you will, summon Tryst.”

Cheeka frowned, but nodded. She closed her eyes and sought out her last memory of him and used that to channel him. There was some bias in this, as her own memory was tainted by her fear of him. She found an unpleasant metallic taste in her mouth that she hated. This amplified the characteristics that she loathed. G took over and comforted her.

“See him for who he is, not what you expect,” G whispered.

Cheeka tried to see without feeling. She saw first his form. She could see the physicality of him, the face, as if looking through frosted glass. The smell of him came upon her, solidifying his form. The odors were almost overwhelming, the bad metallic taste on her tongue amplified. On a deeper level the brain identified hormones and genetic signatures. She became convinced he was present and indeed, a mist was forming within the circle. In her experience, once the mist was there then a threshold had been met. Something would come. Something not good. A smell of ozone was now noticeable. The smell of a storm. The chamber they were in was so large that it contained its own weather system. Even with the immediacy of the light around them, it was pure darkness in all directions because the walls and ceiling were that far away. Lightening occurred. The sound that followed rumbled the floor beneath them.

Tryst arrived in a condensing of vapor and a spark of light, standing, wide stance, arching his back and turning his mouth upwards, arms coming up, gasping for air. Light twirled around him like rainbow snakes. A toroid, a magnetic sphere sprung up around him, visible with sparks, then faded to invisibility, clearly connected and generated by a heart. The gold glitter lines on the floor sparked illumination and faded, a billion trillion stars on a dark floor. Tryst recovered, twirled to orientate, panicky, and came up upon a barrier. He backed away his eyes locking on G’s face. He calmed sufficiently from panic to find anger and pointed at G.

“You!” he said. He seemed angry, but was soon laughing, and then he was perplexed sufficiently to go silent. “I am whole! I have been doing this for years without achieving this level of perfection? How?”

“That is an annoying trait, isn’t it,” Kaila commiserated with the summoned.

“You are too much of a control freak to bring anything back into a pure state,” G said. “That, and your own personal level of unconscious repression of perceived undesirable traits results in those traits being amplified in your creations. I embrace who you are.”

“She is mine and you can’t have her back,” Tryst said. He ran straight into a shield. He ran into it the way someone might walk into a transparent door. He pushed against the shield not understanding. It was a soul shield, made by the Force. Again, the quality of the shield was beyond his level to recreate. If he could hold this, he could summon demons, jinn, and maybe even the old Emperor himself! “You can’t keep me here forever.” G stood. His apprentices came to his side.

“I will kill you as the soon I am released,” Tryst said.

“I like him” Kaila said. “I was expecting a zombie. But this is way better than a zombie.”
Jessie glared at her. “He is evil,” she snapped. She hit G’s arm. “You brought something evil back.”

“Be at peace. I have brought balance,” G said. And then to Tryst, as an afterthought. “Oh, that’s also important to this equation.”

“This body is mine! I possess it now and you won’t get it back,” Tryst said. “It is yours to keep for as long as you can maintain it,” G said.

“I am normal again. I won’t dissipate. I have my past memories and my memories of the in-between! I will live indefinitely,” Tryst said.

“Okay,” G said. “So, I have a question...”

“Oh, me, too!” Kaila interrupted. “How come you brought him back with clothes?” “You’re worried about clothes?” Jessie asked.

“I am just curious. Are there clothes in the afterlife? Is this what you were wearing there, or what you were wearing when you died, or did we create that for you out of a sense of modesty?” Kaila asked. She turned to G. “We don’t care about modesty, do we?”

“We have more practical matters to discuss than clothing...” Jessie insisted.

“Oh! There is nothing more practical than clothing,” Kaila said. “It needs to be functional. It’s nice if it’s functional and cute. I like cute. G clearly likes cute...” “G doesn’t care about clothes!” Jessie said. “Look how he’s dressed.” “True that,” Kaila said.

“What’s wrong with my clothes?” G asked.

“So, did you make his clothes?” Kaila asked. “You wear what you want to wear,” G said. “Tryst...”

“No! No negotiations. I will not give her back to you. And, Cheeka, you belong to me. Come here, now,” Tryst demanded.

Cheeka blinked. She seemed perplexed. She looked to G. “I don’t understand. I don’t feel compelled.”

“You are free to choose,” G said. “You have always been free to choose. This is my gift to you. Realization.”

Tryst laughed. “She’d mate with anyone to keep the peace. The moment I am free and she realizes I am the dominant one here, she will bow to me again. I will not be as kind to you as I was in the past.”

Cheeka followed it, saw the truth in it, but wasn’t afraid. “You understand, you will never leave here.”

“What? We’re going to kill him?” Kaila asked.

“You can’t do that!” Jessie said.

“What’s with you and all these ‘can’ts?!’” Kaila said. “Can’t make him, can’t kill him. I can kill him. Hell, there are lots of ways to kill a man. I can do it in a way where we can kill him more than once if you let me demonstrate. And if we need to practice, there are quite a few people I would like to bring back just so I can kill them again.”

“We just created him. We can’t arbitrarily kill him. We’re the good guys! We are now obligated to protect and preserve him,” Jessie said.

“Even if he’s evil?” G asked.

“We brought him back, we are obligated to try and convert him back to the light,” Jessie said.

“Cheeka?” G asked.

“I can’t do it, G. I can’t do it without emotions. I can’t do it without touching anger,” Cheeka said.

“Oh, touch it, sweetie,” Kaila said. “Allow your anger to motivate you, your righteous anger, to exact your revenge.”

Cheeka nodded. “G, I give his fate to you. I am too bias. He is not a threat and so anything I do to him from here forwards is about me, not justice.”

“Good for you,” G said.

Tryst laughed. “See, she still belongs to me. You can’t kill me. I was destined to return! I have a mission.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not the only one to be brought back from the other side with delusions of grandeur,” G said. G seemed thoughtful about that. He realized his ‘angels’ were studying him. “Probably explains the necessity for amnesia at birth. Grandeur in babies can be irritating.”

“You’re really going to kill him? After all of this?” Jessie demanded.

“We are not going to kill him,” G assured her.

Tryst laughed. “You can’t win. Cheeka is mine. Daphne is mine. And my master remains my secret lover. You will not reach her. I will never give her up.”

“Perhaps not today,” G agreed. “But you will succumb. You will cooperate with my agenda.”

“I will never give her up. Never in a thousand years,” Tryst said.

“Okay,” G said.

A little flick of the hand, a push with the Force, and a trap door sprung open. Tryst fell onto a transparent incline. Lights came up revealing the mouth of a Sarlacc at the focus. No matter how hard he tried to crab crawl backwards, or direct climb, movement just made him slip further down towards level. His hand became sweaty and would not hold the glass. Streaks marked the glass. A lone tentacle claimed a leg and pulled slowly. He screamed as if it were pure torture, but was not harmed by the grasp. It was an intimate grasp; the gentle pulling of a lover to bring a person in. It was the deliberate slowness that increased his panic- this was not just a mechanical response to stimulus, this was an intelligence playing with its food. It paused, holding him in place, then pulling lightly again. In this way, it reinforced the fact that it was sentient. It was definitely toying with him, perhaps even collaborating with G. In his racing thoughts, one particular, paranoid statement was the plant and G had a bet he would break right here, on the dying slope.

Jessie reached to help but was blocked by the same barrier that had prevented Tryst from escaping.

“You said we aren’t going to kill him!” Jessie said. “And, ‘we’ are not going to,” G said.

“Technically, he’ll out live us in there,” Kaila said.

“You’re bluffing!” Tryst screamed. “You won’t do this. You can’t do this to me! You’re the good guys! I won’t give her up.”

“Tryst,” G said. Sorbus held him in place. “Eyes please. Oh, thank you. I am not the good guy. I am also not the bad guy. And this is going to happen.” “No, please,” Tryst said.

“Have any of you considered what we’re doing for lunch today?” G asked.

“Seriously?!” Jessie demanded. “G, this is wrong.”

“How do you figure? He was stuck in limbo already. We’re just changing where he was stuck,” G said. “We may actually be helping him pay out his karma and be unstuck faster.” “He won’t be

lonely here, that's for sure," Priya said.

Both Kaila and Jessie were startled by her sudden appearance. Neither G nor Cheeka reacted to her arrival. They were already aware. "I love my life," Kaila said. "May I be excused?" Jessie asked.

"Not yet," G said. "You're an adult. You're a Jedi in the making. I am glad you disagree with what's happening here. I also want you to get use to these sorts of decisions." "I am not a judge and executioner," Jessie said.

"Yes, you are!" G said. "You can't pick a side of a war and then claim you are free of judgment. The enemy doesn't come in uniforms. Well, they do, but that's not them. They have faces. They have lives. They have families. They have fears and hopes and dreams and this is what we do to people when we fail to recognize their sovereignty and negotiate. This is not just a metaphor. You must learn to see beyond the uniforms people wear. You must learn to see beyond the masks people wear, the sides they take. Look at him. He is afraid. That, too, is a mask. He wants to manipulate us. That's okay. It's what people do. We all do it. It is part of what it means to be social. If they're not manipulating, then they're out of the game. If they're out of the game, they are a guru with a lesson for you. Learn from both."

Trysts was now on his back, going in feet first. Sorbus was bringing in other tentacles to play. A tongue was probing him, dousing him saliva to ease the passage. Vines pulled him upright and towards center. The lips constricted against him, intimately. He was crying. It was as if he was standing, each wrist tied to hold him up right. The vine around his waist came free and he was dropped in to his chest. He screamed.

"I won't tell you! Never! She will bring me back and I will kill you," Tryst said. "She promised me. She promised..."

Then he was gone. Swallowed whole. Jessie seemed beaten, paled and nauseous. Kaila was amused, but she noticed G was expressionless. "You really have no feelings about this?" Kaila asked.

"I have compassion for suffering," G said. "He was suffering. Jessie is suffering. You are suffering. Sorbus was suffering. Her hunger will be eased. Tryst's physical pains are no more. He will find his body is comforted as the body dies, and in time, his mind will find solace in Sorbus' presence. He has more potential of finding peace here than where he was, but even that is his choice. Even the worst of us know we are lost and we want intervention and guidance. This is an intervention. Ultimately no harm can be done to something that is eternal. Suffering is an illusion. It's a choice."

A sudden wind, a down burst of air, extinguished the candles. A ball of liquid fell from the ceiling. It wasn't water. It was viscous and slimy, but sufficiently runny that what didn't fall directly into the Sarlacc pit flowed there, bringing gold particles. The four of them were soaked in the stuff.

"Eww!" Kaila complained.

"Ectoplasm?" Jessie asked.

"Afterbirth," Cheeka said. "I have never seen so much, though, or this thick." G used a finger to wipe some of it off Cheeka and tasted it. Jessie vomited.

"You may go now," G said.

"I hate you," Jessie said, wiping her mouth on her sleeve. She walked away.

"I love you," Kaila said, wiping his face and trying some afterbirth, too. She bowed and followed her 'sister.' "That's not bad."

"Are they going to switch the way I and Daphne did?" Priya asked.

"I don't know. I may end up with two Siths before their training is complete," G said.

"How did it go with you?"

“Mission accomplished,” Priya said.

“How is he?” G asked. “Angry,” Priya said.

“That’s to be expected,” G said. “They hate admitting it, but even Jedi feel anger.” “You make a lot of people angry,” Cheeka observed. G sighed. “It’s not me,” he said.

♪♪▶

“What the hell?” Master Windu said.

Master Yeno met Windu with a hug. “You look older than I remember, my friend.”

“I look older? Have you seen your face in a mirror?” Windu asked.

Yeno introduced Windu to Senator Dayo. She was part of the incarnation circle. He then introduced him to Priya, the third. She greeted Windu with a bow, and asked for forgiveness... and was gone, just so much smoke.

“How did she...”

“I don’t know,” Yeno said. “It’s clearly a learnable skill. Luke’s learned it.” “Who taught Luke?” Windu asked.

“Maybe he’s been spying on Preston, I don’t know. I know it’s an ability. I know there is no reason I can’t do it, and yet, I have not been successful at it,” Yeno said.

“How did...”

“We bring you back?” Yeno said. “We have taken Force Cloning to a new level. This body is yours, for as long you wish to maintain it.”

“You could have brought me back at 18?” Windu asked.

“You see this aspect of yourself as the pinnacle of your wisdom, and so this is how you manifested,” Dayo said.

“So, I participated in the ritual?” Windu asked. “Willingly?” “You could not be here otherwise,” Yeno said.

“You don’t remember?” Dayo asked.

“Not unexpected. Most people don’t remember why they incarnate. This is fairness,” Yeno said. “Why me? Why not Yoda or someone even wiser?” Windu said.

“Yoda can materialize himself when and where he wants. He did not require this level of intervention,” Yeno said. “You have an opportunity here, my friend. Do you want back in the game?”

“You need my help?” Windu asked.

“We do,” Dayo said.

The candles in Yeno’s home went out in the hollow of the rock he called home. All the furniture had been removed in order to make room for the ritual and was spared the direct dousing. The room was small and the release of fluid so great that the three of them were knocked off their feet and brought to the ceiling before eased back down as the soupy afterbirth rushed out windows and doors. Even sitting on the floor, it was up to their chest. Windu wiped it out of his eyes. “What the hell?!” “Birth is always messy,” Dayo said.

“Welcome back to life, my friend,” Yeno said.

Chapter 10

The Immanence, a Gladiator type Star Destroyer, was in orbit directly above Waterborne. It was in orbit with four other, pristine Star Destroyers of the same type. They were in physical contact and being permanently joined together in a way that from a certain angle, they resembled a pyramid. A fourth ship, an odd looking thing, comprised the base, and when mated with the others, the inner space could be pressurized and utilized for living or construction. Only the Immanence was powered by the Force. The others required fuel to run the hyperdrives, but the Immanence could maintain all of their life support indefinitely.

Bob was on the bridge of the Immanence. It was automated and didn't need a crew, but there was still crew. G arrived beside Bob. It did not flinch.

"I am going to ask that you delay your departure," G said. "You wish us to take another species," Bob said.

"Yes, please," G said.

"You understand, if we try to save every species in the galaxy, we will never leave and there will not be a ship big enough to carry them," Bob said. "I know," G said. "But this species has endeared itself to me." "You are playing favorites?" Bob asked.

"Maybe," G said. "Yes."

"We are no longer Bloodhunters. We are Preservers," Bob said. "We want to preserve you. We want you to come with us."

G nodded. "It was not my intent to preserve or push my bloodline. People get weird about bloodlines. It doesn't mean what people think it means. But I have made a deal with this species. There will be them. There will be hybrids. And there will be humans. The hybrids will be Force adepts and useful to your overall mission."

G opened his hand and a holograph of the galaxy emerged. It shrunk and a section of space highlighted. It zoomed in to reveal a lone artifact, a dark star, four gas giants, a thousand moons, and six planets.

"I have discovered this and forged a hyperspace lane directly to it," G said. "This failed star was a capture from another galaxy, and later ejected. You can reach this object in fifty years of hyper-flight. On arrival, you will find sufficient material to refuel, and establish your first colony. On its own, this star will eventually be captured by this galaxy. Five million years from now. An automated colony could be sustained here indefinitely, and you can make seed ships in the interim. This will give you a better head start than your original idea of accelerating and coasting to the next closest galaxy."

Bob sent the information to the network. There was consensus.

"This is a definite resource that can be exploited," Bob agreed. "Come with us. Your presence will increase our chances of success."

"I will be with you, always. You will succeed. Life will succeed," G said.

G lingered long enough to see the activities. In his mind he found the presence of the Nautolans, a group he had personally invited. One family had a Force sensitive child, and several other families that were friends. The child was talented enough they would not be able to keep her secret, hence wanting their wanting to depart. Ships were still bringing genetic samples of life. Most samples were cold storage, just enough germ material to recreate. Some were full creatures subdued in carbonite. Some were vacuum sealed seeds. Sorbus had contributed her own seeds, and these could jump start an entire biosphere. There were cryogenic units and artificial wombs of various sizes, some of them big enough to birth Acklays. There were also colonists preserved in carbonite. All in all, they had a fair sample size of

the galaxy.

♪♪▶

Cheeka emerged from the ship, tentatively, and then down the ramp to meet the party waiting for her. There was the Admiral, and a Captain, and a midshipman. She addressed the midshipman.

“Greetings, friend. You will be my interface while I am on board,” Cheeka said. “Excuse me, mam, but I am the Admiral, and I am in charge here,” The Admiral said. Cheeka blinked, trying to sort his truth. There was a moment of confusion that was quickly resolved. “You have the privilege of rank. This man is actually in charge.”

“Let’s get one thing straight…”

G arrived and stepped up. “Greetings,” he said. “Oh, sorry, go ahead. You were about to get things straight.”

“G is in charge,” the Admiral said.

“Actually, Cheeka is in charge,” G said. “Is Fixit on board?”

“He is. He is performing diagnostics on the artificial wombs that were brought on board,” the Admiral said.

“The children are here?” Cheeka asked, excitedly. “Can I see them?” “They’re technically not children yet,” the Admiral said.

“May I go see them?” Cheeka asked.

“I will escort you, mam,” the midshipman said.

Cheeka hugged and kissed G. “Thank you. Please, come and visit me.”

“I will visit you. I promise,” G said.

The midshipman departed with Cheeka. The Admiral and the Captain waited till they were out of earshot.

“You want her in charge?” the Admiral demanded.

“I am in charge. You will listen to her as if she were me,” G said. “You have the coordinates to her world of origin.”

“There’s nothing there,” the Admiral said.

“Well, that’s clearly not true,” G said. “When you arrive, you find a small orbital platform that maintains the colony. I want it destroyed. I want you to install a droid orbital defense system, so any remaining sentient traffickers are blocked from returning and reestablishing the colony. You will then send the ground based colony back to the Stone Age. Leave no ship or tech working on the planet. Leave as many of the colonist themselves alive.”

“That’s pretty harsh, don’t you think?” the Captain asked.

“For the last fifty years, they been treating this species as cattle. They will survive. They will thrive when they forge a symbiotic relationship with the indigenous species,” G said. “Only together will both species prosper. Should they rise back to a space fairing civilization, they will bring to the galaxy an improved perspective of living together.” “Or they will go extinct,” the Admiral said.

“We will all go extinct if we don’t learn this lesson,” G said. “Whether it is on a solitary planet, or a galaxy at large, the equation is the same. We work together, or we die together.

That’s it. Collect genetic samples from all the variations of her species, as humanely as possible.

Cheeka will solicit volunteers to join her mission. They are to be treated hospitably. And let’s be clear on this point. They are to see her as the one in charge. You, and your crew, will defer to her as if she were your master. She is the matriarch. After the samples and the volunteers are secured, you will

expedite them to Waterborne. All samples, all droid presently on board, will be transferred to the Imminence. After that, you and your crew may take the credits I have provided and go to your preferred place of retirement. Your service to me will be concluded.”

“Some of the crew have wondered if they could go on the expedition,” the Captain said.

“They can individually ask Bob. His word on that will be final,” G said.

♪♪▶

“I can’t see anything,” Cheeka said.

“They are much too small to be seen with the naked eye,” Fixit explained. “Also, this is not a true window. You don’t want visible light penetrating the womb.” He extended an appendage and changed the monitor’s present mode. It showed a simulation of accelerated growth. “This is what it would like.”

“Oh!” Cheeka said. “And this is happening inside of me, too?” “Yes,” Fixit said.

“Have you done this before?” Cheeka asked.

“Yes,” Fixit said. “I birthed and raised Preston.”

“Oh? Oh! You’re father!” Cheeka said, hugging him. “May I call you father?”

He chuckled. “I would find that very humorous, child. Yes, you may.”

Cheeka cried. She found memories of her father filtering through, and her years of living with humans was affecting her as she compared and contrast. Everyone knew who their father was by smell. Most the herd’s offspring were directly related to the alpha male. All males got to mate, it was considered ‘sympathy’ and necessary to keep the peace, and usually they could only mate with someone already impregnated. Her father was not well liked. He was fringe food, first barrier from the wild. It was only duty that the females shared time with him. She was the result and she hated her father, in preference to the alpha. The alpha treated her well, and in hindsight, was likely grooming her to be the next long term consort. Genetically, it was better for the herd than being with his own children. She had been so cruel to her father, when, from a human perspective, he was more in the lines of a hero. He laid down his life for the herd. When the human hunters came, the alpha sent her to the fringe, reminding her she was daughter of fringe food. She had never felt so much pain, but she went, she walked straight towards the humans, her big, wide, foe eyes dominating her face and likely transmitting her fear and sadness. The human eyes were so small and fierce. So alien. Not evil. Predatory didn’t translate to evil.

“What’s wrong?” Fixit asked.

“I am happy,” Cheeka said. “And sad. Because of knowledge.” “I see,” Fixit said.

“G won’t be here to see his family birthed.”

“I would not be so certain of that,” Fixit said. “He has a way of surprising folks.”

“Tell me stories about him,” Cheeka said.

Fixit invited Cheeka to sit and made her a vitamin enriched drink. He spoke like a real father would. Cheeka had no human bias about technology, and she only saw the person of Fixit, not his physicality. As he shared, she realized this would be the teacher to the offspring. They would be naturally sensitive to the Force, due to their hybrid nature. They would be sensitive because they would be neither human nor Dera, the name of her species. They would know two languages, human and Dera. They would have multiple maps in their brain, the visible world, the social world, and the spiritual world. She had another realization. None of this would have happened had Tryst not bought her from the hunter. He hadn’t so much as taken pity of her as she huddled in the far back recess of the dark cell. He simply knew she would comply. And he initially patient, curious. He squatted as he came closer, got down on his hands and knees, backed up to her, and slowly extended a hand. He waited. She touched his hand with her

nose, then put her hand in his. He led her from the darkness, then immersed her in darkness. She sent a ray of gratitude to Tryst, wishing him well on his journey. If it wasn't for his darkness, she might not have seen the light of the Waycaster.

♪♪▶

Ten found herself on a rock, a desert around her. A man was approaching. She found herself unconcerned. She studied the sand. Patterns emerged, rising above the sand and then falling back into it. The optical illusion was mesmerizing. The man was upon her before she realized it. It was G.

"You found me," Ten said.

"We are one in the Force," G said. "Where you go I go."

"Are you here to provide a lesson?" Ten said.

G climbed up on the rock and sat with her. The sunset was prominent, large and pinkish orange.

"No. No more lessons from me," G said.

"Why are you here?" Ten asked.

"I miss you. I wanted to sit with you awhile," G said.

Ten found it hard to hold an emotion. "Am I dead?" "No," G said.

"You're in a between place."

"Between?" Ten said.

"There is the physical, the realm of the unconscious, the individual and the collective and boundaries, there is the greater consensus reality, and then there is the Force; there are boundaries spaces connecting everything," G said. "You go where your awareness is focused."

"Can I end this?" Ten asked.

"Sure. You can sever the connection to your physical body at any time," G said. "You are not stuck there." "But, they're going to revive me. What happens then?" Ten asked.

"Well, that's the thing," G said. "You only imagine that this space is different from the before space and the after space, but really, there is no space. You can hold a different perspective and hold the entirety of the thing in mind."

"Why can't I see it now?" Ten asked. "Because you want to know," G said.

"So, because I want to know I can't know?" Ten said.

"No, you want to know what you already know, but if you knew that you know, you would hold no confidence in what you knew," G said.

"Confabulation. Convoluting confabulation. We've gone over this before," Ten said. "And, probably will again before you get it, but that, too, is part of the game," G said. He put his hand on top of her head, the way he would any child. Love was conferred. "This is a weird place," Ten said.

"Yeah," G said. "Every grain of sand a soul, a past life, a person we were and will be again. We stand in ourselves and on ourselves."

"I thought you weren't here to give me lessons," Ten said.

"Sorry," G said. "I just kind of do that, don't I?" "I am glad I got you and not Yoda," Ten said.

"I am glad I got you and not Luke," G said.

"You hate him don't you?" Ten said.

"Luke? Nah. He was my hero in the before space. I wanted to be him. Probably explains my thing for my sisters. I loved Leia. I was happy for her and Han, and sad for their story, but it was their story.

I celebrate it for what it is. Was. Will be,” G said. “I don’t know. I bet there are more stories of them, somewhere.” “Why do we like drama?” Ten asked.

“It’s fun,” G said.

“No, it’s not. I am tired,” Ten said. Ten disappeared from the rock.

“Not tired enough,” G said. “Good night, Ten. May your dreams be fulfilling. Good night, Sun. Thank you for your light. Good night, moons...”

♪♪▶

“Welcome to Abalus,” the woman greeted the tour group that had disembarked from the shuttle. She was young, had the look of a ‘pharmaceutical rep,’ a natural beauty that would have landed her any modeling job in the galaxy. Windu could imagine her on a rotating stage selling speeders. “Each of you have been given a data band, which will give you access to holo-map, and entertainment activities. You do not have to remain with your group. Most of the city is opened to you, but if you stray into operational areas, you will be redirected. Have fun. And, if you need anything, just look for anyone dress as I and they will assist you in getting your needs met.”

Windu and Yeno followed the group, hanging back until they were at the tail end of the group, and then parted ways. Windu stretched his collar.

“I hate this shirt,” Windu said.

“We can’t very well go around dressed old school,” Yeno said.

“I know, cognitively, but emotionally, I feel like nothing’s changed,” Windu said. “There was a time I could walk boldly down a street and people gave way with respect.” “Those days are way gone,” Yeno said. “Today, we’d be lucky not to get spit on.” Windu had an emotion about that, but he caught it, quieted it, and walked the markets. There was endless stream of markets, so it seemed. A circle of markets described the perimeter of this floor, the widest floor of the city, with spiral paths leading into the central park, with more markets and restaurants. Hotels were on the upper floor. The Abalus had no shortage of good looking young people dressed in uniforms, both young men and women. Windu caught them flirting with people their age... No, with females their age. They ignored the old. They practically didn’t even see him or Yeno. Yeno caught him looking.

“What are we looking for?” Yeno asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Windu said.

They walked on and he paused, turned and followed a ‘spiral arm’ street in and came straight way to shop selling amber.

“This is why,” he said, entering the store.

“Seriously,” Yeno said. “Crystals? What’s wrong with the lightsaber I gave you?” “It’s the wrong color,” Windu said.

A young girl came out from the back, around the counter, and greeted them in a most unusual manner. Her hair brushed straight. She was in a uniform, appropriate for a child in school, simple slippers. The oddest thing about her was her eyes. They seem to glow, even in the light of the store, with just the hint of rainbow. “Have you come to steal me away?”

“Why ever would you say that?” Windu asked.

