



Destinies Entwined: Roots of Evil: Unmasked Soul

Prologue

A large galaxy far, far away, spins quietly in the middle of the vastness of space. Space. The endless void, where mysteries lie in wait around every corner. Whether those mysteries be comets, or gas clouds, or uncharted civilizations, even a galaxy as well mapped as the New Republic held its fair share of enigmas and shameful secrets. Long ignored and often reviled, the planet of Nephron spun on its axis just outside of the Corporate sector. Travelers through space failed to even recognize the rock as having once been a thriving planet. After a millennium of its original inhabitants raping the landscape clean of all its natural elements, the planet turned sour, acrid, desolate. No tree, no blade of grass, no creature except for the soulless roaches that plague every corner of the universe, lived on the planet any longer. Even the last remnants of scum and villainy left the planet after nothing remained to be looted. The constant churn of stormy skies blissfully blanketed the ravaged, horrifically naked and spoiled landscape from any passing pilot's eyes; thereby ridding him of any shame he might feel towards what mankind did to the once prosperous planet. The rain that fell in a constant drizzle burned the land, scorched it, leaving pools of reeking, stagnant liquid that's eventually absorbed into the lifeless soil. Each acid raindrop continued the original Nephronian's mission to further kill the land until there was nothing worthwhile left on the planet surface.

In effect, Nephron no longer mattered. The capital of Nemorearea once thrived as a metropolis of industry, free thinkers, and artisans. Travel down the barren, dust and debris covered streets and one can still see traces of the great civilization. Once vibrant murals and mosaics covered the city walls, their colors now stripped bare of the brilliance as they existed in a constant gray world. Large advertising plaques wept in jagged tears over the long forgotten product photos, scarred by the acid rain. The city, filled with architecturally fascinating, crumbling buildings surrounded the bottom of a great dormant volcano, Trilitona. Looming on the ledge of the cold crater stood the Nephronian capital building of Nemorasis. Built in complete defiance to nature, the massive structure loomed over the empty streets below. Screeching, freezing wind roared down Trilitona shaking the forgotten houses and shops with its unrelenting fury.

The government of Nephron once commanded attention by working in the massive edifice of Nemorasis. They stripped the planet of every natural resource all in the name of commerce. They vowed that man would conquer nature. And they succeeded with horrific consequences. From the city below, it appeared that the volcano must still be active, as large plumes of smoke spilled forth from its crater. The smoke came from Nemorasis, as the polluting smoke still ran the electricity in the aging building.

A single, solitary line of natural smoke issued out of the many chimneys that dotted the rooftops of the menacing gray structure. Climbing up the twenty stories, in the farthest northwest corridor a single window faintly glowed with light. In the window, inside the vaulted, dusty room, a solitary figure sat in a large throne chair before a flickering fire. The figure rasped with phlegmy breath. A crooked, wrinkled finger tapped its yellowed fingernail on the wooden armrest as the figure pointed the other hand towards a holonet, changing channels through the bent, twisted will of the Force. Images roared past a pair of red eyes, captured in a pile of sickly, white, wrinkled skin. The figure sneered as the same cheerful images of the former Chief of State's only daughter's wedding plastered the holonet waves. Gossip and entertainment meant nothing to the figure. The entire event was dismissed and completely

ignored. Yet one image from the wedding caused the figure to gasp. Suddenly, the red eyes held on a girl who stood to the right of the bride. The figure leaned forward and paused the image. Groaning, the figure lurched out of the chair and hovered close to the image.

“No. It can’t be,” the figure seethed. Yet pictures do not lie. The figure stared at the vibrant, happy, dark haired girl standing beside the bride in a light pink bridesmaid dress. Lips sneered together as the full weight of betrayal flooded the figure. Then the figure balked at the name of the groom, Marxx Racees, flashed across the screen. Suddenly unanswered questions from the last several months snapped into focus. Hate and anger swelled in the figure’s chest.

Ripping red eyes off of the dark haired girl, they found a new home on the girl standing in the shadows. The other girl’s titian hair glittered in the sunlight. What caught the figure’s attention was the fact that her stormy gray eyes flared in complete opposition to her calm expression. The red-haired girl’s eyes dripped with hatred, the very language that the figure spoke fluently. A wicked smile crested thin, bloodless lips and an inhuman cackle erupted from a paper thin throat.

From outside the room, a tall, gaunt, skeleton of a man stared in at the figure. His devotion to the figure, bound by a blood oath, made it impossible to ever leave. The cackle called to him, soothed his aching, soulless heart. A smile that reached his eyes spread across his lips. For he knew that in that laugh adventure lay ahead. And he believed that their time of isolation on this hateful planet would soon be over.

Chapter 1

Tanned, flushed, and euphorically happy, the newlyweds, Marxx and Jaina returned to Naboo and met up with their combined families at Chariss and Rowlon’s home. They blushed as their parents and siblings bombarded them with questions about their honeymoon. Sheepishly, they admitted to not spending much time traveling around Mon Calamari, instead opting to stay in at their spacious bungalow and cavorting on their exclusive beach for the two week’s time. Marxx and Jaina smiled remembering how clothing became optional for them throughout their stay; an option they rarely chose. Even when the cleaning droids showed up to clean the bungalow and restock their refrigerator, the newlyweds wouldn’t bother to dress in much beyond sarongs.

They spent their days outside sunning and playing in the brilliant turquoise waters on Mon Calamari. For Marxx vacationing on a beach planet was fascinating and a truly marvelous adventure. Having grown up on a planet devoid of waterholes and lakes, his swimming skills were lacking. He learned to swim on Yavin 4, yet while on Mon Calamari, with the helpful (and often times playfully groping) hands and advice of his wife, did he finally learn to master and enjoy the skill. He found being immersed in warm water under the bright natural sun to be an invigorating and enticing experience. Of course with Jaina floating at his side to smother him with kisses as they treaded water, he found no reason whatsoever to not enjoy the recreational sport.

Being a modest girl, Jaina at first felt somewhat naughty and wild running free on their beach. Seeing that her husband showed no shame in his natural state, Jaina quickly learned not to even think about being without clothing. She found it liberating to be able to race into the water and not have to worry about removing shoes or extraneous layers. She discovered that by not hiding anything in regards to her body from her husband that they felt no reason whatsoever to hide what insecurities lurked in their

souls. When they swam together in the warm waters, Jaina let her mind rid itself of all worldly worries and she let the gentle lapping waves wash her spirit clean. Every time she stared at the gloriously clean, turquoise water, it reminded her of Marxx's eyes. With Marxx at her side in the bobbing sea, together they felt reborn.

Never in their lives did they feel so alive, and utterly carefree as they did on their beach. The waves would gently guide them out into the clear waters where they would snorkel, examining exotic underwater wildlife. In the evenings they would cuddle under a warm blanket on the beach, staring at the stars, discussing the endless possibilities for their future as a small fire burned beside them, warming them with its gentle, crackling heat.

When the evening's chill finally took hold and the young lovers retreated to their cozy bungalow where they would find their large jet tub beckoning them for long luxurious bubble baths. Then two large fireplaces roared with constant heat to dry their wet bodies. By the end of their two weeks, there was nothing that each did not know about the other. Bound together in body and spirit Marxx and Jaina felt that they had become one person, with one purpose, and one heart that beat in a unified rhythm.

Leia grinned at her daughter and patted her husband's arm as his face fell, realizing the full implications of how his daughter spent her time on her honeymoon. Uncomfortable, he stood up and stalked out of the living room at the Racees home into their flower courtyard. Marxx and Jaina shared a knowing glance as Jaina let go of her husband's arm and followed her father outside.

Han sensed his daughter's presence as his eyes swept, unseeing over the green, tree filled, Nubian valley. He turned his head and Jaina stared up at him, a sweet, small smile rested on her face. Han noticed her hair in the sunlight. Loose and long, her brown hair had bleached into a golden honey from her days at the beach. Her usually pale skin shimmered with the vitality of a glowing tan, her white teeth shined brightly. Han barely recognized his Jaina.

"So you had a good time," Han said, clearing a lump in his throat.

"Yes, we had a marvelous time. Although I wish we were still there, we were anxious to get back. We still have so much to do in Theed," Jaina responded. Taking her father's large, calloused hand in hers, Jaina leaned against his arm and stared out across the valley. Although she loved Mon Calamari, her heart swelled at the sight of the valley. Jaina now considered Naboo her home.

Han clasped Jaina's hand tightly as he squinted up into the sun, hoping it would burn away his rising tears. "I am happy for you, honey. You know that, right?"

"I know," Jaina said, grinning as her heart leapt from his words.

Han flashed her one of his famous, charming smiles. "You know, I think if you walked past me on the street somewhere I wouldn't recognize you. Your hair, your tan, and that dress." Jaina glanced down at her favorite two piece red dress confused. "You know, when you were growing up, I always thought that someone, somewhere, was playing a joke on me. I didn't know how it was that out of my three children my daughter was the one who'd want to spend hours fiddling with engines with me. I look at you now... and I don't see a single trace of that little girl anymore. She's changed...for the better I may add," Han grabbed her hand tighter, his heart filled his eyes with love. He placed his right hand on her hair and gently stroked Jaina's face. "You have turned into the most amazing young woman... so much like your mother. I'd really begun to worry that you'd end up wasting your life like your old man

as a pilot. Instead you've become a beacon of light for this place. Do you know the people on this planet adore you? Everywhere your mother and I go here on Naboo, all anyone can talk about is you and Marxx. They truly appreciate all the hard work you've put into restoring the capital. And they love the both of you. It's as if you'd grown up here... I'm so proud of you."

Jaina's chin quivered as she felt tears rise in her eyes. She threw her arms around her father's waist and hugged him tightly. Han returned her embrace with equal fierceness. "I just feel like my children are all getting ready to leave me. Even Jacen's changed. Since he met Raven, he has become a man. I guess I still have Anakin, but even he's on his way to becoming an adult. I would have never thought when I was young that I would have ever seriously enjoyed being married and being a father. It's been the most rewarding and amazing part of my life. You three have given me so much joy over the years.... I guess I just feel like an era is ending. If I seem distant, or grouchy... I guess it's just because I don't want that era to end."

Smiling into her father's soft cotton vest, Jaina said, "We'll always be there for you, Dad. Just because I'm married, doesn't mean I'll stop loving or needing you. In fact, I may end up needing you more. Where else am I going to get advice when I have my own children?"

Han slightly frowned at that thought. Then he realized that Jaina was right. Somewhere down the road, there would be grandchildren. More giggling, happy children would be filling his home with laughter. And grandchildren carried the extra bonus that when he got tired, they would eventually leave with their parents, leaving he and Leia alone in silence.

"Don't you worry, I'll be there for you sweetheart. Always."

Marxx found Jacen sitting up in Paulo's workshop flopped in a large comfy chair, sporting a deep frown. Marxx felt a lopsided grin form on his face as he rolled up beside his best friend on his grandfather's swivel chair.

"What's up?" Marxx asked.

Jacen stared gloomily at his brother. Marxx appeared to shine with his deep tan. Seeing his friend look so happy just depressed him all the more. "How long was your honeymoon? Two months right?"

"Sorry pal, two weeks," Marxx said, knowing full well what was going on in his friend's head.

"I don't know how you did it, buddy. I mean, you were gone from Jaina a full eighteen months. I've only got to wait six and yet, I feel like I'll never make it," Jacen replied. He swirled his foot absently in circles on the floor.

Jacen flashed back to the day after Marxx and Jaina's wedding when Raven flew out of his life. *Raven's long dark brown hair whipped around her head as she stood on the landing platform next to **The Fiery Phoenix**. Jacen sensed a strengthened resolve emanating from her spirit as her cape swirled around her body.*

"The sooner I get on this ship, the sooner I'll be back to you. Master Skywalker and Master Durrion said that after six months in near isolation that I could be returned to my family and friends...and to

you. Master Durrion will still be overwatching me and my training afterwards. Or they may send me to Yavin to continue my training,” Raven said, her warm hand caressed Jacen’s strong cheek. “I’ll miss you everyday. Master Durrion did say he would allow me to send and receive holonotes. So we won’t be completely cut off from each other.”

“No holoimager messages though,” Jacen said glumly.

“No. No holoimager messages. Apparently wherever we are going the signal won’t be strong enough for long transmission,” Raven replied with equal sadness.

“It’s not fair! Young people in love should not be ripped apart like this,” Jacen said, shoving his hands in his pockets, he tore his brown eyes off of Raven’s beautiful face to hide his tears. In a small voice he added, “There should be some Nubian law that forbids it.”

Raven smiled and cupped Jacen’s face. Her pale blue eyes hugged Jacen’s brandy browns, “Well maybe you need to discuss that with your sister and my brother when they return from their Honeymoon. They are helping to draft a new Constitution for Naboo, right?”

Offering a tiny smile, Jacen threw his arms tightly around Raven. Then he brushed aside her messy hair and they kissed, tightening their hold, melting into one another, hoping that somehow, they could make their final moments together extend into eternity.

Kyp exited the ramp to pick up their last box of cargo for the trip. His dark green eyes lingered on the young couple and he fled back up into the ship, giving them a final moment together.

Jacen released from their kiss and stared at Marxx’s twin. Raven’s light blue eyes, bloodshot red, held enough love in them to light the darkest voids of space.

“I miss you already,” Jacen said.

“Me too. I love you, Jacen Solo,” Raven said as she shoved more hair from her teary eyes.

“I love you,” Jacen said, tears falling. Knowing she had to leave, he added, “May the Force be with you.”

Raven replied with another kiss. Each burned the feeling of their lips into their memories. She then ripped herself from him and raced aboard Kyp’s ship, not looking back as she began to bawl.

Kyp poked his head out of the ramp and gave a small goodbye wave to Jacen before the ramp shut. As Jacen watched the golden ship lift up off of the platform, he felt as though a light had gone out in his life.

“You know it’s for the best. She’d be thrown in the stockade if she wasn’t off Jedi training,” Marxx said, trying to comfort Jaina’s twin.

“I know,” Jacen said as he stared at the floor. He glanced back up at Marxx, his eyes dark from depression, “I just really miss her. It’s like someone ripped my heart out and left me wandering alone trying to figure out how to live.”

Throwing a hand in front of his face to smother a grin, Marxx replied, “She loves you. I can guarantee this is as hard for her as it is for you. I know, I felt her misery the day she left here.”

Jacen’s heart leapt. “Thanks.”

“You know what else?” Marxx asked, leaning his elbows on his knees. Jacen shrugged. “I’m sure glad that my sister has you. I couldn’t think of anyone who I’d rather have as a possible, double brother-in-law some day.” Marxx hooted with laughter at the dumfounded expression that marred Jacen’s face. “Who’d have thought my leaving you on that ship would’ve been the best thing to happen to you, eh?”

A small grin formed on Jacen’s face. “Yeah, I guess I needed that butt kicking from Raven to set my life straight.”

Marxx laughed as Jacen began to chuckle, his dark mood lifting. Jacen let out a breath then raised an eyebrow at his friend, “Spare me the explicit details, but how was the honeymoon?”

Beaming Marxx continued to laugh, “Yeah, I don’t think I need to ever know the exact details of what you and Raven do together either.” Marxx shuddered his shoulders. “Let’s just say my honeymoon was perfect. Jaina and I enjoyed our time on Mon Cal, but we’re happy to be back.”

Jacen sensed a stab of jealousy rise inside and then buried it as he felt genuinely happy for his twin and her husband. “I guess it’ll be a while before I get to feel that kind of happiness.”

“It’ll happen, pal. Mark my words. Jaina and I have plans to keep you plenty busy in Theed. We’ve been back what, an hour? Already it appears there’ve been labor disputes and problems brewing all over at the Reconstruction Project, just waiting for our chief negotiator to get in there and resolve things,” Marxx said grinning.

Jacen stared at his friend. Then he nodded as the idea sunk in. “That would be good. I can definitely use a distraction. Thanks, Marxx.”

Marxx reached over and punched him in the shoulder, “No problem, bro.”

Chapter 2

Two month’s into her sentence, Raven’s booted feet pounded through the sticky muck as she ran deeper and deeper into the Dagobah swamp. Humidity clung to her skin and hair plastering her mud-splattered flightsuit to her body. The overall effect made her miserable. She cleared her mind as her light feet effortlessly sailed over fallen logs, and plodded along on her running course. The only thing she truly enjoyed about her daily runs was the fact that she got to do them alone. Her ‘Master’ annoyed her to no end. Raven inwardly fumed, *He keeps using me as an errand girl. Go get some wood, Raven, dig up some roots for our stew Raven... We haven’t had a single discussion on how to properly use the Force... Kyp hasn’t taught me anything about lightsaber skills, mind control, nothing!* She thundered on through the muck frustration building as her thoughts crashed about in her head, *And he wears that arrogant smirk on his face... like...like a favorite piece of clothing. Urrrggghhhhhh!!! I just want to slap it right off!*

While focusing on the surrounding energies of the vast amounts of wildlife on the swampy planet, to help her to enhance her energy, Raven suddenly remembered landing on the planet a month and a half ago. *She stared in horror out the cockpit window as Kyp glided The Fiery Phoenix down through the soupy atmosphere. When they landed, Raven tentatively withdrew to the back exit door.*

“You’ve got to be joking,” she said, as her boots clanked down the metal ramp of the ship. Her eyes drifted over the disgustingly swampy environment. The calls of primordial birds greeted her ears.

Leaning his raised right arm against the hatch opening, Kyp grinned at his apprentice with amusement. He said, “Master Skywalker learned to become a Jedi Knight here from Jedi Master Yoda.” He sauntered down the ramp and stood beside the glowering girl. “I would have thought you would be honored to be trained here.”

Raven peaked an eyebrow and issued a sigh of disgust. She glanced at Kyp. He’d removed his Jedi robe and had stripped down to his tank shirt, apparently already aware of the drenching humidity that permeated the planet’s atmosphere. Raven’s eyes briefly lingered on his powerful chest, deciding that she preferred Jacen’s lean build as opposed to Kyp’s inflated, neck-lacking, imitation of a Gamorrean pig. She averted her gaze towards the swampy jungle.

“So are we going to sleep on The Phoenix or what?” Raven asked, shucking her robe as the sticky air began to make her uncomfortable.

Kyp grinned and ran his fingers through his jet black, spiky hair, “Or what.” Raven stared at him questioningly. “While you were off choosing flower arrangements and dress colors, I was here building our quarters. Come on, follow me.” Tall and powerfully built, the Jedi Master led the way through the swampy jungle expertly ducking branches. “You’ll find the only inhabitants on this planet are organic. There are no cities, no citizens, no people, and no technological amenities of any kind.” Raven groaned, causing Kyp to laugh. “It’s a great place to become completely in tuned with the Force as a result.”

Raven let out a yelp and clenched her hands together as one of the hanging vines off of the many trees suddenly flickered towards her and grew snarling teeth. Kyp chuckled as he yanked Raven past the dangling snake. “Don’t worry, you’ll get used to them. I don’t think they’re poisonous.”

“What do you mean you don’t think they’re poisonous?” Raven asked in a higher than usual voice. She suddenly felt her confidence waning.

Kyp turned around and flashed her a large grin, “Well they are tasty.”

Raven’s light eyes widened, groaned, and threw a hand over her mouth in disgust as she stepped away from him, right into a large prickly branch. “You’re kidding, right?”

Kyp looked back as her hair became tangled in the branch. He said, “You, uh, might want to think of cutting your hair to avoid that from happening a thousand times a day.”

Reaching up behind her head, Raven frantically untangled her hair from the branch. Her heart sank as tears welled in her eyes. She quickly found herself loathing this planet. Kyp’s eyes danced with merriment over her obvious distress as a less than charming smirk caressed his lips. Raven started to think that maybe a prison cell would have been a kinder option than this hellish sentence. She knitted

her eyebrows together and snapped at Kyp, "Do you have any idea how long it took me to grow my hair out? Do you? My grandmother used to force me to keep it butchered short. When I finally got my mask I let it grow. It took me six years to get it this length. Last thing I'm going to do is cut it off!"

Kyp laughed heartily at Raven's outrage. She scrunched up her face and pounded him in the arm, "Stop that!" Kyp's laughter roared louder as he doubled over. From behind them a small flock of birds flew off frightened by Kyp's outburst. Raven rolled her eyes and blasted past him down the path.

Kyp sobered up and chased after the snarling girl. He said, "I'm so sorry, Admiral." His last word reeked with sarcasm. "It was merely a suggestion."

Raven stopped dead in her tracks as the path opened to reveal a huge rounded mud hut. Organic looking in structure, the hut had no glass windows, no machinery attached to it in any way shape or form. She realized with horror that there was nothing attached to the structure to alleviate the humidity or to cool it down. Kyp stood at her side and beamed with pride at his creation. He then realized his apprentice appeared to be waging a battle with tears.

He stared at her, raised an eyebrow, crossed his arms and said, "You're not going to do the girly thing and cry are you?" Raven puckered her lips together as anger brewed under her surface. Kyp felt her rising ire. "And that, my young apprentice is why you are here. We're going to get that anger under control. I'm going to mould you into the perfect Jedi, just you wait and see." Raven shut her eyes and swallowed her growing rage, replacing it with shame. Her cheeks turned bright red. She forced her eyes towards Kyp as he continued, "I didn't bring you here as some sort of maniacal punishment. Remember I have to endure being here for six months alone with you as well. If we spend the entire time at each other's throats, this will be the longest six months of our lives. Now I recommend that you suck it up, grow up, and accept how things are." Kyp tilted his head in a determined manner.

Raven flashed him the sweetest of smiles and said, "Whatever you say, Master."

Kyp watched his apprentice as she stepped into their new abode and he shook his head. He mumbled, "This is going to feel like eternity"

Finishing her course, Raven's feet landed at the edge of a watering hole located a mile from their abode. Her sides heaved in and out from exertion as she wrinkled her nose at the unpleasant smell of her own perspiration. She unzipped the front of her flightsuit and let it fall around her waist, revealing her white tank top. She wiped a stream of sweat out of her eyes. Then Raven yanked a rag out of her back pocket and collapsed to her knees at the water's edge, immersing the rag into the pool. She wiped herself off then rested it on the back of her neck to try and cool herself down. Her mind lingered to Jacen and she wondered how he was doing on Naboo since it had been three days since their last communications. Although they usually share communications daily, sometimes atmospheric conditions on Dagobah prevented every communication to come through properly. Course the bonus was that when the storms would lift, she'd usually have several messages waiting to be listened to at once. She wondered if a message from him would be waiting for her today on *The Fiery Phoenix*. She heard a thrashing through the brush and recognized her Master's heavy footfalls.

"So much for my alone time," she thought as she stood up. Kyp appeared out on the path with an armload of wood. His eyes rested on Raven's lean form. In just two weeks, Raven had already managed to put on extra weight as her muscles became denser and more defined from physical training. Kyp liked the way her muscled arms had developed. His eyes lingered to her head. True to her stubborn

word, she refused to cut her hair. Instead it rested in a series of tight braided cornrows. As much as he disliked the style, it still couldn't hide her beauty.

"What?" Raven asked, eyes flickering with annoyance.

Kyp met her glaring icy eyes and grinned. "Want to help me carry these? I think it's going to rain tonight, I wanted to gather as much dry wood as possible." Raven tucked her rag back in her pocket and came up beside Kyp and held out her arms. Kyp dumped the entire pile into her arms and she yelped in annoyance. "I'm off to go cut more, come back here and I'll give you another armload in a few minutes."

Raven sucked down a biting comment about being his errand girl, and sweetly said, "Certainly, Master."

The rain pounded against the mud roof with thundering precision. Raven nestled into a ball on her cot and stared at the dying fire. She felt an uncomfortable, disgusting sheen of perspiration form all over her body as the rain from outside only managed to enhance the sweltering humidity.

Raven let her mind wander to Jacen. He consumed her thoughts practically all day, every day. And it was the visions of his handsome, loving, sweet face that lulled her to sleep at night. She fantasized about them frolicking in their meadow on Naboo and tried to recapture the feel of his lips against her own. Under her bed sat a small pile of holonotes downloaded from *The Phoenix's* computer. Each note she had memorized every word and every expression from Jacen's face. And each one she returned a follow-up note. She only hoped he enjoyed and cherished them as much as she loved his messages. Raven tried to allow her lovely memories lull her over into dreamland. However her Master prevented such a thing from happening. From across the room, Kyp lay sprawled out on his cot blissfully snoring the sleep of the dead. Raven tried to close her eyes and fall asleep, but the ear-shattering reverberations of Kyp's snoring prevented her from entering into a peaceful trance.

Smirking she yelled, "Kyp!"

Kyp jolted in his cot. Unfocused, wild eyes stared around the room. In that heartbeat, Raven settled down and fell asleep having successfully disturbed his wretched nasal song.

She shivered in the corner of her near empty room watching the news on the holonet. The big Boonta Eve podrace winner was Trazychio, a Dug who'd just arrived from nowhere. She had predicted incorrectly. She quaked, fearing for her own safety.

She wondered if sheer will could make the sportscaster say a different name. Too late. From across the room her tiny wood door burst open. A large, skeleton of a man loomed before her quivering form. Ragged, frightened breaths escaped icy blue lips.

"You didn't guess correctly, now did you?" he sneered.

Tears burned in her eyes as she lowered her head into her knees.

“You little slimy womprat, do you have any idea how many credits you just lost me today????” When she didn’t emerge from her fetal curl, a skeletal hand grasped her by the shoulder and lifted her high in the air. “DO YOU????” he raged. She gasped at the man’s snarling, white face. His black mustache curled into a sneer. The girl’s pupils dilated huge with fright.

“You know what happens when I lose credits? I get... very... angry,” the man’s hand began to shake from ire. He slammed the girl down on her rickety bed. The girl yelped in pain as she landed on her tailbone. He grabbed something from his back pocket and brought them before her face. High voltage stun cuffs. Desperately she tried hiding her fists from his huge hands. However the man overpowered her and slammed the cuffs into place. His wretchedly ugly face beamed a hideous smile as he grabbed the girl by the arms and forced her hands over her head. He looped the stun cuffs connecting chain around a high placed steel peg in the wall and left the girl to dangle. As her wrist’s skin connected with the outer edges of cuffs blindingly searing, nauseous waves of electrocuting pain surged through her body.

“I’ll be back to check on you in a half an hour... unless I forget,” he cackled and slammed the door shut. The girl helplessly swung from the peg, her entire body quaked and jolted as unending pain numbed her senses, and rattled her teeth. The stench of seared meat filled the air as the cuffs began to lightly burn the girl’s slender wrists.

“NOOOOOOoooooooo, Blast you Ryzano!” Raven screamed, bolting upright in her bed. Crashing waves of anger ripped through the Force. In two seconds, still strangled by her nightmare Raven felt strong arms encircle her body. As consciousness began to replace her vivid nightmare, Raven clung to her savior. Tears welled and flowed down her eyes as she rested her cheek on the comforting broad shoulder. Her vision focused and Raven realized her location. And she immediately remembered who had captured her in their embrace. Gently she peeled herself away from Kyp and looked him in the eye. The low embers from the cooking hearth gave the room a fiery orange glow as the wood crackled and popped in the background. Outside, she focused on the continuous, pounding of the rain as her heart wound down from its rapid speed. Kyp dropped his arms, right arm to the side of her legs on her bed and the other in his lap.

“Are you alright?” Kyp’s deep voice purred with concern.

Raven gulped, then smiled faintly. “Yes. Thank you. It was just a nightmare.”

Kyp shook his head and bore his stare into her eyes, “No. Jedi’s don’t have nightmares, or dreams. They have visions.”

“Fine. It was a vision then. One I’d like to forget,” Raven said, as she rubbed her scarred wrists.

“Tell me about it,” Kyp said smoothly.

Raven licked her lips and shook her head violently, “No.”

Kyp’s eyes bore into hers. “You’ve got to trust me.”

“I can’t!” Raven said.

“Can’t or won’t?” Kyp spat back. Raven crossed her arms and scowled. Kyp’s eyes briefly flicked to the dying embers, worried by the lack of light.

Frustration brewed under Kyp’s calm exterior. His apprentice flat out refused to open up about her problems. She couldn’t even muster being civil to him. Feeling much like he was at the helm of a sinking ship he decided to throw dignity out the window.

“Raven, what do you need from me? You need to learn to trust me. There was a reason Master Skywalker selected me to train you. I understand a lot of what you are going through... have gone through. I really don’t want to fail at my mission here, anymore than I would think that you do. The only way that we can succeed if you trust me and open up to me. Believe me, I wish Jacen Solo was a full fledged Jedi Master and that he was here in my place...” Raven’s eyes grew large. “But he’s not. So I’m afraid you’re stuck with me. Tell me what I need to do to earn your trust. I will do or say anything that you request,” Kyp said. His deep green eyes pleaded with her, praying that she would finally allow her hardened walls to crumble. His eyes then flicked briefly to the dying embers, worried by the lack of light.

Raven liked the honesty in his voice. She decided to venture towards meeting him halfway. “I feel like I’m your errand girl. You send me off into the swamps looking for junk. You’re not teaching me anything. And if you expect me to open up to you, you need to do the same for me.”

Kyp stood up from her creaking bed and walked over to the fire. He threw on a couple logs and stoked it until the room brightened again. He brought over a water flask and offered it to Raven. He then sat down on the floor in front of her bed. “Ok. You feel like an errand girl and that I’m not teaching you anything. Why do you suppose that I’m doing what I’m doing?”

“What? Nothing?” Raven asked, peaking an eyebrow.

Kyp smirked, “Right.”

“I don’t know, find out how high my annoyance levels are and see how long you can go before seeing me explode?” Raven replied.

Kyp chuckled. His eyes grew serious and he said, “For a Jedi, the greatest virtue he or she can possess is patience. You my friend are sorely lacking in that virtue. You’re always scowling and pouting and impatiently stomping around seeking attention.” He pointed a finger at her, “You’re not focusing on where you are, and what you are doing. You seem to like being told what to do, so that’s why I send you off on errands. I don’t need an errand girl; I need you to become a Jedi Knight. At the moment, beyond seeing you have great stamina in the physical fitness department, I don’t see much that I can work with.”

Raven scratched her cheek. “Okay, I see your point.”

Kyp balked with surprise. Then he said, “So what do you want to know about me?”

Raven’s mind went blank. She stared at the fire and said, “Why do you always keep the fire stoked? I hear you in the latest hours of night get up and start a fire, even when it’s boiling hot in here.”

Biting a fingernail, Kyp stared at his apprentice. “*Great, immediately pick up on one of my weaknesses,*” he thought unhappily. However he could not help but be impressed by Raven’s skills of observation for finding something to ask that deeply bothered him. Maybe she hasn’t been just completely wrapped up in herself, he thought. “My family was made political prisoners by the Empire. I was separated from everyone I loved and was sent to spend my childhood working in the black mines of Kessell digging for spice- for hours. Every day. No holidays. I either slept, or I dug. That was pretty much my life. I was a human mole who never saw sunlight.” Kyp’s eyes grew hollow as he seemed to disappear from the room, returning back to the void of his past.

Shaking himself out of his reverie, Kyp gazed at his captivated student, “Now that I’m free, I hate the dark. I know, it’s a weakness. But I can’t help it. The firelight comforts me. It keeps my own nightmares at bay and reminds me that I’m alive.”

Nodding, Raven understood his fear. She sensed her iron will begin to corrode. She took a long swallow of water, handed the flask to Kyp and began. “My grandmother kidnapped me when I was a small child. She didn’t love me. She didn’t...doesn’t... love anyone. She saw me as a meal ticket. First I was the poor sickly girl that people would throw spare credits to as a beggar. Then as my Force abilities developed, she started using me in other ways.” Raven ripped her eyes away from Kyp’s interested stare and gazed at the far wall. “She met up with a man, Ryzano Darkglider who posed as my father. I was forced to even take his last name. He is the most wretched person in the galaxy. He headed a huge gambling ring on Tatooine. He taught me about all sports and forced me to use my Jedi instincts to determine in advance who would win. When I guessed incorrectly...” her fingers again caressed her scars and she swallowed, “I would be punished.” Raven lowered her head and spoke into her chest. “I just had a lovely, vivid reminder of one of those times. I buried all of those awful memories years ago. Now they all seem to be resurfacing.”

She turned her face towards Kyp as tears glistened in her eyes. Kyp noted how difficult it was for Raven to relive her past. He sensed a foundation of trust bridging between them and it earned from him a broad, genuine smile. His deep voice rumbled as he said, “Maybe these visions are coming to you to remind you of who you no longer wish to be. Or possibly the Force is willing them forward, so you can face and conquer them. Only you can determine their purpose. Your focus is your reality. If you allow yourself to wallow in your past, you can never advance in the future.” He uncurled his long legs and stood up. “Tomorrow, we will begin your training. Get some sleep, okay?”

Raven beamed and nodded. She curled down under her blanket as Kyp headed for his bed. For the first time since landing on Dagobah, Raven felt the tingles of excitement for what would be in store for her on the next day.

Chapter 3

The waves crashed with thundering regularity against the black rocks that surrounded the base of Reef Fortress on Hapes. The strong, cool, salty wind smashed against Tenal Ka’s body with no regard for her well-being. She didn’t notice her shivering limbs. For the past two months Tenal Ka felt nothing. The once expressionless girl now seemed to have ceased to exist entirely. Having retreated from prying family eyes, Tenal Ka came to her favorite getaway location on Hapes to rethink her life.

Behind her stormy gray eyes a battle between despair and jealousy waged that showed no clear victor.

For well over a decade she had loved Jacen Solo. He brightened her days at the Academy with his goofy demeanor, his fiercely loyal friendship, and his unending compassion. They had fought side by side, and he always impressed her by his quick thinking and battle prowess. Now he was gone, ripped from her life entirely. He fell in love with someone else. She couldn't even utter the tart's name for the mere thought of her brought bile up in her throat.

Had Jacen died, she could have accepted that fate. Warriors died. Death is nothing to fear, but to be embraced. For it means that your time in the physical world had ended and you are then rewarded with eternal salvation. At least that's what her mother, Teneniel Djo, taught her to believe. Instead Jacen found a new person to love. Tenal Ka, his good friend and unrequited love, apparently vanished from his heart entirely. At Jaina's wedding, he briefly approached her to talk, however the entire time they spoke his eyes wandered the reception hall looking for Marxx's twin. He appeared to be bewitched by the dark haired vixen. Tenal Ka stood alone and miserable on the balcony of the Lake Country Resort and watched the happy lovers take a water skiff towards the mainland. When they returned, Raven was filthy as they raced off laughing together to clean up.

Laughing. She wondered if that was the key to why Jacen loved this new girl. Tenal Ka never laughed at his jokes. On Dathomir, she never had the time to be merry or carefree. Laughter implied that work was not being done. Only the most stern, serious, and dedicated of women became warriors. She grew up focused as a result, wishing nothing more than to become a warrior who would make her mother beam with pride. Merriment and goofing off held no value or place in her life. Now she would welcome one of Jacen's silly jokes. She would even laugh at it, even if she didn't understand it, if it meant that his affections would return.

She'd always known, or thought she'd known, that Jacen loved her when they were growing up. She knew it by the way he would often seek and take her hand in stressful times. The way he would always try to comfort her during those occasions. And the way he ripped himself apart when she lost her arm. Her arm. She never blamed him for the accident. The fault was hers alone. Her arrogance and pride allowed her to think that her own proficiency as a warrior could easily over compensate for the defects in the design of the lightsaber she had built. She was wrong. The result ended with devastating consequences. Her fingers lightly caressed the stump of her severed arm, her reminder of her own idiocy. She felt a wave of self-loathing arise.

Tenal Ka then forced herself to think of Raven. Riddled with physical defects her family helped her to heal. A defective heart and lung were both operated on. Afterwards the girl seemed to have taken on a whole new lease in life. As her physical limitations no longer restricted her actions, the girl flourished. What's more though, it wasn't just that she had healed physically, but Jacen's love seemed to have enhanced her spirit. A roaring spasm of jealousy raged through Tenal Ka as a grimace lined her face. Then an unpleasant feeling of deep satisfaction replaced it as she knew Raven was off and away from her precious new boyfriend, into forced secluded training as a Jedi by Kyp Durrion. A deliciously delightful idea flickered in her mind as she envisioned the two becoming enamoured with each other in their long time of isolation, leaving poor Jacen broken hearted. And Tenal Ka would be there to help mend her friend's wounded soul reminding him of why he had loved her for so long. He would then be hers forever.

Then something rare and unusual happened. Tenal Ka smiled.

For centuries the Hapes Cluster hung in the balance of governing stability. Located at the door between the Core Worlds and the Corporate Sector, the illustrious Perlemian Trade Route passed right by the cluster of planets. Raids from spice smugglers, jewel thieves, and every kind of scum and villainy happened on a near daily basis.

The result, the Hapes Cluster remained heavily guarded with one of the finest, most expertly trained armies in the galaxy. Ta'a Chume, the reigning matriarch of the worlds, and Tenal Ka's grandmother, ruled the militia with an iron fist. She took no prisoners. Negotiations ended swiftly. She did not bend her will to anyone. The men and women who ran the mighty Hapan military machine respected the wiry older woman because of her tenacious nature.

Admiral Shorum's Hapan Saber-Dragon class Destroyer headed the patrol fleet which closely watched the border between the Hapes Cluster and the Trade Route. The Admiral stood with three of her captains as they flickered through the logs of the past shift when a perimeter warning claxon shouted throughout the ship. Alert, the Admiral raced to the window and dropped her jaw as one by one twelve enormous Dellaltian destroyers dropped out of hyperspace and opened fire. Before her eyes, three of the Dragon patrol ships exploded outside her window.

"Engage all firepower on those Destroyers!" Shorum shouted as she raced to the torpedo controls. A sickening, leaded feeling exploded in her stomach as she looked out the bridge window. The immense nose of one of the Destroyers now filled the entire window. She pounded on the controls and sent a flurry of torpedoes towards the looming craft seconds before her world disappeared in a sea of flying glass, smoldering metal, and flames.

Ta'a Chume stared at the long list of names. Each name represented a person killed in the attack. 3,286 soldiers in all died along the border. Her frail body shook inside her high-necked green velvet gown. Each man and woman died attempting to protect her kingdom, her system of planets. The people were her responsibility. She failed those heroic souls. She flicked through to a complete list of the recovered wreckage. Most of the bodies would never be recovered. She thought of the vast number of parents, children, and siblings who would never see their loved ones again. The idea made the older woman fume. She sifted through the reports that indicated her fifty destroyers apparently only got in one round of retaliatory shots before being destroyed. From the wreckage, analysis determined the attacking ships to be of Dellaltian in nature.

"They broke our peace agreement. For what? Why? Why would they risk this now?" Ta'a Chume found her mind racing as she thought about her bordering galactic neighbors. She paced in her functional office in the Fountain Palace on Hapes. *"What could they possibly have to gain by doing this?"* Fifty vessels of her grand fleet were now gone. With that simple fact, Ta'a Chume knew what they wanted to accomplish; they wanted to weaken her army. By weakening the Hapan militia they could eventually take over the cluster. An unusual feeling of despair slithered into the matriarch's mind as she thought of the possibility of losing her rule over these planets. She directed her despair not for herself, but for the people on her planets. Those who ruled the Tion Cluster would be merciless in their slaughter of the people of Hapes if they did succeed in overthrowing her militia.

Placing a hand on her waist and tapping a fingernail on her tooth, an image burned in her mind. She called into her comlink, "Rendart, where is my granddaughter?"

Her young and often jumpy secretary Rendart's unsteady voice replied, "M'lady I believe she is still at the Reef Fortress."

"Bring her here, immediately," Ta'a Chume commanded.

"Yes M'lady."

Ta'a Chume's smoky eyes turned up to the clear Hapan sky. The time for Tenal Ka's inaction was over.

Tenal Ka stormed into her grandmother's office, head high, showing obvious displeasure at being interrupted from her self pity wallowing. She stared at her grandmother's back. The woman wore her dignity and grace like a tight-fitting glove. Yet Tenal Ka knew that under that cool exterior lay the heart of a tigress that would willingly kill to protect her own, without thinking twice of the consequences.

"You sent for me Grandmother," Tenal Ka said.

"Yes, I did. Please sit down," Ta'a Chume replied as she turned her wizened face away from the window as regarded her heir. As usual, Tenal Ka wore her reptilian dress complete with utility belt. Her titian hair sprouted in drifts of braids. Her gray eyes appeared distant, clouded. Tenal Ka shrugged and sat down in the offered chair.

"It is time for you to decide what you wish to do. Your days of loafing about are over," Ta'a Chume replied as she peaked her fingers together, elbows on desk. "Grave matters have forced this decision."

Tenal Ka watched her grandmother unimpressed. The Hapes government was always in the midst of some kind of 'grave matter.' Ta'a Chume commenced in telling her granddaughter about the recent attack. The depressed girl found her interest piqued.

"I don't know why they attacked. They have not sent us any kind of a reason for their actions, nor do I believe there will be one forthcoming. Because I do not know of their intentions is why I have asked you here. You must decide what you want to do. I can't run the risk of you just sitting out there being an open target for these cowards," Ta'a Chume said. Standing up she walked around her desk and leaned against it directly in front of her granddaughter.

"The way I see it you have two options," she said sticking a bony finger up in the air, "One, you can finally accept your Hapan destiny and learn to rule beside me during this conflict." Another finger popped up, "Or two, I will order for you an armed and escorted shuttle to take you to Yavin 4. There you can work as a Jedi instructor."

An overwhelming feeling of surprise surged through Tenal Ka by her grandmother's second suggestion. She said, "Why would you willingly suggest that I go to Yavin 4?"

The older woman crossed her arms and stared sternly at the confused girl. "Because that would at least mean that you were away from here and out of harm's way."

Tenal Ka stared at the floor gripped with uncertainty. She's spent her time at the Reef Fortress worrying about her own heart, never once giving a thought to her professional future. She said, "I'd need some

time to decide.”

Her grandmother furrowed her brows. She replied, “You can have one day cycle to decide.” Reaching out a hand she cupped her granddaughter’s chin and raised her eyes to lock with her own. “Sometimes it is easier to mend a broken heart by going to work. You just need to decide which path you want to take. I am giving you the option here of what to decide. I think it should be obvious to you which path I would prefer for you to take, but I cannot decide that for you, only you can.”

Heart sinking into her boots, Tenal Ka realized the validity of her grandmother’s words. Work would help to clear her mind, regain her focus: reawaken her warrior instincts.

She stood up from her chair and faced Ta’a Chume. “I do not need a day cycle to decide. It is time for me to accept my destiny. I will work with you.”

Ta’a Chume nodded her head and said, “Go rest, be back in here at oh six hundred tomorrow morning.” Tenal Ka nodded and left the room. As the door shut behind her, a smile that could have lit up the galaxy spread across her triumphant grandmother’s face.

Chapter 4

Jaina’s feet relaxed on a square, upholstered footstool in the living room of their bungalow. In two hours she and Marxx would be heading to Theed to check in at the Capital. In their absence Anakin and Jacen sent them daily reports of the project’s progress. After arriving back on Naboo, the newlyweds briefly stopped in Theed then continued on their quest to talk to the people on the planet. The crew of the *The Vengeance* were sentenced to work as manual labor at the reconstruction site. With around the clock attention now to the project, Jaina, Marxx, and Anakin felt safe in believing the capital would be completed in less than a year. Even now the crews broke ground to start the new Nubian Museum of Arts.

A broad smile crept across Jaina’s face as she realized the project, her baby, was nearing completion. Through the Force, she could almost feel her grandmother beaming with pride. A pair of strong, callused hands crept to her slim shoulders and began to knead out non-existent tension.

“Good morning, husband,” Jaina purred.

“Good morning, wife,” Marxx replied back.

“Come here,” Jaina said patting her lap. Marxx laughed and turned around the couch. He stretched out on the couch placing his head in her lap. Jaina gently traced the sculpted contours of his pectorals with her left hand and worked through the morning knots in his thick curly hair with her right hand.

They lay in a comfortable silence as Marxx gazed up at his beloved’s face. Each beautiful curve, from the tip of her nose, to the slant of her cheekbones burned in his memory. He watched her long dark eyelashes flutter open and shut as she blinked. Her hair, long and loose drifted down her shoulders. He snaked a finger up and captured one of her bouncy curls. He said, “I love you.”

Jaina rested her eyes on Marxx's pool blue irises and felt her heart swell with joy. Marxx sat up and turned around beside her and said, "I will always love you, when you're old and gray, with no teeth, and wrinkled beyond belief, I will love you completely."

A vision of a wrinkled, toothless Jaina flashed before her eyes. Jaina giggled. "You silly man. I love you too and will always love you."

Marxx leaned forward and cupped her chin and stared deeply into her eyes, "I meant every word of that."

Crinkling her brows, Jaina searched over Marxx's handsome features, his high cheekbones, his square chin, she asked, "What's gotten into you this morning?"

"I don't know... well yes I do," he stood up and paced over to the painting on the wall. It was Paulo's painting of the two of them at the Lake Country Resort- his wedding present to them, and last painting he'd finished before he died. Jaina watched Marxx place his hands on his hips. Her eyes wandered over his bare bronzed back waiting for him to speak. "I woke up thinking of Grandfather Paulo, and how my grandmother just left him. How their love wasn't strong enough." He turned and faced Jaina and continued, "I guess I just wanted to let you know that I will never leave you. You are my life, my main priority. You mean everything to me." He rubbed his right hand on his neck, his nervous tick, and said, "I guess I just felt I needed your reassurance."

Jaina bolted to her feet and walked in front of Marxx. She sensed the main cause of his concerns centered around his grief over Paulo's death and the tears now forming in his eyes confirmed it. His lip quivered as he said, "Foolish of me, huh?"

Softly Jaina's hands wandered up and down his torso, then they encircled his waist. She squeezed him tightly and rested her head on his chest. Marxx crushed her tightly against his body. Jaina said, "Sweetheart, you are not foolish. That's a word I would never use to describe you.... I love you. You are my life, my love... I will always love you... Sometimes marriages don't work out. I don't see that happening with us." She glanced up at him, "Are you really worried?"

Marxx met her brandy brown eyes and wrestled back a tear from falling down his cheek. He rested his cheek on the top of Jaina's head. "No, I'm not worried. I look at both of our parents as examples on how to make a good marriage last. Apparently there was something just... wrong with my grandmother."

"I don't know what to tell you, Marxx. Maybe we can find more of her files when we return to Theed to help answer any questions you still have about her," Jaina said.

Images swirled in Marxx's mind. Each image fuzzy and distorted appeared as blips in his mind. They were snippets of Raven's memories that she Force sent to him back on her ship to prevent him from going to the Dark Side. Knowing the horrific things the woman did to his sister, he replied, "I don't know if I really want to know. But I suppose I should. We have to learn to let go of the past to have a bright future, right?"

Jaina sensed Marxx's distress and replied, "Right." She pulled herself from his embrace and rubbed her hands down his muscular chest, playing with the light scruffs of dark hair, then around to his backside. The corner of Marxx's lip curled upwards as his wife's fingers roamed. She flashed him a large smile

and seductively arched an eyebrow. “You know we do have a couple hours before we have to go meet with Trevalis Borenman about the latest draft of the Constitution. What do you say we go and remind each other how strong our bond is?”

Beaming wolfishly, Marxx replied, “M’lady that is the best suggestion I’ve heard all morning.” Jaina giggled and raced out of the living room. Marxx stood rooted to the floor.

“Are you coming?” Jaina said with a singsong voice. As she spoke, her nightgown soared into the view and landed on his head.

Marxx let the silky fabric slip through his fingers and he whispered, “Mercy.” Suddenly spurred into action, Marxx grinned and dashed down the hallway towards their bedroom.

Jacen locked his door to prevent his spying brother from entering his room unannounced. Together they shared a small condo in Theed as they worked on administering duties over the Reconstruction project while Jaina and Marxx remained out of town. As his mind lingered briefly on his twin, Jacen sensed that his sister seemed to be in a good mood: a very good mood. Grimacing, he switched his mind elsewhere, having spent many hours in the two months enduring her blinding, euphoric twin vibrations. “*Bless the stars, at least her honeymoon is over,*” he thought gloomily. Without knowing it, Jaina helped to contribute to a growing depression that had begun to overtake Jacen. Although he couldn’t help but be happy for his twin, all her joy managed to do was remind him of how lonely he felt without Raven. Daily he sent messages to her on Dagobah. She in turn sent him messages. Every time he returned home from work to find a note from her, his heart leapt with joy. Not being able to actually speak to her though, started to wear on his soul. At least Marxx could talk to Jaina when he trained on Yavin 4. Jacen began to wonder how long he could stand their separation.

Jacen found himself thinking of his Grandfather. Anakin and Padme were separated for long periods of time during the Clone Wars and they survived. He slapped his forehead, *Bad example, they eventually got ripped apart and their love was destroyed... Their marriage was forbidden, they had to hide their love from everyone. At least Uncle Luke doesn’t forbid Jedi’s from marrying.* As soon as the word entered his mind, Jacen knew why he felt so helpless. In his heart, he knew that he wanted to marry Raven. He wanted to be her husband, to start a family with her, and be her protector. He helped bring her back to the light, by his not being at her side right now, it seemed as though he was somehow, miserably failing her, or shirking his duties. And now they couldn’t even speak to each other. Frustration bubbled inside as Jacen fought back the rising swell of tears.

Leaning back in his desk chair, Jacen replayed Raven’s holonote message from last night. A blue image of her appeared wearing a white tank top and her hair sat in a series of cornrow braids on her head. Jacen noticed her arms appeared muscular from constant exercise. Unconsciously Jacen reached up to his own arm and realized he’d fallen behind on working out and decided maybe a trip to the local sports complex and partake in a good long run. While staring at her gorgeous ice blue eyes, his heart melted.

“*Jacen, my love. Today was a good day. Master Durrone and I have appeared to reach an end to our stalemate and he is now actually training me. Although I still think he’s somewhat arrogant, he doesn’t annoy me as much as he did in the beginning. We’ve...ah... reached an understanding. Which is good, I guess. I can’t exactly get very far in my training if I don’t trust my Master. After my morning run, we*

went to a clearing and Kyp made me stand on my head and levitate objects by concentrating completely on the Force around me. I felt calm, at peace. It's a strange feeling using the Force as an ally instead of warping it to my will. For all that I dread and despise this place, I can understand the benefits of training here. The lack of people and technology do help me to better concentrate on my lessons. I better get going. I'm tired and I need to go gather wood. I love you and miss you, Jacen Solo. May the Force be with you."

Jacen watched as Raven kissed her fingers and then touched the transmitter. Tears lined her eyes. He unconsciously squeezed his lower lip as he pondered her words. He understood the importance of Raven and Kyp bonding. If there was no trust between Jedi Master and apprentice, nothing would ever get accomplished in Raven's training. His stomach, however, constricted with jealousy. Listening to Raven and her repeated declarations of love, he did not doubt her and her feelings. Instead, he believed that he despised the fact that Kyp got to spend every day with his love, while he could only sit and wait with bated breath for each of her tiny messages. He knew though that if he suddenly showed up on Dagobah, that he might inadvertently set back Raven's training. Jacen rubbed his forehead as the first twinges of a headache began to creep into his mind.

Suddenly his holo-emitter chimed. Leaping forward he activated the incoming message. His heart briefly fell, then a large smile spread across his lips when he saw the person on the other line.

"Hi Tenal Ka, how're you doing?" Jacen asked. He felt relieved to see a friendly face at the moment to end his wallowing in self-pity fest. He noticed immediately that she wore a long green traditional Hapan dress.

Tenal Ka stood with her hand on her hip watching him closely. He seemed happy to see her, but appearances could be deceiving. "Hello, Jacen. I am doing fine. How are you doing?"

Jacen gulped and said, "Well, I'm a bit lonely. Raven's off training. At least Jaina and Marxx are coming back to the Capital today. They're usually good at getting my mind on other things."

Tenal Ka inwardly grimaced at Jacen's moaning over his girlfriend. Biting down her distaste she said, "I am sorry to hear you are lonely, my friend."

"What's up with the clothing? Your grandmother has you going to some formal function?" Jacen asked trying to change the topic.

"Actually, I am about to join her in a military strategy meeting. Two days ago our neighbors, the Dellaltians, attacked and destroyed fifty of our warships. We are on high military alert," Tenal Ka replied.

Jacen sat up alert and asked, "Are you and your family alright? What happened? Why are they attacking you?"

"Thank you for asking. My family is fine. We do not know why they have attacked. We only know they broke a long standing treaty with this action. They have wanted our territory for years. We only assume that they believe that by weakening our military they can eventually take over the Hapes Cluster," Tenal Ka's said, her gray eyes flashing with anger. "We lost over 3,000 people in their attacks."

Jacen gasped, his eyes filled with concern. "I'm so sorry. That's horrific! And you're helping out your

grandmother?” Jacen said, knowing that must not have been an easy decision for Tenal Ka who spent a lifetime shirking her duties to the Hapan crown.

“Yes, it is time that I begin my formal training and accept my destiny,” Tenal Ka replied.

Surprised, Jacen asked, “So you’re giving up being a Jedi?”

“I would say that I will be applying my Jedi training towards my pending rule. One must be able to keep a clear head when negotiating with cowards and enemies,” the titian haired girl replied.

Jacen nodded, “I can see that. Well let us know if you need our assistance. The Reconstruction Project here seems to be on track. If you need the help of four Jedi, I’m sure Jaina, Marxx, Anakin, and I can spare some time to come help you out.”

A slight smile formed on Tenal Ka’s lips causing Jacen to grin. “Thank you my friend, I will let you know.”

“It’ll be just like old times,” Jacen replied.

“That is a fact. Just like old times,” Tenal Ka said, knowing full well things could never be exactly like old times again. “I will talk to you later.”

“Goodbye,” Jacen said.

“Goodbye,” Tenal Ka said and her image vanished from the holo-emitter.

Jacen let out a sigh and berated himself for feeling blue. There were plenty of people out there with worse problems than he had to worry about. He kicked away from his desk and decided to wait and send off his holo-note to Raven at the end of the day. Feeling rejuvenated, he unlocked his door, gathered his brother and headed off to the capital.

Chapter 5

“Clear your mind. Let the Force flow through you. The Force is your ally, created by all living things. It can enhance your skills and calm your nerves.... When you are calm, you will see things... The Force will speak to you. They may be memories, they may be visions of the future, they may be present day happenings.... Whatever the Force shows you, pay attention to the images,” Kyp’s deep voice entered into the dark haze as Raven sunk deeper into her meditative state.

Standing on her head, her arms lightly shook from gravity’s weight on her body as she Force-lifted six large boulders into the air, casually spinning them with precise balance with the Force. She let out a long sigh and directed her concentration towards her Master seated some five feet away on a fallen log. Another tangent in her mind absorbed more energy from the Force and she casually embraced the air around Kyp’s body. She ignored his surprised squeak as slowly she lifted him off of the ground. She chewed on her lower lip, to contain her giggles, as Kyp’s mouth shot off a slew of profanity. In her mind’s eye she watched as Kyp rose up from his log, his arms reaching out in all directions to try to find some purchase of handhold to prevent himself from rising any further. Finding nothing he

eventually just plopped his hands in his lap as he spun in a slow circle.

“You just better not drop me on my head,” Kyp said, fighting back a laugh. He watched the world spin before him as Raven calmly, controlled his Force fueled joyride. Knowing that he weighed considerably more than the other boulders and stones that continued to circle around him, pride swelled Kyp’s heart at his apprentice’s progress. He began to spin faster.

“It’s noted, I’m impressed. Now please put me down,” Kyp said, as a wave of nausea began to rise in his stomach. Suddenly his dark green eyes grew large as the taste of bile rose in his throat. Before he could warn her again, Kyp jolted upright and calmly returned to his seated position on the log. He placed a hand on his stomach to calm it down and watched as his apprentice continued to stare, expressionless into a black void. He watched her carefully and rested his forearms on his knees. Her control impressed him greatly.

Raven shut her eyes and the glare of a bright, sandy afternoon flared before her eyes. *A small girl, with cropped dark hair, lay sprawled out on a sandy street. In the hot, arid air rasping jagged lungful of breath she sobbed. The front door of the hut opened and an aging, severe looking woman emerged.*

“What are you doing just loafing around. There are chores to be done!” The woman’s eyes fell upon the upturned, empty water flask which had spilled all of its contents into the thirsty sand. “You wasted precious water! You good for nothing little twerp. Do you have any idea how much that costs?” The girl slowly forced her elbows to work as she shoved herself up. Her breath labored with each movement. She flipped over, covered with sand, both knees and elbows sported new abrasions from her fall.

*“I’m... *gasp*... sorry... *gasp*... grand... *gasp*...mother,” the girl moaned as she lifted the now empty flask. Tears poured from her eyes.*

The elderly woman’s thin lips sneered and her nostrils flared, “Get up. Go clean yourself up. And don’t you dare think of using water since you seem to think it’s free around here!” A large wicked hand flashed forward and met with blaster shot precision against the small girl’s cheek. A loud smack echoed down the street as the girl pitched over from the force of the blow. The girl rasped for air, a huge, white handprint etched on her right cheek. A pitch black shadow crawled up and over the cowering girl’s form. The girl forced herself to her knees and attempted to rise to her feet. Only to be met by another bone cracking smack to the other cheek. The girl yelped in pain as her neck snapped backwards flying off of her knees flat on her back. The shadow consumed her body. The girl, barely able to see straight began to crab crawl backwards as the shadow continued to chase her retreating frail body....

Kyp jumped and his heart raced as his serene student suddenly screamed, “*Stop it! I didn’t do it on purpose! Leave me alone you evil old crone!*” A wave of blinding anger rocketed across the practice field. Raven’s link with the Force snapped apart. Rocks thudded to the swampy floor as she tumbled out of her handstand. Covered in sticky mud, Raven threw her filthy hands to her cheeks, still stinging from the phantom traces of the fierce slaps. Kyp squatted before her and lifted her chin up to meet his concerned gaze.

Raven’s eyes flew in and out of focus as the looming figure appeared before her eyes. Savagely she reached out and Force choked the looming figure. Still in the throws of her vision the face of the old woman contorted with pain as she grasped at her constricting throat. She heard her name squeaked. The voice did not belong to her grandmother. Shaking her head her grandmother’s face became replaced by

the worried visage of her choking Master. Horrified, Raven severed her link with anger and Kyp sunk to the ground gasping in breaths of air.

“What have I done?” Raven cried. Wailing in agony, Raven bolted to her feet and raced away from the practice field, blindly into the Dagobah swamps.

Kyp’s sides heaved in and out as he inhaled much needed oxygen. He watched Raven dash off into the woods and shook his head. He rubbed his forehead, then snatched up a skin of water. “*Well, this is definitely payback time for the pain I’ve caused in my lifetime,*” he thought unhappily as he headed off into the woods, following after his distraught student. He experienced no difficulty in finding her trail. She left a path of broken tree limbs and uneven footprints as she raced through the swampy woods. Kyp also sensed and zeroed in on her waves of guilt that reverberated through the Force.

Five minutes later he found Raven lying at the base of a tree in a fetal position, her face streaked by tears and covered in mud. Her fingers twitched as they dug into her braids. Her pupils blackened her entire eyes with fright. Kyp wondered if she’d heard his approach. He sat down with a thud next to her shivering body and lightly caressed her cheek.

“You thirsty?” he asked as he showed her the water skin. For some reason the sight of the nerfhide container only made her wail further into her misery. Kyp didn’t know what to do, he’d never had to try to comfort anyone in a situation like this before. He inhaled the strong mildewed scent from the surrounding boggy land and said, “Raven, I’m not angry with you, you’re alright, you’re alright...” he said. As his words sunk in, she lifted her eyes and stared at her Jedi Master. He was apparently fine and in one piece. She sat upright and threw her arms around Kyp’s broad shoulders and sobbed uncontrollably. Kyp tightened his embrace on his student.

Raven finally removed her arms from his strong neck and rubbed her forehead in despair. She asked, “How could I have done that to you? Bless the Force, you were only trying to help me. And I... I...” Her chin quivered and she started to sob again.

Kyp grabbed her back into an embrace and felt her fingers dig into his back. His shoulder became wet with her tears. Only feeling concerned, he replied, “Obviously we have a lot of work to do. I think I now see why Master Skywalker wanted you to be trained on your own. We’ve got a lot to deal with here.” He gently pulled her apart from him and lifted her chin so she could stare into his dark green eyes. “I’m not about to give up on you. You have real potential. But we’re going to need to get through this, and the sooner we start seriously addressing your Dark Side issues, the sooner you can heal.”

“Why do I keep seeing these things? I locked these memories away years ago because they hurt too much to think about,” Raven said, voice cracking and dry.

Kyp watched his apprentice carefully. Her light blue eyes now streaked bloodshot, her nose and eyelids were swollen red from crying. He reached behind him and extracted a rag from his back pocket and handed it to her to wipe off her face. Taking the rag, Raven meekly smiled and rubbed it over her eyes and blew her nose.

“What did you see? Tell me,” Kyp said softly.

Searching her Master’s face, Raven choked down another sob. Her eyes rested on Kyp’s long, straight nose, his deep green eyes, and his expressive dark eyebrows. She couldn’t believe he would calmly sit

and talk to her after she tried just tried to choke him to death.

“I don’t deserve this. I should just be thrown in a jail cell somewhere. Or better yet, thrown into a Sarrlacc pit and be done with me. I don’t think I can ever get past this... I knew that I wasn’t good enough for Jacen, or for my family. I can’t...do this,” she said, wiping her nose.

Kyp offered her a slightly lopsided smile as he wiped off a slab of mud off of her forehead, “Who are you trying to convince with that little speech, you or me? Look at me... no look into my eyes...” Raven reluctantly met his gaze. “I am not giving up on you, do you understand me? You most certainly are NOT going to give up on me. I won’t let you. You’re tougher than failure. And your family *needs* you, Jacen needs you. They don’t need you in some jail cell somewhere. Also do you really think Jacen’s parents would let him associate with a criminal?” Raven’s mouth opened wide, as if that thought had never even crossed her mind. “I am not letting you give up. We are going to conquer these demons of yours, day by day. And when we’re done, you’re going to be stronger, wiser, and the best Jedi ever. Do you hear me?”

Raven nodded slightly. “Yes, Master Durrion.” Her hands continued to shake and she fell back into a crossed legged squat. She closed her eyes and breathed in and out to calm her nerves. Kyp watched her as she silently worked to regain control of her emotions. In the distance she heard a couple local birds cry. As she washed away her anger, her fear, her guilt, Raven focused on the beating of her heart. Her heart, that loved and was loved in return. Jacen. Jacen. Jacen. Thinking his name, envisioning his smile, calmed her and erased her pain. Then with her spirit focused, she revisited her vision and in a detached voice, she spoke the details of the encounter with her grandmother to her Master.

Listening intently, Kyp became increasingly horrified by what Raven recalled.

“I was helpless. She wouldn’t let me get a respirator, I had to drown in fluid in my lungs everyday. And my heart couldn’t sufficiently circulate blood to help my lungs to breathe. I’d been outside, heading off to the store to buy a loaf of bread, when a pair of school bullies zoomed by on Swoop bikes. They picked on me, as usual, threw me against the hut wall and I fell to the ground. Then of course they took off. My grandmother found me outside and thought I was slacking off. Then when I couldn’t get up, she began to beat on me,” Raven’s heart tightened, her lips drew together in pain, “She didn’t even notice I was bleeding and hurt before she began to lay into me.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Raven. It wasn’t your fault,” Kyp said, hands lightly dangling over his bent knees.

Wiping away an errant tear, Raven replied, “I know. That woman had no love in her heart. I can’t ever recall her saying one encouraging thing to me. She never told me she loved me, or that she was proud of me. She had great pride in belittling and insulting me. The only time she finally took any notice of me was when I finally began to fight back. Instead of cowering, I’d get angry. In school, I broke a kid’s arm and ripped apart our school cafeteria one day with my rage by using the Force. My grandmother grinned like a madwoman. It was the first time she ever showed me any attention. From then on, I was so starved for attention that I just continued down my dark path. She gladly fed my growing abilities with praise and affection.” Raven shuddered.

Kyp furrowed his brows, “Are you worried that I’m not giving you any praise for your progress around here?”

“What?” Raven asked, confused, “No. I mean, you just complimented me before I went psychotic on you. Why do you ask?”

He shook his head, “I’m just trying to figure out why you are receiving your certain visions is all. How do you feel when someone praises you, or compliments you now?”

Raven thought about his question for a moment. Her mind lingered to Jacen and his comments about her beauty that night on Naboo when they first kissed. He said, *“No you’re not beautiful. There’s no word in the whole of existence that describes you... luminous maybe, radiant, gorgeous, breathtaking. My heart constricts in my chest when I’m around you. It’s almost overwhelmed by how closely you resemble a heavenly creature.”* She’d responded by behaving as if he had said a joke. She didn’t believe he actually meant the words.

“I generally don’t believe them. I figure they just want something out of me, and that they can’t really mean what they said. If that makes sense,” she replied rubbing her forehead.

Kyp smiled and said, “Actually it makes perfect sense. What you’ve got is a serious self-esteem issue Raven. You don’t know what you’re worth. Let’s look at this, your grandmother beat on you, she ridiculed you, and she made you feel worthless. The only time you ever felt like you meant anything was when you did things that were contrary to your nature. When you gave into your anger, your fear, your hate, she suddenly saw you as a person instead of a nuisance.” Raven stared with wide eyes at Kyp. She’d never thought about that before. “Now you are trying desperately to reject your fear and anger. You no longer want to be controlled by those darker emotions. For the longest time, anger was your ally. Those emotions were your only weapons in your arsenal in life to use to defend yourself with. Now that you rejected them, you fell like you’ve got nothing to fall back upon. You need to learn to do a couple of things. You need to learn who you are, and you need to learn to love who that person is. Who is Raven Racees? I think once you discover that, you may find out how to accept compliments and not see them as empty platitudes.”

“How do I do that? How do I find out who I really am?” Raven asked, in a very small voice.

“Truthfully, I don’t know. It’s something you’re going to have to do on your own. I promise you I’ll do everything I can to help, but for the most part, you’re going to have to do that on your own. I once faced a similar dilemma during a very dark period in my life. Self discovery is a long and painful process. Personally I don’t think you’re that bad off. You’ve allowed yourself to fall in love with someone else... that’s a major first step in the right direction. You’re lucky to have managed to capture the heart of a Solo. There’s something about those men, they are able to see good in people who don’t even know that goodness exists in themselves...” Kyp’s eyes seemed very distant. “You already know what you do not want to be, now you just have to figure out who you do want to become,” he said smiling. Then Kyp stretched back his shoulders and arms out in front of his legs. In one fluid motion he rose to his feet. He extended his hand to his apprentice. “Come on, we’ve had more than enough drama for one day. Let’s go make us some snake stew.”

Raven shriveled her nose, grabbed the water skin from the ground and took his hand. He heaved her to her feet. “You’re not really going to make me eat that stuff are you?”

“What do you think you’ve been eating for the last two months?” Kyp replied peaking an eyebrow.

Raven’s mouth flew open in disgust, and let out a long, “Uggggghhhhh.”

Kyp lightly punched her in the arm and laughed, “See I told you it didn’t taste all that bad.”

Shaking her head, Raven followed after the footfalls of Kyp towards the most unappetizing of dinners.

Chapter 6

The glorious late morning sun shined brilliantly onto the cobbled streets of Theed. The sweet air filled with the glorious chatter of songbirds and the sweet perfume of thousands of newly planted, blooming flowers. Jaina and Marxx strolled along the mosaic filled courtyard outside the now fully restored capital building. They just emerged from a meeting with Trevalis Borenman, a Nubian political historian who they selected to oversee the creation of the new Nubian Constitution. Now that all of their notes that they’d gathered over the past six months were safely delivered out of their hands, a strange overwhelming sense of calmness blanketed the happy couple.

Marxx and Jaina dressed in Nubian finery clothing. Jaina’s midnight blue dress, flowed long and hugged the sides of her shoulders with its short sleeves. The dresses square neckline accentuated her cleavage, then tapered in at the waist and flowed down with layers of sheer fabric that sparkled with the hints of shimmering rainbows in the sunlight. Jaina’s hair gathered atop her head in a single braided bun that snaked down into spiraling curls down her back. Marxx wore a long sleeved, tan cotton shirt and tailored brown slacks that tucked neatly into the tops of his polished brown Jedi boots. Over his shirt Marxx wore a midnight blue brocaded velvet vest. The couple stopped to admire a newly added water feature in the center of the plaza. Their arms laced luxuriously around each other as they pointed out the finely chiseled craftsmanship that went into the intricate designs on the cherubs in the marble sculpture. Jaina smiled delightfully at her husband with his affinity for noticing the minutest and finer details of artistic expression. Marxx sensed his wife’s admiring stare and met her gaze.

“What?” he asked, peaking an eyebrow.

“You just never cease to amaze me,” Jaina replied.

“Well I did grow up with the esteemed Paulo Brannoush in my household. I did learn a thing or two about appreciating art. I wasn’t only some junk shop repair boy,” Marxx said. Together they turned their eyes to the south of the plaza and saw that within only a few days the foundation to the new Nubian Art Museum had set. Newly erected scaffolding littered the skyline to begin the construction of the internal infrastructure of the building.

“Beauty, art, truth, and love,” Jaina said.

“Yes, and you my dear Queen, represent all four of those principles,” Marxx said, grin etching across his lips.

“As do you, Nubian Son,” Jaina replied, licking her lips lightly, inviting for a kiss. Marxx, always happy to oblige, leaned down and lightly grabbed her lower lip between his and tugged. Jaina grinned and they sank into a deep, sweet kiss. In the midst of their unified bliss, Marxx thought he heard a sigh. He unwillingly pried open an eye and widened it, abruptly pulling apart from their kiss. From all

around them, townspeople emerged from their shops, restaurants, and homes to watch the planet's famous couple of lovebirds. Jaina's cheeks flushed bright pink, and Marxx turned bright red, as women and men of all ages encircled the happy duo, silently watching them bask in their love.

"Guess it's time to mingle with your loyal subjects. Right, my Queen?" Marxx said teasingly.

Jaina rolled her eyes and said, "Oh stop calling me that. But yes, I do think spreading some goodwill with the locals would be a nice idea around now." Jaina grabbed her husband's hand and together they met with the locals of Theed. As they shook hands and talked to the people Jaina and Marxx failed to notice a familiar looking craft descend out of the atmosphere and head to the local spaceport.

Han and Leia watched as Jacen engaged in a heated discussion with Sruga Munn, the Ithorian in charge of the construction crews around Theed. Jacen tilted his head to the side and slapped his hardhat. The crew bosses leathery face lowered in defeat and stalked away from the Jedi. Jacen turned around shaking his head. Completely lost in his own thoughts he walked right past his parents.

"Hey!" Han shouted. Jacen jumped and shook his head. A confused grin formed on his face.

"What're you two doing here?" Jacen asked as he hugged his mother.

"We actually came to check on you," Leia replied tugging her green tunic back into place.

Jacen knitted his brows together, "You mean check on the progress here?"

"No, Jacen. We came to check on you. Let's go get a bite to eat," Leia replied and directed her son towards a small café in town. The lilac walls of the café offered a calming atmosphere as the trio escaped from the ear shattering construction area. Jacen placed his helmet on the table and stared expectantly at his parents. A busty, dimpled, blond girl approached their table to take their order. They each ordered Jawa Juices and a pastry plate to split.

"So what was that all about back there, son?" Han asked as he leaned back in his booth seat. His fingers absently climbed up the wall and rubbed on one of the leaves from a hanging plant, checking to see if it was real or faux.

"Several of the crew members from Raven's old ship are trying to create dissention in their group apparently. They are refusing to work. I told Sruga to go back to them and tell them if they don't comply they are headed to the brig," Jacen said with a bored expression caressing his face.

"Think they'll shape up?" Han asked.

"I don't know. Hopefully. We need them to work in order to keep the project on track," Jacen replied. "They don't know how lucky they are. Their punishment could have been a lot worse."

Leia and Han exchanged a glance.

"What?" Jacen asked lounging an arm across the back of his booth seat behind his mother's back. The waitress stopped by and dropped off the cups and pastries. "Thank you."

Han leaned forward and wrapped his large hands around his mug and stared his son in the eyes. “Your mother and I are worried for you and your attachment to that girl.”

Jacen’s stomach exploded in agony, as if he’d just been kicked. Incredulous he squeaked out, “What?”

Leia scowled at Han for his directness and turned her son’s chin towards her gaze. “What your father meant to say is that we are concerned about how you are getting along without Raven.”

Growing angry Jacen’s voice rose as he yanked himself from his mothers grasp, “That’s not what Dad said! Since when did the two of you suddenly decide you don’t like Raven?”

“We like Raven fine, it’s just that...” Leia began.

“...It’s just what?” Jacen asked. “What? Please, I’m all ears.”

“Son, do you know why she’s off into isolation training?” Han asked, eyebrow peaked.

“She’s got issues to take care of,” Jacen said. “She used her Force abilities through the Dark Side and needs to learn to become a Jedi.”

Han and Leia exchanged glances again. Leia ran a hand over the twists that snaked down from the top of her head and decided to lay it all on the line. She said, “According to the laws of the New Republic, Raven should be serving a lifetime sentence in prison for the crimes she committed while she commanded her ship. We had her on illegal gambling charges, 20 counts on grand theft larceny, and seven counts of murder. She had a habit of killing her crewmen who displeased her.”

Jacen shifted his blank gaze between his parents. Leia continued, “She got off easy, honey. I had to use every amount of influence I could to get this deal. You’re lucky her training is for only 6 months. The courts demanded her isolation be at least a three year sentence.”

Gripping the sides of his nose to fight back a rising, developing headache, Jacen squeezed his eyes shut. “That’s not true. Raven’s no murderer.”

“It is true. She kept very detailed logs of her daily activities. She listed her crewman’s deaths as emotionlessly as if she marked down what she ate for lunch,” Leia replied. “Believe it or not, I fought for her more for Chariss and Rowlon’s sake than yours. It wasn’t really until the two of you became like glue and I saw you together at Paulo’s funeral that we realized you were possibly more than just friends with the girl.”

“She’s bad news, Jacen. Even Luke doubts that she’ll be able to handle her six months in isolation,” Han replied. “You need to get yourself prepared for the fact that she might not be coming back to you. If she fails... she’s going to finish out her sentence.”

A searing heat rose in Jacen’s breast. “I can’t believe you two. You...” Jacen said pointing an accusing finger at his father who sat back, “to this day you are still Kyp’s biggest supporter. Even though he single-handedly blew up an entire star system, you still invite him into your home and hang out with him like he’s one of the guys. Kyp killed *millions* of people. Millions! And you act as if he did nothing! And Mom, in time you even learned to forgive your own father, even though when he was under the

grip of the Dark Side he also mercilessly killed thousands, if not millions of people! Raven killed, what, seven people? Where would be the justice if she were thrown in jail for life and Kyp gets to walk free? You call THAT justice? Is that the New Republic that you've so proudly been creating all these years?" Jacen leapt to his feet and slammed his hands down on the table. Leia and Han jumped as their drinks fell over leaving a dark spreading stain on the white table surface. Jacen breathed deeply and hotly continued, "I'm not saying Raven didn't do things she shouldn't have. Her life wasn't worth much until I came along. But she has changed. I know she has! There is great goodness in her heart. And I think I know that more than anyone... maybe even herself..."

"Jacen, sit down, you're making a scene," Leia scolded. Jacen's brandy eyes flared towards his mother, then he noticed all conversation had ceased in the café. Turning his head, dozens of Nubian citizens and the waitresses stared at the angry young man. Scowling he sat down. Leia's voice remained low and steady, "We're not saying she can't change Jacen. Or even that she hasn't already begun to change. This is why she's being given this opportunity to train with Kyp. We just wanted to make sure you had all the facts before you got in too deep with her is all. We also wanted to prepare you in case she fails of what will happen to her."

"If she fails," Jacen snorted and stood up again. "My girl is tougher than durasteel. I pity the demons that she has to face down. They will lose miserably. She reported to me recently that she and Kyp have begun to trust each other and that she's beginning to truly understand how the Force works. Raven will become a Jedi... And when she does, I'm going to marry her, whether you like it or not! If you'll excuse me, I have work to do... Sorry about the mess." With that, Jacen picked up his hardhat and stalked out of the café and into the blinding Nubian sun.

Their waitress came over and wiped down Han and Leia's table. "Do you want another round?" the pleasant girl asked expectantly.

"Yes, please," Leia said as the girl dashed off for new cups.

"What do you mean? We need to go after him," Han said to his wife.

Leia gazed her coffee brown eyes at her husband. "His mind his made up, Han. There's nothing we can say to change it. He's a man now. Jacen'll have to figure out on his own where his destiny lies with Raven."

The waitress returned with two steaming mugs and left the table. "I only hope we haven't given him ammunition to do something really foolish."

"We? You're the one who got us off on the wrong foot here, not me," Leia said, calmly taking a drink and watched as her husband's face screwed into an indignant frown. She noted the gray hairs that dotted her husband's temple and the few extra wrinkles that lined Han's face.

"Me? Me? You're the one who insisted we come here. I just assumed you'd want to get right to the point, being your time is so valuable and all, your worshipfulness," Han said, maintaining his straight face.

Leia's mouth dropped open. "Stop calling me that you scruffy-looking nerfherder!"

Han beamed at his wife, eyes dancing with merriment as he replied, "Absolutely, your Highnessess."

Leia groaned and squeezed her husband's hand affectionately. Mood feeling lighter, Leia only hoped that her son would not find himself seriously disappointed with his new girlfriend. And she prayed her worries about Raven's stability would be unfounded.

Jaina and Marxx raced across the plaza after abruptly ending their impromptu meeting with the locals. Sensing a rising anger from her twin, the couple rushed off to meet up with Jacen. Storming out of the café, Jacen nearly plowed over his twin as she leapt in front of his path.

"Hey! Jacen, what's the matter?" Jaina said as she fell into step beside him. Jacen grumbled to himself and failed to notice his twin.

"*JACEN!*" Marxx yelled from behind his friend.

"*WHAT?*" Jacen shouted as he wheeled around on Marxx right fist clenched. Marxx jumped back. Startled out of his reverie, Jacen gazed at the shocked expressions of his sister and best friend. He loosened his fist and collapsed on a nearby bench Jacen dragged his fingers through his hair as his hardhat clattered onto the cobbled tiles. He whimpered, "I'm sorry."

Sitting next to her twin, Jaina rubbed her hand across his back. "What's troubling you, Jace?" Marxx squatted on the ground in front of him at eye level.

Staring up at Marxx, Jacen asked, "Did Raven kill people on her ship?"

Jaina stared on confused. Marxx licked the inside of his mouth and nodded his head. "Yeah, ah... she had some serious anger control problems when she was in charge of her ship. She went around Force choking people who fell behind in their duties." Jaina's startled expression, and Jacen's look of despair spurned him on. "I saw their deaths in the memories she sent me...."

"So Mom was right," Jacen said interrupting Marxx. "She was a cold-blooded killer."

Marxx's pool-blue eyes met his friend's red rimmed eyes, "She despised herself every time she did it. She'd go into her room afterwards and get violently sick and cry herself to sleep. She loathed what she had become. Jace, you saved her from her from a life she hated. She's not that person anymore...you know that... I know that... and *she* certainly knows that. You can't give up on her. She needs your support more than anything right now."

After beginning the day miserable, then the conversation with his parents, Jacen sensed himself coming to the brink of a full on bawling fit. Jaina picked up on her twin's growing despair and decided to try to brighten the mood. She said. "Come on Jace, you have nothing to worry about. Raven will do everything in her power to return to you. You know why?"

"Why?" he replied meekly as he forced down a lump in his throat.

"Because she's head over heels in love with you. She told me as much while we were planning my wedding. You are her beacon when she's training. Continue to support her and give her your unconditional love, and she will succeed." A sly grin etched her pink lips. "The sooner she can get done

training, the sooner you two can get married.”

“If she’s successful.”

Jaina grabbed his chin and resolutely stared at him, “No, *when* she’s successful.”

A lopsided grin formed on Jacen’s face as his faith in his beloved renewed and cemented in his heart. “Right. Absolutely. Nothing to worry about.”

Marxx stood up, his knees popping. He slightly grimaced at the noise. “Come on, want to go help us find some files in the file room?”

“Sure,” Jacen said. The three stood up and headed across the plaza towards the new left wing and towards the records room. As they neared the newer construction, conversation shifted and Jacen felt his anxieties and worries slip from his mind. He wrapped an arm around his sister’s shoulders and joined in as the newlyweds laughed over a silly joke, feeling entirely better and more sure of his future than ever before.

Chapter 7

After dinner with the parents, the Solo children returned to Anakin and Jacen’s apartment. Jacen and Anakin crashed in the living room. Anakin flipped on the holonet seeking a sports game to watch. Jacen scowled in deep concentration over the dinner. Marxx and Jaina battled with him to even get him to agree to spend an evening with his parents. Having been outnumbered he chose to sit as far away from his parents as possible. The meal proved to be tense with Jaina and Marxx acting as the lively conversation mediators. When Han and Leia left to return to Coruscant, Jacen refused to wish them goodbye. Although stung by his rebuke, Leia and Han left for home to allow Jacen to come to terms with things in his own time.

Jaina and Marxx went into Jacen’s bedroom and changed out of their afternoon attire and into more comfortable clothing. Exiting the bedroom, Jaina finished shoving her white tank top into a pair of her old, now faded and worn looking Rogue Squadron flight pants, when her eyes met chaos. Jaina wrinkled her nose at the takeout debris that littered the room. Piles of discarded news pads lay all over the place and empty glasses piled on the tables. Anakin lounged in a reclining chair as he flipped through channels on the holonet and Jacen sat staring at the walls. Both appeared to be oblivious to the mess.

“Mom should give you guys C-3PO. You’re living like a couple of Hutts in here. Have you no respect for an orderly home?” Jaina asked and squirmed at the sight of one of the containers still containing remnants of a meal.

“Blame Anakin...he leaves all this junk everywhere,” Jacen said snapping out of his daydream.

“And what, you’re incapable of cleaning?” Jaina asked, hands on hips.

“Do I look like his maid?” Jacen replied indignantly while pointing at his chest.

“Anakin, we’re not sitting in here or touching anything until you clean up this mess!

“What mess?” Anakin absently replied, frowning at his sister’s noise over the holonet. He turned up the volume.

“What mess? Turn on your visual scanning, laserbrain! We need this place spotless in here so we can get these papers out and hopefully not damage them any further,” Jaina said and with the assistance of the Force snapped off the holonet.

“Hey!” Anakin moaned. Then he turned into Jaina’s fiery gaze and rolled his eyes. “Fine!” After twenty minutes of intense cleaning, they found the rest of the boy’s furniture. Jaina conveniently hid the holonet remote as they laid out their piles of files they had removed from the archives room.

After Raven’s men knocked over the cabinets in the records vault a large cleanup operation took place to attempt to restore it back into working order. When the trio had arrived at the file room earlier, they found a large container towards the front door that held the remains of hundreds of disintegrated papers from the time of cleanup. Although the filing droids worked meticulously to attempt to properly keep the papers complete and in order, many of the older, more fragile paper files, simply fell apart on contact. The file room was now in order and properly cataloged again. To the naked eye appeared to have never been touched, however upon a cursory inspection of the files, Marxx and Jaina noted that many of the papers did appear to be missing pieces, or large corners of the paper had simply ripped off or fell apart. They worried about removing them from the relatively safe environment controlled room, but figured if the files fell apart in there, it really didn’t matter where if they removed the papers.

Jacen flipped through the earliest of the files for the Palpatines. “So what are we looking for?”

“Anything that would explain why my Grandmother was such a mystery,” Marxx replied. “Course things might be tough with the records being incomplete now.”

Anakin grabbed a couple files and glanced his blue eyes inquiringly at Marxx, “Didn’t you already look at these things a while ago?”

Marxx held the most recent datapad in his hand and gazed back at his brother-in-law. He replied, “I briefly looked through them when I realized that my grandmother’s maiden name was Palpatine. I stupidly left all the Palpatine files in there though instead of removing them.”

“And how were we supposed to predict that Raven’s men would have done that to the files?” Jaina asked, placing a reassuring hand on her husband’s knee. “Don’t beat yourself up over it.”

Jacen winced at the mention of Raven’s crew’s actions. He said, “Well hopefully we can figure something out. Why do you want all these old files as well as the current ones? Shouldn’t you be able to get the info you need just from the earlier ones?”

Grinning, Marxx said, “Yeah, I probably could, but you know, I’m nosy. I don’t know anything about this side of my family. I just want to see if there’s anything interesting.”

“This is gonna be a long night, isn’t it?” Anakin asked, letting out a long, loud sigh.

“Yup,” Marxx replied. “This’ll probably take all week to go through these things properly.”

“Course it’ll seem a lot shorter if you just stop your whining,” Jaina said as she passed around non static gloves that everyone put on for when handling the paper files.

Anakin balked and stared at his older sister indignantly, “Hey, I represent that remark!”

Everyone giggled and then got down to work.

Kyp paced in the cabin of *The Fiery Phoenix*. Paralyzed by uncertainty, he stared at his ship controls trying to decide what to do. His final, private conversation with Master Skywalker prior to leaving Naboo about Raven surged to the foreground in his mind.

“I want you to contact me immediately if she does anything that remotely compromises your ability to teach her,” Luke sternly said, his blue eyes bearing up at Kyp.

Kyp shuffled lightly under his Master’s stern gaze, “Absolutely, Master Skywalker. The last thing I would want is for my personal safety to be compromised.”

“Leia had to bend over backwards to get this deal arranged. The slightest problem...”

“I understand completely, Master. I will contact you immediately if I think she’s not responding to the training,” Kyp replied.

An attempted Force-choke definitely should be qualified as a deal breaker, Kyp thought glumly. Then he remembered Raven curled up in a fetal position under that tree and their conversation afterwards. He just couldn’t believe or think that she couldn’t change. She was positively horrified by her actions.

He continued to pace.

Master Skywalker needs to know about this. She’s obviously got some emotional instability issues that I don’t know if I can help her through. Master Skywalker might be able to give me some tips on what to do, he mused.

Then he stopped mid pace and realized the error of that train of thought. I can’t tell Master Skywalker about this, if I do, he’ll command for us to come back and they’ll throw her in jail. He’ll see ME as a failure. He still sees me that way, I think. For all that he’s nice to me, I think he still doesn’t trust me... Well, who can blame him? Look at what I did...

Kyp stopped and ran his hands over his face as guilt embraced his tormented soul. All those people, dead. Because of me...including... NO! I can’t do this to myself. I’ve put that behind me. I’ve changed.

A little voice whispered to him “You’ll never change. No one will ever really forgive you for what you did.”

That’s not true! Han forgave me. I needed a lot of time to heal. But I have healed. I’m just...scarred... I

can't turn her in. I... I understand her pain. I lived her pain. That's why Master Skywalker gave me this assignment in the first place. She can change, I know it. She wants to change... I can feel that she does. She just doesn't understand how to do it. I need to show her.

The little voice snorted, "And how are you going to help her do that, when you can't even forgive yourself?"

"How indeed?" Kyp asked, his deep voice trailing off into his empty cabin. *I just need to help her to refocus her energies, and try to help her to get through her anger. I know it'll be tough but I think I can do it. How do I do that? Does she trust me enough? How do I know if she's telling me the truth?*

The voice slyly said, "You know where she is right now?"

What does that have to do with anything? he thought indignantly, shaking imagined images out of his mind; images he had no business fantasizing about. *She worked hard today and deserves her bath time. Bless the Force, she deserves any and all of her free time away from me.*

"You're falling for her. Admit it."

Kyp stopped mid pace. Ever since they'd arrived on Dagobah, he'd done everything in his power to not even let those words cross his mind. He feared them- even more than failure on his mission. Yet his mind wove through his memories, and he remembered the first time he laid eyes on his apprentice; it was on her ship, after she'd been shot. Her skin an unhealthy blue, still didn't hide her beauty. His heart constricted at the sight of her profile- she looked like a wounded porcelain statue. When she awoke and he saw her gazing at herself in her mirror in the hospital room, he believed he'd just laid eyes on an angel, resurrected from the dead.

Raven's beauty haunted his soul. At night, he'd dream of her icy blue eyes, her defined, muscular arms wrapped tightly around him, and he'd allow himself to be happy. For once in his life, in his dreams, he felt alive and free. He found someone who understood his personal pain and remorse. Then he'd wake up and reality always crashed into focus. She is Jacen's girl. How could he ever think of hurting the son of the only man he considered to be a real friend? His only friend. Jacen deserved to be happy. Kyp thought of how his apprentice would perk up when he'd deliver to her a new holonote from Jacen. She'd squeal in delight and race off to listen to it in private. Just thinking of him, made her face light up. She looked as if she'd swallowed the sun. Her love for Jacen illuminated her being.

He dug his fingers into his closed eyes and temple, *I can never compete with that. She loves him, completely... If I want to ever repay society for my past transgressions, the only way I can do that is by bringing that girl back to Jacen. I will not interfere, regardless of how... much...it hurts.*

Kyp tasted salt on his lips and noticed he'd shed a few tears. He scrubbed at his eyes and headed to the holoemitter and set it to record.

"Master Skywalker, things are moving along here. Yesterday Raven lifted me up from my seated position and spun me around like a rock. She has excellent control over the Force. I sense her coming a bit around more each day. She still awakes with nightmares, and we discuss them. She seems to be willing to face her errors and move on. Raven is trusting me more and more each day. I'm just pleased about our progress. I'll send my next report tomorrow, same time. Over." Kyp clicked off the recorder and before he could change his mind he transmitted it, sending it off in the galaxy towards its intended

party. He lowered his head in his meaty hands as his body began to shake. The magnitude of his omission to Master Skywalker unsettled his stomach.

May the Force be kind to me if I'm wrong about this, he thought unhappily.

Raven luxuriously massaged shampoo through her long hair as she stood in the middle of the foggy, bathing lake. Prior to bringing Raven to Dagobah, Kyp discovered this pool, a half a mile from the hut, and determined the private setting would make it perfect as their bathing area. After listening to Master Skywalker's story about the lake creature that swallowed R2-D2, he made several tests to determine that nothing lived in the lake and verified the water was clear enough for them to use to clean themselves. They set up schedules on when they could swim and bathe without worrying about the other stumbling in on the other. Raven preferred to swim in the late evening. Then she could wash up after her physical exertions throughout the day. She liked the soothing sounds of the night creatures as they emerged from their daily slumber to act as her natural music. She worked through all of the knots in her hair and then gently bent her knees, closed her eyes, and sunk backwards into the water. She lightly kicked and rung her fingers through her hair to release the shampoo. After a few more dunks and when she could readily make her hair squeak clean, she began to backstroke across the lake. Her hair swished and clung to her body as the cool water tingled and cleansed every inch of her exposed skin.

In the beginning she used to wear her bather, completely terrified that Master Durrion would barge in on her while she attempted to bathe. In that regard, he had proved himself to be the perfect gentleman and ignored her completely when she took off towards the pond. Now she allowed herself the liberating sensation of bathing naturally.

Her mind lingered to the lovely holonote message that Jacen had transmitted to her last night.

"Hi Sweetheart," Jacen said, smiling into the camera. "Today Jaina and Marxx came to town and we began searching for information on your Grandmother. Apparently, your brother is quite intent on discovering her secrets. We'll all probably be up all night sifting through the hundreds of files on the Palpatine family. They've been on Naboo for eons and were apparently very prolific in producing children in the past. We've already determined that your grandmother came from a family of fifteen children! The fascinating thing is that her brother, who became the Emperor, was the only male in the entire clan. He was the first born and then had fourteen baby sisters come after him.... I wonder if that had anything to do with how he created the Empire. Women had no place in his military world. Maybe he deeply hated women. I don't know. Hopefully we'll get a lot of information on him, and your grandmother in those files.... Anyway, many of the early files have disintegrated so we're hoping that important information won't be lost forever. I'll keep you informed on what we find."

Jacen's face clouded, as if an unpleasant memory just surfaced in his mind. "I want you to know that I'm very proud of you for what you've accomplished so far. I know that deciding to trust Master Durrion was not an easy decision for you. But trust does need to be established in order for you to successfully complete your training. I miss you terribly." He peered over his shoulder as if verifying he was alone and continued, "My heart aches for you. I miss everything about you, the feel of your silky skin, the smell of your hair, the way your soft lips press against mine... I want everything to turn out right for us... for you. I know that you can conquer any demons you have to face. I only wish I was

there to help to battle them with you...I feel sometimes as if I'm failing you somehow by not being there at your side. I only hope that Kyp can offer you the support you need to complete your mission successfully... Just know you have a huge support group here cheering you on. I'd better go. Jaina and Marxx are going to show up soon to start the quest for your grandmother. I miss you. I love you. Come back to me safe." Jacen then blew her a kiss and the image shut off.

Stroking her shoulders and arms through the water a smile formed on Raven's full lips. She loved Jacen's reports. His notes reminded her a world existed outside her murky, swamp prison. His words warmed her heart and made it quicken its pace. She closed her eyes as she kicked in the water and remembered the warm Nubian sun kissing her body as she lay beside her love in their meadow on one of the afternoons after helping with wedding plans. Her entire life, Raven never had another soul to confide her about her feelings or worries. She never made friends. From that moment lying on the table next to him on *The Vengeance* when Raven decided to trust him, her heart opened and she willingly exposed its contents to the handsome young man. Jacen, her love. Just thinking his name sent shivers of happiness through her body. She still often wondered what possessed her to change her mind. She'd trapped her heart closed, locked like a precious jewel in a vault. Was it his smile? His kind words? Or the fact he listened without passing judgment on her? She didn't know for sure. She only knew that deciding to trust Jacen was the best decision of her life. Raven Darkglider ceased to exist, and Raven Racees re-emerged out of darkness.

Who is Raven Racees? She realized that was the question of the hour. *Now that Jacen saved me from my empty existence, who am I? Obviously I cannot erase my past completely. My past helped make me who I am today,* she mused. Her face darkened with despair. *What can I salvage out of my empty, lonely past, to help me with my future?*

As her arms and legs churned through the water and mist, Raven thought about herself when she grew up. Images of physical abuse flared, then of emotional abuse. Her grandmother and Darkglider both delighted in dishing out abuse to her in either form. Throughout the pain though, one thing remained constant in Raven's mind: hope. Hope that she could escape her miserable existence. Hope that she could be free of the pain. And somewhere, deep in her subconscious, she always hoped to find her loving family again and re-enter their fold. She shivered with happiness as she realized her days of loneliness were at an end. Now even across the galaxy, she could feel her twin's happiness with his life and his new wife. As she recalled being at the wedding, she realized that was the happiest day of her life. Shortly after she and Jacen returned from their rendezvous on the cliff, Marxx spent a short time with her before he and Jaina left on their honeymoon.

Marxx's suit jacket rested on the back of the chair in the living room of his wedding morning suite as he stared across at his sister. Raven sat on the couch in the same place their father had been hours before when he gave Marxx a pre-wedding pep talk.

The corner of Marxx's lip curled up as he regarded Raven's disheveled appearance.

"I feel horrible that you're going to be apart from us for six months. We just got you back and have a lifetime to catch up on," Marxx said, his pool blue eyes looking intently into her eyes.

Raven lowered her gaze to the floor. Her voice grew heavy as she stated, "I have a lot to atone for. I don't blame Master Skywalker for sending me off into seclusion. I deserve it."

Marxx peaked an eyebrow and replied, "You know that I know what you did. You sent me all your

memories back on your ship...Raven, look at me.” Raven nervously met her twin’s gaze. Marxx reached out and grabbed her right hand and held it tightly in both of his palms. “I don’t blame you for what you did. I’m amazed you had the strength to go on and keep living after all of the things life threw at you.... I want you to know something. I am going to make it my mission... my sole purpose to find out all that I can about Grandmother Palpatine.” He snorted, “Sorry, I refuse to call that evil woman a Brannoush- she disgraced our family name. I can only hope that I can find something to help give you some kind of closure. She was, unjustly cruel to you. And I don’t blame you for using the only weapons, your fear and anger, that you had at your disposal to try and combat her cruelty.”

Withdrawing one of his hands he pushed a clump of hair out of Raven’s face and saw her eyes begin to turn red. Marxx fought down a rising lump as tears began to well in his eyes. He continued, “I’m genuinely thrilled and excited to have you back in my life. I feel as though I’ve found another half of myself that had been missing for many years. I will be there for you...always.”

Unable to speak, Raven got up and launched herself at her twin. The two embraced and sobbed into each others shoulders. When Raven finally composed herself she pulled away and knelt on the floor in front of her brother. Her large ice blue eyes pleaded up to him and she said, “I won’t fail you, Marxx. I need you as much as you need me... probably even more so.” She let out a small laugh and wiped a tear from her face with the back of her hand. “This is silly. Come on groom, let’s wipe that sad frown off of your face. You have a nervous bride waiting for you out there. Let’s not keep her waiting any longer.”

They stood and Marxx reached over and grabbed something off of his pile of luggage. It was his brown Jedi robe. “Here put this on. Nobody will notice your stains on your dress.”

“You don’t need it?” She asked, uncertain.

Marxx laughed, “I’m going on my honeymoon, dear sister, on a beach planet. I certainly hope I don’t need that robe.”

They both giggled and left the room arm in arm.

Raven’s smile from the memory changed to a frown as she recalled the incident from yesterday. Tears appeared in her eyes as she realized how closely she could have already failed on Dagobah. An icy dagger of fear crept in her heart.

Raven thought as she treaded water, I wonder if Master Durrion will report the incident to Master Skywalker. If he does, I’m finished...to be sent to prison... forever. I’ll never see Jacen again. His family will never allow Jacen to associate with a criminal. Why did I do that? Why did I delve into my anger and nearly choke Kyp?.... Because I hate her. I hate her more than anything. All those years I thought I was pleasing her by turning myself into a vengeful puppet, and really she couldn’t have cared less. Even when I acted as her perfect servant, she still hated me....belittled me...berated me. She wouldn’t pay for my surgery to make me whole, even though I made her millions in credits. She told me the operations were impossible, that I could never be healed. She used me! She waited until I was nearly dead before she finally relented in buying me that blasted mask and respirator! And she loved it. It meant she didn’t have to see my discolored lips and face anymore. She could forget that I was sick. I HATE HER! Raven’s tears burned in her eyes as they trailed down her face. Despair gripped her soul as body wracking sobs began to form in her chest. I need to get over this obsession. I can never get on and become a Jedi if I still allow myself to hate. Jedi’s are rational and clear minded. Normal people

even don't allow their emotions to rule them. If they do, their actions can have devastating consequences.

Images swirled in her mind. Contorted, red faces of the seven men she killed in anger flared screaming in rapid succession through the rising mist. Her mother falling to the ground after being hit by the dart. She then thought of the satisfied expression on Hydin's face when he shot her before her world went black. All of those people suffered from her anger. Her rage. Her power. And Kyp... guilt gnawed at her stomach.

Sobbing, she stood up in the pool and covered her face with her hands. She allowed herself to cry until she felt emotionally spent. Then when she felt she couldn't cry any longer, Raven stared into the darkened evening, determination etched on her face. *I'm going to win this battle. I may never be able to completely atone for the pain I caused earlier in my life, but I can live a just and good life for the future... I have all the reasons in the world to succeed.... How do I do that?* She placed her hands on her hips and chewed on the inside of her cheek. The answer beckoned to her and she faced it head on. *I need to learn to let go of my anger to my grandmother. Only when I do that, only when I learn how to... forgive her, can I ever truly heal..... Blast! This isn't going to be easy.* Her cheeks flushed at just the thought of the woman she despised. *I truly hate her. But know what? My love for Jacen is stronger. That has got to be my starting point.* With that she nodded her head. Bending her knees she leaned back and immersed herself completely in the water again. When she emerged, she felt refreshed. Her soul lightened as the water cleansed away her tears and pain, leaving her newly charged and invigorated. She walked out of the water and dressed, ready to face her Master and start the newest chapter in her life. Energized, she welcomed the oncoming battle with the demons that currently separate her from her destiny.

Chapter 8

Shiurria and Lyamar sat on a dewy hill outside of the barracks gazing up at the star filled, cool night on Hapes 8. New cadets to the Hapan military, they discovered each other during basic training. Never before had they thought that their simple love of their planetary cluster and their fierce loyalty to wish to protect it would end in their finding personal love as well. They laced their fingers as they picked out moving objects amongst the stars trying to determine if they were their local patrol dragon ships, or far off ships passing by in the night.

Shiurra's thick, short, black hair brushed against Lyamar's muscular shoulder. He inhaled her fragrance. His heart swelled at the sight of his lady love.

"We should be getting back soon. Last thing we want is to get court marshaled," he said, not moving.

"I know," Shiurra's dark eyes glistened in the starlight. She stared back up to the dark void and gasped. Together they jerked upright, gripped by terror. Outside the upper atmosphere, large brilliant explosions lit up the sky. Systematically each one of the dozen patrol ships they had earlier detected flashed violently out of existence. The debris from the destroyed vessels fell in fiery trails, like golden streaming fireworks, towards the planet below. Bolting to their feet, the young lovers raced towards the barracks. As they stood outside the door, Shiurria glanced back up into the sky. Before her eyes, the blackened sky shimmered and from nothingness, a large Dellaltian attack cruiser uncloaked. Lyamar tightly embraced his love and they locked their lips as their entire world vanished into a fiery blaze.

Dawn's first light mocked in welcome of a new day onto Hapes. The red orb bathed the capital Fountain Palace in a bloody light. The clouds absorbed the fiery light like weeping bandages in the sky.

No amount of makeup could perfectly conceal the dark circles that surrounded Queen Ta'a Chume's haunted eyes. Tenal Ka watched her grandmother silently from across the room. The Queen's face in the last couple weeks had changed from stern and resolute to gaunt and wrinkled. The stress of the attacks began to physically wear on her appearance. The older woman aged ten years, practically overnight. Tenal Ka barely recognized her resilient grandmother.

General Margatall waited patiently for the Queen to respond to his report.

"There is nothing left of the training post?" Ta'a Chume asked, in her commanding voice.

"No, my Queen. They burned it completely to the ground. There's now only a large crater where the facility had been," the General replied, his adam's apple bobbed as he choked on the words.

"How many lives?"

"With two dozen dragons destroyed and the entire cadet compound as the targets, casualty estimates are approximately two thousand. None of the planetary sensors even detected the vessels, even when they opened fire on the patrol ships. That leads us to believe they entered the system using cloaking devices," Margatall reported.

"Thank you, General. You can leave us now," Queen Ta'a Chume replied. The General saluted the Queen and then left the room.

Alone with only her granddaughter as audience, the Queen silently moved to her large throne chair and shrank into the soft cushions. Her wrinkled, shaking hands snaked up to her cover face. Tenal Ka furrowed her brows as she heard her grandmother cry. She smoothed the silk fabric on her teal gown, stood up, and walked to the window. In the glass Tenal Ka analyzed her reflection. Her hair hung loose in waves down her back. Sitting atop her head rested a sparkling tiara. Her scoop-necked dress hung loosely down her body. She looked every bit of her royal heritage.

Her grandmother's sobbing distracted her thoughts. She decided to try to refocus Ta'a Chume.

"Grandmother, why do we no longer have any spies infiltrating the Dellaltian court?" Her gray eyes stared out across the manicured gardens located outside the Fountain Palace walls.

Ta'a Chume swallowed and cleared her throat. She replied, "Clawdites demand a very high price for their services. The physical strain of altering their appearances into Dellaltian's form tends to shorten their lifespans. When we signed our treaty with them over fifty years ago, they ceased to be a threat... we ceased to see a reason to keep a spy in place... Obviously that was a bad decision."

Tenal Ka considered the reasoning. The Dellaltian physiology would be difficult to reproduce. They were a race of black furred, scaled, fanged creatures with bulky bodies. It would take a lot of energy for

a Clawdite to maintain their personal appearance.

Clawdite shapeshifters were also notoriously unreliable as informants. Always impossible to catch due to their natural biological ability, they would gladly ditch an assignment half way through if a new job appeared that would pay them more. Tenal Ka replied, "That makes sense. I am curious why you would have ceased to use the spies though. Do you not always tell me wise is the one who keeps her enemies closest?" She turned and faced the older woman. Tenal's heels lightly tapped against the cold marble floor, sending light echoes throughout the room.

Ta'a Chume didn't reply. She regarded her granddaughter. She looked at her as if for the first time. Stern and serious, Tenal Ka wore her dignity well. As she paced across the room, back straight in her long gown, she perfectly fit the part of a Queen. The real question remained, personal appearance aside, was she mentally ready to assume the role?

Settling into her own throne, Tenal Ka stared at her grandmother, she said, "Tell me about the Dellaltians, from before they signed the treaty."

The Queen sunk back into her chair and steepled her fingers together. Clearing her throat she began, "The Dellaltians are a warrior race of beings. They live to fight and they excel in creating weapons of war. Over a hundred years ago a planet deep in the Corporate Sector called Nephron discovered a huge amount of pure iron ore on their planet. They dug up every bit of it and sold it all over the galaxy during the days of the Old Republic. The Nephronians established the Perlemian Trade Route that travels past both the Hapes Cluster and those who lived in our neighboring Tion Cluster of planets. For years the Dellaltians prospered in trading with the Nephronians. They never bothered us. Then as Nephron died as a planet, the Dellaltians became desperate and attacked us. They believed that they could further their trade empire if they expanded their territory."

The Queen cracked her knuckles and grinned viciously, "We mercilessly battled them into submission. The Hapan military might blew away their pitiful armed forces. When the Old Republic fell, the Dellaltians found a new ally to sell their wares to. They sold heavily to the Empire. They became the largest manufacturer of ion cannons in the Galaxy. I suppose that with the Empire now gone, and the trade route getting a lot less traffic than it did in years past, that our neighbors are feeling the economic crunch. They are probably repeating history."

The titian haired young woman tilted her head and said, "Yes, the New Republic does not need any new ion canons. I can see why they would be in economic trouble. Their plight is resulting in devastating consequences to our military and people. We need to find out exactly why they are attacking us. We need to open a line of communication with our enemies."

"All of our efforts at communicating with them have failed. They refuse to listen to us. They deny that they've had anything to do with the attacks even though we have physical evidence," Ta'a Chume replied.

Tenal Ka balled her fist on her chair's armrest, "Then they need to be made to listen to us. We need a third party negotiator to intervene. It appears that they've been patiently waiting to execute their revenge upon our system. If they are using cloaking technology, our military forces could get obliterated completely in a mere matter of days or weeks. We need to move on this quickly."

"And who would we get to willingly go talk to those monsters on our behalf?" Ta'a Chume asked,

watching her granddaughter with great interest.

“A Jedi. In the past, the Jedi used to act as the guardians of Peace in the Old Republic. Their job was to settle disputes within the Republic. Master Skywalker would gladly assign someone to assist us in our time of need... Should I contact him?” Tenal asked.

“I certainly hope you are not implying that person should be you. You are too valuable....”

“Of course I am not implying that I should go. That would be foolish. I would make for a perfect hostage. I have no intention of putting myself in that situation,” Tenal Ka replied, her eyes flaring with annoyance.

Ta’a Chume massaged her lower lip and sized up her granddaughter. Her suggestion was excellent. A smile crested her lips for the first time in many days. “Well then, that is a great idea. When it is at a reasonable hour, please give Master Skywalker a call.”

The princess stood up. “Very well. I am going to go meditate for a while. I will let you know the results of our conversation later.”

“Thank you, Tenal Ka. I’ll talk to you later. Get some rest,” Ta’a Chume replied. As she watched her granddaughter leave the room Ta’a Chume smiled slyly. *Although I know I have many years left of rule in me, I know it is time to pass the torch. This conflict couldn’t have come along at a better time to completely ensnare that young girl and force her into her rightful place. When this is all said and done, she will be Queen, and will never think twice about being a pitiful Jedi again.*

Removing her tiara, Tenal Ka stared at herself in her full-length mirror. The young Jedi Warrior, while watching her grandmother this morning, realized that her time of taking up the Hapan crown had arrived. Ta’a Chume appeared to have lost her ability to detach herself emotionally from the effects of war. The princess thought about her decisions in life in training as a warrior. She now understood how crucial that training, the seriousness of her nature, would be useful in becoming a ruler. Tenal Ka closed her eyes and inhaled the sweet smell of calming incense. She suddenly no longer felt that rule would be a burden, but found the prospect inviting and interesting. She opened her eyes rested then on the stump of her arm. *If I am going to become ruler of the Cluster, I will most likely need that cybernetic arm attachment. People will most likely see me as... defective... if I only have one arm. They must trust me completely. I must set aside my pride in order to gain the respect of my people.* Tenal sighed and made a mental note to contact the physicians. *It will be done then.*

She walked over to her bed and sat down cross-legged. She cleared her mind and focused on the energy from around her walls, and outside the Palace. Ta’a Chume’s misery and pain flared through the Force. Teanal Ka sank deeper into the Force as the details of her plan snapped into focus.

Jacen is the best negotiator out of all of the Jedi. When I ask for assistance, Master Skywalker naturally will send him to help us with our dispute. A sly smile tugged at the corners of her lips, *Then when I get Jacen here, he will see me as a queen in training, and realize again why he loved me from so long ago. He will see how strong I am, and he will realize he wants to be with me and not... her.*

Tenal Ka flopped back on her bed and began to softly giggle. She whispered, “This is a fact.”

Exasperation marred Luke's face as he held the spoonful of oats in front of Ben's face. The boy sat in his chair, arms crossed, lips securely sealed and brows furrowed. Around the dining area, splatters of oats stuck like webs onto the walls.

"Come on Ben, you're too old for this! Big boys eat their breakfast. You don't want to be a baby, now do you?" Luke asked, lightly Force pushing the suggestion to his stubborn son.

Ben's face contorted into a scowl that almost brought a grin to Luke's face. It was a mirror image of one of Mara's favorite expressions whenever she felt she wasn't about to get her way on something.

"Don't like. Won't eat!" Ben said. "Where's Mommy? Mommy make it good."

Luke let out a long breath, calming his splitting nerves, and wished he could make Mara materialize out of thin air. "Ben, you know Mommy's been away for a few days. You're stuck with Daddy. She'll be back later today."

