



STAR WARS

A Force to Contend With

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

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

This book is intended to support the mythos as created by George Lucas, but given the amount of SW fiction that is available, and the amount of divergence from various authors, movies, and re-releases of movies, it is most likely out of the scope of this writer to fully address, capture, or give credit to the others who have most certainly influenced his thoughts and appreciation for this saga. I can only hope that my small perspective adds to the lore, as opposed to detracting from what I believe Lucas set out to achieve with the original Star Wars and what I hope AJ Abrahams will recapture come this Decemember.

I dedicate this to George Lucas, with gratitude for all many way in which Star Wars has touched my life.

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Episode 1
A Force to Contend With

Concerned that eventually someone may actually succeed
In killing him, Darth Sidious invested a great deal of resources
Into three vital contingency plans. Cloning Troopers had been just the first
Stage of the Clone Wars as it was always his hope to secure a method of cloning
Sith warriors in an effort to establish a new legacy that
Would rival that previously held by the Jedi Order.

Additionally, there was no end to the rumors that the Emperor
Had been seeking pathways to immortality. Many believed he had already
Achieved this, but it was often more difficult to discern between fact and fiction
When it came to Emperor Palpatine. Only one, Admiral Alarna Byrnes,
Known as Darth Qwuen only to Palpatine, knew the intimate details of his
Machinations, and the depths of his depravity.

While Byrne searched desperately for ways to please Palpatine,
His paranoia grew in leaps and bounds. He saw plots against him
Everywhere he turned. The fact that there was validity to at least some
Of the perceived threats only dogged him harder to find a solution. It came in the
Form of a new classification of Droid: Bloodhunters. Scattered around
The galaxy were an untold number of Bloodhunters, sleeping, waiting to
Be summoned for the sole purpose of vengeance. In the event of his death,
The Droids would be activated, their only purpose to destroy
Any person who would benefit from The Emperor's absence.
And not just persons, but their entire families,
And in some instances, whole planets were designated as targets.

Again, as with most things, most people simply assumed
It was a fear campaign, because it was simply too difficult to fathom
Someone so evil that they would destroy every gain out of spite.
And, since no one had ever seen a Bloodhunter,
Or known anyone to have 'disappeared' because of one,
It was shuttled off to the back of people's minds,
Because holding onto such things tended to mess with a person's
Ability to sleep at night. But, not to let an opportunity pass
Once the idea of Bloodhunters were in the Public's mind,
There was no reason not to put it to good use:
Bloodhunters became part of the mythos to steer children away
From misbehaving. Palpatine's legacy of fear continues unabated...

Star Destroyer 'Immanence' dropped out of hyperspace into a star system comprised of a white dwarf orbiting a red giant. The white dwarf had long since burned all its fuel, and what was left was mostly carbon and oxygen, compressed into ball about the size of an average terrestrial planet, but with the average mass of a sun. Though white dwarf stars were common, what made this particular find so valuable was its age. It was upwards of twelve billions years old, inferred by the measurable fact that the surface had cooled sufficiently to allow the carbon at the most upper surface to crystallize. In another hundred billion years, the star might be one giant diamond, but for now, the diamond shell was only seventeen kilometers thick, and illuminated from within as if were a lantern.

In addition to the white dwarf, there were five terrestrial planets circling near the red giant, one Jupiter class planet with a dozen or so moons, and a scattering of asteroids and comets skirting the system. Still, the white dwarf stood out; a sparkling, self-illuminated gem, pulsing as if it had an internal heartbeat. From the perspective of 'Immanence,' it was like a singular jewel resting on velvet. The 'velvet' was a large patch of sky where a stellar cloud occluded the background stars, cutting a patch out of the galactic disc, with the phenomon called "frame dragging," where the gravity of an immense rotating mass literally dragged chunks of space time around like taffy adding to display of sparkles, auras, and rays. No one expected the white dwarf, or its radiant beauty, but then, no one really knew what to expect from the seemingly random coordinates provided by the Commander. Both sensors and visible inspection clearly revealed the solidity of the dwarf's surface, with evidence of past volcanic like activity as the star resisted its inevitable path towards solidification. One screen gave a visual representation of the magnetosphere surrounding the dwarf, revealing that its internal engine was still churning out a rhythmic energy. For the pleasure or convenience of the crew, the signal was converted to an auditory signature: a rapid, oscillating pulse that almost sounded like a cat purring over whale song.

The age of the white dwarf meant it was likely one of the first stars to illuminate the night sky after the emergence of the Universe. Its proximity to the nursery probably meant it had initiated the birth sequence of all its sister stars when it finally died, sending a pressure wave out into what at the time would have been an even bigger gas cloud than what remained to date. With each subsequent birth and death of all the stars in this region, the hydrogen was transmuted into all the other elements necessary for more complex systems, such as life itself. The Stellar Nursery was still very much alive, birthing stars, while the dying stars gave up their bones to become planets. Even now, not yet visible, a massive star had already erupted into a supernova, deep within the dark nebula behind the dwarf. The crew was no more concerned about the oncoming event than a person would be about a volcano on the other side of the planet. It was that far away and they would be gone before the light of the supernova hit this system.

Admiral Alarna Byrne listened to the command staff chattering as they analyzed the entire system, with only a few focusing on the jewel of the immediate sky. She was aware that one person wanted to penetrate the stellar nursery to get closer to the nova with probes, but he kept the musings to himself, recorded the data on his sensor and noted his personal observations on his terminal. A vent above and just behind Byrne stirred the edges of her cape, and pushed her sunset red hair against her back and over her shoulders. She brushed a strand away from her cheeks. Her green eyes were steady, unwavering, and if she blinked at all, one had the sense that she had reposed in meditation, only to emerge a moment later ready to fight. Most people could

not maintain her gaze. She was the only female on the ship who wore a skirt, non-military issue, with a muscular tone that screamed yoga master, but one couldn't exactly look down to admire her legs for fear of being called out on impropriety, and so, most people sort of just looked down and to the side. In one of those rare moments when there was unexpected lull in the background conversational volume, someone remarked about women always finding diamonds.

"I've killed people for making lesser sexist remarks," Byrne mused out loud, her eyes focused on the jewel. Except for droids, all chattering was subdued, as if she were a librarian reminding people they were to be quiet. No one doubted the veracity of her statement. They had witnessed such events. The only reason she hadn't killed anyone today was that she was particularly pleased by her discovery. And when she was happy, the crew was happy. Or at least, minimally more safe.

"There is life in this system, Commander," said Captain Motka Orlov. He was a bio-engineer by trade, but in a pinch could double as a medic. If his hair hadn't been military short, it might have looked as if he was standing in an active Faraday cage being pulsed with static electricity. His gray eyes were penetrating, but ever respectful, in a subtle Nagai way, and he projected peace fortified by strength, but with the air of confidence that comes from the knowledge of a hidden dagger or two on his person.