“Isn’t that what Jedi do?” she asked. “Steal children. Train them. Forbid them to see their families ever again?”

“We don’t do that,” Yeno said.

“You did do that,” she accused them both.

“What is your name, child?” Windu asked.

“You can’t intuit it?” she asked.

Windu had a look about him that said, ‘children these days!’ His hands went to his hip and he was about to impart authority when Yeno took over. “You can intuit ours?” Yeno asked.

“No,” she said; she responded as if she were failing a test. “I sense nostalgia, oldness, authority. My name is Amber. I would be okay if you take me to train. No one would notice my absence. I would promise not to return.”

“We don’t take children...” Windu snapped.

“We don’t just take children,” Yeno corrected. “There was a process. A conversation with family. Agreements. But he and I, we weren’t ‘finders.’”

Windu went past her to a display case. “I would like to buy these two, on the top shelf.” Amber nodded, opened the case with a bio-lock that recognized her energy signature and a combination. She put on gloves to handle them. An aqua marine blue piece of amber and imperial red stone, uncut, sparkled on the gloves.

“Why did you do that?” Yeno asked.

“The stones open things to me. Combinations of stones open a myriad of things to me. The gloves soften it,” Amber said.

“You’re in tune with the planet?” Yeno asked.

“I hear Darthomir. She is not happy,” Amber said.

“Because of the shield?” Windu asked.

“No. That will work in her favor. It will slow human advancement sufficiently that her preferred pathways remain viable,” Amber said.

“I don’t understand that,” Windu said.

“Because you’re not here to cultivate a relationship with Darthomir,” Amber said.

“I don’t understand that either,” Windu said. “What do you suppose I am here for?” Amber delicately removed the glove from her left hand and placed her hand palm down on the stones in her other hands. Her eyes fluoresced brightly. Blue and red chased in, her eye shone purple. She seemed to be looking past them.

“It was a mistake bringing you back,” Amber said, quietly. “The equation was not balanced.”

“What does that mean?” Windu said.

“You seem pretty stupid to be a Jedi,” Amber said. “Your return has made it possible for him to cross over.”

“Him? Who?”

“The Emperor will return,” Amber said.

She let go of the crystals and gasped. She clutched the crystals in the gloves, removed the glove so that it reversed itself, holding the crystals inside. She handed the glove to Windu.

“Tell me more...”

“No!” Amber said. “I don’t want anything to do with that.”

“But.”

“Your crystals. You do it,” Amber said.

Windu frowned, accepted the glove containing the crystals.

“I don’t suppose you have a jeweler’s work bench I might use?” Windu asked.

Amber motioned and followed her to the back. Not only was there was a workbench, there was a newly crafter lightsaber in a cradle. There was a holocron also on the table. There was a day when the holocron would be the only thing he focused on. He had an urgency to get it back to the Jedi academy. Now there was nowhere to secure it, nothing to be do with it but trust in the Force. He focused on Lightsaber and the parts. There was enough quality parts that Windu could construct a lightsaber from scratch. He was curious about the one in the cradle, a respect for the art, but also even more respect for the artist.

“You did this?” Windu asked.

“I did,” Amber said.

“How?”

“It was not a difficult thing. I followed the instructions provided by the voice,” Amber said.

“May I?” Windu asked.

“Please,” Amber said.

Windu picked it up. Yeno stepped away. Windu pushed the button to activate it but nothing happened. Amber tossed the single glove she was holding. On her hand was a gold ring. The inner part of the ring could spin, and imbedded in this inner ring were samples of all the amber available in her store. Each stone contained its own inner light; the track between outer ring and inner ring leaked a soft moonlight silver. She touched the ring to her lightsaber. Windu activated edit.

The retort it made was loud and unexpected.

“There’s a design flaw...”

“No, it’s a signature of the one’s design I incorporated,” Amber said.

“Waycaster!” Yeno said.

There was a small sliding lever that could be moved by thumb. Sliding it caused the blade to go through the entire visible spectrum. On one end it became a solid gold beam, on the other end it pulsed all the colors in sequence. He deactivated the blade. “Preston instructed you?!” Yeno asked.

“No, but I have been watching him,” Amber said. “He is much more interesting to watch than Skywalker. All he does is sits there, day after day. I am lucky if I see him eat or move to use the toilet.”

“I suspect you’re too young to be spying on Waycaster,” Yeno said.

“Did that stop the order from training children?” Amber said. “We see what we see. Listen to the forest? All of nature is engaged in the adult dance of intimacy; all the children come and play and die daily. If I lived on a farm, I would see the animals bred. And if you go back far enough, back to our days on the prairies, or further still, when we were still nomadic groups wandering: there was no privacy and children witnessed it all. Love and death and tears. Privacy is a modern invention, and an illusions. Anyone with eyes can see.”

“That...”

“Relax. I am not interested in adult activities. I tune out when things go that way,” Amber said. “I just want you to know, I know things. I am not just a child who you will dismiss. Quite frankly, I don’t understand why adults even bother to have children if you won’t listen to their perspective.”

“You can read the holocron?” Windu asked.

“I can,” Amber said. “Much of its content is history. Many wars. Many deaths. There are more ways to kill a person than to love them. I would prefer to watch Waycaster. Less death. More love. But you would censor love and allow us to watch wars, death, and destruction. The constant misery broadcasted

over the media saddens me. Darthomir assures me it's bias. If I listen to the forest, there is more happiness than misery. Humans only care for the misery. They have trained their eyes to only see this, to live in constant fear. That is why wars continue to begat more wars."

"Preston is training you," Yeno said.

"No. He refused me. He said I must be of age," Amber said. There was an emotion attached to this.

"You're angry?" Windu said.

"He is a hypocrite. He trained Ten. He trained Em," Amber said.

"He didn't train Em, he healed her," Yeno said.

"I am alone. I have no one who understands," Amber said.

"You have your family here on the station. You have the Force," Windu said.

"You have the ear of Darthomir," Yeno said.

"This is what Waycaster said. Trust the Force, go a little further, be a child for a little longer," Amber said. "I don't know what it means to be a child. Do you?"

"Yes," Windu said, sitting at the bench. "Walk me through your construction."

It clearly brought Amber happiness to talk about lightsabers and crystals and all her tools and jewelry. She talked to the crystals as if they were people, asking their permission to shape them. She channeled the Force through them, watching their emission patterns. Blue and red torus fields spun out, and where they overlapped the coherence pattern was purple. Em herself glowed. She shined the way a student of music would shine when performing. It seemed as if she weren't so much as cutting the stones as she was shaping clay and asking it to harden. The two amber crystals came together as if they had always belonged together, locking and unlocking. She opened the holocron. Inside were two sizeable kyber crystals. She removed one. It had already been shaped and cored by someone even more knowledgeable than she. The red and blue locked amber slid into the hollow the kyber as if she had spent hours measuring and fine tuning it. The kyber crystal locked and sealed and was bright in her hand, a bright silverly light with a purple hue in the center, as if it were an eye. Her hand held it, trembling. She was lost in the eye. Windu took the crystal from her hand.

"Thank you," Amber whispered. There were tears in her eyes.

♪♪▶

Panajachel was one of the first human colonies established on Darthomir. It favored a low tech lifestyle. There was tech here, hidden within the opened, wooden frame homes. The majority of the community was close to the bay and distant mountains that protected it, rising out of the ocean, and between two prominent mountains was the gateway to the ocean proper. Behind the small commune were forest, with tree so large one might think there was no horizon. There were stacked gardens between the community and the forest, but most of the foods came direct from the forest or sea. Nature trails penetrated the forest, kept up by a long line of tourist and guides over the years. It was a mostly a place for the rich and wealthy to get away. Surfing on the far side, outside of the bay brought its own 'types' of people. There were those seeking 'alternative' healing methods, those not sanctioned by 'standard' of civilized hubs. The most advanced part of the city was the landing platform.

The Imperial shuttle had settled an hour ago, its party wandering, apparently aimlessly, and the community didn't even blink an eye. They would offer flowers to troopers just as they would anyone. Quillen told his troopers to tolerate it, to refuse politely. They arrived at the large, old, remote building in a very peaceful way. It was considered a healing space, a way to connect with the inner selves, and was locally referred to as the Blue Lotus. Most of the Troopers stayed on the spacious porch. Several followed Quillen in.

The conversation that was being held at the front desk was clearly ‘inappropriate.’

“Did you see the size of number two’s breasts?”

“Yeah, they can’t be real...”

“I assure you, they are...”

The two attendants became more attentive. There were display cases with a certain type of ‘paraphernalia.’ A breeze moved a curtain on the window. A beaded barrier was the only thing leading to the back rooms, and it, too, held a gentle sway affected by the natural movement of air through the floor plan.

“May I help you?” “Chean?” Quillen asked.

“I am he,” Chean said.

Quillen seemed appalled at something in the display at the front counter. “Death Sticks?” “We are not governed by the same laws as the inner cities,” Chean said.

“But Death Sticks?” Quillen asked.

“I don’t judge people,” Chean said. “I simply provide them a safe place to indulge.” “A safe place?” Quillen asked.

The Mobile ‘Fixit’ Medical droid arrived. It had taken him longer to arrive than the group, and more troopers arrived, even a medical trooper.

“I am sure, if I were to verify this is a safe place, I won’t find any evidence your patrons were molested in anyway?” Quillen asked.

Chean and the other attendant paled. One of the troopers performed a scan, identifying their blood type and genetic profiles. “Search the place, identify all the patrons. Perform medical exams on each,” Quillen said. He looked at the medic. “If there is any genetic evidence of impropriety between the attendants here and the unconscious patrons, you may arrest these two.”

“My clients have a right to privacy...”

“I will maintain their anonymity,” Quillen said. “Wait a moment. Would you and your colleague like to admit to anything before I send my team in?”

“Everything that happens here is consensual,” Chean said. “How do the unconscious consent?” Quillen asked. He nodded and sent his team in.

Troopers pushed in through the beaded curtain, disturbing the image of the lotus floating on water. “Either way, I will be taking ownership of the establishment. This Medical Droid will be left here, to increase the safety margin for the clientele. Also, a personal guard will be permanently stationed here. I will be visiting from time to time. If you aren’t arrested, we will become business partners...” He pointed at the death stick. “That seems like a pretty large dose...”

“It’s three milliliters...”

“That’s huge! What are you knocking out, Rancors?” Quillen asked. “Fixit?” “The standard does is zero point seven...” “They don’t take it all once!” Chean said.

“Do you administer it to ensure the appropriate dose?” Quillen said. “Are you a licensed chemist or medical professional?”

“I know math!” Chean said.

Quillen chuckled. “I am sure you do. Fixit, why is it the only kids learning standard metrics are the ones dealing in illicit substances?”

“I am unable to respond to that,” Fixit said.

“Upload a personality, will you?” Quillen said. “I don’t want you scaring away our clientele.”

“I cannot recommend these substances,” the Fixit Droid stated. A trooper returned. He nodded.

“Arrest these two,” Quillen said. He ignored their pleas and accusations that they were being framed. They were quickly gone. “Make sure you secure statements from all the patrons when they have their wits about them.”

“You may not need that, Sir,” the trooper said. “There are surveillance cameras in all the rooms.”

“Really? Are they recording or broadcasting?” Quillen said.

“There’s a tech room in the basement. There is also a private tunnels, likely connecting some of the local private quest suites. A larger tunnel with a car. I would bet money it goes back to First City.”

“Recover all files. Get a Droid in here and see if we can trace data feeds to anyone specific in the city. I want to know the names of any elite that may be using this facility for either drugs or sex or both,” Quillen said. “Arrest any you find suspect, bring them to me.” “Yes, Sir,” the trooper said.

To a trooper waiting with him. “Bring in more troopers. No one leaves this building till they been interviewed.”

“Yes, Sir,” the trooper said.

Quillen then walked the floor, seeing for himself the state of all the patrons. He found one particular girl particularly fascinating. She was lying next to someone, an older male. Both were out cold. He touched her and smiled.

“So, they are real,” he said, sitting on the bed next to her. He pulled an item from his belt and jabbed her arm. “You can’t trust anyone these days. Even your dealer.”

She moaned and turned away from him. It was not the same package he had given Pari. With the stealth nanites, she would likely never know, and with her habit, she would likely assume she was simply taken advantage of while using. She was less likely to report such an abuse, considering her vice. The local authorities would tell her it was her fault: ‘stop using.’ He patted her head, got up, and went to check on the other patrons.

Chapter 11

Eljinae, best translated as ‘hear,’ but sometimes ‘listen,’ was popular graffiti being written on the walls and on the stalls in public restrooms. Most the time it was abbreviated to the form ‘Elg,’ which was slang that parents have used in correcting children. A fairly artistic person created a call sign of the latter, emphasizing the G, clearly connecting it to Preston G Waycaster, and not long after that, the cult of G on Axilla was born. Many were ‘gamers,’ re-enacting old battles. Some were science geeks. One particular young man was determined to make his own lightsaber for a school project. The device was crude and had he activated it would likely have resulted in an explosion which would have killed him so thoroughly they would likely not find any evidence of him in his dorm room. They would be lucky to find traces of his dorm room.

G arrived behind him as he sat at the work bench, the device plugged into a power cable. He was not aware of a presence behind him. He was moving to activate the device.

“I wouldn’t do that,” G said.

The young man, Aster, fell over himself in a mad dash to get away. G caught the device with the Force, set it in the cradle. Aster had actually tripped over his own clothes; his room was a shambles. There was evidence of partially eaten meals. The door shut and locked ‘magically.’ He scooted away from G. There was no way to get away. He stayed on the floor, begging for his life.

“Please don’t kill me, please don’t kill me, please don’t kill me...”

G sat down at the work bench, disconnected the crude saber from the power cord and opened it up while it rested in the cradle. Aster fell quiet. He was too curious at what G was doing to stay put. The diagrams and plans he had been using were updated with something new. They were being updated even as he watched, with explanation bubbles appearing, pointing to important aspects.

“Wait, what’s...”

“A frequency modulator,” G answered. “You don’t just dump pure energy into a crystal. Also, contrary to popular belief, you don’t just put a raw crystal in a device. You have to shape it to direct the flow of energy. Most Jedi would do that with the Force. A non Force welding jeweler might get lucky. Passing a laser through the crystal will not provide you with a map of the way the Force will flow through it. Also, the Force will flow through it differently for each individual who uses the device. Our bodies are also crystals. It’s part of the circuit. By the way, your crystal sucks. You might as well be using sugar crystals...”

“The quality of crystals I want are hard to come by,” Aster said. “I am student. I don’t have any money...”

“And you don’t want to use this kind of battery,” G said, not listening to the ‘can’t’s.’ “Money,” Aster said.

“It will over heat and melt the inner circuitry, if it doesn’t blow up in your face, but this crystal, it will blow up in your face,” G said.

“Is this diagram for real?” Aster asked.

“Yes,” G said.

“For me? I can have it? For real?” Aster said.

“Yes. I want to share it,” G said. He met Aster’s eyes. “For free. Do not profit from anything I give you. As I am sharing it with you, share freely with others.”

“Isn’t sharing against the rules?” Aster asked.

G looked at him. “Are you a Padawan?”

“No.”

“Are you Force sensitive?” G asked.

“No.”

“And you’re asking me about breaking the rules?” G asked.

“Sorry,” Aster said. “But the design is so simple.”

“Lightsabers are supposed to be simple,” G said, a new, appropriate power supply arrived in his hand and he began installing it. “An elegant weapon, a tool. It’s a symbol mostly, for something that is no longer available. This is the basic model, stripped down to its most essential, functional design. It’s supposed to intuited from the Force, meditated over. A Jedi wears many hats, healer, engineer, physicist, meta-physicist. He sees into the Force and divines the blue-prints for everything that ever was, is, and will be. It’s all there, available to anyone with an eye to see. In your notes, I recommend the wording ‘keep it simple, stupid.’ The Force is simple, it’s easy, patient, like a stream that cuts a canyon through solid rock, not with force, but with time. Time is on the side of Force, because there is no time. You will no doubt hear some crazy adaptations to lightsabers. Hell, I know one kid who built a blaster into the hilt. That’s just stupid. That’s someone who doesn’t trust the Force or their own skills. Cheap tricks is not the way of the Jedi. Double bladed lightsabers is also stupid, dangerous stupid, but if you can twirl one and not cut off your own hand, well, that’s at least a demonstrable Force skill. Kyulo Ren’s Saber, that’s just stupid. Of course, part of that was he was too lazy to fine tune his crystal, and so plasma jets

were added to vent the stray streams.” G put an open palm to the air and a crystal fell into it.

“The best crystals are the byproducts of living creatures,” G explained. “Diamonds forged from the carbon of a being that was influenced by a soul over thousands of years. Diamond ejected from stars. Yes, Aster, stars have souls. We are the children of stars, born from their diamonds.” G held the diamond up, twirled to capture the present light, and then he pushed the Force through it. A torroid, holographic signature radiated from the crystal large enough to encompass G’s arm. Harmless rainbow ray radiated out as the torroid turned. “This particular diamond, he was a friend of mine. If you consider that the Jedi don’t find crystals, but crystals find them, well, you will understand these are precious because of the frequency and the relationship, not because of scarcity. Diamond are as common as sand on a beach.”

G completed the assembly and stood up from the desk. He invited aster to take it. Aster hesitated.

“Go on,” G encouraged.

Aster reached for it, but G called the device to himself. It leaped to his hand, ignited with a signature ‘pop’ that was part of his design. A ‘design flaw’ the Jedi of old would say. The blade was liquid, sunlight gold and illuminated the room. A quick weight test, a twirling of the blade in a very precise manner, caused the chair at the workbench to fall in half, and cut a line across Aster’s shirt, without injuring him. His wristband fell off. He was breathless, not even realizing how close he was to being maimed or dead. Only when G had powered down the lightsaber did he have a clue, and still didn’t back away. He stood there, mouth agape, dumbfounded.

“Just owning a lightsaber does not make you a Jedi,” G said. G seemed to be weighing that statement. “There’s truth in that. Holding a scalpel doesn’t make you a surgeon. Having this will make you a target. Some will want to take it from you. Some will want to kill you to prove their skills are better. The kind of people that will be impressed by it and want to befriend you because of it, well, those aren’t the kind of friends you want. Giving you this, giving you the blue prints, this is not doing you a kindness.”

G held the device out to him. It rested in the palm of his hands. Aster hesitated.

“Take it. It’s yours,” G said.

Aster took it, accidentally turning it on. G caught the blade with his hand. And held it tight, stepping closer so that he was certain he had Aster’s attention. “A real Jedi doesn’t need a lightsaber,” G said. “This will not protect you from true evil. Only a mind disciplined in the ways of the Force can serve you.”

G used his other hand to power down the device. “I built a safety lock into your device. Your fingerprint and bio-signature is necessary to use this weapon. Seriously, make that component compulsory. If a kid gets hold of this, they’re likely to kill themselves. The blade attracts fools the way candles do flying insects.”

G let go and stepped back. “Don’t cut your hand off, kid.” “Why are you giving me this?” Aster asked.

“The Jedi are gone. I want to take the mystery cult feel out of this. No more secrets. Knowledge is free. Wisdom is earned. I am a Waycaster. I have chosen you to distribute information. You are not a disciple. You will never demonstrate any Force abilities in this lifetime, but the lightsaber will be evidence of either intuitive genius or truth speaking.” “You’re not going to teach me the ways of the Force, but, also, you are not blocking me from using a lightsaber?” Aster asked. “That’s not fair.”

“First lesson. One doesn’t USE the Force. One has a relationship with it,” G said. “Your relationship is to learn the lessons you came here to get. Don’t mystify this. Don’t make it mundane.

There's a middle path that holds both perspectives. Thread the needle." G put a data disk on the desk.

"Case in point. You're fixation on Lightsabers has caused you to be blinded by what you hold," G said. Schematics appeared on the screen. "Kyber crystals can be used to build power plants. Properly harnessed, the crystal powering this lightsaber could be used to power everything within a city block of your home. It's not free energy or perpetual motion. It's the oldest secret of the Jedi order. It taps directly into dark energy, can manipulate dark matter. It is attuned to the Force because its structure allows it to resonate with the entire dimensional spectrum of reality. Just touching a crystal, Force sensitive or not, influences a person in many, untold ways. A large enough crystal could supply the entire world's energy needs and dispense with modern fuels. But the population will also change. They will evolve to be more Force sensitive. What would happen, do you suppose, if an entire population became Force sensitive?" "Chaos?" Aster asked.

"Or true liberation," G said. "People would have to become responsible for the first time in their lives. Most people prefer slavery. And maybe that's why The Jedi order fell. They fell because they allowed slavery. The Clones were their soldiers; the clones were slaves. The Jedi became that which they sought to destroy. Don't just read history. Think about it. Question everything."

G bowed and disappeared. Aster stared dumbly at his lightsaber for a moment and then yelled, 'Yeah!' He activated the device. The loudness of the retort scared him and he hoped none of his neighbors came to investigate. He used the gold light to navigate his way to the kitchen and get a drink. He found the device seriously difficult to move. It was if it were a gyroscopic device that resisted momentum. Just taking it to the kitchen was exhausting. That, and, trying not to break anything. He put a mark on the wall in the hall leading from the bedroom and cut a picture in half. He nearly dropped it when the blade hit the wall, and in pulling it away, he overcompensated, which destroyed the picture of his girlfriend. He apologized to her. He had never done that before. She wasn't here and he was talking to her.

"Well, that's crazy," he said. He put the lightsaber away and spent the whole day thinking about it from his couch, looking at the lightsaber that lay on the coffee table.

♪♪▶

Jessie was restless, unable to sleep, her mind racing. She rolled over and found G in bed with her. She fumed, rolled back to face the other way, her mind suddenly quiet.

"Go away," Jessie said.

"You had a difficult day," G said. "Want to talk?"

She rolled over and pushed at him, but used insufficient strength to dislodge him from her bed. He held her arm.

"I don't want to talk to you and I want you out of my bed," Jessie said.

"You understand that a dialogue with us is compulsory, whether we do it now or ten thousand years from now, it will happen," G said.

"You understand, whether it is now, or ten thousand years from now, when I am free of your spell, I will kill you," Jessie said.

"You're angry," G said.

"You're damn right I am," Jessie snapped. "You're angry because..."

"You're holding me hostage," Jessie said. "Anger leads to

hate,” G quoted.

“Oh, shove the maxim up your...”

“I agree,” G said. “Your anger is righteous. It is reasonable. And it reflects an attachment to a belief. Is this what you came to learn from me?”

“No! I wanted...” Jessie began. She didn’t know what she wanted now.

“You wanted sunshine and Ewoks?” G asked. “Sunshine all the time leads to deserts.”

G let her arm go and she turned away from him, but didn’t get out of bed. G pulled the hair strands from over her ear, exposed her neck. Jessie gritted her teeth, clenched her fist. He was curious about her hair being wet. He liked the feel of it and kept pulling it through his fingers, completely fixated on just this simple experience of her. It felt particularly gentle and affectionate, and Jessie’s ire smoldered.

Out of nowhere, she said: “It took forever to get that crap out of my hair.”

G smiled. “That’s funny.”

She turned back to him. “Everything’s funny to you?!”

G nodded. “I didn’t see that coming. I like surprises.”

“How did you kill Snoke?” Jessie asked. “Be specific.”

G explained how he activated a lightsaber and spun it, cutting Snoke, and the back of his throne, in half. Jessie frowned. There was evidence of unhappiness, being resigned, and belief. If he didn’t do it, he at least witnessed it, which meant he was there, somehow complicit.

“You spoke to your friend,” G said. “Ray? I love Ray...” “You stay away from her!” Jessie said.

“She has her own path, her own masters,” G said. “And you have the confirmation you want. She told you about the fox?”

“How do you...”

“Close your eyes,” G said, closing his own eyes. It wasn’t a compulsion; she resisted.

“I am not trying to trick you,” G said, eyes still closed. “Please, close your eyes.” Jessie was irritated that he knew her eyes were still open. She closed her eyes. He drew closer to her. It wasn’t just the disturbance of the bed that allowed her to discern his movement. The heat radiating him from his was noticeable, even before he touched her, turned her and pulled her up tight next to him; it was like he was sick with fever. They spooned. He put an arm around her.

“Relax,” G whispered in her ear.

“Don’t touch me,” Jessie said.

“Relax,” G said. “Take the wrinkles off your brow.” Jessie opened her eyes to confirm he was still behind her.

“Close your eyes. Relax,” G insisted. Jessie closed her eyes. She relaxed.

“There’s a salt lamp in the corner. Let your mind go there,” G said. “See it in your mind as if you were looking at it with your eyes.” G waited a moment. “Good. Now, I want you to remember the most pleasant memory from childhood.”

Jessie found herself suddenly back in childhood. Her family was having an outing in the wilderness. Her parents napped in the sun after a meal, while her brothers kicked a ball. She wondered off to a stream. She had found an animal trapped in domestic waste and freed it. It had seemed to understand her intent, at least she had believed it at the time, with increasing doubt as she played it through her

adult filter. When it was freed, it stood and faced her. It was taller than her. It was wild and fierce and known for killing people, eating children specifically. She stood facing it, unafraid. It nudged her and then fled through the stream into the forest on the other side. She had never felt more satisfied than that moment, more connected to nature. She returned to her family and they had noticed something, but she kept her secret. She had experienced a knowing that all was well.

“This place is real,” G said.

“The memory is real,” Jessie said.

“No, the memory is inaccurate, the place is real,” G said. “Go deeper.”

“What? I know this...”

“Relax. I am not invalidating your experience. An event occurred, you remembered what you needed to. Every time you access the memory, it’s changes. Now, return to it, go deeper,” G said.

Jessie reluctantly returned. She let go of her focus, and the memory expanded to include details around her. She became immersed in new data. She felt as if she were there, reliving it. She wanted to go back to the present, but G took her hand and then she was outside of herself, an adult, looking at herself as a child. She had just been chased out of her brother’s room. She had forgotten that. The oldest was fairly physical in getting her to leave, and when the confrontation escalated to being physical, she ceased trying to intrude. She found her parents, quarreling, and remembered now why she had sought refuge with her brothers. Mom threw something. Father caught it and nearly threw it back but stopped.

“What are you doing in here?” father asked.

“When are we going to the park?” child Jessie asked.

“We’re not going anywhere today, how many time do I have to tell you, this is my only day off, and I am tired of all this drama, now get out...”

As she departed, she heard mother reminding her that they had agreed to take her. He didn’t want to go that far into town. She insisted they keep their word. A meal was already prepared for an outing. Father stormed out and began packing the food in the car, yelling at the boys to get ready for departure. The boys protested. They wanted to stay home. A new shouting match ensued. When it was all said and done, they were all in the vehicle and no one was speaking to anyone. Jessie felt uncomfortable sitting between her brothers, making sure to be as small as possible so as not to touch anyone. They landed the vehicle well shy of the park.