"Want Mommy!" Ben scrunched his nose down into a large pout.

"I know Ben, so do I. Mommy's not going to be very happy if you don't eat though. You need to keep your strength up if you're going to be a big boy," Luke said, eyebrows peaking over his pale blue eyes. Ben grabbed out with his small fist and grabbed the spoon. For the briefest of moments Luke sensed victory, then jumped as the oats splattered into a goeey mess on his cheek. Ben's eyes opened wide as he realized he'd accidentally hit his father instead of the wall.

You faced a Rancor Monster and Darth Vader and kept your cool. Maintain your patience. He doesn't know any better; Luke thought as he fought down an urge to scream. He casually stroked the back of his hand across his face and removed the gunk. Ben grabbed his bowl and spoon and began shoving heaping oats into his mouth. Sensing possible punishment, he ate without complaint.

Luke stalked over to the kitchen and washed his face. *Oh well, if it got him to eat, it's a small price to pay.* From the living room he heard the holo-emitter chime. Checking one last time on his son's bobbing red head, he left the room. He flicked on the emitter and saw Tenal Ka in full royal Hapan dress.

"Good morning Tenal Ka! This is a pleasant surprise," Luke said.

"It is good to see you too, Master Skywalker," Tenal Ka replied. Her eyes lingered to the Jedi Master's hair. He had something sticking in his dirty blond locks. She shifted her focus back on his face, "Do you have a moment? I need to discuss a situation with you."

"Certainly, Tenal Ka," he replied.

Tenal Ka went on to explain the recent attacks and the lack of communication from the Dellaltians. When finished she ended, "My grandmother and I were hoping that you would be willing to assign a Jedi Knight to come in on our behalf and attempt to open up communications with our neighbors and find out why they are attacking our system."

Nodding his head, Luke replied, "That sounds like an excellent idea, Tenal Ka. I'll be glad to assist you." He scratched his chin and thought for a few minutes, "I'll make arrangements and have your negotiator there as soon as possible."

With the slightest bob of her head, Tenal Ka replied, "Thank you, Master Skywalker. Your expediency in this matter would be greatly appreciated."

"May the Force be with you, Tenal Ka," Luke said.

"And may the Force be with you, Master Skywalker," Tenal Ka replied, slightly bowed her head and cut off her link. Only afterwards did she realize Luke never mentioned which knight he planned on sending to Hapes. She sighed and only hoped he knew to send Jacen.

Luke placed a hand to his hairline as names of his knights swirled in his head. A frown etched across his face as his palm met with some of the sticky oats. *Great, lovely impression to leave on one of my former students*, he thought as his face turned crimson. He got up, peered in at his son who obediently continued to devour his breakfast, and then headed for the refresher to make himself more presentable.

The holo-emitter chimed at the forsaken hour of seven. Jacen rolled out of bed and scrubbed his eyes awake. Having just gone to bed three hours ago after staying up into the wee hours going through a small fraction of Marxx's family files, Jacen felt far from caught up with his sleep. Groggy he flipped on the emitter and saw his Uncle's face appear.

"Good morning, Uncle Luke," Jacen said, yawning.

"Hi Jacen, did I wake you up?"

Jacen focused his eyes on his dressed and fully alert uncle, he yawned, "Yes, you did. But that's alright, what can I help you with?"

"Actually, I was looking for Anakin. Is he there?"

"Anakin? Sure, let me go wake him up," Jacen put the emitter on standby and padded down the hall towards his brother's room. He pounded on the frame and swished the door open. Anakin lay sprawled amongst his sheets snoring the sleep of the dead. Jacen stared at his younger brother, amused as his long legs and arms crept over the edges of his bed.

"Hey! Wake up, Anakin!" Anakin didn't move. Jacen flipped on the lights and gingerly stepped over piles of clothes towards his brother's bed. "Anakin!" No response. Jacen placed his hands on his hips and gazed around the disastrous room. On the bedside table he found a half-full water bottle. A devilish smile formed on his lips as he dumped the contents onto his brother's head.

Anakin jumped in a sputtering mess. He stared murderously at his older brother. Jacen cuffed him on the ear. "Uncle Luke wants to talk to you, he's on the emitter."

Jacen tore out of the room feeling Anakin's building rage. Scowling, Anakin emerged from his dripping

bed. Flipping his soggy comforter off, he mumbled, “He’s gonna pay for that.” Slicking back his hair Anakin flicked on his holo-emitter. “Hey, Uncle Luke.”

“Good morning, Anakin... Or is it?” Luke asked covering a smirk as he noted his nephew’s soggy appearance.

“I’m fine, what’s going on?”

“How would you like to travel to Hapes with me?” Luke explained the situation as Anakin quickly emerged from his slumber state.

“That sounds great! When do we go?”

“I need to wait for Mara to get back from some negotiating out in the Kathol Sector. She should be back later this evening. I’ll be on my way after that. Do you want to meet me at the Fountain Palace?” Luke asked.

“Sure, Uncle Luke. Sounds great. But why don’t you want Jacen to go with you? He’s the negotiator in our family?” Anakin asked.

Luke smiled at his younger nephew, “I think it’s time we find out where your strengths and weaknesses lie, Anakin. I have a feeling I could use your exceptional observation skills, even more than Jacen’s rational mind.”

“Ok,” Anakin said, feeling a bit confused, but resigned and happy to be given such an important assignment.

“I’ll see you there this evening. Just let them know I’ll be coming... Tenal Ka is probably only expecting one of us, so she may not have the authorization entry codes set for two Jedi arrivals,” Luke replied.

“No problem, see you later,” Anakin said.

“See you later,” Luke responded then ended his connection.

A large grin plastered over Anakin’s face. His bright blue eyes twinkled at the prospect of the new opportunity for further developing his negotiation skills. Eyeing his lightsaber, he gingerly picked it up and twirled the hilt nimbly in his fingers, “The question is, will we have normal, standard negotiations or will we have to launch into *aggressive* negotiations?” He posed in the center of his room, slicing his non-ignited saber in an arc. Then knowing the importance of his mission, he placed his lightsaber down and quickly began to pack.

Chapter 9

Blinding light encircled a looming black form. Shuffling back on hands and feet I try to escape. A loud clap fills the air. Blinding pain sears through my brain as stars erupt, clouding my vision. The world briefly fades to black as stinging, throbbing pain explodes across my cheek.....I try to move, no longer

paralyzed by indecision, but my body does not seem to comply with my wishes. Suddenly I am flung, crashing to the ground, breath ripped from my body. I can't breathe! My entire face glows in an excruciating, numbing pain..... (image morphs)she sits below me, hands outstretched, cowering ...steam and the stink of engine oil permeate the air...power, rage, engulf my soul, it cries for revenge, thirsts for justice on all the wrongs that have recently entered my life....(image morphs) a woman stands over a baby crib, thermometer moving nimbly between long fingers. I watch as she places the device in the baby's mouth. She cries and the thermometer clatters to the ground. The woman curses, and flashes angry eyes at the baby, causing her to cry even louder.... (image morphs) A skeletal creature clasps on high voltage stun guards around my bony wrists. He manhandles me, bodily lifting me from my cowering position and laces the chain linking the cuffs over a post high in the wall. My arms burn from my body's weight, but even worse, my wrists cannot escape the sides of cuffs. I cannot reach the peg to try to relieve the unending, electrocuting shocks that rip through my body, causing me to writhe against the wall. Every nerve cell quivers and my blood boils. The stench of burning flesh stings my nose and somewhere in my clouded haze of pain, I know it is from my own wrists scalding from the cuff's heat...

Grabbing his wrists, Marxx gasped for air, crying out in pain, as he bolted upright in his bed. His nose recoiled from reeking, phantom traces of burning flesh. His entire back writhed in pain- as his nerves twitched in agony. Jaina, wide-eyed awoke next to him and gazed with concern at her husband. Tears trailed down Marxx's face as a pain, heartache, unlike anything he'd ever experience before in his life gripped his heart. His hands tore up through his hair as he became engulfed by body-wracking sobs.

Placing her arms lovingly around Marxx's shrouded body Jaina pulled him close to her, enfolding him in her tight embrace. She gently cooed to him as she let the terrors of his nightmare run their course.

Slowly Marxx's senses returned to him, instead of burning flesh, he smelled his wife's sweet clean scent, and focused on the comforting, diffused light of their Theed apartment bedroom. Wiping away his tears, Marxx rested his head in his wife's lap and laced their fingers together. Softly he forced up each of her fingers so he could lightly kiss the pad on each tip.

Jaina patiently waited, stroking her hand through his damp, dark curly locks. His wild eyes refocused as the nightmare loosened its strangling hold.

Regaining his ability to speak, Marxx began, "When I was on Raven's ship, I felt lost, confused, disoriented. Partly from being sick, partly from grieving I nearly gave into the Dark Side and desperately wanted to...to...hurt Raven." A hand rubbed at his stubbled chin as fresh tears poured from his eyes. "She saved me by reconnecting our twin link- she sent me all of her memories from the past." His brows knitted together in despair, "For the most part, I mostly only remembered fleeting images, and feelings. I think I just relived a couple of her more frightening memories."

Marxx sat up and stared his wife in her brandy colored eyes. His hand gently caressed the soft skin of her cheek. She searched his haunted face, his blue eyes streaked with red lines. Marxx continued, "I don't know how my sister was able to survive after all that she went through. My grandmother, and some man abused her...physically... in ways that are unimaginable. She was a sick little girl! And they used her like a...like...like...she was nothing! Worthless!" Tears fell down his face again, "How can anyone do that to a person? How can a person be that cruel?"

Gazing at her husband supportively, Jaina lightly pushed a clump of hair from Marxx's forehead. She replied, "I don't know."

Marxx's gaze fell to their sheets, and he lowered his head. In a small voice, he said, "The scary thing is that in those brief moments on her ship, when rage and power consumed me...I... I could actually understand that feeling of dominating over another person. When you are powerless yourself, it is much easier to lash out against someone who is weaker, than simply facing your own problems and feelings."

Jaina wrapped her arms around Marxx tightly, crushing him to her breast. She sensed where his worries lied and said gently, "Yes, you faced that threshold, and then you refused to cross over it. Why? Because it isn't in your nature. Marxx you are a good man; a wonderful, loving man. I could never love someone who didn't appreciate life and love the way that you do. You respect everyone equally, you do not pass judgement on others... You are a true gem of a person. You have the greatest, sweetest soul in the galaxy. I love you because of that."

Choking down a sob, Marxx tightly encircled Jaina's waist. When he felt he could again speak he said, "Thank you... I didn't realize how tough things were going to be for my sister. She's got so much to deal with. She went through so much pain... I only hope she succeeds. I don't know if I could do it."

"What? Of course you could. You'd never back down from any kind of a fight- even if it was with your own conscious. You'd battle with any enemy that threatened the stability in your life. I can tell you this, from what I know of Raven, she's a fighter. And I don't mean that in the physical sense. She's got a toughness to her that will win against any nightmares she has to face. You have to have faith," Jaina said, looking her husband in the eyes.

"Right. She will make it," Marxx smiled. With that he flung his legs off of the bed and headed for the door. "I'm going to help her the only way I know how... there are still mountains of files to go through. Care to join me?"

Jaina threw off her cover and grabbed Marxx's outstretched hand, "Absolutely, darling. Besides, I'll gladly do anything I can do possibly help raise my twin's spirits." Marxx swept Jaina into his arms and lightly kissed his wife. She pulled her lips away, wrapped her arms tightly around his strong back. "Come on baby, let's go make some sense out of those files."

"You got it, M'lady."

Jacen's brief trip back to dreamland ended as a huge crashing sound jolted him out of sleep. He threw off his covers, yawned and poked his head down the hallway and stood in his brother's doorway. He wrinkled his nose at the stale smell of dirty laundry.

Piles of clothes rested chaotically all over Anakin's mountains of half finished machinery and droid projects. Much like his sister, Anakin understood the inner workings of machines instinctively. However, beyond Jaina's abilities, he could foresee mechanical problems that were not often apparent to the naked eye. The slightest tremors in machines or ships often alerted a part of Anakin's mind that allowed him to immediately diagnose the problem. His father loved it when Anakin rode on *The Millennium Falcon*, usually after a few minutes aboard the ship, he'd always manage to create a large list of onboard mechanical functions that needed checking. Oftentimes he liked to salvage dead droids and mechanical objects, drag them home and tease them back to life. However, like many gifted

people, Anakin tended to start an undertaking and then ignored it as a new more stimulating project enticed him away from his current task. Anakin's room, unfortunately, suffered from his sometimes scatterbrained ways.

Clothing and objects flew from unseen hands against the far wall. Jacen ducked as a hydrosprayer raced towards his head. He shouted, "HEY!"

A muffled voice muttered under the bed.

"What did Uncle Luke want?" Jacen asked, rubbing a hand through his hair.

Anakin peered up from the other side of his bed. "Have you seen my other boot?"

"No. Have you? Jaina's right, you do live like a Hutt," Jacen said, disgusted by his brother's mess.

"So sue me..." he said. Anakin stepped on his bed, head nearly touching the ceiling, walked over it and stood in the center of his room scanning over its entire contents carefully. Anakin appeared to be dressed completely except for one boot. He balled his hands into fists on his hips and chewed on his lower lip. A bright smile then etched on his face as he pointed to the ceiling, "Ah ha!" Anakin yanked out a large box full of spare computer components and rooted noisily around in it. Suddenly he extracted his very long boot, turned it on end and dumped, in a deafening clanking stream, a large pile of small transistors, chips, and loose parts back into the box.

Jacen shook his head, leaned against the doorframe, and crossed his arms across his broad, bare chest. He said, "I pity the woman you end up with."

Anakin sat down in a pile of clothes on his bed and laced up his boot. He stood up, shook his pants legs and looked himself up and down in the mirror. The tallest of the Solo children, Anakin towered over Jacen at 6'6". His dark brunette hair fell in shaggy drifts around his head. Bright blue eyes peered out from an open, boyishly handsome face. Anakin snatched up his Jedi robe causing four socks to flutter to the floor. Oblivious, he draped it around his shoulders.

"How do I look?" He asked, flashing his brother the Solo lopsided smile. He extended his arms out in a model pose, and tossed back his shoulders.

Jacen smirked, "You're a genuine Lando Calrissian. What's up?"

Anakin shot his brother an annoyed stare and finished shoving more clothes in his bag. Then he fastened it shut. He placed his hand on his hip, verifying he had his lightsaber. "I'm headed to Hapes."

"Hapes?" Jacen asked.

"Yeah, there's some kind of border dispute between the Hapes Cluster and their neighbors. Uncle Luke and I are going to try to help Tenal Ka and her grandmother out," Anakin said and walked towards the door.

Jacen furrowed his brows and said incredulously, "Uncle Luke is sending *you* to help with a border dispute? Why? You think negotiations should be best settled with blasters and lightsabers blazing, over diplomacy?"

Anakin grinned savagely, “Jealous?”

“No, I’m just curious is all. Tenal Ka’s homeworld is in serious jeopardy, why would Uncle Luke send you?” Jacen said, irritation entering his voice.

Anakin released an exasperated sigh and shrugged his shoulders. “Guess we’ll find out.” He stooped over and shoved a finger on his brother’s nose, “You know you’re still not off the hook for what you did to me this morning. When you least expect it, I’ll get you back.”

“Whatever,” Jacen said, not really caring about his brother’s threat. Anakin ducked his head down and exited his room. “You still didn’t answer my question.”

Anakin stalked down the hallway shifting his bag into his right hand. He wandered into the kitchen, unfastened his bag, shoved a couple of shurra fruit and a carbonated drink inside before resealing it again. He walked back into the living room and headed towards the door.

“I don’t know why Luke asked me and not you. I was rather surprised and asked him why he chose me instead of you. He didn’t really give me straight answer, something about figuring out my strengths,” Anakin shrugged. “Hopefully, I will be able to help in some way.”

Jacen grinned at his brother. Punching his brother’s right arm, Jacen replied, “You’ll do fine. Just be careful. And take care of Tenal Ka.”

Smirking, Anakin tousled his own hair and replied, “Right, because Warrior Princess, Tenal Ka really needs a man to take care of her. I think it’s more likely she’ll need to take care of me.”

The two brothers laughed. When they sobered up and Anakin opened the door, ducked down and exited into the hallway. Jacen said, “May the Force be with you, Anakin.”

“Thank you, Jacen. May the Force be with you...” a sly smile crept on his face, “And to Raven.”

Jacen smiled, “Thanks, bro. You’d better get going.”

As he began walking down the hall Anakin called out, “Tell Jaya and Marxx I’m sorry I can’t help them any longer.”

“Right. I’m sure that just breaks your heart. I just know how much you love paperwork,” Jacen said, grinning.

Anakin saluted his brother and headed down the hallway. Jacen watched his brother’s tall robed form disappear down the stairs and sent a silent prayer to the Force to help him on his journey.

Unrelenting, screaming wind crashed against the stone structure. Nemorasis refused to shiver or quake under the wind’s fury. Deep inside the structure, the figure wiped a bony finger under her nose. A computer terminal’s light brightened it’s ghastly white face, as her eyes darted over a series of news reports on recent activity in the Galaxy.

A datapad traveled back and forth through nimble, bony fingers. The datapad contained the answers to her prayers and the beginnings of her nefarious plans.

Red eyes scanned over a recent article concerning an unprovoked attack on a military training institution on Hapes 8. Unconfirmed reports indicated that the Hapes military suffered serious losses and appeared to be in danger of deteriorating.

The figure lurched to her feet and began to pace in the office. Square spots on the wall, revealed where paintings, now long removed had once proudly displayed. The figure continued to weave the datapad in and out between bony fingers.

Excellent. Everything is going as planned. Never in my wildest dreams could such a perfect girl fall into my hands. The datapad activated a photo of the titian haired girl from Jaina Solo's wedding. She was Tenal Ka, Royal Princess of the planet Hapes, and Jedi Knight.

The shrouded figure activated a map reader and wandered amongst the glowing stars, stopping under the Hapes Cluster. Red eyes calculated that the cluster was located a mere three parsecs from Nephron. *And the cluster is close to the Core Planets and Coruscant. Ta'a Chume is old. It appears she may even be ready to give up her throne. I think it is almost time to make her acquaintance... almost... but not yet. I don't think they are quite feeling the crunch of war... yet.*

The figure deactivated the map reader and shuffled back to the terminal. With a rasping thud, she sat back down and entered an encrypted communication. A deep, rasping cough echoed through the empty halls of Nemorasis as the figure composed a letter and transmitted it across the galaxy.

Yellowed fingernails tapped, waiting a reply. Then after several moments, the terminal beeped the arrival of the returned message for her first communiqué.

The figure pounced on the terminal and ran an encryption descrambler on the note.

The reply message read, *Your five hundred thousand units are ready and awaiting pickup. The next half million will be ready in six months. Please reply and let us know when you will be by to receive your order.*

A wicked smile jagged across cruel lips. The figure whispered, "Excellent... Soon, very soon... Everything is falling perfectly into place."

A cackling laugh reverberated through the walls of Nemorasis, silencing the howling wind outside with its bloodthirsty zeal.

Chapter 10

Through the swirling mist, Master and apprentice silently walked towards the practice field. To a degree each felt the weight of anticipation, with an undercurrent of worry. The brunette apprentice worried about losing control, again. And the Master worried his apprentice would begin to suspect his

growing attraction. He also worried that his growing attachment would cloud his ability to continue with his teaching. They entered their clearing and Raven stretched. Her long arms reached high into the air, hands grasping together, rolling the tension out of her sculpted shoulders. She climbed onto her tiptoes and then completely relaxed. Kyp watched her from behind, enjoying the view of Raven's lithe form.

"Are you sure you want to do this again?" Raven warily asked her Master.

"Of course I do, you're never going to make it as a Jedi if you back away from your fears. You need to face them, and conquer them. I have faith in you, Raven," Kyp said, as he selected a seat again on his fallen log. Raven searched her Master's face as she stood over him, legs apart, posture defensive. Kyp's green eyes met her uncertain stare as a small smile rested on his lips. Realizing he was being truthful, Raven gracefully melted onto the ground, legs crossed, arms casually draped across her knees.

"I've been doing some thinking," Raven began.

Kyp stared at her, interest piqued. Usually she just threw herself into her lessons and rarely wanted to just talk. His eyes wandered to her hair, again arranged in cornrows. From his bunk, last night, he'd silently watched her meticulously weave each braid into place as she hummed. He shut off the memory and focused on the girl. Her wide open, excited eyes itched to speak. He grinned and said, "What have you been thinking about?"

"My grandmother, and what I need to do to get past my anger towards her," Raven said. She lightly bounced her knees up and down from nervous, excited tension. "She really is the root of my problems. Well... ok... that's not true, my inability to control my anger is my main problem. *BUT*, she is the one who encouraged that behavior in me."

Raven jumped to her feet and began to pace. Kyp leaned back on his hands and watched as his student wandered back and forth, letting the wheels churn in her mind, producing thoughts. She surged on, "The only way I'm going to ever get past things is if I learn to forgive her. Forgiveness and compassion are central to a Jedi's life, right?" She continued, not waiting for Kyp to answer. "If I can learn to forgive her for all the pain she and Darkglider caused me over the years, I can be free. Free to become a Jedi, to live a pure life. Free of anger, hate, and rage."

Kyp chewed on his lower lip. Raven continued to amaze him with her maturity and wisdom. Although she initially seemed somewhat arrogant and childish when they arrived, recently he began to see the soul of a woman emerging. Kyp raised an eyebrow and asked, "That's an excellent idea. Please tell me how you plan on doing that? From personal experience, I know what you feel towards that woman. Your anger for her is great. How in the galaxy are you going to learn to forgive her?"

Her feet stopped walking. Raven placed her fists on her waist and stared down at her dubious Master. She then looked up into the mist. "First off I need to distance myself from the fact that I was related to this woman by blood. She may have given birth to my mother, I may share her blood, but that doesn't mean she knew anything about being a mother. There was nothing motherly about her. *NOTHING*." Raven commenced pacing. "From now on I will only call her Gwynalyn, her birth name... The Force is resurfacing these memories for me to face them, and learn from them. I have to learn to not internalize when I view the events. I need to allow myself to detach- to become an observer. I cannot allow myself to just relive the nightmares and become what I once was..."

“Which is?”

“Afraid. Afraid of her. Afraid of myself and my weaknesses. *I*, Raven Racees, am no longer weak. I am physically strong. And when I finish facing these things, I will be completely mentally strong as well. Raven Darkglider was weak. She was a victim. She allowed others to manipulate her life. She had no free will... no concept of freedom... self thought... self expression. She simply didn't exist. She only lived to try to avoid pain.” Her voice became softer, “Do you want to know something terrifying?”

“What?” Kyp asked, staring up at Raven as her eyes narrowed, staring into the trees of the surrounding swampy forest.

“Raven Darkglider actually didn't mind the pain. She could at least feel it. It meant she was alive. She'd shut off her heart so long ago she could feel nothing! The pain those monsters inflicted upon her reminded her that breath moved in and out of her lung... Their abuse made her stronger. Each time they hit her, screamed at her, belittled her, or punished her, it made her wiser. She became crafty and cunning. Determined.” A wicked smile marred Raven's face, as she continued, “I learned to outwit them both. The apprentice of pain, learned to become a master manipulator herself. I learned to tell them what they wanted, and they left me alone. They were greedy, self absorbent people who couldn't care less about others. Only when I could provide for them did they learn to see me as something valuable. I gave them what they wanted, and they in turn learned to respect me. I helped them both amass a huge fortune. By doing so I finally convinced my grandm...Gwynalyn, to get me a respirator. I told her that if I could be more mobile I could earn her more credits. I also told her we'd need to get off of Tatooine, as the sand would most likely clog the breathing system, and it would constantly need servicing- thus cost her more precious credits. She always hated Tatooine anyways, so it was a perfect excuse to finally leave the planet.”

“Where did you go?” Kyp asked, fascinated.

“Darkglider went on a quest and found a planet everyone had forgotten. It's a miserable, cold, desolate, ugly world where nobody lives there anymore. They set up homebase there. I'd finally gotten old enough by the time we all moved that I asked for my own ship. Gwynalyn had grown to trust me. My arrogance and hate became my permanent shields that I could mask my true feelings and intentions from her. She bought me *The Vengeance* and my crew. Course she had millions and she gave me a ship that ran on spit and glue. It constantly broke down, my crew was incompetent for the most part. We spent the better part of five years roaming the galaxy as pirates, helping to further amass my grandmother's fortune,” Raven said. She plopped back down on the ground. “I didn't care though, the ship was mine. And I was free. Free from her grasp and insults. I worked on building my own fortune on the side, using the gambling techniques Darkglider taught me so well. I'd use my credits to pump in more parts for my ship. It was my pride and joy. I also bought myself art objects. I never owned anything as a child. Art fascinated me to no end. It's in my blood of course, but I didn't know that. I'd just envelope myself with riches and worldly comforts to hide the fact that I was miserable and alone.”

Completely blown away by Raven's candor, Kyp silently appraised his apprentice. He couldn't recall a single time in his own life he'd ever willingly opened up his heart and soul to another person the way that Raven was doing right now. Something occurred to him and he asked, “Have you told all of this to Jacen?”

“Some of it. Most of it actually. We had a lot of time together while we were on Naboo where all we did was talk. I didn't tell him much of the details about exactly how Gwynalyn and Ryzano abused me,

nor did I discuss my... moments... I truly gave into the Dark Side. But he knows most of the ugliness of my past.” Raven peaked an eyebrow, and added, “Why?”

“Just wondering,” Kyp said, silently cursing himself for breaking her train of thought... and of reminding her of her love. “So, we haven’t discussed those times you *gave into the Dark Side*. Do you feel like talking about them? They are why you are here. You’ll need to face those men’s deaths the same as you have to face your memories of your, Gwynalyn.”

Raven scratched her ear and said, “I know- I think I need to battle one thing at a time. If I can get past most of my dark feelings towards Gwynalyn, I think I can reconcile with my other actions. That’s mostly related to dealing with controlling my anger impulses... although those men I killed were all murderers and thieves themselves, I am truly, deeply, sorry that those men suffered because I lost control. However, no amount of wallowing in guilt and misery can bring them back to life. Again, I have to learn to forgive myself for my actions. When I do that, I won’t feel guilty anymore... I think. What do you think?”

Running a meaty hand through shaggy black hair, Kyp stared at his mud caked boots. Suddenly, he found himself wondering who was Master, and who was apprentice around here. Visions of the sun at Cardia exploding flashed before his eyes, his finger poised over the control that launched the Sun Crusher’s deadly torpedo. In his mind the tortured cries of the millions he mercilessly slaughtered at the imperial academy screamed in agony through the Force. Kyp threw his hands over his head as visions of his brother, Zeth, killed in the blast continued to haunt his soul. He began to sob uncontrollably.

“Master Durrion, what’s the matter?” a startled Raven asked, as she watched her Master collapse on himself. “Kyp? What’s the matter?”

Violently brushing his arm against his nose, Kyp stared up at his pupil through teary eyes. He chased down a lump in his throat and asked, “Guilt never fully goes away, it fades. It always resurfaces. Did anyone tell you anything about me before you came here?”

She shook her head and said, “Jacen just said that you and his father were good friends. And that you were a little... unconventional with the way you viewed the Force.”

Kyp barked a guttural laugh, “Unconventional... Right... That’s a way to mildly put it.” He lurched to his feet and wandered to the far side of the clearing. He turned his muscular back to Raven and kneaded his forehead with his fingers.

Raven sat uncertain of what to say or do. Kyp’s large form buckled as he waged an internal battle with his emotions. She closed her eyes and connected with Kyp’s pain. Teasing it, testing it, she recognized it’s parameters. She knew his pain. Raven’s soothing voice requested, “Tell me.”

Refusing to face her, Kyp straightened his back, placed his hands on his hips and let out a long, loud breath. He shut his eyes as flashes, memories, invaded his vision. “I was seduced by the Dark Side of the Force. While training to be a Jedi on Yavin 4, a spirit of a long dead, Sith Lord named Exar Kun possessed and trained me in the dark arts. He fostered my darker, aggressive feelings towards those who imprisoned my family and myself. I blamed the Empire for everything that happened in my life. I sought out vengeance on all of those who ripped apart my family by targeting the Imperial Academy on Cardia.” He turned and faced Raven. His black hair lightly flapped as a soft breeze raced through the

practice area. "I used a weapon called the *Sun Crusher*, created by the last remaining scientists of the Empire, and destroyed the whole star system of Cardia... Oh no, hold on... it gets better. Not only did I kill millions of people, but my brother, Zeth, was stationed on Cardia training at the Imperial Academy. He was my last living relative. And I killed him!"

Raven stared at Kyp with complete disbelief. Any and all words escaped her mind.

Breathing heavy, Kyp wiped away hateful, self-pity, tears and said to her, "My young apprentice, if you actually are able to figure out how to forgive yourself for murdering innocent people, please fill me in on how you accomplished it. I could definitely stand partaking in that lesson."

Unfolding her legs, Raven stood up and walked over to Kyp. Carefully she searched his face as he worked to regain his composure. Raven smiled and said, "I understand now."

"What?" Kyp asked, looking upon Raven's beautiful, compassionate face.

"You're as emotionally scarred as I am. Master Skywalker truly is a brilliant man," Raven replied, crossing her arms across her chest.

"Why do you think that?" Kyp asked.

"He assigned you to train me because you know exactly what I'm going through. In return, maybe if I can manage to heal, you can too. I'm sure he thought of that," Raven said, grinning.

"You're an amazing woman, you know that?" Kyp said, then he flushed realizing he spoke that aloud instead of in his head.

Raven giggled, "Yeah, well, amazing at getting into trouble, right? Come on... I think I'm ready to face those visions." She turned around and walked back towards her favorite corner. Her fingers dug around the base of her tank top confirming it was securely tucked in at her pants line. Rubbing her hands, she hopped onto her hands and kicked up her feet. Calmly she sank into the Force and stones began to lift all around Kyp. He watched as they soared and danced in a choreographed waltz through the air.

Images began to appear in Raven's mind. Dancing with Jacen at the wedding, finishing a raid on Dantooine, dinner with Marxx and Jaina, and then a dark image loomed. Calm and ready, Raven grasped the image and mentally shook out the cobwebs and it snapped into focus.

She cowered in a corner in her bedroom. Her wrists bound with strips from her pillowcase, because they refused to take her in for medical treatment on her wounds. The girl shuddered, afraid to cry, afraid to think, afraid to feel. They hadn't fed her for two days. The girl stared at the squirming roach in her fingers and shoved it wiggling in her mouth and bit down hard. It ceased all movement as its gooey, rancid, dirt tasting insides released in her mouth. The girl detached herself from the horrid taste and chewed. And swallowed.

Suddenly her door bursts open. Darkglider entered. His black eyes darted around the room until they fall upon their prey. With large steps the looming figure grabbed the girl viciously by the wrist and dug its claws into her fresh wounds. The girl nearly swooned from the lack of food and the intense pain through her raw wounds. She could not speak, her feet automatically moved as he shoved her down the hallway. He shoved her in front a terminal that listed the names in the next day's pod race. Blue lips

desperately gasped for air. Tender fingers gently pressed against the terminal screen and icy blue eyes hid behind their sheltering lids. The girl closed her eyes and images flared through her head. She concentrated completely on the names and blindingly bright images raced in her vision: dust, deafening engine noise, speeding racers, and finish line.

“Black pod, with tri turbo engines and orange markings,” the girl said with conviction.

The man pushed her brutally aside and began sifting through the racer names. Selecting one he placed his bet. He seethed, “You’d better be right this time, womprat.”

In the darkened corner of the room, the girl’s large eyes fell upon the woman tapping her fingernails on the armrest of a chair. She lurched out of her chair and walked up to the child. A finger caressed her cheek and then picked something off from her mouth. The girl saw it was a roach leg. The woman flared angry eyes at the man. “Have you forgotten to feed her? She screwed up, yes. But, she’s usually more right than wrong. Get her some food. NOW!”

The man sneered and headed towards the kitchen. The girl said nothing. The woman dug her long nails into the girl’s wound causing it to bleed. She said, “You’d better not fail us again... Get to your room.” With that, she pointed her finger at the girl. An invisible Force sent the girl soaring down the hallway, crashing into the hard wall. All breath escaped from her lungs as stars erupted in the girl’s head and the world went black.

Kyp silently watched as the rocks began to tremble and shake. A battle began. Rage bubbled inside Raven’s chest at the injustice and cruelty she witnessed. She clenched her teeth hard and pried her eyes open, forcing them to view her surroundings, back to the present. She let out a long, controlled breath and then gathered air back into her lungs. She closed her eyes again and focused entirely on her rocks. Again they began to dance.

Clutching his square jaw with his right hand, Kyp felt Raven’s anger diminish and vanish through the Force to be replaced by an overwhelming sense of peace. He smiled broadly, knowing his apprentice just won her first victory against her darker emotions. Slowly and calmly the stones landed one by one onto the ground. Lightly, Raven landed on her feet and grinned from ear to ear.

“Admittedly, that vision was no where near as bad as the one from the other day, but at least you seem to be in one piece,” Raven said, beaming.

“Yes, thank you for not choking me this time. I’m proud of you. You did a great job of controlling your anger,” Kyp replied. “I think this calls for a celebration.”

Raven’s eyes sparkled, “Really? What’d you have in mind?”

As much as he knew it would drive him crazy, he could only think of one thing that would make his apprentice shout for joy. He crossed his arms, raised an eyebrow and smirked. “What do you think?”

“Go somewhere off planet and have a decent meal?” Raven asked, hopefully.

Kyp burst out laughing. “Not what I had in mind. How about if I raise the *Phoenix* up out of the atmosphere and you get to make a holo-emitter message?”

Jaw dropping, Raven lost ability to speak. She stammered, “W..w..wouldn’t Master Skywalker be really angry at you for allowing that?”

“Possibly. But I don’t see him here to stop me. Do you? This is a special occasion, Raven. You deserve it,” Kyp replied.

Squealing in delight, Raven threw her arms around Kyp’s neck and planted a kiss on his left cheek. “Thank you! Mind if I go clean up in the lake?” Kyp shook his head. Overcome by excitement Raven dashed off towards their hut.

Kyp watched her disappear around the bend, and felt every nerve in his left cheek tingle from the phantom traces of where Raven’s soft lips had touched his face. Smiling dreamily, he wandered slowly after Raven.

Chapter 11

The stars streamed in a silent constant moving pattern as Anakin stared out the window of his X-Wing cockpit. His R4 unit chirped merrily into the comm. reporting all systems normal.

“Thanks, R4,” Anakin said, adjusting the air flow controls in his cockpit. He shook his long legs in his specially designed X-Wing cockpit. Most X-Wings were designed to fit average height humans, not ones who rivaled Wookies in height.

Anakin closed his eyes as his ship moved on through hyperspace towards Hapes. He still wondered why his Uncle wanted to send him on this mission and not Jacen. Anakin kept thinking of his Uncle’s words though that they needed to figure out his strengths and weaknesses as a Jedi.

For as long as Anakin could remember he lived life in the shadows of the twins. They always had each other to bond with and share adventures, while he was always left behind. Sometimes, he didn’t even feel like he belonged in his family. His rambunctious older siblings usually commanded the attention of his parents when growing up. Oftentimes, Anakin simply melted into the background, becoming a witness, more than an active participant in his family gatherings. His careful observation skills helped him to completely understand his family members. In a lot of ways, he knew them better than they knew themselves. Simple things like body gestures instinctively told him how one of the twins or his parents were feeling. He learned to recognize speech patterns and tones that often contradicted what the speaker said.

As he had spent time working on the Theed Restoration Project, he discovered that many of the same traits he observed with his own family oftentimes translated perfectly with strangers. Constant hand movements, or tapping of feet immediately spoke of impatience, but even more so they could also mean the person was trying to hide something, desperately wanting to get away. Licking of lips imply thirst in a person, this can be caused by nervousness, which again can implicate the person is hiding something or lying.

As Anakin mulled over these things an idea flickered in his mind. He wondered if somehow Uncle Luke knew about his innate ability to read people. He shrugged. Just because he could read people, didn’t mean he was good at negotiating. Anakin didn’t like to talk very much. And meetings generally

bored him to tears. His brother Jacen lived and breathed to rationalize and talk subjects into the ground and command the attention of others. Jacen's aggressive and fearless attitude when dealing with others helped make him perfect as a negotiator. Jacen lived to spend hours rehashing the minutest details of subjects with others. Whereas Anakin liked to be quiet. Usually when he did speak, witty and smart aleck comments flew unchecked from his mouth. Particularly in large gatherings he wouldn't say much, but when he did, it was usually a memorable moment. He found himself very happy that his Uncle would be joining him to meet with the Dellaltians, knowing that he wouldn't be left alone to try and converse with the possibly hostile group on his own. Because Anakin didn't particularly like leaping into conversations, he tended to choose action over inaction as a way to solve issues. His hand quickly fell to his lightsaber, whereas his brother's always fell to a pen as a way to find a solution to a problem. Not that Anakin ever used aggressive tactics in situations. But in the heat of battle or conflict, Anakin's abilities could be matched by few. He excelled in brawn and concentrated completely on his fighting skills.

Since he spent much of his life in the shadows of his elder siblings, he found receiving praise of any sort to be a difficult job. He constantly doubted the validity of comments when people congratulated him or sent words of thanks his way. Because he did not revel, or even believe their kind words, he remained humble and aloof.

In trying to figure out who he was, Anakin spent hours mulling over his name. Why did his parents name him after his grandfather? Although Anakin Skywalker eventually returned from a long stint with the Dark Side, he spent his life living in a constant moving boiling pot of unchecked emotions. Skywalker lost hope, gave into despair and allowed himself to be consumed by darkness. A man with the greatest of all potentials, failed miserably. Although his namesake eventually overcame his struggle with the Dark Side, Anakin barely counted the victory as valid. His grandfather allowed himself to be consumed with evil, and for the longest time he did nothing to rectify the situation.

Completely uncertain of his own destiny, it daunted Solo to live under his grandfather's shadow. Instinct told Anakin that his potential with using the Force was great. There would be times when he and his twins would be off somewhere and he would feel tremors in the Force long before they felt the same reverberations. He didn't understand why that would be the case. Maybe the twin link clouded their ability to read the Force as quickly as he could, as his mind remained clearer, purer. He'd shake that thought aside realizing if anything, two Force-strong twins should have their abilities magnified, not diminished in being able to read the Force.

Anakin tugged on his black flightsuit sleeve and sighed. Still no closer to an answer he shrugged off the line of thought. The hyperdrive system chimed, alerting him that his target of Hapes would be in range in ten minutes. Anakin snapped his neck from side to side, causing large cracking pops to fill the silent cabin. He grinned as R4 suddenly spewed off a flurry of questions wondering about the origin of the strange noises he just recorded.

"It's alright R4, it was just me," Anakin said, smiling.

Focusing on Hapes, an image of Tenal Ka entered Anakin's mind. A long time family friend, he knew the warrior Jedi well. Even the seemingly emotionless girl could not hide her true feelings from the observant Anakin. He recalled her at the wedding. She simply seethed staring at Raven and Jacen together. Over the years, he knew that his brother had been in love with Tenal Ka. In return, he noticed that she returned his affections. She did little things that spoke volumes. Tenal Ka would generally watch Jacen whenever he was in the same room. If he left the room, even if she was deep in

conversation with another person, her eyes would flit to the door, seeking and waiting for his return. Once Jacen entered the room again, she would no longer watch the door. Casually Tenal Ka also asked about his brother when he wasn't around. Or she would manage to sneak his name into conversations. Anakin witnessed his brother do the exact same things over the years in regards to the Hapan Princess.

He'd noticed Tenal Ka's first displeasure over Jacen's attachment to Raven on the bridge of Raven's ship. When she fell injured, he sensed a wave of displeasure emanating from her direction. At Jaina's wedding, she switched from simple irritation to full out rage. Much to the annoyance of many of the young Brannoush girls, Anakin spent the evening chasing the titian haired Jedi, trying to distract her from his brother and his new girlfriend. She barely acknowledged Anakin as they danced together, her eyes darted around the room seeking her former love and his new girl.

Anakin wondered if three months was enough time for her heart to heal. He doubted it. A sinking feeling told him the Hapan Princess would not be pleased to see him instead of Jacen. A chime sounded in his cockpit as the stars screeched to sparkling pinpricks in the sky as his X-Wing fell out of hyperspace. Immediately five sleek Hapan Stinger security escorts surrounded his X-Wing.

"What is your business in Hapes?" A stern voice sounded into his comm. system.

Anakin sighed and recited his landing authorization code for the Fountain Palace. His ship silently floated in space as he waited for the guards to verify the code.

"You are cleared for landing. Please allow us to escort you to your destination," the voice replied.

"Thank you," Anakin said. He lightly pulled on the throttle and followed the armed guard towards the palace.

She stared at herself in the full length mirror. After an excruciating afternoon of trying on dresses, Tenal Ka finally decided upon the soft gray velvet dress she now wore. She'd never liked wearing gray, yet for some reason, the dress made her large eyes leap off her face, enhancing their beauty. Her shiny titian hair, arranged in long, spiraling curls also brilliantly popped to attention. Atop her head rested her jeweled tiara. Over it she wore a traditional Hapan white veil, worn by all Hapan Royalty when greeting guests. She looked every part the Royal Princess. She shrugged into her long ruby red cloak and nodded at her image.

She zeroed in on her face. Fingering the deep blue sapphire earring in her right ear, Tenal Ka knocked it back into place and out of a clump of hair. Her eyes then lingered on her arms and hands. She raised them up eyelevel. She wiggled all ten of her fingers. Even the naked eye could not detect the difference between cybernetic and flesh hand. The advancements in Cybernetic technology impressed Tenal Ka. Even the fingernails on her new hand grew at different rates, giving it a more lifelike appearance.

From the courtyard beyond she heard the arrival of the ship as it landed on the platform. She closed her eyes and through the Force felt a familiar Solo presence. Her eyes twinkled as she readjusted her veil. She entered the shielded reception hall and waited for her Jedi negotiator to arrive. She carefully recited the formal Hapan greeting in her head. She would be greeting Jacen alone, as her grandmother, fatigued from the news of the day, had already retired for the evening.

The doors burst open and a cloaked figure entered the room. Tenal Ka's slight smile fell as the person approached in her direction. *He's way too tall*, Tenal Ka thought. Her stomach fell to her knees as Anakin pushed his hood off of his head. *Anakin! Master Skywalker sent me Anakin?* Tenal's cheeks turned crimson as she glared at the approaching young man.

As he advanced upon Tenal Ka, Anakin felt her emotions pinwheel from elated to annoyed to angry. All the while the young Princess fumed, Anakin felt the breath escape his body. He'd always seen her wearing her Dathomir Warrior armor and never in full Hapan Royal attire. The young Princess gloriously shined in her beauty. Knowing immediately that he was not the Solo she had expected, Anakin plastered a large diplomatic grin upon his face.

"Why are you here?" Tenal Ka asked icily. All thoughts of formality and decorum vanished from her mind.

Dropping his large duffle bag on the ground with a soft thud, Anakin placed his hands on his hips and tilted his head. He narrowed his eyes and asked, smirking, "Aren't you supposed to first offer me goodwill, goodhealth, and Hapan greetings before showing your disgust with me?"

Guilt washed over Tenal Ka as she realized she'd just failed her first official duty. "I am sorry, Anakin. That was rude of me."

He waved her aside, stooped down and picked up his bag, "Oh don't worry about it, I won't tell anyone."

Reaching up, Tenal Ka ripped off her veil and stormed towards the double gilded doors that led to the rest of the palace. She said, "Follow me, please."

Anakin grinned and fell into step slightly behind the copper haired young woman. From behind her, he could smell the slightly intoxicating scent of a floral perfume. Obviously, she had worn it intended to snare Jacen's attention. Anakin figured his brother probably wouldn't have even noticed the fragrance. He found it enticing.

The Princess pushed the doors open and Anakin followed after in her wake. He scrunched together his brows knowing something was different with Tenal Ka, but he couldn't place his finger on it. He shook the thought aside and glanced around the rooms they passed through. Their footsteps echoed through the long hallways. His eyes drank in the plush settings of the Palace. The ceilings, covered in glass, were not as high as those in the capital building of Theed. From above, Anakin saw nothing but the brightest, clearest of stars. All around the calming sound of water slashing met his ears as they passed dozens of different fountains.

"Doesn't all this running water make you want to rush to the refresher all of the time?" Anakin asked. He smacked his forehead and cringed at his inappropriate comment. Tenal Ka stopped in front of him and turned around. Anakin skidded to a stop, moved his hand quickly through his hair, and smiled raising his eyebrows high.

"What?" she asked confused, placing her hands on her hips.

"Nothing. Sorry, please continue. Umm. Oh! Uncle Luke's going to be on his way here a little later. You'll want to alert your security detail of his arrival," Anakin said, desperate to change the subject.

Tenal Ka stared at the youngest Solo and nodded, "Thank you, I will let them know. So Master Skywalker will be taking the lead on the negotiations, not you?" The Princess continued on her way down the hall as she reached an elegant, rose colored, marble stairwell. She ascended the stairs. Anakin watched her from behind and enjoyed the view of her swinging hips. He found the feminine Tenal Ka to be very intriguing, and attractive. He wondered why he didn't think that way about her at the wedding. Maybe because she had been dressed the same as his brother's girlfriend. He didn't know. He cleared his throat.

"I'm assuming that is the case. I think he wanted me to come along in order to watch him lead things, then I get to be his eyes in case he misses something," Anakin replied.

"Well it would be good practice for you, I suppose. I am not quite sure why Master Skywalker felt this should be a training exercise. We have a serious problem on our hands in our Cluster," Tenal Ka said, as she stepped to the top of the stairs.

Anakin reached the top of the stairs and gazed down into Tenal's gray eyes. "My Uncle is well aware that your Cluster is in danger. That is why he is coming here himself to oversee the negotiations." Anakin dropped his bag and folded his arms to his chest, irritation crept into his voice, "What are you implying, *Princess* Tenal Ka? Are you implying I am unfit for this assignment?"

Jaw dropping, Tenal Ka again realized she'd unintentionally insulted Anakin. Over the years she'd never paid much attention to Anakin, she always saw him as Jacen and Jaina's kid brother. In fact, other than at Jaina's wedding, they rarely spent any time together. At the wedding, Tenal Ka didn't really pay much attention to him, as she was too preoccupied with spying on Jacen and Raven.

Her eyes traveled up his towering form and locked with his light blue eyes and felt herself slightly jolt. His blue orbs bore down into her soul; not faltering, not looking away. They searched her gray eyes, examining her closely. An overwhelming feeling of uneasiness crept over Tenal Ka, her knees slightly buckled, and she suddenly felt exposed under his gaze. Her fingers snaked up to her bare neck and she cleared her throat, "I am sorry, Anakin. I have not been myself lately. This threat is starting to take a toll on me. I did not mean to insult you."

"I am a person you know, I have feelings too," Anakin said, his eyes spoke the pain of her insult, his words the insecurities that lurked in his heart.

Annoyed, Tenal Ka replied, "I apologized, is that not enough for you? What do you want? For me to beg for your forgiveness? Because I will not do that."

Anakin burst out laughing and threw up his hands defensively. "Sorry, Princess. Yes, I accept your apology."

"You can be really irritating. Do you know that?" Tenal Ka said.

Still chuckling, Anakin picked up his bag and raced after her down the hall. Anakin replied, "Yeah, I've heard that from time to time."

Tenal Ka stopped in front of a room and pushed the door open. She said, "This will be your room. We will be serving dinner in four hours. There are some snacks in there if you are hungry until then."

“Is that it? Are you going to leave me in my room until dinner? Don’t I get a tour of the Palace?” Anakin asked, dumping his bag on the floor of his room.

Tenal Ka balked. “I do have other duties to attend to, Jedi Solo.”

“*Right*. And I suppose had my brother been here in my place and he had asked for a grand tour, you would’ve just told him to go take a nap as well,” Anakin said, licking the inside of his cheek and raising an eyebrow.

Letting out a low growl, Tenal Ka replied, “Fine. I will give you your tour. But do not think I will enjoy it.”

Anakin laughed, “And since when have you ever *enjoyed* anything?”

Tenal shot Anakin a murderous stare and stormed off down the hall. Her voice echoed, “Follow me before I change my mind.”

“Absolutely, your Highness,” Anakin said. Chuckling he trailed off after her retreating form.

Chapter 12

Soaring through the endless void of space his soul became consumed by a blanketing feeling of peaceful serenity. Fingering tendrils in his mind, he searched the Galaxy high and low testing the currents in the Force’s energy field. He sought out the minutest of disturbances and tremors. He directed his search towards Dagobah. From the swampy planet, he sensed peace. His eyebrows rose in surprise. For weeks, he’d often felt undercurrent waves of distress and recently even blinding rage from the planet.

Maybe they are having a good day, he thought and sighed. Slowly he floated, drifting on a current of tranquility. Then his vision clouded as he sensed a tremor. The tremor emanated from somewhere in the direction of the Hapes Cluster. He tried to localize the disturbance, but only met with resistance. The unsettling vibration appeared to not have an origin point. He sunk deeper into the Force, attempting to unravel the riddle. A mere border dispute should not produce tremors in the Force... unless.....

Wafts of a familiar intoxicatingly, spicy perfume entered his nostrils and his hold on the Force crumbled. Luke opened his eyes and refocused them on the doorway of his bedroom. Mara leaned in the doorframe. Her long, vibrant, red hair softly curled in drifts down her shoulders. Even the cargo pants and a cotton long-sleeved shirt, and laced leather boots couldn’t hide her curvy, womanly shape.

“Hey, stranger. I was wondering when those baby blues would open. Did I disturb you?” Mara asked, wandering towards the bed.

Luke smiled broadly and said, “You know you can disturb me anytime.”

Mara crawled onto the bed towards her husband and captured his lips in her own. Smiling Luke yanked her down on top of him and they sank into a long kiss. Mara gently tugged on Luke’s lower lip and then

released its hold. Luke's eyes opened and caressed his wife's oval face.

"I hate it when I'm away from you and Ben," Mara said, slightly pouting her large full lips. She rolled onto her side and tightly wrapped her arms around Luke's chest.

Luxuriously stroking his hand through Mara's russet locks, Luke sighed contently. He asked, "So were you able to obtain those computer components?"

"Yeah, of course they tried snowballing me on price. Those toydarians can really haggle when they know you need something from them. They're immune to the Force also which made me rely on my wits," Mara said, scowling slightly.

"Knowing how you think, I feel sorry for them. I'm sure you got them to agree to a fair price though," Luke said.

"Yup. So now I can upgrade the processor on the *Saber's* main computer. I will now be able to access the mainframe to the main library databanks on Coruscant, and at the Jedi Academy from anywhere in the Galaxy. Plus I managed to pick up a new encryption program that should make sending communiqués impossible to crack by hackers," she replied, smiling.

"That's good," Luke said, tracing her jaw with his finger.

"And now, I can be home with you two," Mara said. She gently began to tug at Luke's shirt.

"Well... not exactly..." Luke said, a quiver of fear crept into his voice.

The deep scowl returned on Mara's face. Luke burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?"

Luke stifled his chuckles and replied, "Nothing, Ben just gave me that same expression today is all." He then proceeded to tell her about his mission. His gaze lingered to his chronometer and realized he should leave soon.

Mara rolled away from him and crossed her arms across her chest. "Explain to me why you didn't send someone else on this mission?"

"What?" Luke asked, incredulously.

Mara's light eyes blazed in his direction, "Why didn't you ask Jacen to head the negotiations? You know he lives to lock himself into a conference room for hours and talk the ears off opposing parties. He's brilliant at wearing people down."

"Right, because sending both Jacen and Anakin Solo on a peacekeeping mission would have been a great idea. We're trying to maintain order in the Galaxy, not cause the conflict to escalate," he said, grinning. "Besides, something tells me there's more going on over there than meets the eye."

"How do you know?"

“I felt a tremor in the Force,” Luke said, sitting up.

“And I suppose only the mighty Jedi Master, Luke Skywalker has what it takes to end this dispute,” Mara responded, her anger slightly abating, as she sat up also.

Luke shot her a questioning glance and shrugged his shoulders.

“Fine. Whatever. But don’t you think for one minute you’re leaving here without wishing me a proper hello... and goodbye,” she said, hands at work again on his shirt.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Luke replied and wiggled his eyebrows and embraced his wife tightly. Their lips joined and they fell back onto the bed and made the most of their short time together until Luke needed to depart.

Jacen lay on his back, legs dangling up and over the back of the living room couch. Absently he tossed a ball in the air and caught it in his right hand. He tossed it and caught it, toss, catch, toss catch. His mind numbed as he ceased to even recall his actions. He knew he should be meditating, or heading over to Marxx and Jaina’s to help them sift through their endless numbers of files, but he couldn’t move.

He caught the ball and closed his eyes. Raven’s phantom, melodious laugh filled his ears. His heart constricted in his chest. If he sank deep inside his memories his nose could almost conjure up the smell of her hair.

Jacen’s eyes flew open as he gasped for air. *Solo, you are so hopeless*, he thought. *It’s only been what, two and a half months and you’re becoming a lovesick nerf. You’ve gotta get a grip on yourself.* He began throwing the ball again as images of Raven danced in his mind. Her long, brunette hair, her light blue eyes, her perky nose, each feature burned in his memory. He recalled the feel of their lips connecting when they kissed. He closed his eyes reliving the moment and the ball crashed down onto his nose.

Jacen howled in pain. He twisted himself off the couch and rubbed at his nose. His hand came away clean, no blood. Clutching his nose he wandered into the refresher and stared at his reflection. Other than a slight redness, his nose appeared normal. He then searched his face. His face appeared slightly thinner than usual, accentuating his cheekbones. He splashed water on his face and meandered to his bedroom. He sifted through his closet and extracted a white cotton shirt. He slipped his arms into the long sleeves and became hit with a sensation of déjà vu. He suddenly remembered standing in the cellblock on Raven’s ship and her watching him as he slowly dressed. Even then, somewhere in his soul, Jacen knew Raven. He knew she was his dreamgirl. Jacen’s heart ached.

I miss her so much. I’m not even asking for much, just a holo-emitter conversation with her. That’s all I ask. Just a simple conversation so I can really find out from her how she’s feeling, how her training is going. I hate holonotes. They’re personal, but I know when I compose them I feel like an idiot. I think she does too, Jacen thought to himself as he fastened up his shirt. He plucked up a pair of boots and plopped himself in his chair. Lifting up his right foot he began lacing up his boot. He landed it on the floor with a thud and began lacing up the left. When done he lowered his other foot, but could not force himself to move. *I think I just want to stay home and mope, alone*, he thought.

Launching himself out of his chair he sprawled onto his bed. When he closed his eyes, Raven lay curled up in his arm, from four months ago.

“It will seem like forever, but it won’t be. You know how it is, you wake up one day and suddenly you think to yourself, ‘wow where did time go?’ Six months will fly by, just you wait and see,” Raven said, finger lightly dancing on Jacen’s straight nose.

“No, any time apart from you will feel like eternity. I’ll be miserable without you... I know myself too well. I’ll become despondent, I won’t eat, I probably won’t bathe. Then one day you will return to find this shriveled, stinky man, driven crazy from being separated from the love of his life,” Jacen replied, not cracking a grin.

“Ewwwwww. Well just remember, I don’t have much in the way of nursemaid skills. I may end up washing you with blue milk and force you to eat soap,” Raven said, giggling.

Jacen chuckled, “Well there’s a reason to stay sane. Although, I’m sure after our long absence, I’ll probably be cursing so much, you’ll need to wash my mouth out with soap, anyways.”

“Well then I guess I had better take advantage of your soap free mouth right now,” Raven replied and swooped in for a kiss. The two giggled and tussled on their bed until Anakin barged in an interrupted them a few minutes later, alerting them that dinner was ready.

Jacen groaned. *“I miss her.”* Jacen thought of just lying and moaning when his holo-emitter chimed. Something told him to not ignore the buzzing. He jumped off the bed and ran in front of the controls.

Weaving his fingers through his hair he flicked on the emitter.

“Bless the Force, you heard me!” he cried as Raven’s holographic image jumped out of the console.

Raven giggled. “What do you mean?”

“I was just in my room saying, Ok, moaning that I missed you and all I wanted was just to speak with you via holo-emitter to make me feel better,” he said. His eyes suddenly grew large and said, “Oh no, you didn’t steal Kyp’s ship to make this call did you?”

Laughing louder and uncontrollably, Raven pushed a mass of spiraling curls out of her face. Jacen smiled dreamily from the melodious sound. “Yee of little faith. Actually Master Durrion is rewarding me for a day well done.” She sobered up. “I’ve been receiving all sorts of nightmares and visions from my past while I’ve been on Dagobah. I’ve had to do a lot of soul searching to come to terms with those who wronged me in my past...”

“Darkglider and your Grandmother,” Jacen said, finishing her sentence.

Raven smiled. Then her eyes grew distant, “Yes. I’d forgotten so many of the things they did to me. Each memory reminds me why I learned to loathe and despise them over the years. However, I think I’ve determined what I need to do, I need to learn to forgive them. If I can forgive them, I can complete my journey to becoming a Jedi.”

“Forgive them? Raven, they tortured you, both physically and emotionally for years. How in the Force

are you going to do that?" Jacen asked. Resting his chin on the back of his hand, he leaned in closer to her image.

"I don't know, exactly. That's what I need to figure out. I'm trying to distance myself from my memories. Not allow myself to remain an active member, but try to watch them as an observer. When I don't do that, my anger tends to take over..." A wave of guilt and shame etched Raven's face.

"What?"

"The other day, I acted out when I saw one of my visions and nearly Force choked Master Durrion," she admitted.

Jacen stared at her, not quite sure what to say. He raised an eyebrow, and squeaked, "Is he alright?"

"Yes, he managed to snap me out of it before I killed him," Raven replied. Jacen searched her eyes. Hollow and frightened they bore into his soul. She continued, "I feel positively horrible for what I did! I can't believe I let my anger get the best of me. I was so wrapped up in my vision from the past that I just lashed out at him! I'm determined to never allow that to happen again."

Staring at his love intently, he knew he needed to find some words to help ease her turmoil. He stayed silent for a few moments, then inspiration hit. He shifted in his chair and began, "We all have things from our past that we are not proud of... or want to face. For you, most of your past is filled with shame and self-loathing. Your early years of development are supposed to be filled with love, encouragement, and self-discovery. Out of those three things, you really only experienced one, self-discovery. You found within yourself the resilience to become a survivor. You became far greater than the weak creature your "family" tried to turn you into. They didn't succeed, did they? What happened to you? You turned into a young woman who learned to harden herself to insults, because instinctively, you knew you were not worthy of them. And a pure, part of your soul remained intact through all of their abuse. They made you into a fighter; a fighter who surprised herself by willingly opening her heart up to the possibility of love."

Tears trailed down Raven's face as she raptly listened to Jacen. He continued, "The moment you decided to turn your back on loneliness, and anger, was the moment you were reborn. It was in that moment, I knew, I knew you were special. Love saved you, not just your love for your family, for your family, nor even your love for me; it was your capacity for loving yourself that became your greatest weapon against your past. Quite possibly you don't see this yet, and that's probably something you will have to discover on your own. But ultimately, it is the love in your heart that will allow you to get over your past, and move forward with the future. In a lot of ways, I don't think you need to forgive your grandmother- how could you? She's not worthy of that. She's nothing. She's not worth your forgiveness. The person you need to forgive is yourself. Forgive yourself for not standing up to them sooner, for allowing them to dominate you, to try to break your spirit. Only when you do that, will you be able to get over your past."

Brushing the backs of her hands under her eyes, Raven cleared away her tears. She nodded, "You are right."

"You know what else?" Jacen asked, smile etching his face.

"What?"

“I have complete faith in you that you will succeed. Know why? Because you’re worth it. You’re an amazing woman. Even though you had a rough past, it helped mold you into the most amazing person. You’re fiercely loyal to those you love. And you have this refreshingly open view of the world and all it has to offer. I get immense pleasure out of seeing the world through your eyes. Things I take for granted as commonplace are marvelous to you. You teach me everyday to enjoy the simplest things about life. Maybe, that is why I’m having such a hard time right now. For a brief time, my life seemed endlessly open and fresh with possibilities, without you here, that spark is missing. Everything seems dull, lifeless,” Jacen said, slouching back in his chair.

“Are you really that miserable?”

“I feel like I’m half alive without you,” Jacen said. Suddenly very nervous he added, “Are you happy we’re apart?”

Raven giggled, “Mr. Sensitive. Trust me, I’m as miserable as you are. I spend all of my free time when I’m not training thinking of you. I think I love you so much because you speak, eat, breathe with your heart. Your heart guides you through life. It is your compass, your map for understanding life. I spent a lifetime unaware of how to read my heart. You gave me the directions and opened it up. I only see the world as I do, because I see it through your eyes, through your heart, your soul. Even though I am across the galaxy from you... I feel you here,” Raven said, placing her hands over her heart. “It is your love that gets me through each sticky, dirty, muddy, sweaty day here. I endure my misery, because I know halfway across the Galaxy, you are thinking about me, sending good wishes my way. I know you love me. And my heart yearns to return to you. It is your love that encourages me to succeed in my training. The best reward will be to come home to you.”

“How long do we have to wait?” Jacen asked.

“Three and a half months. Then who knows where I’ll end up. They just better let me visit with everyone before I get sent off for more training,” Raven replied. Her expression darkened at the prospect of being separated from Jacen longer than expected.

“I think Uncle Luke will let you get back to being with your family. I wouldn’t worry about it. He’s got a heart of gold. If Kyp thinks you’re Jedi material, he’ll trust his judgment,” Jacen said.

Raven leaned in and lowered her voice, “Does Master Skywalker trust him enough do you think?”

“What?” Suddenly, light dawned on Jacen, “Oh, you must know about the little incident at Cardia. Yeah, I think Uncle Luke’s forgiven him for that. You don’t have to worry about anything. Did Kyp discuss that with you?”

“Yes, a little bit. It still bothers him, a lot. Same as I’m sure I’ll always be haunted by the knowledge that I killed seven men simply because I couldn’t control my anger... I had no right to take their miserable lives. I understand laws are in place and it’s the duty of the courts to decide punishment. When people take the law into their own hands, there can be no order, only chaos. I will never, NEVER, allow myself to do that again,” Raven said. She whimpered and added, “I hope.”

Jacen’s heart melted. Desperately he wished his hands could span across the galaxy, caress her soft cheek, and stroke her hair. But he couldn’t. Jacen’s brandy eyes beamed, and a lopsided, charming

smile graced his lips. He replied, "I know you'll succeed. You're not a quitter. Nor do you like to lose. There's way too much on the line for you to lose if you don't succeed. I have complete faith in you. If you are ever uncertain of yourself, just know that my heart and your heart beat as one. If yours falters out of beat, mine will be there to bring it back into rhythm. I love you, Raven Racees."

Weeping Raven replied, "I love you too, Jacen." Her face hardened with resolve. "I will not fail. I will succeed. I will come back to you. Count on it."

"Are you kidding, I'm already planning your return party. Pallenberry pie sound good?" Jacen asked, eyes twinkling.

Raven groaned, "Ohhhhh... after the slop I have to eat here, that would be pure nectar in my mouth."

"And I will be glad to feed it to you by hand," Jacen said, eyes dancing with merriment.

Grinning wildly, Raven giggled. "A mighty Jedi isn't much, if she can't feed herself now is she?"

Jacen laughed aloud at the absurdity of her question, "You are a spaz sometimes, you know that?"

"I know. It's why you love me though, right?" Raven asked, her light eyes alit with merriment.

"My lord, yes. Never a dull moment with you around, Raven Racees."

"I aim to please," Raven replied, and peaked an eyebrow.

Both burst into laughter. When they sobered up, Raven's eyes filled with longing. "I should probably sign off, Master Durrón's been kind enough to stay hidden in the depths of his ship. I don't want to keep him waiting long. I also don't want to abuse my privilege. Maybe if I keep this somewhat short, he'll allow me to do it more often."

"Well, I'm all for that. I'll still continue to send you those holo-notes, until next time," Jacen replied, heart falling, knowing their conversation was coming to an end.

"You'd better keep them coming, they're the only things that keep me sane around here. I love you, Jacen Solo," Raven said. She kissed her fingers and touched the edge of the camera. Jacen leaned into her holographic hand, pretending he could feel her caress.

"I love you too, Raven. May the Force be with you. And may your journey continue on it's successful path," Jacen said.

"Thank you. May the Force be with you too, honey. I miss you. Goodbye," Raven said, eyes filling with tears.

"I ache for your return. I love you, goodbye," Jacen said. He signed off their signal in order to cease the prolonged agony of their goodbyes.

Leaning back in his chair, Jacen's heart lifted. Although Raven's news was somewhat discouraging, he heard and sensed a lot of hope coming out of her words. He only hoped that she could understand and grasp the strength of her own convictions. Going over their conversation in his mind, he fully believed

that she would be able to attain victory. He resolved to concentrate all of his spare energy sending good thoughts her way to help her achieve her goals. Re-energized, he got up and headed out of his apartment, ready to return to existing with the living.

As she signed off, Raven's heart swelled. Having already considered many of the things Jacen said, Raven began to internally lay out a map for achieving her goals. Seeing her love again continued to drive her onward. She felt re-energized again. She pushed away from the holo-emitter and chimed Kyp's chambers. The doors slid open.

"I'm done with my one call," she said, leaning against the door, arms folded in front of her chest. A large dreamy smile embraced her lips. "Thank you, I think that probably did me more good than anything else I could have hoped for to revive my spirits."

Sitting cross legged on the bed, Kyp's eyes fixed on the brunette haired girl. Her tight ringlets, created after she expertly undid all of her cornrows, danced around her head. "Do you want to contact anyone else, your parents? Go ahead. I won't stop you."

A large smile formed on Raven's lips and she lightly jumped up and down. "Oh thank you, Master Durrón. I'd love to contact them." Giddy she raced back towards the cockpit. As the door swished shut behind her retreating form, Kyp let out a deep sigh. His heart constricted knowing that look of contented bliss that graced his apprentice's face came from talking with Jacen. His stomach sank as he recalled her giggles echoing through the ship. Each one felt like a slight dagger pricking into his heart. Sensing despair creeping into his emotions, Kyp let out a deep breath and sank back into a deep meditative trance, hoping to ease the newly formed pain that rested in his chest.

Chapter 13

Jacen entered Marxx and Jaina's apartment to find their living room transformed into a control center. A large white board rested against the wall facing the kitchen, covered from top to bottom with names and dates. Jaina sat at the coffee table, celeroot stick in mouth as she pounded away on the keyboard of a computer terminal. Files lay in piles all over the room. Marxx stood staring at the whiteboard, tapping his pen back and forth as he stared at the names. Relieved to see both his sister and brother-in-law fully dressed and busy at work, Jacen shut the door.

"Sorry I didn't come by earlier. You guys seem to have made headway. Found anything interesting?" Jacen asked, as he carefully stepped over the papers.

"Where's Anakin?" Jaina asked, not taking her eyes off of her computer.

"Uncle Luke sent him to Hapes to help Tenal Ka with a dispute in her Cluster," Jacen replied.

"Really? Hummm..." Jaina said.

Marxx stared in deep concentration at the board. His left hand snaked up to his neck and he rubbed it as he pointed to a section of the tree.

“Come here Jace, take a look at this. Did you know that Naboo used to elect Kings?”

Jacen looked at Marxx startled. “What? I always thought they were an elected matriarchy.”

“I know- but check this out,” Marxx said, as he bent down and picked up a file. He pointed to an emblem containing three spires and four circles rested in a row underneath it, that rested next to a name, Bainier Palpatine. “This is my – how many greats Jaina?”

“Seven,” Jaina replied, sight remaining affixed to her screen.

“Seven generation’s back great-grandfather. Looking at this symbol, it closely resembled the Queen symbol that is in your grandmother’s file. Only the matriarch has two spires and three circles. We deduced that it must mean that he was a King,” Marxx said.

“Were you able to find any data supporting that theory? Are you sure it’s not just some symbol showing maybe the paternity of a Queen?” Jacen injected.

Marxx chewed on his lower lip and said, “No... we actually checked with historian Trevalis Borenman, who’s helping us get the new Constitution written. He confirmed that long ago they did elect Kings. Something terribly scandalous happened though, which forced the planet into a matriarchy.”

“Really, what happened?” Jacen asked, curiosity piqued.

“That’s what I’m trying to find out,” Jaina chimed in. “That and I’m looking for any living descendents of Palpatine’s sisters.

Jacen wove his way towards an empty chair and sat down. “Are these still needing to be gone through?” he asked, pointing to a pile of files.

“Yes,” Jaina replied, chewing down her veggie stick.

Opening a file with the name Crushant Palpatine, Jacen began to scan over the contents and found nothing of any real interest, beyond the man had fathered seven children. *Those Palpatines were prolific, I’ll give them that*, Jacen thought. He handed the file over to Marxx who added the information onto the tree. Jacen began to sift through more files.

Jaina glanced over at him and noticed how his sight would occasionally glaze over and a slight lopsided grin crept on his face. Jaina slid back on the couch and stared at him with amusement. Jacen felt his sister’s stare and shifted his gaze in her direction.

“What?”

“Don’t you *what?* me. I know something is up with you. Spill,” Jaina said, cocking her head, lifting her eyebrow. Marxx turned around and cast a confused glance in their direction, disturbed from his cogitating.

Jaina’s twin grinned sheepishly, “I got a holo-image message from Raven. We actually got to talk to each other!”

“Wait a minute, why’d she call you, and not me?” Marxx said, baffled. When Jacen gave him a strange look Marxx burst into laughter. Jaina giggled on the couch. Marxx carefully tiptoed over his piles of paper and crashed down onto the couch next to Jaina.

“Come on...” Jaina said.

Jacen proceeded to tell them about Raven’s recent exploits on Dagobah and how she appeared to be feeling.

Marxx frowned, “So, she’s having problems.”

“Yeah, but she seems to be progressing, Master Durrion wouldn’t have let her give a holo-imager message if he didn’t think she deserved something special,” Jacen said.

“Attempting to Force-choke her Jedi Master isn’t exactly the way to head towards Jedi Knighthood!” Marxx said. Clearly upset he bolted to his feet and began to pace behind the sofa, gesturing wildly. “I mean... I... I... I understand what she’s going through. I’ve seen many of the things that happened to her in the past... Recently even. But that is not the way to get through things. What happens if she does that again and doesn’t pull herself out her vision? What if she kills Kyp?”

“That’s not going to happen!” Jacen said defensively. “She said she’s figured out how to detach herself from being an active participant in her visions. However she did it, she was successful today. What happened to you having faith in her?”

“I had faith in her, because earlier I didn’t think she was still Force-choking people!” Marxx said, blue eyes flashing with obvious concern.

“You know, focusing on the negative isn’t going to help her much, is it?” Jacen replied, irritation edging into his voice.

“Marxx....” Jaina said. Sensing an argument brewing, she grabbed her husband’s arm.

Marxx stared down into Jaina’s pleading brown eyes and he let out a deep breath. “You’re right. Sorry, Jace. No more bad thoughts about my twin. She’ll work her way through things. I know she will.” He leaped over the back of the couch and plopped down next to Jaina, resting his head in her lap.

“Ugghhh... get a room you two,” Jacen said with mock disgust as Jaina leaned down and gave her husband an upside-down kiss.

Jacen plopped the large pile of files on the coffee table leaned back in the chair. “Have you guys tried ripping Chariss and Rowlon’s house apart to try to find something on your Grandmother? It might be easier than sifting through a thousand years of Palpatine lineage.”

Raising an eyebrow Jaina glanced at Marxx, “You know- he has a point. Have you done that?”

“Yeah, I’m sure Mom and Dad would just love me ripping their house to shreds,” Marxx replied, fingers weaving up into Jaina’s hair.

“And what? You’re gonna let that stop you?” Jaina said, chewing on her lip.

Marxx glanced between the Solo twins and realized he was outnumbered. Pushing himself to his elbows he let out a long, deep sigh, “Well I know when I’m beat. Who wants to go to the Lake Country?”

Jaina and Jacen exchanged grins and stood up. Jaina helped Marxx to his feet. As he got to his feet, Jaina captured him into a kiss. He smiled when their lips parted, “I do know better than to argue with you, M’lady.”

Jacen rolled his eyes and headed for the door, “I’ll be out at the *Hope* whenever you’re ready.”

“Ok,” Marxx said, smiling wolfishly at his wife.

“Jaina! Control your husband will you?” Jacen said, as he headed out the door.

Punching Marxx lightly in the stomach, a grin formed on Jaina’s lips, “Later, honey. We’ve got work to do.”

Marxx frowned as she turned around and grabbed a jacket and threw his over his head. “You got the key card?”

“Yup,” Jaina said, flashing the ship’s indicator. They left their apartment. Behind them, Jaina’s computer whirled and spun as it continued it’s last entered search for data.

“Owwwwww!”

Tenal Ka stopped mid stride as her ears registered the loud whacking sound which proceeded Anakin’s cry. She turned to see the youngest Solo standing just outside the doorway to the atrium, hand on forehead.

“I see you forgot to stoop down,” Tenal Ka replied.

Anakin grimaced as his face flushed red, “Excellent observation, Princess Tenal Ka.” Inwardly he cursed himself. So enraptured with Tenal Ka’s guided tour of the palace, he’d failed to even notice the shorter door frame. *Smooth move, Jedi*, he thought to himself.

Tenal Ka walked over to one of the fountains and soaked her ceremonial receiving veil in the water, then extracted it, wringing out excess liquid. “Come over here, Anakin.”

He ducked under the doorframe and sat down on a carved, marble bench. Tenal Ka moved aside his hand and stared at the large bump rising on his forehead. She placed the cool, damp fabric on his forehead. She turned her gray eyes down to his face as her hand gently rested over the veil. Anakin’s bright blue eyes peered earnestly up at her face. A small lop-sided smile began to form on his face as it flushed red from embarrassment. The look struck Tenal Ka hard, reminding her so much of Jacen. Anakin delighted in the a lovely mixture of coolness from the cloth, mingled with the heat produced by her hand.

“You have not always been this tall have you?” Tenal Ka asked.

“What? Oh, nope. I seem to have sprouted in the last six months. I grew approximately six inches in height. I only hope I’m done growing. I really have no desire to match Chewie or Lowie in height,” he said.

A vision of Anakin towering over his family alongside the Wookies, made Tenal Ka slightly chuckle.

“I’m so glad my growth spurt amuses you. It doesn’t help me much. None of my clothes fit. I had to get all new boots. These were specially made because I couldn’t find any big enough that were designed for human feet. Suddenly, I feel like I’ve partaken in some hallucinogenic spice because my view of the world appears distorted. I’ve even become somewhat clumsy because I’m not used to the increased size of my feet,” Anakin complained, shoulders stooped. He added, “That feels nice.”

The Hapan Princess found herself grinning at the dejected young man. His boyishly handsome features scrunched into a pout; lower lip slightly jutting out from under his upper lip. She said to him, “Change can be very unnerving, especially physical changes.”

Nodding, Anakin’s blush brightened into a fiery red, “Bless the Force. So much for my observation skills.”

“What?”

Gently, Anakin reached up to his forehead and grabbed Tenal Ka’s new cybernetic hand. Veil still sticking to his forehead, Anakin gazed up into Tenal’s eyes. “You let them give you a new arm. Do you mind?”

Tenal slowly shook her head Anakin gently pushed her sleeve up her arm. His fingers lightly caressed her cybernetic attachment and his caressing fingers moved upwards towards it’s near flawless connecting point. He detected tiny, light hairs that perfectly matched those on Tenal Ka’s upper arm in color and texture. The soft synthetic skin matched real skin in texture and contours. He lightly picked up her other hand and tested the texture of her skin on both of them.

As Anakin examined her fingers and arm, and under her dress sleeved fabric, Tenal slightly closed her eyes. His fingers delicately traced over her skin, not invasive but explorative, even gentle. She found herself strangely enjoying his attention. He turned her cybernetic hand over and gently rubbed her palms with his fingers, feeling their texture. Tingles of tickling pleasure registered through the hand’s sensors. Her eyes fluttered open as Anakin began to speak, “It’s truly remarkable. The skin grafts perfectly match with your skin tone. The details are amazing; the hairs, the lines in your fingers. Even the consistency of the wiring and metal underneath feels just like real bone and muscle, not cybernetic like my Uncle’s hand. It’s really amazing.”

Blushing Tenal Ka pulled her hand away and sat on the opposite bench, as far away from him as possible. “Thank you, I think they did a marvelous job as well.”

“That must have been very difficult for you to decide. I mean, to let them give you a new arm. I know how long you fought against it,” he said, blue eyes bearing into Tenal Ka.

“Yes, well. I needed to do so for increased support from my people. I decided they most likely would

have a problem if their Princess only had one arm. It does not really matter, anyway. At least I can now do things I was not able to do for a long time,” Tenal Ka replied.

“Like what? Tell me,” Anakin asked.

She glanced up at the young Jedi, and shifted in her seat. His azure eyes gazed at her in a rather disarming way. Tenal Ka again fidgeted with the neckline of her dress. “Well I can more readily snap up my dresses. I..well you know the things I can do. The same as you.”

Detecting her unease and frustration, Anakin watched as Tenal Ka’s eyes searched the floor for nothing in particular.

“Are you alright?” he asked, placing a hand on the veil as it began to slide down his forehead.

“Other than my system is being attacked, of course I am fine,” she stiffly retorted, crossing her arms across her chest.

Anakin suppressed a grin. Her body language spoke that her unease came from a different source than her political problems. He decided to spend some time thinking about it later. He removed the veil from his forehead and placed a finger cautiously over his rising bump. Jumping to his feet, he said, “I think I may require something stronger than a wet piece of fabric to bring down the swelling.”

Tenal Ka’s eyes soaked in Anakin’s looming form, her gaze shifting from his feet up to his face as she stood up. Anakin smiled roguishly in her direction. The look was a perfect blend of charming hilarity as his lump continued to grow in size.

“Come on, let us get to the infirmary and see if they can do anything about that lump,” Tenal Ka headed out the door of the atrium.

“The infirmary. Why doesn’t it surprise me that I would end up needing to visit that place on our tour? Lead the way, your Highness,” Anakin said, carefully ducked his head and gladly followed behind as the throbbing pain in his forehead started to become unbearable.

Chapter 14

Shuffling footsteps crept down a long corridor. The sound of rasping breath echoed in the halls. Two clawed fists clenched the marble barrister as she gazed at her prize, her creation. Looming twenty stories in the center of Nemorasis’ entryway stood a dark statue. She stared at it longingly and with pride. The shrouded figure’s face completely filled the upper levels of the cavernous room.

The statue’s pale face eerily glowed from a special phosphorescent paint applied to the bronze before firing. Often, she believed the statue spoke to her, illuminating her soul with wisdom and truth. Yet, she also felt it mocking her, seething in her inaction. Today she sensed the latter.

To the mighty statue she spoke, “Soon, soon, you will be avenged and again darkness will rule the galaxy.”

From the shadows, the gaunt man shook his head as his mistress commenced in her one sided conversation with the statue of Emperor Palpatine. He remembered the long hours she spent firing each piece and the precarious hell she put him through trying to assemble the enormous edifice. However it gave her immeasurable pleasure, so it had been worth the pain.

“Just a few more pieces of the puzzle need to fall into place and then the fun will begin,” she sneered in delight.

A wicked smile formed on Darkglider’s face as he slithered back into the shadows as Lady Neffrous’ raspy laughs infested the air.

Staring out the window, smoky gray eyes rested upon the churning Hapan waves. She watched the sea violently crash against the distant rocks and shore. The volatile, crashing waves mirrored the sea of confusion that stirred in her mind. Tenal Ka glanced at the holoimage held tightly in her right hand. The image, taken at the Jedi Academy many years ago, depicted Tenal Ka, the Solo twins, and their Wookiee friend, Lowbacca. She memorized every line in Jacen’s face from the exact angle his head tilted to the impish curve of his lips. Her eyes then moved slightly off to the left, and deep in the shadows sat Anakin. He was a mere boy in the photo. His dark hair sat in a disheveled pile atop his head. Through the darkened corners she noticed his eyes appeared hollow and serious. No. Not hollow. Contemplative.

Briskly she walked across her room and sifted through a large nerf-hide covered trunk of objects gathered from over the years. First she found an object that she hadn’t looked at in years and picked it up. Designed by Anakin when he was a child, the device’s purpose was to help her braid her hair after she lost her arm. Determined to not let herself become a victim she never used the device. She twisted two ends of her hair onto the little hooks and activated a button. The device swirled her hair together tightly into a twisted braid. She removed the ends and examined the braid, it came out perfect. She pushed it over her shoulder and let her fingers brush over the long forgotten device. Her brows furrowed at the gift, wondering why she never paid any attention to it and to the person who created it for her all those years ago. She set it aside and decided to further her contents quest.

Inside the trunk she removed a twelve by fourteen inch, metal, embossed box. She moved onto her bed and yanked off the box’s cover. Unceremoniously, she dumped the clattering contents onto her royal purple coverlet. Dozens of holo-images littered her bed. Her fingers meticulously picked up each holo-image and activated it. In each one she carefully searched the image’s pictures. Travel and family images she immediately disregarded. Her search held a specific purpose. After going through all of the images she found four that contained what she looked for; images of Anakin Solo. She then grabbed a holo-album of images from Jaina and Marxx’s wedding. Most of the early images contained Jacen and Jaina goofing off in some way. In these images Anakin always appeared in the background, his blue eyes watchful and distant- an observer to his siblings antics.

The fourth image captured her attention. Taken at the twin’s birthday eighteenth birthday, Jaina, Jacen, Tenal Ka, and Lowbacca stood arm in arm. Tenal noted the usual lack of smile on her own face. She recalled that Leia had made Anakin join in on the image. Jacen’s fingers tousled Anakin’s hair as he sat at his older brother’s feet. Anakin’s eyes were rolled upwards in exasperation. As she stared at Anakin’s young face, she realized that boy who used to tag along with his siblings, no longer existed. Anakin

was now a man, and a gorgeous one at that.

She put the image aside and began flipping through the book of wedding images. One image lingered in her mind. Finding the image her eyes explored the entire scene. The image contained both sets of bridesmaids and men of honor. Since receiving the image, Tenal Ka had focused entirely on Jacen and Raven in the picture. Jacen's arms encircled his new girlfriend and both beamed brightly from their newfound love. As her eyes lingered over the couple again, her heart painfully constricted. Tenal Ka placed a hand over her heart and gasped. Then she yanked her eyes off of them and stared at herself and Anakin. Anakin's arms also encircled Tenal Ka's waist. Tenal noticed her own eyes seemed to blaze with hatred and anger. Anakin, standing a head taller than her had a puzzled and worried expression marring his handsome face. As she glanced between the two couples, one appeared blissfully happy, while the other seemed confused and conflicted. Each wedding image she looked at, every time her own image appeared, she detected anger and pain on her own face. And Anakin, always somewhere in the distance watched her with obvious concern.

A flicker of a memory lingered in Tenal's mind from her days back at the Academy. *Master Tionne sat talking to the students about the Jedi of the Old Republic.*

Jaina sat on the cool slate floor of the Great Temple and asked, "Why didn't they allow the Jedi to fall in love and get married? Love is the greatest thing a person can experience, right?"

"That is true, Jaina," Tionne replied, her silver eye's gleaming with pride at her observant student. "But, along with love comes the darker emotions... mistrust, jealousy, pain, and anger. In the past the Jedi Order did allow marriages. However, oftentimes those relationships crumbled. The demands of a Jedi were great. Oftentimes they could go months without seeing their partners. Over time, the relationships simply deteriorated. Left over feelings of despair and jealousy often sent the Jedi's toward the Dark Side. Those in the Council eventually decided to just ban marriage completely, as they feared losing more and more good people."

The young students all sat with concerned and worried expressions on their faces. Tionne continued, "Marriage is not easy, even for non- Jedi. Unfortunately, sometimes love can lead you to places in your heart that you did not know existed. Dark, cold places. This is what the Jedi Council feared. For a non-Force sensitive person, a break up can be difficult, even devastating. Yet for a Jedi, the consequences of betrayal and jealousy can completely corrupt the person. Once you travel down that Dark path, it will control your destiny forever. Remember that my students."

Flopping back onto her bed, tears streamed down Tenal Ka's face as she held one of the images closer to face again. Her eyes burned onto her own image. *Bless the Force, that is what is happening to me.* Her fingers lingered toward Anakin's worried expression. *Anakin could sense this about me, but I could not. I must have been blistering with my jealousy.*

Laying the image down Tenal Ka stared at the ceiling. Soft, opaque light flooded the room from the fixtures above. *I cannot allow myself to give into my jealousy and pain. I cannot do that. I know better than that. How do I move forward though? My heart still aches and cries in misery when I think of Jacen no longer loving me. How do I get past it?*

Her silent questions loomed heavy on her mind. Determined she thought, *I will no longer allow myself to give into my darker emotions. I know this for certain. Somehow, I will find a way past it. I need to accept things as they now stand and move on.* With a plan in place the Princess flung her legs over the

side of her bed and walked towards her dressing room, determining to ready herself for dinner. After seeing Anakin's careful attention to her at the wedding, Tenal decided to pay some extra attention to the young man. Peering through her closet, her eyes fell upon a dress. Taking it out, a sly grin formed on her face. *This should make him sweat*, she thought, and then let out a small giggle. "This is a fact."

Anakin rubbed his nearly smooth forehead. The medical droids administered a series of injections that helped ease the swelling in his forehead. Aimlessly he wandered around his room. Filled with expensive furniture, the room held the air of elegance. Yet as Anakin sat on the stiff backed couch and chairs, he felt little comfort. He walked over to his large canopied bed and sprawled over it. His feet dangled off of the ends. Anakin groaned. *Sleeping is going to be very uncomfortable tonight*, he thought in dismay.

Ignoring his discomfort and gently swaying his toes, Anakin stared at the red fabric that draped over the bed. Translucently the bright lights shined through the fabric, giving off tiny copper sparkles. *Copper, like Tenal Ka's hair*, Anakin thought. His mind lingered to their encounters earlier in the day, from her cold greeting to him, to her brusque manner as they traveled throughout the palace, to the way she softly placed her veil on his forehead. Although she liked hiding her emotions, Anakin further sensed a tumultuous battle brewing under her calm exterior.

At Jaina and Marxx's wedding, Anakin spent his entire day not enjoying his sister's joy, but endlessly worrying about Tenal Ka's rollercoasting emotions spinning out of control. Although he spent most of his day dancing with the bridesmaid, he knew she never even noticed him, as her eyes remained affixed to Jacen and Raven. He needed to confront her on her emotions. He knew it would do her no good to let her resentment to fester. In a way, he guessed he didn't blame her for disliking, even possibly hating Raven. But sitting around crying about losing something that was never yours to begin with doesn't solve anything.

Anakin's mind wandered back to his first impression of her in the reception hall. Her long gray dress perfectly hugged her womanly form. Because of her years of mastering her physical form, Tenal Ka had looked every bit the expertly sculpted goddess queen. Her feisty, angry eyes upon seeing him somehow managed to even enhance her beauty. It seemed as if their heat ignited her fiery hair ablaze atop her head. Although her face remained calm and serene, her rage seared the room in its brilliance. Smirking, he recalled how quickly her fire extinguished when she realized she'd insulted him. What intrigued him most about the Hapan Princess was that her blinding fury emerged because of her intense love for Jacen. Anakin wondered if he would ever love anyone that much, to love so greatly, and completely that your life just felt worthless once that person vanished. *Of course how was Jacen to know? She never told him. Men aren't mind readers. Particularly with Tenal Ka. She's the worst kind of female. She masks her emotions perfectly, so well in fact you can usually barely tell what's going on in her head*, Anakin mused.

Anakin then remembered her change in demeanor after he hurt himself. She used a sacred piece of ceremonial cloth to tend to his injury. He thought he might be reading more into the gesture, but he couldn't help but think that small act represented something deeper, more meaningful. It seemed as if Tenal Ka still in some ways felt determined to not accept her destiny, as if her individuality still existed; her spirit, her inner fire, still burned inside her soul, begging to be released from her duty. Something else occurred to him, while he talked about his height problems, she lightly laughed, and from the

corner of his eye he detected the trace of a smile. For a girl who devoted herself entirely to serious thought, he found it peculiar that suddenly she found reasons to smile. He spent many hours of his young life enduring listening to Jacen trying to get Tenal Ka to crack a grin with his ridiculous jokes. She never complied. She didn't seem to understand humor.

So why did she laugh at me? Anakin asked, propping himself upon his elbows. His eyes shifted upon the black onyx fireplace on the opposite end of the room. His cheeks reddened. *Oh lovely, I'm so miserably annoying she can't help but laugh at me.* He groaned and fell back onto the bed. Covering his eyes with his large meaty hands, Anakin tried to ease himself from his building self deprecating thoughts. Moping Anakin closed his eyes and forced himself into a nap, hoping, beyond hope, that when he awoke he'd be in a much better mood.

Eyes closed, Kyp allowed the senses of the growing Dagobah night to invade his senses. He heard the cries of the night birds awaking from their daily slumber. Crickets and night bugs began their evening tunes. As he inhaled deeply the humid, pungent, earthy smells of the surrounding swamp tickled his nose.

Kyp let Raven spend some time alone in their hut, while he headed out to meditate. *She probably needs another four hours to get hair back up into her braids,* he thought.

Breathe in, breathe out. His broad chest rose and fell with each deliberate breath. Breathe in, breathe out. He focused on the surrounding energies of the swampy forest and relaxed. He allowed his mind to wander over the planet; to sense and share in its rhythms. Kyp sensed a tremor in the Force. A jolt of darkness twisted in his gut. Although the evening air clung to his skin with sticky heat, Kyp shivered. His dark green eyes fluttered open and he stood up. He began to move through the swampy forest, his mind lingering on the cold spot he detected. As he neared the location, he began to rub his large biceps as they turned to ice. For the briefest of moments he wondered if he'd be able to see his breath on the air. When he couldn't see it, he determined the coldness was most likely psychological.

Glancing around the cove, he spotted a gnarled tree. Through the Force, vibrations of darkness and despair emanated from its twisted limbs and roots. Then as if struck by lightning he remembered about the tree. Master Skywalker told him about its powers. Master Yoda had informed him that the tree would show his student what really lay in his heart.

Scenes of Kyp's past flared, blurring his sight. *NO!* he thought as he violently pushed the images aside. The images represented a part of himself that he wished to forget, that he worked very hard over the years to distance himself from their power. He had learned to forgive himself for his actions. He no longer lived completely controlled by guilt and shame. *Right,* he thought to himself. *That's why you told Raven guilt never fully goes away, it fades. It always resurfaces.*

Kyp stood outside the tree cave entrance and knew he needed to go inside. He needed to test himself, discover what frailties and insecurities still lurked within his soul. He also knew sometime soon, he would have to send his apprentice into the tree. He thought of how great a tool it would be gauge her progress in her training. Reluctance gripped him, planted his feet on the earth.

Closing his eyes, Kyp cleared his mind. He let the energy from the swampy planet fill himself, inside and out. He cleansed himself with its raw power. Relaxed and energized, he entered the cave.

Fingers lightly touched slimy walls as Kyp descended down a flight of natural stairs. His heart pounded in his chest as he sensed tiny creatures scurry into the shadows of the dark and foreboding place. The cave reeked of stagnant water and from years of slime decaying on the floor. Kyp ignored the foul stench and continued further into the cave.

Suddenly before him light flared. His eyes readjusted and he found himself in the corridor of a very large ship. Jacen Solo stood twenty feet away from him, green lightsaber a blur of color as it deflected a multitude of oncoming shots directed at him from down the corridor by unseen adversaries.

“Get her out of here!” Jacen shouted.

From behind him, Kyp felt Raven’s fingers dig deep into his arm, trying desperately to help Jacen. She shouted, “I’m not leaving you, Jacen!”

Kyp noted both he and Raven were defenseless. Their lightsabers lay in pieces on the ground.

A chime behind him alerted Kyp that a turbo lift had arrived.

“Come on Jacen,” he shouted, as he and Raven piled into the lift. Jacen began to move his feet towards the door, when suddenly he rocketed off of his feet and flew down the corridor.

“NOOOoooooooooooo,” Raven cried, from behind him. The doors shut as Jacen’s unmoving body shrunk out of sight.

“We have to go back out there and get him!” Raven cried.

“We have no defenses!” Kyp replied.

“We can’t leave him! What if he’s ok?” Her eyes glistened with tears and filled with despair.

“Come to your senses, Raven! If we head out there, we will be killed as well. What good would that do us? There are too many to fight without any weapons to help us! I’m sorry, but that’s the way of it! We’ll come back for him!”

Raven’s eyes hollowed and she said, “It’s too late. He’s dead.”

The image broke free and the cave returned to darkness. Kyp sank to the floor, body quaking, and rubbed his fingers through his hair. Terror gripped his heart. Tears rolled down his face as he realized he shook not from the shock of seeing his friend’s son killed, but by the fact that when he saw Jacen valiantly give his life to protect Kyp and Raven, a sliver of joy ran through his own heart at his death.

“What is wrong with me?” He asked, as a bone numbing chill embraced his being.

Chapter 15

The doors of the Racees house burst open and Krishta launched herself into her Uncle's open arms.

Marxx laughed heartily as he grabbed his niece under her armpits, began to spin, and swung her off of her feet. Gales of giggling laughter filled the evening as the sun began its evening descent towards the horizon.

"You're gonna hurt her, Marxx," Jaina said, concern etching her face. As the words flew out of her mouth Jaina stopped mid-step.

Jacen stared strangely at his twin. Wrinkling his brow he said, "What is that I hear? A spark of maternal instinct creeping into the voice of the mighty Rogue Squadron Captain, Jaina Solo?"

As Marxx placed Krishta back on her unstable feet, he shot out, "Hey, that's Rogue Squadron Captain Jaina Solo-Racees to you pal!"

"Oh yeah, that must be the difference," Jacen said. His eyes and face alit with merriment. Batting his eyes innocently, Jacen tapped his mouth with his finger and added, "Wait a minute, you're both not forgetting to tell me something are you?"

"*What?*" the newlyweds cried in unison.

Jacen burst out laughing. He said, "Oh, you two are *way* too easy to mess with."

Gulping, Marxx turned to Jaina. His mouth went dry and his hand massaged his neck. In a voice increasing in octaves Marxx asked, "Honey, you're not... ahhh... keeping something from me, are you?"

"Bless the Force, I make one tiny comment and suddenly everybody thinks I'm pregnant?" Jaina said, throwing her hands up in exasperation.

"You're pregnant?" Chariss cried, in a voice filled with delight as she emerged from out of the house.

Blushing deeply, and fury rising Jaina pointed at Jacen, "You're gonna get it for this!" She embraced her mother-in-law, "Hi, Chariss, no I'm not pregnant... well, at least that I know of!"

Chariss smiled as she held her daughter-in-law out at arm's length and noted the shocked confusion that surged across Jaina's features. "Oh dear Jaina, trust me, you will know. Every woman knows. I'm actually glad. I want you two to experience the joy of being together for a while without worrying about children."

Jaina wrapped her arm around Chariss' shoulder and they walked into the house. She admitted, "Me too. In fact, the thought having children terrifies me."

Tanella sitting on a couch in the living room doing some needlework, perked up at Jaina's comment. She began to chuckle, "And what exactly do you fear about having children? Is it the birth process, or the lifetime of immeasurable pain and suffering they put you through in the years to come?"

“Mom! I’m not a pain!” Krishta said, pouting as she jumped up next to her mother on the couch.

Grinning, Tanella put down her sewing and squeezed her daughter tightly into her side. Smacking a huge kiss atop her curly head, Tanella said, “Right. Oh you know I’m kidding, silly.” As Krishta smiled and buried her head in her mother’s soft lap, Tanella nodded her head, hazel eyes twinkling, and mouthed to Jaina, *Oh, yes she is.*

Placing her finger in her mouth, Jaina suppressed a giggle and sank into a loveseat.

Rowlon wandered out from the back of the house at the sounds of women’s voices and grinned at his visitors. He loudly said, “Oh, Jacen! So good to see you, boy! Guess what we had earlier today?”

“What?” Jacen asked, thinking he might know the answer.

“A holo-imager conversation with Raven! Uhhh... what’re you two boys standing over there like statues for? Sit, sit,” he said, scratching his balding head, as he plopped his heavy frame into a rocking chair. Marxx and Jacen exchanged grins. Jaina moved over on her loveseat and Marxx dropped alongside his wife. He wrapped his arms tightly around her shoulder and Jaina leaned into his chest.

Jacen took a seat in a soft chair and replied, “Oh yeah? She got to make two messages?”

“See Rowlon, I knew she called to Jacen, too,” Chariss said from the couch beside Krishta. She glanced back at Jacen and gestured with her hands, “She was in such a good mood, I just knew she had talked to you first.”

Blushing, Jacen replied, “Well she should have called you first. You are her parents, after all.”

Snorting brusquely, Rowlon replied, “Ha! We know our place in the pecking order young man. Young love always comes before worried parents.”

Marxx looked down at the floor with a forlorn expression and sighed. Jaina rested a hand on Marxx’s shoulder and asked, “What is it?”

“I thought she could only call Jacen. She didn’t call me. I guess her twin isn’t all that important to her,” Marxx whined.

Jacen rolled his eyes, “Next time she calls I’ll make sure to inform her to contact you. Talk to your brother, not your boyfriend or parents.”

“I just know where I am in her pecking order is all,” Marxx said.

“Well, you may be number three for Raven, but you’re always number one for me, darling,” Jaina replied and kissed his forehead.

Marxx flashed her a shocked expression, “Well I’d certainly hope so, dear wife!” Jaina giggled and gave Marxx a long kiss.

“Are you all hungry?” Chariss asked grinning at the lovebirds. As if responding on queue, Marxx’s

stomach rumbled loudly. Everyone burst into laughter, Krishta's high-pitched giggles floated above the lower adult laughs.

Tanella smiled and said, "Sure, Mom. Marxx knew it was nearing dinnertime, why else would he magically show up right now? What's the matter? Jaina's not feeding you enough?"

Slyly grinning, Marxx said, "Well she is great around an engine, around a stove... that's another story."

"Good thing they got the Theed fire department in place," Jacen piped in. "I understand they have your number memorized."

Jaina threw her brother and husband murderous stares. In a huff, she detangled herself from her husband's grasp and attempted to stand up. Marxx lurched forward, grabbed her waist and yanked her into her lap. Still pouting, Jaina tried to contain her giggles.

"You know I wouldn't want you any other way, right? I'll take having an excellent first mate to a great cook any day," Marxx replied diplomatically and butterfly kissed her nose.

"Oh come on, she doesn't even pass as a decent cook, Marxx," Jacen replied. Jaina attempted to shout an insult at her brother but Marxx stopped up her mouth with a kiss, smothering her sarcastic words. Briefly she tried fighting him off, then grew limp as Marxx continued to explore her mouth.

"Marxx, your room is upstairs if the two of you need some time together before dinner," Tanella sweetly said as she continued her needlework.

Both Jaina and Marxx blushed deeply. Jaina watched as Chariss lifted herself off of the couch and headed towards the kitchen. Scrambling over the loveseat arm and out of her husband's lap, Jaina landed on her feet. She tugged down on her shirt and stared at her husband. She said, "Well I suppose I need to go work on my culinary skills. I will be in the kitchen with your mother if you need me."

As she left the room Jacen's mouth curled into the famous Solo smirk, "This will be a day long remembered."

Jacen yelped in surprise as a hand snaked around the wall and whacked him on the head. Jaina's peeked around the corner and smiled wickedly at her twin. Through gritted teeth she said, "I will make sure to pay extra close attention to preparing your plate, brother."

The terrified look that graced Jacen's face sent the entire room into another fresh round of peals of laughter.

As the stars emerged from their nightly slumber, a lone figure waited unmoving, undercover as the prison guard passed his room. When the thudding footsteps and jangling keys faded down the corridor, the man flung off his blanket, dressed in his underclothing only, reached underneath his bed and extracted an object wheedled together by pieces of his bed frame's metal.

Stupid backwater planet still uses bars on their prison doors. They'll rethink that decision after tonight,

the prisoner thought. His face contorted in annoyance as he laced his arm through the board and began wiggling his wire contraption into the cell block's keyhole. He waited for that magical snapping noise. It didn't happen. He let out a long sigh and extracted the wires and expertly wiggled them again into a new shape. Then, sweat beading on his forehead, he shoved his tool back into the keyhole. After a few extra seconds, a loud snap filled the air. Pure joy flooded his heart as his cellblock door opened. Luckily for him, they separated the officers from the underlings into different wings in the prison, so he didn't need to worry about excess noise from his former underlings. He grabbed his boots tightly and exited his cell. He glided to the door next to him and opened his neighbor's cell. A hulking, green, Gamorrean emerged from the shadows and grunted his thanks. For all that the man detested aliens, he knew he needed the brute strength of his fellow prisoner to escape.

Together, they scurried down the long stone hallway and silently opened the unlocked door leading to the guard's station. Grendol, the Gamorrean, approached the Niktu guard, watching an Antolian Rugby match on the holonet. The guard's last conscious thought was to groan as his team lost the ball in a bad pass. Grendol's large forearms crashed into the unaware guard's skull sending him unconscious to the floor. The man grabbed the security guard and stripped him bare then quickly threw on the guard's clothes over his underclothing. He quickly laced up his own boots. He snatched up the guard's blaster, and a pair of binders with their key. He then slid the alien's body out of the way and attacked the computer terminal, deactivating motion detectors and opening locks over the entire complex.

"Move," he silently said. Together he and the Gamorrean raced down the hall and skidded to a stop at the corner. Peering cautiously around the left corner, the man detected no more guards. They hurried down a long, northeasterly, white hallway. After four more twists and turns they found themselves at a large metal door that effortlessly opened thanks to the man deactivating it beforehand. He pried the door open slightly and saw four large Weequays surrounding a table, drinking Jawa Juice, and joking over a holomagazine. He slid the door shut and the Gamorrean held out his wrists as the man slammed the binders into place. After readjusting his hat he opened the door.

The Weequays momentarily hid the holomagazine and glanced at the duo speculatively. In a bored voice, the man said, "Prisoner transfer from cellblock 2285."

Non-committal the leathery-faced aliens punched in a series of codes, allowing the two to proceed into the upper level of the prison. As the gate shut behind them, they continued marching up a long flight of stairs. The man's palms began to sweat as he approached the next the final major obstacle before freedom. They passed through a series of six large steel doors and came within reach of the main crossing for the building. The eastern corridor headed towards the main prisoner block and the west led to the exit. The man extracted the binders key from his pocket and released Grendol. The green giant snorted his thanks as the man cracked the door open. He wrinkled his nose as his green companion began to reek of sweat.

Stinking pig, the man thought with disgust. The horrific odor inspired him to gasp for clean air on the other side of the door. Then without further hesitation he proceeded to the main desk. Two leathery faced Niktos stood guard and four Weequays sat behind the main desk. Grendol charged and headbutted the closest Nikto guard in the stomach, grabbing his blaster in the process. The man rolled his eyes and raised his blaster at the heads of the four Weequays and fired. He successfully shot two guards, then slouched beside the desk as the remaining pair aimed their blasters, and shot Grendol in the back. The stench of burning flesh filled the deafeningly loud room as the Gamorrean squealed in pain. Hit, but not taken out, he turned and charged at the desk, leaping across the hall and flew headfirst at the two remaining guards. The man grimaced and aimed at the one standing, confused Nikto. His

blast hit the alien squarely in the face. With the other guards distracted, he bolted for the door, never turning to check the status of his comrade. The man shut the door behind him and blasted the lock controls. In front of him he charged up three flights of stairs.

He looked down at his uniform and tore a huge rip in the front of it. Turning a corner he shouted “A prisoner has escaped, they need reinforcements down there!” Three Gamorreans guarding the prison exit turned and charged past him and in a squealing rage raced down the stairs.

The man savagely grinned and walked out the door free.

Warden Weirman stared at the carnage in his prison. The tall man rubbed his fingers across his forehead in despair and removed a commlink from his belt. He tapped in a code and it chimed.

“Sruga Munn? This is Warden Weirman... No, actually things aren’t fine. I wanted to let you know one of two of your workers won’t be in tomorrow. We had a prison break. One, Grendol... yes the Gamorrean, was killed. The other escaped... Who was it? Hydin. Hydin escaped.”

Chapter 16

Jacen visited the refresher, then he turned away from the cheery living room and stood outside the door to Raven’s bedroom. He closed his eyes and opened her door. From inside her spicy, perfumed scent tickled his nose. For the briefest of moments his heart leapt, as if she had physically embraced his senses. Jacen flicked on her lights and let his eyes caress her large canopied bed. The walls of her room, painted cream with a light buttery yellow wash reminded him of her soft, creamy skin. Her bedding in rich sienna brown with gold accents, shows to Raven’s taste for the finer things in life, without being ostentatious. He scanned the room for the mirror he gave to her as a gift, but could not find it. He realized she must have taken it with her to Dagobah and a smile crested his lips. The door behind him opened and he sensed Raven’s father enter the room.

Rowlon placed a hand on Jacen’s arm and said, “You miss her greatly, don’t you?”

Absently Jacen nodded his head, “More than you could probably imagine.” He turned and faced the shorter man, “I know Raven and I haven’t known each other very long, but I love your daughter very much. I love her so much it hurts to be apart from her. My heart aches.”

Grinning, Rowlon replied, “I know you do, son. Chariss and I have a feeling that one day down the road, we’ll suddenly find ourselves parents of two sets of twins.”

Jacen’s puzzled expression made Rowlon burst into laughter. “You do plan on marrying Raven one day don’t you?”

Smiling, Jacen said, “Yeah. It’s all I want.” The cloud lingered over his features and he sat down on her bed.

“What is it?” Rowlon asked, sitting beside his daughter’s suitor.

Gazing at the ground, and swinging his legs off of the edge of the bed Jacen replied, "Maybe it's nothing. But my parents don't seem to like Raven very much."

"What? That's nonsense, Jacen," Rowlon said.

Meeting the older man's eyes, Jacen replied, "Oh no, I had a huge argument with them yesterday over her. They are worried about her past, that she'll fail in her training, and that she's no good for me. We went out to dinner with them, I had the hardest time even looking at either one of them. I can't believe they don't trust me and my judgment about people." Placing a hand over his heart, he replied, "Rowlon, I know Raven. She's in my soul. I could never love someone who I didn't believe had the purest of hearts. She was hurt terribly growing up, and she has a lot to face from her past. But I know she's strong enough to get past all of that. Every day I hear from her, she seems to be getting along better and better. I'd know if she was lying... trust me. It seems as though Kyp is really helping her."

"We got that impression, too. She's now quite pleased with her new Master. She mentioned she had some trouble the other day, but that she seems to possibly be getting past it," Rowlon said.

Studying the older man, Jacen wondered how much Raven told her parents about her latest encounter with Kyp and her past. Judging by his vague response, he doubted she told them everything, opting to shield them from her pain.

"She does seem to be doing well. I get the impression our holo-notes really help her out though. We just need to keep reminding her of how much we love her to help her through her training," Jacen said, as his finger traced the outlines of a golden wildflower on her bedspread.

"Yes, I'm sure they do. And don't worry about your parents, Jacen. Their concern shows that they love you. One day, when you have children of your own, you'll understand exactly why they are acting the way that they are," Rowlon said, beaming a knowing smile in the young man's direction.

Puzzled, Jacen stared back at Raven's father, "Doesn't it bother you that they seem to have trust issues with her?"

"Not really. We talked a great deal about Raven before she headed off for training. We know their feelings towards her. They aren't as down on her as they maybe led you to believe. They are just worried about her and the past... It's difficult for Chariss and I, son, we are all new to this understanding the Force thing. Your family of course has it in spades. We never even realized anyone in our family had any special abilities for the longest time. We didn't know the responsibilities that come with being strong with the Force. We fully accepted the terms of Raven's sentence." He pointed a finger at Jacen and met his eyes, "I may add that Raven fully agreed to the terms as well. For all that she knew it would hurt her to be apart from you, she confided with us that she needed to come to grips with things she did in her past. She needed to find herself, if you will. From our conversation last night she sounds highly optimistic. Just continue to send her your love, and let her know she is in your thoughts and prayers, and I think you'll find that the next three and a half months will fly by," Rowlon replied.

"I suppose you're right," Jacen said, smiling. "Thank you, Rowlon. I feel a lot better."

"Anytime, boy, anytime."

Jaina's unevenly sliced the carrots as they kept rolling out of her hand. She lightly hissed in annoyance at the vegetables as Chariss continued her explanation of how she was assembling the soup.

"...whenever you have a leftover fowl carcass stick it in a pot with some celeroots, carrots, and a couple onions. Fill the pot with water right over the line of the carcass and contents. Then crank up the heat and leave it alone for about an hour or so. You may want to throw in a few broth cubes to richen the broth and a few boyer leaves for added flavor. Then in an hour the water will have evaporated, pour on more to keep the contents covered. The more times you do this- the broth will richen and thicken. When all the vegetables look dead and have no color left to them, get another large pot and strain out the bones and veggies, leaving just your broth. Then you throw in whatever you want! Course, I made this a while ago, so now I just have to add the goodies... Oh dear here, let me show you how to do that better, dear," Chariss said to the bewildered Jaina. The young Jedi watched Chariss in amazement as she placed an expert hand over the carrots and rapidly chopped the roots into even sliced pieces. From behind Jaina, a long arm snatched a carrot slice and loud chewing exploded just beyond her ear. Twirling fast, Jaina threw her arms around her husband's waist, nearly unbalancing the both of them in the process.

"Good thing Mom took over with the slicing, that was just pitiful, M'lady. I never expected your chopping dexterity to be so lacking," Marxx said, chuckling.

Jaina pinched him, causing Marxx to jump, "Well lucky for you, my dexterity skills flourish in other ways, correct?" she said, wiggling an eyebrow.

Marxx's eyes twinkled, "Absolutely, M'lady. Hey, you'll never get any complaints from me!"