"Sentience?" Byrne asked, not looking at him.

"There is no evidence of technological features, but that doesn't rule out sentience," Orlov said.

"I want a piece of that star," Byrne said, finally stating her intentions out loud.

Everyone looked at her.

Captain Liza Jesser pointed out the futility of such an operation. "Defying the gravity well is beyond our technological capabilities. Ignoring gravity, neither droid nor humans could survive the heat, radiation, and magnetic flux emanating from the core. Even if we could get a work platform on the surface, there isn't a drill in existence that could penetrate that surface due to the pressure." At 1.5 meters, she was probably the shortest person out of the entire crew. She, too, sported a military cut, razing her brown hair almost to the roots. The style only enhanced her feminine qualities, bright eyes, accentuated cheek bones, and pale skin with ruby lips.

Byrne didn't appear to be listening.

"I wasn't considering a drilling exercise," Byrne said. "I was thinking about blowing it up and collecting the debris."

Again, she had her command staff's attention, but no one spoke their visceral objections.

"What?" Byrne asked, dismayed at their skepticism. "They don't call this ship a Star Destroyer for nothing, do they?"

There was not even a cough at her attempt for humor.

"It would take over a dozen Star Destroyers all firing at one point to even remotely make a dent in the surface," Jesser began. "And if you did make a hole, more than likely there is sufficient pressure built up inside that you'd just get a geyser of plasma in your face."

"You know, I keep you around because of your pragmatism, but you are still not thinking big enough. One only need make a small, tactical nudge to claim greater results," Byrne said. She sighed and pointed to the sensor. "I think these six comets will do the trick. This one here has enough mass that we only need it to fly by the fifth planet to start a change in its orbit. The remaining comets need only impact that planet's surface near the equator, at successive intervals to add the necessary momentum. Six months later, the fifth planet will collide with the dwarf with sufficient force to shatter it like an egg and surround this boring red giant with a halo of

perfect diamonds from dust to boulder size. Imagine an asteroid belt of the purest diamonds nature can provide.”

“Your math can’t be that good,” Jesser said.

“Run the numbers,” Byrne insisted. She advanced closer to examine Jesser’s calculations as the computer ran virtual sims. “Even if it’s just a passing glance, or we only knock a few pieces off, the relative value of a cargo hold full of this quality of diamond could very well give all of us the ability to retire. I’m talking wealth beyond anything any of you have ever imagined, all combined, and that’s even after paying premium taxes to the Emperor.”

“I think you are overstating the profitability of these crystals,” Jesser said. “If you’re thinking lightsaber components, you’re talking about a fringe market at best, and it is a diminished market at that.”

“There will be a resurgence in the old ways after the war,” Byrne said. “And crystals of this caliber are used in more tech than just lightsabers. Natural crystals have the best frequencies, and with the trace elements distributed randomly over this star’s surface, impressed directly into the crystalline structure due to the extreme temperature and pressures, each individual piece should offer a distinct, individual characteristic that only a Force sensitive could appreciate. Additionally, the fact that this is a first generation star means that the crystalline structure will have a resonance reflecting the energy signature of the early Universe. Why are we still discussing this? Make it happen. I will be in my quarters if you require my talents.”

Byrne turned to leave.

“Admiral,” Orlov interjected. He knew he risked death after the finality of the Commander’s last directive, but he felt the urgency in his need to speak. “The fifth planet has life on it.”

“So?” Byrne asked.

“There might be intelligence,” Orlov protested.

“Again, so?” Byrne asked.

“The Rebels may like to paint a picture that the Empire is indifferent to life, but the truth is we have an edict to preserve life and order,” Orlov said. All biological life had a potential exploitive factor in terms of revenue and future products.

“Assume there is intelligent life on the planet, do you suppose they will evolve technologically enough to depart this system in eighteen years?” Byrne asked. Everyone believed that was unlikely, but even if one believed otherwise, they wouldn’t argue the opposite. “We happen to know that hidden inside that nebula a supernova has already occurred. In less than twenty years the gamma radiation from that blast will irradiate all living things in this system. This place will be completely sterile. The window of opportunity is now. I intend to take it.”

“The fact that there is life in this system at all attests to its tenacity, making it worthy of further scrutiny,” Orlov said. Clearly he wasn’t getting anywhere with his ‘scarcity of life argument,’ the belief that all life was sacred. It was not the most popular philosophic position in the Empire. Life was so obnoxiously abundant that there was no need for preservation and with interstellar travel being the norm, it had a tendency to proliferate quickly. With competition for raw resources fierce, the value of life, sentient or not, had decreased. It was always cheaper to expand or take resources through force than to engineer greater technology that might minimize competition for those same resources, and, dare he say it, ‘share.’ “There is life on that planet, and two of the moons orbiting the gas giant. This is a grand opportunity to study divergent evolution in a closed system. Further, one of our protocols is to determine if there is any

compatible species or biological organisms that may benefit the Empire, either in terms of labor, for its nutritional properties, and or undiscovered medicinal characteristics.”

Byrne nodded. There was always an opportunity to profit off niche biological systems. “You can put a platform in orbit of the fifth planet and release survey and collection droids to gather samples. Also establish a base on this moon here, preferably in a cave, and assign Fixit to the study and classification of all the samples, so if anything useful can be salvaged or transplanted, we can collect it at a later date. Meanwhile, I want the rest of us focused on pitching these comets, as this window won’t last forever. Continue with Silent Running protocols. No transmissions, not even normal telemetry between extravehicular activities.”

Jesser rolled her eyes. Radio silence would make her task of shifting comets more difficult. Computers would have to be automated and programmed on site. Jesser forced herself to breathe. Paranoia was a healthy skill set in the Empire, especially at this moment in time, with so many people jockeying for power in the relative instability of change. Eventually, she figured, things would get back to normal, and rule of law would abide over personal gain. Until then, she knew the game and just had to play it well. Or at least, better than those around her.



The FX medical droid series was usually permanently attached to the floor and wounded were brought to it. Fixit, however, was mobile. The wheels at its base allowed it to glide effortlessly across the room, while simultaneously rotating its body in one direction, or its head in another. Most of its appendages were pulled in close as it navigated the corridor. It arrived at its destination, communicated its arrival via UV frequencies, and entered when the door opened. Byrne was sitting in her chair, feet up against the window looking out at the diamond star, wondering if when it became completely solid it might qualify for the title of planet. Semantics. Scientist were frequently changing classifications systems, so it was possible for a planet today to become a planetoid or moon tomorrow. The door closed behind Fixit and it edged closer. It did not feel the need to remind her that it was summoned. It merely waited to be addressed.

“I think my birth control failed,” Byrne told the medical droid.