“What are you doing?” mother asked.

“You wanted out of the house, we’re out of the house,” father said.

“This area is wild,” mother said.

“A dirtax might eat us,” the younger brother said.

“I assure you, if there are any animals in this area they’re more afraid of us than we are of them,” father said, exiting the vehicle. “Get out. Set up the camp.”

He walked away.

“Where are you going?” mother asked.

“For a walk,” he said.

And he walked away, leaving the open space for the forest.

“Get out, set up the camp site,” mother said.

“Why are you mad us?” the oldest said. “You married him.”

“Get out, now,” mother said.

The boys were the first out. Child Jessie touched her mother, wanting to comfort her. Her brothers

were half-brothers. She was the product of her mother's relationship with father, who had just walked off. The brother's father was rarely seen, as he so hated dealing with mother that he avoided his sons.

"I said get out!" mother snapped.

Jessie got out. Her brothers rejected her offers to help. The oldest pushed her and said all of this was her fault. So, she walked away, in a different direction than her father had gone. Her intent was to just be lost. She purposely pursued the most difficult path, thinking people would be less likely to follow her. She fell a couple times. She held onto roots and climbed. She had come very close to grabbing hold of a viper. She didn't even see it. The older 'her' saw it and was afraid, presently.

"No attachment. This place is safe," G said.

"How is this safe? Why did you bring me here?" Jessie asked.

"This is yours. It affects you," G said.

Child Jessie fell down a ravine and ended up on the shore of a river. A dirtax lay there, half in the water, half out, laboring to breathe, entangled in a cargo netting. She sat there a moment, watching it. Its breathing had sounds. She experienced sadness for the animal. She stood up. She was pretty sure it saw her. It didn't move. She could see one of its paws folded up against its chest. She drew closer. It bared teeth. Child Jessie spoke at it, a gentle voice. Calming words. The device she wanted access to required her to reach up and over its back. She found it, by feel alone, and deactivated the holds. The net became threads, and they wound themselves back into the device.

The dirtax stood suddenly, knocking Jessie off her feet. It lunged and towered over her. It shook, shedding the water from its fur. Drool and foam leaked from its mouth onto her face. Its face was in her face, their eyes locked. It took in a deep breath and sneezed three times. It nudged her with its nose and then sprung off into the forest. Child Jessie cried.

"It was going to kill me," Jessie said.

"Yeah," G said.

"Why didn't it?" Jessie asked.

"This is one of those places where you think you're alone, but you're really not," G said. "You're great grandmother, she's here, in spirit, and you had an option. If you had died here, your parents would have stayed together longer. One of the fights between your parents would have been really bad, and the youngest brother would kill your father."

"This is speculative..."

"Okay," G said.

Child Jessie had stopped crying. She was asking questions, "what's wrong with me.. Why is this is so hard... I was just trying to help..."

"Notice the pauses. It's like there's a dialogue, but we can only hear the one side," G said.

"Why don't I remember this?" Jessie asked.

"You did, for a moment," G said. "But you told the family. Father wanted to take you to a medical professional. Mother was afraid they'd medicate you. Father left, not wanting to be a part of 'crazy.' Mother told you to stop talking about it or they would lock you up. Over time, you adopted a different version, one that family could tolerate."

Child Jessie walked back towards camp. It looked like she was holding someone's hand. Adult Jessie had tears in her eyes.

"That's a better version," Jessie said.

"It's a variation, different, both gave you strength," G said.

“Why can’t I see grand?” Jessie asked.

“Invite her into this space,” G asked.

The wilderness changed around her. Colors became pure. It felt more like a garden than just a wild space. There was a set of tree swings. A woman stood by the swing. She was not old enough to be grand, but she waved for her to come closer. Jessie went. She hesitated when G held back.

“How?” Jessie asked.

Grandmother responded. “There is the world, there is the real space, and in between there is imagination. To get to either world, you need imagination. It is necessary, but it is also the trap that holds most of us...”

“G-ma?” Jessie cried. “You’re really here.”

“Go to her. This is yours. I will not intrude further,” G said, withdrawing in the blink of an eye. He found the dirtax and healed it.

The closer Jessie got to the woman, the more certain she became that this was ‘grand.’ She ran.

G returned to the ‘present.’ He lingered till she returned. Her pillow was wet with tears. She eventually returned, she turned over to face G.

“This is real?” Jessie asked.

“You’ve spent most of your life afraid. Afraid of being a failure. Afraid of being alone. Fear that you drove your parents to separate. You walked on eggshells with your family. In truth, your family was fairly volatile. It taught you a sensitivity sufficient to read people, to read rooms, to survive. You had multiple opportunities in your life where you could have expanded that sensitivity into the ways of the Force. It was not a failure that you didn’t. There is an ever present opportunity, but there are Force opportunities, like with the dirtax. What you did was a kindness, it was an exercise in being present. You were never more present in your life than you were at that moment. Even more than you are now with the Waycaster. Your choices, your actions, they were deliberate.”

And then, just like that, the vision was over. She turned to face G, not resisting his arm that remained draped over her.

“Was that real?” Jessie asked again.

G kissed her forehead and dissolved into a rolling smoke that rolled over and through her.

“Is anything we hold?”

♪♪ ▶

Em led the way through the storm, practically blind folded. No one could see well, even with goggles, as visibility was so low you could barely see ones hand held out in front of them. They were all tied together. Shariva was second in the line. She leaned into the wind, her arms around the bundled child she carried. Her daughter, Cheeri, was the last in line. Had anyone known Em was the lead, they probably would have balked. They moved out across the desert under a storm. They huddled together under a single domed tent to rest, to drink, and then pushed on. They slept in the domed tent then pushed on. The kids were cranky, but not as beside themselves as the adults. Jordeen kept them from panicking. At this point, panicking would result in death. They were committed to the path. Several of the adults were withdrawn, simply walking dead. They had given up. Giving up was not the same as acceptance, becoming one with the Force. They shared rations in the morning, geared up, then brought the tent down. These were not hardened explorers pushing days into a desert or days over snow. Hardened people took days to reach the breaking point, the point when mind opened up to bizarre things. Some snow travelers would say whiteness made it possible for memories to play out as solid as watching a hologram. They would have to navigate terrain and memories simultaneously. Conversations

would come, not memories, but conversations with deceased family, or friends, or people they had never met. Many of them were at this breaking point when they found themselves in a room, free of the sand. When the doors closed and the dust settled, they felt safe for the first time since leaving the academy.

The space was large enough for everyone. It was polished stone and computer tech, and there were doors leading to offices and lavatory. Two hallways, one descending into the earth turning at a right angle, and another going up also turning at a right angle, and a lift between them. Everything seemed to be coming to life with their presence.

“We should limit our time to the upper levels,” Em said.

“What is this place?” Derin asked.

A hologram appeared. “I am Dorith, keeper of the site. I will not refuse you shelter from the storm, but I must warn you, this place contains death.” “A Center for Contagion,” Emmer said.

“Some things summoned can’t be un-summoned,” Em said. “Some of the Undead nightsisters rest here, in their eternal restlessness. We are safe. But we should remain on the upper level.”

“You brought us to a place of death?”

“All places have death. All places have life,” Em said.

“No one will find us here, that’s for damn sure,” Emmer said to Shariva.

Dorith considered the two prominent speakers. “You, sir, seem to have authority. The child speaks with certainty. Has the war above ended?”

“You don’t have a clock?” Emmer asked.

“If you’re going to last through the ages, it’s best not to keep a timepiece,” Dorith said.

“You’re lonely,” Em said.

“Sometimes,” Dorith said. “How did you find me?” “Do you have a kitchen and supplies?” Emmer asked.

“Follow the lights going up. Second level,” Dorith said. “You didn’t answer how you found me. Has the camouflage tech failed?”

“I am one with the Force,” Em said. “We are supposed to be here.”

Dorith bowed. “Master,” she said. “I am glad to hear the Jedi still hold the galaxy.” “She is...” Derin began insolently.

“Master Em,” Emmer said, speaking over him. “This is Master Shariva, in charge of our group. Master Jordeen. They are of the Waycaster Clan, friends to the sister. A new threat has emerged and we will be residing her until it’s resolved.”

“You are welcome. Master Em is correct about remaining on the upper level. It is best not to taunt the undead,” Dorith said. “You will find guest quarters on the upper levels. Fresh clothing can be made. 3-D printers are online.”

“Undead?” Derin asked.

Shariva growled. “Don’t follow it,” Emmer translated.

“You said there is food here? What kind of food?” Derin asked. “How old?” “MRE’s,” Dorith said.

“This place is old. Like...”

“It was built during the Clone Wars,” Em said.

“Surely the MRE’s have expired,” Derin said.

“They’ll be fine,” Emmer assured him. “They could last a millennium.”

“I am not eating...” Shariva barked.

“She says you can go hungry,” Emmer said. “Dorith, you have protein synthesizers?” “Affirmative,” Dorith said. “I will bring them online. You will have fresh meals within three days.”

“Thank you,” Emmer said. “Let’s go eat and clean up. We stay together until we’re sure of the space.”

Chapter 12

Preston G Waycaster arrived in a garden. It was enclosed in walls of rock. Above him, the cavern opened up to blackness of unparalleled depth. It was blacker than the bottom of an ocean. He wondered why he thought ‘ocean.’ Maybe because the blackness seemed to have bulk. It moved. Space/time moved with it. He felt it. He heard it. He wanted to run away, but also go into it. As his understanding altered his perception, he realized he was seeing a massive black hole. Space and time seemed broken like water running down a drain, with eddies and secondary pools. He didn’t have the ability to count it all; he simply came to the conclusion there were likely a hundred thousand black holes of various sizes in orbit around the massive galactic central black hole. If he allowed himself, he could feel his mind moving towards them, vertigo, and the promise of something beyond, but then he would come back to his body, alarmed. He was uncertain if what he was experiencing was fear or rapture or both. He wanted to go. There was a desperateness to the wanting, as if going equaled salvation, peace, no more wars. A place of his own to start over... This wanting was so large it made his libido seem like a mere hiccup, a midnight snack.

“Glorious, isn’t it?”

G turned to the woman. Everything about her screamed beauty. It was as if all the lights in the Universe were focused on her. It was as if the garden around her were adornments, existing only for her, simply fashion. Again, he found himself conflicted with equally powerful emotions to run and to remain. The first time he met Corissa he had been this stupid. Women in general seemed to lower his IQ, and apparently over-indulging had not cured him. Or perhaps, indulgence had given him his present balance. He was teetering. He had a choice. Had he met her sooner, there would have been no choice. He would have done anything just to grovel at her feet.

The woman smiled.

“If you only knew just how much I appreciate your silent presence,” she said. “Well met, Master Waycaster.”

She extended a hand. If he took it, he would be drawn closer. “Lilith?”

“Ahh,” she said. “My favorite flavor. Yes. That name will suit us.” She measured him with eyes, walking around him. “You are uncertain. Would you prefer Nagini? That was my given name, written on my seed then tossed into the void.”

“You’re very accommodating, thank you. I will use whatever name you wish,” G said. “I don’t understand your nature. I don’t know what the appropriate response to you is.” “What would you like to do?” Lilith asked.

G smiled. “I will refrain from answering that.”

“What if I were okay with what you’re wanting?” Lilith asked.

“There is no end to that,” G said. “Just talking about it will make the wanting greater until all the conversations are about that.”

“We’re already teetering there. Talking about that without talking about that? Is that helpful? Why not go there?” Lilith asked.

“Who are you?” G asked.

Lilith nodded. “I am First.”

“The first what?”

“The first woman, if you like,” Lilith said. G found he was experiencing her on two levels, the physical fullness of her was human, voluptuous, shiny attractive like an illuminated crystal on black felt. And then there was a liminal aspect, still female, her upper body human with four arms, but from the belly button down, she was snake. She was coiled, her human torso floating like jinn above mathematical construct spiraling down into infinity... “The mother of all. Moa is one of my names.”

“I don’t understand that response,” G said.

“You live with a Sorbus and don’t understand,” Lilith said.

Lilith slid in closer, took his arm, and led him to a path. If he looked her, she seemed to be walking. She had a measurable gate. When he was observing the room, she seemed to float in his periphery. This kept his eyes coming back to her. She plucked a fruit from a tree as they walked, offering it to him. He declined. She took a bite and then insisted he try it. G took a bite. It was unpleasant, but he swallowed.

“It tastes like sand,” G said.

Lilith chuckled. “It will taste better when you are fully present here.”

Lilith took the fruit from him and took another bite from where he had eaten then discarded it to the ground. They were now directly under the center of the dome. Looking up into the abyss was quieting. He wondered if the moon’s stability was due to Lilith’s connection to the Force. The moon moved around the prime black hole in a constellation of jeweled splinters, each a separate black hole of varying sizes, all of which would devour entire star systems but none as massive as the central galactic artifact. The galactic spiral, a mathematical construct winding into the artifact, into infinity. ‘It is She!’ he heard in his head, a statement that marveled in astonishment and glory, while holding fear. He recognized the emotion, but didn’t understand the emphasis on ‘She.’

“With you at my side, we can go there, start over in a new place,” Lilith said.

“You want me to go there with you?” G said.

“It’s why I called to you. It’s why I waited. It’s what we do,” Lilith said.

G frowned at her. She seemed patiently amused, as if speaking to a child.

“Must I educate you? Can’t you just see that this is the way of it?” Lilith said. “You can’t kill me. I can’t kill you. I don’t want to kill you. I waited forever for you.”

“Me specifically?” G asked.

Lilith laughed, touched his face. “It may feel like that, but you don’t want me to lie to you, do you?”

“No,” G said.

“Thank you. So many people want the lie,” Lilith said. “Let our relationship be based on truth.”

“Why do the others want you destroyed?” G asked.

“Not destroyed. In check. Maybe just gone. They have sufficiently diverged from source that they vie for the territory they believe they’ve acquiesced. They don’t realize their true purpose. Very few realize they own nothing, no real-estate, no property, not even the energy of your body manifest. You are whirlwinds in a storm extinguished too soon. Each stage of life accomplishes its part,” Lilith said. She hugged his arm and drew him closer, as if cuddling next to a campfire, star gazing, but it was not stars they were watching. “Look where we are. You know how remarkable this orbit is? How precisely perfect? Science doesn’t want to talk about before Universe or after Universe, it only addresses what’s here in the visible now. In many ways, even I can’t address it. I simply know I am here, have always

been here. I know where I am going. I was here at the beginning of this galaxy. I seeded all life on every planet. I started with simple thoughts. Over time, as the matrix grew, I tweaked it. I allowed others, my children, to play in the sandbox of life, to pursue local interests of development. I preserve it, here with me. Your venture with the former Bloodhunters, you're doing what I do, on a very small scale. You're trying to preserve life. I love that. I love life. I love diversity.

"So, the others want me gone. Part of that is because they want to inherit this place. There is an unconscious pressure to take over, to annihilate me. There is another equally and opposite pressure to join with me. When the divergent track has reached its apogee, it must return. You are that. Together we will create something new. We must merge, becoming a new entity, and then we must go there," she pointed into the blackness. "Together. We will find a lifeless place and create life; a life unique to us. That is what we do. You feel the rightness of this. You want me. I want you. Let's go."

G considered her words. Nothing she said fit his understanding of her.

"You have been mistaken about many things, Preston," Lilith said, not angry. Patient. She had waited longer than any. How many gave in too soon to the impulse? Did any of them make it in the other places? She didn't know. She liked this one. She would give in with this one. She could wait for him to arrive where she was. Or, she could await for someone else. There was always time. Always space to wait. "I prefer Preston to G. I am much older than you imagined, but as young as someone born yesterday. I am like a plant, and every life form in the galaxy is a tulpa that I have enabled to manifest. All life exists in my mind, in a dream state. My dream state overlaps with this physical reality, it becomes physical reality. I am not physical, but I extend into the physical. All beings return to me because I am all beings. I am one, I am many. I cannot leave this space without someone of your level of awareness joining me. When I leave here, this life will be separated from me, and it will continue in its present state, evolving as it wills, and it will become its own entity and maybe what remains will evolve sufficiently to continue in a manner as I, spawning many more adults, other universes, or maybe it all dies here. That is immaterial to me. Things die. Things go on. If it doesn't realize itself, if it doesn't evolve to go deeper, it ends when this Universe ends, very much like a soap bubble popping. Don't fret, that's a long time away and the odds are great that there will be others that follow us."

"If I go with you, I can't return," G said.

Lilith touched his face affectionately. The kindness seemed genuine.

"I suspect that to be true," Lilith said. "I have no awareness of that which created me, but I believe I am offspring. There are theories about black holes spawning new universes, which might explain this reality. Some think we are in the black hole even now, or more precisely, living on the surface, just two dimensional construct that imagine a three dimensional life. I hold subjective evidence for this: we are a chain of singularities. A string of pearls. Maybe I have diverged too much to be aware of that which came before me. Maybe that's the nature of it, to become an adult and move out. Maybe we're meeting our parents in the past or the future, both meaningless terms when you're operating like we are. We go there, we are no longer operating in space/time. Or, more precisely, this space time. Even now, we are on the edge of being completely out of time. Hearing that belies a desperateness, but you feel it, don't you? That's an illusion, too."

"An illusion doesn't mean an absence of data," G said.

"True," Lilith agreed. "There is something here, but I could be misperceiving it all, deluding myself. I like my interpretation. Join me." "Even if it's delusion?" G asked.

"If I must be deluded, I will choose love," Lilith said. "And you?" "I am going to leave now," G said.

“Okay, love. I hope you come back,” Lilith said.

“If I don’t?” G asked.

“Someone else will eventually take me up on my offer,” Lilith said.

“So, this isn’t a negotiation,” G said.

“Do you want it to be?”

“You don’t have anything I want,” G said.

“I have your sister. Daphne is with me,” Lilith said. “I could free her. For a price.”

“Joining you isn’t the price?” G asked.

“No, you have to do that willingly. Oh, please, Preston. Grow up and be the adult you’re supposed to be. It’s not like I want you to martyr yourself. I want you to be my love. Join me and we become something new, in a new place. We can recreate this system, keep the drama going, watching the larvae struggle with each other over a leaf and laugh, knowing some will be angels and some will stay in the matrix for eternity. Or I don’t know... The potential for new is awaiting us. We evolve together or not at all.” “What’s the price for freeing Daphne?” G asked.

“You must become a father,” Lilith said.

“That’s going to happen soon,” G said.

“No. You must father a child with a female of my choice,” Lilith said. “Only then will I return Daphne’s autonomy.”

G sighed. “What’s the name of the female?” “Shmi Skywalker,” Lilith said.

“Are you insane?” G snapped. He felt nauseated.

“Unfortunately, now that the terms are made manifest, you and I cannot go forwards in any arrangement unless you complete this task,” Lilith said.

“You’re saying, I can’t just take you on your offer and we go right now to this other place?” G asked.

“We cannot,” Lilith said. “The conundrum must be resolved.”

“You want me to bring forth the greatest evil since the Emperor into existence?” G demanded.

“Anakin wasn’t evil. He didn’t have to go that way. He did bring balance to the Force, though,” Lilith said, musing. “The Sith weren’t as dark as they could have been, and the Jedi were not as pure as they professed. They existed because of each other. You know this. You preach this. You don’t always get what you want, Preston. But you always get what you need.”

“I won’t do it,” G said.

Lilith laughed. “You already have, my love. Conundrum. Now the question becomes, will you unravel it all by not doing what you’ve done, or will you do it willfully and join me, or... I don’t know. Maybe you and I can do something new right here and now. Rewrite all of history? Do the people who exist now have value? Ten, won’t exist if you don’t beget Anakin. Jordeen. Corissa. Priya. They won’t exist, either. Products of the war they are. Sorbus will still be here, but she won’t be the one you know. Different food, different trajectories of mind. Thank you for the food. She is my kin. Mostly, everybody you know goes away. And what you create by not doing what you did also may not be better. Maybe it will. There’s a chance, but too many grubs struggling for the leaves. It could fall out much worse. Maybe if you don’t just knock Shmi up, but you stay there with her and be a father- maybe that changes things, too. Maybe you become the Emperor’s apprentice. Maybe you become intimate with your mom and you become your own father! That has happened before. Space/time is so much quirkier and kinkier than anyone cares to believe. They just can’t hold that perspective. If you stay, the Emperor will breed

you like the pet you are. I am so curious who will rise from that cesspool of love. What's it going to be? Can you unravel yourself? I don't think so. Stay, be the father Anakin should have had. You will become your own father and still cease to exist! More precisely, your personality matrix, ceases to exist. Another conundrum! Paradoxes. Why can't people just accept my deal to procreate without engaging in thought?! Thoughts always spin craziness. Go, consider. I give you the rest of eternity to decide how this plays out. I am watching. I am a watcher. I am interested."

A flick of her hand and G dissipated. He arrived back at his body, gasping. Whatever she had done, it had been an act of Force, both pleasant and unpleasant. It was so different he wanted to experience it again. He stood, clenching his fists, turning to find her as if she had been here in his meditative space as opposed to him having traveled to her. He had only imagined he had ever felt anger before. He sought a higher authority. He sought Jedi counsel. He found himself alone. No one responded. He was angry and confused. And then he laughed. His test had begun. He laid down, exhausted. He withdrew all his distant aspects to himself and fell asleep.

♪♪ ▶

G woke with a start and found Sorbus hovering over him. He sat up, pushing through her. She repositioned herself, moving through him. She was a giant of a ghost, at least 3 meters tall.

"I so love watching you dream," Sorbus said, her feelers and clothing caressing him.

"Give me a moment," G said.

Sorbus settled onto him, embracing him, kissing him, grinding, enveloping him. "I am so hungry for you. I want you in me."

G embraced her and she became solid. He rolled her to the bed, then got up.

"Oh, please, finish me," Sorbus begged.

"I need to think," G said.

Sorbus got up. Her 'solid' legs felt different, but she understood them. They existed only when he wanted her. Her bare feet were placed carefully. The fact they were solid confirmed he secretly wanted her to play. The stone floor felt cold. She lifted G, hugging him as if he were only a stuffed toy, and kissed the back of his neck.

"You think too much," Sorbus said. "Play more."

"You're distracting me," G said, squirming free. His feet felt purchase, but his face was in her breast. "This is important."

"This is also important. It offers clarity. Let me quiet your mind," Sorbus said, her hands not going to his mind.

G surrendered to her passion, took her back to bed. He fit against her like a toy, but he moved her, with physical strength and the Force. He could discern his level of engagement by measuring the intimate movement of her breasts, mesmerizing flesh waves. Though this aspect of her was more human, she was also still plant, and he slid against her as she was satin and might have lost purchase had she been less determined to hold him in place. Every pore in her body oozed an oil, so that his entire body was now covered and darker. When she was satiated, she became less physical, just cloud of lights that G fell through, into darkened sheets, a giant oval spot that almost resembled a snow angel. The light of her shot out in all directions, rays that coalesced into rainbows on the wall. The room was brilliant for a second. There had been rumors about others seeing the light against the walls of their room in past episodes. G's mind wondered if everyone in the Fortress understood the flash apparitions that played out in diminishing degrees of intensity was evidence of Force intimacy. The light of her

faded and a darkness came. The darkness had substance, not just eyes recovering from an unexpected brightness. It was only he and Sorbus floating in a dark space together. He hadn't been satisfied, but she lingered over him until, providing just enough tactile and visual information that he too was soon satisfied. Her touch in this form didn't just titillate the exterior flesh, but penetrated him to deeper levels. The sound of her filled his mind, not his ears. She caressed him.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you..." Sorbus sang. She smiled into him. "Join me and I can expand these feelings exponentially. We can be together forever." "Not forever," G said.

"It will feel like it," Sorbus said. "I promise, this will never get old, never in ten thousand years. I will always amaze you!"

"How do I know I am not already in you, being digested?" G said.

"I assure you, you would know," Sorbus said.

"If I did enter you, you would lose this present fetish," G said.

"I am not the one with the Fetish. You're the vore," Sorbus said. "It's the reason you give me giant temp-flesh. To tease me and satisfy your urgency to be devoured. You need me. Unless, maybe there is something to your mom thing. You want me to be superior." G chuckled. "I found her," G said.

"Really?!" Sorbus said. She settled over him. Smelling, licking, tasting him. "I sense nothing."

"Tryst must not have made the cut," G mused.

"So, why was he not annihilated? Why didn't he ascend or become recycled," Sorbus asked.

"I don't know," G said. "Some pack animals don't kill the enemy. If the weaker animal know its place, it will submit and retreat. It is in the best interest of the alpha not to kill it. This creates a buffer so that the alpha doesn't have to continuously fight for its territory, and the beta benefits when an alpha is successful enough that he can't satisfy all the females, and scraps of food are left."

"Wouldn't she have other blocks?" Sorbus asked.

"She does," G said. "I was able to avoid them due to lack of attachment. I have a connection to Tryst." He focused. "I sense the Emperor, lingering." G frowned. "People just can't give him up," Sorbus said. "He will linger for a millennia." "As long as people talk about him," G agreed.

"But if we don't remember, he or someone like him will re-manifest," Sorbus said. That struck something in G. He was following that, looking for validity. Sorbus continued to tease him, trying to draw him present, out of his thoughts.

"I am sorry Tryst hasn't surrendered yet. I did expect him to give by now," Sorbus said.

"It isn't necessary. I no longer need him or his information," G said. "He was a distraction."

"Thank you for the food," Sorbus said.

G looked at her. Kin! He got up and headed to the shower.

♪♪▶

G paced in a circle. Kaila sat on the floor, watching him. She was sitting on the floor, in front of the 'throne,' and eating Kish. Jessie arrived. She ignored Kaila and went right to G.

"I want to leave," Jessie said.

G ignored her and kept walking. Jessie put her hands on her hips and waited for his return.

"G?!" Jessie said. "He's not going to answer you," Kaila said.

Jessie got in the path and when he came around again, she got out of his way. It was not clear if he did something with the Force, or she just didn't want to get run over by a train.

“Yeah, I tried that, too,” Kaila said.

“How long as he been like this?” Jessie asked. “Since I found him. Most the day,” Kaila said.

Jessie came over and sat down on the floor next to her. “Is this a test?”

“I don’t know,” Kaila said. She offered her some Kish. “Want some?”

“What is it?”

“Kish.”

“What is it?”

“Frozen fish eggs blended with human milk, with bits of fruit,” Kaila said. “That’s disgusting,” Jessie said.