"Are you gonna just stand there and gab, or are you planning on helping, Marxx? There's not enough room in here for you just loafing about," Chariss said in mock seriousness.

"Here honey, let me show you how to cut these things," Marxx said, grinning from ear to ear. He moved over to the cutting board and picked up a handful of long beans. Taking a large cleaver in his hand he tossed it, sending bright flashes through the room as light danced off its sides. Catching it, he rapidly brought the cleaver down and made swift tiny pieces of the beans. Then barely noticing the change in pace he hacked apart several large onions, and made steady progress through the entire basket of veggies his mother had removed from the cooler.

"Ohhhh... I am impressed!" Jaina said as she carefully wrapped her arms around Marxx's waist. She peered at him as he chopped. In mid chop, Marxx snatched a chopped piece of juicy tomato and placed it on her open and waiting tongue. Jaina encircled her lips around fingers and lightly sucked on them. Marxx's smile broadened as her hands gently massaged his stomach. Marxx then jumped as his mother swatted him with a towel.

"Pay attention to what you are doing, young man," Chariss scolded.

"Sure, Mom," he replied and the newlyweds giggled as Jaina ate her tomato piece.

"Alright you two, out of the kitchen! Dinner'll be ready in about a half an hour. Move it!" Chariss said,

shooing them out of the room. Arm in arm, Chariss watched with a happy grin as her son and his wife left the kitchen.

Maxx and Jaina found Jacen and Rowlon emerging from Raven's bedroom.

"Hey, dad. So, I have a question for you..." Marxx began.

"I was wondering when you were going to get around to why you all arrived here," Rowlon said, crossing his arms. "Not that I mind the company, of course."

"Of course," Marxx said. "Did you ever find anything of Grandmother's around here? Besides the obvious stuff, clothes, her statues of Padme..."

"Like what?" Rowlon asked, eyebrows peaking.

"I don't know, any journals, or personal affects that might be unusual?" Marxx said.

Rowlon scratched his bald head, "I don't think so Marxx. But feel free to wander around and see for yourself."

"Thanks, Dad," Marxx said, rubbing his hands together.

"I'm going to go check on your mother. If you'll all excuse me," Rowlon said as he sifted through the young people.

Marxx felt the eyes of the twins fall upon him. He laughed lightly, "Umm. Ok, so where to start?"

"Well I think there's an obvious answer to that question," Jaina replied, fists on her hips.

"Really?" Marxx said.

"The art studio," both Jaina and Jacen said in unison.

"I hate it when you guys do that. Ok, let's go," Marxx said, as they headed up the stairwell towards the attic.

As light flooded the studio, their eyes searched the room differently. They no longer saw paintings, tubes of paint, brushes, packages of clay, half-finished canvases, and sculptures, instead their expert eyes sought out things that may have eluded their notice before. Marxx opened drawers of drawing paper, seeking erroneous keys or datapads. They looked for notebooks and anything of a personal nature. Jacen yanked out a huge pile of canvases and looked between each one to see if anything might be hidden between them. Jaina began stomping on the floorboards, listening for hidden cavities.

From one of the drawers, Marxx extracted a large piece of drawing paper. His breath caught as he laid it out on Paulo's workbench. Jaina threw her head up from examining the floorboards and saw her husband's shoulders bend in as he stared at a colorful drawing. She walked behind him and ducked under his right arm, encircling his waist with her left arm.

“Wow, who is that?” Jaina asked, as her eyes fell upon a portrait of a young woman. The woman’s face alit with joy, appeared to be laughing. Her hair cascaded in long blond drifts down her face. Her green dress was simple. Her light eyes sparkled with merriment.

Jacen stared at the portrait and said, “It’s your grandmother.” Marxx nodded slowly.

“She was beautiful,” Jaina said. “I guess though with her coloring your mother resembled Paulo.”

Brows furrowing, Marxx let his fingers caress the edges of the drawing, “Long ago I remember thinking she was a beautiful angel because she was different than everyone else in my family with her fair complexion. I just can’t believe someone this beautiful could end up being so cruel to my sister.”

“Beauty can be only skin deep, you know. I wouldn’t think twice about her,” Jacen said and walked away. Jacen’s gut boiled with anger for that woman and the hell she put his love through.

Jaina gave Marxx a glance of agreement. He nodded his head, “You’re right.” With that he grabbed the drawing from the center and quickly ripped it in half. Light pastel dust floated into the air.

Standing in the middle of the room, Jaina closed her eyes. In her mind she filtered out the noise from her husband and brother working, and all the noises that sifted up the stairwell from below. She focused entirely upon the sound of the air circulating in the room. As she sunk deeper into the Force, she listened to the air. Jacen and Marxx both stared at her and ceased their actions. Jaina’s hands gently soared through the air, stirring its current. She absorbed more energy from the abundant plant life surrounding the home through the Force, and her hearing intensified. Then she heard it, loud as a roaring wind, a sweeping current of air being sucked under a door.

Jacen and Marxx jumped as Jaina leapt into action. The western wall housed a plethora of boxes, and old furniture. She began shoving items aside, into Marxx and Jacen’s waiting hands. Jaina coughed as large layers of dust clouded the air and dirtied her hands. Then as she continued to dig, parts of the wall appeared. Behind the multiple layers of stuff resided a door.

“Where did that come from?” A voice from behind them asked.

They turned to see Chariss standing at the top of the stairs, wiping her hands on her apron.

“You’d never seen it before, Mom?” Marxx asked.

“No. I never knew it was there. What’s in there?” She asked.

“That’s the question of the hour, Chariss,” Jaina replied examining the wall. “Look at that, it takes an old fashioned key to open it. Any idea where she would have hidden it?”

Marxx met her upturned brown eyes, wiped a large section of dust off of her cheek and shrugged. “How would I know? Mom, you got any ideas?”

Chariss’ voice remained small and distant, “Actually, I may know where it is. Come on, let’s eat first. You’ll need your energy before going in there.” The trio watched Marxx’s mother descend the stairs.

“What if she doesn’t have a key?” Jacen asked.

Jaina gave her brother a hurt expression, “What? You think a little thing like an old keyhole is gonna stop me from getting us through that door?” Shaking her head Jaina headed for the stairs, wiping her filthy hands.

Marxx grinned and said to Jacen, “I love being married to a mechanic. She can’t cook but she sure is good to have around.”

Jacen clapped Marxx on the shoulder, “I marvel at you sometimes, you know that?”

“For what?”

“Any man who willingly married my sister deserves a medal,” Jacen replied, grinning.

Marxx licked his lip and leaned in closely to his friend and smiled wickedly, “Likewise.” Heading for the downstairs exit Marxx’s smile broadened as he heard Jacen chuckle following him closely behind.

Chapter 17

“Right, Uncle Luke, I’ll let her know you’ll be in later tonight,” Anakin said into the holo-emitter.

“Try to find out as much as you can about what’s going on at dinner, then you can brief me when I come in later,” Luke said, standing in his Coruscant apartment as he slid a black glove over his right hand.

“I’ll do what I can. So far Tenel Ka and I haven’t discussed much about what’s going on. I’ll see what I can get out of her. See you later, Uncle Luke. May the Force be with you,” Anakin replied.

“May the Force be with you, Anakin,” Luke said, smiled then ended the message.

Great, dinner alone with Tenel Ka . This is going to be a joy, Anakin thought as his finger lingered to the bump on his forehead. So, now she not only sees me as a annoyance, but a bumbling fool as well. Anakin ceased walking and thought, That is if she even thinks of me at all... which she probably doesn't... Why do you care what she thinks? You want to impress a Princess or something? Since when does being royalty mean anything to you. She's just Tenel Ka, you know. Anakin slapped his forehead to stop the ceaseless spinning chatter that circled through his head.

He stopped in front of a long mirror and stared at his reflection. Somehow in his frantic packing he’d actually managed to throw together a decent outfit to wear that befitted a dinner with royalty. He glanced at the loose fitting, long sleeved, silky black shirt and decided to undo the top couple of fasteners. His black pants legs accentuated his limbs and the cut showed their muscular definition. He stared at the robe and threw it over a chair, deciding to leave it behind. His lightsaber hung off of his utility belt within easy access. He slicked down his dark hair with his hands and grinned roguishly at himself in the reflection. He then purposefully left his room and wove his way through the Palace towards the dining hall.

Anakin entered the room and he stared in amazement. Alit with bioluminescent vines that appeared to twist up and out of the ground, the dining room shined in a soft greenish white glow. To warm the atmosphere dozens of glass candelabras sparkled from the yellow flickerings of flames. The silverware and glass china sparkled under the brilliant light. However dazzling the room appeared it paled in beauty next to the host, standing at the far end of the room, gazing out a circular window.

Tenel Ka's right hand fingers unconsciously played with a gold chain that circled her tanned neck. The firelight enhanced hair color, setting it ablaze in its copper brilliance. She wore a simple, long, sleeveless, taupe gown. Its collar scooped down her chest. Around her waist hung a single gold chain belt that ended with two dazzling red firestones that twinkled in the firelight. For as long as Anakin could remember, he'd always seen her legs in her short Dathomir warrior armor. Yet he could not control his wandering eye as it fell upon the skirt of her dress that hugged her legs and slit dangerously high up her left leg, revealing her tantalizingly bare, muscular leg. He could smell her floral perfume from across the room. Drawn to its scent and the woman wearing it, he silently crept behind the Princess and stared out at the ocean over her shoulder. His heart pounded wildly in rhythm with the crashing waves beyond.

In the reflection of the window Tenel Ka watched Anakin enter the room. His eyes briefly took in the splendor of the room, but they affixed themselves entirely in the direction of the Hapan Princess. Her fingers grew clammy as they nervously tugged on her chain necklace under his scrutinizing stare. From the doorway, Anakin's large form shut out most of the light from the hallway. Even in the window she could see the blue of his honest eyes. Her heart quickened as he approached her from behind. Instantly, his heat radiated from his large body on her back. She felt deliciously naked in her flimsy gown. For some reason she could not explain, she wanted to appear gorgeous for the younger Solo brother. Judging by the expression on Anakin's face upon seeing her, Tenel Ka believed she'd accomplished her goal in spades. Tenel Ka's head swam as her nose filled with the light musk scent of Anakin's aftershave lotion. She heard him deeply breathe in, smelling her own perfume.

What is happening to me? I have known Anakin forever, why am I behaving this way? Tenel Ka thought as her vision slightly blurred and her heart raced. Without realizing it, she gently leaned back against Anakin's broad chest, her head rested on his pectorals as he towered behind her smaller frame. Smiling, Anakin encircled his arms around his friend's waist protectively, slightly stooped, lowering his chin onto the top of her head. Together they stared out the window as the brilliant sun set. Tenel Ka lightly stroked Anakin's hand and he beamed, delighted by her touch. She then shook herself back to reality and extracted herself from Anakin's embrace.

"I am sorry, I should not have done that," she replied, hand rubbing her forehead as she fought off a dizzy spell.

Completely befuddled, Anakin asked, "What? Why?"

"What? Because... it was... improper of me," she said, mind racing.

Anakin smirked the Solo smile, "Improper, huh? What two friends enjoying a sunset together is improper?"

Tenel Ka's eyes narrowed as she suddenly found herself focusing upon Anakin, "Yes, it was improper... you know that was not just... just... I am the Princess of Hapes. I am not supposed to just lounge in the arms of some commoner." Her gut twisted the moment the last word flew from her lips.

Anakin cracked his knuckles and stared down at her for several heartbeats. He let out a low chuckle, "Pulling rank on me are you, sweetheart? Right, I'm just a lowly Jedi, here to serve you in your time of need." Collapsing to his knee he bowed his head, "I am here to serve you, your Grace, your Excellency, your Highness. Please, forgive me for my improper transgressions." He glanced up at her flaming angry eyes and grasped his hands together, pleading, "Please forgive me, I am not worthy of sharing the same room as you, much less breathe your same air."

Growling, Tenel Ka swept past him and grabbed a goblet of water. She gulped down the liquid in attempt to ignore Anakin's sarcasm. Suddenly his cologne lingered close to her nose as Anakin cornered her against the back of a chair.

"My bet is you wouldn't be this rude if Jacen were here instead of me," Anakin seethed. "I bet this is killing you that you have to see me instead of my older brother. Guess what? He's not coming, and you're stuck with me. I suggest you just deal with it."

Anger flaring, Tenel Ka turned around and threw the rest of the contents of her water goblet up into Anakin's face.

Horrified with herself, Tenel Ka put on a strong front to cover her shame, "Do not expect me to apologize, you deserved that."

Anakin sputtered and ignored the water, allowing it to drip down his face, soaking his shirt, as it puddled onto the floor. "I must have hit a nerve, didn't I? Do you think I didn't notice the way you behaved at my sister's wedding? Luckily my siblings were too immersed in their own bliss to feel your selfish, anger." Tenel Ka raised a fist as if to slap Anakin. Ready, Anakin captured her small wrist in his large hand. "I would think of all the people out there, you would know what anger could do to a person. You are a Jedi! Anger will and can destroy you. Rage, resentment, jealousy, those emotions belong to the Dark Side."

Eyes growing large, Tenel Ka tried to fight free of Anakin's durasteel grasp. She said, "Let go of my hand."

"You've never behaved like this before. Why now? Why should it matter to you that Jacen's found someone to love? He's happy. I thought you were his friend. You're supposed to be happy when your best friend finds the love of his life. Why are you being so difficult over this?" Anakin said, his blue eyes bore into her gray eyes, reading into her soul.

"Why? Because, I loved him first!" Tenel Ka shouted back as she continued to struggle in his grasp.

Anakin responded by grabbing her other wrist and stilled her writhing body. Calmly, he said, "That may be true, but you never told him... did you?" Tenel Ka stared up at him, realized the truth in his words and her eyes began to tear. "How was he to know? Huh? You're always so serious. You never encouraged him when he tried to make you feel better. My brother may be very intelligent, but he's a relative idiot when it comes to women."

"And I suppose you are some Galactic expert on the opposite sex?" Tenel Ka spat.

Anakin released her wrists and walked away from her towards the window. He placed a hand on his hip

and pointed at her, “You had all the time in the galaxy to tell him how you really felt about him, and you... never... did. He got tired of waiting for you to make up your mind Tenel Ka. He found an opportunity and he took it.” Tenel Ka folded her arms tightly around her chest. Her chin began to quiver as her eyes flared defiantly towards the tall Jedi. Anakin began walking towards her again, “Contrary to what you’re feeling, or thinking right now, I can tell you this, he and Raven are a good match for each other.”

“I cannot see that,” she said, meekly.

Anakin smiled and stood in front of her again. He gently placed a couple of fingers under her chin and lifted her eyes to search his own. He stooped a little so they could meet each other’s gaze more closely. His eyes traced over her angular facial features. Softly he said, “No, maybe not now, but you will. It might hurt for a long time. But eventually the pain will go away. The trick is to let that happen. If you let your resentment stay with you, it will consume you, fester inside of you, until the good woman I know as Tenel Ka will cease to exist. I know I certainly don’t want that to happen.” Anakin ran his fingers gently down the side of her face. Tenel Ka trembled under his touch, his blue eyes caressed her soul. “The fact you learned to love in your life is a good sign, it means you are open to the possibility to love again. And if you allow your heart to heal, it will seek out a new home. Did it ever occur to you that maybe Jacen was not the man you were supposed to spend your life with? Maybe the Force has a reason for severing your connection with him. Maybe some greater power wants you free of your attachment to him.”

Gasping, Tenel Ka averted her eyes from Anakin’s intoxicating stare. She moved out of his direct scrutiny and moved around the table. Back turned she fiercely scrubbed her eyes in an attempt to avert a flood. Defiantly she turned and faced the young Jedi. Trying to maintain a calm voice she said, “And how exactly do you know so much about love, Anakin Solo? Have you had your heart broken? Are you giving me this advice based on life experience? If so please, enlighten me on how exactly I am supposed to move on.”

Blushing deeply, Anakin grabbed the back of a mahogany chair and gazed back at the distressed Princess. He replied, “Well, you’re right. I’ve never been in love. All I am is an observer. I suppose having crushes and such doesn’t exactly match getting your heart pounded on. I would like to think though, that if I did get my heart broken that I could eventually move on.”

Although she desperately wanted to change the subject, Tenel Ka felt compelled to continue the conversation. Her heart demanded to be heard. She said, “Love is not rational. What if you are wrong? What if Jacen was my one true love? I may never fall in love again.”

Furrowing his brows Anakin skirted around the table and stared hard into her grim face, “You don’t really believe that, do you? Think about this, if you really believed all these years that Jacen was your one true love, why didn’t you ever say anything to him? You had to know that he loved you back. Jacen was hardly subtle.” He noted a change of expressions flash over Tenel Ka’s face. Her features flashed from angry to confused to uncertain. Anakin pushed on, “Why didn’t you say anything? It couldn’t be fear. You’re not afraid of anything. There has to be some deeper reason.”

Shaking her head, in a small voice, Tenel Ka whispered, “No. It’s not possible. I loved Jacen.”

Anakin again stroked her soft cheek, his large thumb moved under her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze. “To a large degree, I’m sure you did love my brother. The real question is how much of that was

real and how much was imagined. No, no.. hear me out. If you truly love someone, can picture yourself spending your entire life with him, you'll never be afraid to say anything to him. For in your heart, you'll know he'll never disappoint you, never falter in your expectations. At the same time, you'll be able to accept his faults as well as his strengths. Maybe there was something in Jacen that held you back all this time. I don't know. I don't have that answer for you. All I know is you need to move on. He's still your friend, and will always be fiercely loyal to you. Same as you will be for him, regardless if he gets married or something down the road. Am I right?"

"Of course I will always be his friend," Tenel Ka replied, avoiding his disarmingly blue eyes. Her eyes then gazed upon his wet shirt that outlined his fit pectorals. Somehow the water managed to deepen his musky cologne instead of washing it off. Tenel Ka felt dizzy from Anakin's looming closeness. She blushed suddenly feeling very uncomfortable.

"Well then you need to start acting like one, and move on. He'd want you to be happy, not depressed and angry about his love life. My brother may seem goofy and aloof, but really, he's very sensitive. He can go off onto a blue funk faster than anyone I've ever seen. Trust me, if he knew you were not truly happy for him and Raven, he'd probably just break down and cry," Anakin said.

"Thank you. I needed that extra layer of guilt to go with my pain," Tenel Ka replied, perturbed.

Smirking Anakin said, "Oh come on, secretly you'd love it if he suffered, wouldn't you?"

"You really think I'm cruel and heartless don't you?" Tenel Ka asked, placing her fists on her hips.

Groaning Anakin turned away from the seething girl, "Great, you haven't heard a word I said. That's exactly the opposite of what I've been trying to tell you! I've been trying to tell you that you have a great, loving heart. But I know you. In the state you are in right now, you'd enjoy it if Raven and Jacen suffered some kind of heartache. You'd like for them to be as miserable as you are."

Tenel Ka realized her anger flared because Anakin spoke the truth. She pouted, shamefaced, "That is a fact."

Heart leaping, Anakin sensed he actually might finally be getting through to the stubborn Jedi warrior. Furthering the issue he asked, "And how does that make you feel?"

"Fine! I am guilty, jealous, and angry! Are you happy now? You should be nicer to me, I'm not used to feeling these things," Tenel Ka replied, deepening her scowl.

Anakin burst out laughing, causing Tenel Ka's gray eyes to flare with hot anger. "I'm sorry, I just *never* thought I would see the day that the mighty Jedi Warrior Princess, Tenel Ka would ask for someone to pity her."

"I am not asking for your pity!"

"Wrong, that is exactly what you did!" Anakin retorted, peaking an eyebrow.

Tenel Ka growled and began to pace like a caged Wompa. Anakin replied, "Welcome to what it feels like to be human. It's not always pretty, or fun, is it?"

“This is a fact!” she seethed. Then her shoulders grew limp. Softly, she asked, “How can I stop the pain?”

Anakin approached her shrunken form and placed his hands on her shoulders. Again, he inhaled her perfume. Her scent only further spurred him to get her to understand his point of view. Into her ear, he said, “I don’t know. All I know is that the more you focus on the pain, and embrace it, the more you feed and nurture it. Pain can lead to the Dark Side. It can consume you.” Tenel Ka closed her eyes as she felt Anakin’s warm breath caress her ear. His long, delicate fingers gently massaged her shoulders, causing her sight to blur and swim in pleasure. “Once you let go of your pain, you will be free.”

Unable to control herself any longer, Tenel Ka turned and threw her arms around Anakin’s lean waist and began to sob into his broad chest. Large, protective arms embraced the crying woman as she wept until she felt emotionally spent.

Anakin handed her a napkin that she used to blow her nose. She then glanced at Anakin’s shirt, even wetter thanks to her tears.

“I am sorry, Anakin for getting you wet. You did not deserve that,” the titian haired girl said.

“Oh don’t worry about it, I’ll just take that as a hint that you don’t like my aftershave. I needed a secondary shower this evening anyway. Also, I think I heard that salt is good for the skin,” Anakin said, grinning.

“What? I do not understand. I tried to apologize and you...”

Lifting her chin, Anakin stared at Tenel Ka tenderly, “I was just joking, honey. Really, it doesn’t matter to me. I’m pretty sure... I deserved it. Although, not entirely.”

Side of mouth lifting slightly, Tenel Ka replied, “Well you are a pain, you know?”

“Yes, you told me that before. Unfortunately for you, I’m a pain who will not be going away any time soon,” Anakin replied, smile broadening.

“Do you still want to eat with me?” Tenel Ka asked, meekly. “If not I would understand if you would like to dine alone. I can have food sent to your room.”

Taking her hand lightly, Anakin said, “Princess Tenel Ka, *nothing* would give me greater pleasure than to dine with you.” With that he led her to her seat at the end of the table, pulled out her chair and helped her sit down. Then he seated himself.

As Tenel Ka unfolded her napkin into her lap she licked her lips lightly and said, “And Anakin...”

“Yes?” He said, blue eyes gleaming.

“I like the smell of your aftershave, a lot. This is a fact,” Tenel said.

Anakin flashed her a boyishly charming smile that brightened the darkened room. However, even his smile could not match the brilliance of the one Tenel Ka honored him with in return.

As the servants began bringing in their courses, Anakin steered the conversation towards the looming war, towards topics far removed from Tenel Ka's unfamiliar emotional territory that they had earlier traversed. The Princess sensed his skillful diversion and began to view the youngest Solo son in a new light. With the way he effortlessly and diplomatically altered their conversation she began to comprehend possibly why Master Skywalker chose Anakin for this assignment. His compassion and cool head spoke volumes. The longer they ate and talked, the more Tenel Ka did not want their evening to ever end.

Chapter 18

“You really don’t need to tell them about that, Tanella. Really, you don’t,” Marxx said emphatically as he finished the remains of his soup.

Brown eyes flashing with merriment, Tanella giggled, as Jaina lifted an interested eyebrow in her sister-in-law’s direction. “So anyway...”

“Urrrgghhhh!” Marxx said, face blushing, stood up and began clearing empty plates and bowls off of the table. Krishta bounced up and down in her seat, laughing as her family giggled over her head. Her brown curls jostled around her happy face.

“...the history mistress asked Marxx’s class if anyone knew of Jango Fett. Marxx thought he heard her say, does anyone know any tango steps?” Tanella’s giggle infected the entire table.

Jacen groaned, “Go on...”

“So nervously he raised his hand, bravely said “I do,” stood up... and began dancing around the classroom!” Tanella finished with glee.

Marxx returned into the dining room as it erupted with laughter. Marxx replied, cheeks hot pink as he continued to clear the table, “Thank you all so much for reveling in one of my more embarrassing grade school moments.”

“He spent years being called Tango Fett by his classmates!” Tanella added, giggling uncontrollably.

“Yes, until I was finally tall enough to intimidate the name out of their memories,” Marxx replied then pointed at his sister with his elbow. “Course she fails to mention this was after we’d been stuck indoors after four day sandstorm. Sis and Mom spent the entire time teaching me to Tango. Needless to say, it was on my brain.”

“Oh son, you are a lovely Tango dancer. You have nothing to be ashamed of!” Chariss said amongst her giggles.

“Not exactly the point, Mom,” Marxx said, cocking his head in her direction.

Chuckling softly, Rowlon rested his hands on his broad girth and commented, “Well you know son, I always said being at that podracing track was a bad thing. Told you you’d lose your hearing.”

“What?” Marxx asked. Causing the whole table to burst into another fresh round of laughter. Marxx grinned slyly as he exited the dining room with another armload of plates.

Jaina bounced to her feet, grabbed a bunch of dishes and followed her husband into the kitchen. She placed them on the counter and watched him wipe excess food off into the noisy disposal. Marxx beamed as Jaina’s arms snaked around his waist and devilishly tickled his stomach. Marxx turned off the disposal, quickly washed out the bowl, stuck it on the rack and whirled around in his wife’s arms.

“So, now you know my secret. All my life I actually wanted to be a professional Tango dancer, not a Jedi Knight,” Marxx said.

Giggling, Jaina smiled delightfully up into Marxx’s bright blue eyes, and said, “Lucky for me you excel at both skills.” Beaming delightfully, Jaina stood on her tiptoes and captured Marxx’s lips in a kiss. Their mouths pulsated and tickled from Jaina’s erupting giggling and they broke apart laughing even harder. Marxx lightly removed Jaina’s arms from around his waist and positioned her arms in a Tango strut. Together they stomped on the ground and moved out of the room together, through the dining room, past their family and around the dining room table. Marxx dipped Jaina right over Tanella’s lap and she briefly met her sister-in-law’s delighted eyes.

“This is all your fault,” Jaina said, then squealed as he lifted her back up and twirled her around the table. Their legs and feet blurred as they spun and twisted around the table. Everyone began to clap in unison, with increasingly fast tempo to egg the young couple on towards dizzying speeds. Marxx ended their dance with dropping his wife into a low dip.

Breathing fast, Jaina’s face contorted as queasiness over took her, she said, “Oh bless the Force, pull me up Marxx, I think I want to throw up.” Marxx yanked her back upright and Jaina’s stomach swirled unsteadily. Putting her hands out to get her bearings. Jaina said, “Ok, I definitely do not recommend doing that right after a large, wonderful dinner.”

Feeling rather guilty, Marxx picked up his wife and carried her into the living room and sat them down on a couch to relax. Tanella, Krishta, and Jacen finished clearing off the table. Then the ladies shooed Jacen out of the kitchen. Chariss, wiped her hands and wandered down the hall. Rowlon and Jacen groaned as they sank into their chairs in the living room.

“Chariss, that was wonderful,” Jacen shouted down the hall.

“Thank you, dear,” Chariss’ muffled voice replied. Marxx continued to stroke Jaina’s hair as her head lay in his lap. They smiled dreamily at each other, ignoring the rest of the world. Jacen rolled his eyes. Then he sat forward as Chariss appeared carrying a large, bronze Queen Amidala statue. With a thud she placed it on the coffee table in front of Marxx.

“My mother used to pay this thing a ton of attention. One day, I crept into her doorway and watched her open up a compartment on it somewhere and hide something. I’ve never been able to figure out how it opens. Let’s see if three Jedi can figure it out,” Chariss replied, then headed towards the kitchen. She peered around the door before disappearing entirely. “Oh and Jaina darling...”

“Yes?” Jaina said, as she sat up.

“You and your brother can decide which of the two of you would like that statue. It should belong to one of you since it is your grandmother,” Chariss said, smiling.

Jaina beamed, “Thank you! I remember this sculpture from when I helped get the house ready with Julillia when I first came to Naboo. I thought it was beautiful.”

“Come on sis, you up for the challenge?” Jacen asked, dropping on the floor in front of the coffee table.

“I’ll try,” Jaina said.

“Do or do not, there is no try,” Marxx and Jacen said in unison. Jaina groaned loudly as the two males burst into laughter.

Closing her eyes, Jaina’s fingers explored every crevice and nook and cranny of the statue. She felt for spaces and hidden compartments. As her fingers moved over the sculpture she said, “Your grandmother was very good at what she did. This was obviously cast from a single clay sculpture, not a mould. There are no raised mould marks on the statue. The good news with that is this should be pretty easy to locate...” Jaina cocked her head as her fingers stopped on one of the raised decorations arranged at the bottom of Queen Amidala’s dress. “This one. It’s different than the rest of the decorations, it’s slightly raised.” She opened her eyes and examined the piece. Absently she tapped her fingers on her teeth. “This should be easy enough,” she said. Pressing hard with her thumb, the compartment did not open. Then she tried twisting it clockwise and it seemed to fasten tighter into place. Jaina beamed and screwed the ornament counterclockwise. It began to unfasten. The thin hidden chamber twisted and twisted until it finally came loose and fell out in her hand. She tipped the statue and nothing came out of the hole. Then lightly holding the tiny drawer she tipped it on end and a slender, bronze key clattered onto the table.

The three Jedi let out a happy yell, and then raced upstairs. Rowlon, Chariss, Tanella, and Krishta followed in their wake.

When the three Jedi’s got to the door, Jaina gave the key to Marxx. “I think you should do the honors. Judging by the architecture of the house, the room should be approximately thirty by twenty square feet.”

Jacen stared at her quizzically.

“What!” She said.

Taking a long breath, Marxx slid the key in the keyhole. He slightly jumped at the loud snap as the key unlocked the door. The door opened to darkness. Jaina’s hand slid to the side and flicked on the light.

“Bless... the... Force,” Marxx said as his eyes examined the contents of the room. The center of the room remained open. The sides filled were lined with tables, filled with statues. The walls displayed numerous holo-images, drawings, and blueprints. The far end of the room was shut off with thick fabric drapes. The Jedi filed into the room and Marxx’s family crowded the doorway. Krishta tried to race in but her mother held her at bay.

The hairs on Jacen’s arms stood on end as he realized who each of the sculptures and images were

representations of. He said, "Emperor Palpatine."

Hands on knees examining one of the sculptures closely, Jaina said, "Yes, but they look like they are from all sorts of eras of his political history. Look at how young he appears in this sculpture."

Marxx glanced at it. "Look at the cleft in his chin, same as my grandmother and Tanella has." Tanella consciously touched her chin.

Jaina sifted through a bunch of drawings, "Look here- she's got drawings of all sorts of Sith Lords." She groaned pulling one out. "Of course, can't hero worship the Sith without having a few drawings of grandfather."

Marxx crowded behind her and stared at the imposing, dark drawing of Lord Vader. He wrapped his arms around Jaina's waist, giving her extra strength.

Jacen shook his head then moved in front of the curtains. "So who wants the honors?"

"I'm almost afraid of what's in there. But go ahead," Marxx said as he sifted through dusty piles of drawings of the Emperor. Each detailed his cloak, the lean of his back, the way his hood shrouded his face.

"Uhhh... Marxx... come here," Jacen said. Marxx glanced up and saw Jacen holding the heavy curtain back.

Jaina and Marxx stood behind Jacen and held the heavy drapes out further. Inside, held a luxurious shrine. A three foot statue of Palpatine in his Emperor cloak stood on top of a table, surrounded by dusty, varying heights, red candles. Lined in purple and red fabrics, the shrine felt dark and claustrophobic.

"What are these?" Marxx asked, picking up two metallic cubes that rested on a shelf under the statue.

Jaina and Jacen both gasped and said, "Don't activate those!"

Furrowing his eyebrows, Marxx asked, "Good grief your twin link is cranked up tonight, isn't it? What? Why not?"

"They're holocrons. It looks like your grandmother was seriously obsessed with her brother and his Sith ways. I'm going to assume those are Sith related," Jaina said.

When confusion still marred Marxx's face, Jacen explained, "Holocrons contain teachings from ancient Jedis. Uncle Luke found several of them early on when he worked on building the Jedi Academy. The Sith ones can be very... persuasive."

"Well what good is it to find them and not at least pop one open to see what it's about?" Marxx asked. He noticed the startled and worried expressions mirrored on both of the Solo twin's faces. "Oh come on, we're not weak minded. I just want to see who the Sith Lord is on these things. I want to see if it actually was my great uncle or not. If it is, it puts a whole new spin on why Gwynalyn turned out the way she did. Maybe Palpatine was grooming her to take over his place. I need to know..."

“Alright, but if they start preaching Dark Arts mantras, turn it off!” Jaina sternly said.

“Right,” Jacen agreed.

“Ok...” Marxx fiddled with one of the cubes. “Uh... any idea how to get this to work guys?”

Jaina grabbed the cube and squeezed on two of the corners. Suddenly a looming, red, holographic man’s shrouded face filled the tiny room. Each young Jedi jumped back in surprise as a voice boomed into the attic:

If you are watching this lesson then you have successfully learned to feed on your anger and aggression. Excellent my young apprentice... now we will commence with learning how to bend the will of the Force for your own personal.... Jaina deactivated the cube.

“Oops, that appears to be lesson two on becoming a Sith Lord,” she said and placed the cube onto the alter.

She activated the second cube. The same man’s face appeared. His wicked teeth gleamed from under a shrouded hood. Marxx stared intensely at the image, noting the man’s lower facial features appeared rather familiar.

Insignificant fools. The Naboo will pay for tarnishing the crown of King Bainier Palpatine. I am now to be known as Darth Virulous, Dark Lord of the Sith. One day my revenge upon the pitiful creatures will be complete. If I am unable to fulfill my revenge then it will be exacted by my descendents. Our name will live in infamy and will not hide in shame! The Naboo and their haughty Jedi thought they could rid themselves of me. For centuries the Jedi overlooked the teachings of the Sith. This will be their downfall. Listen and learn my apprentice. With my lessons, you will learn the power of persuasion and the power of influence. One day... the Palpatine name will rise again, like a phoenix, and rule the galaxy!

Let us begin...

Marxx turned off the holocron and snorted, “Huh, that was interesting.”

“Bainier was your seven times back great-grandfather, right?” Jacen said.

“Yes. I guess we now know what that scandal was about, and eventually how these things got back into Gwynalyn’s hands,” Jaina said.

“So my Grandmother learned the Dark Arts- from listening to these things. Oh, well they shouldn’t be kept here. What should we do with them? Destroy them?” Marxx asked.

Jaina scratched her ear and said, “I think we should take them to Yavin 4, let Masters Tionne and Rodersuin decide what to do with them.”

Jacen chewed the inside of his mouth and nodded his head, “I agree.”

“Alright, fair enough. Do you see anything else that they might be interested in around here?” Marxx said.

Skeptically Jacen fingered the statue, “Do you think they’d want one of these things?”

“NO!” Jaina and Marxx said together. Shoving the holocrons deep into his pocket, Marxx sifted through drawers and piles seeking anything that might be personally relevant to Gwynalyn and explain the roots of her evil ways. After about an hour of searching Marxx and the twins came up empty handed on new information on Gwynalyn Palpatine, only finding piles of drawings, newspad articles, and holo-images of Marxx’s infamous great uncle. However, they did find several datapads containing information on the heroes of the New Republic. Each article detailed how Luke, Han, Leia, and the rebels defeated the mighty Empire.

“I wonder why she had all of these,” Marxx said.

“Look around here. It looks like she was obsessed with the Emperor and wanted to learn his secrets. It would only make sense she would want to exact revenge on those who brought down her brother,” Jaina replied.

“Good thing she’s dead, right?” Jacen said, examining a bust of Palpatine’s face.

“Is she dead? Raven never mentioned anything about her being dead. If she is alive, I have no idea where she would be,” Marxx replied, suddenly very concerned.

“So what should we do? Should we tell someone about all this? Uncle Luke perhaps?” Jaina asked.

Marxx yawned and wrapped an arm around his wife’s shoulders, “I don’t know, honey. Isn’t he off to help Tenel Ka? How would this info help him with that situation?”

“You’re right, it wouldn’t,” Jaina replied.

“Do you see anything else in here that we need?” Jacen asked looking very bored.

“No, I think we’re done. Let’s get out of here. Thanks for your help, guys,” Marxx said.

“No problem, guy,” Jaina said and pinched Marxx in the stomach.

“Ok, guy and M’lady,” Marxx said laughing.

“That’s better,” Jaina said. As her fingers caressed a half completed sculpture of Queen Amidala. “Hey Marxx...”

“Yeah?”

“Why do you think your grandmother made all of these statues of my grandmother? She’s the exact opposite of Palpatine. She was good and pure,” Jaina stated.

Jacen glanced at Marxx and Jaina and said, “I have a theory on that. It looks like she was living a double life. Part of her seemed to enjoy her normal family life. And a part of that was Paulo. Paulo had the greatest respect for Padme and she probably made the statues of her to please him. Then in secret she made all of those statues of Palpatine in that room. Eventually, her hatred of Tatooine helped foster

her dark feelings until they took her over and she left. She probably took your sister because she knew she was weak and would be completely dependent on her.”

Marxx nodded, “That all sounds plausible. Unfortunately, we probably will never know.”

Dusty and tired the three Jedi turned off the light and left the room. When they arrived downstairs they found Chariss staring at the floor with tears flooding her eyes. Rowlon squatted on the floor in front of Chariss, holding her hands and wiping away her tears with a handkerchief.

“I cannot believe my mother would have worshipped that evil man. I don’t understand it,” Chariss said.

Marxx walked behind her chair and dropped his arms around her shoulders, hugging her tightly. Marxx said, “I don’t know why either, Mom. Why does anyone choose the path they walk in life? Some walk the path of righteousness while others traverse the path of evil. Apparently, grandmother got her directions confused.”

“You’re such a smart boy, Marxx,” Chariss said, patting his arm.

Smiling Marxx glanced at Jaina, “I think we’re gonna go, Mom. We’ve got places to go, things to do. Thanks for the wonderful meal.” Marxx planted a big kiss on his mother’s cheek.

“You going back to Theed? Or are you staying in the Lake Country tonight?” Rowlon asked.

“Probably here,” Jaina said.

“Good, then Jacen, you’re staying here tonight, if that’s alright? Give the lovebirds some quiet time alone. There’s a big touchball tournament on tonight on the holonet if you want to watch it with me,” Rowlon said.

Jacen grinned, “Sounds great, Rowlon.”

Marxx and Jaina headed for the door. Jaina said to her brother, “We’ll be by at eight to pick you up.”

“Ok. Later guys,” Jacen said. He watched the two exit the house and noted the amorous expressions they flashed to each other. Knowing immediately how the newlyweds intended to spend the evening, Jacen groaned, and mentally slammed shut his twin link with his sister.

Chapter 19

Staring at her mirror from Jacen, Raven’s finger’s caressed the tortoise shell outer coating on the handle. Her thumb then moved to the large light blue Altorian topaz that rested on the handle. She nervously tapped her right middle finger rapidly against the table as her mind spun in deep debate. Her eyes shifted to her surroundings in the kitchenette on *The Fiery Phoenix*. On the table before her sat a multitude of small wires, transistors, and gears, all parts left over from her construction of her lightsaber. Kyp allowed her to build her weapon on his ship because its environment controls lacked the humidity of the planet. Her eyes rested on her hilt. The bronze colored steel tube sat fully

assembled except for the most crucial of elements- a crystal or gem.

She figured she could either spend days if not weeks, trudging through the swamps of Dagobah searching and possibly not finding an appropriate stone. Or she could use the one from Jacen's mirror. Raven loved the mirror deeply. It meant everything to her, not for its possible monetary value, but because it was the most thoughtful thing anyone ever gave her as a gift. Carefully she examined the handle and figured she could get the gem off with a tiny laser torch. Of course then the mirror would be damaged and incomplete.

As she caressed the stone she thought of Jacen and what he would think of her predicament. She completely forgot to ask him in their holo-emitter message. Her eyes flashed up to the pilot's cabin and briefly thought, *I could just lift the ship up briefly and call him*, Raven admonished herself before the thought even completed in her head. *That would be great, one way ticket to prison. Self control, Raven, you're a big girl, you can make this decision on your own*, she thought. *Besides, you'd never get away with it. Kyp probably watches the logs for calls, he'd know if you made an unauthorized call.*

Shoving hard on the table Raven wandered across the ship towards Kyp's tool chest and sifted noisily through the contents. She extracted the laser torch and then grabbed a pair of safety goggles. With a thud she fell back down onto the bench and picked up her lightsaber hilt and her mirror and stared at both of them.

A lightsaber is the weapon of a Jedi. Once you make one, it will likely be your weapon for life. Rarely will you probably need to actually use it. So you want to make sure you build yourself a safe, and sturdy weapon. It will be at your side at all times. Make sure when you construct your lightsaber, you do so realizing it will be yours, always.

Kyp's words swirled in her mind as her fingers fit comfortably around her hilt. She melted the steel to make grooves in it to make it easier and more comfortable to hold. The grooves circled the hilt and added an organic design flair to the weapon. She carefully placed the nearly finished lightsaber and the mirror back down on the table.

She picked up the goggles and put them over her eyes. *If this weapon is going to be with me for the rest of my life, then it needs a worthy jewel. By taking the gem off of the mirror Jacen gave me, I will always have a piece of my love with me, everywhere I go... besides, I can always replace the gem down the road*, she thought. Cementing her decision, she turned on the torch and carefully cut the gemstone apart from the mirror. After turning off the torch she gently placed it on the table to allow it to cool. She took off her goggles, she picked up the stone and carefully filed off any remaining glue or wood shards that stuck to the back of it. Then she polished the stone to a glittering, aquamarine blue shine. Pulling out a magnifying glass she carefully inspected the stone for even the smallest flaw. Finding none she licked her lips. She expertly disassembled the lightsaber and placed the stone into its chamber. She snapped the hilt together after verifying every component was perfectly aligned.

Raven slid out of the bench and wrapped her hands around the lightsaber. Taking a deep breath she activated it with a loud *snap hiss*. The blue topaz stone produced a brilliant marine blue light that matched her eyes. Smiling, her hand waved the sword to and from, producing a steady electrical hum in the air. The blade did not produce any vibrations down towards the hilt, allowing her hand to remain steady and able to concentrate on the use of the blade. After a few quick practice parries, thrusts, and twists Raven smiled brightly. Turning off her lightsaber she affixed it to her belt, cleaned up the spare parts, picked up her mirror and headed back to the hut.

As she stood in the doorway Kyp's eyes lingered to the new weapon hanging from his student's waist. He grinned and said, "Very good. Tomorrow we begin lightsaber training."

Raven nodded and headed to her bed. The smell of burning wood filled the hut from the roaring evening fire.

"Can I ask you something?" Kyp asked, as he lay down on his left side on his bed.

"Sure," she replied as she sat on her bed and began removing her boots.

"I understand you are already well trained with a lightsaber. How and when did you learn to use it?" Kyp asked, his green eyes filled with curiosity.

Dropping her boot, Raven spun on her bed and grabbed her knees. "When I was given my ship I hired a bounty hunter to find me someone who would be willing to train me in the art of lightsaber play. My grandmother never knew about it. At least I don't think she did... anyway, Bossk found me a man named Brakiss who willingly trained me at an extortionate rate. I spent two weeks with him learning how to dig into my aggression to help enhance my physical strength and dexterity. He gave me my first lightsaber. I never had to build it."

"Brakiss," Kyp hissed. "That Sithspawn. I should've guessed. Wait, how long ago was that?"

"About six years ago, why?" Raven asked.

Kyp groaned and rolled over on his bed. His fingers grazed through his shaggy black hair, "We all thought he was dead. His Shadow Academy got destroyed about ten years ago. Everyone assumed he perished."

"Well, he didn't. He was in hiding I guess. He was also very impressed with me. I think he wanted to recruit me and my talents," Raven said.

Kyp snorted, "Yeah, I'll bet he did. If he knew who you were, he probably would have tried to kidnap you."

"I take it you don't like him very much?" Raven asked, smirking.

"Well let's see, he learned to be a Jedi from Master Skywalker then he betrayed him. He also had this nasty habit of always wanting to kill Jedi. There wasn't much to love about him," Kyp said, meeting her gaze he returned a smile.

"I didn't like him much. I told him off. I informed him I wasn't interested in furthering his agenda, I had my own to follow," Raven said.

Kyp chuckled, "I'm sure that went over well."

"Oh, he didn't care, he had his money. I think he was more hopeful than anything," Raven replied.

"Did he give you any idea what he was up to?" Kyp asked, hopefully.

“Nope. When I flat out refused his offer, he kept his mouth shut tight, wouldn’t tell me a thing.”

“Too bad,” Kyp said staring at the ceiling.

“Not to me, I’m glad to never see him again. He gave me the creeps,” Raven replied as she grabbed a boot off of the floor and began to polish the shine back. “He was seriously on some sort of power trip.”

“Sounds like someone else I know,” Kyp said, smirking.

“Who? You?” Raven said, blowing off some dust of her boot.

Kyp laughed loudly, “That wasn’t who I had in mind.”

“Well then who?” Raven asked glancing in his direction. Her jaw dropped open and she pointed at herself, “Me? You think I’m on a powertrip?”

Kyp rolled back over on his side again, “Well not anymore, but you used to be.”

She pointed her boot at her Master, “You didn’t know me then, so you’re not allowed to judge. I was young, lonely, and naïve. What can I say? Nobody else loved me, so I loved myself... sorta.”

“Speaking of love, did you use the gem from Jacen’s mirror for your lightsaber’s gemstone?”

Raven busied herself with polishing again, “Yes.”

“Really? Won’t he be angry that you destroyed his gift?” Kyp asked, peaking an eyebrow.

“No, I don’t think so. Now I will always carry his stone with me, everywhere I go. When my lightsaber is alit, it will hum, like the beat of his heart,” she said with a smile in her ice blue eyes.

A stab of jealousy squirmed in Kyp’s gut. Inspecting his fingernails, something occurred to him and he asked, “What would you do if Jacen died or was killed?”

Her hand ceased moving in circles over her boot, “What?”

“It’s always a possibility you know. Being a Jedi isn’t the safest of professions. What would you do if he was killed?” Kyp asked.

“Meaning would I seek revenge on those who killed him?” Raven asked, wondering why her Master was posing this line of questioning.

“Maybe... I’m curious,” Kyp said.

Raven’s eyes grew out of focus as she thought of such an empty future. “I think my heart would die. Although I’d probably wish I was dead as well, I would go on because I know that is what Jacen would want.” Her boot dropped to the floor with a loud thud. She jumped, then picked up her other boot and began working on the leather.

Closing his eyes, Kyp's heart asked, "Would you fall in love again?"

Tears flowing from her eyes, Raven matched Kyp's gaze. She asked, "How could I ever love someone when my heart would have been ripped from my chest? I'd never love anyone again. I mean, I might find someone down the road who I'd like, who I might even want to spend the rest of my life with. But I'd never love him the way I love Jacen. When I gave my heart to him, I gave it to him completely. I'll never give it that freely to anyone else again. It belongs only to Jacen."

Kyp flopped onto his back and faked a yawn, his hands covered his face to hide his tears. When he wiped them away he said, "We'd better get to sleep. We have a busy day of intense training tomorrow."

Throwing the boot to the floor, Raven crawled under cover. "Goodnight, Master Durrón."

"Goodnight, Raven," Kyp replied, and faced the wall. Both Master and student drenched their pillows with their tears before they drifted off towards sleep.

Tenel Ka waited in the reception hall as Master Skywalker emerged from the landing platform, long black cloak swirling around his commanding presence. R2-D2 rolled along behind his master. As Luke neared, she noticed that his sandy blond hair became lightly flecked with random white hairs. She greatly respected the Master for his intense wisdom and bravery, but she realized she always thought of him as young and vital. The white hairs reminded her of his mortality.

"Greetings, Master Skywalker. Welcome to Hapes. I wish you prosperity, good health, wisdom, and joy," she recited hands facing upwards palms extended.

Luke placed his palms upon hers and replied, "I greet you Princes Tenel Ka, may such prosperity, good health, wisdom and joy always preside in your lands."

Tenel Ka dropped her hands to her waist, "If only that was possible. Thank you for your assistance with our current crisis."

"Well you know I'd never pass up on an opportunity to help with a friend," Luke replied, smiling slightly. "Has Anakin been updated on the current state of things?"

"Yes, we discussed them over dinner," Tenel Ka replied as she led Luke towards the inner palace.

"I apologize for my lateness, I had to wait for Mara to arrive to take care of our son," Luke said.

Tenel Ka glanced at him with surprise, "You do not need to explain yourself to me, Master Skywalker."

Luke shrugged, "I just didn't want you to think I was shirking my duties."

Stopping mid stride, Tenel Ka glanced at the Jedi Master, "May I ask you a question?"

"Of course," Luke replied, standing casually beside her, lightly swinging his bag. Luke then smiled,

“Why did I select Anakin instead of Jacen?”

The Princess’ mouth dropped open. Luke chuckled. “I thought about sending Jacen initially. But Anakin has great instincts for things. He reads people really well. I wanted to see if he could catch something about the Dellaltians that I might miss. Besides, I wanted someone along with me who could be really objective. You and Jacen are very good friends. I was slightly worried that might end up clouding Jacen’s judgment some. I wanted someone who could watch things without worrying about an emotional attachment with you interfering. I know you and Anakin have known each other for a long, long time. But I also know you’re not close. In the end, Anakin seemed the perfect choice.”

If only you knew, Master Skywalker. I think Anakin and I may have just redefined our relationship, she thought, remembering their intense dinner conversation. “That was sound reasoning, Master Skywalker. I believe Anakin will be good for the job.”

Raising an eyebrow, Luke felt a bit surprised. “Really? I would have thought you would have objected more.”

“No, why should I? I trust your judgment. Who am I to question your motives? I am just grateful you were able and willing to assist. Have you decided how you would approach the Dellaltians? They have rebuffed any and all of our requests for a meeting,” Tenel Ka asked.

“I think Anakin and I are going to simply fly over there tomorrow and surprise them. Luckily, Jedi rarely get refused audiences with galactic leaders. They always seem rather curious by Jedi and our abilities. Even if they have no intention in the beginning of cooperating with us, they usually have no problem talking to us,” Luke said, running his fingers through his sandy hair.

“It is the mystique of the Jedi that they find so fascinating. I find that people often see me differently because of my training. They think I am some sort of goddess or something ridiculous like that,” Tenel Ka said as they continued walking towards Luke’s quarters. R2-D2’s gleaming domed head moved back and forth, taking in the surroundings.

Smiling Luke replied, “Well and I guess the fact that everyone tends to see me as some sort of hero shouldn’t hurt our chances at gaining an audience with King Sshruva Proo.”

“Yes, I thought of that when Anakin said you were coming as well. It must not be easy for you living with such a legacy, living the life of a hero. Do you ever regret it?” Tenel Ka asked.

Feet stopping, Luke glanced at his former student. Without hesitation he said, “No. I wouldn’t change my life for anything. I firmly believe I was meant to experience the things I did in my life. It was the will of the Force, or my destiny as others might say. I would do it all over again without question, regardless of the pain and suffering I endured.” Luke unconsciously squeezed his cybernetic hand. He then glanced at the Princess. Tenel Ka’s new hand clenched in a fist as well. “You got a replacement hand.”

“This is a fact.”

“Because you believe the Hapan people will respect you more?” Luke asked as they walked on further.

Tenel Ka furrowed her brow, “That is correct. How did you know that?”

“It wasn’t hard to figure out. I knew you would never do it for yourself. You were always so determined to live with your...”

“Disability.”

“Yes. I just figured that eventually, if you did it would be for public reasons, not personal,” Luke replied as they came to a stop at a door. Tenel Ka pushed it open to reveal Luke’s luxurious quarters.

“You are very perceptive. I suppose that is why you are a Jedi Master,” Tenel Ka said.

Luke smiled, “Yes, I suppose so.”

Turning her gray eyes up at Luke, Tenel Ka bluntly asked, “Do you think you and Anakin can get the Dellaltians to open up to you?”

“I’m not sure. Before I came here, I felt a tremor in the Force,” Luke said truthfully.

“Was it regarding your negotiations?” Tenel Ka asked, crossing her arms.

“I don’t know. I couldn’t feel out the tremor’s exact origin. All it did was heighten my awareness. I will make sure we are extra cautious when dealing with your neighbors,” Luke replied.

“Well, I will trust in the Force and that things will go well for you tomorrow. Would you like for me to have the kitchen send you anything? I know it is late, but anything you would need, I can have them bring to you,” Tenel Ka said, stifling a yawn.

“No, I’m fine. Thank you Princess Tenel Ka. I will retire now,” Luke said, slightly bowing.

“Anakin is next door. He has retired for the evening as well. I hope these quarters are satisfactory to your tastes,” Tenel Ka replied.

Luke peered inside and smiled, “Trust me, these are far fancier than anywhere I’m used to sleeping. Thank you, I’ll see you in the morning Tenel Ka.”

“Goodnight, Master Skywalker,” Tenel Ka said, slightly curling up the corners of her lips into a smile before she retreated from his room. Luke watched Tenel Ka as she walked away from his door. She seemed to miss a slight step as she passed in front of Anakin’s room, and then she continued on.

Luke smiled and headed into his quarters to settle down for the evening. To his faithful droid, Luke said, “Come along R2.”

R2-D2 whistled merrily and rolled into the room behind his Master.

Chapter 20

The ancient Corellian cargo freighter trembled out of hyperspace just outside the stormy atmosphere on Nephron. Hydin gritted his teeth as the engine in the ship he stole from the construction yards at Theed

set off a series of moaning clunks and bangs.

Punching in the coordinates for Nemorarea he plunged the ship into the planet's churning, violent atmosphere. He gritted his teeth as the hull screamed in agony against a barrage of electrical currents and lightning that pummeled the outside of the ship.

"Come on, hold together you worthless hunk of metal. I didn't risk everything to not make it to my destination," Hydin swore to the ship. It responded with an ear-shattering screech that echoed from tail up to the tip of the ship. Hydin's hair stood on end at the sound. Then the pungent smell of smoke began filling the cabin. No warning lights came on in the cabin, so he hoped that meant the ship wasn't on fire. To his great relief he cleared the storm clouds and entered into an unending sheet of rain. Blindly, he trusted fate that his ship would navigate to the correct location on this forsaken planet. From the darkness a single pinprick light glowed. In a brilliant flash of lightning Nemorasis loomed into view.

He whooped in joy, flicking off a clump of sweaty hair from his forehead and navigated the ship onto the landing platform on the east side of the immense structure. He hoped the Lady would forgive him for his disheveled appearance and clothing choice. Searching through the closets on the ship, Hydin found an immense slicker with four arm holes. As he brought it close to his face, the slicker stank of rotted fish. Groaning, he put it on anyway and headed out into the pounding rain. The wind threatened to toss him about like a leaf. Multiple times the wind tossed him into the air and landed him to the wet ground with a cruel thud. In near darkness he resiliently worked his way towards the main entrance. When he arrived at the main entrance of the building, a large gust of wind plastered him into the duraglass door. He groaned in pain as he sensed bruises forming all over his body. Determination building, he yanked open the door and stepped inside the near deserted structure.

Hydin ran straight into an enormous bronze sculpture. His eyes traveled up the looming erection and he gulped at its grandness. He shucked off the offensive coat and searched for a way upstairs. The sculpture took up most of the downstairs lobby. Climbing up and over the slick bronze folds he felt his way towards the stairwell. In the dark he ascended the stairs twenty stories upwards. As his foot landed on the last step, his lungs heaved and gasped for air. His dark eyes grew large as a jagged blade suddenly dug into his neck. Terrified, he turned his head slightly and came to face with the ugliest human ever born.

Between gasping breaths he said, "Here... to... see... Lady... Neffrous." Horror filled his eyes as a trickle of hot, sticky blood seeped down his neck from the knife's blade.

"Who are you?" the vicious, skeletal man demanded, digging the knife further into Hydin's neck.

Suddenly, Hydin felt a warm dampness trickle down his leg. He closed his eyes in shame. "Hydin... Dothal Hydin. She's been expecting me...I'm...I'm a little late."

"I'd say," the skeletal man retorted. He moved the blade aside and shoved Hydin down the hall. "The Lady does not like to be left waiting."

Hydin's fearful breathing became shallow as the long corridor shrank in length with each dreaded step. From the far end of the hall flickering firelight sent ghostly shadows crawling like demonic prisoners against the walls. Hydin's nerves tightened as he approached the door. The man shoved him inside without introduction and slithered back into the shadows.

He stared at the skeletal hand that tensely gripped the throne's armrest. Dropping to his knee, Hydin bent his head, "Lady Neffrous I apologize for my lateness. I was detained from reporting in earlier."

"Excuses? You've been gone for over six months and you offer me excuses? That is completely unacceptable," the Lady seethed.

"I was imprisoned, Lady Neffrous. I got to you as soon as I could escape," Hydin explained, as his fingers unconsciously moved up to his shirt collar, fearing strangulation.

A low hiss answered him in reply. "Well, out with it. What have you to report? What happened to *The Vengeance* and the Admiral?"

"We had just successfully completed an art raid on the planet of Naboo..." Hydin cringed as he noticed the Lady's clawed fingers clench into a tight fist. Her pointed nails dug savagely into her own skin causing her palm to bleed. "...ah..ah.. and The Admiral did not seem herself. She had taken aboard prisoner..."

"Name?"

Hydin's face contorted into a grimace, remembering how that meddling young man often loved to snoop around the Theed job site, and made friends with that incompetent hammerhead foreman Sruqa Munn. Hydin detested the alien for forcing him to work along with the other commoners on his ship. But mostly he despised the man who brought down *The Vengeance*. He growled, "Jacen Solo. Somehow he managed to veer Admiral Darkglider off of her course. She became despondent and wasn't interested in the spoils from our raid. I thought she was bewitched or something. She then went out of contact and a group of New Republic ships descended upon *The Vengeance*. Per your orders, I seized command of the ship and attacked the fighters. Our Tie's outnumbered them at least seven to one, and yet the Republic ships commenced to slaughter our troops."

"Fool. You let the Rebels win," Lady Neffrous seethed.

"I believe they were better trained, Lady Neffrous. We took out about five of their ships, but they slaughtered our men," Hydin said, sweating heavily.

A log in the roaring fireplace popped, causing Hydin to leap out of his skin. Neffrous said, "And what about the Admiral?"

"Sh..she.. arrived on the deck with an armada of Jedis and they began attacking my men. When she tried taking control of the ship I shot her... then Solo shot me. The New Republic took control of the ship and the crew was imprisoned and put to work on restoring the capital of Theed on Naboo," Hydin said.

Lady Neffrous absorbed the words spoken by the incompetent man. She recalled the young man in question from the wedding images. He was the best man, best friend to Marxx Racees, and son of Han and Leia Solo...heroes of the Republic. She steepled her bloody fingers together and asked, "And what became of Darkglider?"

"According to the newsreports, she lived. Her family operated on her and she regained the ability to

breathe on her own. She has a brother- a twin brother, Marxx Racees and she was involved with his wedding to Jaina Solo. She was Jaina's maid of honor," Hydin replied.

"I didn't ask for gossip. I got that much information from the holonews. What else can you tell me about either her or her brother?" the Lady said angrily.

"M..Marxx Racees and Jaina Solo are considered to be almost like royalty on the planet. Jaina is apparently the granddaughter of some great Nubian Queen... Queen Amidala..." Hydin's mouth dropped open in fright, as the Lady gasped. He continued, "They got support from the new Senate to rebuild Theed and have been overseeing the reconstruction of the city. I guess they are working on restoring the working government to the planet and bring Naboo back as a member of the New Republic."

"I should have guessed Marxx would grow up to be a goody- goody," the Lady murmured.

"Excuse me?" Hydin asked meekly.

"Nothing. What else do you know about them?"

"Other than the fact that they are both Jedi Knights, I don't know much about Marxx and Jaina Racees."

"Jedi Knights," Lady Neffrous spat. "What about their families? Are they on Naboo?"

"I believe Jaina's parents live on Coruscant, as her mother Leia Organa Solo is involved in the New Republic political arena. Her two brothers live in Theed. Oh and Marxx's family lives in the Lake Country, they own a large resort," Hydin replied. He suddenly felt very glad that he spent so many hours perusing the gossip sections of the news. Suddenly remembering something he said, "And a few months before their wedding, Marxx's grandfather passed away. Apparently he was a well known artist, so his death was highly publicized all over Naboo."

Lady Neffrous sat silently. Images of a Paulo Brannoush flickered through her memory, laughter, security, love, pain, dust, despair, hatred. She frowned. No, she felt no sorrow in his passing. Her cold heart registered no emotion.

"Any idea where the Admiral disappeared to?" she continued.

"No, Lady Neffrous. I assume she's still on Naboo. But the local news did not focus much on her. All I know is she received medical treatment and was healed," Hydin said.

"So pretty much, you have nothing important to tell me that I couldn't have pulled off of the holonet," the Lady replied icily.

Hydin wiped away a trail of sweat that trailed down his forehead. "Actually, I do have one thing that should make this all worth while. Well that is if it's still working... hold on a moment." Hydin stooped over and unlaced one of his boots and removed it. Flipping the boot over he unscrewed the heel off of the boot and a small transmitter card fell into his palm. He screwed the heel back onto the boot and stomped his foot back into it. He held a receiver chip and smiled as it flashed. He continued, "Jacen Solo was our captive because the Admiral captured a Nubian Vessel that blasted out of orbit on

Tatooine. We determined that Marxx and Jaina were the other occupants on the vessel when it was captured. Per the orders of Darkglider, we installed a tracking device on the ship. When Darkglider wasn't responding to my hails in the midst of our being attacked, I uploaded the codes into this portable receiver and hid it in my boot, thinking it might one day be important to get back to you." With shaking legs he approached the back of the throne and held out the device.

Two long fingers grabbed the device out of his hand, as Hydin stepped back. Lady Neffrous stared at the device turned on the receiver. The reading mapped out planetary co-ordinates. With the assistance of the Force, she flicked on her mapreader and typed in the co-ordinates. They pointed to Naboo. The woman grinned wickedly. "Excellent. It appears the device was not discovered. Are you cold Hydin?"

"Excuse me?"

"Are you cold? My manservant can take you to your quarters so you can rest. You will need your rest for what lies ahead," Lady Neffrous said with delight.

"Thank you, Lady Neffrous. You're very generous," he said. He glanced down as a pair of high voltage stun cuffs flew across the room and snapped shut onto his wrists. "Wait a minute! What are you doing? I'm not a prisoner... you just said..."

His mouth dropped open in fright as the Lady climbed out of her seat and stood before his quivering form. His eyes drank in her dark shrouded cape, her thin, bloodless lips, and her ghastly pale skin. What frightened him most though were her eyes. Red, they glowed pure hatred. She pointed a long finger towards him and Hydin felt his throat constrict. His eyes bulged as he could not breathe. When he tried moving his hands up to loosen his collar, electrocuting shock bolts blasted through his body. Pain and despair overcame his senses.

"You failed me, Captain Hydin. You saw the warning signs of the Admiral's defection and you did nothing to try and dispose of her like I ordered you to do. And you allowed the Rebels to obtain one of my ships. That ship and its crew lost me fifteen million credits," she seethed. Hydin's eyes began to roll back in his head and his face turned purple. Frowning, she released her Force choke hold upon the man.

Hydin collapsed to the floor and gasped for air. As the Lady's image blurred back into focus, he again found himself wishing that he'd just been finished off.

"Thank you for this receiver, Hydin. We will retrieve you when your next assignment is ready. Darkglider, take him away!" the Lady replied as she slowly headed towards her computer terminal.

Hydin turned, expecting to see the woman from his ship, but instead came face to face with the skeletal man from the hallway. The man prodded him out of the room with his jagged knife. Terrified, Hydin marched down four flights of stairs and was lead down a dark, musty, and cobwebbed corridor. Darkglider unlocked a large, durasteel door and unceremoniously threw him into the cell.

"Are you going to take these off?" Hydin asked staring at the cuffs.

"How can I? I don't have the key," Darkglider sneered. Maniacally laughing he slammed the door shut in Hydin's face.

Dejected, he slumped to the floor of the pitch black room. Outside the storm continued to rage. A blast of lightning highlighted the room in a flash. In that flash Hydin spied a small, dirty man crouched on the floor on the opposite wall. Beside the man slept a large man w/ lightish hair and lots of facial hair.

“Who are you?” Hydin asked the one conscious man. “How long have you been here?”

The tiny man unfurled himself and with a thick tongue said, “My name is Kendu Rewgun. I have no idea how long I’ve been here. I think it’s been a couple of months, but who knows on this dreadful planet. There are no days, there are no nights. It’s only darkness... despair... pain... misery...”

Hydin decided to stop the man before he sank into a pit of depression, “What did you do to deserve to be thrown down here?”

Fuming the small man said, “I did nothing. I’m a ship designer. Darth Neffrous kidnapped me and forced me to upgrade her fleet of Destroyers with my new design features. She promised I would be well compensated, even though I was forced to do so against my will. I didn’t want to do it. I hated the Empire, and she stunk of it. But I wasn’t given much of a choice. Then when I completed my task, she threw me down here with the roaches.”

Fascinated Hydin asked, “And what revolutionary design feature did you apply to these ships?”

Another flash of lightning highlighted Kendu’s slanted, pride filled, eyes. He said, “Cloak morphing technology.” The man yawned and fell over to the ground.

“Wait, who’s that?” Hydin asked pointing at the sleeping man.

“Some Hapan General. Sorry... must...conserve...energy...” With that the man drifted off to sleep.

Hydin held his wrists over his knees comfortably, avoiding getting shocked. He wondered, *What would she need that kind of technology for? And what exactly does she have in plan for me down the road? Or did she just say that and she’s going to let me die down here?* Hydin shrugged and gently lowered himself onto the filthy, cold floor and drifted off into a sleep filled with fits of nightmares and pain as shocks surged through his body all night at his slightest move.

Chapter 21

“I won’t put it on,” Raven said, arms crossed, lips pursed in determination.

“It’s not going to hurt you. You need to put it on for this training exercise,” Kyp replied.

“It’s just that...”

Exasperated Kyp held the object out towards his student, “Please? This will go a lot faster, and the sooner we get started, the sooner you will get this over with.”

Raven took the crash helmet from him and with sweating palms placed it over her head. As the helmet

covered her head, a brief moment of claustrophobic apprehension filled Raven. Feelings of inadequacy seeped into her mind as visions of her life before flashed before her eyes. Then she tried looking around. She saw nothing. A deep giggle emerged from the darkness of the blast helmet. "You've got to joking. I can't see a thing with this blast shield down."

"That's right, my apprentice. Your eyes can deceive you, they are not to be trusted. You learned your lightsaber skills by using your hate, now you must learn by using the Force. You'll find it's a very different feeling. You'll have to trust your instincts and yourself," Kyp replied as he fiddled with the control settings on the firing remote.

"Let me guess, you're setting that for high stun to get back at me for the other day, right?" Raven said with muffled voice.

"Jedi's do not seek revenge, my dear apprentice. All is forgiven, you know that," Kyp said sighing, as the remote flew out of his hands and began to silently buzz through the open practice field. He purposefully walked far away from Raven to avoid getting hit by any deflected or stray stun shots. "Are you ready?" he asked, finger posed over the remote control device.

Raven pointed her lightsaber to the side and activated it with a *snap hiss*. Kyp watched as Raven moved her light blue blade in front of herself and widened her stance. The saber crackled and hummed with its electronic energy.

"I'm ready, Master Durrion," Raven said. Kyp flicked the switch and turned on the remote. Raven's ears focused on the field around herself. She began removing the sounds of the wind, the distant cries of birds and creature, and leaves blowing. She searched for the hum of the droid. White hot pain erupted from her backside as the remote fired off a shot. Raven cursed and leaped in the air.

"You're not concentrating," Kyp said, stifling a chuckle.

"That hurt! Stop laughing," Raven cried.

"Come on, feel the Force. It is your ally, use it to deflect the laser shots."

Raven repositioned herself and howled as another blast zapped her left arm. She growled, as she shook the pain from her arm. She realized that by shutting off the surrounding environment she had closed herself off to the Force. She muttered, "Oh that was real bright of you."

She closed her eyes behind the helmet, sunk into the Force and extended herself into the energy shield. Suddenly she knew where the remote lurked and spun to her right, sliced high her lightsaber and deflected a shot, then she twisted to the left and lowered her humming blade and another shot deflected off of its shining blade. Raven grinned as Kyp kicked up the timing. From the safety of the tree line, he watched as Raven became a spinning whirl of activity: leaping, twisting, parrying, and thrusting, meeting each remote blast perfectly.

He ceased the remote and began clapping, "Very good, Raven. How did that feel?"

Raven switched off her lightsaber, removed the helmet and smiled. "Wow, that was energizing. I felt alive and completely in tuned with the Force."

“What happened in the beginning?” Kyp asked, arms folded, legs apart.

“I was trying to listen for the remote, I completely turned myself off to the Force,” Raven replied, blue eyes downcast.

“Well now you know that gets you nowhere. The Force is a Jedi’s greatest ally. Not only does it allow us to see the future and past, but it enhances our stamina and strength. Only when you are completely at Peace will you reap the full benefits of it. If your mind is clear of doubt, worry, and anger, you can accomplish great things,” Kyp replied.

Raven chewed on the inside of her mouth and narrowed her eyes.

“What?” Kyp asked, sensing a question forming in her head.

“If I’m supposed to act on instinct when I’m fighting the remote, and I’m using the Force, then my instinct is no longer my own, correct?” Raven asked.

“As I said, the Force is your ally. It enhances your reactions. Think about it, when you were younger, your hate fueled your abilities. It’s no different with the Force, except that now you are calm and rational in your use of the Force,” Kyp said.

Raven scratched her ear. “Yeah, I guess that must be what is different. Can I not wear this thing anymore?” She asked, handing him the helmet.

“Ok, why not?”

“It reminds me of the mask I used to wear,” she said wrinkling her nose.

Kyp’s heart fell for the girl. He briefly winced realizing his own insensitivity in making her wear it. She sounded so young, like a child asking something innocently to a parent. “Sorry, I wasn’t thinking. Of course you don’t have to wear that anymore. Anyways, you’ve proven yourself. I think it’s time for hand to hand combat practice,” Kyp said, green eyes gleaming with delight. He raised his bare arms over his head in a stretch.

“Hand to hand combat? Who...?” Raven’s eyes widened as Kyp stretched and then removed his lightsaber from his belt. Raven dropped the helmet to the ground and moved to meet him across the field. Raven carefully sized up the practice field with her eyes. She calculated approximate heights of tree limbs, slopes on the ground and fallen debris. Then she grinned at her Master and ignited her aqua blade with a *snap hiss*. Smiling, Kyp ignited his green blade with a *snap hiss*.

“I want you to try to defeat me,” Kyp said. “Think of me as an attacking enemy, not your Master. Think of me as someone you want to destroy.”

Raven grinned and swished her blade in lazy circles, “And what makes you think I don’t feel that way already towards you?”

Kyp let out a brief, hurt laugh. “Sarcasm is a weapon of the Sith, my young apprentice.”

“Really? I thought that was cynicism,” Raven replied and pressed her lips together in a determined

smile and raised her saber. Kyp chuckled and moved a clump of black hair from his eyes.

They began to circle one another. Raven raised her arms over her head and then sliced her humming blade down towards Kyp's middle. Kyp flashed his saber from the left and matched her slice. Aqua crashed against green in a sizzling match. Raven swiftly raised her arms and swung towards Kyp's head.

Kyp blocked her thrust and laughed. "Thank you for not being afraid to really attack me."

"You haven't seen anything yet, Master Durrion," Raven said. She sunk deeply into the Force and leapt straight up in the air, half piked and lightly landed her on feet, sinking into the mud behind Kyp, sending mud splattering all over their pants legs. Twirling, Kyp's blade matched Raven's and he began to steadily charge towards her, sending her feet backpedaling across the practice field. The musty swamp filled with the electrical smelling charges from their blades.

Kyp noticed a fallen log directly behind Raven and he swung towards her left. Grinning, Raven jumped, legs out and landed on top of the log, a cloud of dust rose off of the log, briefly obscuring Kyp's view. Her arms swung down and met his crackling blade. The force of the impact sent sizzling, burning sparks flying into the air. Raven laughed and released her hold on Kyp's blade. She thrust towards his neck and Kyp round swung his blade up to match it. The force of the impact sent Raven flying off of the log. Recovering from her initial shock she tucked into a ball and landed lightly a couple feet away.

"Nice try, Master," Raven said.

"You're not even trying," Kyp said, faking a yawn. Raven scowled and charged. With saber in left hand she sliced towards his knee, Kyp met her thrust. She quickly thrust it up in front of his face towards the neck, right arm balancing from behind as she began to push him backwards. She then grabbed her saber with both hands and advanced upon Kyp. She'd raise her saber, he'd match it. She'd lower it, he'd parry and meet her thrust. She swung at his knee and he effortlessly jumped over her thrust. Kyp swung towards her head, causing her to defend herself. As their blades crackled over their heads, Raven thought briefly of blasting him with a Force field.

"No Force fields, this is lightsaber practice, not who can out-Force each other practice," Kyp said, grinning.

"How did you?..."

Kyp laughed, "Don't think I didn't talk to Jacen and learn your fighting methods before coming here."

Spurred into action, Raven twirled away from Kyp and rounded her blade towards his back. Thrown off by her unusual tactic, Kyp barely found the time to defend himself. He grinned as she jumped over his head swinging. Kyp rolled and popped up a couple feet away from her to avoid having her chop his head off. He bounced up, tan pants and boots covered in muck. Raven descended and thrust towards his legs, and Kyp sprang up and vaulted to her left. Aqua matched green as their blades crashed waist level.

"We seem to be at a stalemate," Raven said, slightly breathing hard.

“Is that what you think? I still don’t think you’re trying very hard,” Kyp said, looking somewhat bored.

Raven stepped back, lightsaber held out to the side, and stared at her Master. She said, “Hit me.”

“You’re supposed to hit me, not the other way around,” Kyp said.

Groaning, Raven said, “Will you just do it!”

Kyp raised his saber and sliced towards her knee. Raven’s aqua blade deflected and met it, she rose her saber up towards his left shoulder, Kyp rounded his saber up from the right and matched her aqua glowing blade. Raven raised her sword, feinted to the left, then sliced to the right towards his arm. The light smell of burnt singed hair filled the air as Kyp jumped just out of the way to miss his arm getting hit. He grinned delightfully, “Very good!” Then his smile vanished as his determined student spun and thrust with tremendous speed towards his neck. Kyp barely deflected it and he began to backpedal across the muddy field. Raven became a quickening blur of motion as she opened herself to the energy of the swamp, of the surrounding forests, to the life forms in the surrounding several mile radius. Kyp watched her blade slice towards him with expert speed and precision. Kyp felt sweat bead up on his forehead as she descended upon him, rapidly slicing and thrusting. Their blades crackled and hummed as they violently crashed waist level.

Then Raven thrust towards Kyp’s head and he lost his balance and his saber flew out of his hand. With a loud thud Kyp landed on his back, Raven’s lithe form approached him, lightsaber sizzling inches from his nose. Seeing her confident smirk, he stretched out with the Force and his lightsaber leapt into his waiting hand. He activated it with a *snap hiss*, and crashed Raven’s lightsaber straight out of her confident hands. Sitting up he held his lightsaber right at her chest.

“And that my dear apprentice is how you would die,” Kyp said, as he snapped off his lightsaber. Raven groaned and offered him a hand and helped haul him to his feet. “Over confidence will kill a Jedi or soldier faster than anything. If I was an enemy you should have taken the opportunity to do away with me immediately instead of taunting me,” Kyp said as he attempted to wipe mud off of his legs. He resulted in only further smearing the brown gunk deeper into his fabric.

“Ok but wouldn’t I probably want to try to capture my enemy first as opposed to outright killing him? That is the compassionate thing to do. And most likely if he’s an unknown enemy you could try to interrogate him. You can’t exactly interrogate a dead man,” Raven replied as she reached out with the Force, her lightsaber leapt into her hand. She attached it to her belt and began to stretch.

“True, but if there were multiple adversaries in the room, you may have no choice but to kill the individual,” Kyp replied, pulling a jacket over his head. “Would you have a problem with doing that?”

“Well, killing people is wrong. I got into this mess because I took other people’s lives. I guess I’m just trying to figure out when it is acceptable to kill and when it isn’t. And why would you ever think it was acceptable to kill someone? Just because Jedi fight for righteousness and goodness, does that automatically mean we have the right to decide who lives and who dies?” Raven asked, placing her hands on her hips.

Kyp rubbed his forehead and sat down on the ground. He sighed, “I see, you’re asking about the morality of killing.”

Collapsing to the ground, Raven sat before her Master and watched him expectantly. “Yes.”

“I guess it’s hard to say exactly. It all depends on the situation. You and I are both perfect examples of when not to kill people. You killed your men because you were frustrated with them and they displeased you. Obviously, that’s not the way to handle subordinates,” Kyp said. Raven winced. “If you obtain personal pleasure from killing, that is wrong... or if you are seeking vengeance, no matter how much you can seemingly justify that person’s death, vengeance is wrong.”

Raven nodded and furrowed her brows.

Kyp continued, “Take your grandmother for instance. I’m sure that you could come up with a million valid reasons for wanting her dead. The Force knows what she did to you. And I could guarantee nobody would miss her in her passing. BUT, to seek revenge would mar and blacken your soul forever. Seeking revenge is a terrible thing. It means you believe that you have more merit living than the other person. That’s just not the case. No matter how terrible, or awful that person is, there is a reason he or she was born.”

“Right because torturing innocent people is such a worthy pass time for a person,” Raven said, picking up a handful of dirt and squished it unconsciously in her hands.

“Unfortunately, in order for the Force to be balanced, you need good people, and bad people,” Kyp said and grasped his lightsaber. “The only time a Jedi uses his blade is in battle. The lightsaber is never to be used for personal gain or vengeance. If you ever were to do so, you would cease to be a Jedi Knight...”

“And begin your path to becoming a Sith follower,” Raven replied.

“Yes. Of course there is one other valid time to kill and that is in time of war.”

Raven threw her clump of dirt on the ground. “It’s a good thing that I detested myself for killing my men. I certainly never want to kill another person as long as I live. I’m the last person who thinks I’m more worthy of being alive than the next person. You don’t have to worry about me going on a killing spree.”

Smiling, Kyp said, “That’s good. Did you get your run in today?”

“No,” Raven said.

“Do you want to do that now? I think we’ve had enough lightsaber training for today,” Kyp said.

Raven beamed and stood up. She shrieked and shook her head. She grabbed a large bug that landed on her hair. Groggily she threw it to the ground and squished it to death. Kyp smiled at the irony. Her braids thrashed around her head. “Gahhhh! I can’t wait to get off of this forsaken planet.” She kicked up her right calve and stretched, then did so with her left. “Thank you Master for that great lesson today. I’ll be back in a bit.”

Kyp leaned back on his palms as he watched Raven run out into the swampy woods and out of view. His mind returned to the power she exhibited when she battled him right before he fell over. With

startling clarity, he realized his young apprentice had more raw power in using the Force than he possessed. To himself he muttered, “She truly is the twin of Marxx Racees.”

Kyp then prayed to the Force that he would never have to battle her in real life, for something told him she could squash him as easily as she did that bug.

Chapter 22

Tyroogii and Barooth, two young Rodians raced through the Hungirii apple orchard on Hapes 4. Their green skin blended with the bushes as they played hide and seek. Tyroogii’s cupped fingers clung to the base of her tree as she covered her pursed mouth to contain her giggles. Barooth perked up his antennas and zeroed in on his sister. As she jumped her fingers ripped the bark off of the tree. She howled as a large sliver dug into her finger.

Barooth came to investigate, his large black eyes filled with concern. He said, “We’d better go get Mom to help get that out.”

The two alien children raced through the grove, the heady smell of heavy ripened apples filled the air. Tiny insects buzzed around their heads as they raced through the bright early morning. Tyroogii stopped running as the sun disappeared. She gazed up towards the sky and saw large spaceships blinking into existence overhead.

Racing towards his sister, Barooth gasped as one of the ships opened fire. The ground shook under their small feet. The children’s screams went unheard under the deafening blasts from the ships. They threw their hands over their heads from bombarding apples. Barooth’s eyes widened as the overpowering stench of smoke and fire met his antenna. Daring a glance towards the east, he saw a wall of flames race across the valley. Grabbing his sister’s hand, splinter all but forgotten, they raced as the fire devoured the apple grove. Barooth skidded to a stop as more vessels materialized in the air above. Some internal warning told him that they would never reach home in time. He yanked Tyroogii easterly towards the large local lake. Tyroogii dashed ahead and plunged into the cool water. Although normally not the best swimmers, the two successfully made it to a small sand island that sat in the middle of the lake. Crying, they watched as the entire world that they knew vanished in a blackened smokey and orange nightmare.

Tenel Ka listened as General Margatall poured over his list of daily updates from the attacks, “. . .most of our next generation of officers were killed with the destruction of the outpost on Hapes 8. We are going to need an aggressive campaign to get young people interested in joining up with our armed forces.”

Gray eyes narrowing, Tenel Ka asked, “Is that really an issue? I thought that for school children in the Hapes Cluster, the greatest dream they could ever wish for was to become a Hapes officer. The Hapan military employs over sixty five percent of our citizens.”

“That is true, Princess. However, holonews reports are beginning to plant seeds of doubt into the

general public about the safety our military. They are also heavily playing up on the sympathy factor for those killed in action. Relatives of our fallen Hapan soldiers are showing up everywhere on the holonet demanding justice and badmouthing the military for their lack of knowledge into these attacks,” Margatall replied.

“So would some kind of public support from the Royal House help to extinguish this growing dissent?” Tenel Ka asked.

From across the room, Anakin carefully watched the General. Standing perfectly at attention, the man never fidgeted once. His slicked back dark blond hair was perfectly groomed, his moustache trimmed evenly, and his uniform pressed without a single crease. Overall he gave the appearance of the perfect military officer who took great pride in his own personal appearance and his role in the militia. Anakin read that it usually takes over twenty five years in the Hapan military to raise to the rank of General. The man was impeccable, with his coat covered in shiny medals. Anakin focused on the man’s nose. It nervously twitched, often. Anakin then concentrated on the man’s voice and inflection. He detected undercurrents in his calm and passive voice. The main word that caught his attention was the way the general pronounced “Hapan.” Margatall pronounced it as if there was an “I” towards the end, so it came out “Hapian.” Anakin found it odd that someone who lived and breathed to defend his home world would mispronounce the way the cluster’s name was normally said. He supposed it could be an accent.

Anakin snapped out of his contemplation as Tenel Ka’s voice again filled his ears, “This is a fact. I will make issue a public statement later today.”

The doors to the room burst open and a lower ranking captain rushed towards the General. He whispered something to him and handed him a datapad. Anakin watched with interest, then his eyes rested upon the silent and bored looking Ta’a Chume. The once fiery older woman seemed to have lost her spark. She sat on her throne deflated, not paying attention to the proceedings. She even seemed almost catatonic. Anakin now understood why Tenel Ka began to assume the position of power in her land.

Clearly upset, Martagall cleared his throat, “Princess Tenel Ka, I am sorry to report this. There has been another attack. This time it’s catastrophic.”

Gray eyes filled with worry. Tenel Ka gripped her armrests preparing herself for the worst. “And what is the news?”

“Hapes 4 is on fire.”

Tenel Ka furrowed her brows confused, she said, “You mean a couple of cities are on fire?”

“No, Princess. Practically the entire planet has been set ablaze,” the General said gulping.

Fingers of fear and dread gripped Tenel Ka. She felt tears leap to her eyes. “No. That cannot be. Wh... Bless the Force.” She shot her left hand up to her temple as the ramifications of the attack sunk in.

“What is it, your Highness?” Luke asked from beside Anakin.

Tenel Ka licked her lips and stared at her former Master. She said, “Hapes 4 is our agricultural planet.

Its planetary position is such that crops could be grown year round. Most of the planets in the Hapes Cluster do not grow food, as it is all imported from Hapes 4. Without the crops on Hapes 4, my people may now starve.”

Anakin watched as Tenel Ka’s hands began to tremble and her eyes grew red from tears, “How, how could they do that? Hapes 4 is not a military target. They were not even protected.” She glanced at the General, “Were there any survivors?”

“Reports are still coming in. Because the entire planet is ablaze and the smoke is so thick, rescue teams are unable to descend into the atmosphere to search for survivors,” he watched as the Princess shrank further down into her seat. The General softened his voice, “It’s doubtful anyone on the planet will survive.”

“Farmers and their families. That is who inhabit that planet. They massacred not just men, but innocent women and children. Death by fire... those poor people,” Tenel Ka replied. She regained her composure and stared at the General, “How do they know it was the Dellaltians?”

“We received a couple of distress signals from farmers before the communications on the planet cut off. They sent some video feeds of the attacking vessels,” Maratagall said. He walked over to a terminal and plugged in the datapad. Entering a few keys the room filled with a holographic image of chaos. The sky, littered with bulky Dellaltian cruisers, showered fireballs towards the ground surface. Screams of terror could be heard as the image quaked from the blasts.

Anakin and Luke snapped their heads in Tenel Ka’s direction as they felt a blinding wave of fury rise from her Royal Highness. “We must send out our fleet and destroy them for this.”

The General seemed pleased, “Is that an Executive Order, M’lady?”

Stepping forward Luke approached Tenel Ka’s throne. “Your Highness, I understand that this is grave news that you have just received. I am truly saddened by your loss. I do believe it would be wise still to send Anakin and myself to speak to the Dellaltians before you decide on military action. As I mentioned to you previously, I felt a tremor in the Force. I believe there may be more going on here than meets the naked eye.”

Tenel Ka flushed as Anakin’s blue eyes bore into her soul. He stood, towering behind his uncle. Quietly he added, “Tenel Ka you know what Master Skywalker is requesting is the correct course of action. You would not want to go to full scale war without all of the facts first would you?”

“What more do I need? Look for yourself! Those are Dellaltian warships,” Tenel Ka said, pointing at the holographic projection. She stood up and walked to the center of the image. The projected chaotic images danced across her pale yellow dress. “I cannot see why I should sit by and allow them to continue to murder my people.”

In a calm, quiet voice, Luke replied, “Remember, your eyes can deceive you. I truly believe there is something else going on here, something elusive, possibly even dark. Allow us to face the Dellaltians first. We will get to the bottom of this and return by evening to give you a full report.” Luke walked up to the distressed Princess, black cloak lightly swishing along the marble tile floor. Hands clasped in front of him, Luke calmly added, “You are a Jedi, Tenel Ka. You know to trust your instincts. What do your instincts tell you about this?”

The titian haired girl glanced up at her former Master, then closed her eyes. She let out a long breath. Simply she said, "Something about this does not feel right. I do not understand why the Dellaltians would decide now, of all times, to begin these raids." Staring up at Luke she said, "Go. I will wait for your report."

Turning on her heel she stared at General Margatall. "Go find out the status on Hapes 4. Find out if there is anything we can do to assist the planet and try to control the fires."

"Yes, Your Highness," Margatall bowed, then left the room.

"I will see you two off," Tenel Ka replied as she headed for the landing platform.

From her throne chair Ta'a Chume's fingers peaked together and her eyes snapped back into focus. To herself she said, "We'll see how long my granddaughter can wait before declaring war on our neighbors. I am betting the fleet will be dispatched before supper." A wicked smile sprouted upon her thin lips.

Luke climbed into his X-wing and readied it for takeoff. With veiled interest he watched as Tenel Ka followed Anakin towards his ship. He placed his helmet on his head and went through his pre-flight system check with R2-D2.

Tenel Ka glanced up at the tall Jedi. Now alone with the handsome young Solo her palms began to sweat. Anakin gazed down into Tenel Ka's deeply concerned, gray eyes. Her hair was intricately designed into a large bun that sat atop her head, and tiny braids that dangled, around her neckline and up towards her brows. In the middle of it all sat her sparkling crown.

Anakin stared at her, not quite sure what to say. Then he asked, "Is there somewhere in your Cluster where the people pronounce 'Hapan' – 'Hapian'?"

"I do not know. Why?"

"So you don't know," Anakin restated.

"I already told you I do not know," Tenel Ka said, annoyance creeping into her voice.

"Relax will you! I was just asking," Anakin replied. "Sheesh..."

Tenel Ka pursed her lips together and then asked, "Why do you wish to know this?"

Hands on hips, elbows sticking far out, Anakin chewed his lower lip. He debated whether he should say anything or not to her about her prized General. He decided better to be safe than sorry. "How well do you know General Margatall?"

"He has been the Royal House's military liaison for the past five years. Why?" Tenel Ka asked, left hand on hip, right hand fingers fiddling with the neckline of her dress.

“I just felt some strange vibes coming from him is all. I was wondering if you trusted him,” Anakin said, his eyes wandered over her fidgeting fingers.

Tenel Ka sniffed the air, “Well he was my grandmother’s choice. Considering she is vicious in the way she chooses to trust people, I would think it safe to say he is the real thing.”

Licking his lip, Anakin stared off towards the Palace. He said, “There’s just something about him that I don’t trust.”

Folding her arms, Tenel Ka studied Anakin. Instinct told her that he would not have mentioned anything about this had he not been sure of his feelings. She replied, “I will keep an eye on him.”

Turning his face back towards the Princess, Anakin smiled. He began to lightly kick his foot back and forth. “Thank you for trusting me.”

Feeling a bit lightheaded from Anakin’s dashing smile, Tenel Ka asked, “Why would I not trust you?”

“I don’t know, maybe I’m just being paranoid. Forget I said anything,” Anakin replied. His eyes grew large as his foot became tangled in his Jedi robe. He pinwheeled his arms and Tenel Ka grabbed his shirt to steady him before he crashed to the ground. Anakin steadied himself and his cheeks reddened a deep shade of crimson.

Tenel Ka grinned at him and said, “I hope for your sake you stop growing soon, I do not think even my best engineers could repair the damage if you fell over and cracked the landing platform with your incredible size.”

Disbelief filled Anakin’s face.

“What is it?” Tenel Ka asked.

A large lopsided grin formed on Anakin’s face and he pointed to the confused Princess, “You, always serious Tenel Ka, made a joke.”

“I did not. I stated a fact.”

Anakin shook his head, “Oh, *no way* are you getting away with that one. You were even smiling, so you *knew* it was a joke!”

Tenel Ka’s cheeks turned rosy and with a slight smile curling the corners of her lips she said, “That is a fact.”

Anakin softly chuckled. Tenel Ka listened to his hearty, deep voice and felt her heart race. Gently, Anakin placed his palm against her cheek and lightly caressed her soft skin. His pinky lightly grabbed a small titian braid that brushed against her face.

“We will get to the bottom of this, I promise you, Tenel Ka,” Anakin said turning serious.

Tenel Ka lightly pressed her face deeper into his strong hand. Simply she said, “I have faith in you, Anakin Solo. You know what we have to lose here on Hapes. The price is too great for me to not act

much longer. If Master Skywalker is correct and there is a greater threat just waiting to be revealed, I hope you will be able to find a way to bring it to light. I need to assure my people that they are safe. That is my main concern.”

Lowering his head so it hovered just over Tenel Ka’s face, Anakin replied, “And it is my job to make sure you are fully informed before making such decisions. I’ll make it my personal mission to make sure you can keep your people safe.”

Anakin’s musky aftershave wafted delightfully in Tenel Ka’s nose. His nearness no longer made her uncomfortable but reassured. In the blink of an eye, the rest of the galaxy ceased to exist. Only she and Anakin existed in the universe. Her eyes trailed up Anakin’s long broad chest and rested on his full lips. Then she met his smiling gaze. One thought entered her mind only, *Kiss him, you fool*. She tilted her head, positioning herself to do just that. Her hands unfurled from their crossed state and lightly rested on his chest.

Anakin stared at Tenel Ka, his heart pounded. In the darkest most secret corner of his mind, he’d always thought the Hapan Princess to be the most beautiful girl in the galaxy. For years he watched his brother and she flirt around falling in love, his heart skipping a beat along with them in their pursuit. Her hands, her upturned face, her accepting eyes suggested something he’d only dared to dream. Head swimming from her floral perfume, vision blurring with anxious fear, he placed a hand behind her back and further tilted her head with the hand that still rested on her cheek. He leaned down and hovered over her lips, tempted to taste their sweet nectar. Tenel Ka leaned closer to him and lightly lifted herself upward onto her toes. Then a searing hot blast of noisy air pounded the two, knocking them nearly unbalanced as Luke revved up his X-Wing’s engines.

Tenel Ka crashed into Anakin and he fought to regain his footing. They lost their hold on each other and the moment was gone. Tenel secured her right hand against her the skirt of her gown to prevent it from flying up and her left hand pushed her braids out of her face.

“I’ll be back, tonight,” Anakin said, inwardly groaning and cursing his Uncle. Head stooped he turned and raced up the ladder and climbed into his X-Wing. He started the preflight with his R4 unit and threw his helmet on his head. Glancing out the window, Tenel Ka risked raising her hand from her skirt and waved him goodbye. Then Anakin’s heart soared as she raised her fingers lightly to her lips and blew him a kiss. He grinned, pretended to grab it then plastered his hand on his window.

Together Luke and Anakin lifted their X-Wings up together from the landing platform and ascended into the sky. Each set in the coordinates for Dellalt.

From the ground, Tenel Ka watched the two Jedis disappear into tiny specks in the glorious blue mid-morning sky. She sent a silent blessing through the Force for their success on their mission. Her fingers lightly caressed her cheek where Anakin’s hand had been. She still felt phantom traces of his touch. Her entire body tingled at the thought of what almost happened. Confusion gripped her soul as she wondered why she almost allowed that to happen. In the cool breeze, she could still smell his cologne now on her dress. Tenel Ka blushed. Then images from Hapes 4 invaded her thoughts, realizing the frivolousness of her daydreaming she retreated back inside the Palace.

Jaina plopped down on her couch at her Theed apartment, late morning to check out if anything returned from her searches. Marxx got to his knees and began picking up all of the files he had spread across their floor and stacked them on their coffee table.

“So I guess we know most of the mysteries now. We still don’t know exactly what happened to Bainier- but whatever the scandal, it was enough that he got booted out of office and he turned to the teachings of the Sith. He passed down his teachings through the Palpatine lines and it looks like the Emperor and my Grandmother got hold of his lessons,” Marxx said, sitting up on his knees. He raked his fingers through his thick dark curls.

“Uh- huh,” Jaina replied.

Marxx glanced at her with a hurt expression on his face. He said, “You’re not even listening to me.”

“What?” Jaina looked up from her computer. “Oh, yes I heard you. Come here, look what my searches found.”

Groaning, Marxx stood up and flopped on the couch beside his wife. Jaina’s fingers flew across her keypad and opened a window to show Marxx. She said, “The search for anything on Bainier came up empty. So we may never know what happened there unless something falls into our laps. BUT, look at this...”

Squinting at a long list of names with addresses, Marxx asked, “Ok, what am I looking at?”

Jaina highlighted one of the names and magnified it for him to better view it. Marxx read aloud while scratching his head, “Annalise Gretney... Ok and who is she?”

Eyes rolling towards the ceiling, Jaina said, “I’m terrible at these things. I think she’s your cousin. Your Great Aunt Maruua Palpatine, married Brentii Gretney, Analise is their daughter.”

Gazing at his markerboard, Marxx suddenly got very excited, “And Maruua was the second child. That could mean that Analise knew my grandmother.”

“Exactly!” Jaina said, smiling.

“This is excellent. She’s on Bimmisaari near Kashyyyk,” Marxx said. “We could go visit her and then go visit Lowbacca before coming back.”

Beaming Jaina said, “That would be great! I haven’t seen him since our wedding. And you know- he could probably find what we’re looking for on Bainier, he’s a pro with computers.”

“It’s settled then,” Marxx stood up and headed towards the holoemitter to see if Jacen wanted to go with him when there was a chime at the door.

“Jacen’s here,” Jaina said as she downloaded Analise’s information onto a datapad.

“Yeah and someone else, too,” Marxx said. As he opened the door, a wall of fur descended upon him in a blond, shaggy Wookiee hug. Marxx squeaked for air as he glanced up in confusion at the Solo twin’s

Jedi friend Lowbacca, nephew to their father's best friend Chewbacca. "Hey Lowie, we were just talking about you."

Lowie roared a happy greeting and patted Marxx on the head. He then marched into the living room and picked up Jaina in a big hug.

Jacen wandered in behind the Wookie with a large grin. He explained to Marxx, "He was at my apartment waiting for me. Chewie and Dad sent him here with some supplies for the construction project and he came over to see us. Good thing we decided to return to Theed this morning!"

Lowie barked off something to Jacen. Marxx peaked an eyebrow as Jacen laughed, "He said his Jedi instincts would have directed him to the Lake Country."

Glancing at the holoemitter, Marxx noticed they had a flashing message. "Hold on, I want to check our messages."

Jaina filled in Jacen and Lowie on what her system turned up as Marxx activated the holo-emitter. First message sent just after they left yesterday was Lowie barking that he was coming to Theed. Everyone giggled as they heard Lowie's voice echo throughout the apartment. Grinning Marxx deleted his message.

The second message showed a stern, powerfully built, balding man. Marxx asked for Jaina's attention and turned up the volume.

"Jaina Solo-Racees, I am Warden Strom Weirman of the Naboo penitentiary in Theed. Sorry to report to you that we had a prison break last evening. Two inmates attempted an escape. One, a Gamorrean was killed. However the other inmate escaped. Since he was part of the crew working on Theed and part of that crew you helped in arresting, I thought you should know in case he comes after you." The warden looked down at his notes, "It was Dothal Hydin who escaped. We've put out an intergalactic alert bulletin on him, however we doubt we'll see him again. One of the Construction's ships was stolen last night, we're assuming that he took the vessel. Just wanted to give you a heads up. I apologize for allowing this to happen. We are looking into how he escaped and are working to rectify the matter before more prisoners get the same idea. I will keep you updated if we apprehend the prisoner. Goodbye."

Jacen leapt to his feet, "We have to warn, Raven!"

"What? Why?" Marxx said.

"Hydin shot her! He'll want revenge on her, I know it," Jacen said, gripping his sandy brown hair with his hands.

Jaina jumped to her feet, and grabbed Jacen by the shoulders, "Will you relax? He has no idea where she is! Her family members are the only people who know that. Unless you went blabbing about it at the Construction site, I don't see how he would possibly know where she is training."

Terror filled Jacen's brown eyes as he mentally ran through his conversations at the construction site. Even when talking to Anakin, he couldn't recall a single time he would have mentioned Raven's whereabouts. He let out a long relieved breath and said, "No, I don't think I said anything."

“All right, then just relax,” Jaina said. Lowie patted Jacen on the head and offered him some reassuring barks.

“Thanks, Lowie,” Jacen replied as he sat down heavily on the couch.

Marxx erased the message and walked over to the group. Cracking his knuckles, he asked, “So Lowie and Jacen, do you have anything planned for the next couple of days? We need to go to Bimmisaari and talk to a relative of mine about my grandmother. You guys interested in tagging along?”

“Lowie, we’re trying to find some historical information on one of Marxx’s great-grandfather’s. We could seriously use your help,” Jaina said, smiling up to her furry friend.

Howling, Lowie scratched his stomach and agreed to help out. Marxx and Jaina glanced at Jacen. Jacen laughed and said, “Well of course I’m coming, what else do I have to do?”

Everyone laughed. Jaina and Marxx gathered up some personal items, Jaina’s computer, and pile of the files. Jacen and Lowie went to Jacen’s apartment to gather some things. A short while later, they all met up at the *The Nubian Hope* in the hope of finally determining the final pieces in the puzzle that made up Gwynalyn Palpatine.

Raven’s feet pounded through the swampy Dagobah landscape. She wiped a stream of perspiration off of her forehead before she leapt up and grabbed a hanging vine, launching herself deeper into the forest. The Force flowed through her body, giving her stamina an extra boost, and heightened her dexterity and agility. As she landed softly in a pile of crunchy leaves her eyes absorbed the scenery as her mind remained clear. She passed gnarled trees, huge boulders, overgrown spiked ferns, prickly bushes, and fallen logs and branches. Constantly she ducked under hanging vines, and pulled off sticky, transparent spider webs that she always managed to run right into. She leapt over green and tan lizards and often cringed at hanging snakes. In a strange way, she found herself beginning to like the creepy planet, mostly because she knew she would get to leave from it eventually.

Her mind began to wander. She thought about her duel with Master Durrion. Towards the end of it, she felt alive and truly in tuned with the Force. She thought about how she stumbled during the duel because of her own lack of self-confidence in her instincts. She wondered if such problems would plague her abilities in a real life situation. She hoped not. She realized she would just need to practice more.

Raven then wondered what would she do with herself after she completed her training? She didn’t think she’d have much to contribute to restoring Theed with Jaina and Marxx. She knew she wasn’t artistic- so becoming an artist was out of the question. She thought it would be fun to work at the new art museum being built in Theed. She certainly loved art and had intensely studied different art movements and species of artists over the years. Of course, working in a museum was the life of a civilian, not a Jedi. She wondered if she could do that, opt for living a simple life, as opposed to that of the chaotic Jedi existence.

A sliver of doubt ran through her heart as she realized that the people of Naboo, might possibly object to her working at the museum. She did steal their artwork after all. She thought of her painting she

bought on Orb Mantell and thought of possibly donating it to the museum as a peace offering. She wondered whether she should do that or just let the people suck it up and accept her willingness to work.

She wondered if Jacen would mind her desire to work at the museum. Somehow she didn't think he would mind all that much. After being away from her family for so many years, she wanted to live close by her parents, and watch her niece Krishta grow into a young woman. The giggling girl often filled her with melancholy as she realized the joy she missed in her own childhood. All she could do was heap tons of love on the carefree young girl.

Thinking of her niece Raven wondered about the possibility of being a mother herself. The idea shot a wave of terror through her heart. Breathing deeply, she wondered what kind of mother she would be. Would she be smothering? Indifferent? Nervous? She didn't know. Growing up without a normal view of motherhood made her wonder if she would be able to fulfill that roll properly on her own. Oftentimes when she was a girl, she would sit alone on the playground, gasping for breath, and watch as her classmates mothers would arrive to pick them up. She'd watch these soft, smiling women embrace their children and take their small hands, and lead them towards their speeders. A sad longing would grip her defective heart and oftentimes she would sit and weep until the children had completely left the school. Now whenever her mother embraced her, she would often tense up, her arms stiff, uncertain what to do with them. Her mother, always patient, didn't mind and seemed to have the patience of a Jedi Master in regards to Raven's emotional recovery. Her reactions to her own mother made her wonder how she would act around her own children. She supposed she'd never know until it actually happened.

A small smile crept on her face as she wondered how Jacen would be as a father. She visualized them playing in their favorite meadow with squealing younglings racing around them, picking wildflowers, Jacen lifting the giggling children up into the air with the help of the Force, and long tickle fights. All she ever wanted was to be a part of a happy, stable family with her love, Jacen. She just couldn't wait to complete her training and be back in his arms and start their future together.

As her legs thundered on, her heart suddenly constricted in her chest. She ceased running and gasped for air. Surrounded by hot, humid air she felt ice cold. She shivered as she caught her breath. Raven's icy blue eyes traversed the landscape seeking a reason for the chill. Finding nothing she crept around the surrounding swamp.

Suddenly she realized the chill seemed all too familiar. *Last time I felt this was in the presence of Grandm... Gwynalyn*, she thought. Instinctively her hand grasped the hilt of her lightsaber. She ceased all movement and listened intently throughout the swamp. The call of birds greeted her ears. Their cries mingled with the waving and rustling of tree leaves. Her heart pounded in her chest. The Jedi apprentice stood glued to her spot in the swamp uncertain of the origin of the tremor in the Force. She opened her mind completely to the Force and discovered it originated from a location in the swamp, not from a person. She relaxed her grip on her lightsaber and allowed her feet to instinctively lead her to the source of the disturbance.

A large cave opened at the base of an ancient tree. Raven's arms sprouted goosebumps. She crossed her arms and quickly attempted to rub them away. Gripped with curiosity, Raven noticed natural stairs that led down inside the cave. She descended them cautiously, without fear. She jumped and shrieked as her hand accidentally grabbed onto a long snake that slithered on the wall. Her senses heightened as a cold line of sweat appeared on her brow.

She landed on the last step and sank onto the musky, murky floor below. Faint light from the cave's opening above highlighted the earthy room. The mildewed air made her sneeze. The sound of her sneeze absorbed into the walls.

The light snuffed out and Raven became pitched in blackness. She whirled around and a looming figure blocked the cave's entrance.

Raven flew against the side of the cave, gasping in pain as her back stabbed into a jutting rock.

Pitiful, insignificant fool, the figure said. With each word, a vine wove itself around Raven's wrists and waist. The figure continued, *You worthless child will never amount to anything. Nobody loves you.* More vines captured Raven, weaving around her forehead, her neck, her legs. Unable to move, Raven glared at the shrouded figure as it approached.

It stopped before her, and a crooked finger reached out and flicked a fingernail at her cheek. Raven felt sticky blood trickle down her face. Thin, white lips muttered, *You will always be mine.*

"No," Raven growled from the bottom of her throat. "You are wrong! I am loved, I am strong, I am NOT YOU!" With each word, spoken from the bottom of her heart, the vines loosened their grip from her body.

Jagged white teeth flashed. *Weak coward.*

"No! I am not afraid. I'm no longer afraid of you!" Raven spat. Raven heard the familiar *snap hiss* of a lightsaber igniting behind the shrouded form. The room glowed with a red light.

The figure vanished and the strangling vines released their hold on Raven. She fell to the muddy floor and lifted her head to come face to face with a glowing red lightsaber. Backing up onto her feet she came face to face with Raven Darkglider, complete in helmet, breathing apparatus, leather clothing, and long black skirt. Darkglider's hypnotic, metallic breathing filled the air, providing an inhuman rhythm that contrasted with the steady beat of Raven's healed heart. She listened to her own healthy breathing and realized how far she'd come since those lonely days when she wore that outfit.

Breathing shallowly Raven ignited her lightsaber with a *snap hiss*. Raven glared at her former self and studied her metallic twin. Darkglider raised her lightsaber high over her head, twirled, and stabbed towards Raven's chest. Raven measured her healthy breaths, raised her sizzling marine blue saber up from the right and defensively blocked her charge. Desperately trying to snuff her alter ego out of existence, Raven spun and quickly slashed her saber towards Darkglider's heart. Darkglider pounded and blocked her saber. Darkglider jumped up, and swung down towards Raven's chest again. Raven rolled under the swinging blade and bounced lightly on her feet. The two crashed and matched their blades. The more they fought, the more they remained evenly matched.

Viciously Raven grinned, determined to better and defeat her former self, she dove into a dormant place, one she knew well, and willingly asked for assistance. She sunk deep into a rising fury and thrust at Darkglider's chest. Predicting the move, Darkglider's red blade met blue. Their sabers locked in a stalemate. Raven and Darkglider slowly circled each other. Calmly Raven raised her saber and sliced towards Darkglider's left shoulder and hit it with sparking precision.

Darkglider's foot met a slimy stone and she crashed onto her back. Darkglider howled in pain and feebly raised her lightsaber. Remembering her dueling failure with Kyp earlier, Raven knew what to do. Raven jumped, straddled her former self and stabbed Darkglider right through the heart.

In the glowing blue light waves of euphoria -dark power washed over Raven as she triumphantly conquered her weaker self. She thought of how easily she conquered her past and smiled happily. Her smile faltered then as it occurred to her how she achieved her victory. Her heart began to sink. Then a piercing light filled the room and the faceplate burst open in a puff of white smoke.

Raven's ice blue eyes grew wide with terror as her she shoved her fists into her mouth to stifle an onslaught of screams. She fell to the floor in terror. Her legs kicked and heels dug into the dirt as she desperately worked her way away from the vision of Jacen's glassy dead eyes staring back in her direction.

Chapter 24

Water covered most of the surface of the planet of Dellalt. As Luke and Anakin flew into the atmosphere, they blinked from the bright glare off of the bright blue planet. Three large landmasses acted as homes for the planet's inhabitants. And off into the oceans the Dellaltians built their refineries, as to not mar the precious little land on the planet.

As expected, four Dellaltian patrol ships encircled the two X-Wings and demanded to know their business. Anakin listened over the commlink as Luke explained they were on a diplomatic mission to resolve an intergalactic border dispute. Anakin sensed Luke used a gentle mind probe on the Dellaltian officers. In a blink of an eye, the two Jedi were granted access to land in the Capital city of Shooraii. The day was bright with endless blue skies.

Anakin and Luke touched down on a large landing platform filled only with Dellaltian ships. As Anakin scanned the walkways he only saw the native people. In a galaxy filled with literally millions of different species of aliens and humanoids, he found it unusual that this planet would be so isolated. He threw himself out of his cockpit and approached his Uncle. He mentioned his observations to Luke.

"From what I understand, the Dellaltians have always been a very guarded and isolated people. They don't much like outsiders. They also don't like leaving their planet either. If you look at the natives here, you probably will have never seen another Dellaltian your entire life," Luke said, hands clasped behind his back as they wove their way through crowded market streets towards the capital building. The smells of cooking meat and freshly baked breads permeated the air, making Anakin's stomach to grumble. He placed a hand on his stomach as his cheeks turned red.

Anakin felt the weight of dozens of pairs of hostile eyes watching them as they walked along. Lowering his voice and stooping down to whisper to his Uncle, "I have a feeling they don't much like us being here."

Nodding, Luke replied, "Yes, they tend to be very xenophobic. Don't let that bother you though, I'm not worried that King Sshuva Proo will grant us an audience."

"How can you be so sure of that?" Anakin asked as he ducking his head as to avoid a swinging lantern.

"They may not like many other alien races, but they find Jedi to be highly fascinating. I predict they will gladly allow us an appearance, if for the privilege of being in the same room as a Jedi alone," Luke replied.

Anakin nodded his head then listened to the deep, guttural voices of the Dellaltians. They were a race of humanoids who walked erect. Their bulky arms and legs sported scales that ran all the way up their faces. Their backs, and tops of their heads were covered in a thick, black mane of fur. They appeared to have no noses except for a single slot in the center of their faces. Their mouths sported a mass of sharp teeth. They wore a strange combination of leather and chain mail clothing to cover their bulky torsos. None wore shoes, their feet were long, scaled with webbing between their toes. Overall the humanoids lacked in the height department. Anakin guessed the tallest Dellaltian probably reached a height of five foot two. Anakin felt exceedingly self conscious as the locals glared at his towering form as he wove above their masses.