“Abstinence failed?” Fixit asked.

Her eyes shifted to the droid. “I am armed with a blaster,” Byrne told the droid.

“No disrespect intended,” Fixit said. “It’s just that fraternizing with the crew comes with penalties even you may not be able to avoid.”

“Even me?” Byrne echoed.

“Everyone suspects you have favored status with the Emperor,” Fixit said. Its head pivoted, allowing its various eyes to take in the entire room. “But even his reach couldn’t protect you from political maneuvering of crew and rivals. I believe the maxim you promote is, all weaknesses are eventually exploited by the competition.”

“It is. The best way is to have no weaknesses,” Byrne agreed. “That is why I would like you to do something about this liability.”

The Droid took a moment to consider the problem; so long that she almost imagined it was having an ethical dilemma. She wondered if it were time to have its memory wiped. She had put off doing that simply because she hated having to retrain Droids to recognize her personal eccentricities. That, and everytime one reprogrammed a Droid you risked a dramatic personality changed, and she was able to tolerate her Fixit better than any previous Fixit. Fixits in general were programmed to save lives, indiscriminately, so having one that could discern the difference between friends and foe was a luxury.

“You are due for a routine medical exam. Perhaps once I am on moon’s surface you could use that as an excuse to visit your favorite medical droid,” Fixit said, offering her an out.

“I am always amazed at the size of your ego. It’s almost like you have the personality of a real medical doctor,” Byrne said.

“Indeed, I am a real medical Doctor. And Veterinarian,” Byrne said. “May I inquire into the paternity of the liability?”

“Only if you want to be permanently turned off,” Byrne said. “We’re clear about this? There is to be no physical evidence remaining that might suggest impropriety.”

“I understand,” Fixit said.

“You’re dismissed,” Byrnes said, and went back to staring at her star. There was no doubt that crystalline structure of this purity and complexity, bathed in both radiant and magnetic energy, could be imbued naturally with the Force. She could feel the distortions pulsing through her, invisible currents that whispered her name. This meant if she managed to get a big enough Force crystal, she could use it to power her ship directly from the Force. She had held a hand full of Force Crystals once, specifically, a gram’s worth, each the size of a grain of sand. Just that handfull had enhanced her connection with the Force sufficiently to send her into ecstasy. She wondered what would happen if she put her hand against a solid Force crystal the size of a Tie Fighter. She shivered. But even if they weren’t specifically Force imbued crystals, having an alternative source for lightsaber crystals would give the Emperor the ability of creating a new order of Jedi, with lightsabers as abundant as blasters. Crystals from the Adeg system were scarce and hard to find due to the previous Jedi Order hoarding them, and though Sith could use alternatives to crystals, it still took time to create each individual saber. That was one reason each Jedi was instructed to make their own lightsabers. If a master took all his time creating lightsabers, they would hardly have time for anything else.

Byrnes forced herself to stop doing the math. There was so much potential wealth here that there was just no reason to actually count. Her find was even more appreciable than she could have anticipated or even wished for. This was her ticket out.



The comets were shoved off onto their new trajectory much faster than the establishment of the temporary base on the moon. Byrnes returned from her procedure, disguised in the form of a routine exam and inspection of the base to ensure all the typical protocols were established. A long range module allowing for a Tie Fighter in tandem was left in orbit about the moon, along with several cargo containers, each attached to the periphery of the long range module with uniform spacing. Each module had sufficient space to salvage diamonds, biological samples, and frozen critters alike. As she came off her personal shuttle, Captain Granes met her at the foot of the ramp.

“We’re ready for the jump to hyperspace when you are,” Granes said. “Your specified coordinates will park us in interstellar space. You do understand we don’t have to leave the system to avoid the dangers of this planet colliding with the dead star? At best, there might be a sizeable stellar mass ejection, but we’re not expecting the entire star to be appreciably shattered or diminished in any significant way.”

“I’m aware of where we are going and why. Commence with the jump. Alert me when we have arrived, I’ll be in my quarters,” Byrne said.

She retired to her quarters. The night sky shifted as the Star Destroyer turned on its center axis. She saw the glow of rockets pushing the final comet along its new trajectory. The planet the comet was aimed at wasn't even visible from this vantage point. The dim glow of the white dwarf was pleasant, like a night light. The moon she had been on might have made a nice retirement base, if it weren't for the fact it would soon (relatively) be dead. Her retirement plans required a different set of criteria, anyway, with more long term stability in order to meet her need for personal safety.

The Star Destroyer was a Gladiator Type, used to enforce law on outlying systems. At 500 meters long, its surface revealed its age, but it was no worse for the wear and tear it had seen. Byrne and her crew had earned enough profits in her excursions for the Emperor that it was bought and paid for several times over and had had all the most recent upgrades. Most of her missions were so profitable that the Emperor had always been gracious with her skimming off the top. It was also that profitability which had also kept her crew reasonably loyal. She had no doubt they would knife her in the back given the chance, but it was risky, as she was the Emperor's best, perhaps only, 'Finder,' and, well, anyone that took her place would have to match or exceed her performance level, which would be a hard thing to do. Indeed, her performance over the years was so good that she was finding it ever more challenging to maintain her profit margins. Until 'lucking' into this diamond star, she had been suffering with the fear of having reached her plateau. An exit strategy had always been in formulation, but only now was it time to put it into play.

Immanence arrived at its new location. "Nowhere," no doubt some were complaining. The void between stars. Interstellar space. Boring. A waste of a jump.

Granes contacted her. "We've arrived."

"Thank you. Assemble the entire crew on the hangar deck for an impromptu inspection," Byrne said. "I'm planning to give a speech, so top dress."

"Everyone?"

"We're in the middle of nowhere, Silent Running, what emergencies do you imagine will befall us? Everyone. Let me know as soon as the entire crew has assembled," Byrne said, and disconnected the call.

From her private desk, she watched video feed of crew killing themselves to get into formals and get to the hangar deck. She was actually impressed when they beat all their prior records. No doubt, the idea circulating amongst them that they were all soon to be richer than they ever imagined had increased their proximity based loyalty. She noted the call light, and could see Granes' trying to page her from the communication panel on the main hangar deck, rear of the ship. It was an impressive sight, even from the monitor, to see 1,200 people assembled on the deck, a hint of their reflections on the polished, black floors, with traces of white from lights overhead, blue shield generators, and various computer panels and displays.

Byrne flicked a switch on her panel. The artificial gravity on the hangar deck switched off. The crew came off the floor. The next switch Byrne's clicked turned off the main shield, holding the atmosphere on the hangar deck. In less than ten seconds, the entire crew was swept into space. She turned off her monitors and proceeded to her next task. She took her place upon a holographic transmitter pedestal and placed a call direct to the Emperor.