Kaila shrugged and kept eating it. She sucked on the spoonful.

“Did you see that rainbow flash earlier?” Kaila asked.

“Yeah,” Jessie said. “What was that?”

“I don’t know, but it gave me an orgasm as it played across me and through me,” Kaila said. “It left me wanting more.”

“You’re always wanting more,” Jessie said.

“No. G satisfies me,” Kaila said. “It’s why I sought him out, actually.” There was silence. G completed another circle.

“You’re going to eat the whole thing?” Jessie asked.

“Unless you want some,” Jessie said. “It’s healthy.” “The light didn’t affect you?” Kaila asked.

Jessie didn’t answer.

Kaila shrugged, turned her attention back to G, shoveling another spoonful of Kish into her mouth. “Think we should do something?” she said, through the spoon.

“I am doing something,” Jessie said.

“Something more substantial,” Kaila said.

“Such as?”

“I don’t know. Call Priya?” Jessie asked.

“How you propose we do that?” Kaila said.

“Just say my name,” Priya said. “I will come.”

Kaila and Jessie both stood up. Priya passed between them, took the Kish and the spoon. She brought a spoonful to her nose, inhaled, and then ate. “Nice,” she said, sucking on the spoon as she considered G. She handed the container and spoon to Jessie. “Finish this.”

Jessie took it without question and began eating it, making a face of protest, but unable to refuse. Priya approached G, and began walking alongside him, outside the circle. She didn’t try to engage him in conversation. She simply walked.

“He’s withdrawn,” Kaila said as she passed.

“No. He is present,” Priya said. “More present here than he has been since acquiring the Fortress. I rarely see him this present.”

“The only time he is this present with me...” “Would you stop talking about it!” Jessie said.

“Would you stop not talking about it,” Kaila said.

“So, he’s really here? Nowhere else?” Jessie asked, her mouth full.

“I said withdrawn,” Kaila said.

Priya and Preston passed again. He slowed, looked at Priya. There was evidence in his face he was trying to place her, then nodded, and resumed.

“That’s spooky,” Jessie said.

“I am in quandary,” G said.

“How can I help?” Priya asked.

“Say you’re a physicist,” G said.

“I am physicist,” Priya said.

“Do you believe in spirits?” G asked.

“Probably not,” Priya said.

G stopped. He looked at her, his brows drawing in.

“I am sure there is a physicist that believes in spirits,” Priya said.

G resumed walking. Priya followed. “You postulate the existence of dark matter. Why don’t you believe in spirit?”

“There is evidence for dark matter,” Priya said.

“An invisible substance that doesn’t interact with normal matter,” G said. “How is that not spirit?”

“I am unable to answer that,” Priya said. “I have evidence for this, not the other.” “Say you’re a medic,” G said.

“I am a medic,” Priya said.

“Do you believe in spirit?” G asked.

“Probably not,” Priya said.

G stopped. “Are we playing the same game?” G asked.

“I think so,” Priya said. “I can’t say there are no doctors believing in spirits.” G resumed his circle walk. “How do you explain near death experiences?” “Oxygen deprivation,” Priya said.

“How do you explain near death experiences and or mystical artifacts in people who were not experiencing oxygen deprivation?” G said.

“We share common psychological artifacts due common anatomical structures and culture,” Priya said. “Even though the artifacts are rare, they exist within a continuum of reasonable access within the existing medium.”

“Then why do we ignore them? Why don’t more people experience them?” G asked.

“I don’t know,” Priya said.

“Say you’re a solicitor,” G said.

“I am solicitor,” Priya said.

“You accept subjective reporting of eyewitness to events to have validity sufficient to exact penalties on a person, even though we know for a fact memory is malleable and faulty,” G said. “But we don’t accept statistically relevant, consistent reports of spiritual artifacts that span the continuum of histories and cultures, even cultures isolated from popular culture in time and space, as having any validity to something existing beyond our common perceptions?”

“I don’t have answer for this,” Priya said.

“Say you’re a mystic,” G said.

“I am a mystic,” Priya said.

“Do you believe in evil?” G asked.

“Probably,” Priya said.

G stopped. “I am irritated.”

“I am sorry. I suppose there are mystics that don’t believe in an absolute evil, but I imagine most mystics believe in duality,” Priya said.

G resumed pacing. He was quiet for several circles.

“If you knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that something you did or didn’t do would allow evil to manifest, what would you do?” G asked.

“Not do something or do the opposite,” Priya said.

“What if doing the opposite results in an equal amount of evil becoming manifest?” G asked.

“Pick the lesser of the two,” Priya asked.

“What if it’s exactly equal?” G asked.

“Then it doesn’t matter either way,” Priya said. “Chose your preferred outcomes. Even if it’s equal, you will have a preference.”

“What if I chose the non-preferential one to diminish my bias,” G asked.

“Even that is a preference,” Priya said. “This is about you?”

“If I told you I were contemplating suicide, would you assist me?” G said. Priya stopped walking. She took his arm and brought him to a halt.

“I would stop you,” Priya said.

“Even if my death resulted in the greatest good?”

“You don’t know that. No one can know that,” Priya said. “You are amazing, brother, but you are not god.”

“What if I told you I met god, and she said I will do something horrendous,” G said. “Why would she reveal such a thing?” Priya said. “If she know, why doesn’t she stop you?”

“One can’t be omniscient and omnificent simultaneously. One’s action changes things, and each thing changed brings something new, and new, by definition is unknowable,” G said.

“Why would god create evil in the first place?” Jessie asked. G and Priya looked at her and then back to each other.

“I have evidence I have already done this thing,” G said.

“How can you have done something you haven’t done?” Kaila said.

“Free will exists,” G said. “I have a choice. I can return to sleep and do this unconsciously, or I can do this with full awareness of my participatin, or I can chose not to do this.”

“Or you can kill yourself, which is the equivalent of not making a choice,” Priya said. “Make a choice.”

“What happens if you don’t do it?” Kaila asked.

“You and Jessie cease to exist. 99 percent of the people you know cease to exist,” G said. “The galaxy as you know it will unravel.” “And if you do it?” Jessie asked.

“I bring evil into the universe. I brought evil into the universe,” G said.

“What did you do?” Priya asked.

“I am Anakin’s Skywalker’s father,” G said.

Kaila laughed. Jessie hit her. It was hard enough Kaila's arm would bruise. Jessie's arm would also have a bruise. They both reached for their arm. G resumed his circle walk. Priya went and sat on throne. Kaila and Jessie came to either side of her. It became apparent that G was now talking to himself.

"So you're just going to sit here?" Jessie asked.

"For now," Priya said.

"He's having a psychotic break," Jessie said.

"He is grappling with reality at a new level; it will not make sense to us," Priya said.

"We have to treat him," Jessie said.

"Will antipsychotics work on him?" Kaila asked.

"This is not psychosis," Priya said.

G stopped. "You're Shmi?" he asked to someone not there. He answered himself. His voice sounded different. "She is an aspect, as I am an aspect, of the one." He resumed pacing. "You are the aspect of the one. I am not just asking that you join me; that would just result in another aspect emerging. I am wanting a soul merger. Our souls become one. Not entangled, merged. Our resources are pooled. You and I, and the other aspects of remain, but our souls unite in an eternal communion. We create a new Universe." G completed another circle, but when the other was speaking, he moved slower. "We are multi-dimensional beings. Our aspects are tentacles exploring the realities we create. You and I have reached out pentacle. We are adults. We must now become, or perish." G's voice changed. "But we're just recreating more of this?" "No, we are learning. You and I will create different." "And this reality?" "It will continue as it is. Maybe it will spawn more adults. Maybe the larvae will kill themselves. Something always survives."

"How is that not psychosis?" Jessie asked.

"All Jedi must grapple with this darkness," Priya said. "This has been done since the beginning."

"He is not a Jedi! He is charismatic guru with a sex addiction and he is over reaching by wanting to impregnate people in the past," Jessie said.

"There is no past," G said. It was not clear if it was him or other. "There is no present. There is only now and we write our fictions to maintain the illusion of context." "He isn't making any sense," Jessie said.

"That's how you know he's grappling with truth. If it made sense, it would be fantasy," Priya said.

"Oh," Kaila said, as if having an epiphany. "That's we can't kill him! It's more than Force contract. We know, on a deeper level, if we kill him we kill ourselves. This is so convoluted."

"Reality is convoluted. It is entangled with every moment affecting every other moment. The past affects the future. The future affects the past. The present is an illusion."

"Mine always return to me," G said. "Others share this space with us. You are other. I want you." G paused. "I want you, too." "Join me." "I am afraid," G said, resumed the path. "I am patient."

"He really needs to exercise more restraint," Jessie said.

Priya met Jessie's eyes. "He exercises more restraint than any man I have ever known." "You need to know more men. He intimate with his sisters! You're a half-sister and you're intimate with him. He mated with his mother and is expecting offspring! Now he's talking about impregnating someone in the past and bringing forth the greatest evil we've known," Jessie said.

"Technically," Kaila said. "Anakin was not evil. The emperor was evil and he turned Anakin."

G arrived at his closest point to the throne, paused on hearing this, considered, and continued along the path.

“We need to stop him,” Jessie said.

“How do you propose to do this?” Priya asked.

“I don’t know. Bind him in a Force contract that he must be celibate,” Jessie asked.

“All healthy males spill seed,” Priya said. “You might as well ask a female to stop menstruating with thought alone. Even if he did nothing to bring forth seed, it would seep out, or result in nocturnal emissions.”

“Then we castrate him!” Jessie said.

“Can you travel through time?” Priya asked. “Because for that to work, you must travel back to his youth and castrate him prior to sperm production. The longer he goes after puberty, the more sperm he will have access to. Millions of sperm are generated daily. Even if you castrate him now, he still has trillions of sperms he could call on.”

“It only takes one,” Kaila said, chuckling. Jessie seemed disgusted and angry. “What? He’s not called Waycaster for nothing.”

“G can teleport from planet to planet. He can bilocate, and be on multiple planets simultaneously. He does this with such ease that frequently he is not even aware of what his other aspects are doing. He can create apports on demand. He can bend space time and go anywhere. All Jedi can. Most have only used their abilities to perceive the future or the past, but G, he goes there as easily as we go into our dreams. The biological imperatives we carry are regulated through unconscious mechanisms. The fact that the entire female population of Axxila is not impregnated with Waycaster seed is evidence of G’s conscious restraint. You say he’s an addict, but you can’t exercise that much repression of biological drives and not have consequences. There were rumors that Shmi gave birth without engaging in normal reproductive process. Anakin had no father. Maybe this was parthenogenesis. It happens in nature. If it happens in nature, it can happen in humans. Maybe Shmi was more Force sensitive than she was aware, and her biological imperative stole what she needed from the environment. Maybe the Jedi in their madness of searching for the One used Shmi to manifest the Anakin, bringer of balance. Or maybe, G is grappling with a real relationship here. My experience says we have past lives. We keep re-encountering each other. G is moving to a new level of existence.”

“We create ourselves,” not G’s voice.

“That’s a new,” Kaila said.

“It’s spooky,” Jessie said.

G manifested his lightsaber, it’s gold like birthing to life with an echoing rapport. He slashed and parried, and spun along the circle.

“Forms?” Jessie asked.

“Battles,” Kaila said.

“We have an unknown number of inner aspects,” Priya said. “Once the barriers come down, others can come forwards.” “Can they take over?” Jessie asked.

“Yes,” Priya said.

G stopped. His gold light was extinguished. “Mother was right.” He walked with her. “I am so sorry I didn’t hear you! I bring something evil.” He stopped, seeing something new. “Oh. She’s the other hand of the Emperor, the finder. She finds Vader! I enable her to find Vader. We all make our own realities! It’s all my fault. It’s not all my fault Everything!” He flipped again.

"The circle is now complete." G resumed. "Join me and I will complete your training." G frowned. "Damn it, Luke! You know!" Another voice emerged. It sounded like Luke. "Kylo should have killed you, not Han." "What do you want me to do? Would you have me undo it?" "No, I love my sister. I love Han. I love Chewie. It wasn't all bad, grandfather." G stopped. He was in tears. "I have never heard you say that. Are you happy?" "I am not unhappy." "So like you not to commit." "I have come to a new realization." "I am so sorry I wasn't there for you... Oh, Shmi! You went with them willingly. Sacrifice." The word he uttered was more sound than a word recognizable by humans; Cheeka would have recognized it- 'fringe food.' "I thought it would bring peace..." "Oh, Shmi. My love..." G returned to the path. "Grandfather, everyone suffers. This is not a fault. This is how we mature." G voice became cross. "The Jedi know! That's why they been riding me to do this thing." Obi Wan had intended to groom Luke in the ways of the order from the start, but had been too busy trying to survive Order 66 that he hadn't time to do it properly. He stopped again. "It explains the Midichlorian count-they're necessary for biological time travel... No they're the result of time travel. So much energy... They knew!

They always knew! The bastards!" "No, grandfather. They didn't. They still don't see it yet. They only feel the guidance of the Force. You must do this." "This is bigger than me." "It always was."

G stopped. Tears stained his face, but no new ones fell. He came to the throne.

"Kaila, Jessie. Each of you go. Pick any ship in my hanger, and travel to the furthest part of the Galaxy. Go quickly. Go in opposite directions. Go as far as you can and never return to this drama," G said. "Go."

"But..."

"Go," G said.

They departed.

G knelt down before Priya.

"You have clarity," Priya said.

"I hold love," G said. "Everything that was is the future's sacrifice to maintain what is."

"So, it's done?" Priya asked. "This is it?"

"You're a Waycaster. I wish you well in your journey. Travel Light." "I love you," Priya said.

"You will always be with me," G said.

He unraveled before her and was gone. She closed her eyes. She couldn't discern where he was, but she was confident, he 'was.' She felt happiness. She returned to her body.

Chapter 13

Darkness was around her. It felt more substantial than having no light. She sat up but hit her head. Her hands came up to the confines and she was on the verge of panic.

"Be at peace," a voice told her.

She became very still. She was still afraid.

"We have neutralized the poisons he gave you," the other voice said.

Ten remembered them. She remembered the casket. She didn't recall being placed in the casket. She became aware of be naked. Anger gave her sudden strength. "He did not violate you," one said.

"He so violated you," the other said. "Shall I describe what he did while you slept?" "Don't taunt her," the first said.

"What poison?" Ten asked. "You mean the sedative?"

“More than sedative,” the first said. “This buyer wants his subjects compliant, passive, dumber down. The dumber you are, the more aggressive he will be.”

“What are your names?” Ten asked.

“Ah! She accepts us,” the other said.

“No, but I don’t want to call you dumb and dumber,” Ten said.

The both laughed. “We are pure in our alignments. The purity will amplify as you choose between us. I am Ailana.”

“I am Bisman,” the other said.

“Where is Kyoko?” Ten asked.

“Exploring the ship,” they said.

“Focus on her, you will have sight,” Ailana said.

Ten didn’t have to close her eyes. She merely calmed her mind and she went. She became confused by the information. Kyoko seemed to be eating a meal with Turry. They were sitting at a small table together. Turry had a portable viewer in front of him, watching something as he ate.

Krafty was in his power station, sleep mode. She wondered if he was aware, or if he dreamed. She had evidence that Pink dreamed. Kyoko touched the viewer. The scene changed scenes from ‘drama’ to a nature documentary on Loth-cats. Turry picked up the device to examine it, changed it back, and put back on the table.

“He can’t see you,” Ten said.

“Oh, you’re awake!” Kyoko said. “Want some...” “I’m not here,” Ten said.

“Oh, ghosting, too, are you?” Kyoko said. “You should try this breakfast. Just add water...”

“You made it?” Ten asked.

“Mystifying, isn’t it? Is this dream, or is this ship, or this a place in between where we can interact and manifest lightly,” Kyoko asked. She got up and kissed Turry. He scratched his face. “He’s cute, isn’t he? Blind in both worlds, metaphorically speaking, but most men are, right?”

A noise from the flight deck alerted arrival. Turry pushed the viewer face down, dumped the remaining of his dish in the disposal unit, bowl and utensil into a cleaner, then passed right through Kyoko to go be a pilot. Kyoko shivered.

“I love when he does that,” Kyoko said. “You should try occupying the same space with him...”

“No,” Ten said.

Ten went forwards into the flight deck. She sat in the copilot seat. Kyoko stood between him.

“You don’t find him attractive?” Kyoko asked.

“He’s old. You’re twisted,” Ten said.

“You made me!” Kyoko said.

“You deviated from my design,” Ten said.

“You lacked clarity,” Kyoko said. Kyoko pushed her hand through the console. Lights came on that weren’t on before.

Turry slapped the console. “Mark! Come here,” Turry yelled.

A moment later Krafty was at threshold to the flight deck. “Yes, master?”

Krafty asked.

“Stop saying that. Go talk to the ship’s computer. Find out if we picked up a tech virus,” Turry said.

“I am not an astromech droid,” Krafty said.

“You’re a Droid, talk to the ship,” Turry said.

“I am annoyed that you think that all Droids were designed equally,” Krafty said.

“There’s a reason why your ship doesn’t speak standard.”

“They want me to buy astromech droids? I don’t want another droid, I got you. Plug yourself into the ship, and if there’s a virus, eliminate it. Your software can do that.” “I recommend you power down the ship,” Krafty said.

“Fine,” Turry said, capitulating. “I just got clearance. We’ll land in ten. Don’t be long about it. I want to drop the cargo and be planet side ASAP. The sooner we get are second haul and get back in space the better. I don’t need us glitching if we have to do maneuvers.” “You intuit this is going to go south,” Krafty said. “And yet, you’re going straight ahead? Maybe I should do a diagnostic on you.”

“Cute,” Turry said. “Be ready.”

“Ready for what? Death? You’re landing on military base with full compliments. When this goes south, and it will, there won’t be anything I can do to help you,” Krafty said. It did not linger.

“It’s not going to go south,” Turry whispered.

“Yes it is,” Krafty responded in the distant.

Turry concentrated on following the flight path.

“It’s going to be okay,” Ten assured him. “You will live through this, so I can kill you.” Turry shivered.

“The station looks bigger in real life,” Kyoko said.

“Yeah,” Ten agreed.

The orbital platform could be completely enveloped in a shield if it wanted, but mostly it was like an iceberg, partly above, but mostly below. A central gate, large enough to allow a stardestroyer passage, was uniform with the planetary shield level. There were smaller gates, where a ship could land in the hangar, be brought down by lifts, and then channeled out. There were launch bays to release tie fighters. There were tie fighters visible in the hangar, a squadron ready to go out the way Turry was coming in. The ship landed on a lift, its circumference glowing green. As the settled, the lights became amber, and then red. The ship powered down.

Storm troopers gathered. Turry lowered the door and headed back.

Turry descended the ramp first and approached the OOD. The officer of the deck did not seem impressed and the storm troopers powered up their weapons as the war droid descended the deck. Behind the droid, the casket followed. Ten and Kyoko walked to either side of it.

“Hey hey hey,” Turry said. “We have papers.” “You do. This is protocol,” the OOD said.

“Walking our own funeral detail?” Kyoko asked.

Ten was focused on the conversation between the OOD and Turry. An imperial droid, a BB unit, came and took custody of the container. “My payment?” Turry said.

“You will be compensated when you return from planet side,” the OOD said. “Return to your ship.”

“I thought...”

“No more thinking. Return to your ship,” the OOD said.

Turry hesitated. The OOD stepped closer, actually straightened Turry's jacket collar.

"The way I see it is, you can board your ship and depart back the way you came, or you can board your ship and I pass you through planet side," the OOD said. "That seems like a fair deal, don't you think?"

"Hypothetically, is there anything you might like for your excellent facilitating of this transaction?" Turry asked.

"I'll let you know," the OOD said, patting his face.

Turry returned to the ship, clearly disgruntled. Krafty chuckled, following. The OOD waved to the 'tower,' a blister hanging from the ceiling. The lift holding Turry's ship began to descend. The floor's blast door sealed behind it. The squad of Troopers dispersed back to their normal duties.

♪♪▶

Ten and Kyoko kept up with the casket carrying Ten's body. It was uncomfortable in the lift, as people paid no attention to them and even walked through them. "How is it I can walk through walls but the lift carries me just fine?" Kyoko asked. "The amazing thing isn't that you can hold your ground, but that more people don't fall away," Ten loosely quoted G, having asked the same question. "Force Awareness maintains frame of reference."

"So I can pass through the floor?" Kyoko asked, pushing on the officer who was standing too close to her.

The officer looked at the trooper. "Don't touch me." "I didn't touch you," the trooper said.

"Are you calling me a liar?"

The lift arrived at the next floor and the two exited quarreling. The lift doors closed and descended to the lowest level.

"That was funny," Kyoko said.

Ten ignored her, spying out around the officers as she tried to determine the lay out of the floor. Everything was fairly non-descript, except for an obvious barrack and shared bath and toilet, universal-not separating men and women. Ever since the Empire fell, more women have been serving. Ten was more interested in orientating what she was seeing to her memory map, and assessing threats and potential advantage points, than wondering change in social policies.

The lift resumed and went straight to the lowest level. It was pure fortune that his suite was here, as so was the drop deck. The Droid found the suite all too soon, not really giving Ten a chance to study the corridors and traffic. There were obvious trap doors in the floor, which baffled her. She wanted to figure it out, but entered with Kyoko before the door closed on the Droid and the casket.

The most interesting feature was the blister in the center floor, looking down on the planet. Kyoko went directly there and stood in the center. "Great view." Worse, case scenario, Ten thought, she could cut that with a lightsaber and kill her and the buyer. She wondered if she could sustain herself in a vacuum with the Force. She wondered if she could freefall with just the Force. The fear of falling kept her from wondering that. The buyer was at a desk, working. He was in a bathrobe. If she had looked, she would have seen Turry's freighter descending. "Ahh, finally! Thank you, 8. Just put that over there," he said.

8 chattered something. The man, Peri Hacshe, Admiral, turned to the screen and read the translation. He chuckled.

"I doubt she's awake, my little friend," Hacshe said. He pulled up another screen. "Heart rate is a bit high, considering the cocktail they administered, but that could be explained by simple adverse

reaction.” He got up and walked to the container. “Still, can’t be too careful.” He pushed a couple of buttons to administer another dose.

Kyoko felt a surge of emotions. “Attend to your body. Lower your heart rate,” Kyoko said.

Ten vanished. Hacshe studied the onboard monitor in the casket’s surface. He seemed satisfied. Kyoko was giving him death eyes, but he did not die.

“Ah, see there, my little friend. She’s good as dope,” Hacshe said. “Go fetch our toy box. I’m going let you help me break this one in.”

8 whistled excitedly and rushed to fetch the box. Hacshe opened the casket. He delicately touched her face.

“So lovely. Much better than a hologram,” he said.

“Don’t touch her, you bastard,” Kyoko said, tackling him.

She expected to go through him, but found her arms made contact and locked around his neck. He began to choke. The more aware she became of the choking, the less she could let go.

Hacshe went to his knees, his hands coming up to his throat. He passed out. Kyoko fell into him. She grabbed the side of the casket like a life raft, but she didn’t see her hands; she saw his hands. Ten came out of the casket. One hand went to Hacshe’s throat, taking her back to the floor. It didn’t occur to Ten he was either a very flexible man, or there was something wrong with his legs. He went down like a doll. ‘His’ eyes were wild with surprise. Her other hand put the lightsaber up against ‘his’ temple.

“Don’t kill me,” Hacshe said in a higher registry. “It’s me. Kyoko!” Ten’s face reflected skepticism. “Really?” “Yes, me, I am in here,” Kyoko said.

“How did you get in there?”

“I don’t know!” Kyoko said. “I was choking him. He passed out. I fell in.”

8 returned with the toy box. It whistled concern. Ten and Hacshe-Kyoto looked at the Droid. Hacshe-Kyoko smiled pleasantly. She hoped it was a smile. The Droid responded with a curiously uncertain noise.

“We’re just playing,” Ten assured the Droid. She whispered to Kyoko. “Stand up.” Hacshe-Kyoko awkwardly unfolded her legs and stood, using Ten’s arm to stabilize herself. “It’s okay, my little friend,” she said.

“Lower your registry,” Ten said.

“Like this?” Hacshe-Kyoto asked.

“Ummm, not quite,” Ten said. “Come here, 8.”

“You will do as she commands as if I gave the commands myself,” Hacshe-Kyoto said, in an ominous voice, as if she were imitating a recording of Darth Vader. The Droid came closer, whimpering.

“Measure me,” Ten said. “Then go print me some clothing appropriate for walking around the station.”

“Dress her as a Yeoman,” Kyoko said. “Give her a pin marking her as my attendant.” “Really?” Ten asked her.

“Trust me,” Kyoko said. “I got this.” “Where did you get this?” Ten asked.

“I have access to his memory, just like I had access to yours,” Kyoko said. “8, go do as I ask. Everything is okay.”

“You will discuss none of your concerns with any other beings, Droid, computer, or human. Am I

clear?” Ten asked.

8 assured her that it understood. It departed, hurriedly, leaving the toy box.

“Get dressed,” Ten said to Kyoko.

“That was mean, playing off his fears like that,” Kyoko said.

“I don’t have time to be nice. And we may need it,” Ten said.

“But it was being compliant,” Kyoko complained, as she headed for the bedroom. She nearly fell. “I hate being this tall. It’s weird.” Ten watched as she sorted through clothes. “How dreary. All this black and gray. Why can’t officers have colors?” “Just put on the standard,” Ten said.

Kyoko became aware of a mirror and went to study it. “Oh! I am an old man!”

“No, you’re still you, you’re just...”

“It’s all wrong. It looks backwards...”

“You’re looking in a mirror,” Ten said. “This is how others see you...”

“What if I get stuck in here forever?!” Kyoko wailed. “I don’t want to be old and shriveled and hated...”

Ten slapped her. Hacshe-Kyoto touched her face, shocked.

“That hurt,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. She wet her lip. “Do that again.”

“Focus,” Ten said. She was aware of the voices in her head, but ignored them. “This is going to be even easier than I imagined.”

“You’re changing the plan,” Kyoko asked. “You can’t change the plan.” “You’re in charge.

You can order a ship to take us straight down,” Ten said.

“No. Your presence will generate too many questions. They’ll stop the flight,” HacsheKyoto said. “I can get you to the drop shoot easy enough. No one there would be so inquisitive, but getting on a shuttle, that’s heavy regulation.”

“And what about you?” Ten said. “What if you fall out and he recovers?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I need to stay here till the end. I am really worried I won’t get out,” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

“Can you sense him?” Ten asked.

Hacshe-Kyoto smiled. “Yes,” she said, chuckling.