A small Dellaltian boy openly gawked up at Anakin. The tall Jedi grinned at the boy and waved. His smile faded as the child's mother violently grabbed the boy, terror burned in her eyes as she stared at the Jedi.

Reaching the end of the street, Anakin's eyes fell upon the capital building of Dellalt. Built in the center of a giant lake- four long walkways lead towards the structure sitting alone in the center of the lake. It seemed to rest upon a pyramid of stairs that ascended directly out of the water.

Luke and Anakin headed towards the several mile long bridge and nearly started walking across, when someone screamed at them, "Do not soil the sacred bridges with your mortal feet!"

Holding his hands together in front of him, Luke approached the speaker, "I am sorry to have offended you and your customs. We are here to see King Sshruva Proo. Pray may I ask, how are we to get to the Capital?"

Anakin turned and glanced down at a four-foot, very old gray scaled Dellaltian. The salty air tossed his graying black mane violently around his head. He pointed to a speeder. "Outsiders! Never do your research!" The older humanoid frowned, revealing a mouth filled with wicked, fanged teeth, then threw up his hands, "Fine! I will take you across!"

"Thank you for your kindness," Luke said as they looked at the speeder. Luke glanced at the small seats, then stared at his large nephew. Luke took the front allowing Anakin to squish himself across the whole length of the backseat.

The captain turned around and stared at Anakin as his head leaned uncomfortably against the ceiling. "Comfy?"

"About as comfy as I will be, I suppose," Anakin replied.

"Sorry, this is not designed for Wookies," the captain replied and sent the vessel roaring above the walkway. Luke chuckled softly, as Anakin tried not to breathe. After a few minutes of intense discomfort for the tall Jedi, Luke and Anakin poured out of the vessel. The captain poked his head out his window. "You just wait here when you need to return to Shooraii and I will pick you up."

"Thank you, sir," Anakin said, as he rubbed the crick out of his neck.

Anakin turned his head towards the capital structure and absorbed the fascinating architectural details of the building. The building stood atop a pyramid of duracrete stairs. Built entirely out of steel and duracrete blocks, the building would have seemed ugly and industrial if it wasn't for the painted frescos that decorated the blocks. The building rioted with color. Anakin squinted his eyes against the outlandish collection of drawings that decorated the building.

"Any idea what the designs are, Uncle Luke?" he asked as they ascended the stairs.

Luke's blue eyes absorbed the details and shook his head, "No. I guess that will be something to ask." They walked towards the large arched main opening that granted them access to a large formal garden. Again colors clashed everywhere. Anakin's head began to pound from the flamboyant designs overloading his senses. He glanced towards the center of the garden and a female Dellaltian, wearing red leather, rapidly approached the two Jedi.

Frowning she stood before the Jedi, "I am Grizzilla Hrolt, main advisor to King Sshruva Proo."

"I am Jedi-Master Luke Skywalker, and this is Jedi Knight, Anakin Solo," Luke replied. Both Luke and Anakin bowed.

Grizzilla inhaled a long breath of recognition, and then began to purposefully walk through the sweetly fragrant garden with Luke and Anakin following in her wake. "The King has been made aware of your arrival. He is most displeased that he was not informed of your visit earlier, as he feels he is not properly prepared to meet such esteemed visitors."

"We meant no disrespect in not informing the King of our arrival. It was a matter of timing, we were just dispatched here and unfortunately did not have time to try to go through proper channels to meet with him," Luke said, to the diminutive advisor.

She turned her gray eyes towards Luke and asked, "You were dispatched? By whom may I ask? Who would have the authority to dispatch Jedi?"

"The Jedi serve the New Republic. If one of the systems who belongs under the protection of the New Republic is in trouble, we are there to assist them in their time of crisis," Luke explained.

"I thought that was only in the days of the Old Republic," Grizzilla replied as she continued walking. The trio passed under another matching arch and entered into a cobble stoned hallway. They turned left and ascended a winding flight of stairs. When reaching the top, Grizzilla led them through a series of twisting gray hallways. Anakin found himself glad to have a guide as he was certain he would have gotten immediately lost on his own.

Grizzilla then came to a halt in front of a nondescript, unassuming door. She removed a touchpad, hid it close to her body, and entered in a code. The door swung open. They entered into a stark white room with a round black table. Surrounding the table sat five Dellaltians who all wore red. At the end farthest from the door sat the King. Anakin assumed as much by the fact that the man sat on the only object with any color. His chair, raised to allow him to tower over the table was as richly decorated as the outside of the building. He also wore a high gold crown atop his head, and a long red, velvet coat draped over his shoulders.

"Allow me to make introductions," Grizzilla stated. "Our exhalted King Sshurva Proo, these are esteemed Jedi Knights, Master Luke Skywalker and Knight Anakin Solo."

The wiry King's eyes flared open wide and a whistling sound echoed in the room as he sucked in air through his nose slit. In a low, grumbling voice he asked incredulously, "Jedi Master Luke Skywalker?"

Luke bowed deeply before the King, "Yes, your Grace, that is who I am. It is an honor to meet you."

King Sshruva Proo glanced nervously at Anakin. Pointing a scaled finger at Anakin he demanded, "Who is that man? Why would you, the most famous of all Jedi, need a second Jedi to come with you?"

Anakin raised an eyebrow at being singled out. Luke seeming rather puzzled replied, "He is a Jedi Knight, Anakin Solo and is here as an observer and to assist me with the negotiations."

"Negotiations for what?" Sshruva Proo's scales bristled as he swung his chest out importantly. "I cannot trust someone who is that tall!"

Leaning over to whisper to his Uncle, Luke put up a hand to stop him. To the King he replied, "I am in charge of these proceedings. Please be assured that Anakin is highly trained and will act as a fair observer here today. It is not our intention to foster distrust with you. We understand how strangers unsettle you. We are most grateful for the time you have set aside for us today."

Narrowing his eyes into slanted slits, the King stared at Anakin. "I do not trust him! Look at his cape, and the way he walks- he reminds me of someone else who came here once many years ago."

"May I ask whom that was?" Anakin asked calmly and quietly.

"A Dark Lord of the Sith, Darth Vader! He helped bring great wealth to our people by offering to buy our cannons for his fleets. However, he brought many garrisons of troops here to watch our people work. Many of my people were needlessly killed under their hands," the King replied, leaning forward in his chair. The room became charged with an air of distrust. "We have shut ourselves off from the rest of the Galaxy because we do not wish to be hurt any further by outsiders."

"That is most unfortunate your grace. However, I will not lie to you, we are both direct descendants of the man who became Lord Vader," Luke said. All in the room gasped. "We have no intention to harm you, or ask anything of you today that would directly relate to or involve further hurting your people. We are here simply to act as peacekeepers for the New Republic, nothing more, nothing less."

Squinting his eyes, the King let out a sigh, "Sit. We will get on with it." His so far nameless advisors around the table watched the two Jedis with great interest. Anakin winced as he sat on the tiny chair. Silently he prayed his weight would not crush it. Grizzilla moved down the table and sat beside the King and prepared herself to take notes of the meeting. Anakin watched her as she glanced around the room. Her nose-flap twitched nervously, and Anakin detected a quiver in her left cheek. As his eyes scanned the rest of the room, none of the other Dellaltians seemed to show any signs of nervousness, even though they were rather suspicious as a people. Anakin decided to keep an eye on the King's advisor.

"Now why are you here?" the King asked.

Luke smiled at the directness of the leader. He began, "We are here on behalf of the Royal House of Hapes..."

"Hapes! Ta'a Chume keeps bothering us with nonsense! She thinks we are attacking her system. We have no reason to attack her system. Why would we do this? Why would she accuse us of such a thing," the King ranted. Before Luke could reply, the King continued, "We were once a race of warriors who have learned to live peacefully. We have honored our treaty with them for over fifty years. We have no interest in making war!"

Anakin recalled Tenel Ka telling him of the ferocity of her neighbors, looking at them now, he couldn't visualize them as warlords bent on overtaking the Galaxy.

"Queen Ta'a Chume does have her reasons for accusing your planet of these actions." Luke proceeded to tell them about the three incidents and the proof of their culpability. Anakin watched as Sshruva Proo listened intently to Luke's comments. His eyes wandered to Grizzilla and the twitch in her cheek seemed to have intensified. Luke finished by producing the datapad containing the images of the destruction of Hapes 4. He plugged the card into a terminal and the image of the looming Dellaltian destroyers filled the room.

Chaos erupted in the room as the images filled the air. All of the Dellaltians, except for Grizzilla, who attempted to keep up conversation, spoke at once gesturing wildly at the images. The King cleared his throat and all noise ceased in the room.

With a confused expression he stared at the repeating images. To Luke and Anakin he said, "Those ships are not ours. They may look Dellaltian, but they are not ours." He stood up on the raised platform and pointed to the image of the closest ship to his finger. "The hull color is all wrong. We use a lighter iron alloy than was used in constructing the hulls on these ships. Also, if you look over there..." he pointed to the far end of the repeating image, "the ships seem to be materializing out of thin air. We have never employed the use of cloaking technology on our planet. During the time of the Empire, we built ion canons. That was how we made our living. However, we have never employed the use of skills of deception in how we fight. When we decide to attack someone, we let our presence be known. We do not lurk like cowards, appear in thin air and attack! Whoever is flying these ships... they are not Dellaltian."

The King sat back down. Through the Force, Anakin sensed that the King spoke only the complete truth. One of his advisors on the left side of the table spoke up, he said, "He speaks the truth. We are not cowards. Nor do we now have any reason to battle the Hapans. Although we have a well trained militia, we have not sent them on any missions. Nor do we have any interest in the Hapes Cluster. To our knowledge they are still our allies."

Luke nodded his head, like Anakin, he sensed only the truth coming from the Dellaltians. Luke said, "Thank you for your time, your Highness. It appears there is more going on than meets the eye. We need to get back to the Royal House on Hapes immediately and report back to them what you have said. It appears something more elusive is at work here." Together Luke and Anakin rose in their seats. They bowed deeply to the King.

"May the Force be with you, King Sshruva Proo, and may prosperity always reign in your land," Luke said.

"Thank you for believing us, famed Jedi Master Luke Skywalker. May the Gods speed you on your journey," Sshruva Proo said.

Grizzilla swept towards the door and guided them back through the maze of halls and out into the courtyard. Above the sky began to change from bright blue to yellow as the sun began to set. Anakin turned and faced the advisor as they reached the entrance to the capital building. Again, he noted the twitching of her nose, and her cheek.

"May you get back in time to stop Ta'a Chume from doing anything rash to our planet," Grizzilla said. She stepped back and turned around. In the most fleeting of seconds, Anakin watched her face carefully as her scales briefly turned into a sallow, smooth, grayish green. When he blinked his eyes, her face had returned to normal.

Anakin opened his mouth to say something to Uncle Luke, but he was already holding the door open to the waiting taxi, his cape swirling in a mounting, cold wind. When he looked back again into the courtyard, Grizzilla had vanished. Anakin ran his fingers through his dark hair, uncertain of what to do.

Luke called out to his nephew, "Come on, we have no time to waste. We have to get word to Tenel Ka, immediately."

Anakin begrudgingly raced down the stairs, shoved himself uncomfortably into the back seat of the taxi and stared out the window. A dense fog began to spread in tendrils down the mountainsides that surrounded the lake, blanketing the valley with its smothering whiteness. Because the planet spins rapidly on its axis, the first round of nightfall was already approaching. As the sun began to set, the fog turned orange and the valley glowed in the fiery light, the vibrantly painted capital building burned in its brilliance. Anakin's heart pounded in his chest, realizing they no longer had to worry about a mere border dispute, but that some kind of grander, more sinister plan seemed to be at play. He only hoped they could inform Tenel Ka of these new developments in time before she found herself participating as an unwitting pawn in a cruel, twisting game.

Chapter 26

Tenel Ka stared out the window in her royal office at the Fountain Palace. She watched the puffy white clouds drift without care across the sky, as Hapes 4 burned a quarter of a parsec away. Her finger twisted in the gold chain that hung around her neck as her mind wandered to Luke and Anakin. She wondered if they were successful in meeting with King Sshruva Proo. She hoped that if they managed to gain his audience that they would be able to get back to her quickly with their report.

Closing her eyes, Tenel Ka fought back a wave of tears as images from the destruction of Hapes 4 raced in her mind. A half-hour ago General Margatall brought in the first images from the fire ravaged planet. Where previously the planet boasted miles neatly plowed fields filled with produce and fruit, there now only stood smoldering, charred remains. One of the most poignant of visions was of a tiny island where two small Rodian children lay on the ground arm in arm, dead from smoke inhalation. Tenel Ka knew her grandmother would have never just sat by and allowed this to happen in her system.

She would have sent out the armada, lasers and torpedoes blasting, sending the Dellaltians to their deaths. However, as Master Skywalker had suggested, there did seem to be something wrong with this whole setup. The attacks just didn't *feel* like something the Dellaltians would instigate. She could only guess at what news Anakin and Luke would bring back with them from their trip.

For the briefest of moments she let her mind wander from responsibility. The very first image was of Anakin holding her and resting his head on top of hers as they watched the sun set the previous night. She could almost still feel phantom traces of his long, strong arms around her waist. His musk aftershave tingled in her nose. His bright blue eyes sprung into her mind. Her eyes opened with surprise that the first person to come to mind wasn't Jacen. Jacen. Her feelings for Jacen had been so central in her mind recently she decided it was time to face what lay in her heart once and for all. She began to pace back and forth in her empty office. Her light blue gown trailed behind her, gathering up neglected dust from the floor.

I love Jacen Solo, do I not? I have always loved him. He was one of my best friends growing up. He was always there for me whenever I needed someone to lift my spirits or to help me in a crisis. That is what friends do, right? Tenel Ka ceased walking. She jolted on her feet as if struck by lightning. That is just it though, is it not? He has always been a good friend to me, nothing more, nothing less. I would dream about him because I had nothing better to do. We never had any moments that revealed a romantic future between us. Nothing ever happened to get us to that point... This is a fact. It must be that nothing ever happened for a reason. There was a reason Jacen and I never connected that way. Why? Her gut twisted and her palms turned clammy as the answer loomed just outside of consciousness. She shook her head. That is impossible. How is that possible? Consciously she ran a finger across her sweaty palm, and she noted the quickened pace of her heart. In all the years she knew Jacen, he'd never made her feel completely imbalanced and nervous just thinking about him, unlike someone else did. With all certainty she realized in only a mere twenty-four hours her entire life had turned upsidedown. And it happened all because she had fallen for Jacen's younger brother. But is what I am feeling, real? Or am I just projecting my feelings onto Anakin?

Tenel Ka thought of the kiss that almost happened and walked back towards the window. She stared hard at the sky, hoping sheer will could make Anakin's X-Wing appear, bringing him back with hopefully good news for her people, and safely back into her waiting arms.

Analise closed up the curtains that circled her booth and locked it up in the Bimmissaari marketplace for the night. Brushing a clump of brown hair, mingled with flecks of gray, Analise smiled at the amount of wares she blasted through today. Thanks to that little stunt that Jedi pulled, word spread throughout the complex that she was magical. The Bimms loved a good story, and as she spun them a grand yarn. In return, they gladly forked over credits and took away many of her pots and pans. She held onto the pot and spoon that young Jedi used on her head, they'd be her proof of the validity of the tale as the years passed. She turned around and came face to face with the three young adults, heavy with shopping packages, and the wookiee.

She tilted her head, "Follow me, there's a nice little garden just off of the marketplace where we can talk."

The Jedi followed the woman, making quick introductions all around. They descended the stairs and entered the late, sunlit afternoon. Analise led them around the building and down a secluded path.

Above them the asaari trees gently swayed and danced as the sounds of the high singsonged voices of passing Bimm's made for a very calming atmosphere. Mingled with the Bimm's voices the songs of native birds filled the trees.

The path opened to reveal a large flower garden filled with circular seating sections. Analise lead them all to one such location and sat heavily down on the southern facing bench. "Bimms love to tell stories, so you'll see all these kinds of seating areas scattered in gardens all over Bimmisaari. These little people love a beautiful setting to spin a great yarn."

Jaina smiled and squeezed Marxx's hand. "This garden is certainly beautiful," she said.

"Yes, it is," Analise said. Her jovial smile vanished as her eyes fell upon her curly haired cousin. "So who do you want to know about?"

Marxx leaned forward; resting his left hand on his knee he grabbed and massaged his neck with his right hand. "We were wondering what, if anything, you could tell us about your Aunt Gwynalyn Palpatine."

The older woman's face paled. "*She* is your grandmother? I often wondered what happened to little Chariss. I always thought Paulo would eventually get the sense to leave my crazy aunt long ago."

"Unfortunately it didn't quite happen that way. Gwynalyn left my grandfather many years ago... he just passed away recently," Marxx said.

Leaning back against the trunk of an asaari tree Gwynalyn stared hard at Marxx. "I'm sorry to hear that. Paulo was a wonderful man. My condolences. You don't look a lot like her."

"No. I mostly look like my grandfather," Marxx said, hoping to move onto more the topic at hand.

Analise crossed her arms across her chest and crossed her legs. She nodded and began, "Yes, you do look like Paulo, now that you mention it. You have his kind eyes. Your grandmother was somewhat... unstable. She always fascinated me as a kid- she was the youngest of my mother's siblings. She was only about sixteen years older than I was. I thought she was pretty. She was the only girl in the family to have blond hair. My mother told me that from the time she was small she was obsessed with her brother. I guess she idolized him for being a politician and being important. Gwynalyn tried out for the legislative youth program but didn't have the aptitude for it; she scored low on the admissions tests. So she went to art school. She studied to become a sculptor."

"And her brother became her favorite subject to sculpt, right?" Jacen said, gripping the side of his bench as he swung his crossed legs.

Nodding Analise smirked, "Yes, she was positively obsessed with my uncle. Why? We never knew. Maybe she liked the fact that he got off of Naboo. Anyway, then she met Paulo. They became good friends. She latched onto him because he had been a part of the Legislative Youth Program and dropped out. I think she transferred her obsessive feelings for her brother onto Paulo. When Paulo's friend Padme Naberrie was elected Queen of Naboo, they worked as her main artists, and sculpted and painted her reign. Queen Amidala presided over their marriage."

Jaina and Jacen glanced over at her with surprise. "What?" Analise asked.

“Padme was our grandmother,” Jaina said.

Analise peaked an eyebrow at the twins, “Well isn’t this a small galaxy? Anyway, even when she had little Chariss, we knew something screwy was still going on with Gwynalyn. She’d spend hours pouring over the holonet watching her brother residing over the Senate. I mean really, who ever watched those Senate hearings for fun? They’re about as exciting as watching paint dry. Then came the Clone Wars and she disappeared from Naboo with Paulo and Chariss.”

Something occurred to Jaina. She remembered the cloaked images of the Emperor and Vader in the attic. She asked, “Did Gwynalyn ever come back to Naboo on her own?”

“I don’t think so, why?” Analise asked, scratching her ear.

“We found some statues and drawings in her house that would have post dated the Clone Wars. The only way they could have been there was if she came to the house after she left the planet,” Jaina said.

“Jaina, I don’t get it, she was stuck on Tatooine just like the rest of us,” Marxx said. His pool blue eyes searched his wife’s brandy brown eyes questioningly.

“Not always. Remember? Think about it honey, how would she have had statues of Vader in that house? Anakin didn’t get turned into Vader until *after* the Clone Wars,” Jaina said, cocking her head.

“She’s right, Marxx. I’d actually wondered about that one myself,” Jacen said.

“Regardless kids, I wouldn’t know. We left Naboo around the same time the Paulo and Gwynalyn escaped. All I know is your grandmother was a little wacky,” Analise said, rolling her eyes.

“Unfortunately Marxx, that’s about all I’ve got for you. You’re grandmother was a strange woman. Sorry I couldn’t have given you all the information you needed.”

The three Jedi stood up to leave. Lowbacca handed her a datapad and growled. Jacen explained, “Lowbacca has mapped out for you how he will be deleting your information from the general Galactic archives. It will take some time- but this way you can track the progress.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it,” Analise said, standing up.

Marxx wrapped his arm around Jaina’s waist and asked his cousin, “May I ask why you want your true identity erased from the Galactic archives?”

“My parents and I left Naboo same time as your Grandparents. After we left my Uncle declared himself Emperor. We were mortified! We couldn’t believe the audacity of him. And then he gripped the Galaxy in terror. All we wanted was to distance ourselves completely from that man. We changed our names and went into hiding. I still feel the sting of knowing that monster was once my uncle. I just don’t want anyone to try to take out revenge on me for simply being a blood relation to that man,” she said, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Analise, it’s not so bad. Really. Look at me, I married Luke Skywalker’s niece. The Emperor was Luke’s greatest enemy- yet her family didn’t object to me. Well except her father, but he would’ve gotten after any man who wanted to marry his little gil,” Marxx replied, giving Jaina a bit of a squeeze.

“Please know Analise, you will always be welcome to visit us back on Naboo. I’m sure people back there will be more than happy to see you again. Jaina here has spent the last couple of years working to restore Naboo back to its former glory. We’re close to reactivating a solid government and are working with local scholars to initiate our pledge to bring it into New Republic’s protection again.”

Tears fell down Analise’s face. “Well maybe I’ll consider that.”

“Besides, we’re going to have another family wedding coming up soon. I’m sure Jacen and Marxx’s twin sister Raven would love to have you at the wedding,” Jaina said, grinning at Jacen.

Jacen scowled at his sister and scratched his forehead. Changing to a grinning smile he said to Analise, “I’ll make sure you get an invitation- whenever that might be.”

They said their goodbyes and headed back to *The Nubian Hope*. They climbed aboard the ship, settled into their seats in the cockpit as Marxx lifted the yacht out of the atmosphere. Jaina rummaged in one of her bags and pulled out a long piece of shimmering yellow fabric.

“Don’t you think this would look great as a tablecloth in our bungalow?” Jaina asked, as she flicked on the hyperspace co-ordinates and set them back for Naboo.

Lowie growled behind them from the navigator’s chair.

Jacen laughed, “You know, we told you those nerf skewers didn’t look like they were sanitized much in their pre-preparation. How many did you eat?”

Lowie lowered his eyes sheepishly and raised seven fingers. “Well once we launch into hyperspace- you know where the refresher is if you feel like you’re going to get sick,” Marxx said, worried that the wookie may hurl his lunch.

Jaina watched as Lowie’s jowls fell into a frown. Then his eyes grew huge in worry. Quickly he unstrapped himself and raced into the back of the ship. As the three Jedi watched their furry friend race off, a Star Destroyer appeared out of hyperspace and opened fire upon *The Nubian Hope*.

Marxx and Jaina’s eyes grew large as they watched green light pummel the outer hull of the ship.

“Forward shields up! Switch on the deflector shield!” Marxx yelled as their ears rang from a fresh bombardment of laser fire.

“Already on it!” Jaina shouted. They heard an angry Wookiee yell from the back of the ship as something crashed down upon Lowbacca’s head.

“What is it with this ship and Star Destroyers?” Jacen asked as his fingers flew across the controls to activate the deflector shield.

“I don’t know- but at least now, we’ve got a few surprises up our sleeve,” Marxx said, blue eyes twinkling. He moved his hand to the right and targeted the ion cannon the front of the destroyer and launched a torpedo. The torpedo blasted the cannon into to a puff of fiery smoke. The next torpedo bounced effortless off of the Destroyer’s shields.

“Hum, well at least we got one shot in,” Jaina said as she sent the silver ship into a nosedive to avoid a barrage of green laserfire.

“How long before hyperspace co-ordinates are set?” Marxx asked, watching nervously as Jaina raced his ship mere feet alongside the outside of the Destroyers hull. “Uh, honey, what is the point of this?”

“They’re not gonna fire on us if we’re right on top of their ship!” Jaina said.

“Just watch out for the...” Jacen said as his body flung forward then crashed into the navigator’s terminal, shooting intense pain through his head from his crushed nose. “NOT AGAIN!”

Jaina groaned and gave Marxx an apologetic look as the ship’s engines whined from being caught in the tractor beam. Marxx brushed a clump of curly hair from his forehead and he turned off the hyperdrive and cut down on the engines.

“No problem, baby. Really. I love dealing with Imperial idiots,” Marxx said with a smirk to Jaina. “Besides, life had gotten kind of boring lately, right?”

Unharnessing herself, Jaina flashed her husband an impish smile, and then walked towards the kitchenette and opened a cupboard. Lowie came out of the refresher, rubbing his head, just in time for her to toss his lightsaber at him. Jaina distributed the others to her husband and brother. Jacen felt a deep frown form on his face as he recognized a presence aboard the ship. Jaina watched him closely and connected their twin link. She wrinkled her nose in disgust.

Taking his lightsaber from his sister, Jacen twirled the hilt of his weapon in his fingers. He said, “No hiding this time. We’ve got unfinished business with these guys.”

“Right,” Jaina said standing beside her twin.

“What do you mean?” Marxx asked.

“Hydin’s on this ship. I recognized his foul stench through the Force when we got stuck in the tractor beam. It’s time that wannabe Imperial clown gets his power trip revoked, pronto,” Jacen replied.

Lowie and Marxx stared at each other questioningly, then stood behind the Solo twins waiting for the ship to dock. Each Jedi sunk deeply into the Force, waiting to see what would lie in wait for them on the Destroyer. As *The Nubian Hope* landed with a thud into the docking bay on the destroyer, each Jedi stood in battle stance, fingers held lightly over the activation buttons on their lightsabers.

And as the *Hope’s* main entrance door opened, Jacen said, “May the Force be with us all.”

Chapter 27

The blade of the axe crashed down with a thunderous precision as Kyp attacked the fallen log reducing it to firewood. Something in the shade of the clouds told him they were going to be in for a huge rainstorm tonight and he wanted to make sure they had plenty of dry wood on hand in case they were

forced inside for a couple of days. The blade chopped loudly up and down in a steady rhythm. Kyp grunted and briefly stopped to wipe away a stream of perspiration from his forehead with his forearm. His sides heaved in and out from exertion.

Relentless, he continued working. The more he worked, the less time he could sit around and mope. Raven's words from last night stung his heart. Somehow he knew that Raven wouldn't ever fall in love again, that her connection to Jacen was just too strong. As he chopped, Kyp couldn't help but think about love. *What would it be like to actually have someone love me so much that she would willingly never give her heart up again if I was to die? Could it be possible that I could find someone who would love me that much?*

The little voice of doubt spoke up again, *Why should anyone love you? You don't actually think you deserve that, do you? You, the destroyer of lives, what makes you think you deserve any happiness in life?*

Kyp's large biceps swung the axe fiercely, as he thought, *That was a long time ago! I've atoned for my crimes! Why shouldn't I be allowed to be happy? I'm not a monster! I'm... I'm misunderstood, but I'm not a monster! I just want some happiness out of life! Must I be doomed to a life of loneliness and despair? Why can't I enjoy the basic comforts of life?*

The voice snarled, *Because you don't deserve them. You gave up all rights to future happiness when you activated that torpedo. You can now only hope to spend your life in solitude, and hope that your abstinence will atone you for your sins.*

Wood chips filled the air as Kyp chopped, *Right. What do I need with love anyway? Love is a distraction from Jedi training. The Jedi of the Old Republic felt that way! Maybe they were right! I may be a Jedi Master, but I still have much to learn of the living force. How can I even think of fulfilling my duties as a Jedi if I am distracted by love?*

The voice said, *Master Luke is married and fell in love. It is possible to have both.*

Snarling, Kyp stared down at the increasingly large pile of chopped wood and continued to work, *Yes, well Master Skywalker is a hero and I am not. He deserves all the happiness the Force can shell out to him. He's saved the Galaxy many times over. Me? I don't deserve anything. Why should I? I've done nothing in my life to deserve being happy. Maybe the first part of my life wasn't my fault- but what I did when I escaped my hellish existence definitely cancels out any chance I may have had in deserving happiness. No. I must be content with what I am allotted in life. I need to move on. I need to forget about Raven and just move on. So what if people say love fills your life with joy. I've done fine without love for my whole life. I can certainly survive now!*

As if to cement the point home, Kyp threw all of his weight behind his axe chop. As the blade crashed towards the fallen tree stump, Kyp felt and heard a scream of terror rip through the Force. His muscles instinctively tightened and jolted as he sensed Raven's pain and agony. Suddenly, his right foot went numb, then he became overwhelmed with blinding pain. He glanced down and saw that the blade of the axe had sliced clear through his boot and foot. The world drifted out of focus and Kyp's eyes rolled back in his head as they filled with the sight, and smell of the thick blood that began to freely ooze out of his boot.

Before falling unconscious, Kyp sent a single, urgent message to Raven through the Force for help.

In the cave, Raven buried her head with her arms and began to wail in agony over Jacen's image in the mask. When she opened her eyes, the vision had faded, leaving her alone in the dark, dank cave. Her entire body shook with despair as she realized the magnitude of her actions. Through the center of her misery, she sensed a lightning blade of pain rip through the Force.

"Kyp?" she said, as her head bolted upright, and grabbed her lightsaber. Climbing quickly out of the cave, she felt the life-force of her Master dwindling. Panic rose inside of her as she focused entirely on his signature on the planet. As she began to run, Raven threw out a hand and vanished.

Kyp's eyes fluttered in and out of focus. In the space of a heartbeat, Raven appeared before his collapsed form. Warm hands shook his bitterly cold shoulders and Kyp heard her calling his name. He groaned.

Raven stared at her Master's bloody shoe and the fallen axe covered in blood. She ripped off the lower part of Kyp's pant's leg to examine the extent of the injuries. She didn't want to try and remove the boot in fear she might lose half of his foot. Her stomach churned at the thought. She unfastened and yanked off her belt and wrapped it tightly around his lower right calf.

"Master Durrion, wake up! What should I do? Kyp! KYP! I need you to wake up!" Raven gulped down rising bile. *He's going into shock. I can't fix these intense of injuries on my own. He needs help! We need to get off of this planet, NOW.*

Making up her mind, she patted down Kyp's pockets and found the security key for *The Fiery Phoenix* in his left cargo pants pocket. Digging her hand in she wiggled it free and clipped it to her utility belt along side her lightsaber. Then she positioned herself right aside her Master and carefully picked up his limp body and heaved it onto her shoulder. Knees bending under his immense weight she moved as quickly as she could over the fallen log and headed towards the ship. She dug deep into the Force to assist her with her strength and endurance. Several minutes later the ship in sight, she unclipped his activation key and the main ramp opened for her entrance.

Here's to hoping Master Skywalker doesn't throw me in prison for leaving Dagobah over this, Raven thought as she climbed up the ship's ramp. She took Kyp into the medic room and strapped him into the bed. She opened several ice packs and wrapped them around his foot to try and control the bleeding. The tourniquet did seem to have stopped the excess blood flow, she was glad to see. Kyp still remained unconscious. Knowing she had no choice in the matter she raced towards the ship's cockpit. She maneuvered the captain's chair closer to the controls and fired up the engines. With deft fingers she flicked on a galactic map and studied the readout closely. She wanted to take him to Coruscant, but she just had the feeling he wouldn't survive that long of a trip. From Marxx and Jaina's reports she knew that the large hospital on Theed had been built and was now active. The trip to Naboo in lightspeed should only take forty minutes. She activated the hyperdrive and laid in the co-ordinates for Naboo.

The Fiery Phoenix shuddered as Raven pushed the engines to max in attempts to reach Naboo faster. It bounced through the turbulent Dagobah atmosphere.

Come on, blast it! Get us off of this stinking planet! He can't die!... Patience, Raven, patience. Don't destroy Kyp's ship. That won't get you anywhere fast. You'll both be dead! Don't do it, Raven's mind reeled. She sucked down a large calming breath and released it as the ship shot up through the stormy clouds and finally burst out of the Dagobah atmosphere. She positioned the ship towards Naboo just as the hyperdrive beeped its readiness. Raven sank back in her chair, relief flooded her senses as the cockpit window filled with streaming lines.

"I don't know how much longer you should wait, your Highness," General Margatall said, worry filling his eyes. He approached the Princess as she stared out the window of her office. "News of the destruction of Hapes 4 has reached the farthest corners of the cluster and people are demanding justice be dealt. They are tired of the Dellaltians battling us and our doing nothing. They want to know why Ta'a Chume has suddenly decided to let our neighbors get the upper hand on us."

"Ta'a Chume is not in charge any longer," Tenel Ka said.

"Yes, I know that. Your people, however, do not know this. To them the Royal family is appearing weak. They are worried about their own safety. If innocent farmers were so easily destroyed- what would happen if Hapes 6 is next targeted? It is our planet of industry. If it were destroyed, our economy would collapse completely! Everyone is panicking. There have been reports that on Hapes 2, riots have begun in the residential merchants center in the city of Horneccia. Things are getting out of control. You need to act quickly before our own people begin to revolt!" The General said passionately. Flustered he stormed over to the comm. center and activated the images from his datapad.

Tenel Ka turned around. Holographic images of the Hapan's rioting in Horneccia, followed by mass protests circled in the air.

She crossed her arms tightly around her chest and glared at the General. "I cannot, will not act until I know what happened with Master Skywalker and his negotiations with the Dellaltians. I just know there is more going on than meets the eye. I can feel it in my bones. I need to know this before I just issue a full scale attack on our neighbors."

"I understand where you are coming from, Your Royal Highness. It's just that I can't let this go on without informing you of the state of the mind of your people. This Royal House has always stood for swift action against enemies... I just wanted to make sure..."

Gray eyes burned with anger. Tenel Ka spat, "Wanted to make sure of what, General? I think that I of all people know what this Royal House stands for. Better than you, I may add. I suppose you think it is easy to simply issue the order to attack. It is not! I will not condone an action that may lead us into war unnecessarily!"

"Unnecessarily?" General Margatall's hand raced through his slick blond hair as his eyes widened with disbelief. He plugged in a new datacard that showed more images of destruction from Hapes 4. "What more evidence could you possibly need to prove to you the Dellaltians are behind this?"

Pacing across the floor Tenel Ka scowled. *He is right, what more could you possibly expect, Tenel Ka? You have physical evidence that the ships are Dellaltians, you have holographic evidence of their ships attacking. What more do you need?*

Standing tall behind the quietly contemplating Princess, General Margatall said, "I know this must be difficult for you. Nobody wants to be initiated by fire in their first week of rule. But you must understand, the time for negotiations is over. The losses are too great. You need to act now, before they attack again. I assume you want to be remembered as a great ruler of the Hapes Cluster. Your actions today can either make your name shine, or add tarnish to it in years to come."

Smirking, Tenel Ka turned, the late afternoon sun shined through the window and set her coppery hair ablaze in its fiery brilliance. She replied, "Well I guess there is the fundamental difference between myself and my grandmother. I could care less what people think of me." With a grunt she grabbed her cybernetic arm and unhooked it and threw it to the ground. Pointing her stump up into the General's face she said, "I will wait for word from the Jedi before I act. I will not allow more deaths to be on my head."

The General bowed deeply at the waist and gritted his teeth, "Yes, your Excellency."

As he stood upright, the ground shook. From inside the Palace screaming klaxons began to shout. Tenel Ka raced to the window and stared at the skyline in disbelief. A dozen Dellaltian Destroyers emerged out of hyperspace, ion canons blasting across the landscape. Tenel Ka raised her arm to shield her eyes from the bright glare as the Northern perimeter security building burst into flames.

Grimly Margatall stared out the window. "I think it's safe to say the negotiations failed, your Highness."

Watching as dozens of people fled for their lives across the Fountain Palace grounds, Tenel Ka felt tears rise in her eyes. In the softest of voice she said, "Order a full half an armada here to battle Dellaltians, and send a full scale war unit to Dellalt. I want them wiped out... completely."

"Yes M'lady," the General said. He raced towards his terminal and issued the attacks. "We just need your authorization, Princess."

Purposefully, Tenel Ka strode over to the terminal and punched in the war codes. Without hesitation she punched in the final command code as the ground shook under her feet.

"Order an evacuation of the Palace," Tenel Ka said as she strode towards the door. Three Royal guards followed her from closely behind.

"Where are you going?" Margatall asked.

"To get my Grandmother, then we are leaving. We'll meet you at the Reef Fortress," Tenel Ka said, leaving the General alone to organize the evacuation.

The two X-Wings flew through space towards Hapes. Luke and Anakin opened a secured commline to each other as they flew back to report to Tenel Ka.

"I got the distinct feeling that the Dellaltians were telling us the truth. Did you feel the same thing, Anakin?" Luke asked his nephew.

“Yes, Uncle Luke. I felt no deception on their end,” Anakin said. “At least in that regard.”

“Did you pick up anything from them? Although they were somewhat hostile, I felt they were sincere in their dealings with us,” Luke replied.

“I don’t doubt the validity of the words they spoke. However there was one thing...”

“Yes?”

“Did you find anything unusual with the King’s advisor Grizzilla? She seemed somewhat nervous with us there... her nervous ticks seemed to me that maybe she was hiding something,” Anakin said. His mind kept wrapping around that split second before they left the Dellaltian capital and he found himself doubting what he witnessed in the courtyard.

“I assumed her nerves were from meeting a couple of Jedi. Why? What did you detect?” Luke asked.

Anakin bit the inside of his mouth and decided to lay it all out for his Uncle. Drooping his shoulders in his cockpit he said, “She twitched a lot in the meeting. I mean, I can understand her being nervous about meeting us, I suppose. But why now? If the Dellaltians had nothing to do with the attacks, why should she be nervous? Unless of course she knew something she didn’t want for us to know.”

Chewing on the inside of his mouth, Luke frowned. After a few moments he said, “I suppose she could have been worried we wouldn’t believe the King.”

“That sounds like an awfully flimsy reason for being worried about us, don’t you think? I know they don’t like outsiders there, but isn’t that a bit extreme for a reason to be all anxious? We didn’t really look that threatening, did we?” Anakin replied.

Luke chuckled softly, “Well I certainly don’t... you however, are a different story.” Anakin’s face turned bright red. “Don’t worry nephew, I’m sure there’s a reason you were given all the height genes in our family. Be proud of them. I certainly never got them. I oftentimes wondered after seeing how large my father was if I was even related to him. I guess my mother must have just been tiny.”

“As is mine. Well tiny in stature. There’s nothing tiny about her stubborn nature,” Anakin said, grinning.

Luke burst out laughing. He ceased all laughter as his scanners picked up seventy five Hapan War Dragon Destroyers headed in their direction.

“I see them!” Anakin said, as they veered their ships off course to avoid a direct collision. Anakin whipped his neck around and watched as the destroyers shot past them. His stomach rolled in despair. “Oh no, I have a sinking feeling I know where they are going.”

“Me too, Anakin. Let’s get to Hapes as fast as possible. I think Tenel Ka needs us right now!” Luke said.

Concentrating on their acceleration, Anakin completely forgot to mention seeing Grizzilla’s face shapeshift.

Chapter 28

“You have received clearance to land on the southeastern platform, *Fiery Phoenix*. What is your ETA?”

“I’m just entering the Naboo atmosphere now. I’ll be landing in approximately five minutes. Over and out,” Raven replied as she pushed forward on Kyp’s throttle and plunged the ship into the serene atmosphere. Raven squinted from the gloriously bright, Nubian sun. After spending several months on murky Dagobah, she almost forgot what colors looked like. Her heart leapt at the glorious green hills below. She recalled the first time she saw Naboo and how deeply its beauty touched her soul. She understood why her family loved the planet.

Raven’s mind drifted to her Jedi Master. Kyp spent most of the trip moving in and out of consciousness. She worried endlessly about his health and wondered if he would come out of the accident unscarred. She had called ahead to the hospital on Naboo and they walked her through some preliminary work to try and save his foot. Her instinct of icing it was correct. They made her ice it completely and position his leg such that the blood wouldn’t keep flowing from the wound. She wiped down Kyp’s clammy forehead and read back his pulse readings to the medics. The fact that he still occasionally spoke out, they told her was a good sign. It meant that he probably hadn’t lost too much blood.

Snapping out of her reverie, Raven landed the ship on the large platform and activated the ramp. She raced to the door and pointed to the quarters where Kyp was located. The medics descended upon him, hooked him up to a portable life support monitor and lead him out of the ship. One of the doctors, a male Sullustian stared at her with his slanted eyes. His large ears bobbed as he asked in Sullust, “Are you alright?”

“What?” Raven asked.

“Your shirt. You are covered in blood. Are you injured as well?” he asked with concern.

Glancing down at her shirt, Raven realized Kyp’s blood had soaked clear through her white tank top. She then sniffed and realized she reeked of blood and perspiration. “No, I’m fine. Where are they taking him?”

“To surgery, fourth floor.”

“Great, I’ll be there in a few minutes. I’m going to clean up first, and I will move the ship,” Raven said.

The Sullust smiled and his large ears flapped. “We will do all we can to help him. You can count on that.”

“Thank you,” Raven said. She watched the small alien race off towards the building. She shut the ramp and headed back to the cockpit. She moved over to the hospital’s ship port, landed, then headed to the refresher onboard to quickly clean up. Her nerves tightened, as she only hoped and prayed that Kyp

would be alright. As she made her way towards the refresher, Raven stopped and turned around to the cockpit. She flipped through Kyp's files and sent a holo-emitter message to Master Skywalker on Coruscant.

She tapped her fingers and fidgeted as she waited for her message to be picked up. Suddenly Mara's image appeared on the dashboard.

Mara's brows furrowed into a frown, "Raven? What are you doing trying to contact Luke?"

"Is he there? I need to talk to him. Kyp's had an accident and we had to leave Dagobah," Raven explained. Her palms began to sweat under Mara's intensely scrutinizing stare.

"He's actually on assignment. Why don't you tell me what happened, and then try him in his X-Wing?" Mara suggested. "If you do not reach him, maybe I'll be able to do so."

Raven nodded and told her about finding him with the axe in his foot and that they were on Naboo. Mara noted Raven's blood-soaked shirt and the streaks of dried blood that appeared all over her forehead and arms.

"Alright, try reaching Luke in his X-Wing. If you do not get through, let me know and I will try to contact him later," Mara said.

"Thank you, I will," Raven said.

"And Raven," Mara said, peaking an eyebrow at the frazzled girl.

"Yes?"

"Under absolutely no condition, are you to leave that hospital or Naboo. Is that understood? I don't think Luke will be able to get to you. Once I contact him, I will come and get you myself and if Kyp is unable to continue with your training, I will pick up where he left off until either he gets better, or we can find you a suitable replacement," Mara said.

For some reason, Raven found herself hoping Kyp would recover quickly, as she found Master Skywalker's wife to be very intimidating. "Ok thank you," Raven said.

Raven tried to contact Master Skywalker, but only received static from his X-Wing. She called back and reported that to Mara.

"He must be blocking incoming signals. Ok, stay put. I'll get in touch with Luke for you. Go wait for word on Kyp. Let me know the second you hear about his condition," Mara said.

"Got it. And thank you again," Raven said with a small smile.

"No problem. Goodbye." Mara cut the signal before Raven could say goodbye back.

She leaned back in the chair and thrust the palms of her hands into eyes. She muttered, "Great, I didn't do anything, and I'm in deep poodoo."

Tenel Ka's wind blew out of her chest as her body flew against a large pillar. She threw her arm over her head as the entire ceiling cracked and burst into a million shards of raining glass. Three Hapans from the Royal Family security detail circled Tenel Ka as they escorted her down the halls of the crumbling Fountain Palace. The noise from the Dellaltian destroyers ion cannons deafened Tenel Ka's ears with their continuous drumming.

"We need to get out of here now, your Royal Highness!" Trisku, Tenel Ka's blond haired, muscular bodyguard shouted.

"Under the table!" Tenel Ka shouted. The four slid under a large side table as the entire glass ceiling collapsed around their feet with the sound of tinkering glass.

Turning to Trisku, Tenel Ka shouted, "We need to get my grandmother! Only when we have her can we leave!" The color drained from Tenel Ka's face as she watched three large marble columns crash to the floor.

"Again, M'lady. I think it would be wise to leave NOW!" Trisku shouted.

"Come on!" Tenel Ka said as she dashed out into the debris filled hallway. She kept her arm steady along the wall as the floor quaked under her feet. She headed towards a long spiraled staircase and ascended each stair. She and the guards dodged flying debris from the floors above.

Upon reaching the top of the stairs Tenel Ka screamed, "Look out!" She leapt barely out of the way just as a large marble pillar crashed into the top of the stairwell. Trisku and a second guard Yssarrand had cleared the steps and made it out of the way. Tenel Ka growled as the train of her dress got caught under the fallen pillar. Grunting she ripped half of the skirt off, exposing her muscular legs. The third guard, Julato, did not move fast enough. Tenel Ka waved her hand, clearing a cloud of dust as she moved along the length of the fallen structure. She saw Julato's flattened body, crushed under the pillar. She ran her fingers through her thrashed and messy hair. Absently, she realized she had lost her crown at some point.

"We cannot help him! Come on!" She shouted to the other two. Shaking badly, Tenel Ka and her two guards raced down the hall to Ta'a Chume's quarters. They threw themselves into the doorway as the plaster on the walls crumbled outside the Queen's room. Tenel Ka stared with disbelief at her Grandmother lying peacefully asleep in her bed, through a fog of facial powder that had exploded all over the room. As she waited for the walls to quit shaking, Tenel Ka wondered, *How can she sleep through all of this?* Horror gripped the Hapan Princess as she watched an enormous armoire crash onto Ta'a Chume's bed.

"GRANDMOTHER!" She yelled. With no regard for her own safety, Tenel Ka raced into the room. Sinking into the Force, Tenel Ka shoved the armoire off of the bed and sent it crashing against the wall. Clothes flew all over the room.

Blood seeped from a couple of seemingly superficial wounds on the Queen's face. Tenel Ka placed her stump under her grandmother's neck and opened her airway to check for breathing. She squeezed her eyes shut as another ear shattering bombardment rocked the palace. Ta'a Chume did breathe, however she was unresponsive to hails.

“Grab her, we’ll have to check for further injuries when we get to the Reef Fortress,” Tenel Ka shouted to the bald Yssarrand.

“We don’t know the extent of her injuries, M’lady. She really shouldn’t be moved,” Yssarrand replied as he scratched his head. As if in response, a huge crystal chandelier crashed onto an antique Alderaanian coffee table, sending splinters flying.

“I do not think we have a choice, now do we?” Tenel Ka sneered.

Yssarrand didn’t reply, he swiftly wrapped the queen in a couple of blankets and the three raced out the door.

“How are we going to get out? The stairwell is blocked,” Trisku asked as he skidded to a stop before they got to the stairs.

Tenel Ka stopped running, her feet crunching on glass. Overlooking the balcony to the lower level, Tenel Ka spotted a troop of highly armed Dellaltians marching through the Palace. Tenel Ka and Trisku hunkered down to avoid being seen. Grabbing her lightsaber hilt, she whispered to her two guards, “Back to my grandmother’s room. There’s a secret stairwell in there.” Keeping low the three raced back the way they came. Climbing over debris, Tenel Ka pushed aside a large tapestry and shoved hard against the lock mechanism. It was jammed. She pushed again. When that didn’t work she balanced herself and with the assistance of the Force, kicked it wide open.

Trisku held the door open. Tenel Ka flew down the stairs, followed by Yssarrand, then Trisku slammed the door shut behind them. Tenel Ka marveled at the muffled silence from deep in the walls.

“This will take us to the control room. Hopefully the Dellaltians won’t be in there and we can make it to one of our Dragons,” Tenel Ka replied. She cringed at how loud she sounded. The three moved through the dimly lit corridors. When they reached Tenel Ka’s office, they came to a triple enforced duraglass shield. From the office it looked like a mirror. Tenel Ka examined the room and saw Margatall frantically working.

“Ok, get my grandmother out of here, now! I will meet you both in a few moments,” Tenel Ka said.

“But M’lady...” Trisku protested.

Tenel Ka raised her finger in front of his face, “Do not think, just do it! I order you, her safety takes precedence over mine. Now go!”

The secret door opened and Margatall glanced up with surprise. Relief flooded his face, then it fell when he saw Ta’a Chume’s shriveled form.

“You’re still here?” he asked.

“Not for long. What have you to report?” Tenel Ka asked as she stood beside him and stared at his terminal.

“One Dellaltian Destroyer has been destroyed. Reports from Dellalt say that a huge battle is ensuing

there. Dellaltian troops have infiltrated the Palace,” Margatall said, his fingers clawed through his hair.

“We need to re...” Tenel Ka stopped mid-sentence as her secured line beeped. She threw herself into her seat and received a one way scrambled emitter message from Master Skywalker.

Luke’s face looked very nervous as he began, “Princess Tenel Ka, we just saw your fleet racing towards Dellalt. What have successfully met with King Sshruva Proo. We are convinced that the Dellaltians are not behind the attacks on your planets! We would recommend that you call off the attack until Anakin and I can speak with you in person. Things are definitely not as they appear! We will be there shortly! Over.”

Tenel Ka balked. She had seen the Dellaltians in her Palace with her own eyes. She closed her eyes and thought back to viewing the intruders. She steadied herself against her desk as the floor shook under her feet. She visualized how tall they stood in the Palace. The top of their heads met the bracketed plantholders that lined the walls.

“They are placed at six feet,” Tenel Ka said. “Bless the Force, no... NO!”

“What is it your Highness?” Margatall asked.

“We need to cease the attack on Dellalt. Enter the retreat codes! I have to call off the attack!” Tenel Ka said hurrying over to the terminal.

Margatall’s breath shook, “What do you mean, Princess?”

“Those are not Dellaltians out there! I don’t know who they are, but they are imposters. Quick, we need to call off our fighters and save our troops on Dellalt. I need to issue a full scale retreat!” Tenel Ka said. Her gray eyes glared as the General stood, feet glued to the floor. “I am in charge and command you to order the cease fire!”

Margatall marched up to Tenel Ka and grabbed her wrist and arms and then twisted them behind her back. Tenel Ka screamed in rage and surprise. Hot breath in her ear he said, “I cannot do that. My Mistress will not allow that to happen.”

“Get your hands off of me, what are you talking about?” Tenel Ka asked. “My grandmother is unconscious and is not running things! I am! LET GO OF ME!”

Turning her head, she gasped in horror, and felt her blood turn to ice, as Margatall’s face contorted and changed from human to belonging to a grayish-green Clawdite. The changeling pulled a small syringe from his belt and emptied the contents into the squirming Princesses neck.

“My Mistress has been waiting for me to deliver you to her for a long time. Now with enough chaos going on around here, you won’t be so readily missed,” the clawdite seethed. “Your time of playing Queen is over.”

Tenel Ka attempted to form a retort, but the world blurred and turned to black.

Chapter 29

Anakin's eyes widened as he wove his X-Wing through throngs of battling Hapan and Dellaltian destroyers above Hapes. Anakin observed the Dellaltian vessels closely, but could not see any marks or any other identifiers that might point them as being anything other than Dellaltian of make.

A small Hapan dragon escort shuttle blasted off of Hapes and jumped into hyperspace amongst the chaos. For a fleeting moment, Anakin felt a tremor in the Force as the ship passed. Torpedo- fire brought Anakin back to the moment, as he piloted his X-Wing around a large mass of floating debris from a recently destroyed Hapan vessel in the midst of the raging, ear-shattering battle.

"Uncle Luke, we need to get to Tenal Ka now! I have a very bad feeling about all of this!" Anakin said, his R4 screamed as an errant shot bounced off of his X-Wing's shields. "I know R4, just hold on!"

"Hold on Anakin, I'm just trying to get a reading to see if the deflector shield is still up around the Palace," Luke said evenly.

Pulling out his macrobinoculars, Anakin gazed down towards the Palace and saw threads of smoke. He also saw a large ship hovering over the Palace. His heart skipped out of rhythm and his mouth went dry. "I'd say it's probably not. It looks like the Palace is under attack!"

Luke grimaced as the reading returned negative on the shield. "Alright, let's go."

The two Jedi maneuvered their way through the battle and raced towards the planet. Anakin turned around in his cockpit and watched as another Dellaltian Destroyer swooped down into the Hapes atmosphere and joined in on the attack of the Palace.

"Bless the Force, we're too late!" Anakin moaned.

"Stop focusing on the negative, Anakin. I'm sure she's fine. She might have escaped already, also. Don't worry, we'll find her one way or another," Luke replied. "Apply your Jedi calming techniques. You'll need to be clearheaded and focused when we head into the Palace."

"Yes, Master Skywalker," Anakin said. As he landed his X-Wing on the now broken and rubble filled landing platform, Anakin tried to steady his breathing. "R4, stay with the ship!" Anakin said as he climbed out of his cockpit. He joined his uncle and R2-D2 unsteadily on the landing platform. R2 whistled loudly as the two Dellaltian cruisers continued their relentless attack.

"Let's get indoors and find out what happened to Tenal Ka!" Luke shouted over the deafening noise. Capes billowing behind them, the Jedi raced to the unhinged Palace doors. Inside the Palace, their eyes met destructive chaos. A large hole now existed in the wall of the reception room which now opened a portal into the main Palace. Beyond, Anakin saw broken pillars, artwork, fountains, and plants that sat in cloudy rubble inside the Palace walls. Closing his eyes, Anakin searched for Tenal Ka's life energy signature. He felt nothing. Panic rose in waves in his chest.

Luke turned his blue eyes towards his towering nephew as he felt Anakin's tension rise. Luke said, "Just relax, Anakin. I think she must have made it out. I don't feel her presence."

Gulping, Anakin turned his terror filled eyes towards his uncle, "Either that, or she's dead."

Luke sighed as his frantic nephew tore off towards the hole in the wall. Luke shouted, "Wait for me, Anakin! Be careful." R2 whistled nervously beside Luke. "I know, he's his father's son, isn't he?" Shaking his head, Luke tore after Anakin.

Sinking into the Force, Anakin's eyes swept across the destruction of the Palace. Where the night before proud marble pillars stood erect, they now lay crumbled in ruins. The water from the Palace's many fountains flooded the broken marble floor. Glass from the domed ceilings lay in crunching drifts everywhere like ice. The wind from above brushed through Anakin's hair and he glanced up through the open rooftop at the sky. Then his gaze turned towards a vast, gaping window towards the ocean. A Dellaltian Cruiser continued pummeling the Palace with its Ion Cannons. As he watched it methodically plastering the grounds with fire, a Hapan Destroyer snuck up behind the cruiser and blasted it with a series of torpedoes. As Anakin, spread out his hands to steady himself from the rumbling aftermath of the battle, his eyes grew wide with wonder as he watched the Dellaltian Cruiser morph, in the blink of an eye into a Class II Star Destroyer, before it burst completely into flames and crashed into the ocean. Anakin's eyes widened in fear as he stared out at the ocean.

"MOVE!" Anakin yelled to Luke and R2.

They raced out of the main hallway and up the nearest stairwell. A large pillar blocked the stairway entrance Anakin and Luke effortlessly leapt over and on top of the fallen structure. Together they turned and with the assistance of the Force lifted a squealing R2-D2 up and onto the balcony. They watched in horror as the far eastern wall of the Palace, already weakened structurally, gave way as a deafening, roaring wave of salt water flattened itself into the building. Anakin and Luke jumped off the pillar and threw themselves against the wall, covering their heads as debris from all over the room flew in every direction. The two Jedi balled themselves tightly as they instantaneously became drenched.

As quickly as the wave crashed through the Palace it exited, sucked out by gravity's pull. Anakin removed a series of palm fronds, and broken furniture pieces from on top of his head, and he and Luke stumbled to their now wet feet. R2-D2 let out a long mournful whistle as he spun his domed head, shaking off excess water.

"What was that?" Luke asked.

"That was weird," Anakin said, shaking his head, and wringing excess water from his cloak. "I watched as the Hapans took down that Dellaltian Destroyer. Before it crashed into the ocean, I could swear I saw it morph into an Imperial Star Destroyer."

Luke ceased palm hitting the side of his head, trying to release excess water in his ear. His expression turned to disbelief, "Did you say morph?"

"Yes... Oh wait you don't think..."

"I do think so. Whoever is behind this must have employed Kendu Rewgun. How else would they get this technology? That would explain why the Hapans have thought the ships were Dellaltian in design," Luke said.

Glancing down into the three inch flooded hallway, Anakin asked, "Who would do such a thing? And why? Why would they want the Hapan's and the Dellaltians battling each other?"

Shaking his head, Luke said truthfully, "I have no idea. I also don't know why Kendu would have signed a contract with anyone other than the Republic. You know, he was all set to upgrade all of our existing fleet with his technology? Even Rogue Squadron was going to receive a special fleet of updated, covert ships. Mara sent him the contract several months ago, he signed it then we didn't hear from him again."

A puzzled expression creased Anakin's face, "You didn't find that suspicious at the time?"

"Yes, we did actually and have been actively seeking him out," Luke said. Luke listened as the other destroyer continued to pummel the other side of the island. The floor lightly quaked under its relentless pursuit of destruction. "This is peculiar."

"What is?"

"The fighting. Before the attacks were quick and swift. Why are they hanging around now and not fleeing?"

Chewing the inside of his mouth, Anakin shrugged his shoulders. His gaze then fell to the pillar and he saw two things: one a human arm sticking out from under the pillar, and two a large piece of light blue fabric. Anakin's heart sunk to his shoes.

"Oh...no..." tears bubbled in his eyes as he raced to the pillar.

"What is it Anakin?" Luke asked, then he saw the body.

From somewhere deep inside his body a primitive, rumbling yell brewed and bubbled out of Anakin's mouth as he deeply bent his legs and began to lift the massive stone pillar, one inch, then two inches, then three off of the body. Luke watched with a combination of confusion, horror, and fascination as every vein in Anakin's beet red neck and face popped from physical exertion as he lifted the pillar. Realizing his nephew would probably strain himself, Luke swept the body out from under the pillar with the Force.

"Drop it, Anakin! I've got the body!" Luke shouted.

Throwing his fingers out of the way, Anakin stumbled and fell as the pillar rolled and crashed again onto the floor. Luke swayed unsteadily on his feet from the aftershocks from the massive pillar crashing to the floor. He stared at his nephew with disbelief.

Anakin covered his eyes with his meaty hands and asked in a tiny voice, "Who is it?"

Grimacing, Luke gingerly turned over the flattened corpse. "I don't know. Some security guard from the looks of the uniform."

"What?" Anakin said, relief flooding his voice.

A thunderbolt hit Luke as he realized what Anakin expected to find. Luke swept down and picked up the fabric from Tenel's dress and showed it to his nephew. "It wasn't Tenel Ka. It looks like she barely got out of the way. She didn't die here."

Anakin shoved his hands through his hair as tears flooded his eyes. He said, "Thank the Force."

Squatting beside Anakin, Luke listened as more laser fire pummeled the Palace grounds. He glanced up as unsteady wall mounted flower pots jiggled in their holders. Luke said, "You know, you could have used the Force to lift that pillar off of that body. Try that next time and avoid possibly throwing your back out, ok? And don't think I didn't see what is going on between you and the Princess. Anakin, I chose you for this assignment because I thought you could be objective. I know Tenel Ka's a close friend for you. But you have to keep your objectivity. Letting yourself lose your head won't get us anywhere. Stay focused. You could have seriously injured yourself with what you just did. I need you!"

Hanging his head in shame, Anakin caressed the soggy fabric. He said with a snuffle, "I'm sorry, Uncle Luke. You just don't understand. I don't know what I'd do if ...if she's dead." Anakin wiped away his tears, then he straightened himself up, "You're right. Losing control won't get me anywhere. I have to be willing to face the fact also that I may find her dead somewhere."

"I certainly hope for her sake that she's fine and managed to get off of Hapes," Luke said. From the doorway R2 screamed a warning. Anakin flipped to his feet as the sounds of dozens of marching feet headed in their direction. R2 hurryingly rolled into one of the agape bedroom doors just as a battalion of Dellaltian warriors rounded the doorway.

"Blast them!" the leader of the group said.

Anakin and Luke grabbed their lightsabers and ignited them with a **snap hiss**. Green and blue sizzling light filled the corridor as the surprised troops dropped to their knees and began to fire.

Anakin shouted over the ear-shattering drone of laserfire, "They're too tall to be Dellaltians!"

"I see that too!" Luke replied. Both Jedi's sizzling and cracking lightsabers blurred as they deflected and bounced back shots by the attackers. Sinking into the Force, Anakin and Luke redirected the blasted shots right back to the attackers. One by one the attackers collapsed and fell as smoke filled the hallway. After seeing a half dozen of their comrades fall in battle, the remaining half dozen warriors retreated back the way they arrived. Ears ringing from the sudden silence, Anakin switched off his lightsaber as Luke raced towards the end of the hall checking to see if their attackers still lurked. Satisfied they were gone, he glanced down at the corpses and his face turned to shock.

Racing beside his uncle, Anakin's brows crinkled. He said, "I forgot to mention to you when we were on Dellalt, as we were leaving, I thought I saw Grizzilla's face briefly turn into one of these. What are they?"

Luke hovered over the grayish green creatures who lay on the ground. Rubbing his forehead he said, "I think they are changlings, or Clawdites. I've never seen one in their natural state before though, so I'm not positive."

"Aren't they very expensive to hire?" Anakin asked as he began to search the corpses pockets for anything to mark their identities.

"Yes, very expensive. They probably would have had a hard time changing to fit the physiology of the

Dellaltians also. Course it doesn't look like they tried all that hard, as you had noted, they were all too tall for the job," Luke replied. "Find anything?"

Wiping his hands on his wet robe, Anakin shook his head, "No. They have no identification on their bodies. It's almost like they don't have an identity."

Luke perked and cocked his head, "You hear that?"

"What?" Anakin asked. "I hear nothing."

"Nothing. That's just it. It sounds like they have ceased firing on the Palace," Luke said. He and Anakin leapt to their feet and headed back towards the stairs. R2 beeped furiously in their direction. Luke stopped in his tracks. When Anakin had lifted the pillar and dropped it, he'd managed to open up half of the entrance again.

"What?" Anakin asked.

Luke just shook his head, "Nothing, come on." They raced down the stairs and slogged through the water filled hallways. As they ran, phantom images from the Force sprung into Anakin's mind. Anakin saw several large overturned tables all massed together. He stopped and heaved the heavy objects apart, throwing and crashing them into the wall.

"Anakin, what are you doing?" Luke asked bewildered.

Not hearing, Anakin continued his search. When the last table was gone, he dug his hand through the water and pulled up Tenel's royal crown. Luke felt his heart sink. "Ok, where do you think she would have gone to, Anakin? Her office?"

"Let's check her grandmother's room. If the Palace was under attack she would have gone to get the Queen," Anakin replied, and tucked the crown into a pocket inside his robe.

"You're right, let's go," Luke replied.

They dashed up a flight of stairs out of the water. Anakin lead the way as he followed Tenel Ka's phantom traces. They headed back to the western side of the building and came to Ta'a Chume's room. Anakin stared in disbelief at the mess in the room. A huge section of the ceiling collapsed, all the glass windows had been blasted out of their frames, and all furniture lay in shredded pieces. Luke ran over to the bed and stared at the sheets.

He stared at his nephew, "Blood." R2 rolled into the room and whistled unhappily.

"Ok, so they got the Queen out and went where?" Anakin asked, hands on hips. Closing his eyes he saw Tenel Ka kicking at the wall behind a large tapestry. He ran over to the wall and showed Luke the secret door. With all of his weight into it, Anakin kicked the door open. The door slammed apart from it's hinges and crashed down the stairwell.

Luke watched on with guarded amusement at his nephew's brute strength. Before Anakin began to descend the stairs Luke said, "Anakin..."

“Yes, Uncle Luke?” Anakin asked, blue eyes gazing up at his uncle from a couple steps down.

“Remind me to never get you mad at me and challenge me to a fist fight,” Luke said.

Anakin grinned. “I may be big, but I’m not crazy, Uncle Luke.”

Luke chuckled as they descended the stairs. R2 whined a whistle and begrudgingly followed the two Jedi down the stairs.

“What is this?” Anakin asked as they twisted down the narrow stairwell. Anakin ducked his head in the cramped space.

“Secret passage, probably,” Luke said. “It would make sense being it was in the Queen’s chambers.”

Anakin peered out the window into Tenel Ka’s empty War Room office. He burst the door open and they wandered around. Luke checked the computer for any traces of where the Princess might have disappeared to and Anakin examined the relatively unscarred War Room.

R2 lumbered down the last of the hidden stairwell stairs and began moving around the room. Anakin sat heavily in Tenel Ka’s chair and sighed as he stared out the window. The sun peered an angry orange through the haze of dense smoke.

A loud series of metallic beeps shook Anakin’s conscious back awake. He asked, “What is it, R2?”

One of R2-D2’s long telescoping arm reached under Tenel Ka’s desk and extracted an item. Anakin’s face paled as Tenel Ka’s cybernetic arm appeared. He carefully took it from R2. His fingers brushed against the soft, synthetic skin and his throat constricted. Luke peered up at his nephew from the computer as he felt a wave of intense sadness and despair travel through the Force.

Choking down a sob, Anakin said quietly, “I hope she’s alright.”

Chapter 30

Seconds ticked by at an excruciatingly slow rate. Raven’s long legs paced a path in the carpet of the waiting room at the Theed medicenter as she anxiously waited for news on her Master’s surgery. Her thoughts warred between concern for Kyp and intense worry over what she saw in that cave.

Receiving no word from any of the medics on Kyp’s status, Raven decided to face her terrible visions on Dagobah. She wandered over to a chaise that sat in front of the a window, curled up on the couch, and stared out into the brilliant orange Nubian sunset.

Closing her eyes, images of dueling with Darkglider flashed in Raven’s mind. Again, she felt her heat of anger as she fought her former self. Tears brimmed Raven’s eyes as she recognized her own failure in the cave. She was unable to distance herself from her own pain and rage. She mused, *I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to peacefully come to terms with that part of me. How can I? I bitterly hate that girl I once was. What does that vision tell me? Does it tell me that I’m actually still her? I can’t be. I’ve learned so much. And yet, I really haven’t learned anything, have I? I talk the good talk about wanting*

to change, about setting aside my feelings, and when push comes to shove, I'm right back where I started. And according to that vision, Jacen will end up paying for my lack of control... right? What else could that have meant? I know Jacen would never give into the Dark Side, he's way too level headed... No, it's my fault.

Unnoticed, tears ran in trickling streams down her cheeks, soaking her shirt. She began to sniffle. *I've really learned nothing, haven't I? All of Kyp's hard work to get through to me, and Jacen will ultimately suffer for my inability to let go of my past. I knew I didn't deserve him or his love. Why should I? I'm nothing. That vision showed me that I haven't changed and that I'll never change. Right? No. That's wrong. I'm not that terrified young girl any longer. I am strong, I know what I want to become. I know what I want from the future. And that is I want to be with Jacen. I want to be calm and at peace. I'm only half way through my training. Maybe that vision was presented to me as a way of reminding me not to get too cocky. It was meant to show me I still had a lot to learn. And that ultimately, if I don't control this...this... rage inside of me...everything I so desperately want will be taken away from me. I will lose everything. I will lose my family, Jacen, and Jaina. And I will lose the respect of my Master... Failure is not an option Raven Racees. It is NOT! Raven wiped the tears from her eyes as the sky turned purple and the first stars appeared in the sky. Self doubt is my worst enemy. I know I failed that test. But I will not fail again. I will NOT!*

Raven didn't know if she felt any better, or if her guilt over her failure in that vision had receded. But she did know that she suddenly felt a bit more at peace with herself over her inability to control her actions.

She jumped as someone tapped her shoulder. Turning around in the chaise, Raven came face to face with the Sullust medic she'd talked to on the landing platform.

"Hello, I am Chief medic Drium Thurm. I briefly met you outside? We have an update on your friend," the medic said. "Do you mind?" he asked pointing to sit beside her.

"No, go ahead. How is Kyp?" Raven turned on the seat to face the medic, grabbed her left foot and leaned in to listen closely.

"We have successfully reattached Master Durrion's foot. It was a good thing you iced him and applied the tourniquet, otherwise he may have lost it. He could have survived with a cybernetic foot, although he probably would have been plagued with balance issues. Actually, he still may have a while to deal with that as a problem as his nerves regenerate. Otherwise though, he seems no worse for the wear. He will fully recover," Medic Thurm said, his large ears perked up in happiness.

Raven released a long breath and smiled brightly. "That is wonderful news! Oh thank you, Medic Thurm. When can I go see him?"

"He is now resting. But if you would like to wait in his room, I don't see any problem with that," the medic replied.

Raven jumped to her feet and raced towards the hallway. She then stopped and glanced sheepishly at the medic, "Um.. what room is he in?"

"1122."

“Thank you!” Delighted, Raven raced off to see her Master.

The ramp on *The Nubian Hope* lowered. Jaina tightened her grip on the hilt of her lightsaber and glanced at Marxx protectively. Marxx flashed his wife a reassuring grin and pecked her on the forehead. Jacen’s eyes closed as he attempted to search through the Force for a particular presence. His face fell in confusion as he was unable to connect with the Force.

“Oh no, I have a bad feeling about this,” Jacen said as the ramp on the *Hope* crashed open.

Hydin grinned devilishly from the bottom of the ramp. He sneered, “My, my. The Jedi come ready to fight. Better than hiding like gutter rats like the last time... I suppose. Don’t even bother with your ancient weapons, they’ll be of no use for you on my ship. This ship is specifically designed for keeping pesky Jedi like yourselves from tapping into your *mystical energy field*.”

Lowbacca roared a loud complaint as a garrison of troops raced up the ramp and surrounded the Jedi, removing them of their useless weapons.

“Put your hands over your heads,” a stormtrooper demanded, as he shoved his blaster rifle into Jaina’s back. Jaina growled and begrudgingly put her hands behind her head.

Marxx glanced at his wife, “Don’t worry, we’ll get out of this.”

Smiling back at him Jaina said, “Your levels of optimism astound me sometimes, dear husband.”

Jacen scowled at Hydin as they were marched down the ramp. Lowbacca roared his displeasure at being held captive.

Hydin screwed tight his eyes at the noise and held his hands up, “Oh please, please, make your pet be QUIET!”

Lowbacca roar grew louder with displeasure. His fur shook in fury at the insult.

Smirking Jacen said to Hydin, “Better watch it there, pal. Wookies take offense to being referred to as pets.”

“Like I’m worried,” Hydin replied. “Oh and as for you, Mr. Solo, I have a special gift for you.”

Raising an eyebrow, Jacen’s nose exploded in pain as his back crashed onto the metal decking. Through spinning vision, he saw Hydin shake his wrist out. Marxx held onto his furious wife as multiple blaster barrels zeroed in on the small circle. Jacen pulled his fingers away from his nose, and they came back bloody.

Hydin’s plain face bent in towards Jacen. “That’s what you get for making *me* work for a stinking alien on Naboo.”

“We have powerful friends and family,” Jacen said as he struggled onto his feet.

Hydin grinned, "Yes, I am counting on that. I am going to activate a distress call in your ship. We'll see if Mommy and Daddy will come running to your rescue. I know my Mistress will be most pleased if they do."

"Should've known someone else was in charge here, Hydin. You don't have enough brainpower to light up a bio-lucent bulb," Jacen taunted as sticky blood dripped into his mouth.

"Really? It appears I managed to capture myself three Jedi, and a large smelly pet, I think my *tiny* brain has served me quite well," Hydin said, stalking closer to Jacen. "You should be glad my Mistress wants you all alive, because NOTHING would give me greater pleasure than seeing you all suffer, and beg for mercy at my hands."

Cooly, Jacen replied with a chuckle, "Just you wait, the only one who will begging around here will be you."

"Take them away! And make sure they all get separate cells," Hydin shouted to the troops. As he watched the four Jedi move on their way, Hydin climbed the ramp of *The Nubian Hope*. His nose wrinkled from the permeating smell of the Wookiee's fur. He thought, *Filthy beast*. Carefully he sat in the captain's chair and activated a distress signal. He then grabbed his comlink and said, "Take us to Nephron. Now."

Hydin closed his eyes and felt the Destroyer sway as it launched into hyperspace. A delighted grin plastered his face at his success.

Through bleary, clouded eyes, Kyp saw Raven's sleeping face. Shaking his head some, the fog dissipated and he realized he was resting in a recovery room somewhere. Raven leaned on his bedrails and peacefully slept with her chin on her hands. Kyp stole a glance down to his bandaged foot and cringed as he successfully wiggled each toe.

My girl came through for me. She got me back in time to save my foot, bless the Force for that. That was stupid of me. How could I have let that happen? Through his drug induced fog he recalled Raven screaming through the Force. *I wonder what that was about?* He glanced at his student as she peacefully slumbered on. Not seeing any bandages or injuries on her, he wondered if maybe another snake jumped out at her while she was off on her run. Absently he thought, *She's such a girl. That snake is soooo dinner....* With a loud yawn, Kyp drifted back off to sleep.

Long, white fingers stretched across the room, contorting and twisting. The room stank of disuse and fear. A hideous laugh invaded the air, polluting it with noise. From across the room two young men were strapped to the floor, unable to break free of the restrictive bindings.

"If you will not tell me where she is, you will be destroyed!" the long fingers seethed. Blinding blue lightning sprang from the long fingers. Its light filled the room as the two men writhed in screaming pain.

“Tell me where she is!” the voice demanded.

One of the men whos lip was covered in blood, still glowed from the static charge. He boldly replied, “You’ll just have to kill me. I’ll never tell you anything!”

“Make that double for me,” the other replied. The lightning filled the room again and the screams intensified, louder, and louder, until....

Raven jolted with a start at the images that remained fresh in her mind. She dug her fingers up through her braided hair as tears streaked her cheeks.

No, no! She can’t do this! She can’t take them both away from me! They are suffering, Raven silently sobbed herself into a stupor. She pushed back on her chair and left Kyp’s room so as to not wake him up with her crying. She crashed into a couple people down the hall, but their collisions went unnoticed. Sprinting as panic overtook her body Raven burst through the exit doors and inhaled the cool, fresh Nubian night air. She ran on until she reached a small grassy hill away from the medicenter. She threw herself onto the grass and began to bawl. Her fist pounded the damp soil and grass. *She can’t do this to me! I’m not worthy of their sacrifice! If she kills them I will have nothing to live for. NOTHING!* Tossing herself onto her backside she stared up at the twinkling stars.

A feeling of calming euphoria blanketed her troubled soul as a thought entered her mind. Before she knew what was happening, Raven began running down the hill towards the landing platforms. Extracting Kyp’s security key from her pocket, she flicked open the ramp and entered *The Fiery Phoenix*. Settling into the captain’s chair she started up the engines and raised the ramp. She clicked on the ship’s communicator and began searching for Marxx’s ship. As she suspected, she zeroed in on a distress call, echoing across the galaxy.

Determination filled her ice blue eyes as she lifted the *Phoenix* into the Nubian atmosphere.

“Hang on Marxx and Jacen, I’m coming for you,” she said as she lifted up and into space. Flicking in a set of co-ordinates, Raven watched as the stars changed into streaks of light. With a painful sneer cresting her lips she said, “If you think of hurting one hair on either my brother’s, or beloved’s head, you will curse the day you were ever born. If you want me, Gwynalyn, you can have me. I’m coming home.”

Chapter 31

The effects of the drugs began to wear off of Tenel Ka as they landed on Nephron. The Clawdite rolled his eyes and grimaced as the still groggy Princess began shouting and demanding to be let go as her captor strapped multiple bio-bands around her body. Tenel Ka spit in his eyes. The clawdite wiped away the spittle and roughly yanked her to her feet by her titian hair. He shoved her out into the howling Nephron wind. Tenel Ka stopped briefly in her tracks as her eyes fell onto Marxx’s ship *The Nubian Hope*, sitting nearby. She wondered briefly why it was on this forsaken planet. A hard shove in her back refocused her on her captive.

“Move it! And if you stay quiet, I won’t kill you,” the grayish- green alien sneered into her ear.

Tenel Ka tried to wiggle her way out of the bands, yet the more she struggled, the tighter they constricted around her body. She gasped as her arms dug painfully into her ribs. Tenel Ka's cheeks flared red, hot with fury. She replied, "My guess is you will not be paid if you turn me into a corpse! You are going to regret doing this to me!"

Shoving the Princess hard, the Clawdite directed her towards the doors of Nemorasis. Smirking, he said, "You don't particularly frighten me, Princess. I really don't care about you. I'm just doing a job." He threw open the door and shoved Tenel Ka into the dark, musky, cold and vast capital building. Tenel Ka stared in curiosity at the large statue that stood in the middle of the entryway. She then growled as the clawdite shoved her towards the stairs. "Just go up the stairs to the top, your Highness."

"You have no morals do you? All those words you spoke about saving people's lives, they mean nothing to you!" Tenel Ka spat.

"That's right, Princess. I can care less if all your precious people die," he replied.

Tenel Ka marched up the stairs in silence. As her foot hit the last step the shapeshifter shoved her towards the right. Angrily she scowled at the grayish-green alien and continued down the hall. He shoved her into a room lit from fire.

"Stay here!" the clawdite said, and shoved Tenel Ka against a pillar.

I do not think so, Tenel Ka thought, she spun to race out the door and found herself face to face with Darkglider's jagged blade to her throat.

"I'd advise against flight, Lovely. I can easily gut you like a womprat," Darkglider leered.

Tenel Ka gulped at the blade. It was dirty from dried blood and pricked deeply into her neck. Calmly she took one step back and leaned against the pillar to further the distance from the wretchedly, ugly man. Her warrior instincts told her this would be one battle she would not win, at least not when she was bound.

Watching from her position, Tenel Ka watched as the clawdite approached a rounded throne and began to speak to someone. She noted he smiled brightly, then a sickly white hand appeared over the chair's armrest. Tenel Ka shouted in alarm as the clawdite flew off of his feet and crashed into the wall, engulfed by crackling, blue lightning. The changling's body shuddered under the relentless electrical charges, until his eyes rolled back in his head and his tongue extended from his lifeless mouth. The room filled with smoke that smelled of rotted, charred flesh. Tenel Ka fought to control waves of nausea that churned in her gut.

"Bring her here, Darkglider," a voice from behind the chair requested. For one of the first times in her life, Tenel Ka feared for her life. The ugly man didn't say a word as he prodded her forward, towards her fate. She forced her feet to move towards the chair. Tenel Ka stopped and stared at the shrouded figure sitting calmly in the throne.

"I have been watching you for quite some time Princess Tenel Ka. I am Lady Neffrous. I wanted to thank you, my young apprentice," the figure said.

Tenel Ka scowled, "What did you call me?"

“My young apprentice. For that is what you will be, if you are wise,” Lady Neffrous said, as she smoothed a wrinkle from her lap.

“No one is my Master,” Tenel Ka replied coolly. “I have no need for one.”

“I think you speak too quickly, dear Princess. Much you still have to learn about using the Force,” the lady said quietly.

“What do you mean? Shooting lightning at people? I have no interest in learning how to do that. I am a warrior. I fight with my own strength, and use the Force as my ally. I do not bend it to my will. That is not how it is to be used,” Tenel Ka replied coolly, her confidence bolstering.

“I sense a swell of anger in you. It is festering. You need to learn to unlock it and set that lovely hatred free,” Lady Neffrous said, steepling her fingers. “It can do more for you than you can imagine. It gives you great power and strength.”

“I have no need for power,” Tenel Ka replied, tiring of this particular line of conversation.

“Really? Then why do you wish to rule? To be in command of great armies and to command the respect of your subjects takes power. If you are powerless, nobody will follow or respect you,” Lady Neffrous insisted.

“You must be mistaking me for my grandmother. Power means nothing to me,” Tenel Ka replied.

“Power is everything! Without power, things get taken away from you. You can never get back things that are lost...” The woman’s voice filled with rancor.

Braving to unleash the Sith beast, Tenel Ka asked, “Sometimes things just happen. No amount of power can stop them.”

“You are naïve, Princess. Power gives you everything you could ever want. You have lost as much as I did. We are the same you and I. Look at you. You are disfigured and weak. You are not whole. Do you really think your people could ever completely trust you? Even with a cybernetic attachment- they will always know you are incomplete,” Lady Neffrous replied.

Tenel Ka’s cheeks burned. She squeezed her eyes shut knowing that the same thoughts had occurred to her before. She opened her eyes and gazed at her stump. She said through gritted teeth, “No. My people will respect me. In fact, they *do* respect me. It makes no difference if I have one or two arms.”

The Lady gazed ahead, her voice dripped with disbelief, “So certain are you? Perhaps you should watch this.”

The Lady turned on a holovid from her armchair controls, the screen showed a female Hapan reporter standing outside over an angry Hapan mob.

Rumors are rampant that Queen Ta’a Chume is dead. Her granddaughter, Jedi Knight Tenel Ka is the next in line for the throne. There has been word that the Princess has been at the Fountain Palace ever since the first attacks have begun. The crowd below me is protesting her apparent lack of interest or

desire to help her people. They believe that with her Jedi training, Tenel Ka is acting in an overtly passive manner. As she sits in the Palace, the attacks continue through the Cluster. Many in the crowd are calling for her removal, and wish to elect their own ruler. However, without confirmations of these reports, officially there is nothing that can be done but wait and hope that our new leader will act and save our Cluster of planets, gripped by the ruthless hand of terrorism from utter destruction. Many believe that if she does not act quickly, all life will be forfeit... back to the studio...

Tenel Ka's jaw dropped as she realized that the people in her Cluster did seem to harbor less than favorable views of her ruling abilities. She felt a wave of anger rise.

Smiling, Lady Neffrous said, "Very good. That anger can make you stronger. Learn to feed upon it and you will be able to wield the power to make those who are weaker than you see how powerful you truly are. You will learn to bend their wills and make them see you however you wish to be seen. They will respect you. You can be a Queen who will be remembered for all time! The Jedi do not understand that full ability that you can achieve by using the Dark Side of the Force. They believe it should be avoided at all costs. That is why they are weak. There is nothing wrong with wanting and learning to wield power. It is a valuable ally. In time I can teach you to become the greatest of all Dark Queens! Anything, or anyone you ever desired, will be yours for the taking."

Tenel Ka stared at the woman. An image of her grandmother flared to mind. Ta'a Chume seemed to have lived a life void of life and love as she ruled the Hapan Cluster with an iron fist. For all that she hid her emotions well, Tenel Ka had no desire of going through life without love. Nor would she learn to live without compassion. Swallowing down her anger, Tenel Ka breathed in deeply. "I am a Jedi. I do not give into my anger. I will not give in to it."

"So certain are you? I've been watching you for quite some time. You seem to be a loose canon, my young apprentice. You like everyone to think you are calm, cool, and together. But inside, your emotions are in complete turmoil. I can teach you things that will give you a certain amount of peace that you've never felt in your life. All of those things that your heart desires can be yours. Even things that seem to be lost to you forever," Lady Neffrous said.

The Hapan Princess stared uncertainly at the woman. In her heart, she believed, completely, that she no longer wanted to marry Jacen. Anakin helped her to realize her pursuit was futile. Her heart momentarily flipped at the thought of Anakin. Although the Dark woman spoke convincingly of her arguments, Tenel Ka held firm to her beliefs, she had no desire to ever dip into the Dark Side. As she didn't say anything, the Lady spoke again.

"Join me! We have common enemies. I can guarantee you wish for them to suffer as much as I do," Lady Neffrous said.

"Common enemies?"

"Yes. The Skywalkers and the Solos. Meddling so-called do-gooders. They destroyed all that I loved and held dear. Same as you, they have always seen you as an outsider. They do not trust you," Lady Neffrous said. She turned in her seat and faced Tenel Ka. Tenel Ka stiffened as the woman's face, filled with false pity, turned in her direction. "Join me, and together, we can take down the Rebels once and for all!"

Tenel Ka stared at the strange woman and wondered how in the universe she arrived at these

conclusions. "I think you have sorely misjudged me. I do not wish ill-will to any of the Skywalkers or Solos. They are good friends of mine. I never want to see any of them hurting or in pain," Tenel Ka said, jaw jutting in defiance.

Lady Neffous' face fell and her features darkened into a snarl. "Well then perhaps another form of persuasion can convince you." Turning she lifted her finger and two large holo maps burst to life in front of her throne. Tenel Ka stared at the images in confusion. "These show both Dellalt and Hapes. Here you will see your fleet in a large scale battle with the Dellalts..." she said pointing to the holo image of Dellalt, "And here your fleet is battling with the Dellaltians over your precious capital world." Tenel Ka's eyes shifted to the messy battle that ensued over Hapes. "I do wish to thank you for sending your fleet to Dellalt. That battle should significantly deplete both of your fleets. However, I fear I must assume control over both battles. Now that your fleet is insignificant, it bores me to no end."

A wickedly, satisfied grin etched across Lady Neffous' face. She entered some codes into her armchair controls and suddenly a couple hundred ships appeared into the melee of battle over both planets. Tenel Ka stared as the all of the ships appeared to be Hapan in design.

Confusion gripped her, "Where did all of those ships come from?" Her eyes grew wide with horror as she witnessed the new vessels descend upon the Hapan fleet over Hapes, showering them in an unrelenting rain of laser and torpedo fire. Tenel's stomach churned as she witnessed the pending slaughter. Closing her eyes, she realized something. She said, "They are your ships. The Dellaltians who have been creating chaos in my system, were your ships, were they not? Why are you doing this?"

Smugly Lady Neffous hugged her arms around her body and cackled. Her red eyes then fired blistering hatred, "I know those meddling heroes of the New Republic would never sit back and just allow a brutal war to be waged in their precious Galaxy. I intend on exacting my revenge on those who killed my brother, the great Emperor Palpatine! I want their heads! As to how you will figure in on all of this will all depend upon your decision that I will pose to you. You can call off you fleet and issue a full scale surrender to me, right now, which will save your soldier's lives. Or you can sit back and allow my fleet to just slaughter your fleet and take over your cluster by brutal force. If you opt for the first choice, I will allow you to remain the figurehead of the cluster and rule, per my requests. I will admit, you are more attractive than I am, I would think the people would prefer seeing your face to mine on the holo-net. I would prefer to control things from the shadows. If you chose the latter, well, I am sorry my dear Princess... but I have little need for you."

Tenel Ka seethed at the audacity of the woman and her options. The Royal House of Hapes took great pride in the fact that they had never surrendered before to any enemy. Tenel Ka fully planned on not becoming the first leader to fail her family heritage. Lady Neffous opened up a compartment on her throne's armrest and entered in a series of codes. The holoimages changed and the image made Tenel Ka gasp in horror.

The image showed her four friends, Jacen, Jaina, Marxx, and Lowie restrained in a chamber. Each stood with their hands chained far over their heads. She could tell they were animatedly talking amongst themselves. Jaina and Lowie both bitterly fought against the restraints in an attempt to break free. Marxx gazed on with a worried expression towards his wife, shouting something to Jaina in attempts to calm her down. Jacen seemed to be in deep thought.

"What are you doing to them? They have nothing to do with this! Let them go! It is me you want, not

them!” Tenel Ka heatedly demanded.

Tenel Ka scowled as Captain Hydin appeared in the image. Tenel Ka noticed his reflection and realized he stood before a duraglass walled window that separated him from her friends. His grating voice sounded over the comm. system, “Lady Neffrous, everything is set, per your instructions. I await your orders.”

“Hold one moment, Hydin,” she turned off her commlink signal. “So what will it be, Princess? Join me, or your friends will suffer.”

Tenel Ka’s nerves tightened with despair, “What....”

“You appear to be indecisive. I will give you a little time to consider your options...” She clicked back on the commlink, “...say four hours?” Hydin smirked and punched in a series of access codes outside the chamber. He paused, finger over a switch. “Your friends are located in a vacuum sealed room. Once Hydin hits that switch, the oxygen will slowly deplete its supply. The oxygen will completely cease to flow at the end of the four hour cycle. I’m afraid your friends will then suffocate to death.”

Horror rippled over Tenel Ka’s face as something tugged in her memory. The woman mentioned “her brother the great Emperor Palpatine,” Tenel Ka realized, remembering a conversation with Raven back on Naboo, that Lady Neffrous was Marxx and Raven’s grandmother. “You are going to kill them? Do you not know your Grandson is in there? You would be killing your own kin!”

Lady Neffrous’ face fell and a pained look crossed her face, “Marxx? Marxx is in there? Oh dear. Well then I certainly hope you make the right decision. I wouldn’t want my darling grandson to suffer needlessly.” She stood up approached Tenel Ka and placed two bony fingers on either side of her face and squeezed. Tenel Ka cringed from the closeness of the older woman. Her rancid breath swirled in nauseating clouds around the Princess’ face as she continued to speak, “You wouldn’t want for me to have to live with that guilt, now would you? Please help a poor old lady and save her grandson! Surrender your fleet, and no one will suffer.”

Tenel Ka shook her face free of the vice-like fingers. She took a deep breath and sunk into the Force. Somewhere, in the building, she felt the life-force energies of her four friends. They were on the premises, knowing that... she realized she could possibly set them free. She needed time, and as much as she hated the choices presented to her, she wasn’t about to simply hand over her system to this crazy woman. She couldn’t disgrace her family like that, nor would her people ever forgive her for surrendering. And if she flat out refused, she might get thrown in the chamber as well. She needed a bit of time to form a plan. She met the woman’s red eyes, “Your arguments are persuasive. However, I need to think about it.”

The older woman stood up straight. She turned her head towards Darkglider, “Take her downstairs to our guest accommodations. I’ll have my manservant check on you in two hours to see if you made a decision. Oh and Hydin, you may start the countdown.”

The Captain grinned maniacally and flicked the switch. The Jedi in the room continued to discuss their predicament, not knowing their precious air had just begun to cease its supply in the room.

Standing, Tenel Ka nodded and then raised her head and walked towards the ugly man. Darkglider led her down the stairs and shoved her into a black cell and slammed the door shut behind her, leaving her

bound in the bio-bands. Tenel Ka sighed and then stiffened as movement in the far back corner of the cell reawakened all of her senses. She sunk into the Force and gasped realizing who shared her cell.

“General Martagall?”

“Y...yyessss?” came a weak voice.

“What are you doing here?” Tenel Ka asked. “This is Princess Tenel Ka.”

“Princess Tenel Ka? Oh no... I have even further failed you, your Grace!” Tenel Ka startled as she heard Martagall begin to weep.

She wandered over to his corner and gasped at the striking difference of how the General’s appearance had changed, he went from robust and strong, to shriveled and weak. She squatted in front of the dirty and gaunt man and asked, “What happened? Why are you here?”

The General’s light eyes focused on the bio- bands and he sent out shaking fingers to try to undo them from around her body. Tenel Ka turned around as he attempted to locate the locking mechanisms in the barely lit cell. He began, “I was on a training mission in the woods surrounding the academy on Hapes 8 when I was hit over the head. I woke up here. I have no idea who captured me or why.” His fingers finally found the locks on the band restraints and he unlocked them from their grip.

Letting out a long breath, Tenel Ka sighed as her lungs fully filled again with air. She swung her arms to regain circulation. She proceeded to tell the General everything that has happened up until being thrown in the cell. She ended her retelling of the events by saying, “I do not know what to make of this fleet she has found. We are not missing any ships from our arsenal.” From the darkest corner of the room Kendu moved towards the two Hapans, causing Tenel Ka to jump.

“I am sorry to frighten you, Princess. I am Kendu Rewgun a ship designer who was kidnapped same as your General here,” Kendu said.

“You created the holo morph, cloaking technology that belongs on Master Durrion’s ship,” Tenel Ka said, stretching her arms as she recognized his name.

The small man beamed in the darkness, “Yes, his ship was my first real success in showing my technology was viable. The ships you speak of that Lady Neffrous is using against your fleet- they are all Imperial Star Destroyers using my technology...” His eyes fell towards the floor and his cheeks flared crimson with shame. “I hate the Empire. I loathed myself for agreeing to help her - but I am a weak man, I just wanted to live. She killed several men in front of me. I just thought one day I could escape and help others by exposing her and her plans. Obviously, I failed.”

Tenel Ka placed a warm hand on his shoulder. She said, “I understand your reluctance. I have seen this woman kill myself. She has no scruples and willingly kills without thought. I do not blame you.”

Martagall’s voice boomed with newfound strength, “If you built these ships, or modified them, then you must know how to deactivate their cloaking devices. Once they are turned off, the Dellalts and Hapans can readily identify their opponents and defeat them. We just need to get out of here and somehow get word to our fleet with what they need to do.”

“This is a fact. How can this be done?” Tenel Ka asked Kendu.

Moaning, Kendu’s dark eyes shimmered in the dim light, “Unfortunately, there is no way to do this. Once I modified the ships, the lady had her henchman go onto each ship and disable all of the built in safeguards I had tied into the systems to allow the shields to be deactivated remotely. Once the cloaking devices are activated, there is no way to deactivate them.”

“Well that certainly is not good news,” Martagall said, flattening his palms against the filthy floor.

“This is a fact. However, we still must get this information to our fleet. Somehow, someway, they must be able to figure out a weakness or a way to defeat them, regardless. They must!” Tenel Ka stated.

“Yes, and how will we do that, your Highness?”

Standing, the Princess shook dirt off of her ripped dress. She walked over to the door and said, “Leave that to me.” Sinking deep into the Force, Tenel Ka began to examine the doors mechanisms and painstakingly, attempted to pick the doors lock. Knowing mechanics was not her strong suit, she refused to let herself get impatient, and focused all of her attention to her task at hand. She wasn’t about to let her impertinence win over logic.

All lives in her Cluster depended upon her success and she was not about to fail her people or her friends.

Raven stared unseeing at the streaming stars as she blasted through hyperspace towards Nephron. Her heart wrenched in her chest as the images of Marxx and Jacen suffering continued to assault her mind.

Twisting one of her sable braids between her fingers, she thought, *If she’s trying to kill them, I can kill her without facing a moral dilemma*, Raven thought. Her fingers ran over her braided hair. *Even though the woman is evil, could I kill my own grandmother? What kind of a person does that make me, to even think such a thing?*

Raven rubbed her fingers over her scarred wrists as she recalled again the abuse she suffered over her childhood from both her grandmother and Darkglider. She began to tremble. Her trembling intensified as tears cascaded down her cheeks. She knew that woman would and could kill her loved ones without a second thought. The thought of her loved ones suffering under her grandmother’s ruthless hand, because Gwynalyn wanted Raven back, infuriated and terrified her almost senselessly. *Unless I get there in time... then I can save them.*

Wrapping her arms tightly around her body to shake off a chill images began to swirl in her mind. She saw her grandmother with Tenel Ka. They stood in Gwynalyn’s office on Nemorasis. Raven’s mouth hung open wide as she heard her grandmother unravel her plans of galactic domination. Her heart plummeted to her feet when she explained to Tenel Ka what would happen to Marxx, Jacen, Jaina, and Lowbacca.

Wiping tears from her eyes, she yanked herself out of her Force induced reverie and stared at the navicomputer to determine her location. She broke her connection with the hyperdrive and *The Fiery Phoenix* abruptly came to a halt in space. She jumped out of the captain’s chair and dropped onto the

floor into a mediation squat. She closed her eyes and sank deeply into the Force. Her senses lead her outside the hull of the ship towards bits of debris and asteroids that floated soundlessly in space, her soul ascended and connected with the forested planet of Bimmissaari. From there she deeply absorbed the life-forces and energies on the planet.

She muttered, "Ok, come on, come on, where are you?" She soared above the planet and her soul teetered amongst the stars. Then she sensed a sliver of recognition of the life-force energy she was seeking. As she zeroed in on it, its brilliance grew brighter and more distinct. She soared a couple of parsecs and recognized the location of where the Force energy emanated.

Launching to her feet, Raven changed the hyperdrive co-ordinates for Hapes. As the ship altered its trajectory and shot off into space, Raven said, "Don't go anywhere Master Skywalker, they need your help."

Gwynalyn Palpatine stared at her brother's looming face. Lightning sizzled soundlessly across the sky from the windows beyond the immense statue's head.

"Darkglider?"

The man appeared from the shadows, "Yes M'lady?"

"Did Hydin deliver that Nubian ship?"

"Yes, it is out on the landing platform now."

"Hydin has left to join the other ships in battle, correct?"

"Yes, he has M'lady. And he left five garrisons of troops, per your instructions. They are sitting in the assembly hall waiting on your orders."

"Good- I want them to begin patrolling the inside of the building. I want you to go to that ship outside and magnify the distress signal. I want there to be no mistake that the owners of that ship are here. Go, do it now," Lady Neffrous said.

Darkglider nodded and raced down the stairs to do her bidding.

A wicked smile formed on Gwynalyn's lips. "Like a moth to a flame, they will come racing to rescue their pitiful spawn.... My dear brother, you will finally be avenged."

Her laughter drowned out the rumbling thunder from above.

Chapter 32

"Han, stop!" Leia said, as she stopped in the middle of the Theed Palace courtyard, bathed in early morning sunlight. Han, Chewie, and C-3PO turned and stared at Leia's small, yet imposing form.

Wearing a navy blue pantsuit and hair arranged in a series of intricate braids that circled her head, Leia said, "I told you, they aren't here. Going back to Jacen and Anakin's apartment isn't going to get us anywhere."

"I was only trying to help, Leia. You're absolutely sure they aren't here? Maybe they're up in the Lake Country visiting Chariss and Rowlon," Han said approaching his wife.

He watched Leia's tongue trace the inside of her mouth in annoyance. She flung her arm up and gestured around the courtyard, "I'm telling you, they aren't here. I would feel the presences of *my* children. They're gone."

"Hey, they're my children too! Just because I ain't Force sensitive, doesn't mean I'm any less their father! Don't get all worked up, your Worshipfulness. I believe you," Han said, giving in. Chewie sighed, knowing Han just managed to push more of Leia's buttons with his remark.

Storming past the trio, Leia muttered under her breath, "Sure, just don't pay attention to me. I'm their mother, I think I would know these things. But no, he must always question me." She wheeled upon her husband and said, "You're really exasperating at times, you know that?"

Unable to control himself, a lopsided grin formed on Han's face. He said, "Can't help myself, Princess. I love seeing you all wound up. I think it's sexy."

"Sir, it is my understanding that when the blood pressure rises in human beings, this can be catalyst in creating further health problems. The odds of Mistress Leia developing a serious physical ailment from this continued stressful state is two thousand sixty five to one," C-3PO rattled off.

Han snarled at the meddling droid and said, "Thanks for the tip, Goldenrod. I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

"Oh you're most welcome, General Solo. I do hope you will keep Mistress Leia's health more into consideration the next time you decide to antagonize her needlessly," the protocol droid continued, pointing his left arm upwards.

Leia and Chewie began smirking as they watched Han's ears and neck turn bright red from growing anger. Completely heedless to Han's growing wrath, C-3PO continued, "Perhaps we should all go over to the new medicenter and have Mistress Leia examined for a physical, just to verify she has suffered no ill effects of your treatment of her."

"*Suffered no ill effects from my treatment of her??* Why you..." Han said and reached out a meaty hand and grabbed 3PO by the neck and began to throttle the droid.

"HAN! Stop that!" Leia shouted, "You're making a scene!"

"Oh dear, what did I say?!!!" C-3PO wailed when Han didn't release his hold.

"Chewie, pull him off please!" Leia asked. Chewie pushed his way between Han and the droid and helped to remove Han's fingers from around the golden droid's neck.

Leia scowled at Han as he walked away from 3PO.

“Impossible man,” 3PO said as he regained his bearings.

To Han, Leia asked smartly, “And exactly how old are you?” Several Nubians who had stopped to watch the fight resumed going about their business.

Han felt his anger fade as he watched as his wife turned her back on him and stare absently towards the newly constructed medical center. As she gazed in that direction, a glimmering ship caught her attention as it descended out of the atmosphere. Thinking possibly it was Marxx’s ship she shielded her eyes from the glare of the Nubian sun and watched the ship heading towards the medical center. She closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. Sinking into the Force, she recognized who piloted the ship and as it came closer into view, she recognized the ship’s markings.

From behind, Han wrapped his arm around his wife’s waist and asked, “What’s Mara doing here?”

“I don’t know. Let’s go find out,” Leia replied.

As the couple and their Wookiee friend began heading towards the medical center, C-3PO threw his arms up enthusiastically, “I knew they would follow my advice!” With a jump he began clattering his metal feet over the tiled ground and raced after his masters.

A wounded, and cornered Wompa would have been easier to calm down than Mara Jade- Skywalker. The Solo group entered the medical center to find the Jedi Master pacing angrily, hands planted firmly on her hips.

She whirled towards Han and Leia, light green eyes flaring, “Do you know where she is?”

“Do we know where who is? What are you doing here, Mara?” Leia asked, completely confused.

“Raven.”

“Raven??” Han and Leia asked in unison. Leia asked, “Why is she on Naboo and not off training?”

“Ohhh, I just knew I should’ve gotten here sooner. Kyp’s ship is gone also. I’d go question him, but he’s sleeping,” Mara said. Frustrated she raked her hands through her thick russet hair. She growled in annoyance.

Leia walked over to her sister-in-law, and placed a hand on her shoulder, “Mara, tell us what happened. Maybe we can help.”

Plopping down onto a blue couch, Mara let out a deflated puff of air and told her friends about Kyp’s injury.

Han, immediately worried for his good friend, asked, “Is Kyp alright?”

“According to the medics, yes, he will recover. His foot is healing,” Mara said, sitting with her legs apart, elbow resting on her knee.

Leia sat next to Mara and said, "Raven did the right thing bringing Kyp here. There are no facilities on Dagobah. And Raven isn't trained to treat injuries to the extent that Kyp received."

"Yes, I know that. I find no fault to her for bringing her Master to Naboo to heal. I do however fault her in leaving Naboo without telling me where she was going! I specifically told her to stay here and wait until I showed up. I directed her not to leave the planet," Mara replied.

"Maybe she's visiting her parents," Han interjected hopefully.

Leia glanced at Han and smiled, "That's actually not a bad idea Han. Can you go call Rowlon and Chariss and find out if she's there?"

"Sure, honey," Han said, and walked down the hall towards a pay-emitter.

"I'm sure that's where she is, Mara. I can imagine being stuck on Dagobah for several months would be lonely for her. She might have just headed over for a quick visit while Kyp rested," Leia said with more confidence than she felt.

Han returned and shook his head.

"See, she left the planet," Mara said, launching to her feet. "Where would she go? And why would she risk breaking her sentence?"

"I think we need to talk to Kyp. He'd know better than any of us what's going on in Raven's head," Han replied.

"Yes. Time to wake him up," Mara said and headed down the hall.

3PO glanced over at Chewbacca, "Oh dear, I do hope Mistress Raven is quite alright." Chewie growled a non-committal reply and followed the Solos down the hall towards Kyp's room.

"What do you mean she's not here?" Kyp asked, dark green eyes filled with dread. "She was here earlier, napping in that chair."

"She left. She's no longer on Naboo. She took your ship and is gone!" Mara said.

"She took my ship?" Kyp groaned and rubbed his palms into his eyes to remove any and all traces of sleep from them. "What is it with these Racees twins? They're always stealing the *Phoenix*?"

Leia sat in a chair next to Kyp's bed and placed a cool hand on his arm. She asked, "Do you have any idea where she would have gone to? Why would she have left you?"

Kyp stared over Leia's still pretty features. Her brown eyes pleaded for his help. He then looked around the room, "I have no idea. Where are your kids?"

"We don't know, kid. We came to Naboo looking for them, but they ain't here," Han said.

Kyp rubbed his fingers on his left hand under his chin and absently scratched his scruffy hair growth. A part of his heart sank as a thought occurred to him, he asked, “Do you think she took off with Jacen somewhere?”

“Jacen’s smart enough to know that if I ordered her to stay here, he wouldn’t have taken her off planet, right Leia?” Mara asked.

Nodding absently, Leia replied, “You’re right, Mara. He knows how crucial Raven’s success in her training is. He would never just up and leave with her.”

“Unless they ran off to get hitched,” Han said as he leaned against the doorframe to the room. Leia gasped at the thought. Han shrugged, “It’s just a thought. He did tell us he would marry her regardless of if we approved or not. Maybe he took the first opportunity that he could.”

“No, there is no way Marxx would have let them just take off. He has enough sense to know that would be a bad idea,” Leia replied.

“Love can make a person do completely irrational things... or so I’ve heard at least,” Kyp replied, wiggling his newly attached toes. “Besides that just doesn’t sound right to me. I don’t think Raven would do that. She was very determined to conquer her problems and achieve Knighthood.” He felt all eyes boring in his direction. He pushed himself up in his bed and continued, “The girl has serious scars to her soul. I don’t know if any of you can truly appreciate how deep her emotional wounds run. She’s a complicated young woman. Her grandmother and that man Darkglider, used and abused her both physically and emotionally. Her grandmother told her that her physical defects could not be repaired in order to keep her in a subservient state. She endured physical beatings, and being belittled by the people who were supposed to be raising her. The fact that she came out of that half as normal as she did is a shock to me. In fact I’d say that my childhood was downright healthy in comparison to hers.”

Han and Leia both jolted from his last statement. Kyp continued, “Have you ever looked at her wrists? They are covered in burn scar tissue. She had a nightmare while we were on Dagobah where she recalled receiving the inflicted wounds. I never told her, but I experienced her nightmare with her. That man Darkglider, put stun cuffs on her wrists and hung her from a rod in the wall. The stun cuffs burned her wrists until there was no skin left. She had to endure inhaling the smell of her own flesh burning.”

Han gulped as he could feel bile rising in his esophagus. He said, “That poor kid.”

“I never knew that,” Leia said, suddenly feeling very guilty for the way she wailed into her son about his girlfriend. She realized that anyone forced to live through those kinds of conditions could be prone to leading a less than angelic life.

Mara gazed on unaffected, “Well that’s just sad. But that does nothing for us right now, does it? She willfully disobeyed orders and broke her training. She’s vanished without a trace. She’s a danger to herself and others. We need to figure out what happened to her.”

Kyp glared at Mara. His deep voiced boomed, “She’s no more a danger to others than you are! How can you sit and judge her like that? How can any of us? We all have very spotty, and checkered pasts. Each of us has been forgiven for our actions in the past... well, most of us anyways. Her transgressions occurred when she was young, naïve, unloved, and scared. Her actions were a lot less destructive than

what some of us have done. She's only being as severely punished as she is because the laws have changed. How can you possibly judge her, Mara? You lived the life of a smuggler for years and never thought twice about killing scum that got in your way." Mara shifted uncomfortably on her feet and dropped her eye contact with Kyp. Han coughed and stared out the window. Kyp concluded, "Raven's come a long way in my training with her. She's managed to confront a lot from her past, I think she's well on her way to recovery." Softly he added, "She's a heck of a lot better off than I am, and I'm a Jedi Master."

Leia stood up and walked over to the window. She placed her palms on the window ledge and stared outside. She watched a couple of orange lovebirds flutter and chase each other through the tree limbs. She said, "Where would she go? She was on track with her training, and didn't seem to have any interest in leaving here. Where would she go?"

Kyp closed his eyes and his vision from the cave on Dagobah sprung to mind. His lids snapped open. He said, "Jacen must be in trouble. She went off alone to try to help him."

Han moved from the doorway and stood by his friend's side, "And how'd you know that, kid?"

Kyp met Han's concerned gaze, "Call it a gut feeling."

"Well, I know better than to doubt a Jedi's gut feeling. Living with a whole family of them will teach you that right away, right Chewie?" Han said.

Chewie barked in agreement.

"So where would they be?" Mara asked.

Kyp flung the sheets off of his body and swung his legs off of his bed. He grimaced as he stepped on his newly healed foot. Prickling tingles shot up his leg. He determined he could bear the pain. Hobbling over to his chair he picked up a pile of clean clothes Raven brought from onboard the *Phoenix* and slammed himself shut into the refresher. Han and Leia stared at each other not speaking, not quite knowing what to make of Kyp's sudden activity.

A couple moments later, a fully dressed Kyp emerged from the refresher. He threw his ID tag on his bed and shoved Han aside from the door. He hobbled out into the doorway, to the shock of Mara, Leia, and Han.

"You all going to just stand there? We'll never find out what's going on just sitting here gabbing. Come on, we need to find out what happened to my student and your children."

Shrugging Han and Chewie followed after Kyp as he headed out of the medicenter, against medical advice, to find his wayward student. Leia, Mara, and 3PO brought up the rear.

Kyp and Mara sat in the cockpit of the *Jade Saber* beginning a trace for a distress signal from Kyp's ship. Not finding one, they began searching for Marxx's ship. When they entered in his ship's identification parameters, Mara's spy equipment lit up in the cockpit.

“Whoa, there he is!” Kyp said. “I wonder if Jaina and Marxx are also there? I doubt Jacen would have just taken Marxx’s ship.”

“Yes, that is doubtful. Where in the Galaxy are those co-ordinates?” Mara asked. Her fingers flew over her controls, plugging in the co-ordinates into her galactic mapping system. A holo image of the Galaxy appeared before her and the light flashed in the Corporate Sector.

“Nephron. Raven mentioned something about when her grandmother and Darkglider left Tatooine they moved to an unpopulated planet. Nephron’s been deserted for hundreds of years because its original inhabitants destroyed it’s ecosystem,” Kyp said, leaning back in his chair, he chewed on his fingernail. “That’s it. Raven’s Grandmother has them on Nephron. Somehow Raven knew this- probably received a vision of her friends in trouble and raced off to save them. She’s most likely dead set on doing something reckless to try to save them from her grandmother’s clutches.”

Mara nodded, “We’d better let Han and Leia know.”

Han and Leia worked as a team, pouring through Senatorial intelligence reports onboard *The Millennium Falcon*. Leia watched in horror as images of a huge battle waged between the Hapes and Tion Clusters.

Leia turned on her commlink and asked Mara, “Do you know anything about what’s going on over in the Hapes section of the Galaxy? Why are they battling their neighbors?”

“Luke and Anakin went there a couple days ago to try and negotiate a peace agreement. If they’re at each other’s throats, it sounds like the negotiations failed,” Mara replied.

“Have you heard from Luke?” Leia asked, suddenly very concerned about her brother and youngest son.

“No. I tried contacting him when I learned about Raven and didn’t reach him,” Mara replied.

“Well that doesn’t sound good,” Leia stated.

Kyp updated them on the information they uncovered on Marxx’s ship. Leia and Han were gripped in parental concern. The politician in Leia recovered first from her shock.