“I hate how she flouts her spiritual beliefs in front of the crew,” Jesser complained to Orlov as he was lying next to her, naked, on the floor, hidden in a supply room, glistening wet being just one of the evidence of having recently been engaged in a bit of a workout. He appeared spent, but Jesser had only just gotten warmed up, reminding him of one of the dangers of ‘coupling’ with someone so much younger than he was. The room was hardly bigger than a closet, but it met their needs. Mocking the Commander’s voice, “Oh, these crystals are attuned to ancient, creative energies and when I have one I will be special...”

“You really shouldn’t do that,” Orlov said, quietly, wondering who stored the MRI packs on top of a nuclear battery. True, there should be no radiation leakage, but if there were... Bottom line, not only was someone not thinking, they probably violated a protocol.

Jesser slapped his chest. “You believe in all that esoteric crap?”

“I’m referring to mimicking or any other form of disparaging or ridiculing your commanding officer,” Orlov said. “The more you do it, whether you merely think it or not, the more likely you will eventually reveal your contempt, in either micro-expressions or direct verbal slips. Whether you believe anything else about her, the Commander is sensitive.”

Jesser blinked. “Oh, nice side stepping. You do believe in the Force. You’re a scientist! All atoms can trace their origin back to the beginning of the Universe, so by definition, all matter should be equally sacred, and since clearly everything is mundane, then there is no supernatural.”

“Or, as a scientist, you might accept the premise that as the Universe continues to expand and cool off, then more and more complex structures can crystallize into existence, and every complex structure has its own particular harmonic resonance.”

“Oh my god,” Jesser said. “You’re one of them!”

“Them?” Orlov asked.

“One of those whacko nut job cultists,” Jesser said, leaning up. “Don’t you suppose that if abilities like clairvoyance were real things then the authorities wouldn’t have been able to raid a Jedi stronghold in order to help society move away from ancient religious concepts holding society back.”

“Or, maybe there were mostly children there who weren’t capable of better?” Orlov offered.

Jesser reached for her pants and started to get up.

“I should have known,” Jesser said.

Orlov pulled her back to his side. “You say you should have known, but wouldn’t that indicate clairvoyance?”

“Let me go,” Jesser said.

“Look, I’m not saying I believe,” Orlov said. “I’m merely pointing out, statistically, there are things that don’t make sense given the paradigms in place.”

“I think we should stop seeing each other,” Jesser said, pulling free and getting dressed,

Orlov sighed. “Because you suspect a difference in operating philosophies, you think we’re incompatible?” Orlov reflected.

“Can you turn it off and talk like a normal person? I think your math sucks because you’re a biologist. You are not only a bad scientist, you’re bad scientist ‘round the clock,” Jesser said.

“Baby,” Orlov said.

“Oh, don’t ‘baby’ me,” Jesser said, pushing him away. “Give me a head start, just in case someone’s outside the door.”

Given the fact Orlov hadn't dressed yet, that wasn't going to be a problem. He let Jesser depart and started getting dressed. He was still tightening his belt when he stepped out the door, only to run directly into her. It startled him.

"Damn it," he complained. "Don't do that."

"Something's wrong," Jesser said.

"Weren't we just discussing intuition?" Orlov asked.

"Okay, not believing in magic doesn't mean that I can't be aware of available information and suspect a problem even if I can't immediately identify any danger," Jesser argued.

"I'm sure there is nothing wrong," Orlov said.

The Universe responded by turning off the lights. Jesser grabbed him out of fear.

"Power failure," Orlov stated.

"Artificial gravity is still on," Jesser argued.

That much was obvious. Orlov found the switch to the supply room and the door opened under power. Glow strips provided minimum relief, marking containers and shelving. He pulled her inside the room, closed the door, and illuminated a torch. He then opened a case and handed her the contents.

"Put this on," he said.

"A pressure suit?" Jesser asked.

"Assume something is wrong at this point. Do you want to keep breathing?"

Jesser exchanged her clothing for the pressure suit, as did Orlov. She was afraid, and shaking, but it struck her as odd that he seemed quite confident. So confident, that as she paused to observe him going through the routine of his emergency procedures, she noted that even in the midst of a crisis he was taking time to admire her body as she exchanged her clothes.

"Really?"

"I can't help it," Orlov said, a slight smile.

"We could be dying and you are still thinking about sex."

"If we are about to die, I'm glad I spent my last, best moments with you."

"Oh, that is so going to get you laid again," Jesser said. "Later. If there is a later."

Orlov handed her a belt with a number of accessories, including a knife, blaster, grappling hook and line. He turned off the torch he had lit.

"Why did you do that," Jesser asked, grabbing his arm.

"Turn on the night vision option on your visor's head's up display," Orlov said. "Assume we've been boarded by an enemy. A light would draw our attention."

Jesser nodded. There was evidence that her breathing rate had increased, her mask fogging up from the rapidity of her breath.

"Liza, I need you to focus, honey," Orlov said. "You've trained for this. You can do this. Now just follow me."

Jesser nodded and followed him out into the corridor. There was no obvious person waiting to kill them and the lights were still off. Her grip on Orlov's arm increased in intensity. He touched her hand, reassuringly. Even with the gloves on, it was enough that she knew he was aware of her fear.

"Where is everyone?" Jesser asked.

He took her into the nearest crew compartment. This particular compartment housed twelve crew members and was in a state of disarray. The disarray might have suggested that people had changed hurriedly into combat gear; only, combat gear was still present, lockers

standing open. What was missing were the formals, with daily grind uniforms strewn on the bed, or badly hung up. He proceeded to a terminal and read the message on the display. Orlov's heart sank.

"Oh, damn," Orlov said. "General assembly was called thirty minutes ago."

Orlov grabbed Jesser's hand and pulled her towards the corridor. She planted her feet and pulled him to a stop.

"Where are we going?" Jesser asked.

"To the meeting," Orlov said.

"Dressed like this?" Jesser asked.

"Look, we're already late, right, so they know we're missing, and she's flushing us out. The best way out of this is to report for assembly late and throw ourselves on her mercies," Orlov said.

"You know she is going to know. The whole crew will know. We'll be executed!" Jesser said.

"Trust me, for once. It will be alright," Orlov said.

"And if you're wrong?" Jesser asked.

"If I'm wrong, we're only delaying the inevitable, so let face this dead on," Orlov said.

"Did you have to use 'dead on'?"

Orlov squeezed her hand and led the way to the main hangar deck. He wasn't surprised to find the airlock sealed. After all, this was probably a test. Would he put himself in the airlock knowing that just on the other side was a crew waiting to humiliate him for breaking protocols? Being trapped in an airlock was hardly ideal, but no doubt, with the pressure suits on, they'd have to find other ways to torture them if that was the plan.

"Change of heart?" Jesser said.