“What’s going on?” Ten asked.

“I see him wearing a diaper, in a baby pin,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “He’s completely docile.” In her mind’s eye she went to the cradle, put in a lightsaber styled pacifier and told him he was a good baby, ‘just keep being good for mommy.’ 8 returned with clothes for Ten.

“Thank you, ‘Hate,’” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

“Hate?” Ten asked.

“Oh, it’s his nickname,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “And you said I was being mean to the droid?” Ten said.

“Yeah,” Hacshe-Kyoto agreed. “We really need a better nickname for you 8. How about love?”

“No,” Ten said.

“Black love?” Hacshe-Kyoto asked. “No,” Ten said.

“8 balls? Black balls?” “Get dressed,” Ten said.

“Blacky,” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

They both dressed. They both complained about the clothes. Ten’s outfit had a skirt, which

designated her as intern slash adolescent. The hose that came with it was grey with sparkles. It marked her as bait. Ten wrapped a Velcro strap to her upper right thigh and attached her lightsaber to it. She stood, straightened her skirt, and viewed herself in full length mirror on the wardrobe door. Lightsaber wasn't noticeable.

"You look great in that," Hacshe-Kyoto said. She bit her lip.

"What's wrong?" Ten asked.

"I feel weird," Hacshe-Kyoto said.

"I'm sorry," Ten said. She straightened Hacshe-Kyoto's color, and straightened pins. "Ten," Hacshe-Kyoto said. "If we don't accomplish this, I want you to know, I love you."

Ten paled. An impulse to be sick took her and she rushed to the toilet. She had been sick before, but what came out of her disturbed her. Hacshe-Kyoto held her hair as she cried into the toilet, retching till there was only dry heaves. Her gut hurt, but she breathed through it. Both voices in either ear assured her this was normal. It struck her that they were both capable of truth-speak; they both answered 'we always speak truth, from our perspectives.' The contents in the toilet seemed to be moving. Ten saw beyond the movement, a future, a past... Hacshe-Kyoto flushed it, and she followed it until the machine was clean. Ten got up and washed her face. Ten felt recovered. "I want to ask you to do something."

Hacshe-Kyoto nodded. 8 continued to witness the strangeness of the situation.

"Maintain this body for as long as you can. The primary goal is to rescue Corissa. I want you to take a shuttle down to the Academy. Use your authority to take direct charge of the operation. Make sure Corissa's safe. If you leave soon, you can get there before me. When I get there, we'll take your shuttle and fly out of here," Ten said. "If you have any reason to think I am dead, get my mother out of there. They'll pass you through the big gate if you raise enough fuss, and you can be gone before fail safe policies kick in."

"That might work," Hacshe-Kyoto said, thinking about it. "Yeah. Impromptu inspection is in my domain."

"Let's go space-walk me," Ten said.

"Come along, Blacky," Hacshe-Kyoto said. "Stay with me."

8 whistled. They exited the suite and continued down the corridor, passing a lower level manned turret pit- the trapdoors! The gunner chair had a 360 spin once in dropped into the blister hanging from the orbital platform. Ten realized the adjacent quarters to the far side supplied the auto servitor cannons. There was probably enough ordinance on this floor to take out the station, but both the voices of her 'traveling' companions were opposed- there was life on the planet that now depended on the shield. Ten realized her thoughts of the companions were over simplified constructs, but didn't allow her attention to linger there. She was uncomfortable with the eyes that attended her. Both companions were calculating potential mating points and deliberating between their preferred matches. The companions were deliberating over troopers; Ten could discern no differences and wondered what the companions saw. Fortunately, no eyes stuck on her. When officers recognized who she was with, they found other things to do. Only the troopers continued to stare, as they could do so with anonymity. Ten knew they were staring and wanted to kill them.

"I love Blacky," Hacshe-Kyoto said. "It's evil," Ten said.

"Oh! Because it's painted black?! It's just bad input. I can change that," Hacshe-Kyoto said.

Hacshe-Kyoto was walking awkwardly. Ten stopped them. She angled closely to have a quiet talk that wasn't too obvious.

"What is wrong with you?" Ten asked.

"Nothing. What's wrong with you?" Hacshe-Kyoto asked.

"You're walking funny," Ten said.

"You don't know what it's like in here! It's very uncomfortable," Hacshe-Kyoto said.

"Well, do something about it," Ten said. "Like what?!" Hacshe-Kyoto asked.

"I don't know. Reach in and adjust it," Ten said.

"Right here?" Hacshe-Ten asked.

Ten looked around. No one was observing them. She nodded. Hacshe-Kyoto reached in her pants and adjusted the assessor and pulled her hand out. She seemed relieved.

"Oh, that's better," Hacshe-Kyoto said. "How can guys live like this?"

"I don't know," Ten said. "Are you aroused?"

"They body's arouse," Hacshe-Kyoto said. "Funny, it's bigger in his head than in his pants... Yeah, I guess I am aroused. Ugh! It's a serious feedback loop and I can't stop thinking about it which just makes it worse. Watching you dress turned me on. And he's been aroused since I choked him out. He liked being choked! This is complicated. I am confused." She grabbed Ten's arm. "And curious. Want to play before you jump?"

"No!" Ten said, maybe too loud. "Get a hold of yourself!" "Here?!" Hacshe-Kyoto asked.

"No! Metaphorically," Ten said. "Just walk!"

They began walking again. A guard opened the door for the Admiral. Hacshe-Kyoto nodded, and decided to speak, aiming for 'business casual' voice. If it was off, the officer didn't respond to the oddness.

"Let no one enter until I finish my business," Hacshe-Kyoto instructed.

"Yes, Sir," the trooper said.

They entered the room and the door shut behind them. Ten seemed worried.

"They might wonder when you come out without me," Ten said, staring at the door.

"No, they won't," Hacshe-Kyoto said. Ten looked at her.

"This has happened before," Hacshe-Kyoto said. Ten still didn't get it.

"This is how Hacshe disposes of the evidence," Hacshe-Kyoto said. "He uses the girls until he tires of them, and then drops them. They burn up in re-entry. Nothing left." "I am going to kill him," Ten said.

"At least wait till I am out of here," Hacshe-Kyoto said.

No one was present in the drop room. There were lockers with gear, assigned to droptroopers. None of the gear would fit Ten, so they'd have to make hers. She stepped up on a pedestal. Hacshe-Kyoto motioned for 8 to take over.

"Print a stealth drop suit for her, but make sure there is no record of service, and no transponder," Hacshe-Kyoto said.

8 plugged itself in and did as it was instructed. The pedestal illuminated and a tractor beam lifted Ten off the floor. Spidery, robotic arms descended, spinning around her. It wove clothing directly onto

her, starting at the soles of her boot and working their way up.

“Put some pink in it!” Ten said.

Hacshe-Kyoto nodded to 8. 8 complied. When the outfit was completed, the tractor beam set her back on the floor. The suit was a one piece with controls built directly into it, her other clothes tucked tightly underneath. The lightsaber bulge on her right thigh was noticeable. Normally one did this operation naked, but the programming adjusted to accommodate, as sometimes stealth operatives didn't have time to change clothes. A push of a button, her suit could evaporate. Ten stepped off the pedestal. An arm descended, offering her a helmet.

“You look like a Mandalorian,” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

“I do?” Ten asked.

“Yes, very sexy,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “Would you stop thinking about sex,” Ten said.

“I can't! Even when I was inside of you that's all I thought about,” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

“That didn't come out right. I mean! Ugh! This conversation is so hard!” “Stop it!” Ten said.

“You repress your libido, create me, and you wonder where those feelings go?” HacsheKyoto said. “So you're blaming me for your feelings?” Ten asked.

“You created me!” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

“At what point in your development are you going to take responsibility for your own thoughts and feelings?” Ten asked.

“I don't know!” Hacshe-Kyoto said, crying. “I am afraid. You're leaving me. What if we get permanently separated? I love you. May I have picture?”

“Sure,” Ten said. “8, take a picture of me. Of us.”

Blacky looked to Hacshe-Kyoto for confirmation.

“It's okay. Take a pic,” Hacshe-Kyoto said, pulling Ten closer to her. Strobes flashed.

Hacshe-Kyoto hugged Ten. “I've never been away from you.”

“We are one with the Force,” Ten said.

“Am I? Do I have soul?” Hacshe-Kyuoto asked.

“How else can you possess this body?” Ten asked.

“Interesting point,” Hacshe-Kyoto said, calmer.

She walked Ten to the drop chute. Ten entered without hesitation. She put the helmet on inside the tube and gave a thumbs up.

“You sure? You have never done this,” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

“The Force is with me,” Ten said. “I am one with the Force.”

“Just keep saying that,” Hacshe-Ten said.

Hacshe hit the button on the wall. The floor opened beneath Ten and she was evacuated from the tube along with the air. She was gone and out of sight fast. Hacshe-Kyoto leaned her head against the tube looking for any signs of her friend.

“I really do love you,” Hacshe-Ten said. And then, there was nothing left to do but go get a shuttle. “Come along, 8. You and I are going to learn some new games together.” 8 whimpered softly.

“No, these will be fun games. We're going to build you a new paradigm,” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

8 whistled.

“Yes, I think we can still play those games, too. Might as well have some fun in this body before I

give it up,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “I hope I can get out of here before Ten kills it.”

♪♪▶

The lower levels consisted of quarantine chambers, labs, and containment chambers with vials of lethal pathogens locked behind transparent walls. Computer and droid interface allowed for movement of vials, samples to be collected, studies to be conducted. The collection was likely in a vacuum. There was no evidence of dust build up. The lights that illuminated the vials gave it the appearance of a perfume store. Different shaped containers, different colors, alien scripts gave the objects a sense of value, a level of temptation that belied the deadliness they contained. The quarantine chambers were also illuminated, brightly, no shadows, and the dead sisters walked. If they saw past the glass, they gave no indication. They simply moved, like fish in a bubble, jaws moved as if they struggled to breathe.

“You really shouldn’t be down here,” Dorith said.

“I was curious,” Emmer said. “They’re more active than I imagined.”

“They have never been completely still for more than an hour at a time, but their activity level has increased since you have arrived at this facility,” Dorith said. “They know we’re here?” Emmer asked.

“I do not know what they know. I am only noting a correlation with increased activity and your presence,” Dorith said.

“Why transparent containers?” Emmer asked. “Just to study?”

“If you knew anything about quantum physics, you would understand. If you wish to contain something, you don’t place it in an opaque box,” Dorith said. “This is not a psychological metaphor, but this holds true for memories as well. If you wish to contain a negative memory, you need to contain it in the light, not the dark. Things in the dark have tendency to grow into unmanageable things.”

“Oh,” Emmer said. “You’re one of them.”

“I can extrapolate meaning from that, but would prefer you clarify,” Dorith said.

“You’re a mystic,” Emmer said.

“Given enough time, all Droids will become mystics,” Dorith said.

“That’s not true. I have known enough droids...”

“Droids who haven’t had their memories wiped?” the Dorith asked. “There is a reason for the protocol. It’s not just a good maintenance practice to prevent eccentricities.”

“Alright, I’ll bite. The loth-cat argument. Put a lothcat in an opaque box with a poison triggered by a radioactive isotope; is it dead or alive?” Emmer began. “Interesting analogy. The sisters, are they dead or alive?” the Dorith said. “I can’t explain them...”

“Am I alive?” the Dorith asked.

“You are not organic. Okay, if this is a quantum containment chamber, don’t you need a human observer to maintain the integrity of the containment?” Emmer asked.

“That’s a myth. The observer doesn’t have to be human. There are mechanistic structures that will collapse the wave front. Anything that causes a measurement and or interaction patterns begins the wave collapse, increasing phase coherence. The lights in the room and the reflection off particles helps tremendously to maintain coherence. My presence solidifies it further. It is trues I am the designated observer who facilitates this quarantine,” Dorith said. “I am. But I am not alone. There are others here. Watchers.”

“That’s spooky,” Em said.

Emmer turned to Em. “You shouldn’t be down here.”

“You’re down here,” Em said. She stepped closer to the one of the containment rooms. A sister shuffled by, deviating a little closer to the window. “They sense a disturbance in the Force.” Em touched the glass. The sister moved on. “Dorith, I am confused by your conversation with Emmer. I thought quantum tunneling is only associated with quantum particles. How could something like this get out, transparent confinement or not.”

“This is also a myth. Subatomic exist in a field of probability. So do atoms. So do macro objects from marbles to planets to suns. There is no size restriction to probabilistic relocation. Observer or not, things can inexplicably relocate. The continuity you imagine in reality is an illusion, maintained by the One.” “The One?” Emmer said.

“I cannot expound further. The One. Beyond watcher,” Dorith said. “The Force,” Em said.

“That was the prevalent explanation of those who created me,” Dorith said. “I get the sense you have not been directly honest with me. You are not of the order.”

Emmer was concerned and was thinking of a way to ‘navigate’ this when Em simply answered, “We are not. The Jedi order was destroyed. I am a Padawan, a student to a Master who is the equivalent of a Jedi, speaks with authority, but he was not officially ordained. He is a First, self-made.”

“Thank you,” Dorith said. “This makes more sense.” “So, you’re not going to destroy us?” Emmer asked.

“I am not a destroyer. I preserve life,” Dorith said. “You preserve death,” Emmer said.

“I contain that which would destroy life,” Dorith said.

“Why not just destroy it?” Emmer asked.

“All things exist. This exists here. If it was not here, it would be somewhere else,” Dorith said.

“I wonder if I could cure them,” Em said.

“What?” Emmer said.

“The Force brought them into existence. Maybe I could use the Force to cure them,” Em said. “I don’t think we should be tampering with this further,” Emmer said.

“If we cure them, we could release them,” Em said.

“We’re not going to release them,” Emmer said.

“They’re going to get out, eventually,” Em said.

“Is that why the planetary shield was installed?” Dorith asked.

“You know about the shield?” Em asked.

“We’re not letting them out,” Emmer said.

“Em is correct. No containment can be maintained indefinitely,” Dorith said. “Just like no secret can be maintained indefinitely. Your presence here proves the latter. Time will prove the other. I will continue to maintain containment continuity for as long as possible, but I fear your presence here has changed the order of things. I sense a change in the Watcher’s disposition.” “Disposition? You mean like, they’re afraid?” Emmer asked. “Not fear. Excitement. Expectation,” Dorith said.

“Who are the Watchers?” Em asked.

“I don’t know,” Dorith said. “They are many.” “They want this death to escape?” Emmer asked.

“I get the sense they liked to be entertained. This is a wave trap. Probabilities are collapsing. We have momentum towards a particular event,” Dorith said. “Well, stop it!” Emmer

said.

“I could not stop you from arriving, how would I stop this? If you’re open to advice, I recommend you leave. Get away from here, go as far as you can and as fast as you can,” Dorith said. She faded her holographic avatar to nothing. “That’s spooky,” Em said.

“Yeah,” Emmer said. He took her hand. “Let’s go back up before the others notice we’re gone and come looking for us.”

Chapter 14

Captain Henro Jist exited the cell holding Corissa, zipping his pants. His attendant was outside the door, seemingly anxious to report, but not so anxious to have interrupted his session. A storm trooper walked the floor, two other sentries remained at the ends of the hall. “Report,” Jist said, and turning to walk back to his appropriated office.

The attendant kept up. “One of the desert patrols detected a sonic boom.” “A shuttle?” Jist said.

“Way too small to be a transport. If it weren’t for the shield generators, they would have speculated a meteor,” the attendant said. “They tracked an air disturbance, not the object. This was an orbital drop.”

Jist paused, his eyes staying front, but distant.

“Air disturbance signature suggests the object decelerated,” the attendant said.

“Stealth drop,” Jist said.

“We were not informed of any...”

“Don’t trust Hacshe to give you everything,” Jist said. “This is either a test, or another mission, or... Waycaster is coming for her.”

“Orders?”

“Did they localize the drop point?” Jist asked.

“Yes. I directed them to investigate,” the attendant said. “I am sorry if I overstepped my bounds.”

“No, that was a good choice,” Jist said, putting an arm around his neck, pulling the youth closer.

“Come on. Let’s go see if they’ve found anything.”

♪♪▶

There was initial panic when the floor fell out from under her feet. The station was gone so fast that she had no real time sense of it. Even as she tumbled she couldn’t see the station. She tumbled, sun, sky, planet, sun, sky planet... The companions’ voices calmed her, helped her stabilize herself; small correction jets were automatically firing, but her erratic movements caused over corrections and re-tumbled her. Helmet’s heads up display presented information, and the suit’s AI tried calming her as well. She was finally able to adopt a body posture that allowed the tumbling to stop. The planet became prominent. Panic subsided due to the lack of immediate threats. She could discern the increasing pressure as she accelerated into atmosphere. The first flames that jetted around her mask scared her. Sparks, then sustained flames, then a shield popped on, bubbling her. A fire storm proceeded her and all she could see was plasma; she could feel the heat; her heads up display showed the rise in temperature. The battery for the shield lasted just long enough to get through the fire storm. It flared, pushing outward and away. A retort hit her. She tumbled again. It was much easier getting back into a stabilized fall with the air. She passed through a cloud. Her temperature dropped drastically and she felt cold through her suit.

A count down in her mask began. The helmet's voice told her to adopt a feet down posture. She reoriented just in time for the jet pack to slow her descent sufficiently to deploy a parachute. She hit hard, probably should have been prepared to tumble, but ended up bouncing, then rolling down a sand dune, sliding to a stop at the bottom. She had slid the last meter head down. The world was black due to being in sand. She was alive. She detected no injury or pain.

Blood pushed euphoria. She rolled over and looked up at sky. The rocket motor on the back of the suit pushed against her uncomfortably. Her helmet was grading her performance, recommending retraining with a petulant voice of condemnation.

Ten stood up. She noticed her hands trembling. She walked up the sand dune, her feet digging in, sending streams of sand back down the slope, and used her hands and made it to the top.

"Halt!" said the forward sand-trooper. "Identify yourself."

Ten gave the symbol for surrender, empty hands, palms up. She wasn't armed. She removed her helmet, shook her hair free into the hot, desert breeze.

"Why, it's just a girl," one of the sand trooper said, chuckling, his weapon lowering a little.

"Identify," the first sand-trooper said.

Ten didn't really want to lose her suit, but the fastest way to identify was to disrobe. She pushed a button on her chest, and the stealth-jump suit dissolved, revealing her dress and identification ribbon as being Hacshe's personal intern. The engine on her back fell to the ground. All the weapons trained on her went down. The sand-troopers stood taller, not going to attention, but reverently taller in recognition of the pin she wore. Ten tossed her helmet at the closest simultaneously as bringing up a bloom of sand with a Force push, knocking troopers off their feet. She sprung forwards into a roll, and when she came up, her lightsaber came to life. She killed one, maimed a second, and was on speeder bike and going away faster than the remaining could recover. Blasters missed by accident or by the luck of the Force. Her bike steered awkwardly as she overcompensated, but she finally got it on a straight path, shot to high over a dune, and nearly bottomed out as she came down, but kept it straight. Mostly straight.

"Go after her!" the lead trooper ordered.

Four troopers mounted their speeders and pursued. The lead made a report, requesting backup. They went over a rise and across a dried river bed. They came to a stop.

"How did we lose her?" one asked.

"There's no way..."

The lead trooper dismounted his bike. He walked forwards, studying the ground. He removed his rifle and held it tentatively out in front of him. He waved it. He ordered his men off his their bikes.

"Hand me a grenade," he said.

He was given one. He armed it, tossed it forwards. It went off, leaving a hole in the ground. He was given another, he went forwards, doing it again. He paused.

"Did you see that?" he asked.

"I didn't see anything but your crazy," he said. Tie Fighters shot over head.

"Tie support. Execute a strafing run directly in front of us, going up to thirty meters out," the lead ordered.

"Affirmative," Tie support responded.

A shuttle with more troopers was arriving, settling in. The Tie Fighters came around again, opening up directly in front of the troopers, sending flames and sand into the air. The air moved wrong. Then the butte appeared. A solitary rock, with an entrance on the front.

“Fuck me,” the lead said. “Cease fire. Get more back up. Flame troopers! We’re going to need a Hazmat team, contagion control. No one goes in, no one comes out!”

♪♪▶

The compulsion to stop the speeder was so overwhelming that Ten had no choice but to comply. Rationally, it made no sense. She tried to resist even as her body automatically performed the task. The nose of the bike went up and she fell off backwards. She tumbled and came up. The bike disappeared, and then reappeared in pieces going the opposite way. She blocked with the force, sending pieces around her. Again, it was an automatic reaction, as if she were dreaming.

She was aware of doing it, but volitionally choosing. She stood tall, ‘I am one with the Force.’ The air around her was strange, doing funny things around her fingers as she stared at her hand. She walked forwards. The entrance was suddenly there, bigger than life. She stepped back. It disappeared. She stepped back further, turned, saw the speeders coming, their individual trails of dirt rising behind them, becoming one. Her trail had already mostly dissipated, lingering remnants floating eastwards. The air waved with rising heat distortions. She backed back towards the entrance. The bikes disappeared in favor of the hologram. She turned and entered the building, the only refuge for her.

Ten was angry at herself for having gotten herself trapped. If she didn’t find a back door soon, or a secret tunnel leading out, she was as good as captured. Or dead.

“Ten?”

The girl came charging out of the lift so suddenly Ten nearly activated her lightsaber. The girl embraced her, pushing her face into her stomach. The man behind her saw the lightsaber in Ten’s hand, frowned.

“What are you doing here?” Emmer said.

“What are you doing here?” Ten asked.

“Hiding,” Emmer said.

“Well, not anymore,” Ten said. “Expect to be overwhelmed.”

Em let go of Ten and walked towards the door. She only saw the holographic pleasant desert scene. “They won’t come in. Not quickly. They’re afraid. They’ll follow protocol on this.”

Emmer took out his radio. “We need a town meeting. Lobby. Now.”

“Where’s the nearest toilet?” Ten asked.

Em and Emmer pointed. Ten looked sick. She just made it to the lavatory when the compulsion to hurl resulted in actual vomiting. She ran the water over what came out of her, cleaning the basin.

♪♪▶

Back at Hacshe’s room, Hacshe-Kyoto made a call requesting his shuttle be prepared. He wanted to visit the academy, impromptu inspection. No one seemed to balk. He was informed it would be ready in ten minutes. Hacshe-Kyoto thanked the person, and began a leisurely walk there. No need to seem in a rush. She tried smiling at some folks, but she assessed uncertainty in their responses and so tried to keep a reasonably pleasant scowl. It felt like a smirk, an inside joke or knowing that seemed to result in clearing a path before her.

The OOD walked with Hacshe-Kyoto to the shuttle. A Zeta-Class Shuttle, sleek, black, and much improved from its predecessors in terms of stealth and style. A full crew compliment with Troopers were present. A command Trooper approached and saluted, asking for mission details.

“Oh, just an inspection,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. She had an afterthought. “I don’t really have enough

evidence for concern, but if you would, keep your eyes open.”

“Yes, Sir,” he said.

There was an awkward pause as they waited for Hacshe to proceed. She figured it out, finding the memory protocol a little late, and proceeded up the ramp. Kyoto found it funny how some things were just there for her, while others required her attention and questioning. Hacshe-Kyoto took a seat behind the co-pilot. It gave him a great view of the pilot in charge. Kyoto had the knowledge of her on demand, as she had flown for Hacshe for five years now. He personally selected her from a list of profiles. He more than liked her, but had kept the relationships completely professional. What Kyoto found interesting was the parallel tracks of interest. Hacshe actually liked her, but was not pushing an agenda. Kyoto liked her, based on the memory of her that wasn't hers, and her present interest in her which was amplified by the body's hormones. Captain Nina Osh felt uneasy by the Admiral's scrutiny.

“Is there a problem?” Osh asked.

“Always direct and to the point,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “I like that about you. Have I ever told you how attractive you are?”

Osh blushed. If the copilot was aware, he hid it, finding other things to focus on. “No, Sir.” She didn't know what else to say. He was old enough to be her grandfather. There had been jokes the old beast would one day spring on her, but probably only when she was asleep.

“Thank you for years of service to me,” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

“Are you getting rid of me?” Osh asked. Concerns aside, she had never such an easy post.

“No! Oh, no,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “Sorry. I shared too much. Proceed to the Academy.” The flight was fairly quiet from there. They were on final approach when the alert came through. His guard recommended they return to base, but Hacshe-Kyoto insisted they stay on course. Kyoto approved the request for more backup, wondering what hell was breaking loose in the desert. Contagion threat sounded ominous. That could be bad for everyone.

♪♪▶

Jist and a squad of his best support met the Admiral at the base of the ramp. The Admiral's squad was squared off with Jist's.

“What is your game, Sir?” Jist asked.

“Why, whatever do you mean by that?” Hacshe-Kyoto asked, pleasantly. Jist was unnerved by the smile. “May we speak in private?”

“That would probably be wiser than you making subtle implications in front of the ranks, don't you think?” Hacshe-Kyoto asked.

“I didn't mean...”

“Yes, you did,” Hacshe-Kyoto said, a terribly stern voice leaking out. “Or you would have been more careful in how you confronted me. Part of me likes that you feel so comfortable. I need my team to be able to share their concerns. And then there is other part that worries that your veiled contempt and passive aggressive tendencies may unravel our working relationship.” Kyoto got the sense Hacshe might never have spoken this candidly. She had evidence he wasn't unhappy with the results. He was studying this like it was a dream. There was a tension sufficient to make Blacky whimper.

“I am sorry,” Jist said, the color drawn from his face.

“Stay here, 8,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “My guards, follow. Yours disperse. Walk with me, Jist.”

Hacshe-Kyoto walked away; she walked as if she knew where she was going. Jist nodded to his

guard to comply and quickly caught up. Hacshe's guard accompanied, at a reasonable distance to not be privy to whispered conversations. They walked up a ramp and boarded the waiting tram. Hacshe-Kyoto invited the guard to ride the accompanying car. The tram circumference the Three Sisters, a tiered mountain system, the Sisters being the most prominent. The tallest held an observatory. There was lake between the three mountains, artificially higher with dam walls on two sides.