“Ok, here’s what we need to do, Mara your ship is equipped with all the latest counter intelligence software, correct?” Leia asked.

There was a pause, and she replied, “I really don’t want to answer that over an open commlink, Leia.”

“Right, sorry. My mistake. I need to get word to Coruscant that we need to send out our fleet to assist to end the dispute in the clusters. Han, you and Kyp take the *Falcon* and go to Nephron and find out what is going on with our children and Raven. I will send reinforcements to assist you as needed. I have a feeling that my training as a diplomat will be needed to help end the dispute between the Dellaltians and the Hapans. How does that sound to everyone?”

“Sounds good, Leia,” both Kyp and Mara replied.

Mara said, "Come on over, Leia."

"You gonna be alright?" Han asked.

"Well I may end up with a few new gray hairs on my head, but I think I can help," Leia replied standing up.

"I know you can, anyone would be a fool not to listen to you," Han replied.

Leia smiled, then her face turned serious, "Just find our kids. Bring them back safe."

Han nodded and encircled his wife's slender waist with his strong arms, "I promise. If anyone lays a hand on any of our children... they'll wish they were never born."

Leia ran her fingers through his thick hair, smiled, and gave him a long kiss. When they separated she moved away from him. Standing in the *Falcon's* cockpit doorway she asked, "May the Force be with you, Han."

"With Kyp along for the ride, it better be!" Han replied.

Han and Chewie fired up the engines, and when Leia and Kyp had exchanged places on ships, then both ships rose out of the Nubian atmosphere and laid in separate hyperspace courses.

A moan escaped C-3PO as he sat strapped into the seat behind Chewbacca. He cried, "Here we go, again." Han ignored the golden droid's usual complaints and watched as the hyperdrive kicked into gear.

In a flash the two vessels disappeared into twinkling dots in the black sky.

Chapter 33

Luke heard a loud wail escape from his nephew's mouth from outside on the Hapes landing platform. Waves of intense despair flowed through the Force. Luke ran outside to see what caused Anakin's anguish. Luke stopped dead in his tracks as he saw Anakin's hands yanking at his hair. Beyond his tall nephew sat the charred and smoldering remains of Anakin's X-wing.

R2-D2 rolled over to the wreckage and let out a low, sad moan as he examined the leg of Anakin's R4 unit.

Standing beside Anakin, Luke felt his nephew's pain. Anakin shook his head as he examined his destroyed ship. A large piece of wreckage from the space battles above had fallen and crushed his fighter. He held his elbow and bit his fingers. Flicking his fingers upwards he asked, "How am I going to get out of here? That fighter was designed *specifically* to fit my larger size. I can't fit in your X-wing. There aren't any extra ships sitting around. Tenel Ka needs our help! Since she isn't here, I can't very well help her if I'm stranded on Hapes!"

"Calm down, Anakin. I'll try to contact your mother or Mara and see if she can get some sort of a

transport here. Just don't panic. Everything will turn out fine, you'll see," Luke said confidently. He turned and climbed up into his own cockpit and began to activate his holo-imager. R2 followed behind, and connected with the X-Wing to prepare it for pre-flight. As Luke activated his emitter, he found a message waiting for him to pick up. He turned on the emitter and saw his wife's face. Luke's face flashed from joy to worry as he listened to her message.

Anakin shielded his eyes from the morning sun and stared up into the sky. Smoke stung his nose and eyes. Above the two Jedi, the constant thunder of booms from large pieces of debris entering the atmosphere showed that the war still waged up above. His heart ached, wondering where Tenel Ka could be, and he could only pray that she was safe. However, not knowing where she was made every nerve in his body shake with worry. As he squinted his eyes, a solitary, golden object descended out of the sky. Tilting his head, Anakin thought the ship looked familiar. Recognition sank in for Anakin the closer the ship descended from the sky. He connected with the Force and sensed only one life-force energy.

"What in the Galaxy is she doing here?" Anakin said.

Luke's voice startled him from behind, "That's what I'd like to know."

They watched *The Fiery Phoenix* land on the rubble filled platform. The ship noisily cleared its vents and its ramp swooshed open. Raven strode down the ramp. Luke squinted his eyes in disbelief at what the girl wore. Raven approached them wearing a gray, leather bound jumpsuit, complete with long flowing black skirt. She wore thick heavy combat boots. Her lightsaber swung easily off her utility belt and her hair was up and arranged in her cornrows. Except for the helmet, she wore the same clothes she wore on *The Vengeance* when she went by her persona of Admiral Darkglider.

Pulling on her right handed glove, Raven did something completely unexpected. She kneeled, and lowered her head in front of Master Skywalker and raised her wrists together, over her head, in front of Luke.

Staring at the ground, she began, "I know I have no right to ask for your forgiveness, but that is what I am about to do. I come before you Master Skywalker out of defiance of my orders for my training. I know the seriousness of my actions and I am willing to take full responsibility for what I have done. However, before you condemn me to a life in prison for my crimes I wish to be heard and to explain why I abandoned my Master's side and am before you now."

Feeling very uncomfortable with Raven's submissive posture, he folded his arms and cleared his throat. "Please stand, Raven. I am more than interested in hearing why you are here. Last I heard you were on Naboo with Kyp at the medicenter. How is he? Or did you leave him without finding out whether he survived his operation or not?"

Raven's pale blue eyes met Luke's icy gaze, "No, Master Skywalker, I didn't leave him without finding out his condition. The medics were able to reattach his foot and he should be fully healed in no time." Luke nodded. She leapt into her reason for leaving. "My grandmother is holding Marxx, Jacen, Jaina, Lowbacca, and Tenel Ka hostage on Nephron. We have approximately three hours before she kills them all. She has orchestrated the war that is occurring above. Many of the vessels above are hers, disguised as Hapan War Destroyers in order to create mistrust and chaos in the battle. She's using the Solo twins, Lowie and my brother as pawns to force Tenel Ka's hand to give up her Cluster to my grandmother's control."

“And you know all of this how?” Luke asked. Anakin’s face twisted in despair at the thought of his siblings, Tenel Ka, and Lowie being in trouble.

“I received a couple visions through the Force,” she said. Her eyes grew hollow, “I saw Marxx and Jacen suffering, because of me. And as I flew towards Nephron to help them, I received another vision of my grandmother blackmailing Tenel Ka and laying her plans out to her. My grandmother has no morals, no compassion. She will stop at nothing to get what she wants. I also think she’s angry at me for leaving and betraying her. I need to stop her,” Raven said.

“According to the transmissions I received from Kyp, you’re still in no shape to face her yet. He’s not convinced you are Jedi material, yet. I cannot allow you to face your Grandmother. Thank you for telling Anakin and me what’s going on, we’ll take it from here. I want you to take my X-Wing and return to Naboo and be with Kyp. I won’t hold your little sidetrip against you with your training,” Luke said. He raised his fingers to stop her from speaking. “If I see you on Nephron, I will recommend immediately that you have voided your contract with the Jedi and you will be imprisoned.”

Raven glanced at the ground and began tapping her toes. Her tear filled eyes raised and met Luke’s blue orbs. “I know that palace inside and out. I know where she will be hiding my friends. I know where she hid booby traps in the building. You need me there! I could have simply gone on ahead and not bothered to tell you about anything. But I came to you because I knew I would have better success at freeing everyone with your help.”

Raven walked towards Luke, her eyes pleaded with him as her words flew from her mouth, “They are suffering, because of me. I can’t just sit by and do nothing. I feel I am no longer a threat to others, well, except maybe my grandmother. I’d rather rot in a prison cell knowing I did everything I could to help those I care for the most, than spend one day free knowing I could have helped them and they perished because I didn’t help them.” She paused as she realized Luke didn’t seem to be affected by her line of reasoning. She crossed her arms and nodded her head, “So be it then. When this is over, if I am still alive, send me to jail and throw away the key.” With a flick and turn of her skirts, she raced back towards the *Phoenix* and climbed aboard. She shouted, “I’ll see you on Nephron. They’re being kept in the capital building of Nemorasis at the top of Mount Trilitona.”

“Wait Raven! I’m coming with you!” Anakin shouted. He turned to Luke, “We’ll meet you there. I’ll keep my eye on her.” Anakin’s blue eyes pleaded with Luke as he heard Raven fire up the ship’s engines, “I hope you reconsider what you just told her. I know if our situations were reversed, I would do the exact same thing that she’s doing. Besides, I think you have some personal experience that’s very similar to hers, if memory serves me correct.”

Luke gulped and his face paled. He replied, “Trust me, I know exactly what she’s thinking right now. Just try to reason with her, ok?”

“Sure, Uncle Luke,” Anakin replied. With a turn, he bolted towards the *Phoenix* and closed the hatch. He joined her in the cockpit and checked the hyperdrive co-ordinates. He shot a message to Luke with the co-ordinates as Raven pushed forward onto the thrusters and raised the ship into the atmosphere.

Anakin stared at the captain of the ship and noted the determined set to her jaw and brow as she expertly maneuvered Kyp’s ship through the thunderous battle.

Raven leaned heavily downward on the throttle as a large piece of fiery debris shot towards the *Phoenix*. Anakin shouted, "Just try not to get us pulverized before we can save everyone, please!"

Pale blue eyes flashed towards Anakin as the ship shot off into hyperspace. Raven said, "Is that satisfactory for you?" She leaned back in the captain's chair and dug her palms into her eyes. Her shoulders drooped. "I think I seriously screwed things up, Anakin."

"You know, I think Uncle Luke was just being harsh back there. I doubt he'll send you to prison," Anakin replied.

She threw her head back against the chair's headrest, and lightly beat her head. Grimacing, she said, "I don't expect any special treatment. In fact I doubt I've done anything in my life to deserve any kind of leniency. Just because I'm in love with your brother doesn't mean I should be excused for what I'm doing.... No, I think I'd probably lose all respect for your Uncle if he did decide to just let me off with a slap on the wrist. When I said back there I was fully ready to accept whatever comes my way, I meant it. If that means forfeiting my freedom, so be it."

Concern filled Anakin's eyes, "Just don't do anything rash, or foolish, OK? All I'm saying is that I think you've still got a chance. If you use this mission as a trial of a sort, things may turn out to your advantage. If you don't give into anger and don't do anything that might further give Uncle Luke a reason to follow through with what he said."

Letting out a long breath, Raven's eyes filled with tears. She asked, "You honestly think there may be a way out of imprisonment for me? I certainly don't see how that's possible."

Anakin smirked and said, "Uncle Luke would be a hypocrite if he threw you in jail for this. When he was young and in the middle of training while on Dagobah, he did the same thing you are doing to try to rescue my mother and father. He wasn't ready to face Darth Vader, but he did it because he cared so much for my parents and wanted them to be safe. All I'm saying is don't give Luke any more reasons to follow through with his threats. Right now, I really think that's all they are... threats. Use the training Kyp has given you over the past couple of months. Stay calm and don't allow yourself to get unnerved or rattled by things," Anakin swiveled in his chair to face his brother's pretty girlfriend. He continued, "I know you have a terrible history with your grandmother. She probably knows every button to push to get you upset or angry. Remember, you are better than she is and you are no longer that girl who she used to control."

"I do have to face her. I can't let her get off with kidnapping people and not suffering any kinds of consequences for her actions," Raven said, crossing her arms.

"Right. Let justice decide what to do with her. If you face her, try to detain her so she can be tried and imprisoned properly. Don't seek revenge, or dip into the Dark Side. By doing that you'll lose all chances to continue with your training," Anakin replied.

"Why are you telling me all of this?" Raven asked.

Anakin smiled devilishly, "Because if you went crazy on your grandmother, and I didn't warn you against doing it and my brother found out, I'd be the one racing to join you in the prison cell to protect me from his wrath."

“Good point, I’ll keep that in mind,” Raven said. Grinning she added, “I like my privacy.”

The Dellaltian Hover Yacht raced across the Hapes sea after Ta’a Chume’s Royal Hover Barge. The pursuing speeder roared in quick pursuit, rapidly closed the gap between the two ships. Suddenly, Trisku glanced at his controls just as the pursuing vessel achieved targeting lock on the Royal barge. Flicking his blond hair out of his eyes, he threw his full weight on the left throttle and sent the ship soaring westward across the open Hapes ocean, away from the Reef Fortress.

Yssarrand raced to the rear gun port on the boat and began to target fire upon the approaching vessel. The barge shook slightly off course as a large torpedo narrowly missed the barge and sent a large spray of water over the entire ship.

“Faster Trisku!” Yssarrand shouted as he again targeted the Dellaltian yacht. On target, he fired. The blast of green light, hit the pursuing ship on its portside. Smoke began to rise from a newly created hole. He smiled triumphantly and fired again.

The barge shook as the Dellaltian yacht’s next round of fire blasted their communications disk into dust. Black smoke began to rise from the upper captain’s quarters of the Royal barge, as a fire began to rage. Yssarrand leapt away from the turret and quickly attempted to put out the fire. As he stood holding an extinguisher, the barge shook again and he slipped on the watery deck. The extinguisher flew from his hands towards the steering wheel. He threw his body forward and retrieved the extinguisher and glanced up and met Trisku’s worried gaze.

“I’ll keep trying to veer us off course. Get that fire out before the Queen suffocates down there!” Trisku shouted. Yssarrand again jumped to his feet and began emptying the contents of the extinguisher onto the captain’s quarters. He snuck a glance at the pursuing ship and his brows knitted together. A white, trailing streak seemed to have exited the Royal barge and raced towards the Dellaltian yacht. Yssarrand’s black eyes grew wide as the pursuing ship exploded in a single, spectacular explosion.

Their ship raced forward about a mile, before Trisku briefly stopped the ship to assist with putting out the fire.

“What happened?” the pilot asked, his befuddled mate.

Before Yssarrand could answer, another extinguisher began to work on the inside of the captain’s quarters. A slight figure emerged from the charred room, and removed a breathing mask from her face.

Ta’a Chume stared at the two confused guards and said, “Good thing my quarters are set up with weapon controls. You too are useless! Apparently, I need to do all the work around here. Get us back on course. I have a war to manage. ”

“Yes, My Queen,” Trisku said as he raced towards the wheel of the ship.

The Jade Saber skirted the parameters of the chaotic battle that waged over Hapes and descended into the atmosphere. A few minutes ago they received an encrypted message from Ta’a Chume that she was

now managing the war from her Reef Fortress. Armed with the information Luke had forwarded to them via holoimage from Raven and their talks with the Dellaltians, the two women anxiously waited to speak directly to Queen Ta'a Chume. After returning the landing codes through the proper channels, Mara waited for the deflector shield to be deactivated, then she set her ship down on the tiny landing platform of the rocky, fortified stone building.

Greeted by the immense bodyguard, Yssarrand, Mara and Leia followed him throughout the Royal Fortress until they reached the war room. Inside they found the elder Queen expertly launching tactical plans to her fighting ships.

Without looking up, Ta'a Chume began to speak to Leia and Mara, "I apologize for the unusual lack of ceremony in greeting you. My military liaison is missing or dead, so it looks like I get to manage this war on my own. I'm a little frazzled. Activate that terminal over there." Ta'a Chume said as she tossed her head to the left. Leia moved around her and activated a holovideo. The image recorded a military general turning into a changling and then drugged Tenel Ka. "It appears that my entire Palace was infiltrated. You can't begin to know how happy I was to find your ship's signal approaching my Cluster Jedi Master Jade-Skywalker. I'm assuming your husband's *negotiations* with my neighbors failed." The older woman stood up and wiped a stray hair from her eyes she finally met the gazes of the two women, and continued, "I am rather shocked at the lengths the Dellaltians would go to take over my Cluster though. I never realized they were financially set enough to hire a Clawdite..."

Leia stepped forward and interrupted the Queen, "You Highness, if you will excuse me for interrupting you. That video you had us look at is missing the audio."

"Yes, the audio receivers in my old war room were apparently blown out when the Palace was attacked," Ta'a Chume replied.

"Is that video all you are going by in assuming the Dellaltians are attacking your fleet?" Leia asked, pointing to the terminal.

Ta'a Chume laughed in disbelief. She said, "Of course. That and all the physical proof we picked up from the attacks prior to this one. I have no doubts that my neighbors are attacking my fleet and planets."

Mara stepped forward and scowled at the woman, "Then you are gravely mistaken and uninformed." As Ta'a Chume began to fume, Mara removed a datapad from her pocket and attached it to a holo-projector. "Please listen to what my husband has to tell you. I think you'll see that the situation here is not as it seems."

A blue shimmering projected image of Luke Skywalker, sitting in the cockpit of his X-wing. Luke began:

Hi, Mara. I have much to report and little time to do it, so I will try to be brief and concise. Anakin and I reached Dellalt and upon showing the videos of the attacks on Hapes 4 to King Sshurva Proo, he informed us that the ships did not look like his vessels. They were the wrong color and metal in design. Neither Anakin nor I could detect any deceit from the room and were convinced that they were telling the truth. Only after we arrived back at the Fountain Palace did we find out a couple of things that helped to further back up the Dellaltian's claim. The Dellaltian ships that are attacking the planet are utilizing the same holo-morphing technology that was created by Kendu Rewgun. Anakin witnessed a

downed Dellaltian cruiser blink and change into an Imperial Class Star Destroyer before it sank into the Hapes sea. Troops of apparent Dellaltians were patrolling the remains of the Palace. When Anakin and I took out a few of the troopers, in their deaths, they reverted back into Clawdites.

As we were about to try and figure a way out of the Palace, Raven showed up here to let us know who was actually behind these attacks. Her grandmother has orchestrated this whole war in order to take over both clusters. Gwynalyn Palpatine is holding Tenel Ka on the planet of Nephron. She is demanding that Tenel Ka relinquish control of the Hapes Cluster to her, otherwise, she will kill Jaina, Jacen, Marxx, and Lowbacca, all of whom she has captured and are being held in a room where their oxygen supply is being depleted by the minute. Time is of the essence to save them. Anakin and Raven are on their way to assist the young Jedi, and I am following shortly behind them. I will keep an eye on Raven when I get there. I have to go. I trust you will forward this information to Leia, Han and anyone else who can assist with what is going on. I love you, Mara. May the Force be with you.

Luke's image faded and Ta'a Chume's face furrowed into a deep frown. "So this is some outsider who has been attacking my planets? Someone has been making a fool of me?" The older woman stormed across the room and attacked a terminal entering in commands. "I need to send out more vessels!"

"NO!" Mara and Leia shouted together.

Ta'a Chume glanced up startled. Leia approached her and calmly said, "According to recent reports, a large contingency of Hapan Destroyers have entered into the Tion and Hapes clusters and are attacking both of your fleets at will. Their holo design is so flawless that it's impossible to distinguish which ships are friend or foe. You and the Dellaltians need to issue a full scale retreat of your troops, so the remaining ships can be identified." Leia checked her chronometer. "The Republic fleet will be here in 20 minutes to assist with destroying these interlopers- that is if they stick around. You need to let the Dellaltians know that you were deceived and work together to assist with taking out the enemy ships."

Ta'a Chume's face grew red hot with fury. "You want me to admit I was wrong! Every bit of evidence pointed to them."

Mara, leaning against a side table replied, "And what would be worse, wounding your precious pride, or threatening to completely break a peace treaty that has been in effect for several decades?" Mara stood up and towered over the Queen. Planting her fists on her hips she said, "Think about all the lives you could save. Think about how your people will love you for sparing them from further pain and suffering. You can still appear the warrior you have so diligently worked on creating over the years, but you need to act in swiftly and justly, now!"

Leia held her breath as terror raged through her body over her sister-in-law's lack of diplomatic tact. Outside the reverberating din of the war waging overhead made the objects in the room rattle. The sound of tinkling of glass filled the air. Ta'a Chume stared squarely at the red haired Jedi. A sly smile etched on her lips. She asked, "You certainly don't mince words, do you? I like that. You're right, I need to set aside my precious pride. Leia, I suppose this would all be safer to orchestrate from one of the Republic vessels?"

Stepping forward Leia said, "Yes, your Highness. We have a diplomatic Correllian Destroyer coming to meet us outside the boundaries of battle. We will gladly take you and any of your men along. The ship is fully upgraded with the most advanced communications equipment. I have sent former Chancellor Mon Mothma to Dellalt to bring King Sshruva Proo to the vessel as well so you two can hash out your

newest treaty and work together to help bring down the opposing troops.”

“You are a shrewd woman, Leia Organa-Solo. I like the way you think and plan everything out properly. I will go with you,” Ta’a Chume said. She snapped outside her doors, “Yssarrand, Trisku, come with us.”

The two body guards fell into step with blasters at the ready as the Galactic leaders raced towards *Jade Saber*.

As she stared again at her chronometer, her mind wandered to a matter more personal and pressing than the fate of the Hapes Cluster; Leia realized her children now had only two and a half hours of air left in the chamber. She sent a silent prayer to the Force that her brother, and Han would get there in time to save them from death.

Chapter 34

Jaina’s found her ability to concentrate wavering. She closed her eyes and again tried to make contact with the Force. A frown tugged down the corners of her lips at her complete inability to connect with the Force. Her chest heaved up and down as she took shallower breaths. Panic began to wiggle fingers over her heart.

“Something’s not right in here,” Jaina said, glancing at her husband and Jacen.

Frowning, Jacen nodded his head, “Hydin did something to the room controls I think when he was out there.”

Lowie let out a series of low growls and barks as he tugged on his chains.

“I think you’re right Lowie, I think the air is depleting in here. I’ve noticed it’s been getting much harder to breath and I keep losing my concentration. There must be some way to stop that,” Jaina said.

“Can you feel or find the controls, Jaina?” Marxx asked hopefully.

“If I could connect with the Force I could do that. Anyone else here able to use the Force?”

Jacen shook his head. “No. I think they’re blocking us, just like they did on that Star Destroyer of Hydin’s. I don’t suppose you can teleport out of here, can you Marxx?”

Jaina glared at her brother, “You know he’s not supposed to do that!”

“Well if it was a matter of getting a bit of a nervous tick again, or suffocating to death, I’d pick the former. Sorry, Jace. I actually tried and it didn’t work,” Marxx said, jingling his chains. “I need to be able to access the Force in order to do it. Besides I don’t know if I’d have been able to anyways with being bound.”

Jaina’s mouth dropped as her eyes bore into the back of her husband’s head. She watched his ears pink up as he felt the weight of her furious stare on his back. He turned and faced his angry wife. His blue

eyes pleaded, "I just thought if I could do it, I could try to save us all. Is that really such a bad thing?"

"What would be so bad about it? You don't know how many more times you can do that without dying, Marxx! What if your time is up with one more teleport and ZAP you're one with the Force? Where would that leave us? Huh? Did you think of that? You would have left here without even saying goodbye to me," Jaina said, as tears pooled atop her lower eyelids. "How could you make such a decision so lightly?"

Face etched with guilt, Marxx gazed at Jaina. He said, "I'm sorry, honey. I guess I was just trying to do the manly thing and try to rescue my wife is all. Obviously, I wasn't thinking clearly. I promise, I won't do that again."

"Course this now leaves us back at square one. How do we get out of here?" Jacen asked.

Lowie leaned forward and exerted all of his energy to break his chains free. The small chamber reverberated with a deafening Wookiee roar. Lowie ceased straining on the chains when they did not budge. He panted for breath.

"Lowie, don't do that again. You're wasting precious oxygen," Jaina said. Lowie mumbled a low, pitiful growl. Jaina replied, "I know you were only trying to help. Come on guys, we're Jedi, even without the Force, we should be able to figure a way out of this mess, right?"

Jacen and Marxx stared dubiously at Jaina. She rolled her eyes and said, "You do still have brains in your heads, right?"

Jacen's face slackened into a stupid expression, "Huh?"

Marxx smiled sweetly. "Sure, honey. Whatever you say, dear. I will do anything you ask."

Groaning, Jaina said, "If I could smack you two, I would."

Once again, Lowie attempted to yank the chain out of the wall. Jaina rolled her eyes as he let out a sad growl when he didn't succeed in breaking loose. "Thanks, Lowie. I know you tried." To herself Jaina muttered, "I wonder if anyone has any idea where we are?"

A loud *snap clink* filled the guest quarters on Nephron. General Margatall and Kendu Rewgun bounded to their feet as Tenel Ka let out a long, happy sigh of relief. She turned on the two men.

"Kendu, how many vessels does Lady Neffrous own in her fleet?" Tenel Ka asked, pushing a braid off of her forehead.

The short man scratched his ear and turned his dark eyes up towards the Princess. He said, "I don't know for sure. I woke up one day inside a hollowed out asteroid. Inside of it sat the largest fleet of Imperial Star Destroyers I'd ever seen. There were at least two hundred of them. I did manage to find out from one talkative and pompous Imperial captain thug that they were a secret fleet of Emperor Palpatine's. Apparently, they were all but forgotten after the fall of the Empire. Somehow Lady Neffrous must have found the ships. She forced me to train a handful of engineers on how to rig all of

the Star Destroyers with my technology. After we completed the fleet's updates she brought us all into a room and before my eyes, she killed each of the engineers, except for myself. She zapped me and I passed out. I woke up here. I guess she decided she might still need me in the future.... Needless to say, I'm terrified of that woman."

Tenel Ka watched the small man's legs begin to shake. She said, "It is alright, I do not blame you for fearing that woman She unsettled me as well. My friend's Nubian ship is out on the landing platform outside. Kendu, I need you to get out to their ship and send a message to the New Republic representative Leia Organa-Solo. Tell her exactly everything you have told me. They will need to know this information in order to try and figure out how to stop her fleet. Also ask her to send reinforcements here. Her children are in serious trouble."

"Leia Organa- Solo? How can I possibly do that?" He squeaked, his dark eyes grew wide with terror.

"The ship outside belongs to Leia's son-in-law. When you get aboard the Nubian ship check their holo-imager logs. You should be able to find her encrypted code to send her a message. If not, try to reach Han Solo on *The Millennium Falcon*. General Solo will be able to get word to his wife," Tenel Ka said. She held his shoulder to offer him strength. "I do not know how heavily armed this place is, be on the lookout for guards. You are small. Use that to your advantage. Once you get on the ship, stay aboard until help arrives." She turned to Margatall. "I will need your help to figure out how to get oxygen back in that room where my friends are being held. We need to get them free. Five Jedi should be able to take down this Sith woman."

"I'll do whatever you ask, Princess," Margatall said. "You know I'll die protecting you."

"This is a fact. Let us hope that does not become a necessity. Are you ready, Kendu?" Tenel Ka asked.

Puffing out his chest the small man nodded his head firmly once. "Yes. I will get that message to the New Republic."

"Good. Hold on one moment," Tenel Ka said. She let out a long breath and sank into the Force. She didn't sense anyone in the hallway and she waved at Margatall to help her open the door. Clanking open the heavy door, the three stepped out into the musty smelling hallway. Tenel Ka pointed Kendu towards the lower stairwell and nodded. He nodded back and headed towards the railing. Tenel Ka placed her fingers to her temple and attempted to locate the presence of her friends. She whispered to Margatall, "I believe they are being held in the sub levels. Come on, I think there is another way down other than just the stairwell, follow me."

Glancing at the navicom Raven's heart pounded as she realized they were on final approach to Nephron.

"Almost, there. Get ready to visit the torture palace of the universe," Raven said, as she harnessed herself tightly for the landing. "Strap in tight. The atmosphere on the this planet is very rocky."

Anakin strapped himself in and then braced himself against the forward control panel as *The Fiery Phoenix* touched into the tumultuously churning Nephronian atmosphere.

"Now you see why I fled this place as fast as I could!" Raven shouted, as their ship's hull screamed in

protest over being dropped into the middle of a thunderstorm.

Face pale and white, Anakin listened as the engines on Kyp's ship briefly stopped, and the flightdeck lights flickered out as the ship became engulfed in lightning. He pounced on the deflector shield and increased its power levels. The ship roared back to life.

"This place makes Dagobah look like a five star intergalactic vacation resort!" Raven yelled, smirking at Anakin.

His eyes stared quizzically at Marxx's twin. She seemed to delight in the bumpy, dangerous ride through the storm.

Wonderful, I'm trapped with someone who has a deathwish, Anakin thought.

After a few more moments of stomach dropping rolls, they finally dipped under the storm clouds. Raven punched forward on the shifter and the *Phoenix* soared quickly and recklessly through the atmosphere towards Nemorasis.

"Aren't you worried we'll get picked up on their radar? Don't you want to activate Kyp's morphing technology?" Anakin asked.

"Nope, don't need to do either. The one thing my grandmother never planned on is that this planet is great for hiding on, but surveillance equipment doesn't work... too much electrical activity in the atmosphere- screws up the signals, all they get is static! My grandmother doesn't even have any kind of locks or security warning systems attached to the doors of her fortress. Getting inside undetected will not be a problem. Navigating throughout the fortress will be a nightmare," Raven said.

"Why's that?" Anakin asked, as Raven turned the lights on Kyp's ship to minimum brightness and began to circle a large stone edifice perched atop the volcano.

"She had a group of workers retrofit the entire building. You walk inside and it reeks of disuse and neglect, but in actuality, the place is a snakepit. You make one wrong move and you can be discovered in the building, or blown to smithereens. Gwynalyn has a highly advanced tracking system installed throughout the entire building, and in blind areas, she has other lovely booby traps set up to catch people unaware," Raven said, as she landed Kyp's ship next to *The Nubian Hope*. She met Anakin's worried gaze and said, "Now you know why I insisted on coming here."

"Right," Anakin replied. The two released their harnesses and jumped out of their seats. Raven raced towards the medical room.

"Where are you going?" Anakin shouted to her as she vanished into the back of the ship. She emerged and twirled Kyp's lightsaber in her fingers. "What if he comes looking for that, you want to leave Kyp defenseless?"

"Why would Kyp come here? He's recovering from getting his foot sown back together. My brother or one of your siblings would be better equipped in using it. Come on, let's go take a quick look aboard Marxx's ship and see if we can find any weapons aboard it as well," Raven said, clipping Kyp's lightsaber to her belt as she dashed down the ramp and into the driving rain.

She raced up into *The Nubian Hope*. Anakin climbed up to the cockpit and looked around. On the floor under the co-pilot's chair he found several shopping bags. He then glanced up and saw the distress signal blaring at full range. Raven crashed against the doorframe holding two blasters. "Find anything?"

"No, look at that," Anakin said.

Raven glanced at the signal and said, "Good, means help will be on the way."

"If my sister and brother are being held captive, it's probable that your grandmother activated that signal," Anakin said.

"Actually, it was Darkglider. I can smell the stench of his cheap hair grease in here. Yeah, they're setting some kind of a trap for everyone. Come on, we don't have much time. Take this," Raven said, throwing him one of the blasters. Anakin held it tightly into the folds of his cloak and chased after her into the stormy afternoon.

Raven skidded to a halt outside the doors and raised her blaster. Staring out into the story Nephron sky she stared at her blaster and realized the implications of what would happen once she fired it. She thought, *I'll kill people. But if they are firing at me, and preventing me from helping the others, then it must be ok.* Glancing at Anakin, he held his blaster at ready, and she noted he switched the setting from stun to kill. She licked her lips and nodded at Jacen's younger brother. Then she peered inside the doors and saw no activity in the entrance hall. She opened the door and swept the area clean with her blaster. Anakin slipped in behind her and closed the door. She grunted.

"What?" Anakin whispered.

"I see she's gotten more delusional in her old age, finally finished her baby of a project. You know even when I was angry and licking at her boots, I never bought into her beliefs that Emperor Palpatine was some prophetic savior who was unjustly killed," Raven whispered back, pointing to the large statue. From four flights up, blasterfire echoed in the building. "Who do you think that is?"

Anakin sunk into the Force and didn't recognize the person. "I don't know. Whoever it is- is unarmed."

"We don't have much time. Should we wait and see who's in trouble?" Raven asked. She peered up through the railing four flights up and saw a small man squeeze between the railings and drop to the third floor. Stormtroopers appeared and leaned over the railing, blasters firing.

"Guess we're about to help out regardless of if we have time or not," Anakin said as they both raised their blasters and began shooting the unsuspecting stormtroopers. Five fell screaming off of the balcony, before the rest of the troop switched their attention from the fleeing man to the two armed individuals below. Smoke and the sound of laser fire filled the cavernous room.

"Get behind the statue!" Raven shouted as they dove for cover.

"This is a great plan! How do we get out of here with all of those stormtroopers up there?" Anakin shouted, as he swept around the statue, and fired. Raven peered around the left side of the statue and watched the small man slither down to the second floor railing. She waved him down as he stared with

uncertainty at the last drop. Raven fired above to distract the stormtroopers. The man nodded his head and jumped. His small form hit the bronze folds and slid quietly to the floor.

Kendu jumped up in alarm as he landed on two stormtrooper bodies who slid down the folds of the statue. He grabbed at their bodies and pushed the troopers over. Grunting he extracted one of their blasters, checked its firepower capacity and began to slither through the shadows along the stairwell. He figured he'd have about fifteen feet of open space he would need to run across before he could reach the door. Anakin moved around the side of the statue and made eye contact with the frightened man. Anakin mouthed, *I'll cover you.*

Screwing up his courage, Kendu muttered, "No guts, no glory." He turned and ran backwards on trembling legs into the open, blaster pointed upwards and firing. His heart leapt from terror as two stormtroopers fell from his shots.

Anakin brought down five stormtroopers who tried to descend down the stairwell. Raven picked off another four from the balcony. Kendu flattened himself next to Anakin, sweating profusely.

"Thank you, good man," Kendu said.

"Who are you?" Anakin asked.

"Kendu Rewgun, I'm a ship designer. I am on a mission to get word to the New Republic, by request of Princess Tenel Ka," he squeaked as he hid amongst Anakin's robes and bravely fired at another stormtrooper.

"Princess Tenel Ka? Is she alright?" Anakin yelled, his heart flopping uncertainly in his chest.

"When I left her she was. She's trying to rescue some friends of hers," Kendu shouted.

Raven raced to Anakin and Kendu's side. She tugged on Kendu's shirt, she shouted in his ear, "Go! Complete your mission. We'll cover you out the door."

Kendu nodded and raced to the large glass panels as Anakin and Raven blasted the last of the remaining troop to pieces. As they felt the wind on their backs, Raven watched Kendu race outdoors. "Come on, Anakin! Let's go!"

"Go where?" he shouted as fresh recruits from the seventh floor began to descend the stairs and shower the room with laser fire.

Raven grinned, "In here!" She slid her fingers down the third back fold in Palpatine's back and felt a tiny trigger. She activated it and a door silently swung open. "Move it," she hissed.

Anakin fired and took down three stormtroopers and vanished inside the statue. Raven slipped in behind him and the door sealed shut. Their eyes adjusted to the dark room. In the center sat a spiraling stairwell.

Raven hooked the blaster to her belt and met Anakin's gaze, "We have a maze of five obstacles to go through before we will reach the chamber where Gwynalyn is holding the group prisoner. This is the first one. Whatever you do, DO NOT, I repeat, DO NOT step on the red marks on the stairs. This will

lead us right down to where the gang is being held.” Raven turned backwards and began to maneuver her tiny pointed boots expertly down the spiral stairwell.

Anakin groaned as he stared at the stairs, each step contained a singular stripe of gray metal that was approximately two inches in width. The rest of each twelve inch step was red. Anakin noted that the gray stripe varied in position from step to step, which would mean he would have to stare at every single step carefully before negotiating onto the next lower step.

He stared at his large wide feet and dared to ask, “And what will happen if we step on the red?”

Raven turned her heart shaped face towards him, sweat trickling down her forehead, “You’ll get blown to pieces.”

“And how do you know all of this?” Anakin asked nervously.

“I got to watch three other loyal cadets of my grandmother’s fail at this course when they interviewed for Admiral positions on her ships. When they failed I got to see what happened. You need to figure out how to make it down and hurry. I need to tell you the timing of the next maze,” Raven said. She lowered her head and expertly navigated her descent down the long stairwell.

Anakin closed his eyes tried to connect with the Force, but sensed nothing. Something shielded him from utilizing it. With no other choice but to use his own abilities, he gathered his robe behind him and tied it out of his way. Hands slick with perspiration, he wiped them on his black pants legs. He then turned backwards, turned his feet on their outer sides and gingerly began his descent down the stairwell after Raven.

Chapter 35

Lady Neffrous watched the glimmering ships on the holomaps as the two wars continued. She sat, waiting for Darkglider to bring the Princess back to her office for her final decision. She watched as her ships circled the Hapan and Dellaltian fleets, firing occasionally and bringing down their prey at a slow rate. Lady Neffrous hoped that most of the vessels would be surrendered to her so she would be able to use the remaining ships to add to her arsenal. She opened her throne’s armchair consul and activated her mapreader. She stared at the Tion and Hapes Clusters. They stood in direct line to the Core Worlds and Coruscant. A sly grin etched on her lips. She thought, *One day Imperial City will rise again, my dear brother.*

A buzz of her commlink broke her dreams of Galactic domination. She turned it on and spoke into it, “What is it?”

“The Princess and the two other prisoners have somehow escaped, M’lady,” Darkglider seethed. “I’m on my way to the sublevels now.”

She growled in quiet fury. “Idiot! You put her in that room without turning on the Force shielding....”

A light blinked on her armchair consul. She furrowed her brows in confusion as someone had entered her maze below Nemorasis. She briefly wondered who would be idiotic enough to traverse down there.

She flicked on a monitor and saw Raven and another tall man wandering down the stairwell. She sneered. Returning to her immediate concerns, Lady Neffrous seethed, “So that is her decision... Take extra troops with you. I want her dead! Make sure she doesn’t release the other Jedi. Kill her, then kill the others... wait, Darkglider, have the stormtroopers bring me the males, they will need to be subdued as they are Force sensitive. I will leave the females for you to take care of,” Lady Neffrous said, a large grin forming on her lips.

“Yes, M’lady... with pleasure,” Darkglider said. Lady Neffrous could practically hear his bloodthirsty smile before he disconnected their link.

She turned off her commlink and said to herself, “So the little bird has returned to her nest. If she thinks I plan to welcome her back with open arms, she is sorely mistaken. She will see the price that is to be paid for abandoning me.” She opened a channel to *The Extinguisher*. Captain Hydin stood ordering his men in the midst of battle on the command deck.

“Hydin!”

Hydin turned and approached the terminal. “Yes, Lady Neffrous.”

“Wipe them all out.”

A twitch of a smile formed on Hydin’s lips. “Yes, M’lady. I look forward to it.”

“And Hydin, you know what to do if the New Republic shows up,” Lady Neffrous said.

“Yes, my men and the entire fleet are well aware of our orders.”

“Do not fail me,” Lady Neffrous said, flicking a yellow fingernail lengthwise across her neck.

Hydin gulped as her slight message did not go unnoticed. He said, “I won’t.”

“Good,” Lady Neffrous said. She cut off their communications and then switched on the image to see the four Jedi squirming in their cells. The wookiee kept pulling on his chains. Her eyes lingered on Marxx for two heartbeats. A colorless grin crossed her lips, “We’ll see how your precious sister reacts to your death. Her rage should bring her right back into my hands, so I can wring her little neck for betraying me.”

Leia, Mara, and Ta’a Chume stood in the landing deck of the Corellian Destroyer *Peacekeeper* watching the arrival of *The Lady Luck*. As the ship settled and cleared its vents, five figures emerged from the ship: the white haired, and still regal Mon Mothma, Dellaltian leader King Sshruva Proo, two of his advisors, and the ship’s Captain Lando Calrissian.

Ta’a Chume approached her neighboring King and bowed, “King Sshruva Proo, thank you for making this journey. You and I have much to talk about. I hope that we can come to an understanding and end the pointless conflict that is currently being fought in our two clusters.”

Hotly, Sshruva Proo replied, “It is your fault we are at war, not mine, Queen Ta’a Chume. I am only

defending my people from your unprovoked attacks!”

Staring at the short, furry, scaly alien, the queen dropped her eye contact. “Yes, I am aware of that, and I offer my sincerest apologies. I have learned much of what has been going on. We need to discuss these newest developments so we can stop the fighting.”

Leia spoke up and pointed to the east, “We have a secured room for the two of you where you can discuss these matters privately. I will be available if you feel you require a mediator. However, I do recommend that you come to a resolution quickly to prevent any further loss of life.”

The tiny King nodded, “Please Leia Organa-Solo, lead the way.” Mon Mothma fell into step with Leia as they led the two galactic leaders to their room to discuss their situation privately.

“That is one jittery little fellow, let me tell you that. Mara, you are looking lovely as always,” Lando said, smoothly. His white teeth gleamed through his broad smile. Mara’s eyes fell over the impeccably dressed dark man. His dark teal shirt and black pants clung to his fit form. He sported a dark teal cape lined in red silk.

Mara met Lando’s eyes and said, “Thank you, Lando. You look well yourself. As always, dressed to impress. I hope you don’t complain if your silk shirt gets dirty here on a Destroyer. How did you get involved in this?”

“I was on Coruscant, delivering a shipment of Alzocian flour to the Senate’s building. I met up with a group of Alzocians who were trying to get a shipment for the Hapans after they heard what happened to their agricultural planet. I offered to help them to bring their load to Coruscant when their ship’s engine blew and needed repairs,” Lando explained.

Mara flashed him a sideways glance, “Right. And who was she?”

Trying to look innocent, Lando’s eyes widened, “Mara, I am so hurt. Haven’t you known me long enough to know that I am a caring person. I believe in helping others in need, helping wherev...”

“Actually, I DO know you. Hence, my original question,” Mara said, glancing sideways at the dark pilot.

Knowing his defeat, Lando began, “Mitriini was absolutely beautiful. She was the captain’s daughter. Lithe, willowy, and even tempered. I think I would’ve stepped right into a Sarlacc Pit if she asked me to. She was that bewitching in her beauty,” Lando said, dreamily.

Rolling her eyes, Mara asked, “So what happened when you got to Coruscant?”

“Oh, when I delivered the shipment, Mon Mothma was trying to leave Coruscant, but her ship needed repairs. I offered to fly her here,” Lando explained.

“You seem to always be in the right place at the right time, don’t you?” Mara asked, planting her fists on her hips.

“Or the wrong place depending on your point of view!” Lando said, chuckling to himself.

Mara grinned. She signaled to her old friend to follow her as she walked towards the turbolift. Upon entering it she asked for the command deck. As the doors shut behind them, she said, "Well I'm glad you're here. There is an attacking fleet that is battling the Hapans and Dellatians. They are utilizing a morph, cloaking technology that was supposed to be available only for the New Republic. Somehow this fleet got their hands upon this technology. All of the ships that entered into the fray appeared as Hapan Dragon Destroyers. They are confusing the Dellaltians and Hapans. I think the ships must be using some kind of a signal between themselves so they know not to destroy their own ships. We need to decipher that code, so the Dellaltians, Hapans, and New Republican ships can figure out which ships to fire upon. Think you could be of assistance to me?"

Lando knitted his black brows together and said, "I can certainly try. I understand from Mon Mothma that they are using Imperial Star Destroyers, correct? I assume you've tried all the Empirical code frequencies we acquired after the fall of the Empire?"

The turbolift door opened and Mara nodded. "Of course, those were the first we tried. They seem to be using something quite advanced." They exited the turbolift to the right and walked past the command deck down a long, winding corridor. At the end they entered a room filled with computers.

"Anything new to report?" Mara asked. The engineers shook their heads. Mara pushed up her sleeves, and said, "Take off your cape, Lando and get comfortable this could be a long night."

Kendu nervously sat in the pilot seat on *The Nubian Hope*. He felt like he was invading someone's privacy being aboard a vessel uninvited. He concentrated on the holo-emitter logs, seeking a private channel for Leia Organa-Solo when a loud *snap hiss* filled the cabin, followed by a shimmering blue blade fitted squarely under his neck.

"Who are you, and why are you sifting through the logs on this vessel?" asked a male voice directly above and behind Kendu's chair.

"I... Master Jedi... please... I am on a mission to help those who are inside. Do not hurt me!" Kendu stammered in his squeaking voice. He saw the blade move slightly away from his neck.

"Kendu Rewgun?"

Kendu turned his head and met Luke's blue-eyed gaze. He let out a huge sigh of relief as Luke snapped off his lightsaber. "Master Skywalker! I am so glad to see you. I can use your help."

Luke sat in the co-pilot's chair and listened to Kendu quickly tell his story.

"Alright, I need to get inside that building then, my help is needed. First, let me give you the access codes to connect you with Leia," Luke said. Kendu worked with the transmitter controls. Knowing the capacities of *The Nubian Hope* since he had updated the ship some time ago, Kendu knew that he had installed special equipment to boost the signals for the ship that should allow them to communicate with the New Republic, even through Nephron's stormy atmospheric conditions. When Kendu activated the frequency enhancers, he nodded at Luke. Luke turned on the holo-emitter and opened a channel to her on the *Jade Saber*. The code routed to a portable transmitter Mara carried.

Relief flooded her face when she saw her husband with Kendu. Luke asked Kendu to get Mara up to date on what he knew of Lady Palpatine's fleet. Leaving Kendu in Mara's hands, Luke then exited Marxx's ship into the pouring rain. As he pulled his hood over his head, he watched *The Millennium Falcon* land on the far ends of the landing platform. Luke raced over and greeted Han, Chewie, and Kyp.

"We don't have much time left. According to Raven's estimates, we've got maybe an hour before the kids lose their air supply," Luke shouted. He glanced at Kyp's ship that sat on the platform, "I checked the logs and Raven and Anakin have been here for a half an hour- hopefully they've already released them, but I can't be sure until we go inside."

"Did Raven tell you anything about this place that we need to be cautious of?" Kyp asked, as they all stood huddled together on the *Falcon's* ramp.

"Not really, other than there are booby traps set up all over the place. We'll have to use caution," Luke said staring pointedly at Han and then Kyp.

"Caution? If that woman hurts one hair on any of my kid's heads, caution's the last thing I'll be thinking about," Han replied, fingers moving towards his blaster. "What're we waiting for?" That being said, Han blast past everyone and raced off into the driving rain. Luke rolled his eyes and followed into step behind his brother-in-law. R2-D2 had disengaged himself from the X-Wing and made to follow Luke into the building. Then seeing 3PO emerge from the ship, Luke shouted to the protocol droid, "You two go onto *The Nubian Hope* and see if you can help Kendu Rewgun."

C-3PO said, "Certainly, Master Luke. Anything you say." The droid clattered down the ramp and greeted his whistling counterpart. "It looks like for once we get to avoid being shot at!"

R2-D2 let out a series of disgusted chirps and whistles, his red gleaming eye swiveled quickly in the rain.

"I am NOT a coward! I am simply saying if Master Luke thinks we can better assist this Kendu Rewgun person, we should be most pleased with the opportunity that has been laid before us. That is all," C-3PO replied as he wandered out into the rain. "Oh I despise getting wet! I do hope I get a fresh oil bath after this day."

R2 beeped in annoyance as he fell into step behind the droid.

"I am not thinking only of myself, I am positive that Master Luke will get you a bath as well," C-3PO said. "Not that you deserve any special treatment, always talking back to your superiors!"

R2-D2 hooted at the thought of 3PO thinking of himself to be superior over anything.

"Oh switch off!" C-3PO said as the two climbed aboard *The Nubian Hope*.

They entered the cockpit to the scream of a small man. A blue image of Mara Jade smirked at the appearance of the droids. She said, "Relax Kendu, C-3PO sometimes scares the living daylight out of me as well, but fortunately for you he is harmless."

"Scared the living daylight out of you? Mistress Mara, I do not understand what you are referring to,"

3-PO said befuddled.

“Take a seat 3PO and listen. As sad as it sounds, we may actually need your help,” Mara replied. Turning back to Kendu she said, “I’m going to send you a direct link to our database over here- hook R2 up and see if maybe he can help decipher the codes for us.”

“An astromech droid?” Kendu asked, incredulously.

“Believe it or not, that little droid’s smarter than practically all of us combined,” Mara said.

Kendu raised an eyebrow at 3PO looking for confirmation as he directed R2 to the computer port.

“She doesn’t know what she’s talking about, Sir,” C-3PO said, indignantly. R2 sent out an arm from his left side and zapped 3PO in the foot. “Watch what you’re doing!”

“Cut it out you two! We’ve got work to do,” Mara shouted.

“Listen to Mistress Mara, R2. Really, sometimes I wonder at your dedication around here,” C-3PO sniffed. “It’s truly amazing that Master Luke has even kep....”

“Is he of any use to us, Mara?” Kendu asked.

“No.”

“Whatever do you mean?” 3PO asked. His yellow eyes darkened as Kendu grinned and deactivated the gregarious droid.

Chapter 36

Anakin firmly stepped on solid ground and wiped the sweat off of his brow. It took him much longer than Raven to navigate the spiral stairwell, due to his size and lack of experience. He wondered what would have possessed Raven’s Grandmother to come up with such an insane obstacle course to illustrate the loyalty of her officers.

He rounded a corner and saw Raven standing, hands on hips, staring at a door. She appeared to be in deep thought.

“What’s going on?” Anakin asked.

Raven put a hand up to silence him, her lips hung lightly open as she seemed to be concentrating hard on something. Faintly, Anakin heard loud repetitious noises emitting from the other side of the door.

She wheeled on Anakin, and said, “Ok, remember this order, 5 seconds, 2 seconds, 7 seconds, 3 seconds, then repeat: 5 then 2 then 7 then 3. Got it?” Before Anakin could ask she opened the door and stepped forward into a neon lit chamber. The noise from the chamber assaulted Anakin’s eardrums. The smell of burnt fuel filled the room. “Start counting!” Raven yelled.

On the count of five, Raven leapt forward just as she avoided two large durasteel blocks crashing together where she had been standing. As they moved out of the way, Anakin stepped into the spot she vacated. On the count of two Raven jumped into the next section as 4 large circular saws buzzed into the field, Anakin vaulted forward just as large blocks began to crash towards him and the saws receded. At the sound of the saws emerging, Anakin quickly stepped into the next chamber he watched as Raven stood counting in the three second chamber and leapt forward as a heavy stone crashed down where she stood previously.

Anakin jumped forward and felt heat at his back- not wasting time to check what kind of a hideous death he just missed he jumped forward as the stone began to drop. Raven jumped from her five second spot into the two second position. Anakin watched a stun field crackled behind her back. Marveling at the creativity of the creators of this maze from hell, he stepped forward once it cleared. Raven's arms pinwheeled as she barely avoided getting smashed by two more large durasteel blocks. Her skirt smashed between the two stones. Quickly, she unfastened it and let the blocks take her fabric. Anakin gulped, and refocused on his task at hand. He moved into the spot she'd just vacated. Standing in the seven second spot Anakin looked ahead and it appeared that the course was coming to an end, about five places ahead. He watched Raven step forward as flamethrowers covered the space she vacated with fire. Grimacing, Anakin stepped forward, then jumped ahead as the flames ceased.

"Try to get through the very last one as quickly as possible! It's outside of the normal timing parameters, it's only got a one and a half second window to get through it! You'll have to jump!" Raven shouted over the deafening noise in the chamber.

Anakin shouted back, "Got it." He jumped forward and missed the flamethrowers. He watched Raven dance away from more circular saws and he followed her in hot pursuit. Raven narrowly missed another stun field. Anakin stepped between the receding saws and waited for the stun field to clear, as Raven jumped and moved ahead as large spiked rods crisscrossed into the space. Anakin's stomach churned as he noticed some of the spikes were caked in dried blood.

Anakin stepped out of the saws and into the spikes. The last obstacle consisted of four blades that continuously closed together into a pinpoint hole. The one and a half second Raven referred to was when the opening was just large enough for one person to throw himself clear through its center without getting cut. He watched Raven closely as her muscles tightened. She threw her arms back and pounced clear through the center of a collapsing circle. Anakin waited as the durasteel clompers crashed and cleared out before he stepped away from the rising spikes. He watched the collapsing circle and saw Raven peering at him from the other side. Her sweaty face offered encouragement. The circle widened and she yelled, "Now!"

Not thinking twice, Anakin dove straight through the opening, the end of his robe got caught in the center and cleanly got sliced off. Landing in pile on the ground, Anakin's blue eyes stared at his brother's girlfriend, as he raked his fingers through his spiky dark brown hair.

"You sure have a fascinating way of showing a guy a good time. Explain to me again why we're doing this?" Anakin said, as he grabbed her offered hand and groaned to his feet. He absently smoothed out his ruined Jedi robe.

Raven stared up at Jacen's tall younger brother and let out a long breath, "Because although I'm an excellent shot, I highly doubted you and I could take out several garrisons of stormtroopers by ourselves. I know, this is a pain, but I can guarantee we're not going to get followed down here. And

I've already done this before, so I can lead us relatively quickly through this mess. OK?"

Dropping his head in a nod, Anakin replied, "Sure. I get your point. So how much longer?"

"Unfortunately, there are three more obstacles. The next two are not bad....The last one is... challenging."

Staring down at Raven, Anakin chewed on his lip and pointed ahead, "Well, let's get to it."

Nodding, Raven led them down a small flight of stairs and they turned a corner. The smell of salt water filled the air. Anakin groaned when the one hundred foot chamber revealed itself before his eyes. Stepping stones that sat atop tall pillars wove erratically across a deep, black pool of salt water from one side of the water's edge to the next.

"What?" Raven asked.

"I'm going to assume I'm missing something," Anakin said. "This can't be all that we have to do."

Raven smiled. "Yeah, this one is fun. Every fourth stepping stone will explode if you land on it, so be prepared to make a large leap every three stones. Also, the stones are not stable and they move around a bit... just to give you an extra bit of challenge. Oh and lastly, you can't see them, but hidden in the depths of the water are about six guberfish who would love nothing better than for you to accidentally fall into the water and give them their mid morning meal."

Something occurred to Anakin as he detected a sliver of pride in Raven's voice as she described the course, he asked, "Uh, you just had to complete these courses, right? You didn't help her to design them, did you?"

Raven's eyes widened innocently. She pointed at herself and sweetly asked, "Who me?" She giggled as she stepped out onto the first stone.

"That wasn't a very reassuring answer, Raven!" Anakin shouted, as she lightly danced over the stepping stones.

As she moved further into the room, Raven shouted over her shoulder, "No, I didn't help her design them. This was actually my eighteenth Birthday present from her. I got to complete this course and was given my own ship. I actually have fond memories of these obstacle courses because they represent the freedom I won."

She stood a third of the way across the pool before she snuck a glance back at Anakin as he gingerly stepped onto the first stone. He immediately threw his arms out and spun them in order to regain his balance. The stone teetered under his vast weight. Anakin's heart pounded. He inhaled a deep breath and gingerly stepped far to the right onto the next stone. Quickly, he stretched his other foot across. He threw his arms straight over his head to control the swinging. As the stone slowed its sway, he stepped further to the right onto the next stone.

"Remember, skip the next pillar," Raven shouted, as she lightly pranced further ahead in the obstacle course.

Glancing to his right he found the fourth step was enticingly close to his feet. He saw the fifth stone off to the left. For once relief filled Anakin as he easily stepped onto the fifth stone. Although his weight made balancing on the small pillars a challenge, his long legs made navigating from step to step easy. Anakin carefully dashed through the course, remembering to ignore the fourth steps. As he made his way half way through the course, his left foot skidded onto the surface of a stone. He threw out his arms to prevent himself from falling into the water. He let out a sharp intake of breath as the blaster he'd carried from Marxx's ship splashed loudly as it fell from his utility belt disappearing into the dark water's murky depths. He threw his left foot forward and jumped onto the next stone to regain his balance.

"Oh no," Raven said, from nearly the end of the course. "Get moving Anakin! You probably just disturbed the guberfish with that falling blaster."

The unstable pillar Anakin stood on rocked as if something, very large had just struck its base. His mind reeled and he remembered the next step would be number four. He vaulted onto the fifth step and glanced to his right as a large scaly creature's hunched back rose up in the water. Anakin gulped and reached for his lightsaber.

Safely on the other bank, Raven cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted, "That won't work in here! My grandmother has some sort of a special anti-Force shield installed in the lower levels of this building. You'll have to get closer if you want me to throw you my blaster."

The once calm water in the pool began to churn in loud, crashing waves. Anakin's bright blue eyes swept over the course and the pillars all began to sway and became covered by waves as all of the guberfish began to surface. Smelling the scent of his own sweat, Anakin took a deep breath and began to traverse the course as rapidly as he could muster. He advanced six more stones when his heart dropped to his feet. All the hairs on his neck stood on end. Slowly he turned around and saw one of the large creatures swimming, fast in his direction. The creature's hideous head snapped its large fangs towards his prey.

"Anakin! Catch!" Raven shouted.

Lightning fast reflexes, Anakin turned, extended his right arm and grabbed the blaster Raven threw in his direction. Crouching on the stone, Anakin swiftly thought of firing, then noted that the creature was actually aiming at Raven. Holstering the blaster, Anakin leaped high in the air and landed on the guberfish's slick back. Grabbing its scales he hitched a ride as the aquatic beast plowed right through the obstacle course. Anakin tightened his grip as the beast crashed into a pillar causing an ear-shattering explosion. Sprayed with water, the beast did not veer off course.

"Are you insane???" Raven screamed, as the creature zoomed closer and closer in her direction. Eyes widening, Raven raced out of the doorway and plastered herself against a wall. From inside the chamber a series of large explosions quaked the ground under her feet. She screamed as the hallway filled with the smell of burning fish flesh and stone shrapnel ricocheted throughout the hallway. As she peeled her protective arms off from around her head, she saw Anakin rolling into the hallway covered from head to toe in fish flesh. The right side of his face began to swell from a large bruise and blood trickled from a cut by his chin.

Shaking his head, Anakin rose unsteadily to his feet and began to wipe off the guberfish flesh. Face flushed from excitement, grinning wildly at the very confused Raven, Anakin offered his hand to her to

take. Anakin said, "I assumed that there would be a series of explosives towards the end. Figured the fish would fry himself. Looks like I was right."

Wrinkling her nose, Raven said, "That was really stupid. And you stink!"

"Sorry- but hey, it got me through the course faster," Anakin said, hopefully.

"Yeah, well let's just hope your little stunt didn't alert my grandmother," Raven said. "Come on, we're wasting time." She grabbed a hold of a pouch in her utility belt and extracted two large carving knives. Handing one to Anakin, she flattened herself against a door. "Ok, for his one- the lights on the floor change colors. If you step on a tile that goes red, be ready with your knife. A Nazzizzi bat will fly into the chamber and you will need to kill it before it spits on you."

"Nazzizzi bats, great, their spittle is venomous, it will burn through flesh like acid," Anakin said, gripping his knife handle tighter.

"Right," Raven said. She then pulled out two pairs of wraparound goggles and handed him a pair. "To protect your eyes. If the spittle lands on it, you've got a couple seconds to remove these before the acid reaches your eyes."

As he adjusted the yellow tinted glasses to his head, Anakin said, "So you planned on taking us through this from the beginning? What else do you have hidden in your pouches?"

Smirking, Raven said, "Wouldn't you like to know? This chamber's only about thirty feet long-but the tiles change color so quickly we will have to battle the bats. Aim for their bellies- not their throats- if you slit their throats you may get their spit on your hand- or it will eat your blade. The lights confuse them, so they really aren't that hard to kill. But as you're standing around waiting to kill one, more get released."

"Why don't we just run like hell?" Anakin asked.

"The door on the other side only opens once it no longer detects any bats flying. The last tiles do not change. So if we kill them all- get to the tiles as fast as possible. Oh and don't let the bats fall- their weight will set off the tiles also. There's a bin to throw their carcasses in. Ready?" Raven asked then punched open the door before Anakin could answer.

She bolted as Anakin followed behind her into the room as the door silently shut behind his back. Anakin's eyes adjusted to the strobbing neon lights that assaulted his eyes. Grateful for the goggles to cut down on the glare, Anakin followed Raven as they dashed across the colorfully lit floor. As they raced towards the wall opened and a foot long, black object flew into the chamber towards the door they entered. The bat's high pitched squeal echoed in the vault.

"Can we just wait for it to come over here?" Anakin said, as they both safely stood on the solid stones.

"It won't come. See that bright yellow light in the corner? The bat's attracted to it. One of us will have to go and get it," Raven said.

"Oh that's convenient," Anakin moaned.

“Oh yes, my grandmother thought of everything to make each of these lovely courses as difficult, and annoying as possible,” Raven stated. Without another word, lightly she leapt across the room, landed firmly on two blocks just under the bat, slashed upwards and gutted the creature. Expertly she grabbed it before it fell to the floor and dashed across the floor. She threw the dead bat into a corner bin and raced towards Anakin. Just before she hit the final blocks, the lights under her feet turned red. Raven groaned loudly. Anakin seemed ready to race forward as another bat escaped. Raven stopped him, “Let me do it, my feet are smaller. Only if I set off more blocks and more bats enter the vault should you even think of coming out here.”

Anakin watched Raven lightly skip towards the flying creature and he shouted, “What you want to do all the work and take all the credit?”

Raven laughed, “Trust me, we’ll need your brawn for the last one, besides time is running out!” Expertly gutting the next bat, Raven threw it towards the bin. The bat flopped off and hit a block on the floor just as it turned red. “BLAST IT!” Raven shouted. Anakin picked up the dead creature and discarded the carcass. Raven’s feet activated two more red blocks and the room filled with three bats.

As Raven danced amongst the leathery, fluttering wings, Anakin grinned and asked, “You sure you don’t want my help?”

“NO! I am going to toss these things to you though. Get rid of them,” Raven said.

She squealed as one of the bat’s wings caressed the base of her neck. “Yuck! I feel like I’m on Dagobah again. I hate slithery, leathery, creatures!” With that statement she stabbed two bats in one thrust and tossed them at Anakin who chucked them into the bin. Thrown into confusion the last bat flew straight towards Anakin as he just turned back his attention to the room. Upset by the death of his fellow bats, the remaining bat opened his mouth and spit at Anakin’s face. In a single move, with his left hand Anakin removed his goggles that took the entire brunt of the saliva, and with his right hand he skewered the bat on his knife. Tossing it into the bin, he glanced to his left as Raven stood, sides heaving, at his side. The door opened behind them, allowing them out of the chamber.

Jauntily stepping out, Raven smiled and said, “See, I told you that was no problem.”

Anakin rolled his eyes and followed Raven towards the last obstacle. To himself he mumbled, “Sure, she thought the last 2 were simple. If she thinks those are easy, I’d hate to see what she thinks is hard.”

Chapter 37

Standing on the bridge of *The Peacekeeper*, Leia, Sshruva Proo, Mon Mothma, and retired Admiral Ackbar stood around a two holo-grids that depicted both battles that raged in the Tion and Hapes Clusters. Ta’a Chume stood off to the side talking into a commlink.

“Alright,” Ta’a Chume said as she got off of her commlink with the captains of two of her ships battling in each of the Clusters. “They are all set.”

“Ok, just to clarify once more, both of you are going to call off your fleets into a full scale retreat. Two Hapan Dragon Destroyers will stay behind, take an image, and pinpoint the location of the enemy

destroyers. The New Republic fleet will then come in take out the ships. We will only call you back into battle if we need your help. Although, with the ships masquerading as Hapan Destroyers, it shouldn't be too tough to take them out," Admiral Ackbar said, his large lips steadily moving as his red head bobbed up and down.

"Excuse me, Admiral. You are forgetting one thing," Ta'a Chume said. "These ships can most likely become anything. Who knows when we leap out into hyperspace what the fleet will change into. And do we have any guarantee that they will stay in our clusters? What if they all disappear? Their raids could keep going on for weeks and weeks."

"Our warships all have their friendly fire frequencies set in order for us to identify our ships from the enemy, if that is needed," Admiral Ackbar said, emphatically.

Opening a commlink to the engineering room, Leia asked Kendu via Mara's open line, "Kendu, what should we expect the opposing fleet to do?"

Through a large amount of static, Kendu's small voice echoed on the bridge, "I'm not positive what ships Lady Neffrous added to the holomatrix on her fleet of ships. I can bet that she probably has the designs of many of the ships in the New Republic fleet in storage. She designed this fleet specifically create confusion in battle. She'll use whatever designs will best benefit her fleet in the end."

Leia nodded, "Alright, thank you, Kendu. If that happens, let's hope that Mara can come up with a way to crack their code. Do you think she'll have her ships fall back if the Hapan and Dellaltian fleets vanish?"

Kendu said, "According to Princess Tenel Ka, Lady Neffrous is determined to take over the two clusters- by brutal force if necessary. I have a feeling that since she has committed her entire fleet, that she's not about to call off her attack. She'll tell her ships to attack whoever comes along to try and stop her from her objective."

Frowning, Leia nodded her head and said, "Ok, thank you Kendu. Begin the countdown."

Ta'a Chume and King Sshruva Proo activated their retreat signals simultaneously. The remaining Hapan and Dellaltian destroyers vanished from battle.

As they watched the holomaps- images came back from the two Hapan vessels pinpointing the location of the enemy fighters. A group of engineers on the bridge began to map the path of each of the vessels manually as the New Republic's fleet of sixty ships divided and descended upon Palpatine's fleet. Two of Palpatine's ships found their shield generators under attack. Their morphing technology disappeared in a blink of an eye revealing now crippled Imperial Star Destroyers. The New Republic vessels swarmed around the exposed ships and brought them down within moments. Cheers erupted on the bridge as the two ships vanished off of the hologrid. Their voices died as each Hapan cruiser suddenly changed into exact duplicates of each of the New Republic ships.

Ta'a Chume groaned and said, "I hate it when I guess right."

"That is impossible! How could they have known exactly what ships we sent to each battle?" Admiral Ackbar said. Ackbar then groaned as all of the ships in the holo-grid began emitting the same friendly fire frequencies. He could no longer tell which fleet a ship belonged to by their codes.

“I don’t know,” Mon Mothma replied. She peaked a white eyebrow, and whispered to Leia, “A traitor aboard?”

Leia slightly shook her head. “No. Besides, there wouldn’t have been enough time to send over the fleet rosters to the opposing forces. This woman’s been planning this attack for a long time. She very likely read up on how our fleet divides and enters into battle. We’ll just have to hope our fighters know which ships to destroy.”

The lead engineer, Corporal Darak nervously raced to Leia’s side. He whispered to her, “They are jamming our frequencies so we cannot send the co-ordinates of the opposing ships to our fighters. The longer the ships stay morphed, the harder it is for our engineers to track them. We lost about half of the ships.”

“Keep trying,” Leia said. Scowling, she picked up her commlink, “Mara, anything yet?”

“Sorry, Leia. We’re working on it,” Mara replied.

“Well hurry it up!” Leia said as she watched three New Republic vessels explode and vanish off of the grid.

Mara didn’t bother to respond.

“Were those ours or theirs?” Sshruva Proo asked.

“I have no idea,” Leia replied with a twinge of sadness. Leaning over the holo- grid, Leia locked her elbows and felt a large tension knot form at the base of her skull. Her mouth began to dry as she waited for word from Han or Luke that her children were safe. Every minute that passed, she felt the knot grow tighter and larger.

Mon Mothma’s pale eyes fell upon her old friend. She moved around the holo-grid and placed a warm hand over Leia’s and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Fighting back tears, Leia smiled and forced herself to pay attention to the battle as it unfolded before her eyes.

Tenel Ka and General Margatall wove their way down a long stairwell towards the bowels of the building. Tenel Ka felt a cold void in the Force emanating from the lower levels of the building. Since she was unable to pick up her friends life-force energies through the Force anywhere else in the building, she determined they must be located in the far lowest reaches of the fortress.

Although Tenel Ka could not connect with the Force, her heightened warrior instincts told her that Jacen, Jaina, Marxx, and Lowie were being held in a chamber not too far ahead. She rubbed her bruised and throbbing elbow where a large spike had crashed into it when they opened the door at the top of the staircase. She’d cursed herself for not anticipating the entrance to their hidden location would be booby-trapped. Margatall and Tenel Ka carefully moved their way through the spikes and began their decent. Ahead, Tenel Ka heard muffled sounds. The stairwell ended two large doors, one lead straight ahead, the other to the right. She leaned against both doors and determined she heard voices coming from the right sided door. She stood back remembering what happened to her at the top of the stairwell.

Kicking her leg forward quickly, she hit the unlock mechanism and the door slid open, spraying the doorframe in a fine mist of a sticky substance. The Princess and Margatall pressed themselves against the far wall and covered their mouths and noses, allowing the mist to dissipate. Once cleared they dashed through the door to see her Jedi friends behind a series of glass shielded windows. They entered the left side of the chamber, a circular observation passageway stood in front of the chamber.

Jacen noticed Tenel Ka first. She saw him grinning and shouting at her from inside the chamber. His labored words were muffled from the thick layers of duraglass. Tenel Ka noted that each of her friends seemed to be quite tired, most likely due to the lack of oxygen. Marxx's chin rested on his chest.

Margatall tried to open the door to the chamber, he said, "This thing's coded shut. Unless I had a code descrambler or the code to get in, we'll never get the door open."

Frowning, Tenel Ka said, "See if you can find a communication device so we can talk to them."

They began to search the walls of the chamber but were unable to locate a commlink or commbox. Frustrated, Tenel Ka stared at Jacen put her hand up to her face and shook her head, hoping he'd figure out she couldn't find a way to talk to them.

Seeming to understand the signal, Jacen licked his lips and stared up at his hands. Tenel Ka followed his gaze and watched as he pointed his left index finger towards the far left wall of the room. Tenel Ka followed the direction but saw nothing on the wall inside the room to see what he would be pointing towards. She shrugged her shoulders and stared at him questioningly again.

Margatall wandered the small passageway and came the dead end. As he stood there, Jacen jumped up and down, vigorously nodding his head. He settled down and began to breath heavily.

"He seems to think there is something over there," Tenel Ka said, to Margatall.

"I found it," Margatall said and flipped open the seamless control panel for the room. He opened it and stared at the controls and switches.

"Are the door controls there?" Tenel Ka asked.

"No, but look at this indicator. This is the air supply control box," Margatall said. He raked his fingers through his matted and dirty blond hair and he began to work with the codes to try and stop the oxygen from depleting. Tenel Ka gave a thumbs up to Jacen. She glanced at Jaina who looked very frustrated. Tenel Ka figured Jaina most likely felt helpless trapped in there unable to assist with helping to break the codes. Lowie seemed to mirror Jaina's expression.

Tenel Ka raced over to the door controls and yanked off the access cover revealing a myriad of wires. She pulled them slightly to the side to let Lowie see the mess of tiny cables. The blond Wookiee bellowed inside, his roar vibrated the windows. Jacen winced from the noise and rolled his eyes. He listened as Lowie barked several things. Jacen then mouthed directions to Tenel Ka, she watched his lips carefully. "Red wire to blue. Then cut the green wire's casing and twist the three together." Tenel Ka watched him repeat the directions 3 times then gave him a thumbs up.

"I got it!" Margatall yelled from around the corner. Tenel Ka's gray eyes filled with despair as she saw several red, blue and green wires. She had no idea which particular wires Lowie was meaning for her to

work with. She glanced up from her collection of wires and saw Marxx lift his head and smile brightly as he inhaled a long, deep breath. A large blast of air rustled through the hairs of the captive Jedi.

Joyous that her friends would no longer suffocate, Tenel Ka shouted, "Come help me!"

Margatall raced around the windows and dropped beside her amongst the wires. She related Lowie's instructions. Carefully, Margatall located a green wire that connected to the code control box and bit its casing to expose its copper innards. Then he sifted through the mounds of wires and found the red and blue wires that lead from the release switch. He twisted them together. The muffled silence broke as the jubilant cries of Tenel Ka's friends voices filled the hallway as the door opened.

Offering a rare smile, Tenel Ka's gray eyes beamed as her friends showered her with their thanks. She said, "Do not thank me, thank General Margatall. He figured out how to get your air back and open the door."

Together Tenel Ka and Margatall stepped towards each Jedi and cranked loose the chains that held their arms. Jaina winced as the increased bloodflow sent spikes of prickling pain through her arms. Simple pins held their cuffs together and in only a couple of minutes the four Jedi were free. They circled Tenel Ka and simultaneously bombarded her with questions:

"How did you find us, Tenel Ka?" Jacen asked.

"Is anyone else with you?" Jaina asked.

Marxx asked, "Where are we?"

She threw up her hands and said, "Let us get out of here, I will give you all the details later." Amongst the noise, she did not hear the footsteps that entered the chamber.

Tenel Ka glanced down in confusion as General Margatall and Lowie collapsed on the floor. Darkglider stood holding a blaster that emitted a single line of smoke from its barrel. Before the Jedi could react, the chamber filled with stormtroopers.

Jaina groaned, "So much for the rescue."

"This seems a bit like overkill, don't you think?" Jacen said as he surveyed fifteen stormtroopers.

Marxx and Tenel Ka shared a glance trying to determine if they could take out their captors. Marxx noted the blasters were all set to stun. Before he could try and relate anything to her, Darkglider said, "Fire."

At once, the troopers blasted the remaining four Jedi with their blasters set on stun. As they collapsed onto the floor, Darkglider directed to nine of the stormtroopers, "Take the two males up to Lady Neffrous and keep them stunned. The rest of you, bring the females and follow me."

One of the stormtroopers glanced at Lowie and Margatall sprawled on the floor and asked, "What do you want done with these two, Sir?"

"My blaster was set for kill. Leave them be. They're dead."

Luke glanced over the balcony, marveling that they had managed to ascend three flights undetected. The three men and the wookiee raced behind a grouping of four pillars as a regiment of six stormtroopers and a man appeared from the left end of the hallway and headed past their hiding places.

Chewie emitted a sharp growl of pain.

Han's eyes grew wide, he whispered, "Quiet!"

The Wookiee rubbed his throbbing head from hitting it against a low overhanging. He let out a apologetic whimper.

Kyp and Luke concentrated on the stormtroopers through the Force. Kyp slid his fingers around his pillar and glanced at the stormtroopers. They carried two women. Pressing himself against his pillar he mouthed at Luke, "Jaina and Tenel Ka."

Sneaking a glance at Han, Luke nodded. Through the Force, he sensed they were alive but stunned or sedated. Kyp again peered around the pillar. Seeing the stormtroopers vanish to the right at the end of the long hallway he stepped out into the open. Just as he stepped out, a fresh, full regiment of stormtroopers emerged behind him at the left end of the hallway.

"Halt! Stay where you are!" one of the stormtroopers shouted as the crew of white armored men picked up their pace, raised their blasters and ran towards Kyp. Kyp pulled his arm out of his capes fold, and threw out his hands and with the Force yanked two of the blasters out of the grips of the front row stormtroopers. The other surprised guards began firing at Kyp. He manipulated the weapons in the air so they pointed back toward the stormtroopers as they flew towards his hands. He grabbed the hilts and began to fire as he ducked back behind his pillar. The hallway filled with the ear-shattering sound of blaster fire. He kicked a blaster towards Luke and began to attack the approaching guards. Luke activated his shimmering green lightsaber and deflected a succession of oncoming shots before he felt overly exposed. Ducking behind the pillar he picked up Kyp's spare blaster and joined in with the shooting.

The stench of metallic smoke greeted Han's nose as he raised his blaster and began to pick off the completely exposed stormtroopers. He yelled to Kyp, "Great going, kid! Don't be surprised if every trooper in this place is now alerted to our position!"

"Sorry, Han. I was just trying to see where those guys were taking Jaina and Tenel Ka," Kyp said as he fired at an approaching stormtrooper. The guard screamed and flew off of his feet as he pitched over the railing towards the floor.

"Jaina and Tenel Ka?" Han asked with concern.

Kyp gulped realizing he'd just given Han a reason to do something foolish.

Luke groaned as he noticed a dozen stormtroopers racing up the stairwell from two floors directly below them. He yelled, "Chewie, help me!"

Chewbacca turned his bowcaster towards the stairwell, roared and sprayed the guards with his long range fire.

“Thanks, Chewie!” Luke yelled, as the troopers tumbled into a lifeless pile at the bottom of the stairs. Another regiment of twenty four stormtroopers appeared from the far left end of the hall. And the six who had carried the female Jedi away, reappeared from right end. The Jedi, Han and Chewie were surrounded, and running out of ammunition.

Kyp lay his empty blaster down and stuck out his hand towards three of the closest stormtroopers and Force-yanked their blasters towards his hands. They clanked against the stone floor and circumvented the pillars.

“Thanks, kid,” Han said, as he picked up his fresh weapon aimed at the six troopers to the right. Luke’s weapon ceased firing and he picked up his fresh weapon and began to pick off the stormtroopers who hid behind the piles of bodies from the original regiment. He stole a glance down the hall and twenty four more stormtroopers appeared. Luke’s heart dropped and his palms began to sweat. He found himself wondering how they were going to get out of this mess.

Kyp’s voice broke through Luke’s concerned thoughts, “Well, at least they seem to be out of the room.”

“Yeah, but we don’t know what happened to Marxx, Jacen, or Lowie. And where are Anakin and Raven?” Luke asked.

Not having an answer to give Luke, Kyp continued firing at the onslaught of white armor, hoping upon all hope that reinforcements of some sort would appear to help them get out of this mess. His stomach dropped in guilt as he realized that if they all got killed, it would be all his own fault. As Kyp continued to shoot at the stormtroopers, he vowed to himself, if they got out of this mess, he would do everything in his power to protect his friends from harm by whatever means necessary. He then realized that might not happen. Knowing he owed his freedom and life to Han and Luke, Kyp decided to take matters into his own hands. He let go of his calm state and allowed his frustration and anger to take control of his hands. Inwardly, Kyp manifested his rage and he felt a swirling vortex of power building. With a large shove, he created an immense Force-field against the opposing wall and wiped all of the dead stormtroopers and the ten hiding behind the dead bodies flying up and over the balcony railing. Screaming in terror, the living stormtroopers flew speedily into the large statue of Palpatine. Their cries silenced on impact.

Alerted to the Dark power rising around them, Luke yelled at Kyp, “Stop it, Kyp! Don’t do that to yourself.”

“This is no time for a lesson on right versus wrong in using the Force, Luke,” Kyp said, flashing his green eyes towards his worried Master. “Trust me, I’m in complete control.”

Kyp then returned to picking off the stormtroopers as they now had nowhere to hide.

Completely unconvinced, Luke thought to himself, *Great. Kyp and control, not two words I readily associate with each other.* His heart skipped a panicky beat as his body shuddered from waves of pain that seared their way through the Force. Luke’s eyes met Kyp’s and they both doubled their efforts to kill the stormtroopers. Each avoided Han’s eyes, for the pain they felt came from Jaina.

Chapter 38

Jaina and Tenel Ka awoke to find themselves chained to a wall in a large dark room. The stink of stale perspiration filled the air. The Jedis peered around the room to gather their bearings. Tables filled with dirty, jagged tools and weapons lay neatly arranged in rows.

“Where are Jacen and Marxx?” Jaina asked. “I sure hope Lowie’s Ok.”

“I do too. I do not know where the guys were taken. I am actually more concerned about what is going to happen to us at the moment,” Tenel Ka replied. She twisted her shoulders trying to break free of the constraints that held her to the wall. Her handless arm was trapped at the elbow.

Whispering, Jaina said, “The Force shielding doesn’t seem to be turned on in here. Let me see if I can get our constraints unlocked.”

“Oh, you will not have time to do that my pretty Jedi,” came a low, sneering voice from the shadows. Darkglider appeared holding his large, wicked knife. Jaina stared at the man’s dark, slimey long hair, sallow skin and sunken eyes. She felt nothing but pure evil emanating through the Force from the man. Delighted with the challenge of outsmarting two Jedi females, Darkglider decided not to bother turning on the Force shielding. He’d spent his life around Lady Neffrous and learned to easily deflect her Force flinging rages- he decided he could definitely handle two girls. Confidently, he knew no one would be able to penetrate his magnetically sealed, durasteel door. He would have plenty of time to do whatever he wished to these two Jedi.

“Darkglider,” Tenel Ka spat.

“Darkglider? Isn’t he the man who tortured Raven when she was growing up?” Jaina asked, nervously.

Ignoring Jaina, Darkglider turned his pale eyes at the writhing titian Princess, “Yes, we meet again, your Highness. Apparently you broke your deal with M’lady. So I got rewarded by being allowed to take care of you, however I saw fit.” He moved his blade down Tenel Ka’s body, over her dirty and shredded gown and ended it at the ripped hem. He licked his lips and eyed Jaina, “Two beauties to do whatever I wish to do with... Oh, I have plans for the two of you...”

Jaina sunk into the Force and created a Force wall and shoved him to the floor away from Tenel Ka. His knife clattered out of his hands. His eyes burned with hatred. Tenel Ka sunk into the Force and sent the knife spinning into the farthest corners of the room under a bunch of tables. Jaina evenly said, “Don’t...even...THINK about touching either one of us!”

Lurching to his feet, Darkglider grabbed an instrument off of the closest table. It was a bayonet. He approached Jaina, slammed a hand against her chest and cut a slash into her right arm. Jaina howled in pain. Darkglider moved the weapon up to her neck.

“I suggest you learn your manners, pretty one. Next time, I won’t aim for your arm, but your neck,” Darkglider said. Jaina moved her head aside to avoid the clouds of rancid breath that escaped from his

mouth.

Anger surged through Tenel Ka. She calmed herself and with the Force picked up a long dagger off of the table and pointed it towards Darkglider's back. She sunk deeper into the Force, to give the weapon more momentum in its thrust and she let it fly.

With lightning fast reflexes, Darkglider turned and grabbed the dagger mid air before it could plunge into his back. He grinned, "Thank you, Princess. I wanted that. I suggest you stop doing that- although I do not doubt your abilities, you may accidentally skewer yourselves. Course you may find suicide preferable to what I plan to do to you."

Suddenly Jaina felt a familiar presence in the Force. *Kyp!.. and Uncle Luke!* she thought. She sensed her father and Chewie nearby as well. From beyond the closed doors she heard blasterfire. Tenel Ka glanced over at Jaina and they each slightly nodded.

Tenel Ka said, "It is me you want, Darkglider, not her. Leave her alone."

"So noble. The true marks of a Princess. Sorry, love, but I get both of you," Darkglider said. He approached her again and carefully placed the tip of his blade against her right arm sleeve where it met the shoulder. He started to cut the fabric. Tenel Ka's jaw clamped shut as frustration began to build and gnaw at her brain.

"You won't get away with this. We have powerful friends," Jaina said. Her brandy-colored eyes were open wide, speaking to distract him from his disturbing attack on Tenel Ka.

"Yes, you do. And I'm afraid that none of them will survive long enough to save you two," Darkglider said, and triumphantly slashed the rest of the fabric on Tenel Ka's sleeve off. He then bent forward and licked Tenel Ka's cheek. Jaina groaned in disgust and with the Force, picked up some of Tenel Ka's braids and poked Darkglider in the eye. He yelped in pain and backed off.

Through the Force, Jaina felt Luke and Kyp grow more frustrated and their resolve seemed to waver. As she watched the blood from her cut on her arm drip to the floor, Jaina began to panic.

"I've had enough of this," Darkglider said, holding his eye. He placed his left hand on the wall and activated a switch. Jaina felt her connection to the Force end.

"Now Princess, seriously. I have another matter to discuss with you. Where is that ungrateful snot Kendu? He wasn't with you in your failed attempt to free your friends, so where is he?"

Tenel Ka's face betrayed nothing. "So that is what this is all about? I do not know who you are talking about."

"You think I'm a fool, do you? I know you were in that cell with that ungrateful twerp. What did he tell you?" Darkglider said, as he leered closely to the writhing Princess.

"Leave her alone!" Jaina shouted. Anger rose in Jaina as she watched helplessly as the disgusting man continued to torment her friend. She wanted to yank his lower lip up and over his head to shut him up.

"Not a chance. I know she knows where that mouse of an engineer went. And I am going to enjoy

extracting that information from her,” Darkglider said.

Tenel Ka frowned as Gwynalyn’s henchman wandered away from the two Jedi and into the shadows. His acrid voice teased, “Don’t go anywhere.”

Jaina silently wondered where her husband and brother were being held and prayed that they were faring better. Tenel Ka began to regret that she never got to tell Anakin her feelings. Knowing Anakin was safely far away from the crazy people who controlled this planet, made Tenel Ka feel her current situation was tolerable.

Before they could further think of anything, their restraints suddenly came to life with electrical charges. Blinding pain, chased all thoughts out of both Tenel Ka and Jaina’s minds as they began to scream.

“You have GOT to be kidding! Exactly how is my immense size supposed to help with this course?” Anakin asked, despair creeping into his voice.

“Ok, it’s probably more of a hindrance than an asset, but I bet you’ll get through it just fine,” Raven said, hopefully.

Groaning, Anakin stared at the cavernous, steam filled open chamber. On the far other side stood a door. Between them and their salvation loomed a seemingly endless, rocky pit that far below finally ended with a sea of churning, angry, hot lava. The stink of burning sulfur stung Anakin’s nose. Between their side of the chamber and the next were a series of 2-inch thick hanging steps, suspended from the ceiling several feet apart from each other. Each step swung from the light breeze produced from the volcanic activity below. Clouds of steam fogged the area, making it difficult to always maintain a clear view of the opposite door. Anakin wiped his brow as the heat in the chamber made him sweat.

“This mountain is really a dormant volcano. This chamber takes the steam from the lava below and sucks it up through those vents,” Raven said as she pointed to the large round holes that dotted the stone ceiling. “There’s enough energy produced to keep the building electrified for decades,” Raven explained, reached out and placed a foot on the first step.

“So we don’t have to worry about any flying bats, or getting smashed by things do we?” Anakin asked as he rubbed some circulation into his arms, readying himself for the next challenge.

Raven lightly swung her rung and grabbed out for the next one and placed her foot on it and then finally let go of the previous step. It swung and crashed into Anakin. He snatched it and felt his stomach begin to churn.

“Nope. This is the most challenging because most of it is psychological. If you’re terrified of heights, or have vertigo, you’ll be useless on this course,” Raven said as she swung forward to the next step, climbed on and let go of the previous step. Over her shoulder she shouted, “And you do have to have great balance and timing. Let me get about five steps in front of you before you go.”

“Ok. Are you sure they will be able to hold my weight?” Anakin asked warily, as his eyes traveled up to the grappling hooks embedded in the rocks above that supported each step.

“They should. Grandmother had a couple Gamorreans test it,” Raven replied.

Anakin felt slightly better. He walked onto the first rung and watched Raven traverse the course ahead. He swayed the step, inhaled a sharp intake of breath and caught the next swing. A trickle of sweat traveled down his neck as he detangled the two rungs and swung forward onto the new step. His heart hammered in his chest as he swung erratically towards the next swinging perch. Above his head he heard the supports groan. Gulping, he rocked himself and attempted to grab the next rung. He missed. Gritting his teeth, he swung farther and finally snagged the next perch. He continued across the field and found his long legs did help him to better reach the next steps faster.

Anakin found himself gaining on Raven. He glanced at her back and watched her advance onto her next step. Her foot slipped and her hands slid down the wires and caught the very edge of the board before she would have plummeted into the pit. She howled as the flesh of her palms burned against the metal wires.

“RAVEN!” Anakin shouted, as the dark haired girl dangled precariously below her perch. She watched helplessly as her knife fell out of her pouch and tumbled down towards the orange lake of lava. “Hold on, I’ll come help you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, either you or both of us will fall in,” Raven shouted, glancing over her right shoulder at Anakin as he hovered over her three steps away. Heart pounding, she swung her rung and threw her body up and over the step. She gripped the metal with her abdominal muscles. She pushed up on the step, grateful for all the hours she spent shaping up on Dagobah. Panting, she pulled herself back standing upright on the step. Anakin watched her sides rapidly move in and out as she regained her bearings. For the first time, Anakin realized she was afraid. She turned and glanced at him, her wide pupils shut out most of her blue irises. “Be careful.”

“Raven, take few deep breathes. You’re not ready yet to go forward,” Anakin said. He then felt his perch jolt, and a loud groan from the cable above. Realizing he had no choice, he swung and quickly grabbed the next rung. He detangled himself just in time to watch as the right cable from the step he had stood upon snap and fall towards the lava pit. It twisted from the left cable.

“So much for catching my breath,” Raven said. Shoving aside her fear, she raced forward with Anakin in hot pursuit. Looking up, Anakin saw they were half way across the course. As the door loomed closer, he concentrated harder on each step. He let go of a step and had just began to swing towards the next one when he heard a loud SNAP. Allowing instinct to take over his reactions, he threw his body towards the next rung. He wrapped his arms around the step, feet dangling over the lava pit, as the swing he stood on seconds ago tumbled into the fiery depths of the pit.

Raven turned and shouted, “Are you alright?”

Anakin yanked himself up onto the metal perch and quickly worked his way towards the next step. He responded, “Just get going and get us the hell out of this!”

“You got it!” Raven shouted and she swayed forward. The two Jedi swung their way across the course until Raven’s feet firmly met the landing in front of the door. She nervously watched as Anakin narrowly escaped two more steps breaking under his feet. Finally he stood beside her on the opposite edge.

“Remind me not to follow any more of your advice in the future,” Anakin said as he wiped his hand across his sweaty forehead.

Smirking, Raven opened the door. They took a sharp left and stepped down into the observation chamber that surrounded the nearly empty chamber where their friends had been held. They moved forward into the chamber and dashed towards Lowie and an unconscious man lying on the floor.

“Blast! Where are the rest of them?” Raven asked, as she fell to the floor beside the man. She turned him over and checked for his pulse. Anakin checked Lowie.

“How is he?” Anakin asked Raven. He scrutinized the face of the man and he recognized the man. “Oh bless the Force, I think that’s General Margatall. He’s Tenel Ka’s man.”

She shook her head, sat up on her knees and glanced at Anakin. “And Lowie?”

As Anakin went to check Lowie’s pulse, the blond Wookiee bolted upright and roared in rage. Anakin laughed, “Well there’s your answer. Lowie, calm down, it’s me, Anakin. What happened here?”

Lowie glanced around, and gathered his bearings. He placed a furry palm at his right side and one on his forehead. Anakin saw the Wookiee had a blaster burn in his right side. Lowie growled that it hurt, but it wasn’t too bad. Lowie then told Anakin about Margatall and Tenel Ka rescuing the Jedi, but that someone approached them from behind and Lowie was shot. He would’ve helped the others except that when he fell, he hit his head and passed out.

Anakin relayed everything to Raven. Raven planted a foot on the ground and slowly stood up. She sniffed the air and made a disgusted face. She spat, “Darkglider was here. Lowie, can you move? We have to go NOW!” The leather clad girl raced towards the door. Anakin helped Lowie to his feet and they followed behind her as she raced up the stairs. Lowie stumbled up the stairs behind the two humans, grunting from the sharp pain in his right side. As they approached the top of the stairwell the three Jedi felt the Force flowing through their souls as they exited the Force shielded area. They stood in the long hallway and heard blaster fire erupting a couple of floors up.

Raven sat in silent contemplation, as she regained her bearings in the building. Her lips snarled as she realized what most likely had happened to Jaina and Tenel Ka. Lowie let out a low growl as he winced from the pain in his side.

Raven unclipped Kyp’s lightsaber from her belt, twirled it and handed it to Lowbacca. “Kyp’s on the third floor, with Master Luke, your father, and Chewbacca. They’re surrounded by stormtroopers and need help. You and Lowie go help them out. Jaina and Tenel Ka are being held on the far eastern side of the building in Darkglider’s ‘workshop.’ You will have some time before Darkglider decides to finish them off, but not much,” Raven said, her eyes filled with terror. “You can sneak up behind the stormtroopers taking this stairwell.” She pointed to a concealed doorway directly behind them and placed her hand on her own lightsaber.

“Where are you going?” Anakin asked, as he watched her purposefully head down the hallway and open a door on the right. “We’re supposed to stay together!”

She stared at him, “No time to argue! Go help Jaina and Tenel Ka! I have some unfinished business to

attend to. When you're all set, meet me on the twentieth floor. My grandmother has Jacen and Marxx. I'm going to get them."

"Wait!" Anakin shouted, as Raven disappeared into the doorway. He turned to Lowbacca. "Women... Come on, let's go help the others. Tenel Ka and Jaina need us."

Luke's blaster registered empty. He stepped out from behind the pillar and began to deflect the barrage of shots aimed in their direction from the two dozen stormtroopers with his lightsaber. As his lightsaber met a shot, he redirected it towards the stormtroopers. He took down four guards and continued deflecting the shots away from his friends.

Kyp snatched three more blasters and gave them to Han and Chewie. *Blast Raven for taking my lightsaber*, he thought as he watched Luke working alone and taking the brunt of most of the blasterfire. Suddenly a loud noise filled the chamber. Kyp and Luke felt a swell of power in the Force. They peered at the end of the hallway and saw two large forms physically pushing on two stone columns. The columns gave way and crashed to the floor. Over a dozen Stormtroopers failed to get out of the way and perished under the immense weight of the stone structures. Anakin and Lowie ignited their blue lightsabers with a *snap hiss* and began to work their way towards Luke and the other's hiding places. The Stormtroopers found their attention now divided and they began firing at Anakin and Lowie. Luke, Kyp, Han, and Chewie took advantage of their confusion and began to pick off the remaining stormtroopers.

Anakin raced back towards the end of the hallway and concentrated on one of the pillars and picked it up with the Force. He swung the topmost end of it and swept it towards the remaining, standing stormtroopers. The immense weight of the pillar knocked them all off of their feet. Han and Chewie blasted some of the fallen stormtroopers. And then Anakin dropped the pillar again on the remaining guards.

A cloud of smoke lingered in the hallway as the silence blanketed the area. Anakin didn't bother to greet Luke or the others, picking up a blaster, he raced down the hall and skidded to a halt at the far end. Kyp raced up behind the tall Jedi, Han, Chewie, Luke, and Lowie followed behind.

"Just hold on girls, we're coming," Anakin said.

Chapter 39

"Which ship did the fighters just come out of? Forward the ship co-ordinates to central for tracking, Red 2."

"Roger."

"Red leader, I've got a fighter on my tail!"

"Copy. Red six, go assist Red four."

“Roger, Red leader.”

“Red six, where are you? I can’t sha...”

“We lost Red four, Red leader.”

“Re-engage Red Six.”

Leia shook with growing fury as she watched ship by ship explode in the holo-grid. Angrily she shoved away from the display and picked up her commlink. She shouted into it, “Mara, have you guys got anything yet?”

“Sorry, Leia. We’re all thinking as fast as we can down here,” Mara replied. Leia snapped off the commlink and stormed off the bridge towards the engineering room.

As she approached the door she heard Mara say, “You all really don’t want her in here. She’s mad enough to rip the head off a womprat with her teeth.”

“You got that right. What’s taking so long?” Leia said, as she leaned into the doorframe.

“Leia, we’ve been tracking the signals from the ships but have been unable to determine how the fleet is communicating with each other,” Mara said.

Lando swiveled in his chair and faced the fuming, former Princess. He said, “Wait a minute, maybe we’re going at this all wrong.”

Peaking an eyebrow, Leia said, “I’m listening...”

“Just because they’re using old Imperial ships, do we know for a fact that they know the old Imperial codes?” Lando asked.

Mara stared at Lando like he’d just sprouted a second head. He quickly continued, “We’ve already verified that they aren’t using any Imperial codes from the old databanks, right? So if they aren’t using them...”

“...maybe we should!” Leia finished. She thrust her commlink up to her mouth and barked into it, “Admiral change all of our friendly fire frequencies to delta niner Imperial codes. Let’s see if at least that can give us some time to figure out who’s left out there fighting. Put the Imperial codes on a randomizer throughout the fleet.” Leia dashed from the door. She threw herself back and peered back into the room. Offering a slight smile she said, “Thanks, Lando.”

“Anything for you, Leia,” Lando said to thin air as Leia vanished down the hall.

“Don’t get all smug there, Lando. We’ve still got lots to do,” Mara scolded.

“Well you know my day is not complete if I’ve only impressed one lady. Looks like I still have my work cut out for me,” Lando replied.

Mara rolled her eyes and returned to scanning her data.

Leia leaned against the grid and watched as the New Republic ships began to blink and change blue as the code frequencies changed. She gasped. The deception on the part of the enemy fleet had taken a large toll on their vessels. Their fleet of sixty warships was reduced to forty.

Ta'a Chume and Sshruva Proo exchanged glances. Together, without word from anyone, they called back their remaining fleets. The opposing fleet saw the new ships return and immediately all changed back into Hapan designs. They began emitting the same code frequencies as the Hapan vessels.

Ta'a Chume wailed, "This is hopeless!"

"Well at least they are no longer imitating our fleet," Ackbar said.

"Have your fleet switch to our code frequencies, Ta'a Chume. We can then identify your fleet from theirs," Leia said.

Relaying the code change to her fleet, Ta'a Chume watched as her ships began to blink blue onto the grid. Everyone smiled and cheered. Then the entire grid turned blue again as Palpatine's fleet broke their code. Simultaneously as this happened five large destroyers, two New Republic, three Hapan exploded. Ta'a Chume violently kicked the holo-grid and stormed across the room. Mon Mothma rolled her eyes at Leia and followed after the frustrated Queen.

Leia kneaded her forehead with her fingertips. She spoke low to the Mon Calamarian, "We're down to thirty-eight...now thirty-six warships. What should we do Admiral? We can't just leave, I gave our word that we would help the Hapans and Dellaltians. But if we stay, we'll be completely destroyed. We have more than these simple clusters to think about. If our fleets fail here- we could lose the entire New Republic."

"I think we need to order a retreat," Admiral Ackbar said.

Sshruva Proo overheard Ackbar's statement. He bristled his back, "You're going to just leave us to the slaughter then? This is why we never bothered to join the New Republic. We knew that no one could completely defeat the Empire! Go then! Run like cowards! We will fight until the bitter end. We will not just give up!"

Leia's head began to pound. She shook her head at Ackbar. She said, "No, we have to stay. Let's just hope that Mara and her team can find a weakness so we can crack their defenses... before it's too late for all of us."

Anakin's senses kicked into overdrive. He knew Jaina and Tenel Ka were close. Down the long corridor, Anakin turned to a left hallway and stared at the first door he came across. He sensed that the room seemed devoid of the Force. Knowing he could no longer feel the girl's life-forces, he assumed the room must be blocked with more of Gwynalyn's Force shielding. Silently he raced across the hall and placed his ear to the door. He jolted back as he heard Jaina scream in pain. Han's face etched with worry as Jaina's pain seared through his soul. Kyp and the others watched as Anakin tried to open the

door. He then leaned into the large durasteel door and it wouldn't move. He threw his hands up into his dark hair and tugged with despair as Jaina and Tenel Ka both continued to scream inside the room. Helplessly, he paced the hall.

Anakin watched his father race towards the door, raise his blaster, and fire. The men and Wookiees all dove out of the way as the shots ricocheted throughout the hallway.

"What're you doing? Trying to get us all killed?" Kyp shouted as the corridor filled with smoke.

"I think it's magnetically sealed," Luke said, as he brushed dust off of his cloak. Pulling out his lightsaber, he flicked it on with a *snap hiss*, he thrust the azure blade into the door and then jumped back in confusion.

"What're you doing? Slice the door open! Can't you hear my little girl in there?" Han shouted at Luke, his voice catching in his throat.

"I can't tap into the Force. My blade's not penetrating into the room beyond," Luke said and he turned off his lightsaber.

"Everyone move," Anakin said, in a low, husky voice.

Han, Kyp, and Luke scattered out of the way and watched as Anakin's neck muscles expanded, his face turned red with fury and he charged the door. He threw the full amount of his weight behind his leg and right shoulder and smashed his body into the door. Violently, the door exploded inward along with two feet of duracrete on either side of the hinges. Rocky debris showered the hallway; Han, Luke, Kyp, and the Wookiees dove to the ground.

Darkglider spun in the room at the sound of the explosion. Snarling, he raced to a small, durasteel door to the left of the captive Jedis, opened it, and vanished out of the room.

Anakin and Han coughed and burst through the cloud of dust. Jaina tasted sticky blood in her mouth as she bit her tongue. She bellowed in pain. Han's eyes filled with tears as he watched his daughter thrashing in pain. He noted the two tracks of blood coming from her mouth and arm.

Han waved dust from his face and stared at the stun restraints that shocked Jaina and Tenel Ka's arms and legs. The identity of the man who had tortured his daughter snapped into focus. He recognized Darkglider's signature form of torture that he used to abuse Raven all those years ago. Knowing how that man unjustly tormented and abused his son's girlfriend, he felt a surge of anger swell deep within himself. He wasn't about to let that man get away, Darkglider's reign of terror time was over.

Han stared at the walls and saw a large switch. He slammed his palm against it and the girl's bodies went slack with relief.

"Honey, let me get you down," Han said.

"Daddy!" Jaina said, fighting down waves of nausea. "Darkglider bailed out of here once you guys blasted the door down."

"Where did that spineless piece of bantha fodder go?" Han asked, as he and Anakin examined the

restraints holding the girls to the wall. Han yanked on Jaina's restraints then realized he needed a key.

"Out of the way, Dad," Anakin said. Adrenalin still pumping in his veins he walked up to Jaina, dug his fingers around her right leg restraint and ripped it clear out of the wall. He then yanked her left leg restraint out. The cuffs dangled around her ankles. Han bent under his daughter as Anakin yanked out her arm restraints. As she fell he caught her tightly in his arms. Anakin moved over to Tenel Ka's restraints and caught her after releasing her from the wall.

Chewie roared and pointed to the far end of the southern wall where he located the second door. Chewie yanked on the door handle and it wouldn't budge. Kyp dashed over to help Chewie with the door. Lowie roared at the frazzled Jedi Master and tossed Kyp his lightsaber. Kyp snapped on the blue blade and sliced it through the lock, now that the Force shield had dissipated. The door opened wide.

Kyp grabbed something off of the floor, glanced at Chewie and said, "I'm going after him. Get Han and follow behind me!" Kyp raced inside the door and vanished after Darkglider in hot pursuit.

Jaina peered up at her father and offered him a slight smile. Han's throat caught at her expression, she looked just like her mother. He said, "I thought I was going to lose you, honey."

"It'd take a lot more than a few volts of electricity to finish me off," Jaina said with a slight grin. She glanced at Chewie who held the door open. "Now, let go of me, Dad, and go catch that slimo."

"I'll stay with the girls until they feel better, Dad. We'll be right behind you," Anakin said, as he tightly held onto Tenel Ka. Han let go of Jaina and Lowie picked her up as she nearly fell over on wobbling legs.

Han stared as if to protest leaving, when Jaina's eyes blazed with passion. "Go get him, Dad, so he can't ever hurt anyone else."

Convinced, Han turned and fled to the door. He ducked under the short arch and ran inside to see a large spiraling staircase. He heard Kyp and Darkglider's feet pounding the stairs several flights above.

Han shouted, "How far up, Kyp?" As he took the stairs three per step he grimaced as his knees began to ache.

Kyp shouted from far above, "I don't know, I think we just passed eight.."

The two men and the Wookiee flew up the stairwell. Kyp watched as two flights above him the door opened and shut.

"You've got about three more flights, Han!" he shouted.

Panting, Han surged forward and caught up with the young Jedi Master. Kyp stared at his old friend impressed. Together they threw the door open. As the trio exited into the hallway they skidded to a halt as they found themselves completely surrounded by stormtroopers.

Darkglider shoved aside some of the armored men and smiled triumphantly at the trio. He said, "You really are pathetic. Do you think that you can take me down?"

Kyp's sides heaved, but he only smiled and connected with the Force. He waved his hand towards the stormtroopers surrounding them and said, "You don't want to hold these men hostage."

One of the stormtroopers glanced around the circle, "We don't want to hold these men hostage."

"You want to leave this planet and never return," Kyp said, controlling a smirk.

"We want to leave this planet and never return!" the stormtrooper said, dropping his weapon to his side. Surrounding Han, Chewie and Kyp the other stormtroopers began to mutter their agreements.

Darkglider began to chase the retreating regiment of guards demanding they return. Han flashed Kyp a lopsided smile of thanks. Darkglider froze and turned as Chewie and Han stood behind him with their blasters leveled at his back. Kyp stood back to watch how this would play out, giving Han the honors of taking out the man who tortured Raven throughout her youth.

"Put your hands up! You slimy, disgusting, flea ridden excuse for a human being! Turn around so we don't have to shoot you in the back, Darkglider," Han said.

Keeping his back turned to the trio, Darkglider said, "Oh yes, I suppose you couldn't do that, could you, *General* Solo? That would leave such a stain on your *impeccable*, even-tempered character, wouldn't it?"

"Don't think I wouldn't do it, pal. You picked the wrong girls to mess with," Han said in a strangely calm voice.

Kyp walked around Darkglider and glared into his soulless eyes. "I have something special for you, Darkglider," he said. From a shove of the Force, Darkglider involuntarily threw his arms out straight. Kyp snapped on a pair of stun cuffs he'd picked up in Darkglider's torture room and grinned sweetly as he turned on the setting to high stun.

Darkglider began to shake and quake violently. Screaming, he bit the inside of his right cheek and hot, sticky blood oozed from the sides of his lips. Kyp's green eyes stared stonily at the man. He folded his arms across his chest and said, "I'm trying to determine how you get amusement out of watching young girls suffer in this manner."

Growling, Darkglider's eyes flashed with fury as the shocking pain coursed through his body.

"Bet you're wishing now that you'd never laid a hand on Raven, aren't you?" Kyp asked.

Turning his face up defiantly, spraying Kyp with spittle and blood, Darkglider said, "Raven... That... w..welp of a ... Hutt... deserved *everything* I dished out to her ov..er... the... years..." Eyes widening, he smiled cruelly, "She... loved every minute... of IT."

Kyp felt an overwhelming swell of rage consume his senses. As Kyp threw out his hands to strangle the man, Darkglider threw up his wrists to protect his face and neck. Kyp watched with horror as two blue, sizzling bolts of lightning shot out from his own fingertips, and broke Darkglider's stun restraints apart. Darkglider stepped backwards, eyes filled with terror, and fled. Kyp collapsed to the floor, staring at his hands with self-loathing and fear.

Han glanced at his friend as Kyp raked his fingers through his black hair.

“You ok, kid?” Han asked, as his eyes followed Darkglider as he fled down the hall.

“Go, Han. Get him. I’m fine,” Kyp said.

Han tried to say something to Kyp. Chewie interrupted Han’s thoughts with an urgent bark as pointed at the retreating Darkglider. Han fell into step behind the Wookiee to chase the retreating man.

“Tell the others where we went,” Han shouted over his shoulder.

“Sure, Han,” Kyp said, as his friends footsteps echoed out of hearing distance.

Kyp pulled his knees tightly up towards his torso. He stared at his fingers through tear-streaked eyes. *What have I become? I really haven’t learned anything, have I? I’m a complete failure, no better than I was when I blew up Cardia,* Kyp thought. His thoughts wandered to his older brother Zeth, whom he had involuntarily killed so many years ago. *I can’t do anything right, big brother. My love for this young woman is driving me to do things I shouldn’t... things that will destroy me. What should I do?*

Kyp wiped away his frustrated tears, knowing he would simply continued on. Shaking, he rose to his feet and walked back to the stairwell and waited to let the others know his location.

Tenel Ka collapsed into Anakin’s broad chest, sobbing. Cradling the Hapan Princess in his arms Anakin whispered into her ear, “You’re alright now, honey. I’ve got you, you’re alright.”

Tenel Ka wiped her tears from her face and stared into Anakin’s blue eyes. She said, “I just thought how lucky you were not to be stuck on this horrible planet. I am glad I was wrong.”

“Did you really think I wouldn’t come after you?” Anakin asked.

Lightly, she shook her head. “No, I suppose not. I should have known better. You have no idea how glad I am to see you.” Tenel Ka’s heart raced in her chest as she wiped a clump of dark hair out of the young Jedi’s blue eyes. Anakin grinned. Tenel Ka’s nose wrinkled and she asked, “Why do you smell like rotten fish?”

Anakin laughed, “It’s a long story.” He lightly placed her down on a table and removed his tattered cloak. From the folds he tried to pull something out of the folds of the robe. “I’ve been wearing this ratty thing because I was carrying this around. I thought you might need it.” He finally extracted Tenel Ka’s cybernetic arm. She rewarded his efforts with a large smile. She flexed her sore and slightly burned elbow towards him and he fastened her arm back into place. His fingers lightly brushed the synthetic hair, sending shivers down Tenel Ka’s spine. He lightly raised her throbbing wrist and lightly kissed the new, red, angry scar. Anakin then placed his arms on either side of her and met her eye to eye. “Sorry, I couldn’t find your lightsaber, but I thought at least my Warrior Princess would probably be better equipped to battle with both arms.”

“Well two arms make it much easier to do this,” Tenel Ka said. Anakin stared at her quizzically. She threw her arms around his neck and crashed his lips onto her own. Anakin’s eyes grew wide in disbelief

as his head began to swim from Tenel Ka's soft, moist lips. Then he encircled her waist and lifted Tenel Ka, lightly up in his arms as they kissed each other tightly.

Jaina regained her footing after she had collapsed into Lowie's arms and felt her mouth fall slack. Luke smirked at Jaina's confused expression. He placed a hand on his niece's shoulder and said, "I tried to hold this off as long as possible. Guess I didn't succeed very well."

"*Anakin* and Tenel Ka?" Jaina asked incredulously.

Anakin lightly placed Tenel Ka on the floor and brushed aside some stray titian hairs. The Hapan Princess and the tall Jedi turned and faced the group surrounding the door. Both blushed a crimson red. Anakin shook off his embarrassment and glanced down at Tenel Ka and then at his sister, "Are you two alright? Can you move? We need to go help Dad. Then we need to help Raven."

Tenel Ka and Jaina nodded and the two female Jedi, Anakin, Luke and Lowie raced towards the stairwell.

Luke asked as he flew behind Anakin up the stairs, "What is Raven doing?"

"She's confronting her grandmother up on the twentieth floor. Her grandmother has Marxx and Jacen hostage," Anakin said.

"Raven facing her grandmother," Luke muttered. "I have a VERY BAD feeling about this! Come on Mr. Muscles, move faster!"