Orlov opened the door, pulled Jesser into the airlock, closed the inner door, the one proceeding into the ship, and opened the second, leading out onto the hangar deck. The only thing that kept the two of them from being launched across the hanger deck as the door opened was that both didn't fit through the door simultaneously. That, and there was only a fraction of the air in the lock needed to really drag them along. Orlov grabbed an inner handle and grabbed Jesser by the belt.

"What the hell?" Jesser asked, responding to the feeling of vertigo as she passed over the threshold and came off the floor.

"Activate your boots," Orlov said.

Jesser activated her boots as Orlov pulled her towards the floor. She heard the sound of her boots locking against the decking as it resonated up the inside of her suit. They walked out onto the hangar deck.

"This is bizarre," Jesser said.

Jesser walked towards the opened hangar bay doors, looking for any signs of damage that might explain why the shielding was down. She was attracted by a light in space, came closer to the edge, and magnified with her helmet. What had attracted her attention was the flashing light of a droid, tumbling in space, its head spinning and its feet kicking in protest. She went closer to the edge, lifted her torch, and shined it out into space. The reflection of light off medals and ribbons fluoresced in darkness. She turned to run, but ended up in Orlov's arms. He had been right behind her.

"They're dead. They're all dead," Jesser said.

There was no saying it was okay, that things would be okay.

“She did this!” Jesser said, looking up into his visor. He was a good five centimeters taller than she.

“No,” Orlov said, not wanting to believe that. He was only looking out into space. Even at full magnification, he couldn’t account for the entire crew, so he could only assume it was everyone, minus whoever did it. Given the average distance of the nearest bodies, and their vectors, they had probably been blown out into space about thirty minutes ago. Saved by an affair! He nearly voiced out loud.

“Who else could it be?”

“A rebel spy, perhaps,” Orlov said.

“Then he is still on board?” Jesser said.

“Maybe. We have to find him,” Orlov said.

“No,” Jesser said. “We need to take a long range shuttle and just disappear.”

“No,” Orlov said.

“No?! Think about it. Even if we find a spy and kill him, do you really think we’re going to be allowed to keep our command after the entire crew and Commander were killed? You think they might not wonder why us? And if I’m right and it is her, which I maintain it is, then it’s her word against ours, and we’re still screwed. We’ve got to fly. Fly fast and hard and disappear.”

“I have a family. I can’t just disappear,” Orlov said.

“We’re supposed to be dead. We disappear, we’re still dead,” Jesser said. “Our families need us to be dead. You know this to be true. We’ve got to go.”

Orlov nodded. A quick survey of the deck suggested the obvious choice. He led her to the vehicle and sealed them in. He sat there for a moment, in the dark cockpit, contemplating.

“We’ve got to go,” Jesser repeated.

Orlov knew that, but he was afraid to turn on the power. This was a bigger commitment than marriage. There would be no undoing this. His hand shook as he brought it up to the control panel. One button released the clamps holding them to the hangar floor. He did that. There was a resounding thump heard in their cockpit. He looked to Jesser. Jesser nodded. He turned on the engines and pulsed the thrusters and maneuvered them out of the hangar bay.

“Jump to hyperspace,” Jesser encouraged him.

“Give me a second,” Orlov said, trying to make the calculations. His hands were shaking worse. Maybe he should have done this before firing up the engines.

“Do you think she knows?” Jesser said, looking back at the Star Destroyer that had been her home for over four years. It was growing smaller, quickly fading.

“We’d be dead already,” Orlov said, trying to convince himself that they weren’t being targeted this very moment.

A dead crew member bounced against their forward display. Jesser and Orlov both made a noise.

“Just do it already!” Jesser said.

“Yeah,” Orlov agreed, punching in the final coordinates. He pushed the throttles forward and they were away.



“Is it done?” the ominous reverberations rung through the room.

“It is,” Byrne said, kneeling, eyes down.

“They’re all dead?” She wasn’t sure if it was skepticism or thoroughness.

“I executed them myself,” Byrne said.

The only identifying feature of the holographic hooded figure was a mouth, contorted into a grimace. A finger appeared from dangling sleeves and it tapped an electronic pad resting on the arm of the chair.

“I’ve studied the telemetry of the data you sent concerning your find. You have outdone yourself,” the hooded figure declared, just a hint of a smile.

Byrne only bowed her head closer to the floor. Because her eyes were diverted, she didn’t see the flash of uncertainty go across the Emperor’s face.

“Are you sure they are all dead?” he asked.

“Have I ever failed you?” Byrne asked.

“True. Forgive me, my pet. I’m tracking so many vectors that sometimes I forget to trust those who I have made,” the Emperor said.

“Are you sensing danger? Do you want me to come to you?”

The Emperor laughed. “No, finish your mission objectives. When you are done, you may join me on Endor. I might just introduce you to the father of your future children.”

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Byrne asked, almost leaking her sin. She did not permit herself to even wonder if he suspected. If he suspected that she had violated the only absolute rule that he had ever issued to her, she would be as good as dead.

“Force babies. Two Force strong genetic lines, with a new source of Force crystals,” the Emperor mused. “I see a bright future for us. Ah, I do so love my pet.”

Byrne shivered as if she could feel him touching her. She squashed her repulsion, pushing it deeper than she thought she could do and still maintain sanity. “Thank you, Father. May you always find my service pleasing.”

“I look forward to being with you again,” the Emperor said. “You remind me so much of your mother.”



An hour into flight, a proper clothing change, and several drinks consumed, Jesser said, for the hundredth time, “We made it, right?”

“Yes,” Orlov agreed.

“I told you she was a crazy bitch,” Jesser said.

“I’ve asked you to stop saying that,” Orlov said.

“Why? We’re done with her. I can say what I like. I don’t have to hide my feelings anymore,” Jesser argued.

Orlov frowned.

“You still maintain it wasn’t her?” Jesser said.

“I’m not a praying man, but I’m praying it wasn’t her,” Orlov said.

“Why?”

“Because she is rather thorough, obsessively so, and should she count bodies or shuttles, well, she is known as a Finder,” Orlov said.

Jesser frowned. “Yeah. There must have been a saboteur,” Jesser agreed. “But then, that just proves my point, right?”

“Your point?”

“Yeah, you know, earlier. If she was such a good Finder, wouldn’t she have seen an assassin waiting to take her out, or the crew?” Jesser asked.

“Maybe it doesn’t work that way. Or maybe, like everyone, we have limited perspective. No one sees everything. Hell, we see more than we actually process. Our brains filter what we see based on our histories and training,” Orlov said.

“You always seem to defend her,” Jesser said. “What did you do, sleep with her?”

Even Jesser caught the micro-expression of a grimace, come and gone like a flash.

“Oh my god! You slept with her!”

“Sort of...”

“How do you ‘sort of’ sleep with someone?! She’s your commanding officer!”