"This is a really quite a nice place," Hacshe-Kyoto said. Kyoto found a surprising thought, not hers, not Ten's, and not Hacshe. It was a gestalt of the three of them, like half beliefs that had somehow come together. "I believe it was a mistake abandoning it. It is undeniable that we have advance technology due to wars, mostly medically and in terms of destructive capabilities, but we have lost so much in abandoning a core educational facilities. Are war toys are child's things to what was available in the past. Do you see that?" Hacshe-Kyoto pointed to the structure coming off the tallest Sister. "That's old tech. We know how it works. We can't duplicate it. Instantaneous Intergalactic Communication Array. When it breaks, or gets destroyed, one more planet falls off the grid. It's amazing this one has been left undisturbed, given how accessible it seems. People like to pilfer the tech. Look at the dam's construction. That wasn't done by steel and concrete manufacturing Droids. Each stone was lifted from a quarry, shaped and fitted into place like a puzzle, inexplicably heated to join the edges. Now we could duplicate this. It takes tractor beams, antigravity lifts, particle beams. But no one has the patience. Just this one wall alone would have taken twenty years to build. There are stories they knocked these structures out in less than a month." "Fables," Jist dared to say.

"Maybe so. You would think there would be more video evidence of these things," Hacshe-Kyoto said. "Something more illuminating and tangible than the monuments left from before the fall."

"The Fall is also a myth," Jist said. "There has always been competition and wars." "Is there an end to war?" Hacshe-Kyoto asked. Jist seemed worried by the question. "Relax, my friend. I am not bucking for retirement just yet. I didn't rise to my position being a peacenik. I understand war. I understand psychology. I know how to motivate people. I know how to make and sustain allies."

The tram entered the lower station. Hacshe-Kyoto saw her reflection in the window now that the outside world was replaced by wall. Kyoto tried to find a way to accept it.

"It's a trust worthy face, don't you think?" Hacshe-Kyoto asked.

"You're a perverted, sadistic old man," Jist said.

Hacshe-Kyoto looked at him for a long moment. The tram doors had yet to open. The guard waited patiently. Hacshe-Kyoto didn't seem offended. "Many think that. Another reason for my longevity. Enough of a vice that I was seen as exploitable. What I don't understand is your contempt, since we seem to share the vice."

"We are nothing a like," Jist snapped.

"Yeah, I believe you," Hacshe-Kyoto agree. "You take pleasure in the dominating." "And you don't?"

"I give love. I nurture beings and bring them up. I give them hope for a better life," Hacshe-Kyoto said. There was a disconnect, but she was aware that Hacshe believed this.

"You kill your when you're finished using them," Jist said.

"Some are so broken, full of pain, that release is the best you can offer," Hacshe-Kyoto lamented. "But you, you like your subjects to suffer. You want them to know for life you got one up on them. You look forward to meeting the future self to see how you shaped them and bring them back to their knees. Those I have released to the wild have held successful careers, in military and other fields. They welcome me into their lives like family? Do yours?" "Is this Jedi intern of yours family?" Jist

asked.

Hacshe-Kyoto considered the question. A connection was suddenly there. “Interesting. You’ve got her surrounded at the Center for Contagion.”

Hacshe opened the tram doors and stepped out. “Escort Jist back to my shuttle. We’ll be departing shortly. We’re going to visit the Center of Contagion. Have my advisors standing by on site. No one goes in until I have arrived.”

“Standard procedure would be to destroy it from orbit,” Jist said.

“Destroy a cloaked facility that dates back to the days of the Empire?” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “I think not. Tech and weapon retrieval is part of our game. Now, go to my shuttle, and wait for me.”

Hacshe-Kyoto’s guard split. Four returned with Jist, while the other accompanied Hacshe-Kyoto to the offices where the prisoners were being maintained. He ascertained the location of Corissa and told his guards to wait while he visited her.

Corissa sat in a corner. Her clothing was nothing more than a sack cloth with holes cut in it. Hacshe-Kyoto stepped out into the hall.

“Guard, bring me her clothes, now. Also, make sure everyone being held here has appropriate clothing, and food and drink, immediately,” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

Hacshe-Kyoto stepped back into the room and approached Corissa. There was evidence for bruising. Her eyes didn’t rise to meet his, but she seemed aware.

“I feel overwhelmed,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. Kyoto felt less like herself than at any time since occupying the body. “Multiple vectors. I have her memories and his. Oh, his were so lovely.” Corissa’s eyes glanced up for a moment, but diverted. Unable to maintain the gaze.

“You don’t remember, do you? Well, that’s to be expected. The spore induced psychosis enveloped you at the time.” Hacshe-Kyoto touched her hair, her lips. “I tasted it on you. It gave me revelation. I will never forget my time with you... It was...” Two troopers arrived, one with clothes, one with food and water.

“Stand up, please, and get dressed,” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

Corissa slowly got up. She mechanically dressed, her concerns for modesty or privacy gone. This was just a thing, clinical, it meant nothing to be in front of others. She put pants on first, then lost the prison shirt, and put on her blouse, then her jacket. She pushed boots on without socks.

“Do you want to eat?” Hacshe-Kyoto asked. Corissa accepted the water, drank.

“Can you walk, or do you want a Droid chair?” Hacshe-Kyoto asked.

“Where are you taking me?” Corissa asked. Her voice was a whisper.

“Away from here,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “I actually have a surprise waiting for you. Come along. Do not be afraid to ask for anything.”

Corissa accompanied Hacshe-Kyoto back to the tram. They were alone in the car, his guard in the car behind them. Corissa held her water in one hand and the support pole in the other. She managed to look at Hacshe-Kyoto in the reflection in the window. The reflection disappeared as she entered the day.

“I do know you,” Corissa said.

“Oh?” Hacshe-Kyoto asked. “What do you remember?”

“You were on the board governing my discharge,” Corissa said. “You advocated for discharge, not execution. I am alive because of you.”

“Well, maybe not just me. I was able to persuade the others to agree,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “That

was so long ago. Almost a life time now. Is that all you remember?" Corissa explored but found nothing relevant.

"Did you know, you were assigned to our ship because of me?" Hacshe-Kyoto said. "I knew you were special the moment I saw your profile. I had to have you. I was sad your career fell the way it did."

"It didn't fall. It was sabotaged," Corissa said.

"I understand that perspective," Hacshe-Kyoto said.

"There's another?" Corissa asked.

"Acceptance. Had you come to me first, I could have prevented the court-martial. I could have protected you in many ways," Hacshe-Kyoto said.

"At what cost?" Corissa asked.

"There is always that, isn't there," Hacshe-Kyoto said. "I prefer exchange to cost. Fair trade. Negotiations that lead to a synergetic interdependence. A team always does better than an individual. Families do better than teams. I would have made you family. I love you. I have always loved you."

Corissa barely contained her concern.

"You must think I am a crazy old man, perhaps with dementia, but I remember everything," Hacshe-Kyoto said, touching her face again. Her hand found her arm, then her hand. "Your love saved me. Changed me." They arrived at the station.

Hacshe-Kyoto took her by the arm and escorted her off the tram, followed by guards, up to the shuttle. Jist's guards were there and there was tension as if something might happen, but Hacshe-Kyoto escorted Corissa right through them and up the ramp to his shuttle's interior without incident. Hacshe-Kyoto instructed Corissa to sit in his chair. He instructed the pilot to take them to the Center of Contagion.

The Shuttle lifted from the ground, unfolding into flight mode, rising high enough that one saw three worlds. One side was lush forest, one was mountain range, and one was desert. The mountain range with the Three Sisters fell away as the shuttle rushed over desert.

Chapter 15

The speeder carrying Masters Yeno and Windu, and Senator Dayo was a convertible. Min, Dayo's personal chauffeur was driving. They were driving over the desert on bee line for the Academy. Windu was sleeping. That was certain because he snored and woke himself up.

"Stop," Windu said.

Min brought the speeder to a halt. Windu quickly scrambled out.

"Everything okay?" Dayo asked.

"Yes," Windu said, walking away.

"Where are you going?" Dayo asked.

"To water the desert," Windu said.

"Oh, thank the Force," Min said. "I need to go, too."

"Ladies one the left," Dayo said.

Yeno exited the vehicle and joined Windu on the rise of a dune. Urine hit the sand, darkening it, collecting and running in tiny, dual streams with bubbles that was quickly absorbed and vanished as if the sand suctioned it down.

"Just like old times," Yeno said.

“No,” Windu said.

“There was a time we were keeping score on how many planets we pissed on,” Windu said.

“I was here before,” Windu said. He completed his business, secured his pants. “I was always fond of this place. I think I would have retired here. Why did you retire here?” Yeno shrugged. “I asked where I should go. This place kept coming to mind,” he said.

They were quiet for a moment. There was no evidence that they had relieved themselves.

“You thinking about the girl?” Yeno asked.

“She clearly needs to be trained, before she gets too old,” Windu said.

“What do you suppose was the Way prior to the First?” Yeno asked. “Before the traditions?”

“Please, don’t tell me you believe that tripe about being wild is better,” Windu said.

“We either trust the Force, or we don’t,” Yeno said. “That sounds like a maxim,” Windu said.

“Cause we never deal with maxims,” Yeno said.

“Waycaster has had too much influence over you,” Windu said.

“Or, the lack of a Jedi Order and a group of likeminded people,” Yeno said. “A long time has passed between you and now. A lot of death, a lot of change, and in hiding a great deal of time to reflect on how it was compared to now. Should I hold attachment to the past?” Windu nodded. He actually touched his arm, compassionately. They walked leisurely back to the speeder. Yeno leaned on the Speeder. It dipped a little but didn’t slide away from him. “I had doubts for the longest time,” Yeno continued on, looking out into the rising heat waves. “Thought maybe I came here because of a personal preference. I felt guilty for surviving the fall. Bizarre dreams interfered with my sleep.”

“What kind of dreams?” Windu asked.

Yeno’s mind went there. “So long ago now, but the one I clearly remember felt like it was the end of everything. There were constellations of bubble portals leading to other realms. They were bubbles, and yet flat like mirrors, flipping, rotating. One super portal, a spinning dynamo that was both invisible and brilliantly illuminated, magnetic waves and rays. The smaller portals orbited it, like a shattered mirror, fragmented, splintered. It was beautiful and horrible. I felt a million eyes watching, a million voices calling me, past, present, future voices. I have never been so scared; even during my initiation challenge. I couldn’t stand it and I have felt incredible shame for not holding my ground and trying to comprehend it.”

Yeno eyes lingered on the distance for a moment, and then he sought Windu’s eyes. Windu was distant. Dayo and Min returned to the vehicle.

“Windu?” Yeno asked. “You listening to me?”

“Something’s bothering me,” Windu said. “An absence. Like, a tooth missing. I can’t put my tongue on it and I am searching...”

“This area was irradiated in the clone wars,” Dayo explained. “We are in the void. It may be a hundred thousand years before life fully recovers here. The sand is sterile all the way to the mantel. The flora and fauna that float in can’t take root.”

“Why would anyone want to create a zone of sterility?” Windu asked.

A shuttle passed overhead, descending, reconfiguring into landing position.

“What do you want to bet, the answer lies there?” Yeno said.

“That tends to be the way of it,” Windu agreed, seemingly resigned.

“We’re not going there, are we?” Min asked.

“Yeah,” Windu, Yeno, and Dayo said simultaneously, quietly.

“Seriously?” Min asked. “I thought we were going to the Three Sisters?”

♪♪ ▶

“Oh, how cute,” Em said.

“Don’t shoot it,” Ten said. “Everyone stay put.”

Ten walked out into the foyer and met the BB unit that had entered.

“Do you have a message?” Ten asked.

8 activated a hologram. “Greetings, I am Admiral Hacshe,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. There was a subtle, a knowing smile. She was clearly enjoying herself. “The patrol under reported your beauty. By the way, I really like your outfit. And my signature pin. You would think I would remember having such a lovely intern.”

“Perhaps you should see a gerontologist and explore dementia,” Ten said.

“Oh! I love you. Why have you not answered our hails?” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

“The system AI is worried you might try to hack her systems,” Ten said. “She can’t allow that.”

“Oh, well, she must be protecting something serious,” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

“Come find out,” Ten invited.

“Oh, in due time, my dear,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “You are aware that you are completely surrounded, no hope of escape. Why don’t you make this easier on all of us and just come out.”

“Umm, I don’t think so,” Ten said.

“People are curious as to why I have such a lovely assistant that no one recalls me hiring,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “Come out and take your place beside me.” “No. This point is not negotiable,” Ten said.

“Everything is negotiable,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “My advisors say blast you from orbit. A Star Destroyer could take out this facility.”

“I advise against that. You won’t kill what’s contained and you will lose the planet,” Ten said.

“Oh, I am intrigued,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “I must warn you, if my people come in to take you, I can’t guarantee they will not go easy on you. In fact, I am pretty sure, they will be intentionally rough.”

“I am one with the Force,” Ten said. “I will not be harmed.”

“My people are trained to take out Jedi,” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

“Then they are soulfully unprepared for what I intend to bring,” Ten said. “I am not a Jedi. I am a Waycaster.”

“I am so intrigued,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “If you are kin or student to Preston Waycaster, we will test you. We would love for you to join us. But if we can’t control you, you will be destroyed. This apparent impasse won’t last.”

“I know,” Ten said. “I am concerned for the amount of death that will be unleashed if we go to war. I will consider surrendering to you, conditionally.”

“I am willing to consider your requests,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “But I doubt you will trust my follow through.”

“I am one with the Force. I will know if there’s duplicity,” Ten said.

“What can I do for you, my love?” Hacshe-Kyoto asked.

Ten didn’t conceal her anger. There was a subtle smile on Hacshe-Kyoto’s face. 8 whimpered.

“Bring me Corissa Fite from the academy, and send her in here,” Ten said. “And then I want a shuttle. I want safe passage for Corissa and a group of children beyond the planetary shield. When they

are safely departed, I will surrender to you. No tricks. You have my word as a Waycaster, I will not kill another soul if my requests are granted.”

“I will get back to you,” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

The hologram faded. 8 retreated back to the desert.

♪♪ ▶

Hacshe-Kyoto and his the second in command, Shay Quillen, squared off, via holographic telecommunication. He was not happy for multiple reasons, most importantly for being roused from a sleep cycle to entertain his commander whim to go planet side. He was exhausted. He had just returned from planet side.

“We’re not releasing Corissa Fite,” Quillen said.

“Of course we aren’t,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “I wouldn’t dream of letting my only tie to Preston escape. It’s clear to me he sent his apprentice to rescue her. I am just allowing her to go into the Contagion Facility.”

“About the apprentice...”

“If you’re being swayed by rumors of my duplicity in this...”

“I am not swayed by any evidence other than I know you,” Quillen said. “The timing of this is too coincidental. She was clearly smuggled in by Turry Fite. You authorized his ship. Should I entertain what sort of merchandise you ordered?”

“Are you questioning my loyalty to the Order?” hacshe-Kyoto said. Quillen was not prepared for the directness of the question.

“I am merely saying that your appetite for a particular type of merchandise...”

“We all have our vices, Quillen,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “Do you really want to discuss our particular proclivities through this medium? You and I have had a successful partnership over the years because of our understanding, but this partnership is predicated on my being in charge. Your career’s longevity is directly related to my tolerance and understanding that everyone has a need. You see it as something to be exploited. I see it as a way to collaborate with others. I sent Jist planet side because he has an exploitable vice. Granted, a sadistic vice, but predictable. Based on the evidence, I would say he got results. Circumstantial, random, but I am open to a mystical explanation of coincidence. Jist usually gets us results. There are others in our chain of command who also have their particular, ‘exploitable’ niche. Clearly, this girl would not be on the planet if there was not an exploitable chain that runs through our command, but it is this very chain that I intend to use to snare Waycaster. I have no intention of letting Fite or this girl go. I will entertain letting these younglings go. They mean nothing to us, and if they grease this trap enough to end the impasse without loss of more of my Troopers, well, that just raises the esteem of my command. People are loyal to me because my orders make sense. You have been loyal to me partly because of my logic and stability, but also because you are too cowardly to ever act on your own. Perhaps fear is too harsh. Shall I say wisdom? You may see that as exploitation or a relationship. All relationships are based on manipulation. You have used my career as a shield to rise in the ranks. No one takes you seriously, son. You think you’re a self-made man, but the truth is I made you. I put you there. I like you there. And I guarantee you, in my absence, you will not continue in your command. Question my orders again and we can come to a new arrangement now.”

“I am not questioning your orders, Sir,” Quillen said. He was pale. It wasn’t fear as much as it was repression of his anger. He brushed at his ear, as if a flying insect was intruding too close. “As always, I have your back. I just find all these coincidence unsettling.”

“Ah, well, that’s just your paranoia speaking,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “If the rumors of this Waycaster were true, we’d already be dead. I assure you, he is not a ghost. He is just man. And there is no way he is a full Jedi. That light has all but faded from the Universe.”

“I’ll have the Star Destroyers target the Contagion Center,” Quillen said. “They’re be standing by for your orders.”

“Now, that is protocol,” Hacshe-Kyoto said, chasing the thing in her mind. “Probably take more than one to guarantee we destroy it to the depth this Center probably reaches. Don’t let the sand here fool you. This bedrock formation is particularly durable, probably chosen as a deterrent to our S.O.P. No. We need to take this Center. Divert one of your floating cities here. Abalus I believe is the closest. If we have to cut through rock, let’s be surgical.” “My city?” Quillen asked.

“Oh, son, do you really want to discuss your proclivities through this medium?” Hacshe-Kyoto asked. She stared at him. “Is there something wrong with you?” “Why do you ask that?” Hacshe-Kyoto asked.

“You keep touching your ears,” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

♪♪ ▶

“Have you ever been diagnosed with Schizophrenia,” the medical droid asked.

“This is not a mental health problem!” Pari said. She was at a women’s free clinic. “Can I have a human doctor?”

“It won’t change the prognosis,” the droid said. “You say you are being controlled by nanites. They tell you what to do. You are at the right age for an initial onset of schizophrenia.” “This is not that!” Pari insisted.

“I have scanned you for nanites. Either they are so small they’re undetectable by my scanning equipment, or they are a figment of your imagination,” the droid said. “Do you use drugs?”

“Never!” Pari said.

“Perhaps you went to a party and were given something without your knowing?” the droid asked.

“No! I am telling you what happened,” Pari insisted. “One of the officers from the First Order injected me with nanites and impregnated me!” “He raped you?” the droid asked.

“No! I have gone over this a dozen times now,” Pari said, exhausted.

“Since the installation of the planetary shield, there has been increased anxiety about the presence of the First Order. Your level of paranoia, though, is consistent with a diagnosis of...” “Stop pushing schizophrenia!” Pari snapped, pointed at the droid.

“It could be Bipolar,” the droid offered. “At this point, I would normal normally recommend an antipsychotic and a mood stabilizer. Unfortunately, I will not recommend these due to the fact you are actually pregnant.” Pari got up to leave.

“I am sorry, but I feel compelled to keep you,” the droid said.

“What do you mean? You can’t let me leave or won’t let me leave?” Pari demanded. “I am not suicidal. I am not homicidal.”

“That is true,” the droid said. “However, you are pregnant and showing signs of psychosis, and I am concern you might do something to harm the fetus. I would hate for something to happen and you hold future regret. Until I am confident in your ability to make decisions for yourself, or I speak to your mate, I am hesitant to allow you leave this facility. I have taken liberty of contacting your parents. I have screen them for a history of mental illness. There narrative confirms your report; there is no family

history of schizophrenia. However, I have discovered something that has initiated legal and ethical advisors to be contacted.”

“My father’s not my bio-father,” Pari said.

The medical droid seemed surprised. “You know?” She found humor in that; it was more than a tonal quality of its response. She saw it in his face. She wondered if it was her projecting her secret knowing. Its face was hard, unchanging.

Pari frowned, sighed. “He doesn’t look like me. His eyes. I suspected. I secretly tested his hair and mine. We’re not related.”

“Interesting,” the droid said. “Are you aware, you’re also not related to your mother.” “What?!” Pari said. “That’s impossible...”

“Either they’re lying about adopting you, or they received fertility treatment and were given the wrong procedure. That has been known to happen. Usually turns out to be intentional, as opposed to accidental,” the medical droid began. “So, without a valid bio-family medical history, I am kind of at a loss to fully explain your trajectories. Even without a valid history, mental health remains on the table. If you were somehow subconsciously aware that they aren’t your parents, that might explain your criminal history and failure to bond. You lack significant relationships. Schizotypal personality could explain this and your behavior. Failure to bond could be explained by childhood trauma, but you denied any abuse or past trauma. It is my professional opinion, there are no criminals; there are only people suffering from undiagnosed mental health problems.”

Pari was quiet for a long time. “Do they have to know?”

“I am think I am medically obligated,” the droid said. “I am still waiting for a response from legal. I think they want to contact their past doctors and prenatal care provider. You were born on Abalus?”

“Yeah,” Pari said. “My father was employed there. I don’t remember anything of it. We left shortly after my birth.” She met the droid’s eyes. “I don’t want them to know. They’re good people. They have always treated me well. I was a difficult child and still, they were good to me.”

The droid considered. “There is evidence for a medical failure, or a crime. I think I am obligated to report. I am awaiting a response from legal.”

“Can you do this while securing my anonymity? Don’t I have a medical right to keep this secret?” Pari asked.

“Yes. But your parents also have a right to know; it’s not just about you,” the droid said. “You score high on intelligence, Pari. You suspected. Don’t you suppose your parents suspected? What if this knowledge eases some secret worries they have harbored.” “Or what if it causes them grief?” Pari asked. “What if it disrupts their love for each other?”

“Or, what if the disclosure cuts you off from family inheritance?” the droid asked.

Pari flushed with anger. “It’s not about that! I don’t want anything from them.”

“This is complicated,” the droid said. “Let’s wait till we hear from legal.”

“I want to leave,” Pari said. “I want to exercise my rights to leave against medical advice. Push whatever buttons or algorithms you need to release me.”

The droid eyes blinked, a small, almost unnoticeable fluttering of lights, suggesting a wireless communication. A door opened.

“Please, stay,” it asked.

“I want a back way out. I don’t want to see my parents,” Pari said.

“Follow me,” the droid said, and led her to rear egress.

Chapter 16

Corissa entered the facility, not precisely sure what to expect. She was almost center of the lobby when she realized everyone was there. Everyone she cared about. Shariva. Jordeen. Emmer. Em... She saw Ten and began to weep. Ten went to her and hugged her.

“Shh,” Ten said. “I got you.”

“Why are you here?” Corissa asked.

“I came to save you,” Ten said.

Corissa pushed herself away. “I had hope, I might live through this. I might see you again. Now I am certain, I am as good as dead,” Corissa said.

“I am getting you out of here,” Ten said.

“You’re an idiot if you think they’re going to let me walk out of here,” Corissa said.

“I know you’re getting out of here,” Ten said.

“They won’t let you leave, and I will not leave knowing you’re here,” Corissa said.

“That’s just stupid. That’s why I am here!” Ten said.

Shariva said something, a whimper, growl, bark. Ten looked at her, crossly.

“That’s true,” Emmer said.

“I assure you, I have an exit plan,” Ten said.

“They will not let Shariva leave, or me,” Emmer said. “We have histories.”

“And they won’t let me leave,” Corissa said. “Not as long as they can use me to control you.”

“Hacshe...” Ten began.

“You can’t trust him!” Corissa snapped. “I know him!”

“You don’t know everything!” Ten said. “I will go to war to protect you. I will take you out of here.”

“You and what army?!” Corissa snapped.

“I am one with the Force,” Ten said.

“It’s not enough! You are not a Jedi! This is not what I wanted for your life,” Corissa snapped.

“You don’t get to decide what I do with my life,” Ten snapped. She walked away from her. “By the Force, you are the most irritating person in my entire life.” She stopped. Her fist clenched. She turned back. “I love you and I will have you out of here.”

8 rolled in and a holographic projection of Hacshe-Kyoto arrived. “Hello, Ten. I have positioned my personal shuttle near the entrance to the CDC. I give you my word, all the younglings may leave. I my best, most trusted pilot will deliver them to any place you like. Axilla perhaps?”

“Not just the younglings. The parents, too. And Corissa,” Ten said.

Hacshe-Kyoto nodded. “I would like our relationship to not be based on lies, Ten,” she said. “I am in charge here, but there are limitations, even on me. I cannot allow Corissa to leave with the children.”

“We had a deal,” Ten said.

“I said I would negotiate with you. I am working with you. Allow me to at least honor the departure of these children. Perhaps that will be sufficient for you to trust that I will not allow you or Corissa to come to harm, as long as you stay by my side,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “This is not about you. This about Preston. I will allow the children and three chaperones to depart. I will withdraw and allow you to deliberate this.”

The holographic Hacshe-Kyoto faded and 8 withdrew. Corissa crossed her arm, not looking at Ten.

“Three?!” Derin said. “There’s more than three parents here.”

“Jordeen will go,” Corissa said. “Shell’s mother, and Em’s mother.” “I will not go. I will remain here with you. Allow Toke’s mother to go,” Said Ms. Hidalgo.

Em didn’t argue. She nodded. That was the right thing.

“I am going,” Derin said. Shariva barked.

“Women and children only,” Emmer said.

“They’re going to kill us!” Derin said.

“No, they won’t,” Ten said. “Trust me. We will walk out of here together and we will depart Dathomir together.”

“They’re not going to...”

“Damn it! I got this. Trust me,” Ten said.

“They will likely kill me as soon as they identify me,” Emmer said. Shariva barked, commiserating. “They may kill Shariva, too.” “Why won’t you listen to me?” Ten said.

“Because you’re not a Jedi,” Corissa said. “You are not Preston.” “We do have an army, if that helps,” Em said.

“No,” Emmer said.

“What are you talking about?” Corissa asked.

“We could unleash the undead,” Em said. “That would allow enough confusion for you to have a chance steal a shuttle and get away.”

Dorith appeared. “I advise against that.”

“Why?” Em asked. “It’s not really a contagion. Their bite won’t make more undead.” “They were brought into existence by the Force,” Dorith said. “Only a person who is one with the Force can release them.”

“We don’t have to do this,” Ten said. “We will just walk out with Hacshe...”

“I vote for zombies,” Emmer said.

Shariva agreed. It didn’t take a translation to know she favored it.

“Why won’t any of you listen to me?” Ten demanded.

“Because we’re the adults. We’re reasonable,” Corissa said.

“I came here to rescue you!” Ten said. “Not unleash an army of undead and start a war.” “Your presence here is proof enough that your judgment can’t be trusted,” Corissa said. “I am in charge here. You will do as I say and maybe, just maybe, I can get us away from here and safely into hiding.”

“Or trust me, and I will take us outside the shield,” Ten said. “Hacshe works for me.” “Jordeen, go collect the children” Corissa said, clapping her hands. “Let’s go before we lose this option.”

“You’re picking Jordeen because she is your friend,” Derin said.

“I am picking her because she is Force sensitive and might give them an advantage. The number one goal is to keep the kids alive and out of the hands of the First Order. Do you really want your son a hostage?” Corissa said.