Darkglider grimaced as the stun cuffs continued to shock his arms although they were no longer attached together. On the nineteenth floor he fled towards a pair of doors. Whimpering he threw them open and entered into a room filled with artillery. He grabbed several blaster rifles and flung their straps over his shoulders. He then raced through the room and threw open another door which led to a small, private landing platform off of the western side of the building. On the platform sat a small Tie-Fighter. Laughing, that he had escaped the deranged father, Sith Jedi, and their pet Wookiee, Darkglider boarded his craft and began to initiate it for takeoff.

Han raced through the weapons room and heard the familiar roar of a Tie-Fighter engine. Searching the room, Chewie bellowed at Han as he picked up an object and tossed it to his friend. Han caught the object, grinned, and raced out the doors where he stood on the landing platform. The Tie-Fighter's lights turned on and it began its ascent. Han flicked on the magnetic thermal detonator in his hand and flung it towards the Tie-Fighter where it landed with a snap onto the ship's back hull.

As the roaring wind ripped the warmth out of Han's body, he watched as the ship began to climb into the atmosphere. The tiny detonator flashed brightly. Shielding his eyes, Han shouted upwards and into the wind, "I hope you like the heat, pal! Because where you're going, it ain't cold!"

The sounds of footsteps greeted his ears. And Han felt Jaina's arms encircle his waist. Triumphant, he tightly embraced his daughter close to his side and with complete satisfaction Han witnessed Darkglider's Tie-Fighter implode into a bright nova of light.

“That guy won’t be hurting any more girls. Make sure you tell your twin I took care of that slimeball, alright?” Han asked Jaina.

“You got it, Dad,” Jaina replied and gave her father a big squeeze.

As the group watched the debris from Darkglider’s ship fall from the sky in fiery streaks, Luke said, “We still have a job to finish, come on guys.”

Chapter 40

Marxx listened to the ominous sound of thunder and powerful winds crashing against the outside of the building. He sensed he was no longer in the lower depths of the building. He felt the heat of a crackling, blazing fire at his back. He opened his pool blue eyes and found himself in an ornate office. Although he could now reconnect with the Force he found his movements constricted. He sat on a chair, completely enshrouded in bio-bands that tugged securely around his body that smashed him tighter against his chair the more he struggled. As the bands dug into his chest, thighs, and neck, Marxx glanced to his right and saw Jacen, similarly restrained, waking up. The two male Jedi took in their new surroundings. Jacen opened his mouth to say something, but Marxx stilled him with a shake of his dark, curled head. Directly in front of them sat the back of a large throne chair.

Marxx twisted his left ear forward and heard rasped breathing, emanating from the other side of the throne. A tingle of dread surged through his body. He licked his lips and connected with the presence in the chair. Recognition hit him full force. He squeezed his eyes shut tight and mouthed, “No. It can’t be.”

“Why would you say that? Certain were you that I was dead?” A disconnected voice said from across the room.

Jacen stared quizzically at Marxx whose jaw had tightened into a snarl. He flashed his blue eyes towards his friend and he said, “Hoped is more like it, *Grandmother*.”

“Tsk, ts. Wishing an old lady dead. That’s not a very Jedi thing to think, now is it?”

“Considering the amount of pain you inflicted on my twin over the years, I think I’m entitled to hope for that,” Marxx replied.

“You always were an ungrateful and annoying child; always crying when I picked you up, and always messing your diapers when only I was around to change you. You never liked me much,” Gwynalyn said.

Marxx stared icily at the back of her chair. He said sarcastically, “Gee, I never knew I was such a burden to you as a baby. Maybe you disliked me so much because even as an infant I had excellent judgment of character.”

Jacen peaked an eyebrow as he noted the anger rising in his friend. His own gut twisted realizing that the woman who’d caused his beloved so much pain over the years sat only mere feet away. The more

he listened to her smug voice, the more he wanted to shove his fist down her throat to shut her up.

“So what? Are you now going to say that I chased you away?” Marxx asked.

They heard a derisive snort. “I never gave a second thought to you. You meant nothing to me, because you couldn’t help me.”

“Oh, I see now. What’s the point of family, except to exploit them for your own personal gain, right?” Marxx asked incredulously.

“Interesting, I see you DO see things my way.”

With disbelief, Marxx laughed, “I see things your way? You disgust me! How could you just up and leave your family? How could you just let everyone think Raven was dead? How could you not care what happened to your own daughter?” Marxx silenced himself to prevent a tsunami of questions from over-spilling out of his mouth.

The fire crackled as Gwynalyn composed her thoughts. “You wouldn’t understand, boy.”

“Try me,” Marxx challenged.

“I felt trapped on that forsaken planet and I needed to escape. Your grandfather seemed content to stay there and rot. And your mother fell for a local, further cementing her ties to that awful place. I had to get away from there. I was suffocating, dying a little bit everyday. I willingly did what I had to in order to leave. If that meant leaving my family, so be it. If it meant taking the one child I thought I could mold to help me escape quicker, I did so. I’m not ashamed for what I did,” Gwynalyn said simply. “I hated your grandfather for taking me away from my place in the Galaxy. I was meant to help my brother’s rule. And thanks to Paulo’s little sidetrack- I was forgotten by the only man who ever really cared for me.”

“Your brother, the Emperor,” Marxx said.

“Yes.”

“He must not have cared for you all that much if he didn’t bother to look for you,” Jacen said, smirking.

“SILENCE!” Gwynalyn seethed. Jacen fought to control himself from shouting back. He allowed Marxx to take the lead and quieted down.

Marxx stared at the floor and asked, “Did you return to Naboo before coming here? Why did we find drawings of Lord Vader in your hidden studio?”

“You found my special place, did you? Who says I ever returned to Naboo? Why would I want to go back there? Last thing I needed was more reminders of my failed and miserable life. No. I never returned.”

“But...”

“I made those drawings long ago, boy. Who do you think designed the great Lord Vader’s suit of armor? I sent those designs to the droid foundries on Geonosis. The designers there incorporated my suggestions in creating his impressive, menacing form. Ah, yes, Vader was my prize piece of work. Little did Skywalker know my brother planned to fit him into that suit many years before he wore it. Do you now see why I despised my husband? He always got all the glory for his frilly paintings, and my statues, my art, my vision went unappreciated. My brother promised me a place at his side, to help him shape the Empire in the way he envisioned it. My visions would have marked a generation! Together, we made a great team. He was the ruler and I was the planner. He fully recognized and praised my talent. Then I fell off the face of the Galaxy and he forgot about me. And then the Rebel Scum killed him and all I ever dreamed of achieving, disappeared,” Gwynalyn said.

A strange combination of rage and pity warred inside Marxx as he listened to his grandmother speak. He pitied the woman for never understanding the true meaning of love, and despised her for using and hurting those that he loved, all for her own personal gain.

“Those *Rebel Scum* brought peace, freedom, and prosperity back to the Galaxy after your brother kept everyone in fear and oppression for so long. And it was Anakin Skywalker, once known as Darth Vader who killed your brother, no one else,” Jacen stated.

“Keep quiet you fool! I didn’t ask for your opinion on anything! And yes, I well know that Vader turned traitor. Your family boy, has been nothing but a pain in the Palpatine family side for years. But not now, I have them where I want them. Your little family of do-gooders are about to meet their match. Your *noble* New Republic fleet is in peril.”

“What do you mean?” Marxx asked.

“Your precious new family and friends are about to all be destroyed, that’s what. And I will again reclaim what was once rightfully my brothers!”

A feminine voice said, “Over my dead body, you will.”

“Raven!” Jacen shouted in a voice mingled with fear and delight.

Marxx and Jacen faced left towards the door. Standing with her arms crossed, tapping her left heel stood Raven. Jacen’s heart plummeted at the sight of his beloved.

“That can be arranged, traitor!” Gwynalyn seethed.

Worry plagued Jacen as he asked, “Raven, what are you doing here? Why aren’t you in training?”

“She called for me, Jacen. I wasn’t about to let you both die, simply because she wanted me,” Raven replied. She moved towards her brother and Jacen in order to release their restraints when she slammed straight into large invisible forcefield that Gwynalyn had erected around her two prisoners, caging them in front of the fireplace. Raven growled.

“Pitiful little, twerp, you didn’t honestly think I’d let you just waltz in here and release them did you?” Gwynalyn asked.

“Well you’re not the brightest person in the Galaxy, I thought it might be possible,” Raven spat.

“You are right about that. The stupidest thing I ever did was let you leave my sight. I should have just killed you once you were no longer useful to me,” Gwynalyn replied with rancor.

“No longer useful... Right. All of the art my crew stole over the years that you sold, wasn't at all useful to you,” Raven said, her fingers twitched over the hilt of her lightsaber. She closed her eyes and opened herself completely to the Force.

“I should've known you'd be corrupted, allowing yourself to be disillusioned into thinking that your pitiful life was worth anything. You were nothing, as good as dead when I took you away from your miserable life. I MADE YOU! I gave you everything! And what did you do? You betrayed and turned your back on me!” Gwynalyn shouted. Standing in her throne, Lady Neffrous stood up straight and turned to face her wayward granddaughter.

Raven noted that over the last couple of years since she'd last seen her grandmother, the woman had lost all resemblance to humanity. Her face was sallow, her eyes gleamed out from saggy bags of bloated skin. The woman was unrecognizable. But Gwynalyn's grating, loveless voice remained the same.

Raven laughed and repeated, “You *Made me*? What a joke! You never made anything! I take that back, you did do one thing right in your life, you had mother. How Chariss ever escaped from the clutches of the true Gwynalyn Palpatine is beyond me. The fact she even lived to be a normal, happy, healthy woman amazes me. There isn't a loving, nurturing bone in your body! All I ever got from you was criticism, hate, loathing, and anger. Those are hardly the qualities one looks for in a guardian. You disgust me!” She moved fluidly on her toes as she sidestepped away from Marxx and Jacen, leading herself away so they would be well out of Gwynalyn's line of sight. “The best thing I ever did was finally escape from your clutches.”

Gwynalyn's face stared stonily at Raven. She took in the healthy glow to the young girl's skin, and her thick, brunette, healthy hair. She sensed something she'd never felt before in her granddaughter: confidence. Gwynalyn silently admitted to herself that quite possibly, Raven had come into her own power and would be quite a formidable enemy. She decided to try one last time to turn the girl, before, regrettably she would have to be killed.

“Do you really think that the people you have surrounded yourself with trust you? Do you? How could they? They know of your past, my girl. You were a thief, a gambler, a liar, and a murderer. Oh yes, I knew of the crewmen you killed. Each death warmed my heart, for I knew that you were making yourself more and more like me,” Gwynalyn said. Raven tensed up on her feet. She'd hit a mark. Gwynalyn pressed on, “That's right, my dear. You may no longer be hidden under a mask, but you can't hide what lies in your heart. You are just... like... me. Admit it. You let your anger control your actions, you are weak, and you are selfish. You displayed all of these things as a child which is why I chose to raise you.”

Jacen seethed, “Don't listen to her, Raven! You know that's not who you are anymore!”

“I warned you!” Gwynalyn shouted. She dropped the forcefield surrounding the boys. Pointing a finger at Jacen, an invisible hand crept up and crushed his lungs. Jacen gasped to breathe.

Marxx shouted, “You miserable old woman! Leave him out of this!” Marxx sunk into the Force and threw up a forcefield between his grandmother and Jacen. Jacen felt the pressure surrounding his neck

alleviate slightly. Gwynalyn pushed harder but Marxx's abilities stayed her advance. Gwynalyn rolled her eyes and released her Force hold on Jacen. His face turned from purple to red, and back to pale as he gasped in precious air. Jacen met Marxx's gaze and silently thanked him with a nod.

A controlled fury rose within Raven as she felt her arms shaking with rage. Calmly, she said, "Don't touch either of them, again I warn you..."

"Oh? And what are you going to do, little bird? Are you going to kill me? It's a double-edged blade isn't it? You're damned as a Sith if you kill in cold blood, and then damned with guilt as a pious Jedi if you sit back and refuse to kill. I know you, Raven. You are itching to kill me. I can feel your anger. What could possibly be holding you back? All you have to do is kill me, and you can release your friends. I dare you, do it," Gwynalyn said, throwing her arms open wide to give Raven a clear shot.

Like a caged Rancor beast, Raven began to pace back and forth. She unhooked her lightsaber and pointed the hilt at her grandmother, "You really would enjoy that wouldn't you? You're failure as a person would be complete if you could just drag me down along with you. That's not going to happen, though. Why? Because, I am a Jedi and I'm not about to let you influence me any longer. I don't need you! I'm better than you!" Raven stopped pacing and stared at her lightsaber. A broad grin formed on her face, and she tossed her lightsaber aside. She closed her eyes and inhaled a cleansing, breath of air. Her building hate dissipated. "I AM better than you. I am loved, and nothing you can say or do will ever make me turn into you."

Gwynalyn walked around her throne and stood five feet away from a large bay window. She stared at the girl and cringed at her calm demeanor. The girl seemed to glow from the confident light that radiated from her very soul, igniting her beauty. Jacen stared at his beloved and lightly shook his head. In all the time he'd known her, he'd never seen her so sure of herself. His heart swelled with pride. Raven had finally turned herself into the woman he always knew she had buried inside of her soul. Marxx sensed the change in his sister as well, but his eyes remained fixated on his grandmother, wary of her movements. Gwynalyn walked towards the far eastern wall of the building, closer to the window. She stopped and stared at Marxx and Jacen, folding her hands lightly together.

"So nothing will change your mind?" Gwynalyn asked.

"That's right," Raven said, fists planted on her hips.

"I doubt that," Gwynalyn said and raised her finger. Blue Sith lightning sprung from her fingers, bathing Marxx and Jacen in an unholy shroud of electricity. The two Jedi screamed with pain as their vision blurred from the pounding currents. Raven threw out her hand and her lightsaber soared to her call. She ignited the light blue blade with a *snap hiss* and threw herself between Marxx and Jacen and her grandmother. She held her blade out and it deflected the lightning in loud, sizzling, cracks throughout the room. Gwynalyn sneered as she intensified the lightning. Raven held her ground and screwed her face up as she struggled against the onslaught of the lightning. She yelled out in frustration as her grandmother seemed to have an unending supply of rage to release. Jacen's blue topaz held firm in the lightsaber, it crackled, sizzled, and sparked; but the blade did not give out.

Raven began to laugh, and said, "Welcome to what the power of love looks like, grandmother!"

From outside a large explosion shook the building. Distracted, Raven turned her head towards the bay window and saw a shower of fiery debris falling out of the sky. Taking the moment to her advantage,

Gwynalyn turned her fingers upwards and sent large pieces of ceiling plaster crashing towards Jacen and Marxx's heads.

Marxx, anticipating something from his grandmother, connected with the Force and shoved the pieces aside, sending them crashing to the floor. Gwynalyn growled and moved over towards a large bay window to see what distracted her granddaughter. She then saw the debris falling from the sky. Slightly confused, she sunk into the Force and could no longer feel Darkglider's dark presence. Seething with anger, she threw out her hands and erected a powerful Force wall and blasted it at Raven. Soaring off of her feet, Raven's back and skull exploded in pain as she crashed against the far eastern wall. Her lightsaber clattered out of her hands, and out of sight, as Raven's vision swam in and out of focus.

"Leave her alone!" Jacen shouted at the shrouded woman. He then turned his head right towards his injured girlfriend. "Raven! Get up, baby. Are you alright? Raven???"

Gwynalyn's mind raced in giddy delight. Her red, sadistic eyes turned towards the holo-grids that displayed the raging wars. She saw that her fleet continued to effectively deceive the New Republic's fleet. As she watched two more New Republic ships vanish off the grid, she realized victory was at hand. Using the Force, she called a control box into her gnarled hand and she punched in a series of codes and opened a neatly concealed door, located between herself and her disoriented granddaughter. Laughing hysterically, her bony fingers entered another series of codes into the control box. The building began to rumble.

Raven placed a hand on her forehead and attempted to clear her head. Unsteadily, she climbed to her feet.

The rescue party began spilling out of the stairwell directly across from Lady Palpatine's office. Jaina, Han, Luke, Anakin and Tenel Ka piled into the office to view Gwynalyn hunched over her control box and the two male Jedi wiggled in their chairs. In the hallway Chewie and Lowie took up the rear of the line. Lowie haulted and made a sharp left and stared over the open barrister at the towering statue of Emperor Palpatine. The statue's white face began to glow red hot. Roaring loudly, Lowie launched himself towards the door of the office, shoving his uncle inside as the statue exploded in a fiery display of metal shrapnel. The walls quaked with moaning fury from the violent blast. Daring a glance out into the smoke filled hallway, Lowie watched as each of the marble columns shook, and exploded one by one. He roared loudly towards Han.

"I know, she's just set off a series of detonations!" Han shouted, then he coughed from smoke.

Outside, Gwynalyn's secret door revealed a small landing platform, complete with Imperial Shuttle. The roaring wind crashed the older woman's dark robes swirling the black fabric like bat wings in flight. Thunder and lightning crashed in the volatile skies above Nephron. Feeding on the rage of the planet's angry nature, Gwynalyn laughed maniacally as the building jolted and plaster fell from the ceiling, and crashed to the floor. The walls cracked from the force of the explosions.

"Good you are all here now. If you will excuse me, I have to go, Coruscant is awaiting my arrival. Consider this building my gift to you for everything you have done to the Palpatines over the years... I think it will make a perfect family mausoleum!" Gwynalyn shouted with glee.

Marxx shouted, "THIS Palpatine rejects your gift! If you think you're leaving, you're sorely mistaken!"

Marxx dug into the Force and picked up a large table from the western side of the room and flung it clear across the room, crashing it towards the door. As it landed, it effectively blocked off his Grandmother's escape path.

Full of rage and hate, the Sith woman threw a pile of burning logs out of the fireplace and in the direction of Jaina, Han, Luke, Anakin, and Tenel Ka to distract their attention. Luke twisted as his robe caught on fire. Anakin threw himself on top of his uncle to stop the flames. Tenel Ka reached into the Force and flung the logs back into the fireplace. Chewie, Lowie, and Han stomped out the burning embers. Kyp watched Raven as she attempted to regain her senses.

The wind continued to howl through the open cracks in the door and yanked Gwynalyn's hood off to reveal a shriveled scalp covered in sickly wisps of gray hair. She faced her grandson and with the Force yanked a heavy brass lamp off of the wall and it crashed into the side of his skull. The force of the impact knocked Marxx helplessly over onto his right side and he fell unconscious.

"You despicable old hag!" Raven shouted. Jacen reached out with the Force, picked up the bent lamp and threw it at Gwynalyn. She ducked lightly out of the way and growled.

Raven lurched to her feet and searched the floor in vain for her lightsaber.

"You have failed me for the last time," Gwynalyn said. Raven glanced up, eyes wide with horror as the Sith wielding woman aimed her open left palm in her direction and sent the girl sailing up the wall, and pinned her eight feet above the ground. "Now you will pay the price for your disloyalty to me."

"What... are you going to kill me now?" Raven asked as she struggled against the Force hold.

Grinning maliciously, Gwynalyn replied, "No. I'm going to take away what is most precious to you." Gwynalyn faced Jacen. "I sensed your attachment to this weak fool the instant you came in here. Let's see how you enjoy finishing out your life of freedom without the *love of your life*."

Blue lightning shot out of Gwynalyn's fingers towards Jacen, bathing him in radiant, shocking light. Jacen screamed in pain from the electrocution.

"JACEN!!!!" Raven screamed, the word choking in her throat.

The lightning deflected off of Jacen towards the group surrounding the door and they dove for cover. Raven screamed in horror as Jacen's body shook uncontrollably in his chair.

Raven's anguished screams shredded Kyp's heart. A slight grin formed on his lips, for in an instant, he knew the answer he desperately sought. Kyp raced across the room and tackled the crazed Sith woman's waist. Kyp's head swirled as the full weight of Gwynalyn's electrocuting lighting shocked and rattled his brain. Surging forward through the deadly currents, he allowed his momentum to continue his charge. Grabbing the old woman he threw her over his shoulder. Fingers still wielding lightning, Gwynalyn's red eyes blazed with fury as she bathed her attacker in her crackling fury. Kyp slightly faulted in his steps as the pain reached excruciatingly deadly levels. With his remaining strength, he charged at the window, using Gwynalyn's body as a battering ram and together they crashed through the glass. The evil woman dug her clawed fists into Kyp's Jedi robe and the two flew out the window together.

“KYYYYYPPPP!” Raven screamed. From her plastered position, she helplessly watched her Master fall with her grandmother out the window. Spinning, he met her eyes and winked. Gwynalyn’s Force hold on Raven broke and she crashed to the floor. Bouncing to her feet, ignoring her crushed ribs, she leaned out the window and watched in horror as her Master tumbled down the side of the building in an unholy dance with her grandmother. Luke and Han skidded to a halt behind the distraught young woman.

As they watched Kyp fall, a bright blue light engulfed his body. Kyp stared up at his former apprentice and smiled warmly. For although the cold Nephron air burned his body, he felt an overwhelming sense of happiness and calm engulf his soul. No longer could he see Raven, no longer did he feel anguished by his past digressions. He felt complete peace, something he hadn’t truly experienced his entire, tormented life. Kyp watched in amazement as a hand extended in his direction. His smile widened as he realized the hand belonged to his smiling, brother Zeth. Kyp grasped the hand tightly, and in a flash of blue light, Kyp’s body vanished. Gwynalyn roared with rage as she found herself gripping an empty robe. Her wretched screams finally silenced as she crashed to her death below.

Luke grabbed a hold of Raven’s crying, shaking shoulders and led her away from the window. Han stood to the side, rocking with shock from the death of his good friend. No sooner had they turned around when a large explosion shook the building. They watched in horror as large durasteel plates crashed down around all the windows and the door to the landing platform. The Jedi were trapped inside a building with no means of escape. Raven stared at her brother and Jacen, her soul embraced with guilt as both sat unconscious in their chairs.

Anakin wove his way back into the room after racing out into the corridor to see if they could escape through the opening of the building. He shouted, “All the entrances have been sealed. The stairwells have collapsed. This place is falling apart!” As if on cue, a large portion of the Eastern wall, attached to Gwynalyn’s landing platform collapsed. Raven standing closest to the section watched as the Imperial Shuttle and the entire docking bay broke free of the building and plummeted in piles of rubble down the side of the volcano.

“So much for trying to get to that shuttle to escape,” Han said.

“We are trapped!” Tenel Ka shouted as she threw her arms around Anakin’s waist. Jaina desperately tried to remove the bindings on her husband’s limp form and began to sob.

“There has to be a way out of here,” Han said, still shaking from the shocking death of his good friend. Han walked over to his unconscious son and gently checked his vitals.

“I don’t know,” Luke said. He stared at the sobbing Raven who kept raking her fingers through Jacen’s hair. “Raven, is there anyway out of here that you know of?” The girl didn’t answer. “RAVEN???”

Inhaling a deep breath, Raven gathered her senses and stroked a hand lovingly on Jacen’s cheek. She turned and stared at Master Skywalker, with tears streaming down her face. They were trapped twenty floors up with no means of getting down in the building in a reasonable time. At the rate the structure seemed to be collapsing, she knew it would be suicide to lead them through the series of hidden stairwells that riddled the building. If they chose that route, they would be trapped and entombed in the building forever. She couldn’t give her Grandmother that kind of satisfaction. As the ground quaked beneath her feet, she knew the one way she could get everyone out of this mess.

She nodded and choked, “Yes, Master Skywalker. There is a way I can get you all out of here.”

Luke stared quizzically at Raven. Han stepped away from Jacen as Raven purposefully wrapped her arms tightly around his son. She closed her eyes and took a step back and they vanished from the room... to reappear on the main deck of *The Nubian Hope*. Kendu who had been pacing in the main galley trying to wrack his brain for ideas to help the New Republic win their war, jumped back and screamed with fright as the two young Jedi appeared out of thin air.

Raven kissed Jacen lightly across the cheek and said to Kendu, “Please, get him untied and see that he’s resting comfortably. He’s received severe electrocution shock... if you know how he would need to be treated, please do so. Oh, and... be afraid...be very, very afraid for us all.”

Not knowing what to say, Kendu watched as the leather clad girl vanished off of the ship... to return on the twentieth floor. Raven’s eyes took in the growing destruction of the room as the massive fireplace mantel crashed in a cloud of chalky debris onto the floor. Jaina, Anakin, and Tenel Ka were doubled over in coughing fits as they stomped out burning embers that flew out of the fireplace. Raven threw her arms around Marxx and disappeared.

Working on releasing Jacen’s biobands, the reactivated C-3PO yelped as Raven appeared with an unconscious Marxx. She gently pushed a clump of curls from her twin’s forehead and watched him blissfully sleep. She grabbed 3PO’s arm, stared up into his bright yellow eyes, and pointed to Marxx, “If he wakes up, whatever you do, DON’T let him help me! It will kill him.”

“Oh my!” C-3PO said.

Raven stood upright and shook her right hand as she felt a tingling, numbing sensation course through her fingers. She stepped back into the Force and reappeared in her Grandmother’s office. She raced to the first person closest to her, Luke, and stepped back into the Force. Luke appeared on the ship and tried to say something to Raven. But before she could listen, she stepped back into the Force again. She arrived next to Jaina and anxiously signaled to her sister-in-law. Raven slapped her arms as they began to burn from splinters of icy pain that surged through her body.

“Come on, Jaina. I’ll take you to Marxx,” Raven said, focusing on her sister-in-law in attempt to ignore her rising discomfort. Jaina gripped Raven’s hand tightly and they plunged through the Force. As Raven hopped back onto *The Nubian Hope* she heard Kendu and Luke shouting in the cockpit. Her ears picked up a snatch of the conversation before she stepped back into the Force.... “I don’t have the codes!”

She watched Jaina race to Marxx’s side and squeeze his hand. The two women’s eyes met, “Take care of him, Jaina. He’ll need you.”

Jaina furrowed her brows and Raven vanished... to appear back in the office. The noise of the explosions shattered Raven’s ear drums. She threw her arms over her head and jumped to avoid being crushed by a large chandelier that crashed sending crystal droplets clattering in every direction like falling tears. Anakin held Tenel Ka tightly, protecting her from the ensuing chaos. Raven’s back burned from frayed nerve cells. Raven reached towards Han. Shaking his head, Han shouted at the girl, “Get the kids out first!”

Nodding, she glanced at Anakin and asked, “Are you willing to let me take you on one last crazed adventure?”

Grabbing Tenel Ka hand, Anakin nodded, “Yeah, I trust you, Raven.”

Raven wrapped her arms around the couple, and the three stepped out of the room and onto the *Hope*. Anakin watched as Raven slapped the tormented nerves that writhed in her legs. She stared at Jacen as he rested peacefully. Her eyes burned back the tears that spoke of immeasurable pain that settled in her heart. She prayed Jacen did not receive any permanent, physical damage from her Grandmother. The very thought of that having happened... because of her... Raven gulped as she brushed aside fresh tears. She heard Luke shout from the cockpit, “The building’s falling apart, I don’t think there’s any way to stop the fleet. Lady Palpatine died without ordering her fleet into retreat....”

Not wasting any more time, Raven stepped back into the Force and found Chewie, Lowie, and Han standing under the doorway arch as the floor quaked unsteadily under her feet.

“General Solo, give me your hand,” Raven shouted. Han stared at his friends. The Wookiees both roared at him to go.

“Ddon’t worry, I won’t leave them!” Raven shouted to the reluctant man.

Han stumbled through the falling debris and grabbed the dark haired girl’s hand. Shock registered in his brown eyes as he watched Raven’s face ripple. Under her skin, her muscles and nerves waged a war from the effects of her Force leaping. Han suddenly remembered Marxx and how close the boy came to death from doing this little trick. Before Han could comment, they emerged on Marxx’s ship. Raven’s body screamed. She gasped for air and threw her arms tightly around herself and doubled over to try to fight off the stabbing pains that ripped her body to pieces. Sounds and the sights in the cockpit blurred into dizzily, disoriented patterns. Her pain jolted Jacen right out of his unconscious state.

“RAVEN!” he shouted. His brandy eyes widened with fear as he saw her face, afire with dancing nerves. A dull, blue aura of light emanated over her body. “What are you doing to yourself?”

In the background, she heard Han shout into the cockpit, “Leia, we need a medic... fast!”

Raven’s eyes pleaded with Jacen as he leapt to his feet in attempts to grab a hold of his beloved. Knowing she still had the wookiees to save, Raven’s eyes teared up. To Jacen she mouthed, *I love you*. Before Jacen could reach her side, she lurched into the Force and arrived back into her grandmother’s headquarters screaming. She collapsed to the floor, paralyzed with pain that shot completely through her body from head to toe. The two Wookiees raced over to the girl and helped her to her feet. Lowie tossed a large piece of falling plaster aside with the Force as it crashed towards their heads. Raven’s vision blurred as the furry Wookiee’s faces vibrated in and out of her visual focus.

“I...I...tthhhhiinnkk... I can only... swing one..mmmmorre... tripppp,” Raven said, as her arms twitched involuntarily. Raven’s lungs barely responded to her vocal instructions. She gripped both of the Wookiees paws and attempted to disconnect herself from her pain and focused entirely on Jacen’s anguish outside the building. *Last leap*, she thought as she sent the herself and her furry companions plunging into the Force. The two Wookiees collapsed into a heap on the floor of *The Nubian Hope* with a vibrantly glowing Raven held securely in their arms.

Anticipating where Raven would arrive, Jacen shoved Lowie aside and ran a worried hand over her palpitating face. Raven's eyes glazed over as she distanced herself from the pain that attacked her body. Eyes brimming with tears Jacen glanced around the cabin and met Luke's worried gaze. "Was Marxx this bad off?" Jacen asked. Luke didn't respond. "WAS HE?"

"I think she might have done irreparable harm to her nerves with all the Force leaps, Jacen. I don't know if she'll make it," Luke said. The magnitude of Raven's actions sunk into his heart. The girl, like Kyp had sacrificed herself to save everyone aboard.

"No, I can't believe she can't be saved. I'm NOT giving up on her," Jacen said, his throat constricting. In his heart as he stared at Raven, he knew that Luke's words were probably true. Putting on a strong front, he grasped Raven's right hand, "Just hang on, baby. The medics will get you all fixed up."

"Thhhheee... ffflllleeeeeetttt. Wwwhaatt's the..sta..tttuss of the flleeeet?" Raven quietly stuttered to Luke. Her eyes, no longer clouded, focused on the Jedi Master's face with urgent need.

"Don't worry about that, Raven. You need to get better," Luke said as he took her left hand.

"NO! Tttteellll Me!"

Now awake, Marxx shoved everyone aside and squatted beside his glowing twin. He stared at her neck and face. Her very skin seemed to be disappearing before his eyes. Tears poured from his eyes as he said, "Oh Force, I'm sorry I couldn't help you, Raven. You've done too much. Just hang on for us, please?"

"I... knnnooooow how tttttoo sttttoopp fleetttt," Raven said.

"What?" Luke said.

"She said she knows how to stop the fleet," Marxx said. He sniffled and stared at his twin, "Tell me how and I'll do it, Raven."

"Noooo... tiimmme," Raven said. Closing her eyes she forced herself to her feet. Her feet screamed as if she just stepped on a bed of spiked nails that shot straight up her legs. She placed her hands Marxx's face. "I l..love you Mmm..aarrxx. Tellll Mommm and Ddddad, I lloovveed them." She turned her eyes to Jacen and gently wiped away his tears, "Onne day.. yyyou'll unndderrstandd why I diid this... I'lllll... alwayzz, llovve yyyoouu, Jaccen. Gooo..on..withouutt mee."

"NO!" Jacen yelled. As Jacen reached to grab Raven and prevent her from leaping, his hands met empty air. In a brilliant flash of blue light, Raven vanished.

Raven appeared in her grandmother's office after focusing on the faint signature of fear and anger that embedded itself into the very stones of Nemorasis after years of Gwynalyn's occupation in the building. Her internal pain reached a level so high, Raven couldn't feel her body any longer. Confused, she realized that in fact, she couldn't feel her pain any longer. Intrigued, she reached for her forehead and paused to stare at her hand. A blue radiant light engulfed her arm and body. As she gazed at her hand she could see straight through it, blood vessels and sinews moved inside the back of her

shimmering hand as she wiggled her fingers. With a disconnected sense of wonder she thought that her very tissue seemed to be in the midst of fading, rapidly disappearing and becoming one with the Force. Turning her head southwards Raven watched a thirty-foot section of the wall collapse. She could no longer hear the noise of the destruction, nor could she move her mouth to speak. Her ears met only a calming sound similar to when one swims underwater. Closing her eyes, she instructed her shimmering feet to move. Raven floated instead of walked towards the throne. She lightly dropped onto her grandmother's chair. She gripped the armrests as the entire floor to the left of the throne collapsed. Groaning, she threw every bit of her last strength into pushing up the cover on the left arm-rest to reveal a control panel.

Images of her grandmother swirled dizzily in her head. One phrase from her past entered her mind, *If you ever think of abandoning me, or stealing my ship, I'll destroy you, Womprat. You can never run, you can never hide from me. With one command, I will send you to hell where your treacherous soul belongs.* Raven remembered the reports from Correllia of a mysterious explosion at their salvage shipyards. She often wondered if her grandmother had detonated her ship, and followed through with her threat, after *The Vengeance* had been confiscated by the New Republic. Her quivering fingers moved over the controls and landed on a numeric keypad. Her grandmother always dabbled with gambling, but never developed Raven's knack and ability for the sport. Gwynalyn always used the same series of numbers to bet. *They will bring me luck,* she'd always say. Most times, they did not. Raven knew that her grandmother was a creature of habit. She knew what code to enter.

Staring at her nearly invisible hand, Raven grasped both of her hands together and with every bit of strength she could muster, she pounded out the code. Raven watched the light above the keypad change from red to green. She flicked her eyes forward to view the quivering images from her grandmother's holo-grid. A large, satisfied grin appeared onto Raven's face as her entire body enshrouded in a calming, brilliant, blue light. Free of guilt, pain, and anguish, Raven raised her arms triumphantly. Gladly, she melted into the Force, towards eternal salvation, as the floor collapsed beneath her Grandmother's empty throne.

Chapter 41

Standing at attention on the bridge of *The Extinguisher*, Captain Hydin's eyes blazed with delight as he watched a large Correllian class star ship explode from a direct hit fired from his ship.

"The Rebels have yet to figure out our codes, Sir. I believe victory is at hand. The New Republic fleet is down to twenty-five ships," Corporal Ewish reported, as he handed the captain a datapad.

Hydin's smile deepened, "Excellent. M'lady will be most pleased with that report. Thank you, Corporal."

Tapping the datapad lightly in his hand, Hydin sat in the captain's chair and softly chuckled to himself, *This is a good day, indeed,* he thought. As he leaned forward to enter the data into the holo-transmitter, to forward the battle updates to Lady Neffrous, the lights on the bridge darkened red and warning klaxons blared throughout the vessel. Confused, Captain Hydin jumped as a looming, blue holo-recording of Lady Neffrous appeared on deck.

Her image said, "If you are viewing this message, you have failed me for the last time."

Eyes wide open in shock, Hydin waved the datapad in the air and screamed at the fading holo-recording, "No! You're wrong. M'lady! We're winning the day!" He slouched in the chair as a series of explosions rocked the deck of the ship. Hydin felt a wetness between his legs and closed his eyes as *The Extinguisher* exploded in a fiery display of shrapnel.

Ta'a Chume's commlink blared, "Your Majesty, we don't know what's happening... but there are ships out here that seem to just be exploding!"

The Hapan Queen glanced at Leia for confirmation. Staring at the grid, Leia watched as one by one ships in battle began disappearing off of the display.

"What is happening?" Admiral Ackbar asked. "Is it some other method of attack?"

"I don't know Admiral," Leia replied. Gazing at the communications officer, Leia said, "Inform our ships to revert to Republic codes in the friendly fire frequency. Let's try to identify who's being destroyed out there. And tell our fleets to hold fire."

Ta'a Chume and Sshruva Proo relayed the messages to their fleets. Anxiously, they watched the holo-grid. As the fleets received code transmissions, the ships slowly turned blue. As each ship on the grid popped into focus, all aboard *The Peacekeeper* waited for the enemies to commence firing.

"All ships are reported in..."

From a parsec away in the cockpit of *The Nubian Hope*, Kendu listened to Leia's amazed voice over the commlink say, "All remaining Hapan, Dellaltian, and New Republic ships have reported in. It appears the enemy fleet was somehow destroyed!"

Kendu stared incredulously at Luke. Luke gripped the back of Marxx's captain chair as a lump caught in his throat. Hoarsely he said, "She did it. Raven did it – she destroyed her grandmother's fleet and saved the New Republic."

Waiting for Raven to appear on deck, Jacen felt Marxx's ship roll as a series of large explosions rocked the landing bay.

Heedless of his own safety, Jacen raced out of *The Nubian Hope*, with Marxx hot on his heels. Together they watched as Nemorasis imploded and collapsed into a smoldering pile of debris. Trails of thick smoke, dust, and ash raced towards the heavens above the rubble. Jaina stood inside the ship's door and stared at the inside of the main cabin, waiting to see if Raven would appear. As the seconds ticked by, and slowly turned to a minute, she wiped away the burn of tears and descended the ramp to stand beside her husband and twin.

"Come on, baby. Come on," Jacen said, as he wrung his hands together. The harsh Nephron wind crashed unnoticed through his sandy brown hair, sending it wildly dancing over his head.

Marxx closed his eyes and took a long deep breath. He connected with the Force and searched the surrounding area for Raven. As he searched in vain, he knew that his quest would end empty. Deep in

his heart, he knew Raven had perished inside the building. Their twin link had severed. Marxx felt half alive and hollow. He gasped as silent tears wracked his entire body. A loud wail of utter misery escaped his lungs. Marxx threw his hands over his eyes as he began to sob uncontrollably. Jaina wrapped her arms around him tightly and the two collapsed together in a heap onto the landing platform. Marxx removed his hands from his face and dug his fingers into Jaina's back for support. Jaina's own cheeks, wet with tears, began to sob along with her husband as she felt her heart break for the two most important men in her life.

Jacen heard Marxx crying and tried to block the sound out. Not wanting to believe his friend's pain, or that Marxx knew for a certainty that Raven wouldn't return, he further distanced himself from his twin and her husband. Yet, deep in his heart, and in the Force, he knew that Marxx's anguish was real. Jacen could no longer feel Raven's life-force energy on the planet. Her brilliant life energy had faded and ceased to exist. A single tear tracked down his left cheek as the truth started to send daggers into his heart. Jacen felt a heavy blanket fall upon his shoulders, then a pair of strong hands gripped and massaged his shoulders.

"She died a hero, son. She rescued all of us. That last leap... she did something that caused her grandmother's entire fleet to self-destruct. She not only saved the us, but who knows how many millions of lives she saved by destroying that fleet. You should be proud of her, son. I know I am," Han said, as he squeezed Jacen's shoulders tighter.

The wind burned Jacen's cheeks as trails of tears traveled down his face. Voice husky from emotion, Jacen said, "Words can't describe how proud I am of her. Nice to know you could appreciate her in the end, Dad. I can't believe she's g..." As the words left his mouth, Jacen realized their finality. An ache and pain like he'd never experienced in his life, burst like a supernova in his heart. Seeing his father fighting back tears of his own, and hearing Jaina and Marxx, Jacen couldn't control himself any longer. Jacen broke free from his father's grasp as tears poured from his eyes, clouding his vision. Jacen heedlessly raced off of the landing platform, stumbled down the rocky incline, and erratically ran across the open valley of the dormant volcano.

Han knew better than to try to follow Jacen. He closely watched his son and brushed aside his own tears. Chewie patted Han on the shoulder and let out a comforting howl.

"Thanks, pal," Han said. Chewie stepped back to catch up with his nephew.

Han not only mourned along with his son the loss of the brave and often misunderstood young woman, Raven, but also because today he lost his good friend, Kyp. He remembered Kyp as the bright young man who helped he and Chewie escape from the spice mines of Kessel. Kyp seemed like an adopted son as much as a close friend to Han. He supposed he always loved the troubled young man because Kyp tried to overcome so much in his life. Seeing a lot of himself in Kyp, Han always hoped that somehow Kyp could come to terms with his past transgressions and find peace in life. Han hoped that his own example would have shown the young man that even the dirtiest of scoundrels could be saved from a loveless, meaningless existence. Guilt gnawed in his stomach as he thought of Kyp sitting on the floor ripping himself apart after shooting lightning at Darkglider. Being so hell bent on catching Darkglider, Han didn't bother to really find out how Kyp was feeling. Han wondered if he'd stayed behind to talk to him instead of chasing after Darkglider that Kyp might still be alive. His mind wandered back to Kyp charging Marxx and Raven's grandmother when she assaulted Jacen. Kyp saved his son's life, and single-handedly defeated the enemy. He, like Raven, died a hero.

Han glanced to his right and saw Luke staring after Jacen's diminishing form.

"Kyp made his own decision, Han. There was nothing you could have done. Kyp was a grown man with many demons to face. Instead of following down a destructive path towards darkness, he chose to give himself entirely to the light and end his life in one selfless act," Luke said, brushing aside tears. "He saved Jacen's life and rid the Galaxy of a formidable enemy. He died a hero."

"That doesn't make it any easier to accept, Luke," Han replied. "Young people should never have to die or sacrifice themselves for others. It just ain't right."

Nodding, Luke said, "I agree. However, when Kyp and Raven decided to actively pursue becoming Jedi, they were well aware of the choices they may be presented with along the way. You don't enter into the job of Protector of the Galaxy, lightly. It's a hard job, and sometimes the only reward you can take away is peace in death. We all have to die somehow, unfortunately, it appears today was the chosen day for both Raven and Kyp."

"Did you foresee any of this?" Han asked.

"No, I didn't," Luke replied.

"If you had seen it, would you have tried to change any of this?" Han asked, as he watched his son wander aimlessly around in the center of the crater, his blanket fluttering behind him in the breeze.

"The Force doesn't work like that, Han. Even if I had received images of someone's pending death, the Force is always in motion, A simple factor can change everything. Raven came to Nephron because she received a vision through the Force that Marxx and Jacen would die if she didn't come to try and save them. Jacen might have died if Kyp hadn't been there to interfere. Raven recklessly and selflessly threw aside all of her own problems she may have faced by breaking her sentence, all to save her loved ones. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't fault her for doing what she did, for I did the same thing long ago," Luke replied as his eyes stared unseeingly at the churning Nephron sky.

"When Leia and I were on Bespin," Han said.

Luke's pale blue eyes met his old friend. He nodded. "My future lay along a different course than these two Jedi. I suppose only time will tell why they both needed to perish."

"I don't know how I'm going to let Chariss and Rowlon know about this. They're going to be devastated. They finally got their little girl back, barely got to spend any time with her, and now she's gone," Han said, wiping the back of his hand under his eyes. He thought of how he'd feel if he were in his friends' shoes. He couldn't help but believe that the pain of losing one of his children would be more than he could bear.

"Chariss and Rowlon knew what it meant to be a Jedi. They understood the risks involved," Luke replied.

"Sure, Luke. Whatever you say. All I know, as a Dad, that's the last call I ever want to receive. No parent should EVER outlive their children," Han said, and slowly headed inside *The Millennium Falcon* with the Wookiees.

Thinking of his own boy, Ben, Luke said, “Me either, Han. Me either.”

Anakin watched Marxx and Jaina comforting each other. Wrapped in a long, natural fiber blanket, Tenel Ka’s gray eyes followed Jacen’s erratic path down below in the dormant crater as she nestled herself tighter in Anakin’s strong arms.

Thinking of how many times Raven could have perished in the obstacles they faced under that awful building, Anakin still couldn’t believe she was dead. His heart ached for his brother, for in their short time together on Nephron, Raven exhibited immeasurable feats of courage and bravery. She left a lasting impression on the youngest Solo. His time with Raven made him understand why Jacen fell in love with the reckless, young Jedi. Although her methods may have been somewhat unorthodox, her heart weighed of pure gold.

“She was something else, was she not?” Tenel Ka asked. Guilt gnawed at her stomach as she said, “I never thought much of Raven, I am afraid to say. I guess it came from my jealousy. I thought she was just a flighty airhead who stole my boyfriend. I seriously underestimated the girl. I wish I could take back every bad thought I ever had for her.”

Anakin wrapped his arms tighter around Tenel Ka. She snuggled her head on his chest. The wind wrapped the blanket around both of their bodies. Anakin saw Tenel Ka watching Jacen and a sliver of doubt ran through his mind. Soberly he asked, “You want to go to Jacen, don’t you?”

“This is a fact. He is my friend and I would like to try to help him with his pain,” Tenel Ka replied.

“That’s not what I meant,” Anakin said as he dropped his arms from her back. Anakin distanced himself from the Hapan Princess.

Tenel Ka furrowed her brows, “What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s convenient for you now, right? Raven’s dead. Jacen’s free again. He’ll need comforting and who better to be there to pick up the pieces of his broken heart than the woman who’s been in love with him for his entire life,” Anakin replied, bitterly. He violently brushed his left palm under his eyes to wipe away tears.

“I do not understand why you would say that, Anakin,” Tenel Ka said, feeling hurt and confused.

“Well you love him, don’t you? He’s the one you want, not m... anyone else,” Anakin replied as waves of jealousy gripped his heart. Chocking back a sob, he tried to save face, “You know, I’ll understand, I mean, how could you possibly resist, right? Look at him, he’s a weeping, emotional mess! Go for it Tenel Ka, whisk your man up in your arms.”

Understanding dawned on the titian-haired Princess. She approached the tall Jedi and wrapped her arms tightly around his waist. Staring up into Anakin’s surprised and hopeful, blue eyes, she said, “You are a foolish, foolish young man. I have not spent one moment thinking of Jacen in a romantic way since you and I parted ways. All I kept wondering was when I would see YOU again, and hoping that YOU were safe.”

Anakin scrunched his eyebrows together and in a tiny voice asked, “Really?”

Tenel Ka nodded, “This is a fact. I only wish I could help Jacen now because he is my friend and I know how miserable he must be with his girlfriend gone.”

“I’m sorry I doubted you,” Anakin said.

“It is not a problem, we are all not feeling like ourselves today,” Tenel Ka said.

“Thanks for understanding.”

Squeezing the Princess in a tight warm hug, Anakin’s fears subsided as they swayed together in the breeze.

Alone in the crater, Jacen failed to notice how wet his face had become from his tears. Absently he noticed the rim of the neckline on his shirt sagged from water. He gave little thought to his own personal well-being or safety. His heart ached and burned with a longing that would never again be fulfilled.

Images assaulted his mind of Raven, his Raven, the girl of his dreams. He saw her thick brunette hair, her light blue eyes, her perky, upturned nose, and her fine cheekbones. Jacen hugged himself tightly as his heart sank heavily in his chest from sorrow. Images swirled in his mind from their time together, from their first, ominous and fateful meeting on *The Vengeance*, to Paulo’s funeral when he first laid eyes upon her unmasked beauty, to their frolicking in the meadow, their first kiss on the balcony of the Lake County Resort, and to their too abrupt goodbye and final parting. Jacen’s misery encompassed his soul. The woman he visualized growing old with, and raising a family with was dead.

Raven’s love made him feel more alive. She gave his life meaning and purpose. Her very presence intoxicated him from their first days together, even when he had no idea what she physically looked like. Her very spirit moved his soul and filled empty, emotional caverns that existed in his lonely heart. Now, he felt incomplete with her gone. His mind wandered back to the first time she opened up to him after she had kidnapped Chariss. Even from the beginning, he sensed something inside of her that even she had no idea existed, character and courage. There was something about her that allowed him to openly express himself in ways he had never done before with another person.

“Why are you being so nice to me?” Raven whispered.

“Because...I... like you and admire your courage. I think you can be more than you are though. You have great potential. I can tell life has so far given you the short end of things. But you deserve to be happy. And there are plenty of people who would love to have you in their lives...I think...know...that I am one of them,” Jacen said, gulping. His heart dropped and he felt a pounding in his ears as the last comment escaped from his lips. He’d never been able to be this open and frank with his feelings before to Tenel Ka. What was it about this woman? Was it the fact he couldn’t see her face that made him feel so bold?

Wiping his nose with the back of his hand, Jacen folded his arms around his body as he swayed in his misery. His memories lead him back to Life Day Eve, when he cradled Raven in his arms not long before she’d have to leave for Dagobah to start her training. Their words haunted him like whispers on

the wind:

Raven began to giggle and she caressed his left arm. She said, "You just make me want to melt."

Breathing hot air into Raven's ear, Jacen said, "Well I certainly wouldn't want that to happen. I like you in a solid state."

Giggling uncontrollably, Raven twirled in Jacen's arms so she could gaze upon her beloved. Her hands rested on his broad chest, and she moved them up his cotton shirt. She fastened her arms around his neck and pulled his face down towards hers. Their foreheads touched. Her eyes glistened with tears, "All my life, I dreamed of finding you... hoping that one day, some wonderful man would find the real me and love me. But you know, I always believed- and maybe still do- that I'm not worthy of that."

Jacen gazed into her liquid blue eyes and felt his throat constrict. "I don't see how you could ever have thought that. I know you had a rough start in life, but somehow through all of the misery you went through, you held onto the goodness in your heart. True it may have been hidden for a while, but you never lost it. Honey, I know you as well as I know myself. Believe me when I say, I think if anything, you deserve to be loved even more than most people...because you spent so much of your life without it." Jacen flashed her a Solo smile, "I plan on spending a lifetime heaping mountains of love on you."

Jacen's body quaked as he thought about his flippant words to her about liking her in a solid state. His last image of Raven, writhing in flux with the Force surfaced in his mind. Wracking tremors overtook his body as he sobbed, knowing he'd never feel the warmth or softness of her skin, or inhale the spicy fragrance of her hair heated by the Nubian sun, or hear the gentle lilt of her bubbly laugh. His beloved was dead, and he now felt like a mere shell of his former self.

He wanted to join her in the beyond. Yet, his rational mind knew he couldn't do that, it would cheapen her actions. She sacrificed her life so everyone they both loved could live. Jacen's heart flipped between feeling empty and worthless without Raven, to unbelievably proud of her sacrifice.

Raven had filled him with joy in a way he'd never imagined was possible in the Galaxy. He completely accepted the faults that others saw in Raven. He loved her unconditionally. Her impetuous and reckless nature led her to this horrible planet. Her once fragile and defective heart that hungered to be loved, drove her to feats of immeasurable courage. While pride blossomed in his chest, at the same time, Jacen's heart ached with guilt that he could not have taken her place today. He would have willingly given his own life to save her from death. In a way, he supposed she would never be dead though. Her heroic actions would live on in infamy and song. That hardly mattered to Jacen though, as he stared miserably at his empty arms.

Jacen found a large stone and leaned against its rough edges. He sat heavily upon the rock and covered his eyes, trying to block out the final images of Raven dying. She looked so pale and frail at the end, yet even when she could barely speak, her eyes burned with self-confidence and awareness of the importance of her actions. When he thought of her standing up to her grandmother, a slight smile crested his chapped lips. For the briefest of moments, Jacen believed Gwynalyn feared Raven. His smile broadened. That bitter, old woman feared Raven because of her inner strength alit from the love that radiated from her soul. In the end, Raven learned her own worth.

Sliding off of the rock, Jacen landed on a heap on the cold, crater ground. Jacen didn't notice as the cold wind assaulted his body, ripping warmth away from his body core. He raked his fingers through

his sandy hair and tried not to think, but to just bawl. He hoped his sobs could somehow help to cleanse the pain that invaded, and festered in his chest. Closing his eyes, Jacen's chilled body folded onto the ground and cried. Wallowing in his utter misery, Jacen's mind numbed to all thoughts other than his encompassing grief. Through his sorrow a flicker of a voice called upon the wind to him, it said, *It wasn't supposed to be like this...*

Puzzled, Jacen could have sworn he knew the identity of the voice, but who it belonged to remained just out of reach. Suddenly his mind filled with images of Raven. Confused, he realized he had never seen the place before, nor could he see who was talking to his beloved.

"What would you do if Jacen died or was killed?"

Her hand ceased moving in circles over her boot, "What?"

"It's always a possibility you know. Being a Jedi isn't the safest of professions. What would you do if he was killed?" a voice asked.

"Meaning would I seek revenge on those who killed him?" Raven asked, wondering why her Master was posing this line of questioning.

"Maybe... I'm curious"

Raven's eyes grew out of focus as she thought of such an empty future. "I think my heart would die. Although I'd probably wish I was dead as well, I would go on because I know that is what Jacen would want." Her boot dropped to the floor with a loud thud. She jumped, then picked up her other boot and began working on the leather.

"Would you fall in love again?"

Tears flowing from her eyes, Raven matched the speaker's gaze. She asked, "How could I ever love someone when my heart would have been ripped from my chest? I'd never love anyone again. I mean, I might find someone down the road who I'd like, who I might even want to spend the rest of my life with. But I'd never love him the way I love Jacen. When I gave my heart to him, I gave it to him completely. I'll never give it that freely to anyone else again. It belongs only to Jacen."

Jacen's heart warmed as he heard his beloved utter the words, he wondered if he could be as brave as she claimed she would be in his situation. The image swirled and changed and like a thundercloud the murky vision clapped into focus:

Blue lightning shot out of Gwynalyn's fingers towards Jacen, bathing him in radiant, shocking light. Jacen screamed in pain from the electrocution.

"JACEN!!!!" Raven screamed, the word choking in her throat.

The lightning deflected off of Jacen towards the group surrounding the door and they dove for cover. Raven screamed in horror as Jacen's body shook uncontrollably in his chair.

Raven's anguished screams shredded Kyp's heart. A slight grin formed on his lips, for in an instant, he knew the answer he desperately sought. Kyp raced across the room and tackled the crazed Sith

woman's waist. Kyp's head swirled as the full weight of Gwynalyn's electrocuting lighting shocked and rattled his brain. Surging forward through the deadly currents, he allowed his momentum to continue his charge. Grabbing the old woman he threw her over his shoulder. Fingers still wielding lightning, Gwynalyn's red eyes blazed with fury as she bathed her attacker in her crackling fury. Kyp slightly faulted in his steps as the pain reached excruciatingly deadly levels. With his remaining strength, he charged at the window, using Gwynalyn's body as a battering ram and together they crashed through the glass. The evil woman dug her clawed fists into Kyp's Jedi robe and the two flew out the window together

Throwing himself against the stone, Jacen gasped at the violent images of Kyp's death. *He died saving me*, Jacen thought, his entire body shaking from the realization. As he shook the images from his mind, his eyes rested on the shimmering, spectral form of Kyp Durrion.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," Kyp repeated. "Raven loved you more than life itself. She sacrificed herself so you and your kin could live. Your love was the greatest thing in her life, it positively lit her up from the inside. Whenever she thought of you, she glowed like she had swallowed the sun. Any man who can make a woman that happy deserves a second chance." Jacen's mouth fell agape. Kyp stared right into Jacen's eyes and added, "Take care of her this time around, Jacen. Don't let her out of your sight."

"What?" Jacen asked. Furrowing his brows, Jacen glanced around in confusion and witnessed Kyp's form fading in a swirl of pale blue light. Kyp took a large step to the right and moved aside his robe to reveal a feminine form that curled at his feet in a fetal position. Jacen stared incredulously up as Kyp faded completely away, his last image was his gleaming, broad smile.

Jacen's heart overflowed with hopeful joy. Racing on his knees, Jacen crawled over to the body on the ground. He briefly paused as his hand greeted a mass of long, white curls. Gently his fingers lingered along the seams of a familiar, leather suit. However, instead of dark gray, the material now gleamed bright white. He rolled the girl over and he let out a confused yelp of delight. His fingers traced the porcelain white skin, that covered a pair of familiar high cheekbones. The wind captured a favorite spicy fragrance and sent it dancing into his nostrils. The scent filled Jacen with an overwhelming, familiar feeling of warmth and love. Heart pounding with restored urgency and hope, his pinky finger traced the outline of a pair of full, dark pink, pouting lips. Before his eyes, her skin deepened from pale white to a rosy pink. Suddenly the lips parted and the girl gasped, her cheeks darkened healthily. Her eyes fluttered open. A pair of pale blue eyes stared at Jacen with complete confusion.

Jacen's heart beat wildly in disbelief... Kyp had just returned Raven to him alive and well.

She glanced curiously around the landscape and then back at Jacen. Worry etched her brows as she asked, "Where are we?"

"I think this must be heaven, honey. Otherwise, I must be dreaming or something," Jacen said as his arms encircled her waist he brought Raven into his lap. He threw the blanket around her body and crushed her in a tight embrace. As he turned her completely around, Jacen found the luxurious white curls made Raven's icy blue eyes stand out brightly on her beautiful face.

Raven jolted as something fluttered in the corner of her eye. She grabbed a fistful of her hair and brought it around to her face to view. She shook her head in confusion. "Jacen, what happened to me? Why's my hair white? Where are we? And why do you look like such a mess?"

Laughter bubbled out of Jacen's throat as he crushed Raven against his chest. Tears of joy drenched his face.

"Stop laughing at me! I'm serious!" Raven said, slapping his arm half-heartedly. Her voice caught in her throat as her mind reeled over the past events. Her full lower lip quivered and she asked "Please, tell me you didn't die too... did you? I'm a complete failure if you did!"

Jacen's heart broke and he ceased laughing. Tracing a finger along Raven's lips, he flashed her the famous Solo smile and said, "Honey, I'm not dead."

Sitting upright in Jacen's lap, Raven's eyes grew wide, "Wait... then that would mean..." She threw her hands up in front of her face and stared at their solid form. Lightly she caressed her hands in confusion. "Jacen, *I DIED!* I know I did. How is this possible?"

Jacen took one of her hands and massaged her palm with his thumb. Raven's body tingled with delight at his touch. He said, "Power of love, I guess. We have your former Master to thank for bringing you back to us all."

"Kyp?" Raven asked. "What? Why? I don't understand."

Shaking his head, Jacen said, "I don't understand how it's possible, all I know is that I owe that man everything. He saved my life, and he brought you back to me. I guess I now know why my Dad loved him so much. He never thought about his own well-being, and always thought of others... well other than that time he blew up a planet... but... I hardly think that matters anymore. He'll always be a great man in my eyes."

Dropping her head onto Jacen's strong shoulder, Raven's fingers worked on straightening out Jacen's frayed collar on his messy shirt. She tilted her head upwards and stared at Jacen's handsome profile and strong, square chin. She said, "I don't remember anything after I destroyed my grandmother's fleet. It was weird, I felt completely peaceful and happy as I became one with the Force. Then I woke up here."

"I wonder why Kyp showed up as a ghost and you didn't," Jacen said. Raven raised the right corner of her lip and shrugged. Jacen laughed, "That was rhetorical, darling. I certainly didn't expect you to have an answer."

Worry suddenly plagued Raven and she timidly asked, "Do you think Master Skywalker is still going to have me arrested?"

Jacen threw his head back and howled with laughter. Raven scowled, "Will you stop that!"

"You saved the entire Galaxy from a marauding force of enemies. Honey, I think you might get a big, shiny medal, or maybe the world's shortest track record to earning the title Jedi Master, but I highly doubt that Luke will throw you in jail," Jacen replied, brandy brown eyes grinning delightfully as he chuckled.

Raven sighed with relief and then giggled. Biting her lip, Raven innocently asked Jacen a question, "Well then, if that's the case, I think we should name our first son, Kyp. What do you think?"

A fresh round of tears flowed out of Jacen's eyes as he said, "Darling, I'll gladly name ALL of our children Kyp in his honor. It's the least I could do for him for bringing you back to me."

"Even the girls?" Raven asked, her voice climbing in pitch.

"Yes, even the girls," Jacen said. He rolled his eyes back and began to tick off, "Let's see, Kypaleia, Kyparina, Kypletta..."

Raven's giggling boiled into rolling peals of bubbling laughter. She choked, "Oh stop! Those are horrible!" Jacen joined in with her laughter until both of their sides ached. When they finally stopped giggling, Raven placed her hand behind Jacen's neck and captured his lips in a kiss. As Jacen traversed and mapped every inch of Raven's sweet lips, for the first time he truly realized he was not dreaming. His beloved was alive, and back in his arms forever. Grinning broadly, he descended onto her lips kissed her with renewed, and joyous passion.

Their combined euphoria shot a brilliant wave of bliss into the Force. Somewhere, in the far off reaches of the Galaxy, Kyp smiled contently.

Jaina placed the blanket over Marxx's shoulders. He sat hunched over the darkened, and antiquated gameboard on the deck of *The Millennium Falcon*.

"I don't understand why would I have been given her back, just to have the Force take her away from me again," Marxx said, as he pounded his fist against his forehead. "WHY?"

"I don't know, honey. Sometimes one life is worth saving many, I guess," Jaina said, as her hand massaged circles on Marxx's back.

Eyes pooling with tears, Marxx huskily said, "This is going to kill my mother. She'll be inconsolable."

"She has your father, Tanella, Krishta, and us both to help her through this. When Jacen comes back we'll head right back to Naboo to start the healing process for you all," Jaina replied, resting her chin on Marxx's left arm, and gazing up into his pool blue eyes.

"We don't even have a body. I don't think I'll ever have complete closure to this. You know my life never really felt complete without Raven in it. When I found her again, it was like all these unanswered questions suddenly disappeared. I finally figured out who I was again. I understood something that had evaded my grasp for the longest time," Marxx replied. He leaned forward and gazed at his wife. Her large, bloodshot, brandy brown eyes stared compassionately back in his direction. Sniffling, she reached out her left hand and entwined Marxx's fingers with her own. He continued, "She didn't have to die. I could've done that last leap instead of her. I had the strength, she didn't. All she needed was to tell me what to do."

Jaina recognized the guilt in her husband's voice. She squeezed his hand tightly, "Baby, you saw her at the end, there. She was already almost gone. She knew there would be no return for her. We don't know how it would have affected you. You might not have come back either. What would we all have done then? I don't think I could've born losing both of you."

“Well, I’d hate to be apart from you also. Having you here is about the only thing that’s keeping me together,” Marxx said. He picked up her hand and kissed it lightly. “How do you think Jace is doing? We should really go get him, it’s cold out there,” Marxx replied.

Glancing at her chorometer, Jaina said, “I’d say give him another twenty minutes. Then we can gather him up and leave this horrible place once and for all.”

Marxx wrinkled his brows together in confusion and he stared at his wife. Jaina sensed a swelling in the Force around Marxx. She asked, “What’s the matter, Marxx?” Bolting upright, Marxx turned over the stool they both sat upon. Jaina crashed to the floor with a yelp of pain.

Offering his hand to his wife, Marxx cringed, he said, “Sorry, baby. You alright?”

“Yeah, what’s the matter?” she said, as she bounced to her feet and wiped herself off.

“Come on!” Marxx said, as he moved towards the door of the ship.

“What?”

“COME ON! Everyone, come on!” Marxx said and he grabbed Jaina’s hand and dragged her off of the *Falcon*. Luke, Anakin, Han, Tenel Ka, and the Wookiees had all been sitting at the side in the main cabin quietly reflecting on the events of the day, stood up and quickly followed Marxx and Jaina. The party poured down the ramp saw Marxx break free from his wife’s grasp and watched him race across the crater floor. Running towards him, they witnessed a girl in white crush him in a large embrace. Marxx picked the girl off the ground and swung her in wide, joyous, circles. The wind carried peals of laughter up the confused group.

Anakin pulled a pair of macro-binoculars from his belt and focused on the happy couple. He lowered them in amazement. “That’s not possible.”

Chewing the inside of his mouth, Luke crossed his arms and stared as the twins twirled in delight. Jaina reached the happy couple and began to laugh in wonder. Jacen threw his arms around his twin and embraced her tightly.

Luke placed a hand on Anakin’s shoulder and stared up at his nephew. Smiling, he said, “Never underestimate the power of the Force, Anakin. Never.”

Chapter 42

Leia stood on the deck of *The Peacekeeper* and watched *The Fiery Phoenix*, *The Nubian Hope*, *The Millennium Falcon*, and Luke’s X-Wing take turns landing in the docking bay. The crew of the immense battleship stood on the deck and waited for the occupants on the four ships to exit their vessels.

Han, Chewie, Kendu, and the droids exited the *Falcon*. Kendu’s face brightened pink as the sea of faces began to lightly cheer. Slapping a hand on the jittery man’s shoulder, Han pushed Kendu forward.

“I don’t understand, I didn’t do anything,” Kendu replied.

“Sure you did, you let everyone here know exactly what was going on. You provided them with invaluable information. Don’t sell yourself short,” Han said and pushed the little man forward.

Leia rushed forward and crushed her husband in a tight embrace. Lando smiled from behind the former Princess and hugged his friend Chewbacca.

Han and Leia turned as Luke leapt down from his X-Wing and walked with Anakin, Tenel Ka, and Lowbacca across the flight deck after the young trio exited Kyp’s ship. Tenel Ka had replaced her shredded gown with a standard issue, gray flightsuit. Luke nodded in acknowledgement of the crowd as they continued to cheer on the new group of arrivals. Anakin let go of Tenel Ka’s hand and rushed to his mother, wrapped her in a tight embrace and lifted her off of her tiny feet.

Luke smiled at the mother–son reunion. He jolted back to reality as Mara grabbed his hand, swung him around and crashed their lips together in a kiss.

Marxx and Jaina exited *The Nubian Hope* together and stood at the base of the ramp. Jacen appeared in the doorway and struggled with Raven inside.

“I’m not going out there!” called a voice from inside the ship.

“You most certainly ARE coming out here. No one is going to believe you are alive if you don’t show your gorgeous face out there,” Jacen said.

“I’m not going!”

Marxx burst out laughing as Jacen flashed him a crazed grin and dodged back inside the ship. He appeared again carrying Marxx’s distraught sister, cradled in his arms. When the lights on the deck illuminated Jacen and Raven, the crowd’s roar reached an ear-shattering crescendo.

“Oh alright, put me down,” Raven shouted into Jacen’s ear.

“You’re not gonna run are you?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes, “No, I won’t.”

Placing her lightly on her feet, Raven dug her fingernails like vices into the back of Jacen’s hand. Jacen gasped, “Honey, tone down the grip, please.”

“Sorry,” Raven said and loosened her hold on his hand.

Wiggling circulation back into his fingers, he said, “Oh don’t worry about it, I’m used to your grip of steel.” Jacen’s face glowed with pride for his beloved as he watched her deeply blush from the cheers. Jacen leaned down and said into her ear, “See, you’re a legend. They’ll be talking about it for years, the white Raven returns.”

“I don’t feel like a legend,” Raven replied, and tucked a strand of white hair behind her ear.

“That’s a good thing, my dear. Trust me,” Jacen said. Knowing his beloved’s insecurities about herself, Jacen confidently believed that Raven would never fall victim to arrogance or get overly full of herself over her newfound notoriety. The couple approached Han and Leia. Jacen’s chin rose and he stared at his parents evenly.

Leia threw her arms around the young girl and hugged her tightly. Into her ear, Leia said, “I’m so proud of you, Raven. I don’t know how to thank you.”

Pulling away and looking somewhat embarrassed, Raven replied, “Oh I don’t need or want anything. I didn’t do anything special. Kyp is the real hero out of this mess he killed Gwynalyn. All I want is to be with the people I love.” Gulping she turned her head in Master Skywalker’s direction. When she, Jacen, Marxx and Jaina had arrived back on the landing platform on Nephron, Luke had already climbed into his X-Wing to start their leave from the planet. He left without telling her if she would still be prosecuted or not.

Stepping forward, Luke smiled and said, “Well, don’t worry. You’re not going to get any objections from me in that regard. You may think you didn’t do anything, but trust me, you most definitely earned yourself the biggest pardon ever.”

Grinning broadly, Jacen wrapped his arms tightly around Raven’s waist. In her ear he teased, “See, I told you so.”

“Anyway, we have a feast waiting upstairs in the commons, and rooms for you all to rest in for the night before returning home tomorrow,” Leia said.

Anakin’s stomach growled as if on cue. Everyone laughed as his face turned bright crimson. Reaching out to take Tenel Ka’s hand to escort her to dinner, Anakin swung backwards as she remained standing on the docking bay. Tenel Ka grinned at the confusion that marred Anakin’s handsome face.

“Go with your family, Anakin. I have some business to attend to,” Tenel Ka said, squeezing his hand.

Furrowing his brows, Anakin stared at her inquisitively. He asked, “Do you need my help?”

“No, Anakin. I will be fine. This is something I need take care of on my own. Thank you for asking,” Tenel Ka replied. Gently she tugged on his arm, bringing the tall, young man closer towards her face. She placed a cool hand against his cheek. Standing on her toes, she lightly kissed his lips. Catching his breath, Anakin blushed again. She pulled away from him and began to walk off. The titian haired Princess turned and faced the happy young man and said, “Just make sure you leave some food for me, because I am famished.”

Laughing, Anakin watched her enter into a turbolift and flashed him a devilish smile before the doors shut.

The myriad of stars twinkled outside the window of the conference room. Each star represented a system of planets, most were unexplored that expanded into an infinitely large universe. Ta’a Chume’s

eyes moved northward and saw the glowing blue planet of Hapes, peacefully spinning, free of invasion and destruction. The old queen sighed thinking of all the work that would need to be done to restore her Cluster to its former glory. Mentally she began to create a checklist of the people who needed contacting for reconstruction of The Fountain Palace, and the military base on Hapes 8, and soil experts to advise how long before crops could be sown again on Hapes 4. Her eyes flickered in the darkest corners of the room and watched her two Royal guards observing her every move.

Deep in thought, her ever attentive ears picked up the sound of a door opening. The guards tensed and then relaxed as they recognized the visitor. Ta'a Chume glanced into the window's reflection and saw Tenel Ka standing in the doorway. Ta'a Chume turned and let her eyes fall upon her granddaughter.

"That's hardly what I would call proper attire for a Princess," Ta'a Chume stated taking in the flight uniform.

Tenel Ka stepped over the threshold and the door softly closed, trapping her inside the room with her grandmother. Raising an eyebrow she said, "I see your observation skills are as keen as ever, grandmother."

"Well it doesn't do much good to be a ruler if you can't differentiate simple things like flightsuits from grand gowns," Ta'a Chume stated.

Crossing her arms across her chest, Tenel Ka tapped her left-hand forefingers on her right bicep. Flatly she said, "Well if this is something basic, then I suppose something as simple as determining if you had a clawdite in your ranks should have been no problem."

Ta'a Chume waved her hand, "Oh they always give themselves away. Course I haven't seen one of them in years... but I would know them if I saw one... they have a particular odor to them that they cannot hide."

"Really."

Peaking an eyebrow, Ta'a Chume wondered why her granddaughter would doubt her about something as miniscule as this, "Of course."

Dropping her arms, Tenel Ka walked around the long oval conference table and stood before her grandmother. She said, "You had a clawdite in your court for, who only knows how long, and he went by completely unnoticed under your trained eye."

Ta'a Chume stiffened her back and she turned away from her granddaughter, "I don't know what you are talking about. That's impossible."

Following the older woman, Tenel Ka bore down upon her with controlled fury, "It IS possible. This is a fact! Your military liaison General Margatall was kidnapped by Gwynalyn Palpatine several months ago and was imprisoned on Nephron. He was replaced with a clawdite in your court. He stood next to you, and you did not smell his odor, nor suspect the deception. You continued to trust him."

Ta'a Chume turned around and jolted slightly by how dangerously close Tenel Ka invaded her personal space. Blocking her right shoulder, the old woman shoved her way past the younger woman and said, "I don't know where you got your information, but that is simply not true."

“You can deny it all you want, but I have witnesses who saw the real Margatall on Nephron; dirty, and gaunt from living the life in a cell,” Tenel Ka stated.

“And where is he to back up your claims?”

“Dead and buried under thousands of tons of rubble.”

“Well that certainly is convenient for you,” Ta’a Chume replied, coolly. “You don’t have a body to back your claims.”

Tenel Ka lightly smiled, “This is a fact, I do not have his body.” She walked away from her grandmother and approached a computer terminal. She synched into the Hapan security mainframe, and began searching the databases. Entering her Royal clearance codes, Tenel Ka smirked. Punching in another series of codes, she reached out with her left hand and turned off the lights in the conference room with the Force, and activated the holo-projector.

Ta’a Chume glance up and saw a holo-image of her granddaughter shouting at General Margatall in the war-room on Hapes. The image wavered a bit from the ongoing destruction of the building, but the image did not falter as the general changed from his human self into a clawdite, and administer a syringe full of drugs into the writhing Princess.

The image faded and Tenel Ka turned the lights back on. Turning, she leaned against the table, folded her arms and stared at her grandmother, awaiting her reply.

“Well I can see why you changed your clothes, that dress was a disgrace,” Ta’a Chume said, blandly.

Tenel Ka let out a loud laugh, “Is that all you have to say?”

“And what exactly do you want me to say, Jedi Tenel Ka? That it appears I was duped for months on end? That I’m an old fool who has no business ruling any longer? That my judgment is gone? Is that what you are implying, Princess?” Ta’a Chume spat, as her voice climbed in pitch.

“Well I do not really need to imply any of that, since you have just admitted all of this yourself. You sat back and allowed our Cluster to fall under attack. And even when the attacks began, you never once suspected a traitor might exist in our ranks. Why? I will tell you why! Because you are arrogant, power-hungry, and your judgment has been impaired. You are no longer fit to rule our Cluster,” Tenel Ka snapped.

Sniffing derisively, Ta’a Chume threw back, “And I suppose you think that you are?”

“This is a fact!”

“Really? And who was it that made the official decision to attack the Dellaltians? I certainly hope you do not decide to pin that little digression on me. You are the one who issued that attack. If you were privy to this little bit of information, why did you still attack our neighbors?” Ta’a Chume asked, smugly.

“I tried to call back the troops, but the clawdite stopped me. It is a fact that I used poor judgment in

trusting him. Of course, I only trusted him because you trusted him entirely. I suppose it is safe to say we are partly both to blame,” Tenel Ka replied.

“Partly, I do not share any blame with you, my dear Granddaughter. You behaved poorly during this crisis. If anything, you left me more certain than ever that you have no future in leadership or ruling Hapes. You are indecisive, passive, and overly cautious. Such traits may be expected for a Jedi, but not if you are going to rule a cluster of planets,” Ta’a Chume said, coldly.

Understanding dawned on Tenel Ka, she approached her grandmother and lingered again into her personal space, “You were aware of everything that was going on around you, did you not? You just played feeble and overrun with emotion to see how I would react in this crisis. I should have known something was up with you, you do not care about anything, or anyone except your own precious self. What kind of a leader does that make you? That you would sit back and let your people die needlessly, leaving me alone to bear the brunt of the decisions while you are still mentally able to assist. You disgust me. I cannot abide to look at you!”

Turning on her heel, Tenel Ka turned around and walked to the opposite end of the room. Before Ta’a Chume could speak, Tenel Ka resumed, “For years the women of our family have ruled the Hapes Cluster with an arrogant iron fist. My foremothers set aside their hearts and souls to trade them in for greed and power. Today, I saw the ugliness of what the power of greed can do to a person.” Spinning on her heel, Tenel Ka faced her grandmother again, “Greed of power, makes one ugly. It strips the person of her humanity. Living life without a soul is not living. You fault me for being overly cautious and indecisive. I call my actions intelligent. The great leaders know to view all angles on situations before they act out. To simply act without having the all of the facts is suicide! For years I have struggled with this duality nature in myself. Who am I? Am I a Jedi or a future Queen? Do I reject an artificial arm, or use my own strength and intuition to survive? The fact is that for so long I have thought there was a distinctive line between these two worlds. I believed one could only be one or the other. I now see that is wrong. I can be both. It is my calling to bring something to the Royal throne of Hapes that has not existed before, do you know what that is, Grandmother?”

Ta’a Chume cleared her throat, and choked, “No.”

“Compassion. Compassion is central to a Jedi’s life. When I saw all of those people dying in the holo-vids my heart broke and ached for their pain and the pain of the victims families. What did you do? You played feeble and gave no thought to them. You used their pain to measure my ability to wield the power of my crown. Yes, I made a terrible mistake, one which I will have to live with for the rest of my life. However, I plan to work hard to make amends to the pain my one foolish act caused upon the Dellaltians. Until the Fountain Palace has been rebuilt, the Reef Fortress will be the main headquarters for the Royal Court. I have a lot of public damage control to attend to and will spend a great deal of time traveling throughout the Cluster to regain the trust of the people in our realm. After that, we will hold a changing of the title ceremony and I will be crowned Queen Mother of Hapes. I would appreciate your continued assistance in the court, as your years of service, and experience to the Cluster will be invaluable to me. But if you chose to turn your back entirely, I will understand.”

“Do you really think you can just oust me as Queen? From what I’ve seen you are not yet ready to handle the responsibility,” Ta’a Chume replied, balling her hands on her hips.

“That is a fact,” Tenel Ka said. Ta’a Chume stepped back in surprise. Tenel Ka continued, “I do not know if I will ever be completely ready to rule, but now the time is right. I believe it is time for me to

jump head first into my reign, it is the only way I will ever fully become comfortable with my place in the Cluster. And I want to do this while I am young enough that I can rely on you for assistance, when it is required.”

Ta’a Chume chewed the inside of her lip. Uncertainty gripped her heart, but in the end, she knew her granddaughter was correct, she had only a handful of years left in this life and knew they would be better spent molding her oftentimes headstrong granddaughter, than leaving her alone without guidance. She said, “Very well.”

Tenel Ka nodded her head and squeezed her grandmother’s hand. She then turned to leave the room. The two guards simultaneously made to follow the Princess out the door. Tenel Ka paused as the door opened and spoke to them in a low voice, “She is still your Queen. Stay with her.”

The doors closed and Ta’a Chume found herself staring out the window again. Instead of staring at the stars she gazed at her tired, and wrinkled reflection in the glass. As her hand roughly caressed her cheek, she fought back a tear as she realized with all finality that the one battle she never had a chance of overcoming had finally claimed victor: old age.

Six long tables connected together in the officer’s lounge to seat a table of the New Republic’s most renowned heroes for a feast: Admiral Ackbar, Mon Monthma, King Sshruva Proo, his two advisors, Lando, Chewbacca, Lowbacca, Han, Leia, Jacen, Raven, Jaina, Marxx, Anakin, Tenel Ka, Luke, Mara, Kendu, and eventually Ta’a Chume. One seat remained empty up towards Han. The room filled with fast and furious conversation. C-3PO raced around the table refilling glasses with water and Balmorran wine.

Anakin stood up when Tenel Ka entered the officer’s lounge. Anakin massaged his shoulder. Tenel Ka gave him a concerned glance, “Did you bump into something with your shoulder?”

Chewie and Lowie started to bark with laughter. Luke coughed on his water as a laugh bubbled in his throat. Han flashed the Hapan Princess a lopsided grin and said, “Sweetheart, you can say that again.”

Confused she flashed him a worried glance. Anakin whispered, “I’ll... ah... tell you about it later.”

He pulled out a chair he had saved next to him for Tenel Ka to sit down upon. After thanking him and sitting on the seat, she burst out laughing at the sight before her eyes. Anakin had loaded her plate five inches high with food. Anakin’s grin highlighted his boyish good looks. Tenel Ka raked her fingers through his bangs and tousled them about.

Jacen’s ears perked at the odd lilting laugh and dropped his jaw in amazement to see the expression of merriment that danced across Tenel Ka’s usually somber face as she fed a spoonful of rice into Anakin’s awaiting mouth. Leaning across the table, he snapped his fingers at Jaina. Jaina, who had been in deep conversation with her husband, scowled at her twin, “What?”

He threw up his open palms and shrugged his shoulders, pointed down the table, and opened his eyes wide with disbelief. Jaina watched Anakin take a hold of Tenel Ka’s fingers and suck them clean. From

the far opposite end of the table, Ta'a Chume watched her granddaughter's behavior with horror. Jaina rolled her eyes, "Yeah, don't ask me how that happened. I'm as in shock as you are."

Raven chewed on a biscuit and watched bemusedly as Jacen gossiped with his twin, "But did you *hear* her? I think she laughed for me once in all the years I've known her."

"Yeah I think that was out of pity more than anything. You are the worlds worst joke teller, Jacen," Jaina said between bites.

Marxx snickered.

"Wait a minute, I think he's funny," Raven said, jumping to his defense.

"Course you would, you're his girlfriend," Jaina pointed out. Wiping her hands quickly on a napkin she challenged her brother, "Come on, pull out one of your classics and let's see if Raven really thinks it's funny."

Jacen rubbed his hands together and peered upwards deciding which joke to tell, when Han stood at the head of the table and tapped on his glass. Everyone quieted. Raven gazed down the long table and noted Han's somber expression.

He glanced around the room, and began, "Now as you all know, I'm not the professional speech giver around here, so I'll try not to ramble. If you'll note there's an extra seat at this table that remains empty. That seat should have been filled by my friend Kyp Durron. Today, he sacrificed his life in order to rid the Galaxy of another hostile Palpatine takeover... Kyp was a great friend to me. I know most people only remembered him for his actions against Cardia, and that is what they base their opinions of him upon. But that's only a part of Kyp's past. Kyp was selfless to a fault. Although he'd get overly emotional sometimes, he rarely did things simply for his own selfish needs. He never desired or wanted anything in life. The only thing he ever wanted was peace. I can only hope that he is happy where he is now and that the pain that followed him throughout his life has been replaced with peace. Please join me in a moment of silence for our fallen hero."

Everyone bowed their heads. Jacen grabbed a hold of Raven's hand as she silently began to cry.

Han sat down to mark the end of his speech. Luke rose to speak. "The life of Jedi is hard, and long. Most people see being a Jedi as a glamorous profession, it's not. If the Force has selected you to become a Jedi you are expected to spend much of your life in deep meditation, and learning to balance your personal and professional life carefully. Although Jedi are supposed to be peacekeepers, we are at times called upon to act in ways that are in complete opposition to what our humanity may demand. We must learn to let go of our conscious selves and in a split decision, realize that in one act, we can make the Galaxy a better place. I've seen this happen three times in my life. The first was over thirty years ago when my father destroyed the Emperor. The second two happened within a short span of time together today. A Master and his apprentice both showed what it truly means to be a Jedi. Kyp sacrificed himself to save Jacen from being destroyed by the power of the Sith. He also rid the Galaxy of a formidable enemy. I witnessed Kyp when he died and I think it's safe to say he has found peace. He seemed happier than I'd ever seen him before. The man who many misunderstood will be remembered forever as a hero. I mourn the loss of a friend and colleague today."

Luke turned his eyes upon Raven's glowing white hair. He smiled and said, "The Force works in

mysterious ways. Every time I think I might grasp an understanding of how the Force works, I get thrown something unexpected that makes me rethink everything. Today I witnessed a young woman utilize an unique ability the Force gave her to help others in need. She could have sat back, said there was nothing that could be done and we all would have perished. Instead, she selflessly used her special ability to save everyone from death. Raven Racees gave her life so everyone she cared about the most could live. Then, she could have stayed and possibly been healed by medics, but instead, she made one final journey to rid the Galaxy of a fleet, bent on destruction. In return for her selfless acts, the Force gave her a second chance and returned her to the material world... and with a new hairstyle,” Luke added. Everyone chuckled, through tears. “Raven, there are no words to express the level of gratitude the Galaxy will owe you for your actions today. In the years ahead, always remember that the Force has granted you the most precious of gifts, when you figure it out, I believe you need to pass on what you have learned from this experience.”

Luke sat down again and conversations flared again around the table.

Tears trailing down her face, Raven couldn't think of anything to say in response to Luke's statements. Jacen wrapped his arms around his beloved in a tight embrace. Raising her head from Jacen's shoulder, Raven's tear filled blue eyes hugged his brandy brown eyes. She said, “What did I learn from this?”

Heart breaking at the innocence in her voice, Jacen said, “Uncle Luke's right, that's for you to figure out. I certainly don't know the answer. I think the two of us will be spending a lot of time in deep mediation over this.”

“Together?” Raven asked.

Jacen laughed, “Kyp instructed me to never let you out of my sight, trust me, I have zero interest in ever doing that again.”

Raven snuggled into his arms and whispered, “Good. I miss him, you know? He was a great mentor.”

“I think Kyp will always be with you. He obviously had a profound impact on you. You've grown so much since before you started your training. When you faced your grandmother, I almost didn't recognize you. You were so confident in yourself. I know Kyp's training had a lot to do with that,” Jacen said.

“Yes, it did. Kyp's training, and your continued love. You truly helped me through all of my hard times, even when you weren't there,” Raven said, nestling tightly into his arms.

Jacen closed his eyes and inhaled Raven's spicy shampoo. His eyes filled with tears. When he opened them, he met Marxx's emotion filled orbs. The dark haired young man smiled at Jacen and then buried his head in Jaina's shoulder to hide his tears.

Deciding to try to brighten the mood some, clearing his throat, Jacen said, “So how does an ewok get from one place to the next?”

Scrunching her brows together, Raven said, “What?”

Jaina groaned.

“E-woks! Get it! Instead of ewoks- he walks...” Jacen explained.

Marxx burst out laughing at the disgusted expression that etched on Raven’s face. She pulled away from Jacen’s arms, returned to her food and said, “Ok, I now understand what Jaina was saying earlier.”

“What? Oh come on, it was funny, right?” Jacen said, hopefully.

“You really are hopeless,” Jaina replied, rolling her eyes.

“Come on, it wasn’t really that bad,” Jacen said, flashing Raven the famous Solo smile.

“Don’t flash me that sexy smile of yours, hon. If I fake a laugh, will you promise to never tell another bad joke like that again?” Raven asked.

“Oh please say yes to that one, Jacen. Please?” Jaina said, eyes open wide in anticipation.

“Nope sorry. I know I’m funny. If you guys refuse to admit it, that’s your problem I guess. I am not going to stop telling jokes,” Jacen replied.

In his best impersonated voice of C-3PO, Marxx said, “We’re doomed.”

Raven and Jaina burst out laughing. Jacen scowled.

“Now THAT was funny!” Raven replied as she wiped tears from her eyes.

Giggling, Raven grabbed Jacen’s pouting face and covered his mouth with a kiss. Jacen laughed as her giggles exploded in his mouth. Grinning brightly at Jacen when thy pulled away, Raven said, “Don’t worry, baby. I’ll always love you, regardless.”

“Part of my charm, right?” he said, flashing her a lopsided smile. “Wait a minute, what do you mean *regardless?*”

Sweetly Raven replied, “Now, now honey. Not everyone can be blessed with a great sense of humor, that’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Marxx and Jaina burst out laughing at Jacen’s hurt expression.

From down the table, Han heard the peels of laughter flutter throughout the room from his children. His face fell.

Leia’s eyes looked worried, “What’s the matter, Han? Still missing Kyp?”

“No. Well, yeah, I’ll always miss Kyp. But something just occurred to me, that’s all,” Han replied.

“What?”

Sighing deeply he said, “I think this Kyp’s way of telling me he’s alright.”

“What do you mean?” Leia asked, completely confused.

Flashing his wife a lopsided smile, he said, “Only Kyp would get devilish delight in knowing that by returning Raven to Jacen that I’m going to end up forking over half our life savings in hosting another wedding. My financial misery always gave him the greatest perverse pleasure.”

Behind a napkin, Luke chuckled deeply. Mara, Leia, Lando, and Chewie joined in with adding their chuckles.

To everyone he said, “I don’t need this.” Grin changing to a frown, Han made to get up from the table. Everyone roared with laughter, as Leia grabbed his arm and forced him back down into his seat.

Behind Han, C-3PO came bearing a bottle of wine, “Excuse me, General Solo, would you like some more wine?”

“You better believe I do,” Han replied. And to the roaring din of laughter, he downed the last fourth of the bottle in a few gulps.

Turning to Artoo, Threepio said, “Really, you’d think after all this time he would have developed some manners.”

Artoo hooted derisively at the taller golden droid. Taken aback Threepio said, “As if you should talk, I’m the one who’s programmed for etiquette and protocol, not you.” Letting out a loud, “Hurmph,” Threepio pointed to the kitchen, “Come on Artoo, let’s get more wine. It appears General Solo is very thirsty this evening.”

Holding his lowered forehead between his hands, Han stared at the table. Leia rubbed his shoulder blades.

Regaining his composure after laughing, Lando said, “You know, I’d willingly buy the *Falcon* off of you if you’re really low on cash, pal.”

If looks could kill, Lando would’ve been as dead as Greedo. Curious about all the noise from the adult end of the table, Jaina excused herself and placed her hands on her father’s shoulders.

“What’s up, Dad?” she asked.

“He’s depressed at the prospect of paying for another large wedding,” Leia replied.

“Who’s Anakin’s?”

Throwing his head up wildly, Han’s heart pounded in his chest, “Anakin’s??”

“Anakin what?” Anakin asked from the middle of the table.

Pointing his finger accusingly at his youngest child, Han said, “You’re not planning on getting hitched anytime soon are you?”

Anakin gulped as Tenel Ka raised a curious eyebrow in his direction. Sputtering his lips, Anakin said,

“Sheesh, No Dad! What would give you that idea?”

Tenel Ka glowered at Anakin, “And what is wrong with marriage?”

Sweat trickled down Anakin’s back. He tugged on his collar, “Uh, is it HOT in here suddenly?”

“Ok, so you must mean Jacen,” Jaina said, delighting in her younger brother’s discomfort, she left Anakin to defend himself against his Warrior Princess, girlfriend. “Well just relax, Dad.”

“Why?” Han said, fearing the answer.

“Because, it’s customary on Naboo for the bride’s family to pay for the wedding. So Chariss and Rowlon will get to spring this upcoming nuptials,” Jaina replied.

Han’s face changed from depressed to elated in a heartbeat. Threepio reappeared with a fresh bottle of wine. He leaned over, “More wine, General Solo?”

Flashing a lopsided smile at the golden droid, Han said, “Threepio, give a fresh round to everyone! Drinks are on me!”

Chapter 43

After pushing her floppy straw hat tighter on her head, when a warm, late morning, Nubian breeze threatened to send it sailing away, Chariss lowered her left hand back onto the handle of her pruning sheers and attacked her hedges with expert glee. Snipping quickly, beads of perspiration formed on Chariss’ forehead from her exertion and as the sun warmed the dark path under her bare feet. Pausing to wipe the sweat off of her forehead, she stared across the luscious green valley. The pregnant emerald trees swayed in the gentle breeze, filling the air with a rustling, calming sound that only nature in its fullest glory can create. She sensed the trees were busily talking together.

Chariss closed her eyes and inhaled the seductively sweet fragrance of her pink stargazer lilies that had just opened today. Their perfumed scent, particularly when planted en mass could carry for miles when carried on the breeze. She plopped the sheers on top of the hedge and walked over to her bed of lilies. Extracting a pair of copper handled clippers from her back pocket, she clipped off three stems and made a bouquet. Snipping off the messy, yellow pollen ends, she shook the flowers and brought them up to her nose and smelled their sweetness. Her eyes opened as a cackling, boisterous sound filled the air. Darting in a frantic chase, two ravens soared in the sky above. She squinted her eyes and watched the birds as one plunged freefall out of the sky. Chariss gasped. The second raven frantically chased behind the falling bird. Then the first raven let out a loud cackle, flipped open its wings and soared upwards past the pursuing bird. Chariss chuckled at the bird’s antics as the second bird threw back its head, reversed its direction and soared in hot pursuit of its teasing companion.

Lowering her eyes again to her lilies, her heart leapt in her chest as the strangest sight greeted her eyes. A girl with pure white hair, wearing a solid, white, sleeveless dress approached her at a fast run.

It took Chariss a couple of seconds to recognize the girl as her daughter. For some strange reason, an overwhelming feeling of déjà vu overcame her senses. Pushing the sensation aside, she threw out her

arms and captured Raven in a tight embrace. Glancing behind Raven, three figures emerged; Jacen, Marxx, and Jaina. They seemed amused by her confusion.

“I love you, Mom,” Raven said, choking back a tear.

Pulling out of her daughter’s embrace, Chariss stared at her baby in bewilderment, “I love you too, baby. Raven, why are you here and not in training? And what happened to your hair?”

Smiling, Raven said, “It’s a long story, Mom.”

Still holding Raven’s hand, Chariss tilted her head for Marxx to kiss her cheek. Her eyes lingered on the yellow remains of a bruise on Marxx’s face. She said, “Hello, darling. I think I need a lot of explanations here.”

“I think you better get Dad, Tanella, and Krishta. We don’t really feel like explaining this more than once,” Marxx said.

An hour later the sun lingered high in the sky, radiating heat on the Racees family as they relaxed on their outdoor porch. Four chaise lounges sagged under the weight of the couples, Rowlon and Chariss, Jaina and Marxx, Jacen and Raven, and Tanella and Krishta, as they listening to Jacen retell the events of the past couple days. Rowlon’s protective arms circled tighter around his wife as the story progressed. Sweating rings onto side tables, glasses of iced sun tea sat untouched as the last words of the story escaped from Jacen’s mouth. He nestled back into the chaise as Raven leaned into his chest. They absently entwined and detangled their fingers, as they waited for the Racees reactions to their adventures.

“I don’t understand. Raven, what do you mean you became one with the Force? What does that mean?” Chariss asked.

“It means she died, grammy,” Krishta said. She slid off her mother’s lap and climbed onto Ravens’ legs. “I want to come back from the dead like Auntie Raven and come back with neat hair.”

Grinning, Raven wrapped her arms around her niece and said, “Honey, don’t wish for that, EVER. You must understand, like Grandpa Paulo, when you die, you don’t come back. That’s how things work in nature. What happened to me is something that is very rare. Enjoy every moment you are alive.”

Turning her large brown eyes at her exotic looking aunt, Krishta said, “Well then, at the very least, I want to become a Jedi, like you.”

Raven laughed, “Well I’m not a Jedi yet.”

“What? What kind of foolishness is that? You save the Galaxy from near destruction, and Luke can’t even make you a Jedi?” Rowlon asked indignantly.

“Dad, it’s alright. He gave me a small break to return here so I could let you know everything was alright, then I have to return to Yavin 4 for a while to complete my training...”

“What in the stars could you possibly still have to learn?” Rowlon asked.

Stroking Jaina’s arm, Marxx spoke up, “Dad, learning to be a Jedi is a lifelong pursuit. You don’t just understand everything immediately in a short period of time. You know, Raven’s had some unusual things happen to her and she’s going to need some time to digest everything. She’ll also probably need the time to hide away from reporters once her story gets out.”

“And how long will this be?” Rowlon asked.

“I don’t know, nor do I know how long it will be until I’m Knighted, Dad. Don’t worry about it. I’m not in any big hurry,” Raven said. Placing Krishta on her feet she got up from her chair and squatted by her mother. “How are you doing, Mom? I’m sure this was all very hard for you to listen to.”

Chariss nodded and said, “It’s weird, you know? I mourned the loss of my mother years ago. I had put that to bed, I was at peace with thinking she just up and left us. Then knowing she deceived us by taking you away from us, and now all of this... I don’t know what to think. I certainly am not happy to hear what she did. I can’t say I miss her very much. I don’t know what to feel.”

Wrapping her hands around her mothers soft hands, Raven said, “If you remember anything good about Grandmother Gwynalyn, mourn the loss of the woman from those memories, do not feel sorry for the woman who passed now. Any shred of humanity that existed in that woman died a long time ago. All that was left was bitterness, hate, and anger. I’m sure it must be very hard to admit that the world is a better place without your mother, but unfortunately, that’s the case here.”

“What an amazing girl you are Raven... that you can so easily forgive,” Chariss said with wonder.

Glancing downwards, Raven said, “Well, I have to admit, it’s much easier to do now that she’s dead.”

“Well when it comes to picking relatives, I’ll take a white haired sister over a crazed, lunatic of a grandmother, any day,” Tanella said, trying to lighten the mood.

Raven smiled at her sister. Tanella moved off of her chaise and headed towards her sister. Holding out her arms, Raven hugged her tightly. Pulling apart, she took Raven’s hand and beckoned towards the kitchen, “Come on, let’s go make dinner.”

Terror gripped Raven’s heart, she choked, “You want me to cook?”

Tanella rolled her eyes, “Oh no, not you too. Alright, Jaina, UP! Both of you come with me.”

Jaina begrudgingly rolled out of Marxx’s arms and followed his two sisters indoors. Krishta skipped after the retreating women.

Marxx leaned over and faced his parents, “Are you both alright?”

Chariss’ face glowed with love for her son, she said, “I’m just happy you are both safe and returned to me.” Her eyes fell on Jacen, “All of you.”

“Thank you, Chariss. Do you mind if I go for a walk?” Jacen asked.

“Of course not, dear,” Chariss said.

Jacen excused himself and stretched his long legs. He placed his hands on the window pane and peered into the house towards the kitchen. Raven and Jaina worked as a team to unload items from the cooler. Feeling assured that his love was in good hands, Jacen walked through Chariss’ garden and down the road.

The radiant sun shined off of Jacen’s sandy brown hair and warmed his soft white cotton shirt. Much like his sister, the more time he spent on this planet, the more he fell in love with its natural beauty. He paused to wait for a speeder to pass by on the road and cut across to the right side of the street. Meandering through several back paths and walkways, he came to a small, ice blue painted bungalow. He pushed open the creaking gate and walked along the overgrown path. His eyes flickered around the yard, cataloging the work that needed to be done. He ascended the three stairs in one step and entered a series of codes into the doorlock and entered the cottage.

The front door opened into a small landing that rose into a comfortable living room. The furnishings in the tiny house were sparse. But the few couches, chairs, and tables that decorated the home were built with fine Nubian craftsmanship. Jacen turned his eyes into the southern corner of the room and gazed upon Gwynalyn’s statue of Queen Amidala that had held the key to Gwynalyn’s secret room. He absently wondered what she’d think of it being here. He decided to leave it alone for now. His footstep echoed on the wood floors as he walked through the small dining room that connected to the living room. He passed through the comfortable galley-style kitchen towards the home’s one- spacious, yet near empty bedroom and refresher. The bedroom currently held only a small single cot and a beautifully carved armoire. Jacen opened one of the armoire's doors, pulled out a drawer, and extracted a pair of work pants and changed. He tugged on a pair of heavy boots and discarded his shirt. Weaving through the house, he exited the porch and rounded the house to a small shed. He opened it and activated a lawn mowing droid and a grabbed a pair of gardening sheers and gloves.

Jacen cleared his mind, allowing himself to simply enjoy the simple pleasure’s of pruning hedges. About thirty minutes into his chores, he heard a loud squeal of annoyance and glanced down at his feet to see the mower droid, beeping impatiently for him to move out of its path. Grinning and wiping the back of his hand across his forehead to wipe away excess sweat, Jacen stepped aside, rubbing his tight abdominals, as the buzzing little droid continued onward and devoured the overgrown grass. Jacen moved back into place by his yellow hydrangidia bush and watched with amusement as the little droid’s arms extended and yanked a large weed, roots and all out of the ground before continuing on its path. The wafting smell of fresh dirt mingled with cut grass and the sweet flowers. Clipping furiously, Jacen’s broad back darkened under the Nubian sun.

“You know, you could probably do that in half the time using your lightsaber,” Marxx said from behind the gate.

Caught off guard by his brother-in-law’s voice, Jacen accidentally chopped a large blossom off of the bush. He groaned as Marxx let himself into the yard. “So, what’s up Jacen? You making extra money on the side by gardening?” Marxx asked, pool blue eyes flashing with merriment.

Smirking, Jacen stooped down, picked up the flower blossom and placed it on the porch step and said, “Gee, how’d you guess?”

“Come on what are you really doing here?”

Taking a large step back Jacen planted his fists on his hips and grinned at the house, "Welcome to my house, or our home...or will probably be our home... I hope... you know, me and Raven."

Marxx laughed. "Don't tell me you're actually worried that she's not going to marry you?"

"Well, she could suddenly have some kind of religious epiphany and decides not to marry at all or something," Jacen said.

Closely examining his friend, Marxx suddenly realized Jacen actually seemed nervous. He wrinkled his brows together and rubbed his forehead. Marxx said, "You've GOT to be kidding. There's no way she's not going to marry you, Jace. Believe me on this one, alright? I just left the house and Tanella was in the kitchen yammering on and on about wedding dresses."

Flashing his Solo smile, Jacen relaxed. "Well you can never be too sure, right?"

Marxx rolled his eyes and shook his head. The mowing droid buzzed several times and shut down after it completed mowing the yard. Walking towards the shed, Jacen put the droid away, grabbed a couple rakes, and canvas bags for collecting the grass clippings. He asked, "So how'd you find me, anyways?"

"You're joking, right, buddy?" Marxx replied, taking one of the rakes.

Jacen glanced back at his friend and rolled his eyes, "Sorry, must be the heat getting to me. Force signature, duh."

"Come on, let's get all this debris cleared up and get back to Mom's, dinner's almost ready," Marxx said.

The two young men raked up the yard and then dumped the clippings into a compost mixer. Jacen picked up the bloom, stuck it in his teeth, yanked off his boots and deposited them on the porch before walking into the house. Marxx peered around the house at the furnishings, and asked, "So how'd you afford this place and the furniture?"

Filling a jar with water, Jacen plopped the bloom into it and placed it in on the kitchen counter. "Contracting," Jacen said as he filled two glasses of cold water for them to drink. Handing Marxx a glass he walked into the dining room and placed the jar in the center of his dining room table.

"What?" Marxx said.

After taking a long swig of his water, Jacen said, "When I was working in Theed on the capital project, I got in good with the crews I did negotiations with. After I'd settle their cases, they'd hire me to help out with other disputes. I took on a few extra jobs in my spare time and saved the money to buy this place. I met most of the artisans who made the furniture in the capital building also. I did some bartering with a lot of them to get the furniture you see in here. For some of the more opulent pieces, like my armoire I contracted the artists to make the pieces."

Impressed, Marxx said, "Nice. And I suppose you also got in good with a goldsmith?"

Jacen licked the inside of his mouth and peaked an eyebrow. “Yeah. Wanna see it?”

“Yup,” Marxx said and followed Jacen into the near empty bedroom. “Why’s it so empty in here?”

Blushing, Jacen said, “Well, Raven does have that great, antique bed already.”

Marxx laughed and said, “You’re right, I forgot about that.”

Opening one of the drawers, Jacen activated a secret compartment and pulled out a little box and handed it to Marxx. Marxx opened it and gazed at the twisting gold band, lined with shimmering Borealis stones. He approached the window and the sunlight fragmented sparkling rainbows all over the room from the stones.

“She’s gonna love this, pal. When are you gonna do it?”

“If I can get her away, I was thinking tomorrow afternoon. We, ah, have a special place where I want to do it,” Jacen said.

“You’re not gonna tell me?”

“Nope. Figure she’ll be blabbing about it until you’re sick of hearing it anyway, so why bother,” Jacen said.

“You’re impossible, bro,” Marxx replied, chuckling, returning the ring to his friend.

Lopsided smile forming on his face, Jacen said, “Yeah.”

“And you need a shower, you stink,” Marxx said, grimacing in disgust as he held his nose.

Jacen laughed, picked up his boot and chucked it at Marxx’s retreating form as he raced out of the bedroom laughing.

“Dinner was, *interesting*,” Jacen said as he leaned against a guardrail overlooking the Lake Country valley. The sun crept towards the horizon, bathing the valley in a warm orange hue. Raven’s white hair flamed copper as it absorbed the fading light.

Raven began to giggle uncontrollably. “That’s a mild way of putting it... You can say it, the meal was a disaster. I don’t know what Tanella was thinking leaving Jaina and me alone to cook that nerf roast.”

“That’s alright, I find I enjoy my mealtimes more if I really have to give my jaw a good workout while I’m eating. You know, burn calories while I’m eating,” Jacen said, recalling the chewy, tasteless meat from earlier.

Cackling with laughter, Raven threw herself under the guardrail and popped up on the other side of Jacen. “Well that’s good to hear, because that was a sample of my cooking expertise.”

“Oh well, I can order a mean takeout meal, we won’t starve,” Jacen said, flashing Raven a large grin.

Giggling uncontrollably, Raven swept to the left of Jacen and swung under the guardrail and jumped up at his side. Throwing her arms around his shoulders, she wove her fingers through his hair. Jacen delighted by the feel of her explorative fingers on his head. She said, “Well it’s a good thing then that my being a bad cook doesn’t prevent you from loving me.”

Jacen gazed at his gorgeous beloved as the setting sun brightened her features. “Right, good thing... So, ah, would you like to go on a picnic tomorrow?”

Peaking an eyebrow, Raven asked, “You’re not testing me are you? You’re not gonna make me make the lunch?”

Throwing his head back, Jacen laughed, “Bless the Force- NO! I’ll take care of that, don’t worry.”

Giggling, Raven said, “Ok. That sounds fun!”

As the sun crept over the mountains final glorious bands of gold light flooded the valley. Jacen wrapped his arms around Raven’s waist and descended upon her lips. Cherishing every moment with his love, he burned the sensation of her soft lips into his memory. Delighting in the closeness of her beloved, Raven clung tightly to Jacen, tugging deeply on his hair as they kissed. While the couple shut out the world around them, and allowed their minds to blissfully blur together in their combined euphoria, the sun dipped behind the hills signaling the end of the day.

Jacen opened his eyes and gazed at Raven. Her white hair glowed in the growing darkness of the night. Taking her hand and leading her back to her parent’s house, Jacen couldn’t help but think Raven’s new appearance made her seem like a beacon of light in the shroud of darkness. Jacen pulled Raven closer to his side and he wrapped his arm around her shoulder. She tucked her arm around his waist and leaned into his side as they walked together. Sighing, Jacen’s heart pounded with absolute, complete joy, only the tiniest twinge of anxiety made it skip out of beat as he thought nervously about the next day.

Chapter 44

Panic gripped Jacen when he anxiously woke up at dawn the next morning. He peered through the window in despair as storm clouds littered the sky and threatened to dampen his proposal plans. He threw a pillow over his head in disgust as he heard fat raindrops fall on the roof of his bungalow. Angrily, he shoved the pillow under his head and forced himself back to sleep. When his eyes bolted open three hours later, he strained his ears for the sound of rain. He was greeted with silence. Leaping to his knees he flung open the heavy curtains only to be blinded by the sun shining in all of its glory. Squinting his eyes, he craned his neck and located the wind chasing the gray storm clouds off towards the South.

Grinning madly, he jumped out of bed and padded into his kitchen on bare feet. Yawning, he flicked on the caff maker and waited for his daily caffeine fix. Opening his cooler, he examined the sparse contents inside. Slamming the door with disgust he turned off the caff maker and decided to head into town, he needed to buy picnic supplies, anyway. After jumping into the shower and changing into loose, comfortable navy flight pants and a white tank, he wandered out into the gloriously bright

Nubian morning. The fragrance of everything freshly washed from rain greeted his nose. For some reason he always enjoyed the smell of wet duracrete mixed with fresh, wet grass.

Whistling, his feet pounded the cobblestone paths as he walked a quarter of a mile towards the nearest grocer. Along the way he stopped and chatted with a couple of his Nabierre cousins, Tyrina and Wes who were out for a morning stroll with their new baby.

Entering the grocer he selected a droid hovercart and wandered the aisles. First hitting the takeout counter, the girl put together two long shredded nerf meat sandwiches to his specifications. He placed them in the hovercart, and ordered a large tossed greens salad with pallenberry vinegar dressing. He wandered in the cheese aisle and selected a mixed, diced cheese plate with hearty grain crackers. Moving to the produce aisle he selected luscious plump golden grappas, a couple pallenberries, and a few limmeons for the house. Images of romantically hand feeding the cheeses and fruits to Raven flitted into his mind. He grinned at the delicious visions. He chewed on the inside of his mouth and examined the area, wondering if he needed anything else.

“Might I suggest a couple tawello fruits, sir? They are sweet and come from the third moon of Iego. They are positively divine,” the droid hovercart suggested.

Nodding, Jacen selected a couple of the fruits and gave the cart his thanks. Following his nose towards sugar heaven, he wandered over to the bakery and selected an assortment of puffed pastries filled with Raven’s favorite limmeon crème. He stopped, selected a bottle of champagne and a couple bottles of flavored seltzer water and examined the contents in his cart.

“You’ll never fit all of that in a basket,” the droid hovercart said.

Jacen chuckled. “I guess you’re right. Oh well. My fridge is almost empty at home.” Pouring himself a mug of caff on the way out, he paid for his groceries and lead the droid hovercart to his home. He unloaded his bags and the cart automatically returned to the grocer.

Spending a frustrating hour trying to figure out what to take to the picnic, Jacen filled his handwoven basket to the very brim with food, utensils, plates, and cups. He picked up a blanket and headed for the door. Placing the basket down on a small table by the front door, he ran into his bedroom and stared at his reflection in a long mirror that was tacked to the outside of the bathroom door. Quickly, he shucked his tank and changed into a gauzy long sleeved, white shirt. He raked his fingers through his hair and wondered if he should change into a different shirt. Paralyzed with indecision, he threw off the shirt and grabbed a button up long sleeved shirt. He neatly rolled up the sleeves to his elbows and gave himself a once over again. He decided to settle for his final selection. His eyes lingered on his Jedi robe. He sputtered his lips knowing his Jedi status wouldn’t impress Raven. He walked back to his front door, picked up the basket, blanket, and locked the door. Whistling he walked to his gate as the sun beat brightly down upon his head. His cheeks puffed out in mid whistle as his heart crashed into his throat. Panicking, he set the basket on the ground and he frantically placed his hands all over his body. Jacen spun on his heels and headed back towards the house. Rolling his eyes at himself he unlocked the door, ran back inside, opened his armoire doors, unfastened the secret compartment, and pulled out Raven’s ring. Opening the box, to verify the ring was safely nestled inside the velvety layers, Jacen kneaded his fingers on his forehead and laughed at himself for his near stupidity.

Well that could have been disastrous. So much for being Mr. Smooth today, he thought as he exited his bungalow, finally ready to meet up with Raven.

The hydroboat effortlessly skimmed over the gently rolling lake. Raven wore her hair gathered inside a pale pink, floral printed scarf to protect her pale head from the damaging sun. She smoothed the fabric of her matching pink sundress. Jacen's fingers absently twined the spiny curls of her platinum locks as she leaned back into his chest, enjoying the warming rays of sun bathing her skin in its radiant light. Raven inhaled the late morning air and savored its sweetness.

"You're not thinking of dying your hair are you?" Jacen asked breaking Raven's daydreams.