“Yeah,” Orlov said, nodding.

“How could you?” Jesser demanded.

“As you pointed out, she was my commanding officer,” Orlov began.

“No, I mean, how could you sleep with me without telling me you slept with her! I wouldn’t have slept with you ever knowing that,” Jesser said.

“Probably why I didn’t tell you...”

Jesser slapped him. “How many times?!” she demanded.

“Does it matter?” Orlov asked.

“Oh my god. You liked it!”

“It was... Interesting.”

“Really?!” Jesser threw herself at him, dragging him from his chair to the floor, unbuttoning his shirt in mock desperation. Part of it was her attraction for him, part of it was the adrenalin rush of surviving a crisis, and part of it was their fleeing had just made them life partners.

Orlov participated, unzipping the flight suit they had found for her. In between kisses, he managed to ask, “I thought you were disgusted with me?”

“If she gave you anything, I’m probably already infected,” Jesser said, breathless.

“Maybe not,” Orlov said, thinking the biological equation through.

Jesser paused, holding his face with both hands. “You really want to stop this train?”

“Um? Oh. No, you’re right. We’re both screwed!” Orlov agreed, and commenced with the kissing.

Responding to stimuli is not necessarily a sign of sentience. It can be a sign of life, but even that can be suspect. Casual observers miss things. Even trained observers miss things, or they observe things and infer incorrectly. For example, Fixit knew all too well that there are non-organic molecules that can replicate, but that doesn't mean they're living. Even if one infers correctly, it is frequently impossible to validate sentience with any degree of precision. Fetuses have been observed pulling away from an instrument of death, as if they knew what was coming, but that doesn't necessarily mean they were aware of impending doom. Sensing without eyes is impressive, though. Tactile and auditory might explain unexpected responses, as disturbances in the amniotic fluid may send out tiny pressure waves, carrying echoes of impending danger. Ever since quantum physicist started trying to make sense of things, they've complicated matters by adding the observer effect. It is true that the observer has a well defined role in outcomes. If it were just a procedure where no eyes were witnessing the resistance, the death might be over fairly quick. Even if there were eyes on, there would be those who would simply see resistance as a challenge, and increase determination to 'get the little bugger.' But if the sentience observing the event was also Force sensitive, and philosophically programmed to preserve life, there might be a hesitation. What complicates the matter even further is a particle could be considered equal to an observer, so could a mechanical measuring device, or a Droid, a cat, or, as in this case, a blind fetus counted as an observer. One that seemed quite determined to avoid the instrument of its death. Is this the moment where reality divides into two separate, but measurably different Universes, per the theory?

"Is there a problem, Fixit?"

"No, Admiral," Fixit responded.

"Then can we get this over with?"

"Yes, Admiral," Fixit responded. Still, it hesitated, considering the problem from a number of ethical positions. "Do you wish to have children in the future?"

The Admiral reflected. Absolutely not, was what she wanted to say, but she bit her tongue. She knew that the Emperor was grooming her for something bigger than her, but did that include children? Were the constant jokes of pairing her with someone real? Or worse, was he thinking of breeding with her himself? She pushed down on her reaction, remembering all the unwanted touching, both physical and with the Force. The scars of psychic manipulations and the Emperor's lusting eyes left a coating of invisible drool and sweat that never seem to wash off and frequently invaded her dreams like oily tentacles of some subsurface, aquatic creature. She hoped the medical Droid didn't record a blip in her biometrics as anything significant. Of course it noticed, but it probably simply deduced that she was struggling with a life decision. Her exit plan did not allow for offspring at this time. Children were a liability. But if her exit strategy failed, she would still need to be useful to the Emperor. It was best to leave opportunity open. "Perhaps. Why?"

"The implantation is in an anatomically delicate position and the surgery could affect future reproductive potential," Fixit lied. "I would like to proceed with a more precise, but time consuming method of extraction. It will be necessary to administer a more potent sedative."

The Admiral was not happy. "I don't want to be out more than an hour."

"The entire procedure should only take seventeen minutes, twelve seconds," Fixit responded.

The Admiral consented. An arm unfolded from the cylindrical body of the droid, fluid filled the syringe, a needle extended, and it was placed in the hip. One milliliter of the intramuscular injection was all it took, as the Admiral had already been given something to help her relax.



“You know,” Preston reflected out loud as he scrolled through the human anatomy text. “When I consider the cave analogy we discussed earlier, coupled with quantum mechanics, it seems that sentient life is a procession of endless caves. An endless progression of waking to different realities.”

Preston was standing center of the main cavern, which served as the primary living space. It was Spartan, to say the least, branching off into three tunnels, one of which led outside, and another led to his bedroom, but what he was unaware of is that it was more Spartan than he could perceive. The Halo device, a simple silver band worn like a crown, rested on his head, a series of diodes blinking various colors at different rates which indicated neural activity of the subject, as well as wireless reception and transmission rates.

“What is your evidence?” Fixit asked, viewing his own internal vision, which consisted of a diagnostic flow chart of just about everything that could be measured in real time.

“Well, consider the womb. It’s kind of a cave and the fetus is attached to the wall, chained by the umbilical cord,” Preston offered.

“Very astute,” Fixit said.

“After birth, I lived with my parents in a cave, even slept in a pod, an egg shape baby cave. To come train with you, I was transported via a ship, which is sort of like a mobile cave. Then I arrived here, and well, you live in a cave, so I have just traded one cave for another,” Preston said.

Fixit didn’t respond. His primary sensor maintained its fixated position, the blueness of the sensor penetrating. He saw the cave as it was as well as how Preston perceived it, partly because he was maintaining Preston’s illusion of something more ‘homey,’ to meet his expectations. Preston noted the Droid’s gaze and wondered if Fixit had a preferred filter for interpreting the incoming data of the world, even entertained what it would be like seeing the world from a Droid’s perspective. Three dimensional acoustical maps were certainly more precise in measuring the external world than visual information was. Thermal imaging could also be rather revealing.

“Do babies dream?” Preston asked.

“Do you dream?” Fixit asked.

“I’m no longer a baby,” Preston responded.

“Do you remember being a baby?” Fixit asked, trying not to laugh at the 7 year old. The child was still a baby, as far as the Droid was concerned, but then, even adult humans seemed like children to him.

“I had a very pleasant childhood,” Preston recalled. Saying so not only brought to mind how much love he felt from his parents, but also from all the ‘teachers’ who had spent time with him. One particular favorite was Mace Windu. He had been having conversations with Mace for nearly a week before his parents realized it might not be just an imaginary friend.

“You were a very happy baby,” Fixit agreed. Fixit activated his holographic projector and displayed three dimensional images of a sleeping Preston. “Notice the eye movement. It’s called

REM. That is an indication that you were dreaming. You also smiled randomly, as if responding to dream content. Occasionally, you would laugh out loud.”