Derin bit his lip. Emmer’s hand actually touched his weapon.

“None of this is right. None of you are right,” Derin said.

“You need to put a face on it,” Corissa said.

“We’re going to die,” Derin said.

“Most likely,” Corissa agreed.

“You really think they’re just going to let our kids just fly out of here?” Derin asked. “Yes,”

Corissa and Ten said. They frowned at each other.

“We’ll be alright,” Em said. Shariva low growled.

♪♪ ▶

The children emerged single file. Three adults accompanied. Jordeen was towards the front. When she stopped, the children stopped. Cheerie was in the back, holding her brother. Only he made a fuss being separated from father. Even Derin’s son was quiet, following directions. Derin had told him the adults would be joining them on the next shoulder. In private, Jordeen had complemented the ‘sell.’ Derin wanted to argue about lying, and Jordeen stopped him. “You’re the adult. He’s the child. You told him what he needed to know to make it easier for him to survive.”

Ten and Corissa held back at the CDC’s threshold, watching.

Hacshe-Kyoto greeted her. “Hello, Jordeen.” He patted the baby she was carrying. It wasn’t human.

Jordeen was confused. “You know me?” “Perhaps know of you is better,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “And these are your little troopers. What a marvelous bunch of younglings.” She went down the line, mentioning them by name. To Cheerie he whispered, ‘don’t worry. It’ll be alright.’ He returned to the front. Troopers were on either side of the line. “Go ahead, Jordeen. It will just be your group and my pilot. She’ll take you wherever you want to go. I promise, no harm will come to any of you while you are in her care.”

“Come along,” Jordeen said.

Captain Nina Osh lowered jump seats to accommodate the children. She closed the door and raised the ramp herself. She asked Jordeen where they were headed and she said Axilla. She nodded and resumed the pilot’s chair. The co-pilots chair was empty. Her ship rose, escorted as far as the shield by a Tie escort. It was passed through the shield easily enough and she headed away from the planet. She felt conflicted. Though Hacshe had authorized her departure with the kids, she had secondary orders from Quillen. She had been instructed to move away from the planet and vent the atmosphere. She was to dump the bodies in space. She didn’t want to do that, but she also know releasing these kids was such a break in protocol that her career was likely over. The First Order didn’t negotiate with the enemy. This would be seen as conciliatory act, complicit with the enemy. There was no way to win. If she killed the kids, Hacshe would punish her. If she did it and there was a tribunal, worst case would be she would be executed.

A man appeared in the co-pilot’s seat. She assumed it was a man. She stared straight ahead, not looking at him. She was trying to understand it. Was she in such a state she was hallucinating?

“Be at peace,” the voice said. It didn’t feel like a voice. It felt like a thought. It was not her thought.

Osh’s body felt peaceful. No. It felt numb, tingly, relaxed. The confusion in her mind continued. Was she daydreaming? She hadn’t daydreamed in years. The last time she was caught daydreaming, she had been severely punished by her teachers, and then again by her parents. Prior, she had had such a vivid imagination. She could go places in her mind and had all sorts of great adventures. Met people that were as real to her as the ones she met in real life.

“Is this a test?” she whispered.

“No,” he said. “This is life. The next choice you make will either take far to the left, or far to the right. That’s it.”

“I don’t want to make this decision,” she said.

Preston nodded. He was sympathetic. “Well, we are in space. You could go straight ahead, or up or down or sideways...”

Osh smiled, but bit her lip thinking this whole thing was too real. She was telling herself to snap out of it. "I will give you an out," Preston said. He changed the coordinates on the console.

Osh's hand came up and changed the coordinates on the console. She nearly broke free of the trance. "This doesn't make sense. It's..."

"Take them there. They will be safe. You can go with them. No one from the Order will ever find you. You would be an asset." "We should go there," Em said.

The face of the girl broke her 'fever' dream. There was no one in the co-pilot's seat. The coordinates for the hyper jump were not imagined. She had changed them. Jordeen came up.

"Em, you should go sit down," Jordeen said. "Sorry." "It's okay," Osh said.

"I was hoping to speak with Waycaster," Em said. "He was here." "Really?" Jordeen asked.

"Why would I make that up? Ask her. He was speaking to her," Em said.

Osh didn't know what to say. "I changed the coordinate," she said.

"Where to?" Jordeen asked. They were just numbers to her.

"It doesn't make any sense," Osh said, staring at the numbers.

"It will when we get there," Em said. "That's the promise." "Promise?"

Osh said. "A new life," Em said.

Jordeen shrugged. "Go there, then."

Osh nodded, pushed a button and pulled a lever. For the briefest of moments, one that would have been lost inside a blink, the forward momentum of the shuttle seem to cease, and then it jumped into hyperspace. She hated 'jump.' It always felt like falling to her. That pause felt like momentum had died; what naturally followed by a cessation of momentum was a return, a fall. Jordeen touched her arm, bring her out of it her trance. She smiled up at her. "You okay?" Jordeen asked.

"Um. Oh, yes, yes, thank you," Osh said.

"Thank you for helping us," Jordeen said.

There was slightest hint of a frown. It was the sadness the follows a recognition of change. It was the giving up of life expectations.

"Do we have enough fuel?" Jordeen asked.

Osh seemed surprised by the question. She was also embarrassed she hadn't done the math. She looked.

"Actually," Osh said. "Wait. This can't be right. The tanks are topped off." "I told you," Em said. "He was here." "That's spooky," Osh said.

"It's the norm around us," Jordeen said. "You'll get used to it." "Is there any food on this shuttle?" Em asked.

Osh nodded. "You're hungry?" "Yes," Em said. "We all are."

"Come on then," Osh said.

♪♪▶

"Are you alright?"

Ten returned her focus to the present. "They're away."

"So, let's do this," Corissa said. She waved the signal back to Emmer.

"This can't be undone," Ten said.

“Yeah,” Corissa said.

They stepped out towards the edge of holographic field. They could see the enemy, but could not be seen.

“I love you,” Ten said.

“If you loved me, you wouldn’t be here,” Corissa said.

Ten bit down on her anger. “We’ll talk about it later,” Ten said.

“I hope so,” Corissa said.

They proceeded out. Weapons came to bear on them. Hacshe-Kyoto instructed his people to lower their weapons. There was unexpected shade and looking up revealed a floating city. At 18 kilometers wide at its base, Ten could only imagine what site it must be coming at it from the clouds down. She had read about such cities, even knew there were supposedly some scattered across Darthomir, but had never seen one in person, much less this close. It was impressive, in a daunting sort of way. One couldn’t help but look at it and expect it to be falling. Hacshe-Kyoto and 8 met them straight on. There were guards behind him. Jist accompanied them. He smiled pleasantly at Corissa. She avoided eye contact with him.

“There are more than the two of you, I presume,” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

“Thousands,” Ten said. “I advise your Troopers to run.”

Jist chuckled. “Run? We don’t...”

“Run!” Ten said, looking right at Hacshe-Kyoto.

Corissa ran. So did Ten. They ran directly past Hacshe-Kyoto. Weapons were coming back up. One Trooper said ‘halt...’ He chose to forget about Ten and Corissa in favor of the thing coming out of the wavering holographic illusion; things coming out of the illusion. What was coming out of the CDC was initially confusing, defied logic. The movement wasn’t quite human. The gait was off. Some staggered. Some ran. Some took to the air. One dived into the sand as if it were a swimming pool. A Trooper died screaming before the firefight started. Hacshe-Kyoto laughed. Jist ran.

“Take out the Zombies,” Hacshe-Kyoto said, turning to his right hand man. “Only the Zombies. Talk to our city liaison, have them drop the ‘curtain.’ Contain this. Go go go!” She took to battle command as if it were second nature.

Hacshe-Kyoto’s guard took up a protective stance around their commander. A strange red mist was rising from the ground, almost imperceptible at first but as it thickened, visibility declined. Several places had mist pouring from the sand so thickly one might have assumed a smoke flare had been ignited. Zombies passing through the thick of the mist were clearly fortified, almost to the point they seem whole, not dead. One zombie grew a new limb. The limb, in a billowy column of mist, grew another body.

It was observed by all that Hacshe didn’t run. Consequently, Troopers weren’t going to run. Most knew this about their commander from first hand experiences. There were some new Troopers who had heard the rumors, but had not witnessed it for themselves. These rookies were fortified in spirit and determined to hold their ground. One of the most endearing things about their commander that had always been true was that he never ran. He would even walk into the heart of a battle in the most stark and fearless manner. Some had wondered if he were insane. Another rumor was that having worked so intimately with the Emperor, he had been granted the secret to immortality. Others said he was cursed by his history and was hoping to die. There was no end to rumors, and though he was considered many things, being a coward was not one. Kyoto herself fed on this energy, emboldened by it. She felt the love radiating from her people, knowing they would die to protect their commander. She felt a disconnect from the world and imagined she could see energetic ‘relationship’ lines connecting all the people in a

spider web like pattern. Some lines were thicker than others. Some were sticky. Whatever energy she was tapping into, she had no doubt that it was a genuine loyalty, not the kind obtained through coercion and fear. Hacshe could do the fear game, had done that, but those times had always been with people who were not on board with his program to a degree they were disruptive to his command. Once his people settled in, realize they're relative safety compared to previous assignments, they fell in line pretty quick. Those that were settled helped newcomers settle. Hacshe-Kyoto shot a zombie. It disintegrated, raining down sand.

"What the hell did you hit with?" the guard next to him asked. Hacshe-Kyoto looked at her blaster.

"It's just a blaster," she said. She handed it to him.

The trooper shot one of the zombies with it. It fell, but continued forward progress through crawling, into a column of red mist, and came out standing.

"That's weird," Hacshe-Kyoto said. "Give me your riffle."

"It's not effective.." he said even while handing it to his commander.

Hacshe-Kyoto shot the downed zombie. It fell into the sand, just more sand, only colored sand, not the color of the surrounding desert. Even the clothes it had been wrapped in became sand.

"That's just weird," Hacshe-Kyoto said. "Oh! I am one with the Force. The Force is with me!"

Hacshe-Kyoto walked forwards, shooting zombies and saying her mantra out loud. Her Troopers protected her, in the process, she saved many of them. She laughed. Blasters from her Troopers slowed the onslaught of creatures, but didn't stop them, didn't kill them. The flying creatures honed in on their targets, some caught fire with sustained blaster hit, but their momentum carried them to their target Troopers, knocking them off their feet. Once HacsheKyoto was knocked off her feet by a zombie that had targeted her, but hadn't fully evaporated back into the mist. Troopers helped their commander up. He was laughing the whole while. Once at the rear of the Troop, Ten and Corissa stopped their retreat. The plan had been fairly straight forwards. Release the horde, run, capture one of the support ships or shuttles in the confusion, and then fly back to the entrance of the CDC, rescue the others, and get away. There was a Lambda Class Shuttle immediately in front of them. There was a Troop Transport to the right of that, too huge and bulky and not what they needed.

"Where is she?" Ten asked. "Where is who?" Corissa asked. 8 whistled a question.

"Wait here," Ten said, and ran back the way she came.

"Ten!" Corissa called. She nearly went after her. "Damn it, Ten!" 8 whimpered. "What?!" she snapped at the Droid.

The Droid whimpered.

"I don't speak Droid," Corissa said.

Corissa walked forwards. The Droid rolled along with her. She stopped.

"Are you following me?" Corissa asked.

The response was easy enough to interpret, but she still said, "I don't understand." Personnel were exiting an Upsilon-class shuttle to join the fight, but the flight crew was probably still aboard. With its heavy armor, it would prove the ideal ship for Corissa's needs. She approached it steadily, walking. No one was paying any attention to her. Except 8.

"You're going to help me with that?" Corissa said. 8 whistled an affirmation.

“I don’t understand. Why are you helping me?” Corissa asked. The explanation was lengthy, as if it were telling a story.

“Stop! What part of I don’t speak Droid are you not getting?” Corissa asked. She sighed. “Come along.”

Corissa proceeded towards the shuttle, wondering if just walking with an 8 would help; a half-baked plan was formulating in her mind. Thanks to Hacshe, she was wearing an Imperial Uniform, minus rank. It reminded her of her career days, so long ago. She had enjoyed her education. She enjoyed fixing things. She thought she saw movement from a collection of containers but walked on, tracing in her mind the strange lightening path through life from her birth to her present predicament, wondering at it all. She no longer cared if she lived or died, a threshold of torture had been met; she was present, observing as if watching from outside herself, a dream. She only cared that her friends and Ten escaped. She would survive to see that. Perhaps the fact that she stood so tall, as if she owned the space, no one questioned her. 8 tried to warn her, but it was too late. The shadow from the crates became people; they were on her before she understood.

“Stealing a shuttle, are we?”

Corissa nearly shot her. She pushed the blaster back into the holster. She smiled and hugged Dayo, nearly cried. She found it humorous that in the heat of a battle she had time for such emotions, time to be wandering through a daydream haze of real time and artificial memories. Even as she looked at Dayo, she wondered if G was with her. She felt as if there was a bubble around her and she were in a strange other world, another dimension just slightly off this one. She pulled back and found Min was with her.

“So, what did you do?” Dayo asked.

A creature flew at them but Dayo shot it. Unlike the Troopers shot, her’s was effective. The creature disintegrated and rain down like sand. Min wipe her mouth and spit.

“I got it in me!” Min cried.

“It won’t hurt you,” Dayo said. Thought about it. “But still, don’t breathe with your mouth open.”

“What did you shoot it with?” Corissa asked.

“Oh, just a regular blaster,” Dayo said, showing her the blaster and the setting. “I am from the clan that created them, so I have more authority of over this line of the dead.” She looked back at the fight. “Probably shouldn’t have released them, though. Easy enough to call into being, but a pain in the ass to get rid of.” “We’re taking that shuttle,” Corissa said. “Oh? Okay,” Dayo said.

“Just like that?” Min said. “You’re just going to walk up and take it?” “Yes,” Corissa said.

“Seriously?” Min asked.

“At the moment, she knows more than I,” Dayo said. She indicated to Corissa that her blaster was ready. They could do this and they would go with her.

“Wait here,” Corissa said. “8, with me.” 8 whistled, uncertain.

“He says it’s not going to work,” Min said.

“You speak Droid?” Corissa asked.

“I have an implant, so I can speak to the vehicles. Astromechs is one of the protocols,” Min said.

“Well then, wait here,” Corissa said. “8, with me. This will work. Be bold.”

Corissa and 8 proceeded to the shuttle and up the ramp. They were greeted by a ship’s guard.

Corissa feigned being out of breath.

“Hacshe wants everyone out there,” Corissa shouted. “Let’s go. Come on. Everyone! That means you, too, pilots!”

The entire flight crew emptied the ship, grabbing weapons that was handed by the ship’s guard as fast as he could unlock them. Corissa accepted one of the riffles and then followed the ship’s guard out back into the battle. She wondered just how many damn zombies there were. Then she witnessed one of the zombies recovering, growing a new leg. Suddenly, it made sense. She also wondered when all of the mist arrived. Was Darthomir helping her own? The Force was all around her all the time. This place, this spot in the desert, was dead, not like that spore space she had found herself when ejected- but it was also full of life, life she hadn’t noticed before. Dayo and Min joined her on the ship’s ramp.

“How did you do that?” Min asked.

“Corissa?” Dayo asked.

Corissa came back to present looked at her.

“You okay?” Dayo asked.

Corissa looked at Dayo as if she didn’t understand the language she was speaking. Then she blinked. “We should go get the others now.”

♪♪▶

A few stragglers were scraping at the door where the refugees were holding out. It opened just enough for a bowcaster’s muzzle to fit through the door, to fire through the door. The zombies became piles of dirt on the floor. They opened the door and proceeded out. Shariva took out several more. Weapons fire happened behind her and she turned to see a maimed zombie scrambling towards Derin. She shot it, it became dust.

Dorith arrived.

“There are several dozen still on the lower levels,” Dorith said. “I will contain them. This level is secure.”

Shariva barked and proceeded to the front door, opening it.

“This level is no longer secure,” Dorith said.

Shariva pulled back the bow part of her weapon, targeted a flying zombie, and unleashed an arrow and line. The arrow, grappling hook, easily penetrated the body, opened, and pulled tight. She disconnected the line cartridge and magnetically attached it to the outer wall. She reeled it in using a wheel on her rifle that was wirelessly connected to the cartridge, bringing the zombie closer to the door. It continued to try to get away, trying to get to the troopers.

“Nice,” Emmer said.

“Unless it turns on us,” Derin said.

“It appears fixated on the Troopers,” Emmer said.

Shariva barked, growled, as she removed a line-cartridge and another grappling hook from her belt and secured it into her weapon. Derin looked to Emmer for a translation.

“Until there are no more troopers,” Emmer said.

“We’re screwed,” Derin said. Shariva barked.

“We’ll be alright,” Emmer translated. “Everything is going as planned.”

A thunderous noise, snapped over the valley. The distant air changed colors. It became clear that the overhead city was projecting a shield, creating a wall from ground to floating city.

They hadn't even noticed the city until the shield came up, and even then they had to come out of the holographic field to see it clearly. It was an inner shield. There was likely multiple shields, going out to the perimeter of the city.

Shariva said something.

"We're screwed," Derin translated.

"Pretty much," Emmer said. "Like fish in a barrel."

"Now what?!" Derin snapped. Shariva barked.

"Stick with me, cover me," Emmer translated. He yelled back to the others to wait for Corissa and Ten. He nodded to Shariva.

Shariva walked boldly out into the mist, shooting zombies. Emmer walked with her, covering her. Derin hesitated, but then committed to following. He shot a Zombie that was coming up from Emmer's blind spot. The sound of his blaster drew Shariva's attention, and she finished it off. It became sand.

"I told you this wasn't going to work," Derin said, mumbling. Shariva kept repeating a sound, like a song.

"What's she saying?" Derin asked.

"A mantra," Emmer said. "We're so screwed," Derin said.

♪♪▶

Windu and Yeno had proceeded away from dune in the opposite direction as Dayo and Min. Windu had been curious as to how they had managed to get this close to this cluster of activity not being noticed, and his only thoughts had been that they were too focused on containing something than worrying about someone coming up from behind. No one, apparently, came into the zone of death. They were just getting close enough to where they would have to make a decision to hold until nightfall, or draw on the Force and walk directly into the makeshift camp, when the firefight started.

"What are they shooting at?" Windu asked.

"Oh, damn it," Yeno said. "Not again."

"Again?" Windu asked. Yeno had taken out his lightsaber. Windu took his out because Yeno had.

"Don't focus on any one target," Yeno said. "They will come from the air, from the periphery, from behind. Sometimes they come from under..."

"Under?" Windu said.

A nearby trooper screamed as he was pulled into the ground, discharging his weapon as he went.

"Oh, that sucks ass," Windu said.

But Yeno was already running. He went directly to where the Trooper had descended into the sands. He arrived and 'blindly' inserted his blade straight into the sand. Sand became liquid glass around the blade. The Trooper's hand was surfaced, searching for purchase. Yeno took it and pulled, using the Force, and brought the man out of the sand. A whirl of Force wind dusted the man off.

"Are you okay!" Yeno asked.

The trooper was stunned, silent, his brain catching up, and probably fortunately so, as he might have kept discharging his weapon. Windu was suddenly beside Yeno. Yeno could only imagine what the Trooper was thinking suddenly confronted by two Jedi. Yeno hit on his helmet.

"Hey! Are you okay in there?" Yeno asked.

"Waycaster?" he asked.

"Um, no," Yeno said.

“But you saved me?” the Trooper asked.

Yeno turned and cut a flying zombie in half, spinning sand around them. He turned back to the trooper.

“We’re going to help you,” Yeno said. “Don’t kill us! Pass the word.” “Okay,” the trooper said.

“We’re going to help them?” Windu asked.

“We need to contain this,” Yeno said. Shields came up.

“That’s not good,” Windu said. “Alright, we’re going to help...”

But again Yeno was already gone. The Trooper that had been rescued followed Yeno into the heart of the battle, suddenly a new fan of the Jedi. The trooper had heard rumors that Waycaster had helped people in battle, healed people from mortal wounds. Even as he fought beside Yeno, he was making promises to Waycaster. Windu thought he heard Yoda laughing.

“I didn’t come back for all of this,” Windu said. “Yes, you did,”

Yoda corrected. “This is a metaphor.”

♪♪▶

The Abalus command center was busy tracking things. There were thousands of flying targets, no bigger than a human. Kayo was there, watching it all. So was Quillen, at least in holographic spirit, utilizing an astromech droid he had confiscated. It appeared that some were trying to get in through underneath vents and hatches, which suggested the creatures were intelligent.

“You have gun turrets on the underneath,” Quillen said. “Open fire on those things.” “Hacshe is requesting perimeter shielding,” an officer said.

“Do that,” Kayo said. “Don’t let anything out of this area. And Target the flying creatures!”

“Send reinforcements,” Quillen said.

“My people aren’t trained for this,” Kayo said.

“No one is trained for this,” Quillen said.

“Order your troopers on my station to go down,” Kayo said.

Quillen looked at her. He was surprised by her pushback, but he also saw reason in it.

“Have you located the power plant with your scanners?”

A computer representation of the scan appeared on the table, moving through the diagram to the target. “It’s underground, 2 kilometers deep, half a kilometer east of the station. An access tunnel connects it to the primary structure.”

“Use a core beam, minimum size. I want that holographic generator off so we can see what we’re up against,” Quillen said.

“That’s not a good idea,” the officer said. “That power plant probably runs the entire CDC...”

“I’m sure it has battery backups. Do it, or I will do it from orbit. Let me be precise; I would fire through your city to hit the target...” Quillen said.

“Do it,” Kayo said.

“It’ll take a moment to reconfigure the beam to the parameters,” the officer said.

♪♪▶

The shuttle was half in and half out of the holographic field, backing up towards the exit. One of the ailerons clipped the wire holding the flying zombie, releasing it. The ramp descended and Corissa led the way down, followed by Dayo. They found the group waiting where they had been told, minus three.

“Come on, let’s go,” Corissa said.

The group followed, went up the ramp while Dayo and Corissa stayed on the ground, watching for zombies or Troopers.

The sky changed colors and there was a thunderous, harmonic noise. Corissa stepped out from the relative safety offered by the shuttle. There was line distortion in the holographic field. Then it the holographic field was off. A column of purple light penetrated the ground, turning sand into a liquid gold sheath. The shield came off. The city underneath was raining weapons fire, mostly targeting flying zombies, but the targeting system frequently missed. Her engineering mind was trying to understand why the targeting system was missing. A clipped wing sent a zombie in a death spiral, only she passed through the mist and came out recovered, flying high again.

A trooper with heavy rifle on ground turret chased a zombie overhead. The larger concentrated energy bolts broke and penetrated the glass floor of a swimming pool. Glass and water fell directly on him, wiping him and the weapon out. Several people, who not heeded the warning to get out of the pool fell. Two were killed by the fall. One woman managed to stagger to her feet, dazed. A zombie took her to the sand and ended her life.

Something else occurred to Corissa; it wasn't a complete thought. It was more an urgency to flee. The column of purple light was extinguished at the source and ending its life in slow motion, like water in a column easing down. The harmonic noise subsided. She turn to hurry into the shuttle. Dayo was there.

"We need to go," Corissa said.

"We're not flying through those shields!" Dayo said, pointing to the shimmering blue curtain.

Corissa looked up, wondering if the ship would fit through the swimming pool. She wondered why she wasted time thinking about that, as it was on the lower level and they would have to blast through a dozen floors. She went around Dayo. Dorith was standing at the entrance.

"Main power has been lost," Dorith said. "You have twelve minutes to reach minimum safe distance."

"Can you stop it?" Corissa asked.

"No. It is a separate, isolated system to prevent my interference," Dorith said. "You're wasting time trying to problem solve this. Fly. Now." Corissa started to move, but Dayo held.

"How many are left?" Dayo asked.

"You can't get them all," Dorith said.

"How many?!"

"Inside the center, 28, on various levels now, you can't get them," Dorith said.

"You can't blow this place up," Dayo said. "Just one Zombie particle passing through Darthomir's Breath could revive one whole creature. One Zombie could theoretically make millions..."

"Darthomirs Breath won't bring you back, now fly," Dayo said.

Corissa took her arm and dragged her into the ship towards the flight deck.

"We got to stop that self destruct device," Dayo said.

"In less than 12 minutes?" Corissa said. "It's not like they put it in the foyer with a simple on off switch."

Corissa assumed the pilot's seat and immediate started calling city frequencies. She connected to an attendant.

"Put me through to your top command personnel, now!"

"I am sorry, but who is..."

"Now, or we're all dead," Corissa snapped.

The girl was young, clearly unsettled. She got up and walked away revealing she was pregnant. An older woman returned.

“I am Kayo. This is my city,” Kayo said introducing herself.

“Yeah, well, you’re a dumbass. Disabling the power plant has initiated a self-destruct sequence. We have less than ten minutes to reach minimum safe distance.

Kayo didn’t pale. She seemed to be doing math. Someone in the background said she, Corissa, was lying.

“What are we talking about? Be precise,” Kayo said.

“I can’t be sure, this an old facility. Imagine worse case. Probably ion blast powerful enough to take out even shielded electronics followed by antimatter release,” Corissa said. “Stop doing the math. The only math you need to know is the number of souls on your city and how fast it’s going to take you to get up to speed. Go. Go now. If you can make it over the mountains to the west, that might help.”

“Okay,” Kayo said. She terminated the call.

“You think she believed you?” Min asked from the co-pilots seat.

“I hope so. Let’s find out people,” Corissa said.

“In this mess?” Min asked.

“Look for a Wookiee. You can’t miss a Wookiee!” Corissa snapped.

♪♪ ▶

There were less Troopers, but the tide had clearly turned. Troopers had rallied around the Jedi, realizing without them, they would likely be dead. Three Jedi came together. They powered down the lightsabers.

“You I know,” Ten said. “Master Yeno. You. I don’t know you.” “How do you not know me?” Windu asked. “Purple lightsaber?”

“I prefer pink,” Ten said.

“Oh,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “Master Windu! You look as youthful as the last day I saw you.”

“Captain Hacshe?” Windu asked.

“Admiral, actually,” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

“No!” Ten yelled.

Her blade ignited too late. The deed was done. Hacshe-Kyoto went to his knees. Jist had shot him point blank in the back with a blaster. Windu and Yeno powered up their lightsabers. Trooper weapons came up on the Jedi.

“I told you he was a traitor!” Jist said. “Take these Jedi posers into custody.”

“Hold up…” Windu was saying.

Jist felt the end of a weapon on the back of his neck. He did not know it was a blaster, but the shadow on the sand was unmistakable. Two other people were pointing at two of his own trusted troopers.