"Possibly. Don't you think it makes me look like an old woman?" she asked, tilting her head back she gazed at Jacen's upsidetown face.

Giggling, Jacen said, "Looking like an old woman is the LAST thing it reminds me of, my dear."

"Really?" Raven said, as she twisted around to face Jacen. She searched his brandy brown eyes, yanked off her scarf and shook her head, sending her white curls swirling around her face. She asked, "What does it look like to you?"

Staring intently at her hair, Jacen chewed the inside of his cheek to come up with an answer. Finally he said, "I believe that when we die, all of our true connections to our worldly selves vanish. We are left as only radiant beams of light that exist in the Force, restoring its vibrancy, and luminosity in the Galaxy and beyond. When I look at you, and I see that hair of yours, it's as if you've been blessed by the Force itself. The white just reminds me how pure and perfect the Force is, and how I'm eternally grateful that you were returned to me."

The hydroboat captain let out a groaning sigh. Jacen furrowed his brows. "What?"

"You've really gotta work on your pickup lines, pal. That was a bit over the top," he said.

Raven giggled as Jacen stared indignantly at the man, he said, "I'll have you know this girl was returned from the Force. She died saving the Galaxy and the Force returned her to the living. Her hair is her one mark to prove that journey happened."

"Right... sure," the boat captain said, rolling his eyes. Jacen's face snarled into a frown as he glared at the man.

Grabbing Jacen's chin with her right hand thumb and index finger, Raven turned his face back in her direction. She said, "Well I thought it was lovely. But I guess you're right, I shouldn't try changing it. I guess I'm just not used to it yet." Gently she slid her soft lips against his in a light, tempting kiss. When she parted from him, she licked her lips and grinned. Jacen relaxed in his seat and smiled, the hydroboat captain all but forgotten.

"Well, it'll take some time, but then you'll barely remember you once had red hair," Jacen said.

"RED? My hair was brunette!" Raven said, punching him in the arm.

Grinning roguishly, Jacen said, "Really? See I don't even recall. I'm just too used to seeing you like

this.”

“Cheeky,” Raven retorted and collapsed back into his waiting arms. The combined smell of the fresh lake, and the glorious, wildflower filled hills, mingled with Raven’s spicy perfume. Jacen lowered his chin on top of Raven’s head, and fought back a tear of sheer joy at the perfect beauty of the day. Jacen’s arms constricted tighter around her waist, protectively pulling Raven closer to his body.

Raven purred in pleasure as Jacen’s masculine scent tickled her nose. Lightly she caressed Jacen’s tanned lower arms. The hydroboat glided to a stop at a small landing at the bottom of a hill across from the Racees’ resort. Jacen climbed out of the boat and offered his hand to Raven. She launched herself upwards and crashed into his waiting arms. She giggled as her wobbly legs refused to work properly. The boat captain handed the couple their basket and blanket. He flashed his tiny commlink, “Just call me when you’re ready to be picked up.”

“Thank you,” Jacen replied, took Raven’s left hand, and they climbed up a stairwell, crafted by men out of the dirt and rock that existed from the side of the hill. In Raven’s right hand, her scarf fluttered in the soft breeze as they ascended the hill. Her lips smiled broadly. She had hoped that when Jacen suggested they go for a picnic that this meadow would be their destination. When they reached the summit of the hill, she grinned deeply, kicked off her shoes and raced across the meadow, her giggles carried on the wind.

Jacen placed down the basket and tore off across the meadow after Raven. She stopped, threw her arms out wide and spun in dizzy circles. Panting, Jacen watched his beloved as she spun faster and faster, her white hair crashed around her head like the foam on a wave. Laughing she stopped spinning and threw her hands up to her head as her vision wove in erratic patterns. Jacen jumped forward and grabbed her before she collapsed to the ground. Laughing the pair fell to the ground together in a pile of arms and legs. Raven flipped over on top of Jacen’s stomach and grinned at his as she bubbled with laughter.

Stroking Raven’s wild hair out of her face, Jacen smiled deeply. His heart pounded in a joyous rhythm. His smile faltered and faded on his lips.

“What’s the matter, honey?” Raven asked, picking a blue wildflower out of his hair.

“I just thought of what a difference a couple days can make. Two days ago, I was at the brink of emotional carnage. When you were dead, I felt as though my whole reason for living had just been sucked out of my life. I didn’t want to live. The pain of being apart from you was...unbearable,” he said, tightening his arms around her slim waist.

Resting her head against Jacen’s broad chest, Raven stared unseeing, at the swaying grasses. She said, “Who would ever have known that love can produce such incredible pain? I’m sorry you had to go through that, Jacen.”

Gently he removed his left hand from her waist and turned her face towards his gaze. He said, “I’m not.”

“What? Why would you say that?” Raven asked.

“Because, how else would I have known how to measure my love for you?” Jacen said, as his fingers caressed her silky skin. His fingers lingered onto a mole that dotted the left side of her face.

“How can you measure love, though? Love is immeasurable, isn’t it?” Raven asked.

“I think love can be measured by the amount of pain that is produced when one is separated from their most beloved. From my brief encounter with that pain, I just knew that sorrow would be a bottomless void. My love for you runs that deep. All I know is that I never want to have to go through that again,” Jacen said flopping his head back onto the soft grassy field.

“Me either,” Raven said. Jacen rubbed his hand along Raven’s back as they lay together in silence. Finally Raven asked, “What do you plan to do?”

“What?” Jacen asked.

“Have you given any thought to what you want to do with yourself? I mean, Theed should be fully up and running this year. What will you do after that?” Raven asked as the Nubian sun beat on the back of her head. She expertly wove the scarf back around her head to protect her scalp from burning. She slid off of Jacen’s stomach and wove her thigh across his legs. Her right arm curled tightly around his waist as she gazed up at his strong chin.

Watching tiny clouds slowly drift across the sky, Jacen shifted his eyes towards his beloved, curled around his body. He tightened his grip around her shoulders and hugged her tightly against his body. He said, “I don’t know, really. How about you?”

Nestling tighter against Jacen, she lightly played with the folds in Jacen’s shirt. Raven said, “I don’t know. Before... everything that happened, I was sort of thinking it would be nice to work in the art museum in Theed. You know live a nice, normal life?”

Jacen frowned, “You were willing to just give up being a Jedi completely?”

“Possibly, I mean, I never really considered the life of a Jedi anyway. I love art so much, I thought it would be a natural choice for me to do with my life. You know, educating others as my way of paying back society for everything that I did over the years? Also I spent so long away from my family I was thinking it would be nice just to be near them. And if we had kids they could grow up around their grandparents and my sister. And they could play with Marxx and Jaina’s kids, with Krishta babysitting them all,” Raven said. Realizing what she had just implied, Raven blushed and buried her head in Jacen’s shirt.

Grinning broadly, Jacen delighted at Raven’s mention of them having children. His heart lifted with joy, realizing that maybe he had nothing to worry about with his proposal. Then again, he thought, that was what she thought *before* this recent series of adventures. Gulping, he asked, “I really don’t think you have to worry any longer about making amends with society, honey. Trust me on that one. So that was before, what do you think you want to do now?”

Smiling, Raven tucked her arm under Jacen’s side and yanked him on top of her body. Giggling she said, “Cherish every day I have with you.”

Flashing Raven a wolfish smile, Jacen said, “Well I can fully get behind that idea!” Together they kissed under the bright Nubian sky and allowed all of their fears to melt into the sunny warm day. Jacen lightly caressed Raven’s face and smiled when their lips parted, as they inhaled much needed breath.

Rolling over, Jacen jumped to his feet and offered Raven his hand.

“Come on, I don’t know about you, but I’m starving,” Jacen said.

“Me too. I can’t wait to see what you brought us,” Raven said wiping grass off of the back of her skirt after Jacen launched her to her feet.

“Find us a great spot, I’ll go get the basket,” Jacen said as he raced off towards where he abandoned the basket. Raven shielded her eyes from the glare of the bright afternoon and bounded along in the meadow seeking the perfect spot. Directly to the north the melodious rumble of waterfalls filled the air. She thought about the cliff that they had rolled towards at Jaina and Marxx’s wedding and knew to steer clear of its drop off. Finally she found a spot about dead center of the field. From this location they could still see the waterfalls and the entire vista of the sea of wildflowers. Raven began picking a bouquet as Jacen approached her with the basket and blanket. Grabbing the blanket from Jacen, Raven tossed the wildflowers in the air, and helped to spread the blanket across the grass. She sat cross-legged down upon it to smooth it out over the prickly terrain.

Grinning, Jacen collapsed to his knees and peered into the basket. Raven tried to sneak a peek inside and Jacen slapped her hand.

“Ouch!” Raven yelped.

“No peeking!” Jacen said.

“Meanie,” Raven replied, drooping her lips into a large pout.

Jacen laughed. “Oh come on don’t give me that look, all will be revealed shortly.” He leaned over and captured her lips in a kiss. Raven wove her fingers through his hair seductively. Jacen let go of the basket and switched his attention to his lady love. Raven opened her left eye, and snaked her hand forward and snatched the basket. “Hey!” Jacen shouted breaking from her kiss.

Giggling, Raven shot to her feet and raced off across the meadow trying to get the basket open to take a peek at its contents. Laughing, Jacen chased her around the meadow until she skidded back onto the blanket and wrapped her arms tightly around the basket.

Collapsing onto the blanket, Jacen’s sides heaved from laughing and running, “If you want to pull everything out that badly, be my guest!”

Raven wiggled her eyebrow victoriously and dove into the basket. She extracted a bottle of champagne and gently rocked the bottle back and forth. She said, “I see, trying to get me tipsy, eh?”

Jacen wiggled his eyebrows back at her and said, “Well, you know you’re not all that generous with your kisses, I figured you needed a little loosening up.”

Raven balked in disbelief and pointed the bottle at him, “Take that back or I will make that a reality!”

A look of mock horror passed over Jacen’s face. He threw his hands together and bowed at Raven’s feet, “Please forgive me for my thoughtlessness, oh wise and all powerful White Raven.”

Howling with laughter over the audacity of Raven's newly bestowed title, she fell over backwards.

Jacen snatched the basket back and took out plates and utensils as Raven worked on regaining her composure. Wiping tears from her eyes she licked her lips as he produced a plate of cut fruit and cheese and crackers. He unwrapped the plate and kept it out of Raven's reach.

She pouted her lips again, she said, "Ok, it's not nice to hog all of the food!"

Giggling Jacen replied, "Sheesh will you relax. I was planning on feeding you." He held a grape in his fingers.

Furrowing her brows, Raven crossed her arms across her chest and asked, "Why would you want to do that? I am a big girl and can feed myself, you know?"

Rubbing his hand across his forehead, Jacen tried to control himself from bursting out laughing. Visions of a perfect romantic picnic faded before his eyes, replaced by an increasingly frustrating afternoon with his befuddled girl. He said, "It's supposed to be romantic."

Dropping her arms to her side, Raven narrowed her eyes, "What do you mean romantic?"

Jacen walked on his knees towards her and held a grape just out of her reach, "Well, let me see if I can show you." He placed the grappa between his teeth and wagged it with his tongue.

Raven laughed, "You look ridiculous. What are you doing?"

Rolling his eyes, Jacen flopped down onto the blanket and chewed the grappa, "I give up."

Slowly rubbing her hands up Jacen's chest, Raven lowered herself at his side. As he turned and gazed into her eyes, he noticed their merriment had been replaced with longing. Voice husky, Raven reached onto the plate grabbed a piece of cheese and said, "Show me." She mimicked him by placing the cheese between her teeth and straddled his body. Forcing himself up on his arms, Jacen leaned forward and carefully bit the cheese in half and ended the bite with a kiss.

Giggling, Raven pushed the creamy, sweet cheese aside in her mouth with her tongue and pulled from his lips. She peaked an eyebrow as she chewed and said, "Aha! I think I understand."

Flashing his beloved a lopsided grin, Jacen picked up a slice of pallenberry fruit and extended it towards her mouth. Raven gently took a bite from the end and then flickered her tongue along his fingers towards the base of his hand. He released the rest of the slice into her mouth. Before he could extract his fingers she lightly sucked upon them and caressed their soft skin with her tongue. Jacen felt a surge of pleasure rip through every nerve in his body. His eyes slightly blurred out of focus as she slowly let go of his fingers. Smiling, she chewed on her fruit. She said, "I think I'm getting the hang of this."

"Uh huh... you most certainly are," Jacen replied. Raven wiped her mouth and picked up a large slice of tawello fruit and offered it to Jacen. He gently took a bite of the fruit the droid hovercart had recommended. The fruit melted like sweet, grainy, sugar into his mouth. He sucked on Raven's fingers and watched her smile dreamily as her body tingled in delight. He said, "Alright, you have to try one of these, they're too good."

Placing the fruit between his teeth, Raven wrapped her arms tightly around his shoulders and swooped in for a bite and a kiss. As they chewed their fruit and their lips danced in a kiss, Raven's fingers tugged at Jacen's hair. Finding it increasingly hard to concentrate on anything, Jacen explored her muscular back with his hands. Jacen blocked out every sensation surrounding them except for every shocking second of joy produced when he and his beloved locked lips. As they increased their intensity of their kiss, Jacen panicked and suddenly realized he needed to end things. Gently he pushed away from Raven, he lightly set her off of his lap. He breathlessly choked, "Ok, enough of that. I think I'm ready for the main course, what do you think?"

Grinning, Raven had sensed Jacen's problem and nodded. She snatched a couple more pieces of cheese and said demurely, "Sure, that's fine. Guess I don't need any more help with that, do I?"

Pointedly looking down into the basket, and sinking deep into the Force to gain control of himself again, Jacen said, "No, you most certainly do not!" He pulled out the salad, splashed dressing on it, and then set the bowl in the middle of the blanket. Raven dished out large helpings for each, as Jacen handed her a sandwich. They ate and talked about their families, and about Kyp until they completed their main courses.

Groaning, Raven flopped to the ground and placed her hands on her stomach. As she stared at the drifting clouds, she said, "I don't remember the last time was that I was so full."

Jacen snuck his hand into his pants pocket and pulled out the ring. Lightly, he stuffed it into one of the limmeon puffed pastries. Nervously, he said, "Um.. I have dessert too."

"Dessert? I can't eat dessert. I'll explode out of my dress if I do," Raven said.

"Fascinating and none too unpleasant mental image you just gave me there, my darling," Jacen said. Raven giggled. "Come on are you sure you can't eat just one? It's limmeon crème filled, your favorite," he teased.

"Stars, you want me to become fat, don't you?" Raven moaned.

"Like that would bother me, come on... I'll split one with you, how's that?" Jacen said, growing exasperated, as he sensed he may have to dig out the ring from the dessert and wash it off somehow without her noticing.

Raven lifted her head and stared at Jacen's perplexed face. She sensed his worry through the Force and peaked an eyebrow in his direction. Lurching to her elbows, she shoved herself back up into an upright position again.

Feebly, Jacen said, "I just don't want the crème to melt so you can't enjoy it."

Smiling, Raven placed her hand on Jacen's face. She said, "You're such a sweet man. What could I have possibly done to deserve having you in my life?"

"Luck?"

"There is no such thing as luck. Isn't that what we're taught as Jedi?" Raven asked.

“I guess you’re right. Then maybe it was destiny, or fate, or the Force, or whatever that brought you to me in the first place,” Jacen said. Sensing this could be a good set up for what he wanted to ask Raven, he continued, “All I know is that my days have been brighter, and my nights less lonely since you came into my life. Even when we were apart, physical distance couldn’t keep my soul from yours. I love you so much, Raven. We were given a second chance and I don’t want to ever miss a moment apart from you.”

Raven’s eyes swelled with tears, “I don’t want to be apart from you either, Jacen. I love you so much.”

Jacen suddenly wished he hadn’t shoved her ring in the pastry, he thought this would be the perfect time to just offer it and propose. Instead he handed her the pastry. Absently, Raven took it and swiped a glob of the crème out the middle of the puff. Her finger hit something hard inside.

“Jacen, there’s something in here,” she said.

“Really?” Jacen asked, as he battled with the sides of his lips from curling upwards.

Raven sucked on her fingers and dug into the puff again. This time she found the object. She dropped the mangled pastry on her plate and inhaled the sweet, citrus flavored crème off of her hands. She furrowed her brows in confusion as a ring emerged in her palm from under the sweet custard. She placed a finger in the air, as she tried to determine where the ring came from. She said, “Ok, this wasn’t in that thing before, right?”

“Right,” Jacen admitted.

“You put this in here? Why?” Raven asked. Suddenly, as she cleared more of the crème off of the ring and it began to sparkle, her heart pounded in her chest. Jacen grabbed a bottle of water and poured it over her hands and cleaned the ring until it cast bright, reflected sparkles across the blanket. “Jacen... what?” Her hands began to tremble and shake as her heart palpitated in her chest.

Jacen’s vision blurred as all sound in the valley faded into the background. The only sound his ears registered was the rapid beating of his heart. Staring into Raven’s confused and hopeful blue eyes, he said, “Sorry, another failed attempt at being romantic. I guess I need to work on that. All I want to do, is to spend the rest of my days, being with you, loving you, taking care of you, and raising a family with you. I love you, Raven. Will you do me the honor of agreeing to marry me?”

Tears cascaded down Raven’s face, as she began to sob. She rolled her eyes at herself for losing her composure and threw her arms around Jacen’s neck.

Concern etched Jacen’s brows as tightly held a shaking Raven. He asked, “Is that a yes?”

Sniffing and pulling apart from Jacen, Raven laughed, “As if you have to ask! Of course it’s a yes! I was beginning to think I might need to be the one to propose!”

Jacen laughed, took the ring from her hand, and with trembling fingers placed it on her left-hand finger. Throwing her arms around Jacen’s neck, Raven clung to him for dear life. Jacen dug his chin into Raven’s shoulder and inhaled the smell of her intoxicating shampoo. A emotional supernova of joy burst in his heart as he realized all of his dreams had come true. Throughout the time of their separation

while Raven was in training, Jacen dreamed of this day and the time that they could eventually marry and be united as one forever. Tears of pure happiness flowed from his eyes.

As Raven clung to Jacen, her heart pounded in blissful joy. Silently, she thanked Kyp for making this day possible. Her life suddenly filled with meaning and purpose. Although the Force hid the path of her future, Raven knew one thing for certain, that she would never have to face anything alone again. That certainty brought an overwhelming peace to her spirit as she clung to her beloved.

As the sun set over the western Nubian hills, Jacen led Raven through the gate of their bungalow's yard. He placed the picnic basket on the ground and stepped behind her and gently removed her scarf that covered her eyes. The setting sun bathed the cottage in a warm and inviting glow. Raven gasped and grabbed Jacen's hands in delight.

"What is this, Jacen?" She asked tentatively.

"It's our house, or will be our house, once we're properly married," Jacen replied. "For now it will be a reminder of where our future will be once we are married."

"It's adorable! Do you know that I actually went for a walk one night, around Life Day I think, that I saw this place and thought it was cute?" Raven asked incredulous at the coincidence.

Jacen chuckled, "Uh- huh. I was with you."

"You were?"

"Uh-huh. It needed a lot of external repair and the yard was a mess, but you said it had good bones. So I've been working on it in my spare time and while you were off training. Anakin couldn't figure out where I kept disappearing to. It actually didn't need that much updating though- just a fresh coat of paint, a few shutters, and a little yard work and it was all set," Jacen said, cradling her tighter around her waist. Into her ear he said, "Course we'll really only be able to enjoy it for a little while and will have to eventually move."

Pouting, Raven asked, "Why?"

"Well there's only one bedroom in the house. I don't know about you, but I don't really want to sleep with all of our children in one room. Please tell me you don't want that," Jacen said.

Raven giggled and said, "No. I don't want that. I guarantee we'll want to keep our privacy. Guess we'll just have to enjoy it while we can, right?"

"Absolutely," Jacen replied. Gently he turned her around in his arms and lovingly moved his hands up on either side of Raven's soft face. Gazing into her light blue eyes, he said, "You're the center of my galaxy, my dear. Without you I'm lost."

"Well then, let's hope this little place gives us a house to center ourselves and allow our love to grow and flourish forever," Raven replied.

“Absolutely,” Jacen said and kissed his fiancée deeply. Picking up the basket, Jacen took Raven’s hand and led her up the stairs. He unlocked the door, threw the basket onto his entry table, and swooped Raven up in his arms and carried her across the threshold. Her giggles filtered out the door and filled the valley with their joyous song.

As the door shut behind them two ravens circled and chased each other through the sky racing towards their nest to settle in for the night, sending their merry, cackling cries towards the heavens and the fading sun.

Chapter 45

For the next six months the Solo siblings found themselves busy and spread out across the Galaxy. Jacen joined Raven on Yavin 4, to help her with her Jedi training. Much to his surprise and delight, Luke put up no resistance to his suggestion. In the period of time from Raven’s return from the Force, Luke sensed a marked change in the young woman. He wondered if this change was due to her redeeming acts, or the fact that her grandmother and Darkglider were both now dead. Regardless of which factor contributed more to her change he admitted that Raven appeared to be quickly following the path towards becoming a great Jedi. Weekly he received exasperated reports from both Jedi Masters Tionne, and Rodersuin that Raven’s control and abilities with the Force far exceeded their own. Confused as to why Luke would insist on keeping her at the Temple instead of granting her the title of Jedi Knight, the two Masters began assigning her the duty of training many of the younglings at the academy.

Both Raven and Jacen delighted in their duties. After spending her childhood taunted by her classmates, Raven found sheer pleasure and delight in educating the younger children by teaching them tolerance and respect of others. She quickly took on the roll of levitation instructor. Her calm and soothing voice inspired the younger children to connect deep within their souls and learn to attune with the Force. Offering the perfect blend of praise with constructive criticism to the youngsters, many found themselves longing to master their skills, simply because they wished not to fail the young, and pretty instructor.

Jacen became the instructor for lightsaber dueling and techniques. He learned to identify the individual strengths and weaknesses of his students and helped each one individually to specialize his techniques with the blade. Because of his natural born ability to understand alien life forms and animals, Jacen’s observation skills and abilities truly shined with the alien cadets at the academy.

One day into their sixth month on Yavin 4, Jacen and Raven raced through the moon’s forest with empty backpacks strapped to their backs. Their feet glided across the thick layer of mossy, forested earth as the earthy scent of decomposing natural material filled their noses. The humidity made their clothes cling to their skins adding an extra, challenging element to their exertion. Raven’s white cornrow braids trailed behind her head as she picked up her pace, sinking deeper into the Force, maxing her endurance levels. Remembering the co-ordinates for the tree, provided for her by Marxx, Raven turned a sharp left, vaulted over a fallen pine limb, and skidded to a stop in front of a pallenberry tree. Jacen stopped behind Raven, grabbed her shoulder, and leaned over gasping for air.

“What...did.. you...do.. THAT.. for?” he asked.

Grinning, Raven placed her hands on her hips and said, “What’s the matter, hon? Worried I was going to run right off of the planet? You didn’t need to try to keep up with me.”

Standing upright and grabbing at his right side to try and calm a stabbing pain, he furrowed his brows at Raven. Finally, regaining enough breath he said, “You never cease to amaze me. Look at you, you aren’t even breathing hard.”

“Control, darling. You must learn to control the Force around you,” Raven said and laughed at Jacen’s annoyed stare. Sinking deeply into her knees, Raven leapt into the air and grabbed the lowest branch of the tree, six feet above her head. Swinging herself over it, Raven wove her way up through the limbs in the eighty-foot tree towards the ripened fruit above. She glanced down amongst the leaves and watched Jacen haul himself up through the maze of branches. Finding a large branch towards the top of the tree, Raven steadied herself and shrugged the backpack off of her shoulders. She inhaled the wonderful sweet scent that was so heavy she could almost taste the fruit. She gently began removing the heavy, hanging pallenberries from the tree, and filled her bag. Jacen emerged on a limb on the opposite side of the tree and began picking the fragrant fruit as well.

As Jacen plucked one of the globular fruits and said, “Lowie and I used to climb this tree all the time when we were kids and we’d have contests to see who could eat the most fruit.”

Laughing, Raven said, “I bet that had dangerous consequences.”

Smirking Jacen replied, “Yeah, poor Lowie once got so stuffed after eating twelve of them that he couldn’t climb out of the tree for six hours.”

“I was mostly thinking of all that fiber intake,” Raven said.

“Yeah, that was a problem too. I don’t think we’ve ever run so fast to the Temple before after those contests,” Jacen replied laughing.

Raven’s pack stretched until the sides nearly split. She carefully closed the bag, hoisted it upon her shoulders and climbed her way towards Jacen in the tree. They both sat side by side and stared at the red, gaseous planet of Yavin that dominated the skyline. Raven rested her head on Jacen’s left shoulder as he carved apart one of the pallenberries. Opening her mouth, Raven accepted a piece of the sweet, slippery, juicy fruit from Jacen’s knife. Juice dribbled down the right side of her chin as she blissfully enjoyed the smooth, fresh taste of the treat. Jacen leaned over and gently kissed away the nectar.

“You just can’t get pallenberries in stores that taste this good,” Raven remarked as she accepted another slice of the fruit.

They enjoyed eating the fruit in silence and watched a flock of noisy owlgrets skim across the tops of the trees. Raven chewed the inside of her lip and opened her mouth to say something. She slammed it shut. Furrowing her brows, she tried to speak again, but couldn’t get the words out.

Smiling, Jacen grasped Raven’s hand and said, “You know you can tell me anything, sweetie. What’s on your mind?”

Turning her light eyes towards Jacen, Raven tightly grabbed his hand and said, “I really enjoy teaching here. Today, that new little Twi’lek cadet, Oolanada... you know her?”

“Yes.”

“Anyway...she’s been having the worst trouble focusing here with all the wildlife here and hasn’t been able to lift anything with her mind. The poor girl has repeatedly run off from my lessons in tears. Today, I talked with her and asked her to think about her home planet and pretend she was sitting in her bedroom, just thinking. She did that, and then slowly I asked her to incorporate the surrounding stones and rocks into her vision. She levitated three stones! Well they did drop almost immediately, but she made progress!” Raven said.

“That’s wonderful, hon,” Jacen responded. Narrowing his eyes, he asked, “So why were you having such a hard time telling me that?”

“That was to illustrate a point. I... I,” Raven stammered. Her hands began to tremble.

“Honey, what’s the matter? Tell me!” Jacen asked, the pallenberries sunk in his stomach and churned sourly at Jacen’s growing worry.

Blurting it out, she said, “I think I want to stay here and teach... for a while at least. And you know next fall, Krishta’s going to come here to begin training. I know it will be a lot easier for her if I’m here. She’s so close to Tanella, I know the separation will be hard on her. I just love teaching, I feel like it’s in my blood and it’s what I’m supposed to do.” She sucked in much needed air after spilling everything out.

Flashing her a lopsided smile, Jacen said, “And that’s what you were having a hard time telling me? That’s it? Nothing else?”

Sheepishly, Raven said, “No. That’s it.”

“You still want to get married, right?”

Curling her lip up, to imitate Jacen’s lopsided smile, Raven grabbed Jacen’s chin and said, “Of course I do.”

“Well I don’t know what you’re worried about. I’m enjoying myself here too. I always loved studying here when I was growing up. And like you, I really enjoy teaching the younger kids. There are worse things than us aspiring to become Jedi instructors. I think my Uncle would be quite pleased if we mentioned our desire to him,” Jacen said.

“You’d want to do it also?”

Jacen’s heart broke as he heard a twinge of helplessness leak into Raven’s voice. He realized she didn’t want to bring up the subject because she feared he might want to abandon her and not also wish to teach. Cupping her chin, Jacen said, “Yes, honey. I would love to teach here as well. After we’re married we can settle here for a few years and teach until we see if something else comes along. What do you say to that?”

“I think it’s a lovely idea. I was just worried what with the new house you bought us that you might not want to be away from it or Naboo,” Raven said, and sighed with relief. She tightened her arm around

Jacen's waist and calmly swayed her legs over the pallenberry tree limb.

"Well I wouldn't mind us just hanging out at our cottage all the time, but I think I'm more happy if our lives were filled with purpose. Besides, it can serve as our oasis away from here," Jacen replied.

Raven smiled, "You're so sweet... Are you ready to go back? Carmellio's gonna want these for dinner."

"Am I ready? No. But if we must, we must," Jacen said, detangling himself from Raven's embrace. The couple descended the tree and raced back towards the Temple at a leisurely run.

When they emerged from the clearing, they noted a mid-sized Correllian cruiser had landed on the planet. They watched as a stream of students helped to unload cargo from its hull.

"Must be the newest delivery of supplies from Coruscant," Raven said. As she shifted the weight of her pack on her back, she walked past a Quarren, an alien native of Mon Calamari. The pilot's turquoise eyes opened wide as it turned its triangular head in her direction. Through its tiny oral opening, hidden behind tentacles and tiny husks she heard the name "Branwen" muttered. The ship's captain stumbled over on its feet and caught its fall with its suction cupped fingers. Embarrassed, he escaped Raven's helpful hands and raced aboard his ship, bowing and repeating "Branwen."

"What was that about?" Raven asked Jacen.

Glancing curiously at the ship, Jacen said, "I have no idea." Together they headed inside the Temple and traveled their way through the long halls towards the kitchen. Their stomachs rumbled as wafts of cooking nerf meat filled the halls. They burst through the door and heaved their loaded backpacks on the counter for Carmellio, the Temple's Twi'lek chef. The green skinned woman popped up from behind her stove and smiled brightly at the couple.

"You brought me those Pallenberries?" she asked as she approached Jacen and Raven. "Thank you two, these are wonderful, everyone loves them. So few are brave enough to climb those trees. You're as thoughtful as your brother, darling."

Raven blushed, "Thanks, Carm."

"Hopefully these will be enough for all the cadets to enjoy. We'll go out tomorrow and get you more," Jacen said. "The tree's just loaded with the fruit. I think we've got about a weeks window before they start to turn."

"Thank you two so much. I appreciate whatever you can get me. I'll freeze whatever I don't use," Carmellio said, flinging her left head tentacle out of the way as she unloaded Raven's pack.

Tapping her fingers on the counter, Raven asked, "Hey, Carm..."

"Yeah, sugar?"

"Do you know what *Branwen* means?" Raven asked.

Carmellio stilled and stared, disbelieving at Raven. Then she averted her gaze and stared pointedly at

Jacen. Hitching her thumb in Raven's direction she asked Jacen, "Is she for real?"

Jacen stared quizzically at the cook and shrugged. He asked, "Do you know?"

"Oh, man. You're both kidding, right?" Planting her fists on her ample hips, the Twi'lek shook her head and headed towards the back of the kitchen. Her voice called out, "You two need to get off this moon more. Girl, you're a legend. Listen to this..."

Jacen and Raven lifted their ears as a recording of a lilting, reedy cord of music filled the kitchen. Raven tilted her head as a soft, female human voice began to sing:

*One time a bird knew how not to fly
With broken wings she began to cry
Longing for a life free of pain and hate
The bird decided to no longer wait...*

*With a troubled heart the raven watched
As her guardian's heart began to rot
Helplessly she assisted in an evil plot
Until she escaped from imprisonment....*

*Branwen fly away! You are more than what you seem!
Branwen soar up high! Your deeds will never die!*

*Until that fated day, the raven knew not her destiny
With conviction and love she faced it gallantly
Taking on her greatest foe
She went down a hero!*

*Branwen fly away! You are more than what you seem!
Branwen soar up high! Your deeds will never die!*

Raven groaned and exited the kitchen as the song continued to play. Jacen waved at Carmellio and chased after his fiancée. Grinning he asked, "Alright, what's the matter?"

"I wasn't the hero- Kyp was the real hero, not me!" Raven spat.

"Honey, come on- you knew this was going to happen. You did blow up your grandmother's fleet, afterall. And how many people can claim that they returned from the dead? Naturally, you needed to assume that everyone would cling to your story and talk about it. The press presents things the way they want people to see them. Besides, there were holo-vids plastered all over the holo-net of the fleet exploding and that was a lot more interesting to people to watch then just hearing about an old lady falling to her death," Jacen replied.

"What? That's crazy!"

"Revisionist history, my dear. They can pinpoint you as the real hero- because you have this strange, legend quality with your return. Your hair, your return from death, you've got the stuff to sell recordings, books, shows, whatever. Besides everyone still thinks my Uncle killed the Emperor and not

my grandfather. People believe what they want to believe,” Jacen said, taking Raven’s hand.

“How can they just forget Kyp? He gave his life completely, he should be written in songs, not me,” Raven said, disgusted.

“I don’t know why they haven’t, maybe time will change that,” Jacen said exasperated. “Anyway, come on, let’s go to my quarters and see if we can figure out what *Branwen* means.”

Climbing four flights of stairs, Raven and Jacen entered his spacious room. Not knowing how long he’d be at the academy, Jacen hadn’t really done much decorating to the place. He pulled up a chair to his computer terminal and synched to the Intergalactic database.

As she waited for his connection line to take hold, Raven grimaced at herself as she stunk of perspiration, “Yuck, I need a shower.”

Jacen grinned, “Yeah well blasting through the forest like you’ve got a Frayt lizard on your heels will do that.”

Lightly she cuffed his left ear and then pointed to his screen as his connection beeped readiness. He typed in the name Branwen. The database spun for a few moments and spit out three thousand hits on the name. Quickly scrolling through them most seemed to relate just to Raven and her deeds.

Jacen scrolled quickly down the list. “Wait! Stop! Go up!” Raven said.

He moved back up the list and came across a historical reference from the main Coruscant library. He clicked on the link and said, “Good eye, baby.”

Glancing on the page, Jacen opened a file for “Name meaning.” He read aloud, “*Branwen* means, awww... *beautiful raven*. Wait there’s more or it means *fair, blessed, or white raven*.” Jacen felt the hairs on his arms stand up on end. “That’s kind of weird.”

“Click on this,” Raven said, pointing to a mythology link.

Jacen activated the link and a story sprang up on the screen. Raven read, “It’s from ancient Alderaan archives. *King Bail Ban ruled Alderaan well and was loved by his people. However much fulfillment he received from pleasing his fellow Anderannians, he was lonely and wished for a wife. Bail journeyed far and wide across his planet, he looked in every house, hovel, and palace to try to find the one woman who would warm and fulfill the loneliness in his heart. He cared not about her social standing, he just wanted to find the one woman who would please his hollow heart. His search came up empty.*

Dejected he wandered onto the Wellinian plains and sat upon a stone, heart heavy with sorrow. The skies opened and poured rain upon him, further drowning his misery. As the clouds emptied their rain, a single ray of sun broke free from the clouds and a brilliantly shined upon the king. Shielding his eyes he stared up into the light and saw the outline of a raven circling above. Squinting, he noticed the raven floating, effortlessly through the sky. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning erupted from the clouds and hit the bird. It fell from the sky and landed many feet away from the King. He rushed to the bird and cradled it in his arms, sad to see the magnificent bird struck down in its prime. The death of the bird mingled with his own misery and loneliness and he began to sob. His tears splattered upon the bird’s carcass. As each tear hit the feathers, the bird’s black wings turned white. Finally spent of tears and

unable to see through his grief, the King placed the now pure white Raven on the ground and bowed his head. When he opened his eyes, the bird had vanished to be replaced by a beautiful maiden with hair and skin as pure white as fresh winter snow.

“Who are you?” King Bail Ban asked.

“I am she who you seek. Your compassion created me,” the woman said. Gently she held forth a long, white raven feather. “Only a king with the purest of hearts would I have come to. Your caring for my former self, shows your true spirit.” The King took the feather and stared at the woman in amazement. She offered him her hand and said, “I am yours, forever.”

When the woman smiled, the clouds above broke and vanished from the sky, bathing the plains in a radiant sunny light.

“What is your name?” the king asked.

“I think you already know my name.”

The King thought about it for a moment and the name dawned upon him, “Branwen.”

The woman smiled and together they returned back to his palace and ruled Alderaan peacefully as husband and wife.

Shaking, Raven collapsed onto Jacen’s bed.

Jacen chewed on his fingernail and sighed, “I hate reading stories of Alderaan, it makes me so sad, you know? It sounded like such a beautiful place. It’s such a shame that my mother’s home planet is just... gone. All I know of it are the stories my mother remembers, and even those memories are beginning to fade as she gets older. It always sounds like it was a majestic there.”

“Did you hear that story though? No wonder they call me that name, the similarities are...are.. freaky,” Raven said, rubbing away the bumps that had formed on her arms.

Jacen smiled and rolled his chair in front of the bed. Gently he took her hand right hand and pushed aside her cornrows to peer into her eyes. He said, “Well, every myth and fairy tale has some aspect to it that could be similar to life I guess. At least we now know that name’s not an insult but a compliment of sorts, right?”

Grinning, Raven said, “Right.” She leaned forward and pecked Jacen a kiss on the lips and stood up.

Letting go of her hand, Jacen asked, “Where are you going?”

“To clean up. I’ll see you at dinner time, ok?”

“Sure. Love you,” Jacen said as Raven exited the room.

“Love you, too,” she called behind her as she vanished into her bedroom to gather her things to head for the refresher.

Jacen's heart pounded in his chest as he replayed the story in his mind. A flicker of a smile crossed his face as the name Branwen sung out in his head. He couldn't help but identifying with the surprise and joy that King in the tale experienced when the love of his life appeared before his eyes. *Sometimes, it appears... truth is as strange as fiction*, Jacen thought. He flicked off his terminal, gathered his clothes and headed for the men's refresher to clean up.

Chapter 46

The Fiery Phoenix noisily flushed its vents as it landed on the newly paved landing platform for the Fortress Palace on Hapes. Anakin Solo cut the engines and wove through the ship towards its door. After much argument, Luke gave the ship to Anakin after his X-Wing had been deemed beyond repair. Anakin had insisted the *Phoenix* should go to Raven, as it belonged to her former Master. Raven however knew that the vessel would be of more use to the young Jedi as he helped Tenel Ka restore the Hapes Cluster back to its original glory. She argued the technology would help to conceal their Royal identity as they flew throughout the cluster. Finally, Anakin reluctantly agreed to keep the *Phoenix*.

Anakin and Tenel Ka spent the first seven months after the destruction of Nemorasis traveling together throughout the Cluster meeting and generating goodwill with Hapan citizens and determining what repairs needed to be initiated throughout the region. Anakin acted as Tenel Ka's personal bodyguard, and utilized his Jedi training to assist her with determining the real mindsets of the crowds and citizens she met in her journeys. On several occasions he had to dispel some discontent within crowds of protestors still upset with Tenel Ka's lack of immediate action against Lady Palpatine's fleet. However, Anakin's imposing physical presence was enough to deter anyone from wishing to attempt any kind of ill will to Tenel Ka.

Determined to give Tenel Ka the highest level of credibility, Anakin put a halt to their growing attraction and reigned in his own personal desires for Tenel Ka to be replaced with a cordial outward appearance. By doing so, Tenel Ka found herself more deeply impressed and attracted to the youngest Solo brother. She didn't even need to broach the subject to Anakin, he simply knew that she wanted this to happen. However cool and distant they appeared in public all shields fell when they were in the privacy of *The Fiery Phoenix*. Into the beginning of her tour, they stopped on Hapes 4 to witness the remains of the charred agricultural planet. Tenel Ka's chin remained high, but Anakin felt waves of intense sorrow and remorse emanate from her through the Force. All the while that they explored the planet, Anakin fought not to wrap his arms tightly around the Royal Princess. After Tenel Ka sifted through the remains of a farmhouse and saw a small toy doll she sunk deeply into a squat in her knees, covered her eyes and openly wept for the loss of life that affected not just adults, but children as well. Back on the ship that night, Anakin cradled Tenel Ka in his arms as she clung to his chest and drowned herself in a sea of sorrow until she fell asleep in her Jedi Protector's arms.

Smiling at the memory, Anakin exited the *Phoenix*. The cool Hapan air rustled through Anakin's Jedi robe as he headed towards Tenel Ka's main assembly room expecting an audience with the Princess. He'd just returned from Hapes 4 with updates on the planet's progress. Once inside he found the room empty. Anakin focused on Tenel Ka's energy and sensed her located in the dining room of the newly rebuilt Palace. Surprisingly, the engineers discovered the Palace had only received minimal structural damage to its foundation. With a few walls, stairwells, and support pillars needing to be replaced, Ta'a Chume spared no expense to make the repairs done in the most expedient manner. Mostly the building needed to be cleaned of water damage from the wave and practically every window in the Palace

needed replacement. Much of the furniture needed to be reordered or restored, but overall the damage was easily repairable and restoration time was minimal.

Anakin raked his fingers through his thick dark hair while his heart raced in his chest. Shucking his Jedi robe, he handed it to a waiting TC-18 protocol droid and he entered the dining room. Alit with bioluminescent vines and candles, Anakin sensed a wave of déjà vu pass over his body. Nervously, he smoothed his royal blue, silk shirt and stepped into the room. The door slid silently shut behind his tall frame. Standing by the portal window, Tenel Ka stood, watching the sun set. Anakin's mouth dropped as she filled his vision. She wore a long, silky black dress that plunged dangerously low down her back, and magically hugged her front torso without any apparent support system to keep it in place. A long sideslip revealed her muscled left leg. Anakin's heart caught in his throat as his eyes drank in her spectacular form.

Tenel Ka controlled a smile from flickering on her face as Anakin entered the room. She immediately sensed his reaction to her dress. She quivered in expectation as he walked across the room and stood directly behind her back. Anakin's body heat radiated onto her back, warming her chilled, exposed skin. Tenel Ka gasped as her back tingled delightfully at Anakin's nearness. Anakin's head swam as he inhaled Tenel Ka's intoxicating floral perfume. Lightly, he extended his fingers and softly traveled them slowly up the length of her bare back towards her shoulders. Gently he massaged the smooth skin on her neck with his thumbs. Closing her eyes, Tenel Ka's body trembled under his tender touch. She purred as he lowered his head and lightly brushed his lips over the inviting curve of her neck. Slipping her left arm over her head, she massaged Anakin's hair as he continued to explore her neck with his lips as his warm breath tickled and delighted Tenel Ka's skin. Her lips parted silently, enjoying the attention. Gently she tilted her face and Anakin's lips moved up her chin. Turning completely in his arms, Tenel Ka wrapped her arms tightly around Anakin's neck and sought out his lips with passion. Anakin accepted her kiss, delighted by the intense waves of passionate pleasure that surged through his body. His hands clung tightly to her silky back. As they parted, gasping for air, Tenel Ka licked her lips and turned her gray eyes towards Anakin's bright blues.

"That is what I call an appropriate welcome home, what do you say?" Tenel Ka asked.

Trying to see through the mists of desire that clouded his vision, Anakin said, "I'm soooo not complaining. Um, Tenel Ka, can I ask you something?"

"Yes?" she asked, suspiciously.

Anakin's cheeks blushed a deep crimson and he squeaked, "If I pull away from you, is your dress going to fall off?"

Tenel Ka burst out laughing and tightened her grip around Anakin's neck. She said, "You would like that would you not? I hate to disappoint you but it is securely fastened." Flashing him a devilish smile she added, "There are two royal jewels you will not be laying your eyes upon any time soon."

Impossibly, Anakin's face deepened a darker shade of red from embarrassment as he burst out laughing. He replied, "You never cease to amaze... and shock me, Princess."

Tenel Ka lowered her hands down his chest, caressing the slippery, silk fabric of his shirt. Her head swam in delight as she sniffed Anakin's musky aftershave. Underneath her palms she felt his heart pounding in his chest. Grinning up at Anakin she thought his embarrassment only heightened his good

looks. Anakin bent down and lightly kissed Tenel Ka's forehead. She tilted her head back further and teasingly sought out his lips again. Smiling, Anakin lightly pulled his head up just out of her reach. Tenel Ka pouted causing him to laugh. He said, "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were trying to seduce me, M'lady. Trust me when I say, you have very little you'd need to do to break through my feeble defenses."

"Is that a fact? That is not a quality I would look for in a Jedi Protector," Tenel Ka teased.

"You know what I mean," he said.

Tenel Ka rested her head on his broad chest and closed her eyes. Anakin tightened his arms around her waist protectively. She murmured, "I could get used to this."

Gently rocking the Hapan Princess in his arms, Anakin said, "Me too." His heart palpitated in his chest as he thought about her words. "I don't suppose lowly Jedi are allowed to marry Hapan Queens, are they?"

Tensing in his arms, Tenel Ka glanced up at Anakin. Eyes widening, she gazed up into his face quizzically. Anakin backpedaled, "I meant that hypothetically, of course."

Pushing herself out of Anakin's arms, Tenel Ka walked away from his warmth. Heart catching in her throat, she said, "Of course that is what you meant."

Blundering fool! Anakin thought as he felt Tenel Ka's annoyance ripple in the Force. He stepped towards the angry Princess and said, "I'm sorry. I... well... I mean, we're nowhere near that point, right?"

She turned her charcoal eyes in his direction and smiled at his obvious discomfort. She said, "This is a fact. You are right, we are not anywhere near that point yet. And who knows if we even will be."

Her words stung like a slap. Anakin choked out, "You're right, who knows."

She stood before the tall Jedi and gazed into his hurt eyes. Wrapping her arms around her waist, she asked, "I guess now that we have brought this up, we should face the question. Anakin, would you want that? Would you want to be married to a Queen? My life will not be easy from here out. And if you and I were to mate and be married, you would most likely lose your freedom as a Jedi. Hapan Princes are expected to dote on their Queen's religiously, and raise their children. I just do not know if you could, or would want that life. Do you?"

Anakin placed his balled fists on his hips and wandered towards the portal window. He stared at the purple sky as the remaining sunlight vanished from view. Gripped with indecision, Anakin stated, "I don't know."

Tenel Ka walked behind the tall Jedi, and placed her hands on his back. Throat constricting, she said, "I do not know what to do, Anakin. We have gotten so close in the last few months, you have been so good to me. I could never have dreamed of finding such a wonderfully caring friend. I have learned to rely upon you and your constant support. I do not know if I could have faced a lot of things I saw without you at my side." Anakin turned and gazed into Tenel Ka's smoky eyes, his heart breaking at the obvious pained strength she inched into each word. She continued, "I just... I do not know what to do."

If we keep this up and continue to get closer, we could end up with our hearts broken.” Placing a warm hand on Anakin’s left cheek, Tenel Ka said, “You mean so much to me, I do not know what I would do if I lost you. But if we have no future...if you cannot see us together...”

Gently, Anakin touched, her quivering chin to quiet the distressed Princess. Fighting back his own tears, he said, “Do we need to decide this right now? I mean, how long is it into your Queenship before you are expected to marry? You’re pretty young, right?”

Breaking out of Anakin’s hold, Tenel Ka walked towards the opposite end of the table. She said, “No, I do not have to marry right away. But what good would it do for us to allow ourselves to fall in love and then be ripped apart? Would you be able to stand to stay on in my court as my personal protector if I married someone else? Could you stand that?”

“Don’t say that!” Anakin spat, as he shoved away a tear that escaped the corner of his left eye.

“I am sorry, Anakin. But I am being realistic here. The reality of the situation is that if you... if we develop these feelings, and you wish to maintain your freedom, we will never be together. I must marry. I must produce a female heir to the throne,” Tenel Ka replied icily. Staring into the sparkling candelabras, misery invaded Tenel Ka’s once delighted mood. Flatly she said, “Of course there is another option.”

Lifting his hanging head, Anakin asked, “What?”

“You do not want to hear it,” Tenel Ka replied and nervously grasped the back of her chair.

“Come on, don’t leave me hanging. You didn’t mention it, if it’s not a viable option, right?” Anakin said, frustration building.

Licking her lips, Tenel Ka slowly began, “There is a law in Hapes that says if the husband to the Queen is unable to provide the Queen with an heir that he can be set aside. The Queen can take on a consort....” She watched as Anakin’s face reviled at the thought, she said, “See that is why I did not want to bring it up. I knew the idea would displease you.”

“Displease me? Displease ME?” Anakin said, incredulously. His voice rumbled with disgust, “THAT would be your solution to our relationship? You would suggest that I should DISHONOR you? That I should just be your lover?...”

Tenel Ka interrupted him, “And I know that would reflect badly on your family. I would never wish for that, Anakin.”

“Do you really think I care what my family would say? Do you think THAT’s why I’m objecting to this? Tenel Ka, I could care less about myself and how others view me. What worries me is that you seem to think, or seem to be implying that you think the only thing I want from you is... is...to have you. Is that truly how you see me? Do you think I’ve simply been biding my time with you, waiting for the first moment I can get you out of your dress and into your bed? Do you think THAT’s why I burst through a magnetically sealed door to get to you? Do YOU?” Anakin boomed, his eyes bore into the Princess as he stalked closer towards her quaking form.

“Anakin, please stop shouting!”

“Stop shouting? Why shouldn’t I be angry? Do you really think I’ve enjoyed getting close to you all these months, simply so I could use you and then be done with you?” Anakin asked. Choking on his words he said, “That’s disgusting!”

Sobbing uncontrollably, Tenel Ka threw her arms over her head in despair. She said, “I am sorry, Anakin. I just do not know what to do!”

Stalking back towards the window, Anakin pounded his head against the pane of glass. Meekly, he said, “I thought you liked having me around you the last few months. I didn’t realize I was a burden to you.”

Grabbing a napkin, Tenel Ka blew her nose. She turned and stared at his back, “Please, Anakin. Do not say that. I have grown to need you in my life. I need your support, your opinions, your honesty, and your friendship. You mean everything to me. I am simply showing you what you would have to give up if you were to chose to be with me.”

Turning towards the distraught Princess, he said, “Explain to me what you think I am so anxious to keep a hold of. Please, I’d like to know. What could I possibly hold more dear to my heart, than the woman who’s managed to capture mine entirely?” He approached Tenel Ka and bore softly into her confused eyes as his heart ached in his chest. “What kind of life would I possibly have, if I didn’t have you in it?”

“Oh, Anakin,” Tenel Ka sobbed. She rushed across the room and launched herself into his waiting arms. Her body shook from crying.

Anakin pleaded, “Just, please tell me we don’t have to decide anything right this minute? Please? Like you, I’m new on this whole being in love thing. Last thing I want is for us to say something stupid and have us fall apart before we even give ourselves a chance to figure out what we want to do.” Anakin rocked Tenel Ka in his large arms.

“I am so sorry. I never wanted to hurt you, Anakin. Or to imply you wanted only to use me. I know you better than that. I cherish you because you are a true gentleman. I do not know what is wrong with me and why I would say such things to you,” Tenel Ka said, as she snuggled tightly in his arms.

Furrowing his brows, Anakin replied, “Well you are stressed out.”

“Well that is no excuse. I just do not want for you to feel like you are being trapped into anything,” Tenel Ka replied. “And I wanted to let you know what would possibly happen if you did agree to marry me, down the road. You would be, in a lot of ways, considered a glorified housewife in my cluster. I just do not know if that is your destiny. You are a Jedi, Anakin. You have too much talent and drive not to fully explore what you should be doing with your life. The last thing I would want is for you to wake up one day and resent me, because you spent your life not doing what you should have been doing all along... Does that make sense? I think I just went about saying it wrong.”

“It makes perfect sense,” Anakin replied. “I guess if I’m being honest with myself, I don’t know if I could handle just being your husband Prince. All I can tell you is my being with you feels right. I guess I’ve just wanted to avoid the obvious problems that may lay ahead for us, because I’m so in love with you.”

Tenel Ka curled her arms tighter around Anakin's waist and tipped her head to meet his eyes. Anakin saw her eyes fill with wonder as she softly asked, "You love me?"

Smirking, Anakin said, "Well, I would have thought that was painfully obvious, my dear. Do y... No, you don't have to answer that." He squeezed his eyes shut to break off his connection with her pleading eyes.

Snaking her arms up around his shoulders and face, Tenel Ka softly caressed Anakin's cheek. The back of her hand tickled from a few stubbles emerging in the evening. She said, "Anakin, look at me." He opened his eyes as his heart flopped in his chest. He mapped Tenel Ka's glowing Titian hair with his eyes, and then matched her intense gaze. Softly, she said, "This is a fact, I love you, Anakin Solo. This is why I brought this whole subject up with you. My heart no longer belongs to myself and it will always belong to you. However, if you do not want the only life I can offer you, I will understand. And as much as it would pain me, I will let you go."

"The selflessness of love, right?" Anakin said.

"Something like that," Tenel Ka replied.

He turned his face away and gently pushed her head against his chest so he wouldn't have to look in her eyes and to see their imploring pain. He said simply, "I guess we've reached a crossroads, haven't we? We can't go back to how things were before."

"No, we cannot."

"I really don't want to just end this, do you?" Anakin asked as he crushed her tighter.

"No! I do not want to give you up," Tenel Ka said. "You are the best thing in my life. You ground me and give me stability."

Softly he replied, "Well, I can't leave you either. If I did that my heart would just die."

Tenel Ka smiled at the innocence in Anakin's last statement. She murmured, "Me, too."

"So what do you suggest we do? I'll take your lead, Tenel Ka. If you want for us to end things...I'll do whatever you say," Anakin said, and dropped his chin on her head.

"Anakin, I do not want us to be apart. I adore you too much for that. But as I said, if you want to leave I will understand," Tenel Ka said.

"I don't want to leave," Anakin replied, hugging her tighter.

"Well then I guess it is settled. You are staying and we will just have to figure things out as we go along," Tenel Ka replied, savoring the warmth of Anakin's arms.

"Yeah, I guess so," Anakin said. Anakin's eyes turned back towards the portal window and gazed at the twinkling stars that shined out the window. He wondered to himself how many other men out there found themselves in similar positions as he currently held. He wondered how many would willingly

give up countless adventures, simply to please and be with the woman that they love. As these thoughts swirled in his mind, he couldn't help but speculate what side of the issue he would eventually fall upon. The thought of children stilled his beating heart. He realized he'd never really given the subject much thought, other than he expected to one day be a father. He wondered if he was ready for the responsibility. As the Princess tightened her arms around his waist, Anakin's heart burned joyously in his chest. How could he possibly not want to be the father of her children? A smile crept across his face, yet doubts still emerged to mar the occasion.

For now, Anakin thought. We can just keep things as they are. Who knows, maybe when the time comes that I will need to really worry about these other questions, the answers will be clearer.

Kissing Tenel Ka lightly on top of her titian head, Anakin said, "Come on, sweetheart, let's eat."

Tenel Ka lifted her head to meet Anakin's smiling eyes, "That is a great idea." Standing lightly on her tiptoes, Tenel Ka offered her lips to Anakin. Grinning he wove his fingers through her thick hair and gently caressed her lips. As they melted into each other, their earlier tensions and uncertainties evaporated in the air, waiting to re-emerge from the shadows to face another day.

Chapter 47

In the next nine months, Theed changed from a city of reconstruction to a thriving metropolis. Jaina and Marxx worked with an elected committee to begin seeking out the first round of female candidates who would be worthy of election for the role of Queen of Naboo. From their many visits across the planet, Jaina and Marxx had comprised a long list of possible candidates. Each of these girls took a test that would measure their honesty, integrity, knowledge of current events, and history. The young females who scored the highest were advanced into the general, planetary election. During this time, Marxx and Jaina mostly stayed at their Theed apartment and flew to their bungalow in the Lake Country as a means of escape. In the weekday evenings Jaina spent a couple hours at her brother's empty apartment, meditating. Marxx peaked an eyebrow at her the first time she told him her plans to start this ritual. Dipping into the Force, he could tell Jaina was hiding something from him, but he figured it would do little good to argue with her or question her motives. More times than not she'd come home with missed grease smudges under her fingernails and on her face. Marxx figured she probably spent her evenings tinkering with the items in Anakin's room to blow off steam.

Marxx awoke excitedly early one morning in their Theed apartment and felt Jaina curled in a ball under their sheets. Her matted hair spun in every direction on her pillow. Smiling, Marxx gently pushed her chocolaty locks aside and revealed her contented, sleeping face. Lightly, he butterfly kissed her cheek and crept out of bed. Stretching, he smiled at the day's date - it was their first year wedding anniversary. Silently he grabbed a bathrobe and threw it on over his bare arms and chest and padded out of their room towards the kitchen, scratching his chest and yawning. He flicked on their caff machine and began selecting contents out of the cooler to make breakfast. Expertly, he shredded several poatos, wiped away tears as he chopped up an onion, and dumped the slices in a pan with butter to brown. He then sprinkled some Corellian herbs over the whole dish. Throwing open a cupboard, Marxx extracted a bowl, cracked a few chuko eggs into it, and began to whip them into a frothy mixture. He poured in some cream, and began to sway in time to the beating of the whipping spoon. With the assistance of the Force, Marxx flicked on a radio and began to softly hum along to the current song playing. He then tossed some cheese and greens in time with his cords. His bare feet squeaked

across his kitchen floor. He chucked his bathrobe to the floor as he continued to work.

From the hallway, Jaina's lip curled into a delighted smirk as she watched her husband wiggle and dance before their cooker. After he flung the objects in his bowl, he threw out his hand and shook the pan of sizzling potatoes in time to the music. Jaina shoved her fist in her mouth to contain her giggles and opted to admire her husband's v-shaped bare back as his hands moved from chore to chore. Marxx dumped his eggs into another pan and then sang out a cord of the song, threw his left hand over his head and spun on his heels in a circle while singing into his spoon. As he spun, he opened his eyes and caught a flash of his wife scrutinizing his actions with obvious merriment.

Blushing, he swung towards Jaina, grabbed her hands, continued singing- badly- and twirled her in time to the music. Throwing her head back, Jaina laughed out as Marxx spun her towards their dining room table. Dipping her low, Marxx brought her back up towards him quickly. Jaina wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and kissed her husband to stop his horrible singing. Sliding her hands through his thick hair, Marxx lifted his wife and carried her towards the couch and laid her down, deepening their kiss.

Jaina broke herself from her husband's embrace and said, "You better get back into the kitchen, or everyone'll think I'm cooking."

Widening his eyes, Marxx bounded off of Jaina and ran back into the kitchen, and flipped his eggs just before they burned. Yawning, Jaina grabbed dishes and began to set the table. She removed some pallenberry juice from the cooler and poured them both glasses. Marxx divided the contents of his pans onto their plates and returned into the kitchen to place them into the sink to clean later. He walked back to the table with his pot of caff and poured them each a glass. Lightly kissing Jaina on top of her head, Marxx said, "Happy Anniversary, honey."

Smiling brightly, Jaina pulled Marxx down and kissed him softly, rubbing her hand up his bare chest. She let go and said, "Happy Anniversary to you too, baby."

Feeling happily flushed, Marxx sat down and dove into his eggs. Jaina glanced at him sideways and asked, "So did you have anything planned for today?"

Swallowing his eggs, Marxx wiggled an eyebrow at his wife, "Well I'd thought we could spend the morning and afternoon getting... ah... reacquainted with each other."

Jaina laughed and said, "Right because we never do that!"

"Well I was thinking we could...ahh... relive some of our favorite honeymoon moments today... if you know what I mean," Marxx replied, peaking an eyebrow.

"Darlin' you're far from subtle, the lowest lifeforms in the Galaxy would know what you meant," Jaina said, drinking her juice.

Pointing his fork at his wife he said, "I do have evening plans for us though, so you'd better dust off your finest, sexiest gown for me, darling."

Peaking an eyebrow, Jaina said, "Really? Well that works out perfectly then, because I have something planned for us this afternoon. For the *entire* afternoon."

Marxx's face fell. Disappointment leaking into his voice, he asked, "You do?"

Giggling, Jaina said, "Honey, I think we have plenty of time to get 'reacquainted' after whatever you have planned for us. Trust me, you'll love what I have planned."

"I'm sure I will, baby," Marxx said, and shoved potatoes into his mouth.

Taking a long savoring bite of her eggs, Jaina's heart swelled at her considerate husband for making them breakfast. She said, "These are great."

"Thanks," Marxx replied. "I included your favorite blend of Corellian spices in the potatoes."

Grinning, Jaina said, "I noticed."

Marxx smiled and said, "So you excited about the election tomorrow?"

"Of course I am," Jaina replied, chomping down eggs.

"Who do you think will win?" Marxx asked.

"I don't know... my gut tells me Rauha Letitia from the Northern regions has an edge. She positively nailed the integrity and Naboo history sections of her test," Jaina replied, eyes bright as she blew on her coffee to cool it before taking a long swallow.

"True, but Abrey Shahnaz may also get the nostalgic votes as she was related to the last Queen of Naboo, Queen Jamilla. The Southerners have always been popular," Marxx replied, slyly grinning knowing that Jaina easily got riled up with political debates.

Jaina nodded her head and wiped her mouth with her napkin, "Yeah, but she did poorly in the integrity section. She seems kind of full of herself. I think she's more interested in the wardrobe than ruling a planet."

Marxx hooted with laughter. "Oh come on, she's not that bad!"

"Well, I know. Ok, I just don't like her..."

"Yes? Why? Because she's a blond?" Marxx asked, grinning broadly.

Laughing, Jaina threw her napkin at him and stood up to clear their now empty plates. She planted a kiss on Marxx's head before heading into the kitchen. She called out, "Well that would officially be the shallowest, and stupidest reason for disliking a candidate."

Grinning, Marxx crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, "You haven't answered my question."

Jaina peered at her husband from under the cabinets, "Come on, she thinks the shaaks flatulence is the reason for the increased air pollution on Naboo. She wants to wrangle them all up and stick them in an environmentally sealed, domed shelter. Unfortunately, the rise in pollution was from the reconstruction of Theed and should level out now that the Capital is nearly completely finished. She's just too naïve

for the job, I'm afraid." Jaina started washing the dishes and continued, "She is smart and I know she scored exceptionally high on the tests otherwise, but I'm sorry 15 is too young."

"Your grandmother was 14, as I recall," Marxx said. "And I seem to remember that Naboo once elected a Queen who was 12!"

"Yes, well... my grandmother was an exceptional woman... from what I hear," Jaina replied. She placed the dishes in the washer and activated the wash cycle. She picked up Marxx's robe and placed it on the kitchen counter. Walking around the kitchen she dropped herself into her husband's lap and played with his bouncing dark curls that framed his forehead.

"I think you're jealous," Marxx said, grinning.

"Jealous? Jealous of what?" Jaina asked, furrowing her brows.

"Well, when this new Queen's elected tomorrow, the people will stop calling you the Nubian Queen," Marxx said. Jaina lightly pinched Marxx's left cheek. He giggled and planted a kiss on her mouth to stop any verbal objections. Jaina wove her fingers up Marxx's bare chest and tenderly caressed his broad, bare shoulders. Marxx lightly began to caress her long calve and gently started to push upwards her nightgown to find her tempting thigh to explore. Jaina snatched her left hand off his shoulder and grabbed his meandering hand. Marxx opened his eyes and stared at her with genuine hurt. She jumped from Marxx's lap and pulled him to his feet. Marxx crashed into Jaina and smiled as he noted the heat rising in her eyes.

"M'lady, I thought you said you had plans for us this afternoon," Marxx teased as he lingered above her tempting lips.

Grinning seductively, she caressed his earlobe, "It's not afternoon yet, is it?"

Flashing her a wolfish smile, Marxx said, "I like the way you think, M'lady." Marxx then bent down and lifted his giggling wife up in his arms and carried her towards their bedroom.

The Nubian Hope landed in the Southern region of Requora on Naboo. Marxx stepped down the ramp and shielded his eyes from the blinding early afternoon sun as he examined the landscape. Jaina emerged behind him wearing tan flight pants and a purple tank top. She laced her arms around his waist as Marxx gazed upon the myriad of cavernous rock formations that dotted the grassy, yet barren, green landscape.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Jaina asked.

"Uh-huh," Marxx said as he turned to view his wife. The wind blew her long ponytail swirling around her back. "And we are here because?"

"What, don't you like it here?" Jaina asked, innocently.

"Uh... sure... I mean it's secluded and would be an interesting place to explore, I guess," Marxx replied, fishing for a reason why his wife would have flown them into the middle of nowhere. Terror

gripped his heart, “You didn’t buy all this land did you?”

Jaina laughed, “Nope, wrong guess. Nice try, though.” She clanked down the ramp and walked towards the back of the ship and stood under the cargo release mechanism. Marxx followed his wife and stared quizzically at Jaina, wondering about her surprise.

Hardly able to contain her excitement she felt indecision grip her as to how to present Marxx with his gift. Finally she began, “When I first met you there was one thing that defined who you were as a person, it helped to mold and shape you into the man I fell in love with. Unfortunately, when you moved from Tatooine, you were forced to give it up...”

A sly smile began to form on Marxx’s lips, as his heart began to pound. Visions of Jaina returning home in the evening with grease on her face began to flash through his mind. He stepped back and re-examined the landscape. Tentatively, he said, “Ok...”

Jaina flicked on the cargo hold lock and the door jolted open. Two crash helmets fell into her waiting hands. She tossed one at Marxx. He jammed it under the crook of his arm and licked his lips in excitement as she lowered the ramp the rest of the way.

Marxx jumped in excitement as his old podracer, *The Nubian Dream* fell into view. Dashing forward, he caressed the hull of the green painted racer. He stared at it with a mingled expression of joy and melancholy.

Jaina gently stroked his arm as Marxx’s fingers caressed the hull painted by his grandfather. Throat constricting with emotion, Marxx turned his turquoise eyes upon his wife. He asked, “How did you get this?”

“Well, the hull’s actually the only component left of your original pod racer. After you sold it on Tatooine, it was disassembled and it’s components were scattered all over. I had one of Dad’s old... ah ... acquaintances help me to find what I currently have here. He told me the pod had been scrapped for pieces and he wanted to know if I wanted him to track everything down. I finally asked him to just find me the hull. You’ll never guess where it was!” Jaina said.

Marxx gruffly laughed, “Watto’s right?”

“Yup! He bought the hulls and kept them to show off as bragging rights to his clients and bookies. Apparently, he was quite proud of you for winning the race,” Jaina replied warmly.

Marxx nodded his head as his former Toydarian employer lingered in his mind. Tossing his helmet in the racer, Marxx crossed his arms across his chest. He said, “Sheesh, it’s been ages since I thought of Watto, or Tatooine. Seems like eons ago that I was there.” Turning he faced Jaina, the sun filtered across her tanned face. He gently removed a stray hair out of her eyes and stroked her soft cheek. He said, “I guess I just blocked a lot of it out. My years being with you are the happiest of my life so far.”

Jaina threw her arms around his waist and they rocked together, not needing to speak. Finally Marxx asked, “So what’s this thing got under its hood? And how’d you get the components for building it?”

Scowling, Jaina said, “So you guessed I built it, huh?”

Laughing, Marxx said, “Yeah, well you’ve been coming home after your ‘meditation’ sessions with grease all over your face and fingers, so I assumed you were up to something. I would have never guessed this, though. Why’d you do this?”

“Well, we first really got to know each other because of your racer, and I wanted to keep it in our family as an heirloom of sorts. I figured our kids might get a kick out of seeing it and speeding around in Daddy’s racer,” Jaina replied with a grin.

Marxx felt his stomach drop in terror. Jaina sensed his immediate change and rolled her eyes. She said, “Don’t worry, I’m not pregnant... yet.”

Marxx relaxed then assisted Jaina with examining the insides of the engine. Marxx checked out the engines and the levels of the power couplings and grinned at his wife’s meticulous attention to achieving the best results from the racer.

Standing up, Jaina planted her fists on her hips and said, “This wasn’t the easiest thing to build, they don’t exactly have schematics on the galactic net on how these are designed.”

“Well of course not, every racer wants to keep his engine schematic secrets to himself. You built this from memory?” Marxx asked, wiping his hands on a rag.

“Yup, plus I used my intuition. I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised. I’ve given it a few of my own special modifications. It ain’t your old rig, baby,” Jaina said, wiggling her eyebrows.

Marxx laughed, “Yeah, no kidding. I’m sure if I had you at my side years ago, I’d be the greatest podracer who ever lived.”

“Who says I would’ve just helped you?” Jaina asked, peaking her brow. Swaggering close to him, she walked her fingers up his shirt and tapped his nose. Smiling, she asked, “You think you could’ve beaten me?”

Roaring with laughter, Marxx picked Jaina up and swung her in a circle. He planted a kiss on her lips and finally replied, “I bless the Force I never had to compete against you. Something tells me my pride would’ve been wounded on more than one occasion being beaten by a girl.”

Smirking, Jaina activated the hover controls on the pod and moved it away from the *Hope*. Marxx and Jaina placed their helmets on their heads securely, and climbed into the vessel. Marxx grinned as he realized that Jaina did little to change the room in the cockpit to better fit two people. Jaina was squished tightly behind Marxx, her thighs tightening securely against his own as he locked the restraints into place.

“You ready, flyboy?” she asked.

“Yup, sure am!” Marxx said and activated the engines. The silent Nubian landscape boomed with the roar of the pod springing to life. A flock of birds rose noisily into the sky to escape the pod’s deafening bellow. Jaina laughed and tickled Marxx’s stomach. He grinned and revved the engines a few times to get a feel for Jaina’s sticks and throttle controls. Jaina tightened her thighs around Marxx’s body to signal him to get going. He shouted over his shoulder, “I’ll start out slow to get a feel for the pod, then I’ll step it up!”

Shifting the throttle into gear, the racer sprung to life. Marxx carefully maneuvered over the rugged landscape, zipping the pod in and under rock arch formations. The wind ripped at their clothing as the racer devoured the landscape. Marxx's heart raced as the adrenalin pumped in his veins. The joy he used to feel for this sport swept over his senses as the world flashed by his eyes. He shifted the racer eastwards towards a curved hill and sent the racer on its side as it hugged the formation. Jaina tightened her grip around Marxx's waist as gravity pulled at them in their seats. Marxx scanned the landscape and saw a canyon to the south. Pointing the racer in that direction, he increased the speed as the racer roared over the grassy, Nubian plains. Three shaaks bounded away from the noisy craft as it sped towards the cliff. Jaina licked her lips as they approached the drop off. Slyly, she reached past Marxx and flicked a switch as the racer plunged off the cliff. Both Marxx and Jaina's stomachs soared weightlessly in their chest as gravity collided with the vessel. Without directing the pod, the racer automatically activated a small magnetic field and gripped itself to the canyon wall. The maneuver would have shed seconds off of a plunge in a race. Marxx grinned at his wife's ingenuity. Throwing his weight into the left thruster stick, Marxx increased the speed of the racer as it continued its decent down the eighty-foot wall. He flicked Jaina's switch as it reached the ground and the pod ripped across an open prairie. Marxx kicked up the acceleration to maximum and his body crashed back against Jaina, flattening her against the back of her seat. Jaina's cheeks flushed with the thrill of the added speed and then pointed to the west, and Marxx directed the racer to the left. They soared up and over a series of small hills, causing their stomachs to rollercoaster in their body cavities. Jaina laughed in delight. They crested the last hill and emerged back at the high cliff wall. Marxx aimed his racer towards it and activated Jaina's magnetic field guides and the racer climbed the wall easily. As it leapt over the lip, Jaina pointed westwards away from their ship. Marxx turned left and the racer devoured the open field. Jaina directed them to the north. Squinting his eyes, Marxx saw a large open cavity in a stone wall.

"Want me to go into the cave?" he shouted.

"Yes, and turn off the engines when you get in there," Jaina yelled back. Marxx lifted his right thumb off his right throttle to signal he heard her directions and flicked on his floodlights. The racer plunged the couple into darkness. Marxx wove the racer into a series of tunnels and stopped when Jaina tapped on his shoulder.

As he shut off the engines, silence screamed in their ears. Marxx unhooked the harness and extracted himself from the cab of his racer. They removed their helmets and tossed them onto the floor of the racer. Jaina snaked her hand behind her seat and removed a floodlamp. Gingerly she stood up in the pod and flashed the bright light towards the ceiling.

Marxx glanced around the dark cave, now alit by the lamp. He noted jagged stone walls covered in moss and from the farthest depths he could hear water dripping. However, he didn't see anything of any interest in the cave. He asked, "Why are we here, babe?"

Continuing to flash her light around in the cave, Jaina said, "Patience is a virtue, my dear."

He reached forward and caressed the back of her leg. He said, "I love the racer, Jaina. Bless the Force, it rides better than my old rig."

"Yeah, I thought you'd like those magnetic fields I installed. Just think of how much time they could shave off of the courses on Tatooine," Jaina replied.

“You know, you could make a lot of money selling this new feature to professional pod racers,” Marxx said.

Jaina gazed at her husband, “Now why would I want to do that?”

Balking, Marxx said, “Well it’s not like we’re going to have any real use for them, right? Right???”

Flashing him a sweet grin, Jaina said, “Well, I don’t know. I just think it’s wisest to never say never darling.” That being said, she switched off the floodlamp, thereby pulling the blanket of darkness over Marxx’s puzzled expression. As their eyes grew accustomed to the dark, on the ceiling and walls, millions of bioluminescent beings sparkled like a myriad of stars.

“Whoa!” Marxx said, as he craned his neck and watched the tiny creatures crawling about their business. “What are they? And how’d you find out about these things?”

Jaina explained, “I was helping to move some of the old manuscripts into the capital’s new library wing when I dropped a Nubian atlas. It opened actually to this area Requora and they had a little subsection that talked about these bugs called Unwenians. Apparently they only exist in this region of Naboo and are to be found nowhere else in the Galaxy. It was when I saw the landscape in the atlas though that inspired me to find your pod and make it for you. This place just reminded me of the race courses on Tatooine. I just wanted to show these little guys to you since they were also a part of my decision to make your gift.”

Marxx launched himself up into the pod and wrapped his arms around his wife. Smiling in the dim light, he said, “I think it’s perfect. Thank you so much, baby.”

“You’re welcome,” Jaina said, smiling back. Lacing her arms around Marxx’s shoulders, Jaina drew her husband towards her in a deep kiss.

When they separated, Marxx gazed at his wife and said, “Well, we need to get back to the *Hope* and get dressed. It’s nearing time for my surprise for you.”

“I can’t wait,” Jaina replied with a grin.

They jumped back into the pod and Marxx lead them back across the plains with added speed and joy towards their ship.

Jaina examined herself in the mirror closely. Before leaving for Requora, Jaina had grabbed her evening clothes to change into on their ship. After showering and placing her hair carefully up in a series of four long braids twisted into loops that fell down her neck and met again atop her head, Jaina changed into her dress and then applied her makeup. She’d bought the dress on a lark in a small dancers boutique in Theed. Sizzling red, the dress consisted of one tiny spaghetti strap that attached to her left shoulder. The fabric then plunged across her chest diagonally and revealed the right side of her torso. The fabric on the left side of the gown met low where it curved around her back and finally met up with the right side of the dress to secure it into place. That one intersection of fabric was the only place where the dress connected. The rest of the dress fell in shimmering, triangular layers of silk that

swirled around her legs and was held together by built in undergarments. She bent down and finished lacing up her high heeled dancing shoes to complete the outfit.

Scratching her forehead she scrutinized herself and thought, *It takes a lot of work and energy to look this scandalous.*

She twirled in the room and kept her eyes on the mirror to make sure that if she did dance that nothing would fall out of place, or body parts wouldn't fly out from under cover. Kicking up her legs, she realized that although the dress was very provocative, it was designed to be danced in and she would not end up embarrassing herself while wearing the gown. Grabbing a bright red azulla rose, she tucked it into her hair as her only adornment. Under her feet, she felt *The Nubian Hope* land and flush its vents. Picking up a fringed black shawl she threw it over her shoulders and covered her upper body, only revealing her nearly exposed right leg. She exited her room and nearly ran smack into Marxx. He wore a pair of form fitting black pants, and a silky red shirt that he'd unbuttoned half way down his chest. Over his shoulders he wore a half length black cape. Jaina's heart fluttered with pride at his dashing appearance.

"Wow, how'd we do that? How'd we manage to match when we had no idea what each other was going to wear?" Jaina asked.

Marxx's eyes barely left her supple leg, and he said, "Well, I actually assumed you'd be wearing black. Guess things work as they are supposed to. Come M'lady, our evening awaits." Marxx offered her his right arm. Jaina gladly grabbed onto it and they descended the ramp of the ship.

Several people passed the ship and pointed at the emerging couple. Jaina's heart pounded in surprise as they exited the ship. Unable to control herself she jumped up and down in excitement. She squealed, "You got us reservations at *Unadorned Delights*?"

Grinning, Marxx said, "Well I'm not usually one to name drop, but I did find that by doing so we were able to bypass months of reservations. Being considered honorary royalty in this star system does have its advantages!"

Built on a floating city that circled the third moon of Naboo, *Unadorned Delights* had become the hottest entertainment mecca center in the Galaxy. Twenty-four hours a day bands of every type played. The music never stopped, drinks never ceased flowing, and everyone danced. The dress Jaina wore she had bought specifically in the hopes of ever coming to this traveling oasis in the sky. Although Marxx gave no hints they were coming here, she decided to wear her dress anyways... just in case. She planted a kiss on Marxx's cheek and left a tart red smudge behind. They walked up to the club's doors, past a long line of hopeful aliens and humans wanting to get into the club. The Gamorrean bouncer took one look at the couple and pushed open the door to let them inside past the long line of screaming, gawking people.

Jaina and Marxx wove their way through the crowded club. Pounding music assaulted their ears and orange and blue neon lights strobed throughout the room. Marxx yanked Jaina through the hoards of people and found another Gamorrean at the far southern side of the building. Marxx shouted something to the piglike creature who pointed to an eastern stairwell. Marxx dragged Jaina in that direction.

"Where are we going?" Jaina shouted as she waved smoke out of her face.

“You’ll see. We’re here for a very specific reason tonight,” Marxx yelled back. They reached the winding stairwell and wove through large numbers of aliens and humans who crowded the steps dancing from a higher vantage point above the room below. When they reached the top they entered into a large sultry lit room. As the doors shut behind them their ears filled with classically spicy music. A large dancefloor sat in the middle of the room surrounded by hundreds of tables. The Twi’lek hostess smiled brightly when she recognized Marxx and Jaina. Quickly, she ushered them towards a luxury table located right next to the dance floor. Crossing her legs demurely, Jaina tightened her shawl around her shoulders and sat down as the hostess handed them menus.

“You’re waiter will be by shortly. You made it just in time, competition starts in five minutes,” the hostess replied before leaving them alone.

“Marxx...” Jaina said. Marxx buried his face in his menu, to hide the smirk that etched his lips. Jaina fingered his menu and pulled down on it to meet his eyes. “What competition?”

Before Marxx could answer, a large Hutt slithered up to a microphone and began to speak into it in Huttese, “I am Glydoola the Hutt and will be the emcee for this Tango competition tonight. We have seventeen dance pairs registered into the event. The winner tonight will not only receive the coveted Galactic Tango Champions title, but will also receive one hundred thousand credits!” The large crowd roared with delight.

Jaina’s eyes flared angrily at Marxx, “Please tell me you didn’t enter us into this competition, you didn’t, right?”

Marxx coughed and hid a smile as the Hutt began to introduce the judges.

“Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!” Jaina growled.

Marxx kneaded the back of his neck with his right palm, nervously. “What? How do you expect us to pay for the educations of any future children, darling? Being a Jedi Knight isn’t exactly the most profitable profession. Besides, you and I can easily take this competition in a heartbeat,” Marxx replied, shifting uncomfortably under Jaina’s icy glare.

A protocol droid delivered to Jaina and Marxx their adhesive identification numbers. Jaina studied the tag wondering where she could affix it to on herself since her dress had no back. Shaking her head, she said to Marxx, “You should’ve told me, we could’ve spent time practicing.”

“Well I would have told you... honestly, don’t look at me like that... but I just found out about this competition yesterday. I hardly think one night is enough time,” Marxx replied as he turned his back to Jaina. She slapped his tag on the back of his shirt under his cape. Jaina leaned down and stuck her tag on the left outside edge of her skirt.

She picked up a glass of water and took a long swallow as she realized looking at their number that they would be the first couple in the competition. Sulking, she said, “We’re gonna look like amateurs.”

“Well, maybe... but I bet we do fine. You and I know a lot more about Tango dancing than a lot of people. Trust me, darling. We can heat this room without even trying,” Marxx replied.

Jaina’s eyes wandered to his exposed chest and wiggled her eyebrow seductively. Glyndoola glanced in

their direction and boomed, “And we will start this competition with the Nubian Queen and Nubian Son themselves- Jaina and Marxx Racees!”

Suddenly their table was bathed in a white hot spotlight. Marxx shoved aside his chair and turned his back to Jaina. He moved his hands up to his shoulders and removed his cape, twirling it in flourishing movements. He spun it high over his head as it fluttered in waves over Jaina’s head. The crowd sucked in their breaths and pointed at his stylish entrance. He then placed the cape on the back of his chair and offered his hand to his wife. Jaina glanced away from him and crossed her arms and legs. The crowd laughed. Marxx twirled around the chair to face her and dropped to his knees pleading for her attention. Jaina lifted her chin and rolled her eyes and let out an exaggerated sigh. The crowd laughed harder. Gingerly, she extended her right leg towards Marxx. Lightly his fingers traveled up its silky length. As he neared the top of her exposed thigh, she slapped his hand. The crowd howled as he pulled away in mock pain. In a singular fluid movement, Jaina rose and spun to her feet. Lifting her knees up high, she seductively high kicked around Marxx, her left-hand fingers rustled his silk shirt. She tried walking away from him, but Marxx caught the edge of her shawl and lightly pulled on its edge. She stopped in her tracks and sighed. In a solid movement, Jaina threw open her wrap and it floated onto Marxx’s head, covering his face. The crowd gasped at her fully exposed, slinky dress. The shawl fell down Marxx’s face and he absorbed her backless dress. He gulped. Jaina turned and faced her husband, whose mouth gaped open as his eyes drank in what little she wore. The crowd roared with laughter at his reaction.

Softly, music filled the room and the tango began. Jaina threw her hands above her head and crooked her fingers towards Marxx to follow her as she began quickly stepping backwards onto the dancefloor. Marxx leapt to his feet and chased after her retreating form. Arms open wide he held out her scarf and plunged to his knees and fell backwards facing the ceiling. Jaina stepped over his doubled over body and offered him a hand. Grabbing her right arm, Marxx hauled himself to his feet. Holding out her scarf he spun around her body and then lowered it over her head and dragged her body close to his own. Jaina backstepped away from him and Marxx matched her steps. As their faces stared at each other mere inches apart, Marxx asked through his teeth, “Where in the Galaxy did you get THAT thing?”

Innocently, Jaina slithered her arm up in the air and down his face. Her right leg wove up his backside and locked tightly in the crook of his back. Marxx securely tightened his arm around her waist and dragged her limp left leg across the dancefloor. Jaina smiled delightfully, “You said you wanted sexy, darling.”

“Sexy, yes. Slutty? No!”

Jaina scowled, unhooked her leg and thrust her left palm into his chest and spun away from Marxx, her scarf pooling onto the floor by her feet. Marxx grabbed her left hand and twirled her tightly into his body. Jaina said, “Relax darling, you’re starting to sound like my father.”

Marxx flashed her a lopsided smile, and said, “Well we can’t have that, now can we. I have to confess, I’m actually glowing with pride that you can pull off wearing that dress.”

Jaina tickled his face with her fingers and they spun apart from each other briefly and met up again after Jaina high kicked several times. Together they traveled the length of the dance floor in a series of complicated linear footsteps. They ended their line with Marxx twisting his arms and lifting Jaina over his head. Laying flat and tightly holding her legs together, Jaina connected with the Force to steady

herself as Marxx spun below her with increasing speed. The crowd gasped, as Marxx began raising and lowering his arms to show his strength. In a fluid movement he placed Jaina on the ground and she spun away from his arms. She stopped and threw forward her chest to pose in order to allow her dizzying vision to stop spinning. Marxx raced across the dancefloor, captured her arms and they strutted together around the floor in a figure eight pattern. Jaina wove her legs in and out of Marxx's. As they reached the center of the dancefloor, Jaina bent backwards across Marxx's arm and wove her legs around his waist. Grinning, Marxx spun her around as the crowd gawked in amazement. Using the Force, Marxx leveled Jaina so she wouldn't fall. Grabbing her arms, Marxx lifted her upright. The music began to reach its powerful ending crescendo. Jaina unlocked her legs and flew upwards over his head and then piked downwards and shot across the floor under his legs. Marxx spun and threw himself across the floor and landed in front of her as the music ended.

The crowd roared around them, delighted by their entertaining dance. Jaina's eyes traveled to the judges who all seemed rather flustered and busily talking amongst themselves. Grabbing her wrap, Jaina held out her hands to Marxx who lifted her off of the ground. They bowed and danced their way off of the floor.

Plopping herself in her chair, Jaina took a long swallow of her water and picked up her menu.

Leaning over, Marxx asked, "So do you think we have a shot?"

"Oh, I don't know, we'll have to watch the other couples and see how they do. Something tells me they will give us a serious run for the money," Jaina replied. "We're definitely at a disadvantage going first. The judges usually mark lower since they know that many more are on their way."

Smile falling, Marxx slouched in his chair and said, "Blast it, you're right. Oh well, it was fun, wasn't it?"

Unable to hide her delight, Jaina said, "Yes, that was fun, I will admit it." She threw her shawl back over her shoulders and they ordered their dinners. They spent the next several hours watching the sixteen other couples. Believing that they really didn't stand much of a chance of winning, they enjoyed the evening's entertainment and pointed to the more exotic moves some of the obviously professional couples executed. They stored away the techniques in their memory for future attempts. One couple Trialla and Uburu from the outer rims set the bar far and above all other competitors with their theatrical flair and technical difficulty. Jaina and Marxx agreed hands down they would be crowned the winners. The remaining couples seemed to fall into one of two categories, either they were exceptionally technical in their moves, or they were creative. Jaina and Marxx, along with the crowd watched in horror as a pair of insect-like Bantelions finished their feverish dance with the female chomping off the head of her male dancer.

Grasping at the back of his neck nervously, dryly, Marxx commented, "She must go through a lot of partners."

Giggling, Jaina replied, "No kidding, huh? And I bet they are none too thrilled to be selected either."

Jaina and Marxx finished watching the dancers and found themselves completely surprised when the judges called them up in the final five as they made ready to announce the winner of the competition. Jaina noted with amusement that the Bantelion was not in the remaining five group.

Glydoola the Hutt began to speak, “The judges had the most difficult time this evening, for the tango is a dance that truly translates over many cultures and is one of the most loosely interpreted dances all over the Galaxy. We want to thank all of our competitors tonight for bringing their own flair to the dance.” The crowd applauded loudly. “Now I will announce the winners. We have three cash prizes to give away, a second runner up, a first runner up and the winner.” Glydoola announced the third and fourth place winners who both received ribbons. Marxx and Jaina glanced at each other in alarm as they realized they were within the top three.

“The second runner up, exhibited grace and amazing technical difficulty. Winning a cash prize of \$25,000 credits... Yoolanno and Rop Bornunio!” Glydoola said. The two Twi’leks bowed deeply and danced over towards the Hutt to receive their prize money.

“Marxx...” Jaina said out of the corner of her mouth, as her grip tightened like a vice around his own.

“I know, baby,” Marxx said. They glanced at Trialla and Uburu the exceptionally tall, and lithe pair of humans from the outer rims who Marxx and Jaina knew should win the competition. Jaina flashed them a smile. Trialla, the platinum white haired woman snarled back a jealous frown.

Jaina stared indignantly back as the Hutt began to speak again. “The judges found themselves in quite a conundrum for what to do for the lead champion here tonight, for these two couples showed amazing poise, and grace under fire. Their dances were inventive and technically superior to all else who danced tonight. Although both pairs styles differed greatly, each brought wonder and joy to a favorite dance across the galaxy. In the end, the judges had to decide a winner based on overall presentation and personality. That being said...” a drumroll began in earnest in the background. “Tonight’s first runner up will receive a cash prize of \$50,000 credits...” Jaina’s heart flipped, not believing that she and Marxx most likely will be coming home with that much credits. Marxx grinned knowing that those credits- even half of the major winnings could be a great start for a nest egg for their future children. “...is Trialla and Uburu of Mooltarii!”

The tall woman fought with her tears of rage as she and her partner bowed to the crowd. Jaina’s legs shook violently below her skirt and Marxx threw his arm around her waist to support her from falling over.

“How? How is that possible?” Jaina asked as her hands shook.

Glydoola announced with flair, “This means our new intergalactic tango champions are Jaina and Marxx Racees, The Nubian Queen and Nubian Son from Naboo!” The crowd roared with deafening applause and jumped to their feet. Jaina and Marxx approached the Hutt to receive their flowers and cash prize.

Jaina leaned close to the Hutt and said, “This can’t be right, they were much better than we were!”

The Hutt emitted a hearty laugh and said, “That may be true, but you two obviously enjoyed yourselves out there... those two looked like they were dancing before an execution squad. It was your personality and sheer joy of dancing that won you the final prize. Trust me, you earned it!”

Marxx and Jaina turned and squinted as small vid droids hovered about them snapping their photos to be soon plastered all over the holo-net. Jaina stood stunned at the attention. Marxx, sensing her overwhelmed state, swooped in and gave her a large kiss. Under the hot lights and the intoxicating

noise of the crowd, Jaina finally allowed their victory to sink into her senses. She threw her arms around her husband and returned his kiss with added passion and delight to further extend their moment of blissful, victorious joy.

Back on *The Nubian Hope* Jaina set aside her flowers and stared at their large check. Marxx laid in a course for the Lake Country and determined they would get there in two hours. Jaina looked up from the check and into a mirror.

Marxx appeared behind her and wrapped his arms tightly around her waist. Resting his head on top of her chocolaty hair, he said, “You are the most beautiful woman in the galaxy. Do you know that?”

“If you say so, honey,” Jaina replied, giggling.

Leaning downward, Marxx kissed her silky neck and exposed shoulders. He then glanced up into the mirror and met her gaze in the glass. He said, “Humm... your neck is wonderful, unfortunately I think it’s missing something.”

Furrowing her brows, Jaina asked, “What?”

Removing his arms from her waist, Marxx pulled out a slim box he had stuffed into the back of his waist of his pants. He brought it around and showed it to Jaina. Heart leaping into her throat, Jaina lightly took the velvety blue box from Marxx as he lovingly massaged her shoulders. With a snap, the box opened to reveal a long golden chain covered with dangling Borealis stones. Jaina’s heart pounded as she gasped at its beauty.

“I can’t wear this!” she squeaked.

“Of course you can,” Marxx said, lightly lifting a finger he removed the necklace from the box and unfastened its clasps. Jaina pushed aside her hair and Marxx clasped it around her creamy neck.

Jaina stared at the shimmering necklace and unconsciously purred in the back of her throat. She said, “Not exactly the gift to give a mechanic, is it?”

Smiling, Marxx said, “Well, if you put it that way I guess not. But I think it’s a very appropriate gift for my wife...” he lowered his lips again and kissed her neck, between kisses he continued, “...the love of my life... and my soulmate.”

Twirling, Jaina threw her arms around Marxx’s neck and sought his lips passionately. She wove her fingers through his dark, curly hair and melted against his muscular body. Lightly lifting her in his arms, Marxx carried his wife towards their quarters on the ship. As their finally lips parted, Jaina smiled, inhaled much needed oxygen and said, “Happy anniversary, Darling.”

“You’d better believe it is!” Marxx replied. Eyes flashing with merriment, Marxx added, “Time to get reacquainted!”

As behind them the door to the quarters silently shut, Jaina laughed and said, “You’ll get no objections from me, darling.”

Chapter 48

Jaina and the two elected candidates waited nervously inside the warmly lit Queen's chambers. Marxx watched his wife with amusement, as her own anxiety levels seemed to match those of the two young women actually running for office.

Rauha Letitia from the Northern regions stood by a large paned window and gazed outside overlooking Theed. In its busy streets, colorful banners swung from lamp posts and people shouted out election propaganda to people passing by- even though the polls had been closed for over an hour. Nervously, the seventeen-year-old girl tucked a strand of black hair behind her tanned ear. Her mother stood beside her and rubbed her back in attempts to comfort her nerves.

Abrey Shahnaz the candidate from the Southern regions threw herself into a comfortable throne chair. Her eyes kept darting around the room, as if she were cataloging every granite brick, and bit of architecture that held the room together. Her light blond hair gleamed under the overhead lights.

Wearing his finer Nubian, golden clothes, Marxx approached his wife and wrapped his arms around her waist to still her pacing. Jaina leaned back into Marxx's strong arms and gently caressed his forearms. Unconsciously, she wove her right-handed fingers up to her chest and touched her new necklace. A phantom smile etched her lips as she recalled their Anniversary day filled with fun and satisfying pleasure.

"It shouldn't be much longer. I know the eastern caucuses are finally closing, their totals should be counted within minutes," Marxx whispered into Jaina's ear.

Jaina smiled, "I know. I'm just so excited. We've worked for so long to bring this to fruition. I can't believe that it's actually here." Marxx rocked his wife in his arms. His arms circled her waist, caressing her velvety, royal blue dress.

"You look beautiful, you know that?" Marxx said, thinking of anything to distract his wife.

"Well you do keep telling me that," Jaina replied. She reached behind her and laced her fingers up through his hair. "And you, my dear, are charming and very handsome."

Marxx grinned. "I wasn't fishing for compliments, but thank you."

Everyone turned as the doors to the chambers opened. Jaina's eyes opened wide as her mother, wearing a long, flowing white gown, entered the room carrying a datapad. The two candidates turned to face the former Chancellor. Rauha's face paled as she clung to her mother's arm.

Leia gazed at the two young women and smiled. She then turned towards her own daughter and handed her the datapad. She said, "I believe the honor should be yours, my dear."

Extracting herself from Marxx's arms, Jaina approached her mother and took the datapad. Leia placed a hand on her shoulder and pointed out the results. Jaina's eyes widened and excitedly she said, "It looks

like the vote was very close, almost too close to be believed. But after several recounts, it does appear that Rauha Letitia has won the election by fifty-two percent.”

Abrey Shahnaz’s face fell into a pout. Then flicking a finger up to her eyes to shove aside tears she raced across the room and embraced the quaking victor. The darker girl stared in wonder at Jaina. Holding out her arm, Jaina directed Rauha towards the inner chambers of the Queen’s quarters, as Leia led Rauha’s mother and Abrey out of the chambers.

For months, Naboo’s top fashion designers worked round the clock to create wardrobes that were specifically tailored to each young woman. Abrey’s clothes would now be altered to fit the current Queen. Rauha had not yet seen her royal trousseau. She entered the room and stared in shock and wonder at the magnificent gowns arranged on mannequins. She stared at each one, and found her eyes returning to a bright red, long sleeved gown with a fluted collar, puffed sleeves, white ermine fur lined cuffs and faux borealis stones decorating in wave patterns along the bottom bell of the gown. Seeing the dresses, the reality of her situation sunk into Rauha and she smiled brightly. Jaina smiled in return.

“You have excellent taste, M’lady. That gown took the most time to create for you. We’d hoped that you would be drawn to it and want to wear it tonight for your coronation,” Jaina said.

From out of the shadows six young, dark haired, women dressed in identical deep pink, hooded gowns converged on the new Queen and guided her behind a screen where they began to dress her for the evening’s festivities.

Jaina fingered some of the newly crafted hair ornaments and she called out to the new Queen, “Do you need me to go over anything, M’lady?”

Rauha’s shaky voice called out to her, “No, Jaina. I think I’ll be fine. I think I can remember where to stand and what to do.”

Smiling, Jaina said, “Alright, well I’m going to go out and wait for the ceremony to begin.”

“Jaina?” the new Queen called out tentatively.

“Yes, M’lady?” Jaina replied, stopping in her tracks.

Rauha poked her head out from behind the screen. Wearing a series of what looked to be very uncomfortable corsets, she approached Jaina, took her hands, smiled, and said, “Thank you so much for everything. You have done a great service to our planet. Your support and devotion to our people is to be commended.”

Jaina bowed her head slightly and said, “Thank you, M’lady.”

Licking her lips, Rauha peaked an eyebrow. She said, “I was hoping something.”

“What is that?”

“That after I am crowned that you would be the official bearer of our application to the New Republic Senate,” Rauha stated.

Jaina beamed, "I would be delighted."

Rauha tightened her grip on Jaina's hands, "And... I was hoping you would like to be our first planetary Senator to the New Republic."

Eyes widening, Jaina didn't quite know what to think of the honor that the Queen was requesting. Jaina stammered, "M'lady, I am sure there are plenty who would be more qualified than I to fulfill that role... I'm not even native on this planet... I couldn't possibly..."

Smiling, Rauha's dark eyes alit with delight, "That all may be true but the people of Naboo have grown to trust you and they all adore you. They see you as their great champion for rebuilding Theed. I would be most pleased if you would represent us in the Galactic Senate."

Jaina's heart pounded in her chest. She would never have guessed in a million years that anyone would ever offer her such a position. She thought of her beginnings as a rogue squadron fighter pilot and marveled at how time and circumstances can change a person. She let the idea bounce in her head. She'd always felt more like her father's daughter than her mother's. Yet, in the past year since she worked on the Restoration of Theed, she'd discovered that she had more in common with her mother than she would ever have realized. *Who would have thought that I would go from Tomboy to Senator in just a couple short years?* she wondered.

She thought about Marxx and said, "I'd need to discuss it with my husband. Can I get back to you?"

"Of course!" Rauha said. She glanced over her shoulders at her impatient handmaidens. "I'd better get dressed. Thank you, again!"

Jaina bowed and left the room in a stunned daze. Her footsteps echoed in the great halls as she wove her way towards a curving stairwell. Marxx leaned against the balcony railing talking with Luke and Leia waiting for his wife to arrive. He extended to her his elbow and frowned at her puzzled expression. He asked, "What's the matter?" Marxx shook Jaina's shoulders lightly, thinking she had not heard his question.

Glancing up at her husband, Jaina said, "She wants me to be Senator."

Marxx beamed, "Really? That's fantastic! ... Isn't it?"

"Well yes, I suppose. Would you want me to do it? It would mean we'd have to move to Coruscant and live there during my term in office," Jaina replied. "What would you do at the capital?"

Luke stepped forward and smiled at his niece. He said, "Actually, I have something I need to discuss with you and Marxx... well with everyone in our family... let's just say that Marxx won't be a lay-about if you do decide to take the position."

Jaina furrowed her brows and said, "Come on, spill Uncle Luke."

Blue eyes twinkling, Luke said, "You both have more important things to worry about at the moment. I want to bring this up when I have your fullest attention. But I'd say that if the Queen asked you, that you should accept the position, Jaina. I know that you've often thought you were more like your father than your mother, but your dedication to restoring this planet has shown what an amazingly mature

woman that you have become. I think the Nubians would be most grateful to have you voicing their collective concerns in the New Republic Senate. And knowing your parentage, you'll automatically gain recognition amongst the other Galactic Senators. Oh and finally, the Jedi could use having a voice in the Senate."

Bursting out laughing, Jaina said, "And to think that YOU weren't the politician in our family, Uncle Luke. That was the cunning argument, I must compliment you on your skills of persuasion."

Marxx eyed Jaina, and took her hands, "Honey, are you absolutely sure you would want to do this? You're a pilot at heart, not a politician."

Staring into Marxx's pool blue eyes, Jaina thought about it for a moment and said, "You know, I don't believe this choice would have been laid before me if I wasn't supposed to grab it. I know it'll be hard work, but I think I really want to do it. Why else would I have been led here if it wasn't to continue my duties for helping Naboo? What, don't you think I could do it?"

"No, I just asked because I know you, that's all. I just want to make sure you're not just making a rash decision is all. I want you to be happy," Marxx replied. His pool blue eyes gazed deeply into Jaina's liquid brown eyes affectionately.

Placing a hand on Marxx's face, Jaina said, "I want to do this."

Marxx smiled and said, "Alright, I just wanted to make sure."

Luke and Marxx followed Jaina and Leia down the stairs.

Leia wrapped an arm around her daughter's shoulders. She said, "I think you'd be a wonderful representative of Naboo. Do you realize you'd be following in your Grandmother's footsteps?"

"Yes, Mom- and yours as well," Jaina replied, remembering her mother had long ago been a member of the Imperial Senate.

As they reached the doors of the Palace, Jaina turned to one of the Nubian Royal Guards and gave him a message to bring to the new Queen. He hurried off to deliver the message.

Outside the grand palace, thousands of people crushed together in the courtyard to witness the coronation of their new Queen. Jaina and Marxx's entire families sat in a corded off reserved section of seats to the right of the Capital building's doors. Jaina waved to Tenel Ka and Anakin. And then she and Marxx sat next to her twin and his fiancée, recently returned from Yavin 4, and excitedly discussed the latest developments.

Jacen stared at his twin when she told him of the position the new Queen had offered. Folding his arms, Jacen shook his head, "I just don't know, sis. I know you've done a great job here and all- but Senator? Do you really want to go into politics?" He leaned in close to her and added, "I always thought you did the whole pilot thing in order to completely distance yourself from Mom. If you did this, you'd be following in her footsteps... Do you want that?"

Jaina suddenly felt like everyone was ganging up against her decision. Hotly she said, "What? Don't you think I can do it?"

“Well... you’re not the most even tempered person in the world. You need to be able to keep your head and not let insults bother you if you go into politics. You can’t just blast a Force field at everyone who disagrees with you. You’re going to have to learn to control your anger,” Jacen replied.

Sensing her twin had just laid out a challenge, Jaina controlled her annoyance and replied, “Trust me, I’ll do fine.”

“Alright, whatever you say. Just don’t come crying to me if you don’t like it. I tried to warn you against it,” Jacen said, holding up his hands in defeat.

“Your objections are noted,” Jaina replied.

About an hour later, a quartet of trumpeters emerged out of the capital building and tooted out the official Royal fanfare to mark the beginning of the crowning ceremony. The Theedian Mayor, Huna Werrin approached the podium, and quieted the crowd.

The robust, jovial, short man beamed out to the crowd. Huna said, “Today is a day of great historic significance to Naboo. For far too many years, we were forgotten by the Galaxy after the Clone Wars. For years we have lived in eternal shame for being the home planet of the Galaxies most notorious Tyrant. However, time seems to have helped heal old wounds. In the midst of wallowing in our own miser, one young woman arrived on this planet and made it her personal mission to restore our planet back to it’s pre-war glory. With painstaking details, she helped to recreate our lost capital city and helped to restore Democracy as an active political system on our planet. The wonderful tiled ground you stand upon and the glorious capital building behind me all owe their thanks to one woman’s devotion to the Nubian Cause. And thanks to her family we are here today. It is only fitting then, that the woman who brought our planet back out of the dark ages should be the one to crown our new Queen. Please, give a warm round of welcoming, to your honorary Queen of Naboo... Jaina Solo-Racees!”

As the crowd roared, Jaina blushed and walked across the stage, her nerves feeling very frayed as she stepped onto the podium steps. Fearing she’d be struck by stage-fright, Jaina stared out across the sea of friendly, expectant faces in the crowd. The last time she’d given any kind of a large speech was before the Rogue Squadron pilots, nearly a year and a half ago. She’d never spoken before a crowd this large before and the prospect made her stomach churn. Yet as the blinding lights bathed the front steps, Jaina’s sight diminished some and the crowd blurred into an ocean of dim faces. She felt her stomach settle as her heart swelled with pride. Under the spotlights, Jaina realized her vision of restoring Theed was complete.

Smiling, she began, “My journey to here has been rather... unusual. How many people out there can say that their dead grandparents shoved them towards their destinies? Not many, I am sure. However that is what happened for me. I didn’t know this planet existed prior to a couple of years ago. Unfortunately, much information about the political history of the Old Republic was destroyed during the reign of the Empire. Many of the ideals and visions that held the Old Republic together for so many years melted under the tyrannical rule of the Empire. My own mother, Leia Organa-Solo has been instrumental in helping to once again establish peace and democracy throughout the Galaxy.”

Jaina turned her head and smiled at her mother. Leia beamed with pride at her daughter as large rounds of applause filled the air. Leia leaned against Han, whose face glowed with parental pride. Jaina

continued, “It was the ideals of Democracy, and Freedom that made this Galaxy a wonderful place to live, free of slavery and oppression. In the Old Republic you could speak your mind freely without worrying about punishment. True and absolute Freedom does not possess strings. However, laws and rules must be abided for order to be maintained in the Galaxy. The same is true for Naboo. You survived many years without a working government here. The amazing thing is as a people, the Nubians are a resilient folk. You didn’t allow your traditions or your absolute belief in yourselves to ever falter, even though you were cut off from the rest of the Galaxy. You lived and maintained your creed of enjoying everyday to its fullest through the four pillars that built Naboo: love, freedom, art, and beauty. It says a lot about a people who can still stick by their founding principles even when the rest of the Galaxy has forgotten about them. Your spirit is strong... and I believe that no matter what challenges are thrown at this great planet, you will always maintain your dignity and your ideals. For you, the Nubian people exemplify all that is pure and good in this Galaxy. May you always live free to allow your hearts to guide you. And may you always be happy in your pursuit of your dreams.”

The crowd cheered loudly and waved colorful banners in the air. Beaming, Jaina’s heart pounded in her chest. She continued, “Today marks the first day that Naboo will return to it’s original, glorious past. Democracy once again united the people of this great planet, and together you have elected a brand new Queen... It is my greatest honor to present her to you now.... Please give a warm, warm welcome to your new Queen... Rauha Letticia from the house of Cerullia.... Queen Cerullia!”

The trumpeters sounded out the arrival of the new Queen. The crowd roared, and those sitting in the reserved seating section stood up. Rauha exited the building wearing the red gown. Her face was painted white with small bright red accents on her cheeks. Her dark hair ascended into an intricate triangular shaped coiffeur, decorated with several copper spiraled headdresses. The crowd cheered as the newly elected Queen stood to the right of the main podium. Jaina reached under the podium and extracted an object off of a shelf. She then stepped off of the platform and bowed her head before Rauha. Speaking into a tiny, floating microphone Jaina explained the importance of the glowing globe in her hands. She said, “What I am holding is the Nubian Globe of Peace. Discovered in the vaults under Theed, for centuries this globe was handed down from generation to generation of Queen. This sphere of light represented the four principles of Naboo. When a Queen accepts this globe into her hands, she fully accepts the duty to protect and preserve the principles of Naboo. Rauha Letticia, do you accept this offering and all that it presents freely and without reservation?”

In a calm and expressionless voice, Rauha said, “I accept this globe freely and all that it represents.” Smiling, Jaina handed her the orb. Rauha’s hands only slightly shook as she turned and faced the crowd of cheering onlookers. Then she raised the orb over her head and it shimmered a rainbow of lights. The crowd roared louder and banners flew. From the heavens tiny hover droids dumped confetti and flower petals on the crowd of onlookers. The trumpeters signaled the end of the coronation. The new Queen sat in a throne and a series dancing and acrobatic performing acts arrived on the main steps to entertain the crowd.

Jacen leaned over to Raven and whispered, “Maybe I was a bit hard on my sister. I think she might actually be able to handle this politics thing.”

Giggling, Raven said, “Well don’t tell me, tell her.”

“What? Are you nuts? She’ll never let me live that down if I cave,” Jacen replied.

Rolling her eyes, Raven said, “You’re impossible.”

“Yeah, and you love me for it, don’t you?” Jacen replied, wiggling his eyebrows.

Raven groaned and kissed him to shut him up.

Marxx wrapped his arm around his wife when she returned to her seat and smiled. He said, “Well honey, even if I had nothing to do on Coruscant, I think that just sealed the deal. Your future is in politics. I think you could charm a Hutt out of his gambling empire.”

A satisfied smile crept over Jaina’s face as her heart warmed her chest with waves of euphoria. She felt as though she had the power to take on a whole fleet of enemies single-handed. She said, “I think you may be right, Marxx. You may be right.”

Luke and his family piled into a marble conference room in the Theed Palace after the Nubian festivities had ended.

Pacing, Luke grasped his hands behind his back and stared at the assembled group: his two nephews, his niece, his sister, Han, Mara holding Ben on her lap, the Racees twins, and Tenel Ka. Chariss and Rowlon sat off to the side with Tanella and Krishta.

Clearing his throat, Luke began, “As you all know recently we found ourselves in a situation that could have had deadly consequences to the Galaxy. Somehow, a Dark Side presence managed to exist in the Galaxy without our being aware of it.” Luke held up a hand as Raven seemed to want to speak up, he said, “I don’t blame you for anything, Raven. I don’t even think you knew how powerful your Grandmother had become. It was also blindness on my behalf that I didn’t bother to ask you if she still lived or not... Losing Kyp has been hard. He was a higher level Jedi, and our numbers are so few that even a single loss is felt in our entire community.”

Luke stood before the group and stared at them all. He continued, “We cannot allow this to happen, again. The Dark Side does cloud things, and makes it hard for those of us who choose the righteous and good path to see when evil lurks, but I believe that we now have enough of us who are trained at the higher levels of mastering the Force that our collective abilities should be able to sense when danger permeates in the Force.” Luke took a deep breath and said, “In the time of the Old Republic the Old Jedi Order was run by a selective group of Jedi Masters who were members of the Jedi Council. These Jedi Masters helped to create order and administer the Jedi’s activities. They gave assignments to the younger Jedi Knights, created codes, and directly worked with the leader of the Senate. Because our numbers are growing, I would like to start up the Jedi Council, again. With funds allocated from the Senate in our behalf, I have secured a piece of land just outside of the Senate building that used to house the now out of business hotel “Extraveganza.” On this property, we are going to raise the hotel and build a new Jedi Temple.” Luke extracted a datadisk from his pocket and plugged it into a holo-projector. An architectural drawing of a large pyramid jumped from the display. Luke paced out of the way and said, “This will be the design of the Temple. As you look at it, you probably recognize its design...”

“It looks like the temples on Yavin,” Marxx said.

“Yes, exactly. Now in case you are wondering, we are not going to abandon Yavin 4 as our main

training center. I like having a separate place to train the younger apprentices away from the distractions of Coruscant. However, when they reach the level of Jedi Knight, I would like for the Coruscant Temple to become everyone's home base. Unlike in the days of the Old Republic, I do not wish to force all Jedi to live under one roof- but I want there to be one central location where all Jedi can feel welcome to return to and can choose to live if they prefer. And it would also be a place for large gatherings that is more centrally located in the Galaxy than just Yavin 4."