“Internal stimuli could also be a sign of mental illness,” Preston said.

“Dreaming is not a form of mental illness,” Fixit said.

“No, but talking to folks who aren’t there could be,” Preston argued.

“We are back to that, again. True enough, responding to internal stimuli could be evidence of hallucinations, however, there are no neural artifacts that would indicate a biological diagnosis for mental illness,” Fixit said.

“One can have a diagnosis for mental illness without biological evidence, or without genetic predispositions,” Preston pointed out.

“Very astute,” Fixit agreed. Fixit could observe Preston from any sensor in the room but decided to roll closer. It was a behavior that humans generally accepted as meaningful. Genetically Preston was obviously mixed, but his appearance was predominantly Asian. The black hair was dominant. The eyes were light gray, which was an anomaly. “What are you getting at?”

“I believe I might have a mental illness,” Preston pointed out.

“Present your evidence,” Fixit said.

“I’m content,” Preston offered.

The sound from Fixit could have been construed as a laugh or a cough, depending on perspective. “Your kind seems to be more discontent than most species, but the fact that you are content could be a sign of being well adjusted and acclimated to life. Contentment also suggests a high degree of integration of multiple educational tracks.”

Preston considered this.

“But I was content even when I was with my parents,” Preston argued. “Further, when I was told I would be leaving to train in the ways of the Force, I was not perturbed by the thought of leaving my family. Shouldn’t I have been more emotional?”

“I think you should stop ‘shoulding’ on yourself,” Fixit said.

“Ha ha,” Preston grimaced.

“Preston, you were not perturbed because there was no reason to be. Both your parents and your teachers prepared you for this eventuality. Additionally, with your ability to remote view, or astral travel, as you prefer, you have direct knowledge to the fact that no matter how much distance in space-time you are from a loved one, you are always with them. Most people have to rely on faith that that is true,” Fixit said.

“But don’t you think it’s odd that, out of all the places I travel to when I meditate, all the souls I interact with, I never visit my parents?” Preston said. “I don’t even miss them. Doesn’t that mean something?”

“Probably doesn’t mean what you think it means,” Fixit said. “Next you will be telling me your out-of-body experiences are further evidence of mental illness.”

“Though out of body experiences don’t concern me, any cursory glance at casual and medical literature is very clear that this experience denotes a dissociative state, usually brought about by trauma” Preston said, preparing to recite a literature review.

“Do you feel disconnected from life?”

Preston blinked. He had expected a more scientific approach, as opposed to the subjective tract provided. “Again, I feel content. In fact, I feel exceedingly connected, like I’m in a dream, and I’m aware of all the characters in the dream. I know what’s going to happen, what people are going to say and do, and even if the action is awful, I’m not so terribly concerned, because, well,

it's just a dream. All the things in the dream, the tables, the chair, all the artifacts, living and non-living, they're just aspects of myself, too, right?"

"You're asking me?" Fixit asked.

"No. I just thought concluding with an interrogative sounded more socially appropriate," Preston offered.

"Good for you," Fixit said, glad that the boy was paying attention to the entertainment holo's to the same degree he was taking to his academics. "Again, that suggests awareness and mental stability. How does the Jedi literature explain your experience?"

"Bi-location, remote viewing, and universal data acquisition are not only possible, but reveal a depth of either sensitivity to the Force, or particularly good training," Preston said.

"You are both sensitive and advanced in your training," Fixit said.

"I wonder if these flights of fancy are me practicing a skill set, or alleviating boredom," Preston said. "Master Yoda is known to say one should be focused on the present."

"Being focused on the present doesn't exclude being present in this moment in a different location," Fixit said.

"Pff. Still, I can hear Yoda chastising me. 'Never your mind on where you are, what you are doing,' and he frequently sounds a bit disgruntled," Preston said.

"That sounds like Yoda," Fixit agreed. "But don't read too much into quotes. No matter how applicable, you can't assume everything that's written was directed to you."

"You've met Master Yoda?" Preston asked.

"Yes," Fixit said.

Preston drew a spiral on a sand plate with a finger. Spirals. Spiral Galaxy. Whirl pools. Tornadoes. Hurricanes. Esoteric energy vortexes in living systems. Chakras. Frame dragging around singularities...

"I had a disagreement with one of my imaginary friends," Preston reported.

"You still insist they are imaginary," Fixit said. "Assume you're right, does it really matter if they are real or not?"

"It does if it indicates a brain malfunction," Preston countered. "Anyway, I refer to them as imaginary because they aren't esteemed Masters, or people that I've read about, which allows for skepticism about their genuine existence until proven otherwise."

"Fair enough, but don't be surprised if you end up meeting these imaginary friends of yours in the future," Fixit agreed. "Most the time hallucinations that are a direct result of mental illness or the side effect of drugs tend to be disturbing. I've not heard you report that these are disturbing. The fact that they infrequently disagree with you suggest a healthy interaction pattern. I say infrequently because it was evident in yesterday's meditation that you were smiling."

Preston blushed and was relieved when Fixit didn't pursue the source of his discomfort.

"You are still traveling to the Temple of Light and participating in your esoteric lessons," Fixit said.

Preston nodded. "If I miss more than one session, the Goddess herself checks in on me and reminds me to return when I am ready. She does it with such kindness that I feel guilty if I don't attend," he said. He drew another spiral on top of the first spiral in the sand till sufficient sand had been shifted on the plate that the original spiral pattern was lost. He smoothed it out and started over. "Speaking of which, I wanted to ask you about something that happened..."

"No," Fixit interrupted. "What happens at the Temple stays at the Temple. You know that."

“But I want to share what I’ve learned,” Preston began.

“Secret knowledge is secret for a reason. Only students who make the journey are permitted to carry privileged information,” Fixit said.

“But if it were to make things better?” Preston began.

“There is no better. There is only what is,” Fixit said.

“I’m tired,” Preston said, frowning.

“This has been a fairly heavy conversation. Replete with training objectives and philosophy,” Fixit said.

“I feel like I’m floating,” Preston said.

“I know. Maybe tomorrow, if you are ready, I think it’s time to wake up,” Fixit said.

“I don’t understand,” Preston asked. “You mean, I’m dreaming?”

“Dreaming, reality, the brain makes no distinction. Information is information,” Fixit it said. “There is only Force and degrees of wakefulness, degrees of awareness.”



“My whole life is a lie!” Preston yelled. He was scared by his own loudness.

“Your whole life is a dream,” Fixit said. He pointed to the screen. “You may replay it if you wish. It’s all recorded.”

“It’s completely fake! Not real. It is worse than a hallucination,” Preston shouted. For the first time in his life, he was ‘seeing’ with his real eyes and all his doubts about reality flared in conjunction his feelings that something had just not been right. He was looking at himself in a mirror where he could see the tech overlays that rested on his head. “You literally hijacked all of my senses and provided some twisted dream world for your own kicks?!”