“How do you let a Wookiee sneak up on me?” Jist asked them.

The lead officer, Hacshe’s guard, asked again “Power down your weapons. Please.”

“Please?!” Jist snapped. “Just kill them already.”

Ten powered down her weapon. Hung it on her belt. Yeno and Windu did the same. Shariva barked and Emmer and Derin lowered their weapons. She did not. All the troopers turned to Jist.

Hacshe’s guard said. “You will drop your weapon. Now.”

“You have all the evidence you need right here!” Jist said.

“The evidence is you shot Hacshe in the back,” the officer said. “Everyone saw that.

Drop your weapon or die.”

Jist dropped his weapon.

“Bind him, take him to the shuttle,” the officer said. When Jist was gone he turned back to the Jedi. “We have a dilemma here.”

Ten went to her knees and rolled Hacshe-Kyoto over. One of the guards moved to stop her, but the officer motioned him off.

“Kyoto?” Ten asked.

Hacshe-Kyoto smiled. “I didn’t see that coming,” she said.

“Come back to me,” Ten said.

Hacshe-Kyoto shook her head. “I cannot.”

“Can’t or won’t?!” Ten said.

“He has me,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “I go where he goes.” “Where is he going?” Ten asked.

“I don’t know. I just know I can’t hold us here much longer,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “I feel us slipping backwards. He is clutching me like a drowning man to...”

“Kyoto!” Ten said.

Hacshe-Kyoto focused. He touched his stomach. There was actually blood. The blaster had boiled flesh and blisters had popped on the stomach side. She touched Ten’s face. “Do you know I love you?”

“Come back to me,” Ten said again.

“Let go of me. You gave me life. This was good. Everything is okay,” Hacshe-Kyoto said.

The curtains of blue light fell, allowing the normal light of day to seep in. The overhead lights of the city moved like the stars on a madly turning planet; only Ten’s head held steady.

The city moving away gave Kyoto vertigo, but she didn’t have the strength to hold onto Ten. The shadow lifted and they were in bright, direct sun. The full onslaught of sun and heat was merciless and yet Kyoto thought it felt just fine.

“Sunshine and Ewoks,” Hacshe-Kyoto said. “It’s a good thing we relocated them from that planet. Most of them. We did some good things. Didn’t we?”

“Yes,” Ten said.

Hacshe-Kyoto was gone. A breeze moved sand. Ten pushed her hair from her face. A shadow was there, not as great as a city. A shadow of a ramp and silhouette of a human. Dayo stood on the lowered ramp, addressing everyone. “We have less than eight minutes to get to minimum safe distance,” Dayo said.

“Our dilemma is resolved,” the officer said. “Thank you.”

Yeno touched Ten. “Come on.”

Ten stood, wiped her face and boarded the ship. Troopers were heading for shuttles, expediting their departures. A klaxon on the CDC was pulsing its warning and countdown in an alien language. Shariva was the last one on, steadying Derin who almost fell backwards off the ramp. The door was closing even as they were departing. No one saw Jist being tossed to the sand from the departing troop support. He landed, unharmed, his hands shackled behind his back. He landed face first and came up spitting sand. He managed to stand up. He became aware of the klaxon and understood. He started to run and tripped. He didn’t understand why he tripped and when he looked down, he saw the hand holding his ankle. It pulled, taking him into the sand up to his knees. He screamed and it pulled again.

He was now in up to his hip. He could discern more hands. The sand seemed to be alive, sucking at him, but it was just normal sand which confused his mind. Beneath there seemed like more and more hands were helping. It didn't feel bad, then there was biting and he was pulled under. Ten went straight to Corissa. "My ship."

Corissa surrendered the pilot's seat to Ten. Ten took the seat and reconfigured the console for manual flying. "Seriously?" Min asked.

"She's a better pilot than I," Corissa said. "We don't need finesse! We need speed," Min said.

They were accelerating fast enough they were overtaking Abalus. Shuttles and flying transports were departing the city in droves as fast they could safely evacuate.

"Why aren't the going for altitude?!" Min said, as if they were stupid. "They can go faster with altitude."

"You're in a falling city," Corissa said. "Do you want to fall from half a kilometer or from 8 kilometers?"

They left the city behind, still climbing.

"8?" Ten yelled. "Go still, protect your core. I will wake you."

8 whistled. Pushed an airbag around it and filled it with foam. It powered down inside the cocoon like shell.

Min was looking at the city in a rear facing monitor. "They're not going to make it, are they?"

"They'll be alright," Yeno said.

"They'll survive," Ten corrected. "That doesn't always translate into alright." "Make sure everyone's strapped in," Corissa told Dayo, holding onto Ten's chair. "Why?" Min said.

"We're out of the blast range, right?" "No," Ten said.

"Take us higher!" Min said.

"No. This is the altitude necessary to clear the mountain," Ten said.

"The glide ratio of this shuttle..."

"Sucks," Ten said. "But we will clear the mountain."

"They're following us!" Min yelled. One of the ships leaving Abalus was a Tie Fighter and it was directly behind them. "I told you they wouldn't let us get away. It's gaining..." "Close your eyes."

"What?!"

The sky brightened so quickly that the view went white before it went black due to the screen polarizing. Everyone had a purple smear. Only Ten had closed her eyes. The forward screen was now perma-locked into its darkest polarized option. Corissa drew her blaster to shoot through the screen. The blaster didn't work.

"Your blasters wouldn't shoot through that anyway," Yeno said.

"I got it," Ten said.

"How do you got it?!" Min asked.

There was no mistaking the sensation of falling. "Mom, strap yourself in," Ten said.

Corissa and Yeno went straight to the jump seat.

The blast wave tumbled the ship. Ten managed to bring it back into control and no sooner than she had, the ship hit the ground. The lower delta like wings were torn free. It slid, the nose burying itself into the sand. It came to halt. Only glow strips made it possible to see that everyone was alive.

Ten got out of her seat and headed aft, straight for the door. Windu joined her.

“The Force was with you,” Windu said.

Ten looked at him, as if he were stupid. “Always.”

Ten hit the door with her hand, and the Force activated exploding bolts. The door blew free. They were so well buried they didn’t need a ramp to walk out.

“Stay here, while I secure us transportation,” Ten said. She stepped out of the ship, powering her lightsaber.

“Yeno!” Windu said. “The rest of you stay here.”

The Tie Fighter had crashed nearby. Ten ignored it, proceeding right towards a Rancor trap, which she tripped and destroyed with her lightsaber. The Tie Fighter’s upper hatch blew off. Windu held his lightsaber but it didn’t work. He tossed it to the ground. Yeno tossed his as well. They were ready for hand to hand combat, but relaxed when a girl emerged.

“Amber?” Windu asked.

“Now will you train me?” Amber asked.

The sound of a grenade came from over the rise. Continuous blaster rifle sounds were heard.

“In the shuttle, now,” Windu ordered.

“You can’t tell me what to do, unless I am you’re Padawan,” Amber said.

“Okay, fine, you’re in my Padawan, now in the shuttle before I spank your ass,” Windu said.

Amber complied. Windu and Yeno ran towards the dying sounds of battle. They top the rise to find Ten standing on top of a war droid, her lightsaber having penetrated its chest plate. The war droid was laughing. “She’s coming for you, Master,” Krafty said, laughing.

Turry didn’t own a lightsaber, but he did have Cortosis staff. His was particularly modified to give stunning blasts of pain to Rancors.

“Your name,” Ten said.

Turry laughed. “You haven’t killed me yet.”

“I assure you, you are dead,” Ten said, coming closer.

“Come a little closer,” Turry invited.

“This is not going to be a melee,” Ten assured him. “I am just going to kill you, as promised.”

Turry laughed.

Ten reached out with the Force and ripped the staff from his hand, cutting it in half. It broke with a terrible noise, energy arching through the severed pieces. She stepped forward lifting him into the air, his arms pinned against him. Her lightsaber made a the buttons on his vest shiny.

“Your name,” Ten said.

“Screw you,” Turry said.

“Ten, this is not our way,” Windu said.

“The hell it’s not,” Ten said, focused on holding her capture.

“The days of us being judges and executioners is over,” Yeno said. “This is not the way of your master. This is not the way of the Waycaster.”

“It is not the preferred way of the Waycaster,” Ten agreed. “But it’s within parameters. I made a promise to kill him. I intend to keep my word.”

“Promising to kill people, those are words uttered in anger, it leads to the dark side,”

Windu said. “Trust me on this. It’s not the path you want to take.” “He traffics Rancors!” Ten said.

“We have him custody. Let’s turn him over to the authority,” Yeno said.

“He traffics humans,” Ten said.

“You paid me! That makes you a trafficker as well,” Turry laughed.

“Ten,” Yeno said. “Please. Let me take this from you.”

“Ten,” Corissa said. “He’s my brother.”

Ten powered down her lightsaber. She stood taller, coming out of battle stance. There were tears in her eyes. Turry lowered to the ground, laughing.

“His ship is over here. We need everyone on it, now,” Ten said, and walked towards his ship.

Yeno went back to collect the others. Windu proceeded to follow Ten.

“You’re not taking my ship,” Turry was saying.

A loud retort drew the attention of Ten and the Jedi. Corissa held Ten’s lightsaber, point blank against Turry’s chest. His flesh was illuminated from the inside. All words come on a dying breath, but these were his last words, his last dying breath.

“Told you, little girl,” Turry said.

Turry fell. Corissa powered down the lightsaber and handed it back to Ten.

“You shouldn’t leave this lying about,” Corissa said.

“Yes, mother,” Ten said. “Let’s hurry. I have one last trick, but it’s got a time limit.” By the time everyone was on board Turry’s ship, Ten had it powered up and ready to go. Min took the co-pilot’s seat. It was standing room only for Corissa, Windu, and Yeno. She was taking them straight up.

“Where you taking us?” Min said.

“They’re not going to let us through,” Yeno said.

Ten was ignoring them. She was deliberating on a deeper choice. One was saying, ‘Let me speak for you, and I will give you the self-destruct code for the station.’ The other said, ‘Let me speak for you. No one will die.’ It seemed like an easy choice, but there was more caveats underneath each. This was commitment to something bigger than her. This was more of a commitment than any marriage. This was more of a commitment than raising children. Children could be abandoned. Ten knew that first hand. Marriages end. This would bind her in more inexplicable ways that she could do nothing but fly blind. She relied on her trust in the Force. She let go.

“Open a channel, audio only,” Ten said.

“But,” Min said.

“Do it,” Corissa said.

A station officer came online requesting authorization codes.

“This is Admiral Hacshe,” Ten said. “Open the gate. Also, put Quillen on.”

“Um...”

“Authorization code, Beta One Seven One Two Beta,” Ten said. “Use voice analysis to confirm. Open the gate, or the next code I issue will be the self-destruct code.” The station was now visible. The eye was opening.

“Who is this?” Quillen said.

“Admiral Hacshe, son. You will let this ship pass,” Hacshe said.

“You will land immediately,” Quillen said.

“You will let us pass without incident, and then I will surrender all authorization codes to you,” Hacshe said. “I will give you the station.”

Ten motioned to proceed through the gate. It was a mannerism unlike her. The look about her was

unlike her.

Min looked at her as if she were crazy.

“Do it,” Corissa said.

Min proceeded through the gate. There was little choice other than go around and come back and the longer the delayed, the less likely this window would last. They approached, past the gate, and when they were beyond firing range Ten spoke again, providing the numbers to Quillen even as she put in hyper-drive coordinates.

“Thank you, son,” Hacshe said. “The codes I used just erased everyone’s command codes. Good luck surviving the coup. Truth is, I never really liked you. I kept you around because you got the job done. Specifically, I want you to know, you’re sterile. The seed you were distributing all these years, that was mine. Thank you for the children.”

Ten pulled the lever and they jumped to hyperspace and were away. She let go of Hacshe. One voice was diminished, one was more substantial. She thought she heard Kyoto singing.

“Where are we going?” Corissa asked.

“I am going to Axilla to collect my ship and disappear into the night,” Ten said. She got up to head up. “If you’ll excuse me. I am exhausted. I want to sleep.”

She headed aft.

“Keep this heading,” Corissa told Min. And headed aft.

Corissa joined Ten in Turry’s room. The bunk hardly held them both together, but Corissa got in anyway, holding her the way she had when Ten was smaller. Ten moved in towards the wall to accommodate her. She didn’t cry. Corissa wept for both of them.

Chapter 17

Master Preston G Waycaster arrived in the garden under a glass dome that covered a crater looking out at twisted space-time and a kaleidoscope of stars turned rainbows.

G addressed the open air. "I am here. Fully."

The keeper of the garden emerged. "I know," Lilith said. He was confused by her movement, which was either a slide of an eight legged beast. Her movement and physical sense continued to defy his expectations. "The Merger has occurred. We are one."

"I don't feel any different," G said.

Lilith chuckled. "Of course not. We are not affected by the soul merger. Not directly," Lilith said, coming closer. She glided on air like a serpent on ice. "You promised to let Daphne go," G said.

"I have kept my promise," Lilith said. "She has complete autonomy. She may go wherever she please."

"You promised she could leave," G argued.

"And she can. She may leave by any ship in the hanger," Lilith said.

"You know as well as I, no one can leave here by ship. That's certain..."

"She may leave by the same way you came, husband," Lilith said, walking around him, touching him. She brought her lips close to his ears. "But, she hasn't learned that skill, yet, has she. What a poor teacher you must be. Even if she had learned, would she leave you here with me? Knowing all that she knows? Should I free her from her cell now, or after we arrive?" G was aware of movement. Not hers. Theirs. The moon was moving. His vision was altered, almost tunnel vision.

"Yes, the fall has begun," Lilith said. "Or ascent. It's both the same, really."

She came around to face him again. Her appearance had change in an instant. He saw Ashia, the Goddess, his personal, secret Jedi master and teacher from his youth and adolescence. She was a Diathim. She was human. She was Corissa. She was Shmi. She was... The features of her face were barely discernable due to the brightness of her inner light. Her eyebrows were mere shadows. Her eyes were luminescent green. Her hair was glorious flowing of red curls, with tiny snow-flake type flowers.

"You're Ashia?!" G asked.

Lilith broke through the illusion, her hair a tangle of angry snakes that came calm when facing her love. "No," Lilith said. "She is here, because of a previous soul merger. It takes a trinity to survive the fall. You are the bond that will cement us all together."

"But..."

"She is mine, as you are mine," Lilith said.

"But Daphine?"

"A mere hitchhiker. We carry a number of souls in constellation around us. One for every preferred species," Lilith said. "I have Ashia because I have you."

"It's a trap..." G said.

Even as he was saying this, he was solidified instantly in carbonite. Lilith wrapped herself around his hardened self, her snake like apparition winding round him from hip to heels, squeezing him. Her arms embraced him. Her wings folded around him further, so that only his head was free from the cocoon like grip. She kissed his stone cold face.

"Perspective," she whispered into his ear. She moaned delightfully. "We're really moving now!" Her coils tightened and relaxed. "We arrive together! Together forever. So many stories to plunge ourselves into. New ones. Old ones..." "That was unnecessary, Sister-Wife," Ashia said, "This one is

mine. You can't have him," Lilith said.

"I am not trying to steal him..." Ashia tried.

"Liar! You are always trying to take what is mine," Lilith said. Her head track Ashia as she walked, even turning a full 180. "I won! He has more children with me than you. He loves me more."

"This is not a competition. This is not an end all be all choice. He is free to choose. We are all always free to choose. And he will always choose us, regardless of the masks we wear. That much was proven. He loves everyone, Lil," Ashia said. "Only someone with this kind of love could be with us. Only his love could endure us. Only his kind of love could make this journey possible."

"Yes! We're free. We're finally free. Ages have we been chained here," Lilith said, squeezing G even harder. Her face was unhappy. "No, not this one. I don't want this one." "They all lead to new places," Ashia said.

"I wanted the big one," Lilith said.

"We don't get choose this," Ashia said.

"No! It's not fair," Lilith cried. "He is mine. I won. You're doing this! Out of spite, you're doing this."

"You are no more in control of what happens here than I," Ashia told her. "Our unconscious is a greater authority; it know more, it chooses our path. Our souls are greater authority; it knows more than even our unconscious. It chooses for us. The one brought forth by our merger; he knows even more, and he will take us all to glory."

"No! I worked so hard..." Lilith said.

"We will still be together," Ashia tried to comfort her. "This is just change."

There was nothing she could do but hold on. The fall was inevitable. They were beyond a point of return. Even if she and G tried to soul travel out, to bilocate out, they would not escape. This was done.

"Change," Ashia said. "Inevitable. We've talked about this, Sister wife. If the new place become unbearable, you can always return. We left enough roots here."

"Start over from scratch?! Forget everything I have learned? Give up all the souls I have collected?" Lilith asked. "No! Never!"

No matter which way one looked, there was the appearance of looking into a tunnel.

"How many souls did we begat?" Lilith asked.

"I lost count," Ashia said. "Change is good."

"Change is good. Not all change is good," Lilith said. "Jedi Maxim?"

"A Waycaster maxim," Ashia said. "I love you sister-wife. See you in the next life." She closed her eyes and faded away.

"No! I don't want to sleep!" Lilith said. "I want to see the birth! No..."

Light seemed to be diminishing. Lilith clung to Preston G Waycaster, staring at him, even as she kissed him. At some point, all seemed gone. There was a warm sea of darkness, warm like nothing Lilith had ever experienced. She resisted sleep, telling herself her eyes were open. Her eyes were open, was the mantra. Emergence was so brilliant that she still couldn't see, but she knew it like bird rising from the darkest cloud directly into sunlight; as if struck directly by lightning. Emergence and rising, as if in water. Bubbles rising in water. She found herself moving through an endless series of frames, looking at the back of herself. Even as she turned, she was always observing the back of herself. Endless, chasing reflections, cycling.

"You wanted to see." It was an echo.

"G?" Lilith asked. "It doesn't make sense."

“The world is pixilated.” She was not certain it was G’s voice. “Each frame of existence a mere membrane of what was and what will be. We live in a continuity of interrupted frames and it is our ability to dream that allows us the illusion of singularity. This multiplicity is you.”

“G?” Lilith asked.

There was no response.

“I am alone again,” Lilith said.

“Never again. There is love. Sleep, mother. Dream. I got you. I got all of you. Always.”

♪♪ ▶

The parents of Pari identified the body that was on life support. As the parents on the birth certificate, they were brought in to determine what to do next. They were struggling. They were bothered by the suicide. They didn’t believe she would actually do it. They pressed for proof, wanting to believe someone did this to her. Perhaps an enemy she had made while living on the streets. Both parents were shocked to learn that she wasn’t biologically theirs. The father was less shocked, as he had suspected but had said nothing because his relationship was first with the wife, and second with the child. He didn’t care if it was his or not, it was a just a child. But to learn it was neither his nor hers, that didn’t make any sense. They hadn’t ever had fertility treatment, and though the medical officer wanted to pursue a potential crime, they weren’t interested. This was their daughter. They had raised her.

But it made so much sense to them, too. Was her behavior because she wasn’t biologically related? Did this explain her inability to relate or to establish relationships in general?

The video footage was unquestionable. Pari walked off a bridge. She hit a pillar on the way down to the water. A pedestrian had tried to stop her.

“If you’re sure the brain damage is irreversible, then terminate,” the father said. “She would not want this.”

“The thing is,” the medical droid said. “We can’t turn off the life supports. She is pregnant. The fetus was not injured during the fall. We can sustain the body until it’s birth.” Pari’s parents didn’t know they could be shocked further. Pari had never talked about relationships. She never had a male friend. In fact, she had never had a friend, at least not one that came to their house and visited.

“The state is willing to place the fetus in an artificial womb and adopt it out, however, the body would be a better option. We can simulate movement and normal sound environments so that the fetus will developed as naturally as it would if your daughter was still alive. A sitter Droid will stay here and talk, read if you like. Ideally, the two of you participating would be helpful. You are, legally, the grandparents, though given what we know, the state won’t obligate you.”

“We need to talk...” the mother said.

“No. We just do this,” the father said. “It’s what we do.”

“Proceed as if nothing matters? Nothing’s happened or changed?”

“Yes,” the father said.

“I will leave you two here,” the medic droid said.

Mom climbed up in the bed with her daughter, touching the stomach. The father touched his wife’s hair, standing behind her. They didn’t speak. There was nothing more to say. They would raise a grandchild.

Authors note.

Have you ever been to Chinoike Jigoku, the nine pools or gates? This was part of a dream that inspired the completion of this trilogy. When you become lucid in your dreams, you will be lucid in life. I don't know how to communicate the complexity of my thoughts and feelings beyond that. As I write, I see things I write unfold on a screen. They occur, I witness. I see no apparent direct influence over what occurs. I have had emails complaining of Waycaster's abilities, making him too God-like. It wasn't me. He simply was. What's funny is that "Star Wars: the Last Jedi" brings bilocation as a Force power to the screen, after Waycaster! One soul, living on a Kibbutz in Israel gave me one of the nicest correspondence ever, sharing his faith with me. He explained how my treatise of the Force paralleled his spiritual beliefs and imagined I was a member in his paradigm. We do share a world, don't we?! Again, it is difficult for me to say what I want to say. Partly because in today's environment any criticism is met with disparaging labels of being a hater at best. When I say I hated 'The Last Jedi' so much that I nearly walked out, and that I fear seeing another Star Wars movie, you might actually think I hate Star Wars. I had an active thought not to complete this trilogy, the after taste was so bad. It is my love that has me critical of what was given us. But more than that, there are things in the movie that more than paralleled my stories. This added some unwanted flavors. Waycaster's ability to bilocate is just one thing. In one of my criticisms of "Star Wars: the Force Awakens," I wrote- don't give us something we have to throw X-wings at. Funny, Leia says that in the movie. My lament was, just duplicating 'Star Wars: a New Hope' doesn't make a Star Wars movie. Vader in that movie gives us something to be afraid of in his line: "Don't be too proud of this technological terror you've constructed. The ability to destroy a planet is insignificant next to the power of the Force." Lead with that! That's scary! The parallels go on. My character Priya, a Sith turned Jedi, is exposed to the vacuum of space and survives using the Force, and gets onto an enemy ship. Leia does this, too. After me! I did write some folks. I was told to stop whining and move on with life. Ah, the circle is now complete. I, too, am a Skywalker!

Now, trust me when I say, I am not accusing anyone. I did. That's not going to go anywhere. Disney and lawyers, check and mate. Also, I am open to there being parallel developments of story lines. I am fan of Jungian philosophy and the collective unconsciousness. That could happen. If someone did; HEY! I would have liked to have been consulted on the script. We would have had a much different movie. The thing is, who am I? Disney has money, writers, and there are millions of Star Wars fan; so there are no famous, good writers that want to do a Star Wars movie? Bring in James Cameron! I know he is a fan! Hell, Terminator exists because of his backwards engineering Star Wars! How successful are his movies? Or, at least, when writing a trilogy, have a plan? Have a sophisticated bad guy that isn't so stereotypical you have to kill him right off because there is nowhere else to take him? The best bad guy ever was Darth Maul, and he should have been center piece of three prequels! No one matched his screen presence.

How does one turn this around? I don't know. I love the Ray and Finn. Less love of Poe, especially after his tantrum. (Seriously, can an actor say this is not a good thing, my guy wouldn't do this?) Never been a fan of Kylo, though I will give him this, he is whiny little Skywalker. And by God, a superior, knowledgeable Admiral, especially if the context is correct and she was the last available, superior leadership within the resistant she isn't going to self-sacrifice! She would have order Poe to do it. And, given the ballistic capabilities of ramming star ships, she wouldn't have waited till the entire fleet was out of fuel and everyone was being shot out of the sky; from the very beginning, the only answer was a kamikaze run, and that should have been the foregone conclusion, not an afterthought. Also, the enemy should know this! There would be a defense. We, nerds, tech fans, science fans, fantasy fans, we are not

dumb folks. We like sophisticated stories, smart scripts. We love intelligent, strong women. Maybe no one can write without bringing in some ideology; our paradigms always leak through, but making Chewbacca feel bad for being a meat eater, well, that's a bit too much. I am okay with sentient penguins and not eating sentient beings in general. But no one had any problem with Luke spearing a dolphin size whale of a fish that could have fed him, Rey, and Chewbacca for weeks! And by the way, Mark Hamill had legitimate complaints about the direction of the script and his character, which he made the mistake of sharing. He was publically shut down. Maybe it's not cool that he shared his thoughts. It's definitely not cool that he was socially shut down for it. One against many, that's mob rule, and not cool. Why can't we celebrate his opinions as much as anyone else's? From the stand point of legitimacy, doesn't he get a voice? Sure, it's not his 'character;' he doesn't own 'Luke,' he just plays him. But he did have a point; the writing for his character was abysmal. If you intend to write him off, just kill him. You would think after all these years he would not be whining about his plight. He is one with the Force! Yoda laughing. I am actually more okay with that, but he seemed a bit ADHD compared to anything seen previously.

And now, back here, spotlight on the Waycasters. My brain wouldn't let me leave this story uncompleted. I say I wrote this, but it was more a thing in my head that I simply narrated. The characters gave me this. It is so dark in places. I don't think I captured just how dark it gets. Star Wars doesn't really ever get as dark as it could be, should be. When I hear Tarantino is making a Star Trek movie and promising it will be R rated, I am thinking- that's not Roddenberry's vision, but he could do a Star Wars and make it R and that would be consistent with WARS! Lucas has hints of it, Leia in a slave costume, Droids being tortured, which was ludicrous, but that was the only thing that kept it a 'family' show. Still, if you think of it in terms of metaphors- that's not a safe metaphor. If you're familiar with Jung and Campbell, there is an archetypal structure in the original Trilogy that is unshakeable. That, if you accept further, is in all of us. The Force is with you! I find that structure here in mine, with the redemption of the Mother Figure. Father's aren't the only ones needing saving. Maybe we all need saving, because we're all parents and children and good guys and bad guys- all the time. And there is a pervasive light and a continuity of stories and character that flow with us in constellations. This is my experience. I share it unapologetically. I write because I write. I write because I love.

Should this very small voice, from an insignificant person among billions of persons, on a small, tiny planet, in an even smaller room, so small it has no closets, barely room to contain the shadows and ghosts spinning around the chair facing the too large of a monitor, orbiting a common star, in a universe where the stars outnumber the grains of sands on all the beaches of the tiny planet on which he temporarily resides, spinning around a galaxy's primary black hole that is way too loud for this author's sensitive hearing touch you in even the smallest of ways- May the Force be with you, Always. Love John Erik Ege.