"And by having it located on Coruscant, the Jedi will have a more immediate presence in the Political arena than they currently do. By having the Temple located near the Senate building, maybe the Senate will be more likely to pay attention to the needs of the Jedi and maybe you'll be able to procure more funds, correct Uncle Luke?" Jaina asked.

Beaming, Luke replied, "Spoken like a true politician."

Jaina blushed and Marxx squeezed her hand affectionately.

Speaking up, Han asked, "So who're you planning on being a part of this Jedi Council of yours?"

Leia raised her eyes and startled as Luke stared in her direction. She said, "What?"

"I think it's time that you finally heed to your Jedi heritage and become a leading member of the council," Luke said. He raised a hand before Leia could belt out a series of protestations. "We need you as our representative of the Jedi in the Senate. You are the only one amongst us who truly knows how politics work. Leaders from all over the Galaxy trust you and respect your opinions, Leia. They are going to be a lot more willing to speak to and listen to one of their own, as opposed to some *mystical* Jedi, like myself. You would be doing us a great service by doing this. You could keep the council abreast on the latest goings on in the Senate and how their decisions may affect us. And also, by furthering your Jedi training, you may be able to develop even greater insight into what the politicians are feeling."

Leia rolled her eyes. Folding her arms across her chest, she said, "You've tried to feed me that argument before, Luke. The New Republic Senate needs me..."

"Yes, they do. However, as things currently stand, you hold no title or no position in the Senate. On a whim, they could decide they don't want your support any longer and you'll find yourself discarded and uninvited in the Senate," Luke replied.

Leia balked. "They wouldn't do that!"

"I don't understand how you think you can trust politicians, Leia," Mara said. "They're all out for themselves and their own planet's best interests. If they believe that you are in the way of them getting what they want, they'll gladly toss you aside. Don't think for one moment that they won't do it."

Luke's blue eyes blazed at his sister. He said, "You've put it off for too long, Leia... you know that. Besides, we *need* you."

Glaring at Han, Leia's lips curled into a snarl. Indignant, Han pointed at himself, "Don't look at me that way, your Highness, I had nothing to do with this!"

“Yeah? And I don’t see you jumping to your feet to support me either,” Leia replied, coldly.

“Hey, I know better than to get into your political problems, my dear. This is entirely up to you. I’m keeping my mouth shut because I know what’s best for me,” Han replied.

Under his breath, Marxx said, “I know how he feels.”

“What’d you say, hon?” Jaina asked, in response to her husband’s grumbles.

“Nothing, dear,” Marxx replied, sweetly.

Luke spoke up again, “Mara is on board as are Master’s Tionne and Rodersuin.”

“Wait, what about the Academy? Who’s going to teach then?” Anakin asked.

Grinning, Jacen turned in his chair and faced his brother. He said, “Raven and I will be in charge of the Academy after the new Temple on Coruscant is built.”

“Nice to know you let my son in on this little surprise, but didn’t bother to inform your own sister!” Leia seethed.

Chuckling, Luke rocked on his feet letting Leia’s anger bounce off of him harmlessly.

“So there’s you, Mara, Mom, Tionne, and Rodersuin... who else do you have planned?” Anakin asked, as his palms began to sweat. Tenel Ka lifted her gray eyes and met his worried gaze. She placed a calming hand on his own fisted hand.

“Actually, I think for now six will do the trick. The last person I want is Marxx,” Luke replied.

Missing Luke’s allusions earlier to his plans for Marxx, the young man’s eyes registered surprise. He pointed to himself, “Me? Why me?”

“Because you hold the title of Jedi Master. And I want to have a younger voice on the Council. Oftentimes, I find it does little good to only have the elders making all the decisions. Besides, I need some of you up on speed of how things are working, I won’t live forever. You all need to be able to carry on the Jedi Order legacy,” Luke replied, smiling.

Everyone remained quiet, still hurting from Kyp’s absence. His death still remained strongly in their minds as a reminder of their own individual mortality. Breaking the contemplative silence, Luke asked Marxx, “So is that alright by you?”

“Certainly, Master Skywalker,” Marxx replied. Jaina smiled at her husband, grasping his hand tightly.

“I suppose that leaves me,” Leia replied.

“Yes,” Luke replied.

“And how long before you want to start this?”

“After Jacen and Raven return from their Honeymoon in four months. The temple will be ready by then,” Luke stated.

Knowing how quickly construction projects flourished in Coruscant, everyone had little doubt that that new Temple would be ready in that timeframe.

Jaina leaned back in her chair and grabbed her mother’s hand. Her brandy eyes met her mother’s. She said, “Mom, come on. Eventually, you knew this day would come. Don’t you think it’s time that you became the champion for the Jedi? Uncle Luke is right, with you being the voice of the Jedi in Senate, they will take you seriously.”

Staring at her daughter, Leia felt shock rip through her body. For years she chose to ignore the fact that her long, sable hair began to pepper in streaks of gray, and that the lines that crinkled around her eyes seemed to get longer each day. Her daughter looked so much like herself from her youth. She realized her own mortality in that moment. As she listened to the strength in Jaina’s voice, she heard her own words and commitments to peace and justice in the Galaxy and knew that they would never be silenced, for they lived on in her child.

Smiling back at Jaina, she squeezed her daughter’s hand and stared back at her brother, whose own face no longer looked boyishly handsome. She realized with a start the generation shift had begun, and their time was passing. Swallowing a lump in her throat, Leia said, “I agree to help however I can, Luke.”

Rubbing his hands together, Luke let out a loud sigh of relief and said, “Alright, from this day forward things will change in the Jedi Order, hopefully for the better. Jacen and Raven will you stand please and come over here?”

Raven peaked an eyebrow at Jacen and they approached Luke tentatively. Smiling at his nephew and his fiancée, Luke said, “If you both are going to command the respect of hoards of screaming, young apprentices, you need titles to match. From this day forward, I grant you both the titles of Jedi Master.”

Jacen and Raven both shook their heads in disbelief. Luke asked, “Do you accept all of the responsibilities that go along with that title?”

“Yes, Master Skywalker,” Raven replied, her own voice sounding hollow in her head.

“Yes, Uncle Luke...umm... Master Skywalker,” Jacen replied, grinning.

“Great, consider yourselves Knighted,” Luke said. He added, “Do you both feel you need a fancier service?”

Raven glanced at her happy parents and laughed, “What more could I possibly need than to be granted my title before my family as witness? I’m all set.”

“Me too, Uncle Luke,” Jacen replied. Taking Raven’s hand he led her back to their seats.

“Well it’s about time,” Rowlon whispered happily to Chariss.

“Princess, Tenel Ka?” Luke asked.

“Yes, Master Skywalker?” Tenel Ka replied.

With a stony expression, Luke said, “From what I understand there are still tensions between you and the Dellaltians, is that correct?”

“Yes, Master Skywalker,” Tenel Ka replied.

“Perhaps, you would think it prudent then that Anakin remain on in your court as your liaison between you and your neighbors?” Luke asked. The corner of Anakin’s mouth twitched upwards.

“I do believe that would be a good course of action, Master Skywalker,” Tenel Ka replied. Jaina coughed loudly, turned in her chair and batted her eyes at her younger brother.

As Luke turned away from the younger crowd, Anakin stuck his tongue out at his sister.

“Oh, that is mature,” Tenel Ka said.

“Well you know, gotta give a reason as to why I’m the only one who’s not a Jedi Master around here,” Anakin replied.

“HEY!” Jaina and Tenel Ka both barked at him in reply.

Throwing his hands up defensively, Anakin said, “Alright! Sorry, let me rephrase, the only male in here who’s not a Jedi Master.”

Han stood, stretched and tousled Anakin’s hair and said, “Well I’m not, and Rowlon ain’t either.”

Rolling his eyes, Anakin sighed, “Whatever.”

Grinning, Luke said, “I guess this meeting is officially closed.”

“Everyone back at my place, I’ve got a great late dinner for everyone,” Jaina said, wrapping her arms around Marxx’s waist.

“You didn’t cook it did you?” Anakin asked, stretching his long arms over his head.

Knitting her brows together in annoyance, Jaina dove into the Force and shoved a small Forcefield at Anakin, causing him to fly over the back of his chair and land with his feet facing the ceiling. Circling the chairs Jaina stared at her dazed younger brother, “Actually I did cook some of it- and I fully expect you eat every last bite of your food... do I hear any objections?”

Anakin dropped his head, he beat it against the hard marble floor. “You’ll get no such objections from me, sis.”

“Anyone else?” Jaina asked looking around the room. She laughed as the collection of her family, including Marxx slowly took a couple steps closer to the door.

“I suddenly pity the politicians on Coruscant,” Tenel Ka replied, breaking the tension.

Not laughing, Jacen added, “I was thinking the same thing.”

Everyone else burst out laughing as Tenel Ka and Jaina helped Anakin to his feet. Arm in arm the Skywalkers, Solos, Racees, and Tenel Ka exited the new Capital building in Theed. Jacen and Raven stopped in their tracks as one of the Queen’s handmaidens stopped to ask them to follow her and visit the Queen. The rest of the family proceeded outside. As they exited, they found the cool Nubian night alive with a carnival of activities in the Theed courtyard. Suddenly, all eyes turned skyward as a brilliant array of fireworks lit up the sky. Marxx wrapped his arms tightly around Jaina as he noticed tears forming in her eyes.

Into her ear he whispered, “This is all because of you, darling. You truly are a remarkable woman.”

“Possibly. But I think none of this would have even happened if I hadn’t met you to begin with,” Jaina replied, resting her head against Marxx’s arm.

As she watched the Nubian citizens enjoying the festivities, Jaina’s heart swelled with pride. She could barely remember the chaotic mess that war had left Theed when she first arrived on Naboo. Gazing out over the booming city it appeared as though the Clone Wars had never destroyed the city. And although the buildings themselves were whole, it was the joyous spirit of the citizens that brought the heart back to the city, pumping life into its veins, and completing the healing circle.

After the fireworks ended, Jaina and Marxx’s families returned to their small apartment for lively conversation before they would need to return to their different corners of the Galaxy... only to return together once again for the second union of Solo and Racees families.

Chapter 49

Raven sat cross-legged out on the small balcony of her families rented cottage in Theed. Eyes closed, she allowed her other sensations to absorb the happenings of the glorious, sunny morning. Songbirds flittered around citrus trees twittering delightfully back and forth to each other. As their wings stirred around the fruit, its crisp, citrus smell wafted into Raven’s nose. At her side a gray and tan striped, stray yoncat lay on the porch purring contently in the increasingly, warming morning sun. Raven smiled at the sound of the contented animal and stroked his fur as his two tails flickered in delight. The critter’s purrs deepened with pleasure. Jumping, Raven’s eyes flew open as the yoncat landed with a thud into her inviting lap. He arched his back for more attention. Raven proceeded to stroke his bristly fur and watched his eyes open and close in pleasure. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw one of the songbirds zipping amongst the branches. And he shot off of Raven’s lap to pursue the flying birds. Raven giggled as the cat tore around the yard in pursuit of the none-too-worried birds.

“Who’s your friend?” a voice called out from the open door.

“I don’t know, some stray,” Raven replied. Turning, she squinted her eyes upwards to see Tanella walk out onto the deck and handed her a mug of steaming caff.

Lowering her heavy frame next to her younger sister, Tanella crossed her bare feet in front of her and stirred her spoon in her caff to mix up the cup’s contents. She glanced at Raven and asked, “So, how’re you doing?”

Cradling her mug, Raven tapped out a light tune into its side. She replied, “I’m surprisingly fine. I thought I’d wake up a bundle of nerves, but I’m not worried about anything.”

Peeking an eyebrow, Tanella asked, “Nothing? Are you sure?”

“Nope, I’m good,” Raven replied and took a drink of her caff.

“Not even your wedding night?” Tanella teased.

Raven swallowed hard on caff and coughed. Tanella slapped her back. “Sorry, hon. Didn’t mean to startle you with that one so early in the morning.”

Laughing, Raven flicked spilled caff from her fingers. She said, “It’s alright. Actually, I’m pretty calm about that too... I mean, neither of us will know what we’re doing, but I’m not worried about anything strange happening.”

Tanella threw her head back and laughed. Regaining her composure, she said, “You kill me sometimes, little sister. I most certainly would hope that *nothing strange would happen*. What I was wondering is, are you worried about getting hurt... being in pain... did you want any advice on anything?”

Raven rubbed her fingers through her white curls, and stared at her sister. She replied, “Pain doesn’t matter much to me. I guarantee I’ve endured worse pain in my life than anything my darling Jacen could do to me.”

Eyes falling on the raised scars on Raven’s wrists, Tanella understood her reasoning. Since her return Tanella and Raven worked on feeling out their relationship. For most of her life, Tanella only really had her little girl and mother as company. She found it refreshing to have a new female in her family to talk to and confide in. Yet because of her somewhat stunted emotional growth process, Tanella always saw Raven as much younger than her twenty-seven years. She possessed a naivety that was oftentimes refreshing and vexing at the same time. However inexperienced she seemed to be in real life, there was always an undercurrent of pain that rested below Raven’s exterior. Instead of festering like it would in most people, Raven turned that pain around and fed strength from its power and bolstered her character.

Tanella studied her younger sibling as she drank from her mug, looking for any sign of Raven seeking pity or sorrow for her past. She never did. In fact Raven always did the exact opposite. She preferred not to draw attention to herself in any way shape or form. Because of her recent adventures, Raven found it increasingly difficult to visit heavily crowded places without people and aliens crushing in on her seeking some sort of affirmation for their own lives and existence. It was as if by her being returned from the Force that people believed she had become some great prophet, or oracle from the heavens. Although Jacen loved her hair, Raven had seriously considered dying it brown again, so she could return to a normal life, free of public scrutiny and adoration.

Thinking this, Tanella changed the subject and asked, “So what made you agree to Queen Cerullia’s request?”

Wiping her mouth, Raven replied, “Well it’s kinda hard to outright refuse a Queen. When she asked Jacen and I if she could marry us after her coronation, how were we supposed to refuse? I mean, what

an honor, you know? I'm kind of hoping that by doing this that maybe people will realize I'm a normal human being and will leave me alone."

Chuckling, Tanella blew on her caff and said, "Sure, normal people all the time have royalty officiate their weddings."

Blushing, Raven said, "Well... alright, so maybe not normal... but if by seeing me with their Queen maybe they'll see me as a person instead of some mystical foreseer." Throwing her sister a sideways glance she asked, "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course, you don't have to ask for permission," Tanella replied.

"You never talk about your husband. What happened to him?" Raven asked.

Pain stabbed in Tanella's heart. Although those memories always filled her with great joy, intense sorrow always followed its resurgence. She watched the birds flit around, and said, "What made you think to ask that question?"

"Well being my wedding day and all, I've just been thinking about it recently," Raven said. "You just never talk about him. If you don't want to... I'll understand. I don't want to pry."

Tanella smiled at her sister and said, "Well it's no big secret. It is... painful... I suppose, which is why I don't talk about him much." Her eyes developed a far-away look as she began, "Krishtoff was a great and wonderful man. I'd spent most of my life as the girl in the group who was always the best friend- but never a girlfriend to the guys I knew. I'd actually given up ever meeting anyone until one day at the annual Tatooine Sand Fair, Krishtoff approached grandfather's painting booth. I was manning it while everyone else was off at lunch. I couldn't take my eyes off of him. Oh, he wasn't handsome, but he was rugged, manly, and yet there was something elusive about his character. Maybe it was his slightly haunted eyes that drew me to him... Anyway, he was a space pilot who delivered spice around the Galaxy. He never knew his parents- they were killed by the Empire. I guess when he saw me- he saw that I was stable and could possibly offer him a life he'd never experienced. We were happy for a couple years... but he couldn't get space travel out of his veins. He began to fly again."

"Why didn't you go with him?" Raven asked.

"I couldn't. Mother needed me. Oh, I know she seems like an emotional rock, but she wasn't always like that... in fact she was quite the opposite. For years after you died... well when we thought you'd died... she'd go through these times where she'd collapse into herself, nobody could reach her... least of all Dad. She blamed Dad for giving up on you for the longest time. She blamed herself mostly. Only Marxx and I could ever get through to her when she'd go into her hole. It took her seeing her two, healthy children to reaffirm to her that all was not lost. I couldn't leave her. As much as I wanted to be with my husband and explore the Galaxy with him... I couldn't. Krishtoff knew this and always made his trips short to return back to me. The day I found out I was pregnant was the hardest day of my life. Krishtoff flew off to deliver a shipment of spice to Orb Mantel. I came home elated from the news from the medic and turned on the holonet since nobody was at home. I then saw a report that a patrolling blockade accidentally fired upon and destroyed six incoming ships. I just knew Krishtoff was one of those pilots. I never received any official confirmation, but the fact that he never returned was clarification enough," Tanella replied, wiping tears from her eyes. "I knew I had to be strong for my child. All of my love I had for my husband, I poured into Krishta. I always feel great regret and sorrow

that she never knew her father. Holo-images aren't exactly the same thing. He was a good man. Everyday, I miss not having him in my life."

"Are you sure he's dead? I mean, you never got any clarification, right? He could still be out there somewhere," Raven said.

Frowning, Tanella said, "I gave up such dreams long ago, Raven. I've accepted the fact that he's dead. I just... I don't know what I would do if he suddenly showed up on my doorstep to tell you the truth. I think I'd probably kill him for abandoning us."

"Well you are Force-sensitive, so you are most likely right. You would have known if he was still alive." Raven grabbed her sister's hand tightly and offered her a comforting smile. She said, "If he is truly gone and you've accepted this, you can move on. Something tells me that you will love again in your life... if you allow that to happen."

Tanella snorted and said, "Oh dear, don't worry about me, I had my one chance at happiness. I don't regret one moment of it."

"Don't say that. Of course you can love, again. You just have to be willing to look," Raven said.

Meeting Raven's eyes, Tanella asked, "Could you do it? If you lost Jacen, could you fall in love again? Would you be willing to just give your heart freely and completely to another man? My love for my husband was...is... as deep as what you feel for your beloved, trust me."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to come out that I was trivializing your marriage in any way, that wasn't my intention. I just meant that you're not used up, you know? You're still young, and have a lot of great qualities that a man would fall head over heels for. Krishta's going to be leaving soon to start Jedi training and you'll be left alone. I just want to make sure that you'll be happy, or be able to find some level of happiness without her around," Raven said.

Once again, Tanella found herself confused by her younger sister. Now she suddenly seemed much wiser and older than her years. She shook her head and said, "I suppose you're right. Anyway- enough of this talk about me. This is your day! We'd better get ready to head over to the Capital, you need to get ready." Hauling herself to her feet, Tanella offered her sister a hand.

Raven launched to her feet and hugged Tanella, tightly. She said, "Thank you."

"For what?" Tanella asked, pulling away.

"For taking care of Mom. And for being such a good friend to me," Raven replied.

Chuckling, Tanella said, "Darling, that's an unwritten part of the contract. It's what you do when you're family."

Smiling, Raven said, "I am learning that. But I just wanted you to know I appreciate it all the same."

Wrapping her arm around Raven's shoulder, Tanella steered them towards the door. "Well I won't be much of a friend if I make you late for your own wedding. Come on, let's get to it!"

Jacen paced a flattened path in the carpet in his room. Right hand on waist, Jacen's left hand nervously rubbed his forehead.

"I'm getting married today. I'm getting married today," he mumbled repeatedly. Throwing his head upwards, he launched himself across his room to check for the tenth time that his suit and shoes sat in their places in his closet. Beating his head lightly against his closet door he thought, *Jacen, you're gonna give yourself a heart attack. Just relax!*

A light tapping at the door sent his heart cartwheeling, again. Sensing who stood outside, he relaxed, "Come in, Mom."

Jacen's door swished open and Leia walked into his room. Dressed in a comfortable tan pantsuit, Leia's hair hung long, and loose waiting for her turn with the hairstylist later in the morning. A broad grin etched on her face as she studied her oldest son carefully. Leia asked, "How are you doing, honey?"

"Oh, I think you know how I'm doing. My hands are clammy, my heart keeps racing, I'm sweating for no apparent reason, and I think I'm losing my mind," Jacen replied and collapsed on his bed.

Leia chuckled and crossed the room to her son's bed. She sat down next to him and pushed a clump of sandy hair out of his eyes. She said, "Getting married is a big deal, I'll grant you that. After today, you will no longer be living a life as your own. You and Raven will become united as one. Her needs and desires will become your own, the same as her sorrows and pain. Marriage isn't something one enters into lightly," Leia said, stroking his cheek. "But I don't really think I need to tell you that. You're a grown man now. I know you wouldn't have asked Raven if you weren't ready to accept the responsibility of marriage."

Jacen studied his ceiling and said, "Mom, I just can't imagine my life without Raven. I think from the moment she was returned to me, I ceased thinking of only myself. We've kind of infused ourselves to each other's souls. The air I breathe is sweeter because I have her in my life... I can't ever imagine being parted from her."

"Then why are you so nervous, honey? Raven loves you as much as you love her. Do you doubt that she'll be there for you?" Leia asked, eyes filled with concern.

Scratching his bare chest, Jacen shook his head against his comforter. He said, "No. I know she has no reservations about marrying me. I guess I'm just stressed out because of the whole grandness and enormity of the whole thing."

"I can understand that. You are being married by a Queen after all," Leia replied.

"Right! Exactly! We're going to become the first real official ceremony to take place in the new Capital Building. There are going to be reporters and holocams everywhere taking our photos to be plastered all over the holonet. What if I mess up my lines? Or I fall on my face? Or what if something terrible goes wrong? The possibilities are endless. I just want absolutely nothing bad to happen on Raven's big day. She deserves this glorious day to shine without something horrible happening to mar the occasion," Jacen rattled off.

Giggling, Leia grabbed her son's hand, she said, "You need to stop worrying about what-ifs, love. You just have to have faith that things will work out the way that they've been planned. You'll drive yourself crazy thinking about all the things that could go wrong. If you spend your whole day thinking about that- you're not going to enjoy your wedding day. I want you to relax, and let your father and I worry about running the service and the details. You don't need to do anything but allow yourself to enjoy everything about the service and your beautiful bride."

"You'd do that for me, Mom?" Jacen asked, incredulously.

Smiling, Leia replied, "Yes. That's what parents do, they worry for their children."

"I suppose you're right," Jacen said. Laying his hands on his chest, Jacen exhaled a deep sigh of relief. All the tense muscles in his body relaxed as he connected with the Force to help calm his senses.

"I am sorry, honey," Leia said.

Hearing sadness in his mother's voice, Jacen's eyes popped open. Squinting in confusion, he asked, "What for?"

"That I wasn't always there for you when you were growing up. I was so busy helping to build the New Republic, I spent many hours away from the three of you. It killed me most of the time to do it. Looking back, I think I was a failure as a mother," Leia said.

"Mom..."

"No, I mean it Jacen. I'm looking at you here today and you're a grown man, getting ready to marry, and in a short period of time you'll be a parent yourself. I just can't help but think that by devoting so much time away from you that maybe you felt gyped, or somewhat resentful towards me," Leia said, turning her dark brown eyes towards her son.

Taking his mother's hand, Jacen sat up on his bed and faced his mother. He said, "Mom, you did a great job at raising us. I do know that there were times when Jaina and I were little that we often wondered why our Dad seemed to be around more often than our Mom, but we learned to accept that you had an important job to do. Neither of us hold anything against you for working as hard as you did. You have nothing, I mean nothing to feel bad about."

Wiping a tear from her eye, Leia said, "Thank you. I guess I'm just being silly and reflective is all. After today my two oldest babies will be married. I'm suddenly feeling very old."

"Well I think you're beautiful and I don't think you look a day older than when I was a child," Jacen replied, smiling.

Leia laughed heartily and said, "My dear boy, you are quite the charmer, aren't you?"

Jacen flashed her the famous Solo smile. Both mother and son glanced towards the door as Han leaned in the doorway. He asked, "Alright, what's all this laughing going on in here?" Walking across the room Han sat in Jacen's desk chair and swiveled around to face his eldest son and his wife. As he stared at the two he noted that his son shared his mother's eyes in shape and brightness. Their noses also mirrored each others. Otherwise, Jacen's face was shaped like his own.

“How’re ya doing, Jace?” Han asked.

“Better... now. I woke up a bundle of nerves, but Mom helped to calm me down,” Jacen replied.

“I still can’t believe my kid’s gonna get married in such a big fancy wedding. How’d you manage to swing that?” Han asked, scratching his left leg.

“Well, I think it’s because of Raven more than me. If I was marrying anyone else, I doubt the Queen would’ve even known me from the next guy on the street,” Jacen said.

“Now that’s not true, Jacen. You helped a lot with the Reconstruction Project,” Leia pointed out.

“Ok, that is true, but what I did certainly didn’t garnish anything worthy of the Queen’s notice. No... it’s all because of Raven,” Jacen replied.

“Isn’t she uncomfortable with all this public scrutiny stuff? Why’d she agree?” Han asked.

Jacen smiled and said, “The Queen walked us into the Grand Reception Hall and Raven’s mouth dropped open. She’d never really been inside the Capital Building before. I think the intricate peaked, and carved ceilings just spoke to her. She loves art and things of beauty and that Reception hall is a piece of art in itself. I think she was just honored at anyone even suggesting that she could get married in such a beautiful place. She didn’t even think of all the publicity that the event would garnish until afterwards. Oh and do you guys know what she did?”

“What?” Han asked.

“She donated her painting of Queen Amidala, painted by Paulo to the new art museum. She also donated to them the statue that her grandmother had sculpted of her as well. The two will be on display side by side in the museum,” Jacen said, beaming. The more he talked about things other than his wedding, the more his nerves further unwound.

“That was a lovely thing to do, Jacen. Why’d she decide to do that?” Leia asked.

“Well, since we’re going to be on Yavin 4 for who knows how long, she didn’t want the pieces just sitting in our cottage being ignored. She wanted as many Nubians to enjoy them as possible,” Jacen replied, grinning.

“That’s kind of ironic isn’t it?” Leia said, pushing a lump of hair off her right shoulder.

“What?” Han asked.

“Well, Raven’s grandmother fell out of love with Paulo, and there will be their works sitting side by side in the museum,” Leia said.

Jacen nodded his head, “Yeah, she thought about that. But she figured that at least from what she knew, her grandparents were happy while they were on Naboo. And those works represented a brief time in their lives when they were happy together. She thought it would be fitting.”

Flashing Jacen a lopsided smile, Han said, “Sounds like you found yourself a very unselfish woman there, Jace.”

Meeting his father’s eye, Jacen said, “Yes, I have.”

Leia sensed something flash between the two men and said, “Jacen, you know that your father and I are both sorry for what we said before about Raven, right?”

Waving a hand, Jacen said, “Oh, don’t worry about it. That was a long time ago. Besides, I know that you both only had the best of my intentions in mind when you worried for me. I also know that I’d gotten a bit...possessive and territorial about Raven. I think that mostly came from the fact that I knew that she never really had anyone for so long that she needed someone to fully believe in her and the goodness that rested in her heart. I just kind of adopted myself as her champion... I guess.”

Running a hand through Jacen’s hair, Leia said, “That’s what you do with the people you love, sweetie.”

Groaning, Han stood up and placed his hands on either side of his back. He said, “Well, although we don’t have the primping problems that the ladies do, we should get on over to the Capital and get ready for the event. We males need to be there to greet the guests.”

“Right, Dad,” Jacen said. Suddenly his heart flipped again, realizing his wedding loomed in just a few hours.

Giving her son a hug, Leia felt a tear cascade down her cheek. She said, “I’m so proud of you, Jacen.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Jacen said, swallowing a rising lump in his throat. He glanced towards the door as a huge mass blocked the light from the hallway.

Anakin ducked his head and wandered into the room and groaned, “Oh man, is this a wedding or a funeral?”

Rolling his eyes, Jacen pointed at a stack of newspads and with the assistance of the Force threw them at his brother. Anakin bounded out the door just in time to miss being hit by the projectiles. Following his laughter, Leia and Han left the room so Jacen could change in private before heading to the Capital Building. Calling all the newspads up in his hand, Jacen noted with amusement the story on the top newspaper highlighted the schedule for his wedding. Having not read the article previously, he skimmed the story and felt his heart seize in his chest as he read, *Theedian officials believe that there will be close to two hundred thousand well wishers who will show up from around the planet and the galaxy to offer goodwill towards Naboo’s newest and brightest heroes.*

Heart again palpitating in his chest, Jacen unconsciously let the newspads clatter to the floor and headed to his closet. Extracting his suit, he forced himself to get dressed and only prayed that the day would go by smoothly. He thought, *Otherwise, we will be the laughing stocks of the Galaxy.*

Chapter 50

“You look stunning,” Chariss said, clasping her hands tightly together as she drank in the sight of her

daughter.

Turning in front of a full length mirrored wall, Raven stared in disbelief at her reflection. After enduring two excruciatingly long hours with the hairdresser and makeup stylists, Raven finally put on her dress. In silk of the snowiest, purest white, her dress gleamed as brightly as her hair. The shoulder straps, two inches wide tapered and met in a V between her cleavage. Her eyes fell upon the tip of her chest scar and smiled, not minding that it could be seen. The seamless dress hugged her curvaceous body and fell into a long, flowing skirt that trailed three feet behind the back of her legs. The reverse of the dress fastened high on her back and laced together. The silk was completely unadorned except for a small floral embellishment that rested at the neckline's V.

Raven resisted the urge to muss with her perfectly spiraled curls that cascaded from the top of her head and fell in flowing ringlets down her back. Encircling the top of her head, weaving under her mass of curls rested a small, white, floral crown. Because of her heavy hair, she opted to not wear a veil. Raven's eyes studied her reflection from her head to toe appraisingly. She sucked in her stomach to flatten it and turned her head slightly to the right.

"Does this look like a nightdress?" Raven asked, suddenly worried.

From across the room, Tanella laughed, "That's one expensive nightdress if that's what you think of it!"

Raven smirked. Chariss shot her eldest daughter a disapproving frown and smoothed a couple of folds out of the back of Raven's dress. She said, "I think it's beautiful. The complete lack of ornamentation on it just highlights your natural beauty. I think Jacen won't be able to keep his eyes off of you."

Adjusting her bosom, Raven wiggled her eyebrows and said, "Well that is the point, is it not?"

Chariss laughed and said, "You silly girl."

Smile fading, Raven turned to her mother and grasped her hands tightly. Worry etching on her face, Raven stepped off of her pedestal and stood eye to eye with her mother. She asked, "Are you going to be alright with this?"

Wrinkling her brows together, Chariss asked, "Why would you ask that, honey? You know how happy I am for you..."

"Yes, I know. But.. well...it's just..." Raven thought hard, not wanting to break her earlier confidence with her sister concerning her mother's once fragile mental state. "I just came back into your life and now I'll be leaving, again. When I return from my Honeymoon, I'm headed right back to Yavin 4 and will be living there for I don't know how long. I won't get to see you very often."

Feeling tears swelling in her eyes, Chariss smiled at her daughter and said, "Oh, my dear girl. You are so sweet to worry about me. Don't you know that it's every mother's dream that their children will find happiness in their own lives? It is the job of the children to leave their parent's nest once they are full grown." Hearing, Tanella utter a grunt across the room, Chariss added, "But of course if they stay behind we are pleased as well." Turning back to her youngest daughter, Chariss continued, "You have always been a special girl, Raven. I couldn't be happier for you today. You've been through so much hardship in your life, you deserve your life from this point on to be filled with nothing but great joy."

Glancing down at her hands, Raven said, “Well I don’t know about that. I think there are plenty of people out there who deserve happy lives, who will probably never be able to rise above their harsh situations.”

Taking Raven’s hands in her own, Chariss said, “Never for one moment should you believe that you do not deserve happiness. You endured so much...sadness and pain in your youth, you deserve to no longer have to worry. I think you’ve earned that right, my dear daughter.”

Offering a small smile, Raven said, “I missed you growing up. Grandmother filled my head with all of these nonsense stories about you and father abandoning me... but I think deep down I knew she was lying. I used to lay in my bed when I was young and try to talk to you. I think rationally I knew you all would never just abandon me, yet as the years rolled by and you never seemed to show up, I guess I just accepted what my grandmother told me... I don’t know how I could’ve ever believed her. You know, I don’t have a lot of memories of you from when I was young, but the few I do remember, are of you holding me tightly and singing softly to me. I should’ve known that you never abandoned me.”

“How were you to know? You were powerless to do anything against your grandmother. I’m proud of you for coming as far as you have in your life. Not many people could have endured the abuse you did when you were young, and still manage to come out of their pasts as a healed and whole person,” Chariss replied. Gently adjusting a few of her daughter’s curls, she smiled broadly at her youngest child. “You are truly remarkable. I am so grateful that you found Jacen and that he has always been able to see the wonderful, amazing woman inside of you.”

Raven’s eyes scanned the floor, and said, “He doesn’t judge me for my past... he never has. You know, I wounded his sister and he turned right around and started to try to figure out how my mind ticked and wanted to get to know me. He had no reason whatsoever to be interested in me beyond being just an aggressor, and yet he bothered to try to get to know me. Nobody had ever done that in my whole life... ever! Nobody saw me as anything other than a burden or someone to be feared. Jacen didn’t see me in either way. He’s such an amazing man. I’m so grateful to have found him, and so... amazed that someone as wonderful as he is would actually want to marry and spend the rest of his life...with me.”

Placing a hand on Raven’s cheek, Chariss smiled, “You deserve his love... I fact I think that you two were possibly destined to find each other...never doubt that he loves you, never stop believing in how you both feel for each other. Marriage is a two way street. He may love you more than life itself, but if you start doubting his love, or if you start to believe that you do not truly deserve him- eventually the walls of trust you two worked very hard to construct will start to tumble. I know that you haven’t had much of a chance in your life to see how normal, well adjusted live, but something tells me that you will not let anything come between the two of you. You need to know that the only way to keep your relationship alive and healthy is to keep your lines of communication open. And you have to keep them open every single day. The moment you stop telling Jacen how you’re feeling, or once you start assuming he knows what you are feeling, is also when things can start going wrong. Men aren’t mind readers. Even with Jedi instincts, I doubt Jacen knows what is going on in your head. If something is bothering you, or worrying you, you need to face the situation head on.”

“Have you and Dad ever had a problem like that?” Raven asked.

“Actually yes... all couples go through that. After the first time or so it happens, you learn to prevent the pain the next time around. It’s a lot less painful to say things and talk about things that you may feel

Jacen will get upset about when they happen, as opposed to letting too much time to pass,” Chariss explained.

“So Jacen and I are doomed to having problems is what you are saying?” Raven asked, eyes open wide with worry.

Chariss chuckled, “Well that’s always bound to happen, honey. When you’ve been with a single person for a long time, you’ll eventually hit hurdles that the both of you will have to work together to climb over. But the more times you argue and resolve your problems, the stronger your marriage becomes. Let me tell you this also, don’t be afraid to argue. If you fully believe in something you need to let Jacen know this. You’re not going to do yourself or your marriage any good by just caving into everything Jacen asks for just because you’re worried about upsetting him. The more times you simply give into things, the more resentful you will feel over time. This will fester and you will become angry towards Jacen.”

“But in that case, I should actually be angry at myself for not speaking up... not at Jacen,” Raven replied.

A sly grin formed on Chariss’ lips. She nodded her head, “You are correct, dear. Of course it’s simple to be objective about that right now, it’s a lot harder when it’s become a reality in life.”

Sighing, Raven collapsed into a chair and kneaded her forehead with her fingers. She said, “This is going to be a lot harder than I thought, isn’t it?”

Squatting in front of her daughter, Chariss gently stroked her hand and said, “It could be. But I’m really not too worried. You and Jacen love each other deeply... I’d say as deeply as your father and I do, or Marxx and Jaina. I just know the two of you have what it takes to make your marriage stay strong and last for your lifetimes. I have complete faith in you, honey.”

Fighting back a tear, Raven threw herself around her mother’s shoulders and hugged her tightly, “I love you, Mom. Thank you.”

“I love you too, baby,” Chariss said.

Krishta’s high voice echoed across the room as she stood, palms flat against glass staring out the window, she asked, “Mommy, who’re all those people down there?”

Tanella, dressed in her light blue, long silk maid of honor dress walked over to her daughter and craned her neck to peer out the window. She whispered, “Oh bless the Force.”

“What?” Raven asked. Tanella’s eyes grew large as she stared at her sister. “What do you see?” Launching to her feet, Raven picked up the edges of her dress and clicked across the floor wafting her fresh, floral perfume throughout the room. She stared out the window that overlooked the capital building’s courtyard. The yard was corded off into two large sections with a long opening in the middle. Thousands of people stood smashed together in the right and left observation areas. Raven’s legs began to quake. Feeling sweat threatening to appear on her brow, she glanced at her mother, “What’s going on, Mom?”

Chariss licked her lips and said, “Apparently many people on this planet wanted to wish you and Jacen

good will on your wedding day.”

“You knew about this?” Raven asked, scandalized.

“Well I just read about it this morning...” Chariss lurched forward as Raven’s knees buckled out from under her body. Grabbing her daughter before she fell backwards, Chariss led Raven to a chaise and sat her down. Tanella picked up a large box top and began fanning her sister.

The door opened and Jaina, wearing her pale blue bridesmaid dress entered the room. Her eyes scanned the room and she raced towards the fallen bride. She asked as she skidded to a stop next to the group, “What happened?”

“She just saw the crowd outside,” Tanella said as she watched her sister’s skin begin to pink up again.

Rolling her eyes, Jaina sat next to Raven and said, “Oh come on, it’s not like they’ll all be inside the hall. They’re outside. Queen Cerullia has several large screens outside so they can view the event, but with all the soundproofing in the building’s structure you won’t hear any of them. It’s like they won’t even be there at all. Stop your worrying, Raven.”

Woozy, Raven sat up and scowled at her sister-in-law. She said, “How nice of you to bother to mention this to me, sister.”

Giggling, Jaina said, “Well maybe I should’ve... this would have been highly entertaining watching you passing out all day.” Throwing up her hands to fend off a half-hearted slap from Raven, Jaina laughed louder. Sobering up she asked, “You feeling alright? There’s someone outside who wants to see you.”

“Who? Not Jacen, right??? He can’t see me!” Raven asked bolting upright in her seat.

Howling, Jaina said, “Will you relax! Sheesh. Come on in!”

The door opened and Rowlon, wearing his black tux, with matching green mint shirt to match Chariss’ dress peeked into room. Grinning, the bald man said, “I feel like I’m traversing behind enemy lines.”

Raven giggled as he came over to his daughter. Jaina hopped off the chaise to give Rowlon room to sit next to the bride. Wrapping his arm protectively around Raven, he asked, “So how are you doing, sweetie?”

“I’m nervous. Did you see all those people out there?” Raven asked, leaning into her father’s soft stomach.

“Yes, I did. They’re all here to see my baby girl get married to her handsome Jedi and to wish her well. I think it’s wonderful. Why’re you so worried about that?” Rowlon asked.

“Well, they’ll all be watching me,” Raven replied, feebly.

“Ahh... but from afar, honey. They won’t be in the building. Besides, once you walk down that aisle, I guarantee you, you’ll forget about every person in that room, except for your groom. Those people will all fade into the background, like petals on the wind. You’ll even forget your old man is out there,”

Rowlon said, grinning affectionately.

Raven wrapped her arms tightly around her father, she inhaled his soothing, musky aftershave and let her face rub against the bristled softness of his cotton and wool blend jacket and said, “No, Dad. I’ll not forget you’re there.”

Chuckling Rowlon said, “Well, don’t worry, I won’t hold you to that promise. Anyway, I have something for you.”

Sitting up, Raven smoothed out the folds in her silk dress and stared quizzically at her father. From out of his right breast pocket, Rowlon brought out a long slim box and handed it to his daughter. With shaking hands, Raven snapped the box open and stared at the item inside with furrowed brows.

“It is the same stone, my dear,” Rowlon replied.

Gently, Raven’s finger touched the large, pale, blue topaz that hung at the end of a white gold chain. She asked, “How did you get it?”

Seeing his daughter appeared to have no interest in removing the necklace from the box, Rowlon gently took it out and unclasped the chain. Chariss lifted Raven’s hair and Rowlon looped the necklace around her neck and locked it shut. Raven’s eyes never left the stone. Rowlon said, “I hired a couple of salvage droids to go to the scene and dig through the rubble on Nephron to find your old lightsaber a while back. I was hoping it would still be in tact, but I’m afraid your casing was smashed nearly beyond recognition. The stone, amazingly remained in tact though. That topaz was buried under thousands of pounds of rubble, and it didn’t even develop a hairline crack... Pretty amazing, huh?”

Raven’s heart pounded as her lips curled into a broad smile. Simply, she said, “Yes... amazing. Thank you, Daddy.” She then flung her arms around her happy father. As the weight of the cool stone rested on her chest, Raven’s heart soared triumphantly. Ever since leaving Nephron, she’d felt very bad about losing Jacen’s gem. And although she constructed another lightsaber while on Yavin 4, it didn’t seem to garnish the same sentimental value that her previous lightsaber had held. By receiving the jewel back on her wedding day, Raven’s worries about the crowds outside melted away, for she remembered the reason for this day, and that was her love of Jacen. As solid, and indestructible as the topaz itself, Raven felt a wave of warm pride wrap itself tightly around her soul. She realized all of the people outside came, maybe initially to pay respects to herself, but in the end would witness the absolute power of Raven and Jacen’s truest love. She determined with as much sadness, and pain that still permeated into the lives of millions of beings everyday, if she could bring a little wistful joy into their bleak days she had no reason to be resentful towards the well wishers.

A commlink on Jaina’s hip chimed and she spoke into it quietly. She then glanced over at Rowlon and Raven and said, “The Queen is ready whenever you are.”

“Well? Ready to face the music, darling?” Rowlon asked.

Smiling, Raven said, “Absolutely. I’m ready.”

Jaina talked into her commlink and the group gathered at the door to head towards the main ceremonial hall. Kristhta, now six and half and familiar with her duties, stood patiently at the door as her mother and Jaina gathered their bouquets and then exited the room, with Chariss giving Raven a final

reassuring squeeze before leaving the room.

Smoothing her dress, Raven twirled before her father and asked, “Am I mussed up anywhere?”

Glowing with pride, Rowlon said, “No, sweetheart. You look absolutely perfect. My little girl is a woman. How’d that happen so quickly?”

Hearing the obvious regret and pain in her father’s emotion filled voice, Raven said, “I may be a woman, but I’ll always be your baby girl, Daddy.”

Gasping, Rowlon thrust his palm up to his eyes and brushed away a couple of tears. He offered his right elbow to his daughter who clung to it tightly. He said, “You know, you make me proud, don’t you?”

Chin quivering, Raven said, “Thank you, Daddy. I certainly try.”

Fearing she might be on the verge of crying and destroying her makeup, Rowlon smiled brightly and said, “Well there’s never been a more deserving man than Jacen. Let’s get you to him.”

“I love you, Daddy,” Raven said, as they moved towards the door.

“I know you do, sweetie. I love you, too,” Rowlon replied. Throwing his shoulders back high, Rowlon lead his daughter out of the waiting room towards her groom and to deliver her into the waiting, and open arms of the Galaxy.

Chapter 51

“Relax, will you?” Anakin said to his pacing older brother. “You’re gonna walk a path right through the floor.”

Not paying any attention to any of the guests, being either alien, human, or droid, who filled the grand ceremonial hall, Jacen nervously twitched and walked in circles in front of the alter. Exasperated, Jacen said, “I just know something bad’s going to happen.”

“Right, something bad will happen, like you passing out flat on your face if you don’t chill out,” Anakin replied, smoothing out the wrinkles in his Jedi robe. With all three men in the main party as Jedi, Jacen had decided they should all wear their robes.

Jacen’s brows peaked, and he tugged on his right sleeve collar, gulping he said, “Blast it, you’ve got a point there.” Staring at his brother, Jacen wondered who turned up the heat in the room. He then questioned his own judgment for deciding to wear their dark robes that just absorbed the heat from the lights in the hall. A flash of a furry paw in the crowd caught Jacen’s eye and he returned a wave to Lowbacca. Trying to distract himself from his immediate misery, Jacen said, “You know what? I know what the problem will be- you’re so blasted tall nobody’ll be able to see me up here.”

Slapping Jacen hard on the shoulder, Anakin smirked and rolled his eyes, “Yeah, sure. That’s it *I’m* going to ruin your wedding.”

Returning to pacing, Jacen missed Anakin's sarcastic come-back. Anakin turned and signaled his father from the far end of the room. Han left the side of some of Leia's Naberric cousins to approach the alter.

"What's up, Anakin?" Han asked.

Jutting his thumb at the jittery groom, Anakin nodded his head in his brother's direction. He whispered, "He's driving me nuts. Is there anything you can do for him?"

"Well I suppose I could roust up a couple shots of Corellian brandy for him to throw back, that should calm his nerves," Han replied, clapping his hands on the pocket of his black dresscoat. "Darn, don't have a flask on me." Winking, and slapping a hand on Anakin's arm, Han approached his oldest son.

Anakin walked away from the alter to assist Marxx with seating guests and stopped half way down the row to lean in to talk to Tenel Ka. Wearing a long, formfitting, lilac dress, the Hapan Princess appeared to belong in the royal palace. He grinned and whispered to her, "He's as nervous as a Hutt at a gambler's anonymous meeting."

"Poor, Jacen. What is he so worried about?" Tenel Ka asked, taking Anakin's hand.

Sliding in beside his lady-love, he gently ran a finger down her muscular arm, sending delightful quivers through Tenel Ka's body. Flashing smoldering blue eyes in the flushed Princesses direction, he said, "He thinks something bad's gonna happen."

"Did he receive a premonition from the Force?" Tenel Ka asked, eyes full of worry.

Grinning with a lopsided smile, Anakin replied, "No, just nerves."

Anakin leaned forward, covered the right side of Tenel Ka's cheek and lightly brushed Tenel Ka's lips with his own, savoring their silky, warmth. Tenel Ka returned his kiss with equal affection. Anakin frowned as someone loudly cleared his throat nearby. Breaking from Tenel Ka, Anakin turned his gaze towards Marxx who rocked lightly on his feet, grinning broadly. The youngest Solo turned in his seat and stood up, gazing at the older woman who nervously clung to Marxx's arm. She looked remarkably like Marxx and Raven's mother, Chariss.

"Anakin, I'd like you to meet someone special. This is my cousin Analise who lives on Bimmisaari... She's related to my grandmother," Marxx replied, beaming. "Analise, this is my brother-in-law Anakin Solo and that is Princess Tenel Ka of Hapes."

Tenel Ka waved.

"That explains the resemblance to Chariss! Nice to meet you, M'lady," Anakin said, bowing slightly.

"Hello, Anakin. Nice to meet you," Analise replied, blushing at the attention of the handsome young man.

"I see my Aunt Julillia and her husband Marckos up here whom I want to sit Analise next to – if you'll excuse us," Marxx replied and steered the nervous woman away from Anakin.

Bending over Tenel Ka, Anakin said, "I have to get to work."

"Go on, do not let me stop you," Tenel Ka replied, smiling. Giving her another quick kiss on the cheek, Anakin thrust himself out into the aisle towards guests needing to be seated.

Tenel Ka turned her stormy eyes around the grand, ceremonial hall. The round room held two rows of curved wooden benches with a singular, wide aisle dividing the seats that led towards the rounded, multileveled stage that was now covered in pillars of fragrant, white flowers. Four towering bronze statues flanked the four corners of the stage, each representing one of the main virtues of Naboo, beauty, art, love, and truth. Her eyes soared up to the cathedral ceilings that peaked into a dome of clear glass windows that brightened the room with the light azure, late morning Nubian sky. Her eyes traveled towards the front of the stage where she watched Han talking to his son. She smiled at her nervous friend, closed her eyes and read through her program, again.

"Are you alright, Jace? You look like you just swallowed a sour gundark egg," Han asked, placing a reassuring hand on Jacen's right shoulder.

"Sure, Dad. I'm fine... why shouldn't I be?" Jacen asked, running his fingers through his hair. Eyes streaked with red, Jacen pointed towards the door and said, "Tell me you didn't see all those people out there!"

Frowning, Han said, "Yeah, I saw 'em. What're you so worried about? They're outside, it's not like they're all gonna cram into here to watch the service." Han's eyes widened as he watched his son's vision glaze over. Reaching forward, Han steadied his son as Jacen began to wobble on his feet and slipped out of consciousness. Worried, Han threw his eyes around the room and met Leia's. Her smile froze on her face as she raced to assist her husband. Together they helped walk Jacen out of the main room into a side preparation chamber. Han deposited Jacen onto a chaise as Leia fanned him with her wedding program.

"Jacen, are you alright? Come on, hon," Leia asked, lightly slapping his left cheek. Staring at Han questioning, she asked, "What's the matter with him?"

"The crowd outside, apparently," Han replied, rolling his eyes.

"Well it's not like we can ask them to leave. They wouldn't go even if we asked them to," Leia replied.

"I know that," Han said, pointing at Jacen. "I think he knows that too!"

Jacen's eyes fluttered open and his body jerked as he absorbed his new surroundings. He squeaked, "What happened?"

"You passed out, son," Han replied, flashing a lopsided smile.

Jacen leaned forward and dropped his head between his legs and moaned. He said, "Great. Some Jedi Master I am, huh? Passing out's such an attractive quality in a man," Bolting upright in the chaise, he stared at his parents. He whined, "I'm never gonna get through this."

Leia's face turned from worried to hard. She said, "Of course you are going to get through this. You

want to get married, don't you?"

"Yes," Jacen squeaked in a small voice, as he stared uncertainly at his mother's stern expression.

"You want this day to go smoothly for Raven, correct?"

"Yes," Jacen replied, with more confidence.

Han butted in, "Think about it, Jace. If you're this nervous about all those people out there- how do you think Raven's doing? I can bet you she's a nervous wreck. She hates crowds. You need to be the strong one here. You understand?"

Smiling, Leia winked at Han. She said, "Your father is absolutely right, honey. You need to get a grip of yourself, and just relax. When your bride enters this room, you'll forget all of those other people out there. Remember this day isn't about all those well wishers outside, it's about you and Raven. Can you just focus on that?"

Closing his eyes, Jacen took a large, deep, cleansing breath in and then slowly let it out. Opening his eyes, he gazed at his parents and smiled. He said, "Thanks you, guys. Can you give me a few minutes alone to collect my thoughts?"

Uncertain, Han asked, "You sure you're gonna be alright, champ?"

"Yeah, Dad, I'll be fine," Jacen replied. He hugged each of his parents and watched them leave the room together and close the door. Jacen placed his palms on the soft, velvety fabric on the chaise and gently stroked the luxuriously, bristled, purple material. He dug his fingers into the seats grooved curves and released the fabric. As his muscles relaxed, he felt a wave of nervousness seep out of his veins. Closing his eyes, Jacen concentrated on his breathing and let images of Raven jump into his mind. In his mind's eye, he watched her racing around their meadow on the day he proposed. Cheeks flushed and deep with color, his beloved had never looked more radiant, alive, and beautiful. His heart pounded in his chest as he could almost smell phantom traces of her spicy scent and his ears rang with the lilt of her giggling. He realized that all of the people outside the Palace didn't matter- all that mattered was Raven. His mind lingered to those frantic moments that he raced towards her limp form, lying in the center of the volcano on Nephron. His heart swelled as he relived the sheer joy of when she opened her eyes, again. Whole, pure, and restored, Raven had been returned from the Force. She was his and he would never let her out of his sight.

He reckoned that Raven would most likely be even more nervous than himself. Knowing how she seriously despised the adoration and celebrity level that the Galaxy has bestowed upon her, he figured she would probably be in really bad shape over all of the people outside massing to watch their wedding.

Leaping to his feet, Jacen walked into the fresher and scrubbed his face clean with water. Raking his fingers through his hair, the sandy locks pricked out in all directions. Scanning the room, he found a brush and calmed his hair. Straightening his suit jacket, Jacen scrutinized his reflection. Although his eyes still looked a bit red, they didn't appear too noticeably out of sorts. Taking a deep, calming breath, Jacen exited the fresher and stopped before the door that lead out into the ceremonial hall.

Again, Raven's face flooded into his thoughts and caused Jacen to smile. He thought, *Today, I'm going*

to get married to the woman I love. Nothing, and nobody is going to prevent this day from coming off perfectly... especially me. Raven, baby... I'm ready for you, whenever you are.. and I promise you, I won't let you down...

Throwing open the doors, Jacen walked back out in front of the stage and his eyes swept over the packed pews of the room, brimming with smiling faces. Anakin and Marxx stood at the front and both turned when Jacen entered the room.

“You alright?” Anakin asked at Jacen’s left side.

Nodding, Jacen said, “Never been better.”

At Anakin’s side, Marxx peered down the hallway and saw Han signaling to the boys. He peeked around Anakin at the groom and said, “Well it’s a good thing, pal. Because it looks like my sister’s ready.”

Anakin bore his blue eyes into his brother’s and asked, “Are you sure you’re alright?”

Flashing their family smile, Jacen said, “Let’s get it started.”

Both Anakin and Marxx headed down the aisle, Jedi robes flowing behind their tall forms. From a towering organ with pipes that traveled the entire length of the sixty-foot walls at the center of the room, music began to play. Everyone in the pews craned their necks as a door to the far right of the stage opened and six handmaidens, dressed in purple lined up holding up fronds covered in white flower petals, created an archway for the Queen to enter the room. Queen Cerullia, dressed in a cornflower blue, ornate gown, hair coiffed in a high circular pattern, walked through the tunnel and stood off to the right of the stage. The Nubian Holy Man followed in the Queen’s wake.

All eyes then turned towards the rear of the magnificent room, as Han lead Leia and Chariss down the aisle, one on each arm. Grinning roguishly, Han gave Chariss’s arm a bit of a reassuring squeeze. Chariss smiled and whispered, “I’m alright, Han.”

“Good. Let’s just hope the groom is as well,” Han replied, before he and Leia took their seats in the front right pew and Chariss sat at the left.

Next all eyes turned down the aisle as a small female voice called out, “Come on, Ben!” Rolling her eyes, Krishta lightly tugged on Ben’s hand and positioned the confused, little, red-headed boy towards the aisle. Collectively the crowd let out a series of sighs as the titian-haired, three and a half year old boy, wearing a proper, diminutive suit began to run nervously down the aisle, carrying a pillow. Krishta said rather loudly, “Don’t run, Ben!”

The boy stopped running and looked frantically around the room. Weaving her way out of her aisle, Mara crept around the edge of the stage and appeared at the end of the pews. Squatting and extending her arms, Mara smiled at her son. Seeing his beaming mother, Ben shot off down the aisle at a full tilt run and leapt into her arms. The crowd laughed delightfully. Jacen chuckled softly as Mara stood up and held her wriggling son in her arms, waiting for Anakin to show up so Ben could hand him the pillow.

Erasing the frown of annoyance off of her face, Krishta threw back her curled, brown hair and began

walking down the aisle, dropping flower petals. Her eyes flittered at the smiling faces in the pews and she smiled sweetly back to each person. Reaching the center of the aisle, she threw up her hand and showered herself with the remaining petals, spun once and then stood off to the left of the stage.

Grinning, Jacen found himself thinking, *Bless the Force, she loves dramatics, doesn't she? She's gonna be a handful at the academy.* The dark haired girl smiled at Jacen, grabbed the sides of her pale blue dress and gave him a curtsy. He returned her grin and gave her a sly thumbs up.

Then the best man and the maid of honor turned the corner. Other than towering over the pews, Anakin for once didn't appear immense under the high domed ceiling. On his arm he lightly held Tanella's wrist. Flashing Raven's sister a large grin, Anakin lead her down the aisle. When they reached the front, Anakin bowed to Tanella and turned towards Mara. Ben shot out his arms and shouted, "This is for you, Anakin!"

The wedding guests laughed as Anakin thanked his cousin, tousled his hair, and took the pillow. Mara, still holding Ben walked them around the pew and sat next to Luke who covered his mouth to smother his amused chuckles.

Next, Jaina and Marxx strode down the aisle together. They both affixed their gazes on Jacen and relaxed when they sensed he seemed calm and content. Taking their places on the stage, the music pitched into a loud crescendo. Jacen took three steps forward to reach the center of the head of the aisle and turned to wait for the entrance of his bride. Everyone in the pews got to their feet as Raven and Rowlon rounded the corner.

The sea of people in the room melted into the woodwork of the room as Jacen's tunnel vision only focused upon Raven. Her formfitting, elegant dress and perfectly cascading hair magnified her natural beauty. Excitement etched her face as she beamed at her groom from the end of the aisle. Her cheeks brightened as she flushed. Jacen beamed as he sensed waves of elated calm emanating from Raven. His heart pounded in pride at her for keeping her composure.

Rowlon lead his girl down the aisle and Raven watched Jacen's smile broaden as she came closer to her beloved. Her heart pounded in rhythmic joy from just the sight of Jacen's handsome face. Dressed in a dark suit, tucked neatly under his black Jedi robe, Jacen had never looked more dashing. He appeared calm and collected. The wide, encouraging smile that crested his lips enchanted her as his smile had done from the first time they met. Her heart swelled with love.

Suddenly, Raven stood next to Jacen. Clutching her father's arm, she watched as the Holy Man and the Queen emerged from the side to stand before the couple.

The Holy Man, dressed in brown robes and a bright red sash, asked, "Who gives this woman to this man?"

"I do, her father," Rowlon replied proudly. Gently unclasping Raven's hand from his arm, Rowlon kissed her white knuckles.

Raven threw her arm around Rowlon's neck and into his ear whispered, "I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too, my darling," Rowlon replied. As she released her grasp, Rowlon felt a couple of tears trail down his face as a large smile plastered across his face. Moving aside, he slid into the pew next to

Chariss and offered his sobbing wife an arm to lean against.

“Please be seated,” the Holy Man asked the wedding guests. Collectively they sat down. Suddenly, Raven felt very exposed at the front of the alter. Jacen watched as her bouquet slightly quivered under her white knuckled grasp. Gingerly, he reached across their distance and placed his warm hands on top of her own and entwined their fingers. Raven’s smile widened as she sensed Jacen’s calm and strength radiating through the Force. Lightly closing her eyes, she inhaled a deep breath and relaxed.

Queen Cerullia clasped her hands together and buried them under her large sleeves. She stated, “On the planet of Naboo, it is the right of the woman to chose her mate, her husband. For it is from woman where life springs eternal and the constant rebirth of our people emerges. The woman is not only the bearer of children, but she embodies the pillars of Naboo, beauty, truth, art, and love. Women are the more emotional of the sexes and more likely to fully understand the principles that Naboo holds higher than all else. When a woman agrees to enter into marriage, she is agreeing to teach her knowledge of these principles, not just upon her children, but to her husband as well. For it is in the ability to see beauty in the simplest of things, a flower, or a blue sky, that makes each day pregnant with joy and glory. For centuries the people of Naboo have elected female representatives to their government, for women understand the power of truth. Lies and deceit harm people, and they bring only ugliness and chaos into an environment. When untruths take hold in a relationship, the foundation will begin to crumble. It is up to the woman in a marriage to always hold this principle high and to never allow any lie- regardless of how small or insignificant it might seem- to enter into her marriage- else she will invite the means for its destruction. Art...” A sly smile formed on the Queen’s lips as she spoke the word, she continued, “is the ability to take what you find is beautiful and recreate it for others to see and to experience. Not everyone is skilled with their hands and can create masterpieces out of stone, or paint, but creating art can come from the simplest means... creating a child, or making a balanced and splendid meal... or decorating a home warmly. Any of these things show not only to yourselves, but to others that you value and appreciate the aesthetic appearance of your surroundings and the things you wish to project to the world to see. It is the job of a woman to make sure everyday that those around her understand that even the simplest of things can contribute to helping to create a world filled with beauty.”

The Queen took a deep breath, and continued, “And finally, love. Love is one of those intangible emotions that can change and shape a Galaxy. In a place devoid of love...only sorrow, pain, and heartache can exist. Love makes everything bloom and flourish. In places where the soil is barren, love and attention to seeds, can make plants grow. And in a marriage, everyday if you make sure to feed your love, you will nourish it until it blooms and fills your hearts completely until you can never imagine or can’t even remember what life was like prior to joining into your holy union. Love shared equally in a marriage by the man and the woman makes for the strongest of unions. It is the job of the woman to make sure, everyday, that her marriage stays strong- that both man and woman share their duties equally, that they equally express their needs and wants. And that if some tragedy or sorrow should affect the couple, she is to constantly remind herself and her mate that they can face any conflict together with a united front. Raven Racees, do you accept these principles, and do you agree to uphold them to the fullest in your marriage to Jacen Solo?”

Raven’s eyes brimmed with tears after listening to all of the things the Queen listed out for her to think about. All of her life, she’d lived pretty much only thinking and taking care of herself, the prospect of taking care completely of another person excited her and filled her with immeasurable joy. Blinking aside her tears, she smiled brightly and said, “Yes, with all of my heart I will.”

“And to you, Jacen Solo... Do you agree to respect the needs and desires of Raven Racees, and to agree to never interfere with her desire to uphold these principles? Do you agree to contribute equally into your marriage and understand the pillars that you will need to participate within every single day in order to make your marriage successful?” the Queen asked Jacen.

Gulping, Jacen nodded his head and said, “I do.”

From the Queen’s right a handmaiden appeared and handed her a twined, golden rope. The Queen held the rope high and tugged hard on the sides. She said, “I hold this up for all here to bear witness. This rope has no beginning and no end. It is a continuous circle and loop. The only way to break this rope is to physically cut it by an outside third party.” Taking their cue, Raven handed her bouquet to Tanella and with the help of Jacen, the couple knelt, side by side upon a low bench. They laced each other’s hands together and the Queen twisted the rope in a figure eight and encircled it around their two sets of joined hands. She continued, “This infinite pattern in which this rope has been shaped represents the flow of human blood. As in our physiology the blood circles from the heart, through the veins throughout the body and back to the heart again in a continuous, strong current of strength and vitality. Jacen and Raven, your joined hands, held through this unbreakable rope signifies that from this day forward, neither of you are a singular person anymore. You are but one person, with one soul, one heart, one purpose. By joining hands under this rope, you both agree to never let anything sever your relationship. And that if any force comes along that threatens to interfere with your union, you will agree to battle against it together, as one united front. Do you both agree to this?”

In unison Raven and Jacen said, “We do.”

Nodding, Queen Cerullia stepped aside and the organ began to play. From the back of the ceremonial room on a high platform a choir of young children filled the room with their voices. They sang of the power of love in an ancient Nubian dialect. Although their words were not recognizable, the harmonious tenor in which they sang, lifted the hearts of all gathered in the room. The sun crossed over the noontime zenith and the windows above the domed ceiling flooded the room with brilliant rays of sunlight. Raven and Jacen, seated in the middle of the building became bathed in the light’s glory. All else in the room faded from their visions as they could only see each other.

Jacen stared at his beloved, glowing in the splendor of the sun and he felt all breath escape his body. She glowed like a heavenly angel. As the children’s voices soared and climbed in harmony, his heart palpitated in the intoxicating nearness of his beloved and her bewitching, ethereal beauty.

Raven flashed Jacen a bright smile, sensing his sense of wonder at her appearance. She too found herself equally bewitched, as Jacen’s sandy hair glowed golden in the ray of the sun. His dark eyes penetrated through the bright light and met hers filled with absolute love and adoration. Raven forced herself to breathe and fight back tears of joy as Jacen mouthed the words, “I love you.”

As the last notes of the song ended, the sun passed overhead and the room darkened again. Jacen and Raven blinked a few times to see the Holy Man standing in the Queen’s vacated place. Holding the Holy Nubian Text in his hands, the Holy Man raised his hand and sprinkled dried herbs onto the rope that still encircled the couple’s wrists. Speaking in ancient Nubian, he blessed their agreed union, and the rope, and placed his hand upon the golden chain. He lifted it off of their wrists and handed it to one of the handmaidens who held open a carved wooden box lined with red velvet. The Holy Man kissed the rope and placed it inside of the box. The handmaiden closed the box and a flash of the Queen’s seal sparkled in the room. The Holy Man took the box and handed it to Tanella who in return handed it to

Jaina to protect and keep to return to the newlyweds.

The Priest then gestured for the couple to rise to their feet. Jacen surged upwards and offered Raven help so she wouldn't tangle herself in the folds of her dress.

The Holy Man said, "Jacen and Raven have written their own vows for each other... Jacen, you may begin."

Clearing his throat, Jacen met Raven's bright blue eyes and he cradled her small hands inside the palms of his own. Smiling, Jacen began, "We're always taught that love is the greatest emotion a human can experience. That it lifts our spirits and embodies all that we see and know is good and pure in the Galaxy. I never knew what love truly was until I met you, Raven. How is it that our heart knows what will best feed our lonely souls? The heart knows who will best nourish loneliness and banish it from our lives... When I first met you, I probably had no reason to think of you as anything other than a threat... but something in my heart yearned to you... it hungered to embrace your spirit. And I couldn't stop it's quest until it had successfully accomplished it's mission. You are everything I ever dreamed I could find in my beloved, you are sweet, gentle, naive, vivacious, shy, and rambunctious all wrapped up into one. You're fearless and unabashedly protective of everyone and everything that you love. Your love makes my heart beat stronger than it ever did on it's own. It is as if our two souls have infused and become one... without you... I would be... and was an incomplete man. I won't let anything, or anyone, EVER, separate us. You are my oxygen and the rhythm of the living Force. You are my soul. Before all who we love, I vow to spend every day of my life making the world you live in a better place. I vow to bring a smile to your face everyday... even if things seem impossibly bleak. I promise to NEVER let anything, or anyone, come between us whether that be famine or feast, sickness or health, plenty or nothing. I don't need anything in this Galaxy, except you. You make me a better man and I can only pray that I make you even half as happy as you make me everyday, my beautiful Raven."

Snatching her right hand from out of Jacen's, Raven covered her mouth to hide her trembling lip. Tears that threatened to fall earlier gently fell from her eyelashes. Averting her gaze upwards, Raven inhaled a deep breath to calm her crashing emotions. Staring back at Jacen she said, "And THIS is why the girl should be allowed to do this first!"

Jacen smiled brightly as the wedding guests chuckled.

Exhaling, Raven shot out her hand and clasped Jacen's hand tightly. Composure regained, she began, "I grew up in darkness. No light penetrated my soul for loneliness and despair banished goodness from my life. I was nothing but a mere shell of a person, void of love and light... All I could hold onto was a sliver of hope... hope that one day I would be rescued from my miserable existence and that someone, somewhere would show me that life is worth living... and could show me what it meant to love and be loved in return. My heart longed to be filled with light, with joy, with love. Empty for so long, it was like a dry sponge, yearning for water. Then you came along. You exasperated me to no end, you doggedly chased me and drenched me with your goodness, showering me in light. How could I not fall in love with you? For even my dreams, my subconscious led me to you. You, Jacen, are my everything. I only started to live when you came into my life. You taught me to love and that being happy was not a crime. Everyday that I am with you, I am a better person. I learn so much from you and feel that it will take a lifetime to fully understand what it means to be truly happy. Being with you, I know that I will never take joy for granted... for you engulf me in it. You make my heart sing as it has finally found home... with you. I vow to spend every day of my life making you happy and our lives together filled

with joy and goodness. I vow to never doubt our love and to always believe in the power of our union and I vow to banish darkness from our lives. If we do face trials, we will do so together, as one... and I can only pray and believe that my difficult past was meant to make me stronger and allow me the extra resolve to get us through anything that could threaten to tear us apart. I will never allow that to happen. I accept you freely, Jacen Solo. I will always love you whether you are sick or well or poor or wealthy. There will never be another to break us apart. You are my heart and I vow to never, ever, let you go... you're my angel."

Jacen placed a hand on the left side of Raven's face as he watched more tears threaten to fall down her cheek. His chest constricted heavily with emotion as his vision blurred from his own weeping eyes. *How did I ever get so lucky to find you?* Jacen thought as the Holy Man smiled watching over the couple.

Clearing his throat, the cleric said, "The rings, please."

Anakin removed Raven's ring from the ribbon and handed it to Jacen.

"The exchanging of rings is a ritual older than time itself. Much like the rope that bound your hands together in a continuous loop, the ring signifies that the unbreakable bond of marriage. By agreeing to exchange these rings and to wear them always, you are both agreeing to live your life- no longer as two separate people, but as one person, joined together in spirit. Jacen please place the ring on Raven's finger and repeat after me..." Raven extended her shaking hand towards Jacen and he gently slipped the cool, gold band around her finger. "I, Jacen Solo, take thee Raven Racees to be my wife..."

"I, Jacen Solo, take thee Raven Racees to be my wife..." Jacen repeated, sweat trickling down his brow.

"This ring signifies my boundless, unending love for you..."

Jacen grinned, "This ring signifies my boundless, unending love for you..."

"I promise to always be true to you, to respect you, and to make our marriage the number one priority in my life.. 'till death do us part," the Holy Man stated.

"I promise to always be true to you, to respect you, and to make our marriage the number one priority in my life... 'till death do us part," Jacen repeated, briefly choking on the last part of the sentence, knowing how they had once crossed that bridge. Bravely, he smiled at Raven.

"Now Raven," the Holy Man said. Anakin handed Raven the second ring. Flexing out his fingers, Jacen offered Raven his hand. She slid the gold band over his knuckle and into place. "Now Raven, repeat after me, I, Raven Racees, take thee Jacen Solo to be my husband..."

"I, Raven Racees, take thee Jacen Solo to be my husband..." Raven repeated, feeling a bit dizzy from the weight of the words.

"This ring signifies my boundless, unending love for you..."

Raven proudly said, "This ring signifies my boundless, unending love for you..."

“I promise to always be true to you, to respect you, and to make our marriage the number one priority in my life... ‘till death do us part,” the Holy Man stated.

“I promise to always be true to you, to respect you, and to make our marriage the number one priority in my life... ‘till death do us part,” Raven repeated triumphantly and glad she didn’t mess up on repeating any of the words.

The Holy Man beamed and said, “With these words declared your fates have been sealed. From this day no longer will you be but two but you will be one, united in love and marriage. All before here today are witness to this union. May you both have nothing but years of peace and joy and may you procreate profusely.” Raven and Jacen blushed deeply. “Before all here, I pronounce you husband and wife... you may...”

Not waiting for the Holy Man to complete his sentence, Jacen and Raven threw their arms around each other and kissed. Grinning, the Holy Man finished, “... kiss your bride... Everyone, please give a warm hand to Mr. and Mrs. Solo!”

The wedding guests shot to their feet and the organ began to pipe up with a loud, triumphant march. From overhead the windows opened and a cage, hidden on the stage released 2 snowy doves who flew up and out of the domed building towards the freedom of the blue sky. A rumbling thunder of loud cheers from outdoors could be heard through the open windows.

Any and all noise in the hall blurred as Raven’s mind only focused on her beloved’s soft and inviting lips. As they pulled apart, Jacen and Raven rested their foreheads together and collectively let out a deep and happy sigh of relief. Tanella thrust Raven’s bouquet into her open hand, and Jacen swooped down and lifted Raven lightly into his arms. Throwing back her head laughing, Raven wrapped her arms tightly around Jacen’s neck as he carried her down the aisle and out of the main room towards the outer hallway. When they reached the empty, marble hall, Jacen spun his bride in quick dizzying circles.

“Oh Force, not so fast Jacen, I’ve been so nervous, I might throw up!” Raven replied, through her delighted giggles.

Chuckling loudly, Jacen ceased spinning and sought his wife’s full lips again. Slowly she slithered out of his strong arms and pressed tightly against his body. When they parted, Jacen whispered in her ear, “I love you, Mrs. Raven Solo.”

Smiling luxuriously, Raven repeated the name, letting it roll on her tongue like honey, “Mrs. Raven Solo. It’s funny isn’t it?”

“What?” Jacen replied.

“Solo- I’ve been solo my whole life- and now that I’m forever connected to you, that is my last name. We should change it to Double,” Raven said, grinning.

Jacen burst out laughing, “Something tells me Dad would object to that, dear wife! Wife... I like the sound of that.”

“Me too,” Raven replied, giggling.

A light touch on Raven's back forced the couple to turn around. One of the Queen's handmaidens stood silently behind the happy couple. Blushing she averted her gaze and said, "I am sorry to disturb you, but the Queen would like it if the two of you, and your wedding party would meet her in the receiving bay downstairs."

Furrowing her brows, Raven asked, "For what?"

"That, you will have to wait and see, M'lady," the handmaiden replied, curtsied and headed towards the stairs to lead the way.

Peaking his eyebrows, Jacen said, "You know, we could just run away if you want."

Giggling, Raven said, "I'm too tired to run. As long as I have you at my side, she could throw us to the crowd outside and I wouldn't care."

"I'll be here, baby... always," Jacen said. Clasp hands, the newlyweds followed the handmaiden down the stairs. Jacen signaled for Anakin, Tanella, Marxx and Jaina to follow. The rest of the wedding guests followed in a long, contented line.

"What do you think Queen Cerullia has in store for us?" Jacen asked, his blushing bride.

Turning her eyes to meet Jacen's, Raven replied, "I have no idea, all I know is it can't possibly be any better than being your wife."

Grinning like a fool, Jacen replied, "You've got that right." Together they descended into a dark corridor, anxious about what lay ahead, but certain that whatever mysteries waited to be revealed they would face them happily, together.

Chapter 52

The blue and green planet of Hapes 5 spun on its axis. A large continent, located below the southern equator, covered with jungle oasis land, plunged into nightfall. In the far northwestern corner of the lush continent, a secluded vacation resort nestled in large, tropical nature preserve. Teeming with life, the canopy of ancient trees that homed thousands of indigenous lifeforms towered over rolling hills and looming, dormant volcanoes. The full moon radiated light over the tranquil, rhythmic water of a lake nestled in the middle of preserve. Night birds and creatures called to their mates and for sought out their dinners in the surrounding forests. In the middle of the resort land, in the middle of the lake, standing on stilts rested a cozy, secluded vacation hut bathed in the moonlight as the smell of salt, tropical wildflowers, and rich, fragrant soil hung in the cool, night air. Through an open window, the only sign of life in the hut was the soft glow from a fading fire. The light from the fire's embers illuminated the bedroom in a low, warm radiance. Piles of haphazardly strewn luggage, robes, and shoes lay forgotten around the room, as the hut's occupants lay nestled together in a large, soft bed under a pile of silky and luxurious fabrics.

Raven leaned on her elbow and gazed longingly at her spent and exhausted husband. A dreamy, contented smile plastered over Jacen's sleeping face, as he snored. Raven's lips curled into a grin as her

fingers lightly traced the path of the muscles in his right arm. Curling herself around Jacen's body, Raven smiled as Jacen wrapped his arm tightly around his wife in his sleep, crushing her against his body. She closed her eyes, inhaled Jacen's masculine and comforting scent, and enjoyed the protective weight of his arm around her bare back as the sounds from the forest filtered in through the windows. Raven smiled at the solitude of their location and suddenly felt very grateful to Tenel Ka for her generous gift at this exclusive oasis for their Honeymoon.

Too wired and elated to sleep, Raven's fingers danced across Jacen's chest as visions from earlier in their wedding day swirled in her mind:

From out of the darkened tunnel, Jacen and Raven saw a long line of immense, native falumpasets each fitted with ceremonial seats secured to the highest parts of their gray, leathery hided backs. Raven peaked an eyebrow as she saw the Queen sitting upon the back of the first falumpaset and nervously watched a court page who offered his hand to help her onto the back of one of the waiting creatures.

"Can we go on together?" Jacen asked the young man, detecting Raven's reluctance.

"Of course, there is room for you both," the boy replied.

"Want me to go first?" Jacen asked. "I'll help you up into my lap then."

"O..kay," Raven replied, suspiciously as she watched the page activated an elevating lift that carried Jacen to the top of the creature's back. He held out his arms to his bride as she nervously stepped onto the lift. When it reached the height of the creature's back she fell into Jacen's open arms. Snuggling tightly against him, her eyes widened as the beast let out a happy bellow. She shifted nervously in the seat as the beast wiggled, anxious to get moving.

Chuckling, Jacen said, "I think he likes you."

Craning her neck around the large, red fan that framed the back of their seat atop the creature she watched as Jaina and Marxx climbed onto another falumpaset together. Tanella waved Anakin aside and climbed on her creature alone w/ Krishta cradled on her lap. Anakin and Tenel Ka shared the ride on one of the beasts. Both sets of parents found their own creatures to climb. Luke, Mara, and Ben received a seat on the final beast and the rest of the wedding guests filled into open air speederbuses decorated brightly for the festive occasion.

Turning around, Raven peered up into Jacen's brandy-brown eyes, and asked, "Where do you think she's taking us?"

Shrugging, Jacen replied, "I don't know. All I know is she had our reception planned out as well as our service."

Raven stared at the large gates that slowly began to open. The crowd outside, grew eerily quiet. Heart constricting tightly in her chest, Raven grasped tightly onto Jacen's arm. Into her ear he whispered, "Everything will be alright, baby. I'm here, I won't let anyone harm you." Nuzzling her neck, Jacen inhaled her floral perfume and furrowed his brows. He stated, "You smell... different."

"I know- the makeup stylist told me that I should wear a scent I've never worn before on my wedding day. That way, whenever I wear it in the future, you'll always be reminded of our wedding day," Raven

replied, grateful to him for changing the subject to take her mind off of their falumpaset lumbering forward. “Why? Don’t you like it?”

Inhaling his chest deeply, Jacen burned the light scent into his memory as the crowd began to roar with life as Queen Cerullia sprang into view. Leaving a butterfly kiss on his wife’s ear, he said, “Umm.. I think it’s heavenly.”

Raven spun and captured Jacen’s lips in a deep kiss as their beast entered the sunlight. Confetti and streamers poured from out of the crowd and their cheers reached deafening levels. Ignoring the people, Jacen wrapped his arms tighter around his bride and kissed her harder, much to the added delight of the onlookers.

Pulling away from her groom, Raven’s ears began to pick out a singular word, chanted in a singsong unison throughout the crowd, “*Branwen! Branwen! Branwen!*”

Nuzzling her ear, Jacen said, “I like that name. I think we should name a daughter, Branwen.”

Choking on a laugh, Raven stared incredulously at her groom and said, “You’re joking, right?”

“Nope. Branwen and Kyp- I think those would great names for our kids,” Jacen replied, dreamily as he wrapped his arms tighter around Raven’s curvaceous form.

“Well... I agree with Kyp... wholeheartedly. But I don’t know if I want to name my daughter that name... I want her to be a unique person. Good thing we’ll have plenty of time to discuss and decide on a girls name. No hurries,” Raven stated.

“True. Course with our month-long honeymoon on Hapes 5, who knows...”

“Who knows what?” Raven squeaked. “You’re not planning on getting me barefoot and pregnant immediately, are you?”

Chuckling, Jacen said, “Well, maybe not *immediately*, but I don’t know about you but I’d love to have kids as soon as possible.”

Stroking Jacen’s forearm, Raven replied, “I’ll be ready whenever they come along. I just hope though that we can have some time together, alone, before kids take over our lives completely... I mean we’ll be surrounded by them everyday at the Academy. I think we’ll cherish our time alone.”

“I agree,” Jacen conceded.

Raven then concentrated on the faces passing by. Each one whether it be man, woman, child or alien, seemed to wish the newlyweds nothing but good cheer. Grinning, Raven waved at small children who sat perched on their father’s shoulders as the crowd continued it’s chanting of her mythical name. The Nubians warm welcome made her heart swell and her blood to race to her face. Although she didn’t understand why these people would possibly be interested in her wedding, she decided to no longer be angry with their enthusiasm. The wedding parade traveled the entire length of the courtyard under the bright Nubian sun, with the sky filled with colorful banners and confetti that prettily littered the falumpaset’s path. The air filled with the mingled scents of cooking meats and sweet flowers.

“I have a confession to make,” Jacen said, as he felt his wife relaxing in his arms, enjoying the ride.

“What?” Raven asked, frowning her brows.

Sighing deeply, Jacen wove his right hand fingers through Raven’s fingers, exploring the softness of her skin. He said, “I... uh... kinda passed out right before the service. The pressure of knowing all these people were out here finally got to me, I guess.”

“Really? I wouldn’t have guessed that. You were really calm in there, you did a great job of taking care of any anxiety you might have felt,” Raven said, amazed.

“Yeah, well. I finally realized you might be a bit overwhelmed and I pulled myself together,” Jacen replied, glad that he at least managed to appear calm during the service. “I knew I had to be strong for you.”

“I love you, Jacen. You’re so selfless,” Raven replied and lightly brushed his lips against her own. Biting her lower lip, Raven said, “Well... I have a confession too.”

“What’s that?” Jacen asked, wrapping his arm tighter around Raven’s waist.

“I passed out also... when I saw the crowd,” Raven said, blushing.

Jacen burst out laughing and hugged Raven and kissed her left cheek. Chuckling, he said, “Some Jedi Masters we are, huh?”

“I promise to never tell any of our students if you do too!” Raven said.

“Deal,” Jacen replied. Raven leaned back and snaked an arm through Jacen’s hair and kissed him lightly. The crowd roared with approval.

The deafening noise brought a rush of blood to both the bride and groom’s faces and they broke apart. Confused, Raven watched with interest as the Queen’s creature stopped in front of the newly finished Nubian Art Museum. Her eyes traveled to the front of the eight storied, domed, green marble building. Above the ornate entrance a sheet of bright red cloth shielded what was most likely the name of the museum. Jacen and Raven’s creature stopped behind the Queen’s and a lift rose for Raven to climb upon. She lightly stepped upon it and blew Jacen a kiss as it lowered her to the ground. A few moments later, Jacen joined his bride on the steps of the museum. The Queen refused to answer their questions until the rest of their wedding party successfully either got off of their falumpasets or out of their speederbuses.

When the entire wedding party stood expectantly at the entrance of the Museum, the Queen finally spoke to the hushed crowd, “Today we not only celebrate the wedding of one of Naboo’s most cherished citizen’s wedding, but we also are going to officially unveil and dedicate the new Art Museum. It will be open to the general public, tomorrow. Our Galaxy has experienced many years where profound changes have affected the lives of every citizen in the Republic. Recently a young woman willingly sacrificed her life in order for billions to continue to live free from the threat of tyranny. She not only saved the people she loved the most, but millions of people who may have lost their freedom had the New Republic fleet perished on that fateful day. It is because of your great sacrifice, Raven Solo, that everyone in this crowd is assembled today. The Force has already bestowed

upon you, and your loved ones, the greatest gift you could ever hope to receive in return for your selflessness... life. However, the people of Naboo wanted to find a fitting way to express our gratitude to you. A month before the events that we speak of occurred, a letter was received at the palace inquiring about possible work at the new art museum when it was completed.”

Raven felt her stomach churn and flop as she clutched tighter to Jacen’s arm. Jacen stared at his bride with confusion. The Queen accepted a holopad from one of her handmaidens and began to read,

To whom this may concern,

I know I have no right to ask this, for if anyone in this Galaxy doesn’t deserve special attention, it would be I. Feel free to throw this letter away if you feel me unworthy of my request, for I would understand completely.

My entire life I have loved art. Something as simple as a painting can evoke a torrent of emotions within the heart. The fact that artisans are talented enough to recreate what they see in real life, or how they interpret things in real life, fascinates me beyond measure. I spent every waking, free hour of my life devoting my time to study the history of art all over the Galaxy. Nubian art always appealed to me the most. The landscapes were truly magical. I couldn’t imagine what a world would look like with so much green in the landscapes, for my life was spent either on a desert planet or on board cold, stale, clinical spaceships. The trees intoxicated my senses. And although there are many other cultures across the Galaxy who produce fine artwork, the artists of Naboo truly shine above all else. Their loving attention to detail, and passion for realistic representation, moved me in ways no other artists in the Galaxy could ever achieve. I lived my life inside a mask that helped me to breathe, and simply by looking at the Nubian landscapes, even through a hazy face shield, I could almost feel the warmth of Nubian sun on my face and hear the rustling of the leaves of the trees.

The paintings of these Nubian artists brought the only ray of real joy to my sterile existence. So how did I repay these great artisans for the wonder and the inspiration to dream that they provided me over the years? I led a selective band of thieves into the vaults of your great city and stole your heritage. My heart ached with every action and I am deeply shamed of my crimes. What I wish more than anything, is that if I end my sentence for these crimes, is to return to Naboo and repay your people by working at the art museum that is under construction. I would understand if you would deny this to me, however, I do believe my knowledge would prove invaluable to the public.

“The person who wrote this letter proceeded to include a forty page, outlined history of the different styles and movements in Nubian art from over the past one thousand years. As her letter stated, the information proved invaluable into helping the curators at the museum to best arrange the artwork inside the building, in a way that best shows the progress and advancement of art through the ages of Naboo... We are very proud of the author of this letter and wanted her to know that we hold no ill grudges against her... momentary lapse of judgment... we also understand that she didn’t do this on her own. She is unable to accept a position at the Museum, for she has received the calling of a greater purpose, to act as a teacher of the young. I hope she knows that if the day ever arrives that she again would seek employment here... a position will be available to her. The author of this letter stands before you all now and it is to she that I dedicate this museum...”

With a pull of her hand, the Queen released a ribbon that secured the cloth above the grand, museum’s entrance. Slack-jawed and eyes popping, Raven watched as in gold letters the name *The Raven Solo Museum of Fine Nubian Art* was revealed before the public. The crowd roared with approval as Raven

slouched against Jacen, seeking support as her legs wobbled below her dress.

“How? Why? What?” Raven asked as the questions leaked from her mouth. Two handmaidens arrived at her side and took either of her hands and lead her over to stand beside the Queen for holoiimages and her comments.

Beaming proudly, Jacen clapped his hands in encouragement to his wife. Raven scanned the wedding party and met Marxx’s blue eyes. He grinned madly, shoved his pinky fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly. Rolling her eyes, she then scrutinized Jaina. Her sister-in-law smiled sweetly at the confused bride while she clapped. Throwing her hands on her hips, Raven asked, “You knew about this, didn’t you?”

Jaina just batted her eyes innocently and laughed.

Raven’s eyes grew wide as a microphone was placed in front of her mouth. Heart fluttering madly, she closed her eyes and tried not to think of the thousands of people cheering below the steps of the museum. As she opened her mouth, the crowd silenced. Startled, she began to speak, “I... I had no idea of this. I’m shocked beyond the ability to speak. Frankly, I don’t understand why the Queen has bestowed such an amazing honor on me... but I guess I’m not going to complain.” Holding her hands to her chest she said, “I love art. It speaks to a person in a way that nothing else can. If somehow having my name attached to this great museum can either one day inspire a young person to wish to pursue the life as an artist, or to study art, then this honor will be made worth while. Thank you, M’lady... so much... and to all of you for coming to share in my special day.” Raven bowed her head towards the Queen and ran into her husband’s awaiting arms.

A sly smile formed on Raven’s lips as the memory faded. She then remembered touring the museum on Jacen’s arm and giving him a private and thorough history lesson in Nubian art. Jacen walked enchanted as he’d listened to his wife excitingly rattle off different brush techniques and movements each artist contributed towards the development of the Nubian artistic heritage. The tour ended in a small room that held Paulo’s painting of Queen Amidala gazing out one of the windows of the original Theed Palace. Beside the painting stood the statue of her created by her grandmother. Jacen wrapped his arms tightly around Raven’s body as conflicting emotions surged through her body. She fought with joy and grief. She was joyful that the pieces would be enjoyed by all, but full of sorrow for the passing of her grandparents and for what might have been.

“I wish Grandfather could have been here today,” Raven said, quietly.

“I think he was here... from somewhere, he watched his lost granddaughter return to the bosom of her family and get married today,” Jacen replied, rocking her gently in his arms.

Footfalls echoed in the chamber, Raven turned to see Marxx and Jaina enter the room holding hands.

“How’re you doing, sis?” Marxx asked, sensing her sadness.

Releasing her arms from around Jacen, Raven raced to her twin and hugged him tightly. Stroking his sister’s hair, Marxx dropped his head on top of hers and said, “He watched you today, I know he did. And I’m sure he’s very proud of you.”

Eyes brimming with tears, Raven asked softly, “How can you be so sure? How do you know he’s

here?”

“He’s become one with the Force. His life energy is embodied in every living thing: every tree, cloud, falumpaset, or ray of sun. I felt his presence in the hall today. He was with us,” Marxx said. “He wouldn’t have missed your big day for anything.” Seeing his sister on the verge of tears, he quickly changed the subject. “So are you guys excited about going to Hapes 5 for your honeymoon?”

“Yes! It sounds delightful,” Raven replied as she removed herself from Marxx’s embrace.

Taking Raven’s hand, Jacen said, “Tenel Ka truly was wonderful to us. She knew that if we’d gone most anywhere else we’d be hounded by the press. This resort exclusively belongs to the Hapan Matriarchal Court. Only those given royal permission can stay there. We’re very honored.”

“I’m sure it will be amazing. You’ll have to tell us all about it,” Jaina replied, hugging her husband tightly.

A clattering at the door made the two couples glance towards the entrance. C-3PO and R2-D2 arrived. Flailing his arms happily, C-3PO said, “Master Jacen! Your mother has been looking everywhere for you! She requests your attention, immediately in the grand assembly hall in the dome.”

Grinning the two couples followed the bickering droids out the room, towards the large feast and party hosted by the new Queen...

Jacen let out a loud snort. His eyes flew open then shut as he immediately fell back asleep. Raven shoved her fist in her mouth to contain her giggles. Burying her head in Jacen’s chest, images of their reception speedily blurred through her mind. The afternoon and into the evening was filled with dancing, laughter, tears, and fun. But it was her last moments on Naboo that surged forward in Raven’s mind. As she and Jacen stood next to Anakin and Tenel Ka, ready to hitch a ride to the Hapes Cluster for their vacation on *The Fiery Phoenix*, the new Jedi Council approached the bride and groom. Luke, Leia, Mara, Rodersuin, Tionne, and Marxx stood around the couple grinning.

“What?” Jacen asked, suspiciously.

Luke licked his lips and said, “Well, we had our first vote a few weeks ago and decided it just wouldn’t be right for the Jedi Academy professors to not have any kind of mode of transportation of their own.”

Pushing back a large clump of red hair, Mara continued, “Kendu’s been working non-stop, around the clock, with New Republic engineers on Corellia to update the New Republic fleet. We found out he had a pet project on the side he was crafting on the side.”

From out of her robes, Leia produced an activation key, and with huge grins plastered on Anakin and Tenel Ka’s faces, *The Fiery Phoenix* morphed into a sleek, pure white, triangular ship. Mouth agape, and eyes popping, Raven’s eyes traveled over the ship’s gleaming hull. Her heart pounded in her chest, and her mouth turned dry at the beauty of the design of the ship.

The bride lightly brushed her hands over the hull as her eyes absorbed the ship’s sloping, aeronautical design. Hoarsely, she said, “She’s beautiful.”

Jacen grinned at Raven’s reaction. He liked the ship, but could tell his wife instantly fell in love with

the prototype. Turning to his brother, he asked Anakin, "What is it with women and ships?" Glancing at Marxx, Jacen asked, "What's its name?"

Marxx wrapped his arms tightly around Jaina, as Han, Rowlon, and Chariss came out from behind the Jedi Masters. Grinning devilishly, Marxx's pool blue eyes twinkled as he said, "Kendu named her *The White Raven*."

Rolling her eyes, Raven said, "That's a lame name for a ship."

Chuckling, Jacen grabbed his wife's hand, and spun her into his chest. Gazing deeply into her eyes, and running a hand through her platinum curls, he said, "I think the name's perfect."

"It's not exactly a great name for going incognito though. We might as well just shout *Hey it's Jacen and Raven Solo!*" Raven replied.

Pursing his lips, Jacen glanced at Luke and Marxx, he said, "She's got a point there. Would Kendu be offended if we changed the ship's name?"

Rocking on his feet, Luke replied, "Probably not. I told him I thought the name wouldn't go over very well with you two. You've got a month to register a new name with the ship registration board."

"Looks like you got your way, darling," Jacen said.

"Better get used to that, Jacen," Raven teased. Feinting a shocked expression Jacen covered her mouth in a kiss as her giggles bubbled and erupted in their mouths.

Lightly extracting herself from Jacen's arms, Raven kissed Jacen on the forehead, climbed out of bed, tucked him in tightly, and threw her Jedi robe over her shoulders. Silently she exited the hut and padded barefoot onto the wooden deck that surrounded their abode. A long walkway stretched from the center of the lake to the shore. Their new ship sat on the shore, glimmered brightly in the moonlight. Raven briefly thought of coming up with a new name for it and waved the idea aside, they had plenty of time for that. An inviting wind rustled Raven's hair, causing white curls to obscure her vision. Under the robe, her right-hand fingers twined in the chain that held her blue topaz. Having rested next to her heart, the stone was warm to the touch. She smiled as she remembered Jacen lovingly caressed it earlier in the evening during their lovemaking.

Raven closed her eyes and inhaled the earthy, fragrant world surrounding the hut. Sinking deeply into the Force, her heart pounded steadily and strong. She let the Jedi robe fall and pool around her ankles. She removed her precious necklace and lay it on top of the robe. The cool night air kissed her bare body, her skin prickled with goosebumps from the sudden exposure to the cold. Throwing up her hands, Raven dove into the lake. Upon impact, the warm water enveloped her skin and embraced her body. Kicking froglike, Raven swam along the bottom of the lake, her eyes darting in the murky, dark depths. A shell caught her eye. Snatching it, she tightened her muscles and surged to the water's surface. Inhaling much needed oxygen, she shoved her hair out of her face and treaded water. She examined the shell she'd brought up and admired its ridged beauty. As she scrutinized the shell, a sharp pair of claws peeked out of the shell's opening and pinched her pinky finger. Crying out in pain, she dropped the shell with a splash and then began to giggle. Flipping backwards, Raven spun acrobatically in the water. As she broke the surface again, she floated up on her back and began to back stroke, lazily across

the lake. The combined feel of the cool air on her exposed skin and the warm water made for an invigorating, and joyous experience.

Staring at the twinkling stars, Raven thought about the number of times as a child she used to lie in her uncomfortable bed and wish upon the stars to bring happiness and joy into her life. She became conscious of the fact that patience was her greatest ally in life. For had she escaped her grandmother's clutches earlier, she might not have met Jacen and would never have really known what true happiness meant.

I guess sometimes you have to learn to suffer, and to learn from the pain that life throws at you in order to really appreciate the true meaning of being happy, Raven thought. As she swam, she realized for the first time in her life, she not only felt happy, but she felt truly contented. As her brain churned, she recognized she no longer desired anything for herself, other than to always feel this blissfully satisfied with life. She churned her legs and arms in the water as a broad smile rested on her lips. Her smile faded as she thought of her former self, fearful, lonely, and angry. She knew for certain that she never wanted to return to being that haunted young girl, again. Somehow, she determined, even if something happened to everyone in her family and she was left alone again, she doubted she could ever go back. She was no longer that girl. She loathed and pitied Raven Palpatine for her helplessness. With the burning strength of her heart, Raven vowed to never allow herself to tumble again into despair, or fear, or hatred. Those feelings were destructive and she reasoned, the more she allowed those feelings to encroach upon her soul, the easier it became to lose herself entirely to their demonically, enchanting wills. She also vowed she would never allow herself to become her grandmother... never.

Her one wish in life would have been for Kyp to have survived the confrontation on Nephron. She wished he could have been allowed the chance of finding the same level of happiness that she discovered in life. She missed him, and often found herself wishing she could speak with him and learning from his wisdom. Nightly she sent a silent prayer to the Force that he was being treated well and had found peace. She also desired for her family, particularly Tanella and Krishta, to never have to experience any kind of pain, or sorrow. Her heart pounded steadily in her chest. She felt healthy and her life enriched, not just because her once wounded heart was restored, but because it beat stronger and more assured due to the enveloping support and love of her family and husband.

Her musings were suddenly interrupted as something gripped and tickled her legs. Shrieking in confusion, she threw her eyes forward and saw Jacen grinning mischievously in the water at her side. He said, "Sorry, honey, didn't mean to startle you. Is this a private swim, or can I join you?"

Beaming, she said, "Umm.. I thought you were sleeping."

"I woke up to not find you next to me and well... I panicked," Jacen replied, sheepishly.

Raven smiled at his protectiveness and threw her arms around Jacen's broad shoulders in the water and descended upon his inviting and open lips. The couple treaded water awkwardly together. Raven plunged backwards when they released from their kiss. She came up sputtering from the water and began to laugh hysterically. Shoving a face full of water in Jacen's direction, she swam playfully away from his strong arms. Grinning brightly, Jacen tore across the water after his laughing bride. The couple eventually ended up on the far southern shore. They dragged their throbbing legs up onto the cool sand and fell in a heap. Gasping for air, Jacen collapsed beside his wife and nestled her enticing body against his own to share body warmth.

Breath finally restored, Jacen said, “Well that was ... invigorating. I don’t know if after that I’d have much energy to do anything else.”

Peeking a brow, hand caressing his thigh, Raven taunted, “Are you sure?”

Smile stretching from ear to ear, Jacen said, “Well... maybe just not this second...”

Wrapping her arms around Jacen’s chest, Raven sighed deeply as they watched the stars sparkle overhead. Raven whispered, “Thank you, Jacen.”

Running his fingers through her hair to detangle her messy curls, Jacen asked, “For what, hon?”

Raising her liquid blue eyes towards his face, Raven replied, “For giving me this day... and for sharing your life and love with me.”

Jacen’s heart constricted in his chest, and he said, “Oh, honey... you don’t have to thank me for those things. I give those things freely and completely to you. I love you more than anything in the Galaxy.” Wrapping his arms tighter around his bride, he said, “Besides, a herd of wild Banthas couldn’t ever drag me away from you... you’re a part of me, and I’m a part of you. We’re just not complete without each other.”

A supernova of love blazed in Raven’s heart at his words. She said, “I believe that too. Do you know something?”

“What, baby?” Jacen asked, as he gently played with her long fingers and kissed the pad of each tip.

“I believe you and in you completely. I also know that I am worthy of your love, that I am a good person who has every right to be completely happy. Your love makes me glad to be who I am. I wouldn’t exchange my life for anyone else’s in the Galaxy,” Raven replied, her body shivered happily under Jacen’s gentle touches.

Brushing his finger along the length of her chest scar, Jacen said, “You really are completely healed, aren’t you baby?”

“Yes, and I would have never gotten that way without you. You saw me for who I really was, and knew I what I could become. How? I’ll never quite know. All I know is you are my soul mate, my beloved, my angel, and I’m never going to let you go,” Raven replied as she gently pushed Jacen on his side and climbed on top of his chest. “I’m lost without you.”

Smiling in wonder, Jacen stared at Raven, enchanted as the moonlight set her white curls ablaze in an ethereal glow. Placing his hands on either side of her face, Jacen’s heart swelled with sheer and utter joy. Barely able to see through a trail of happy tears, Raven let out a laugh and kissed her husband with passion. As he wrapped his arms tightly around his bride, their souls entwined together. In the black blanket above, a large shooting star blazed across the skyline, leaving a long, pale vapor trail in its wake. Unmasked and unblemished their love burned radiantly, infusing itself onto the Force, causing the star’s tail to brighten, as they banished darkness out of their lives, forever.

Epilogue

“Look over there!” Jaina said, suddenly, pointing towards a northern hill.

Shielding his eyes from the blinding sun, Marxx stared startled in the direction Jaina indicated. Giggling, Jaina plunged into the lake and began to furiously swim in the water towards the tiny island.

“Hey!” Marxx shouted. Flashing an annoyed glance at his wife, Marxx took a long run and leapt into the warm water, bounced to the surface and chased after her retreating form. Eventually the couple crawled out onto the soft sand, with Jaina far in the lead.

Breathlessly she shouted to Marxx after he finally reached the shore, “See I told you I would get here first, Marxx!”

Placing his fists on his hips, and shaking his curled head, spraying his wife with water, Marxx said, “Yes, and you leaped in the water well before me! You cheated!”

Eyes open wide, Jaina pointed at herself, “Me, cheat?”

“Yes, you. I should think that Queen Cerullia would be very interested to know that her future Senator cheats!” Marxx replied, lips pursed tightly together.

A quiver of fear crept into Jaina’s heart as she sat up in the sand, nervously she asked, “You wouldn’t mention that to her, would you?”

Marxx stared contemplatively towards the sky, then his face cracked into a large grin. He said, “Had you going there, didn’t I?”

Tossing a handful of sand at her husband, Jaina flopped to the ground in relief. She said, “I would just have killed you, especially after spending the last week packing to move to Coruscant.”

“You know I’m supportive of you, baby. I’m just teasing. Besides, even if you’d given me a five minute lead, you still would’ve beaten me. I’m just not the greatest swimmer,” Marxx replied. As the bright Nubian sun kissed Marxx’s broad, bare chest, his eyes turned towards the center of the island.

Stroking his muscular forearm, Jaina said, “Go ahead and visit him, honey. I’ll give you a few moments alone.”

Smiling, Marxx leaned forward and kissed Jaina lightly on the lips. As he pulled away, he said, “Thanks.”

Jaina watched as Marxx climbed to his feet, brushed sand off of his body, and swimtrunks, and walked through the overgrown path towards his grandfather’s mausoleum. Flipping her head back into the sand, Jaina closed her eyes and experienced the wondrous sensation of the warm sunshine massaging her skin. She could feel the water drops evaporate and then dry, leaving tiny spots of coolness that quickly became warm on her body. Contented, she let the frantic packing schedule of the last week, and some recent rounds of nausea, leak from her conscious as she enjoyed the simple pleasure of sunbathing.

She focused on her hearing and picked out the sounds of six distinctively different birds sing. An echo from the past whispered into her ear *We used to come here every day on retreat. I love the water, we would swim over to that island, lie in the sand and let the sun dry us -we would try to name the birds singing.* Jaina smiled, and as her mind replayed when she and Marxx climbed out of the water, she suddenly remembered her vision she received long ago of Padme and Paulo climbing out of this very same lake. She recalled that they had said similar things to each other, although with time, their exact words had faded from her memory.

From farther on the island, she could hear traces of Marxx's voice being carried on the wind. He seemed to be having a long conversation with his grandfather's grave. Jaina supposed some might have thought that crazy, but if Padme's visions taught Jaina anything, she realized that the dead can have an affect on the living and that even in the afterlife, they still watch over and pay attention to their loved ones left behind.

Opening her eyes, Jaina pushed herself to her feet and brushed the excess sand off of her skin and bather. Feet sinking into the warm, gritty sand, she stomped up the path to find Marxx sitting on a marble bench with his elbows resting on his knees, head slightly hanging down his chest. He scooted over to make room for Jaina when she entered his peripheral vision. Sitting beside him, Jaina clasped his hand tightly and rested her head on Marxx's broad shoulder.

They sat in silence for a while, as Jaina admired the carvings on the mausoleum and the surrounding hillsides, rich with full trees.

"I was just telling him that I was going away and where I'd be going... so he'd know where to look for me. Is that silly?" Marxx asked, blushing.

Smiling, Jaina said, "No. I don't think you need to tell him though, your grandfather follows you everywhere. He's a part of you... a part of your heart."

Tightening his grasp on Jaina's hand, Marxx said, "You're right about that."

"You know what I was just thinking?" Jaina asked, as her toe etched a heart shape in the sand.

"What?" Marxx replied, smiling at her drawing.

"I was just thinking about the visions that sent me on my journey over two years ago. That my grandmother and grandfather seemed to have wanted me to meet you, I think," Jaina said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Think about it, if we'd never met, we'd never have found Raven, and she'd have never confronted her grandmother, and we might all now be under Gwynalyn's tyrannical rule," Jaina said, as the wind tugged her long hair behind her back.

"I guess you're right about that. You think they saw or knew what was coming and they threw us together to try and prevent things?" Marxx asked, a bit confused.

"I don't know. Maybe. I've always seen the Force through kind of practical eyes... it's there to help us to maintain our emotional centers and to help enhance our abilities. By focusing on the energy around

us, and embracing the living Force, we as Jedi thrive and live fuller lives. I'd never had any reason to think though that the dead could influence the living in anyway... I mean, they're dead, how could they, you know? And then I received my visions. They sent me on a journey that I didn't know I wanted to take. Along the way, I met the most amazing and wonderful man," Jaina said as she turned her brandy brown eyes upwards to caress her husband's pool blue orbs. She continued, "Who would have known that a podracer from Tatooine would be connected to events that could have altered the shape of the Galaxy?"

Marxx let go of Jaina's hand and wrapped his arms tightly around her shoulders, as she snaked her arms around his waist. He said, "Let's not forget my sister and your brother, either. I don't think I alone could've helped to change Raven the way Jacen did. It was his love for her that helped her to see her real self and gave her the strength to finally defeat our abusive grandmother... It is as if our families, yours and mine, were destined to entwine together. As if we were supposed to meet on so many levels."

Nodding, Jaina said, "You're right. All I can say is I thank my grandmother Padme from the bottom of my heart for leading me to you. My life is richer and fuller with you beside me. I know with your love and support that I'll be able to handle the complications and senseless bickerings in the political arena."

"Don't worry, baby. You'll do a great job representing Naboo in the Senate," Marxx replied, hugging her tighter.

Inhaling Marxx's masculine scent, mingled with the dried salt on his skin, Jaina smiled. Biting her lip, she decided it was time to tell him her secret. She said, "Of course it may become quite a juggling act for me... for us..."

"Being a politician can't be all fun and games, I mean your Mom's always busy. I hope it doesn't take over your life completely... that you can learn to balance your work and home life," Marxx said, suddenly worried.

Sighing, Jaina said, "Well, I'll have a reason to return home and not take on too much responsibility at work..."

"True, we will have to work on doing everything we can to make our Coruscant apartment half way as comfortable as our bungalow here on Naboo. I'm sure you'll want to come home early to help with decorating the place..." Marxx rambled.

Rolling her eyes, Jaina sighed again deeply, frustration building. Removing her right hand from Marxx's waist she grabbed his chin in her hand and yanked his eyes to meet her own. Through puckered lips, Marxx asked, "What?"

"Darling, you're not letting me finish," Jaina said, peaking a brow.

Marxx noted the sweat on the palm of Jaina's hand and detected a nervous look in her eyes. Focusing completely on his wife, he said, "Sorry, honey. What were you saying?"

Now that she had Marxx's complete attention, Jaina's heart flip-flopped in her chest. She licked her lips and felt her mouth go dry. She said, "I was saying that I'll have every reason in the Galaxy to return

home and not allow politics to completely overrun my... our life.”

“Why’s that?” Marxx asked.

Pausing briefly, Jaina wondered at Marxx’s reaction. Finally she just blurted out, “Because I’m... we’re going to have a baby.”

Feeling as though he’d just flown out of the cockpit of his podracer and hit a stone wall, an adrenalin rush of emotions surged through Marxx, from worry, to fear, to happiness, to joy, and back to worry. Jaina began to giggle as she watched beads of sweat form on Marxx’s brow. She asked, “You ok there, Dad?”

“Dad? I’m going to be a father.... We’re going to be parents,” Marxx muttered.

“You alright about that?” Jaina asked, worried by his conflicted reaction.

Turning to his wife, he immediately smiled brightly to banish any worry from her eyes. Launching to his feet, he swept Jaina up in his arms and felt an elated cry of joy rip out of his lungs. The sudden noise sent a flock of tiny songbirds soaring up into the sky. When he could finally speak again, he said, “How could I not be elated, knowing that you and I have created something wonderful that is going to bring great joy in our lives? I can’t think of anything better to show the world how much I love you, and how strong our love is than to have a baby.”

Beaming, Jaina scrunched her toes together and kicked her feet happily in Marxx’s arms. She said, “You had me worried for a moment there.”

Placing her lightly on her feet, Marxx asked, “How long?”

“I think I’m about seven weeks along, so we have a long while before I start to show,” Jaina replied.

Terror filled Marxx’s eyes as he placed a hand protectively on her stomach. He asked, “Do you think your swimming hurt the baby?”

Grinning, Jaina said, “No. As long as I don’t do anything too strenuous, exercise is fine. I feel fine.”

Marxx smacked his palm on his forehead, “I’m so dense! That’s why you’ve been so nauseous during our packing.”

“Yeah, I have a feeling he’ll be a handful for us... probably a real speed menace,” Jaina said, grinning. She added, “Not that he’d have much of a choice in the matter with us as parents.”

“He?” Marxx said, heart pounding. “You can already tell what it is?”

“No, I mean, I don’t know. But I’m hoping for a boy. What about you? What do you want?” Jaina asked, raking her fingers through her brown hair.

“I don’t really care as long as she or he is healthy,” Marxx replied. “I’d have thought you’d have wanted a girl, you know, pass on the strong Nabierre women genes?”

Smirking, Jaina said, “Yeah, and what would I get? I’d get a daughter who wanted to play in frilly dresses all day and do her hair and makeup and be terrified of a hydrospanner.”

Laughing, Marxx wrapped his arms protectively around his wife and said, “Well I guess that would be your luck, wouldn’t it?”

“Totally,” Jaina said, nestling herself deeply into warm contours of Marxx’s chest.

“I love you, Jaina Racees,” Marxx said, as they lightly swayed together under the bright Nubian afternoon.

“And I love you, Marxx Racees,” Jaina replied, grinning. As she enjoyed the comfort of her husband’s strong arms, circling her waist, she thrilled at the prospect of becoming a mother. She couldn’t ask for a better or worthier man to be the father of her child. Knowing that their love would only grow and deepen with time, confidently she added, “Always.”

Jaina pressed Marxx’s hand tightly against her stomach. The couple connected deeply with the Force and together they could feel the traces of their baby’s strong and rapid heartbeat. As Jaina and Marxx laughed with insane joy, Jaina knew that somehow, somewhere her grandparents were smiling since there would be a third generation of Skywalker children. Also, as Jaina stared at Paulo’s mausoleum she realized that this child would exemplify everything that was good and pure from Paulo’s marriage to Gwynalyn. Children wash away the sins of the parents. Feeling her baby’s heart beating in her belly, Jaina knew Anakin’s fall and Gwynalyn’s sins were cleansed, forever through the power of their grandchildren’s love.

The End