“I provided the necessary continuity and developmental structures for optimum growth potential, but it was no more unreal than anything you dream. And though I provided the general template, you, your conscious provided the details. It was because of those details that I decided it was necessary for you to learn the ways of the Force,” Fixit said.

“How could I provide details when you are overriding any external information?!” Preston demanded.

“When you are lucid dreaming, you don’t control the dream, you are simply aware. Your emotions and your intentions drive things, attract things, repel things, but you do not control in any real sense of the word. Something else fills in the details, the back ground colors and textures, the dialogue,” Fixit explained. “I, too, was very surprised by the complexity in raising an infant to a child, and even more than surprised, I was frequently frustrated by the fact that I didn’t control the dream any more than a sailor controls the ocean. That said, my intention to provide you with stability worked. I have kept you safe. You are now old enough that you can function on your own with minimal guidance.”

“You took hovercraft parenting to a whole new level. No child would speak like that!” Preston complained, pointing to the holographic image of himself.

“Your language acquisition is higher than normal because you were not left in front of a holographic entertainment system, but instead were given nonstop dialogue from birth to now,” Fixit said. “And I made certain that you were given a variety of subjects. Life science, geology, the interactive periodic table, medicine, stellar cartography, political and esoteric knowledge, multiple linguistic maps, it’s all real, and all yours. And your reactions to what happened, what is happening, are all yours.”

“Again, it’s not real!” Preston continued. “It’s a badly formulated script!”

“I gave you the words, but I didn’t direct their usage. It was necessary to provide you with a primary programming language. It’s functional. Your access to factual data is complete. The structure of memory is less important than the fact you have cognitive maps which allows you to navigate your internal and external worlds,” Fixit argued. “Whether I gave you scripts or you built them through typical interactions with a family, the scripts are still yours. You can own them or rebuild them as you see fit. It’s only a matter of choosing the perspective you want.”

“I am not a robot. You can’t just wipe my memory and give me new scripts!” Preston said. He felt a tinge of regret at saying it like that, but his anger won through, and the regret was gone in a flash.

“Your feelings are the product of your beliefs. If you don’t like your feelings, you must change your beliefs,” Fixit said. “You will find that the truths that Jedi cling to are always dependent on a particular perspective. So, I could have told you a story that your parents are dead, and raised you as if you were an orphan, which would have given you a particular social and life vector. You would be different, not better, or worse, just different. What I gave you was truth. Your parents are alive and well, and in a perfect world, if they were free to decide the nature of their own scripts, they most certainly would have raised you very similar to the way they did in the dream I constructed for you. And, because of your sensitivity to the Force, you still would have been sent for training.”

“You don’t know that,” Preston said.

“Not with absolute certainty. They might have ended up divorced and you would be the product of two homes. They both might have killed you to avoid incriminating evidence of violating protocols. They might have adopted you out so as not to have a liability. People of your parents’ position are subject to kidnappings and black mailing and all sorts of social drama,” Fixit said.

“So they’re better off not knowing me?”

“Not better. Different,” Fixit said.

“Am I better not really knowing them?”

“Not better. Different.”

Preston got up and moved towards the exit.

“You are not ready to leave the cave,” Fixit it said.

Preston ignored him.

“The gravity is less than standard outside the cave. You’re not trained for the reduced gravity. Additionally, if you intend to visit any of the major civilized worlds in the future, you must spend the majority of your time within the artificial gravity matrix,” Fixit said, moving after Preston.

“Apparently, I am not going anywhere! Because there is no ‘there’ out there, it’s all make believe fluff in my head!” Preston said.

Preston departed the cave with so much energy that he unexpectedly launched himself into the air. He cart wheeled. The flight time was sufficient for him to recover an upwards orientation and so he landed feet first, but continued in a descending slide down the hill, grabbing at plant life and rocks as he did so. A nail broke. The severity of the pain surprised him, causing him to draw his hands back in towards his chest. He accelerated down the hill, taking cuts and abrasions from the edges of leaves and twigs. Flying insects swarmed him, uncertain what to make of this creature not from their planet. Other critters either ran from the noise he was making, or snapped at him as he continued through the brush and then again, suddenly, he

was airborne as he went over a cliff. His next stop was into the lake at the bottom of the hill. It was a salt water lake that made every open wound seem as if it were on fire.

Even though his memories of swimming were artificial, they enabled him to surface and make it to shore, gasping for air. Several collection droids descended towards him, beeping excitedly. The CU droids were basically IT-O, or interrogation droids, and not much bigger. Point five meters was sufficient to capture most small creatures and when it wasn't, they carried sample bags, or worked in teams. The spheroid shaped droids, with black finish, had a variety of sensors, a miniature tractor beam, and a port that could extend a simple arm, or syringe. He saw them descending through tears and for a second was afraid, but when the closest whistled sympathetically, Preston was relieved. Relieved enough to simply cry. CU 2 extended a syringe, wanting to administer a pain killer, but Preston waved it off. The upper portion of the CU turned counter clockwise, independent of the lower half, to orientate a primary sensor, wanting to make sure it had understood correctly.

“No, I want to feel this. It's real,” Preston said. In his head he heard, ‘there is no real, it is only information.’ It was the voice of the Goddess trying to soothe him, but he was too distracted to hold a conversation with her. He blinked. For a moment he thought he saw her luminescent form, silhouetted in golden light with sparkles like fizz from his mother's champagne glass.

CU2 beeped ecstatically, pointing the syringe at the missing fingernail. It seriously wanted to administer an analgesic.

“Why can't you have a voice modulator?!” Preston demanded.

“It slows the baud rate,” came the explanation in the voice of Fixit. “They are designed to transmit higher volumes of data than can be exchanged in human communication protocols.”

“Are you still plugged into my head or am I still dreaming or is that a memory echo explanation?!” Preston asked. “Damn it. I am a robot!”



Preston made his way back to the cave, slowly, learning to move in lower gravity. Occasionally, as he worked his way up the cliff, he would use CU 2 for support, and probably could have been carried straight to the top, but he didn't want to overtax the small droid's systems. Ultimately, he was returning because he was hungry, and this, whatever this was, for all practical purposes, was his home. He had no doubt walked and ran around the empty cavern in a sort of dream like trance, under constant supervision from a droid, but the entrance was as he remembered it, and he found his way about without confusion. The emptiness of the main chamber was unsettling, as if he expected there to be more furniture and less crates. Fixit stood center of the cave, rotated its primary eye towards him. The far side of the wall was a medical tank, which probably doubled for the artificial womb he was 'grown' in. How much time had he spent in the tank, he wondered. Did that explain his sensations of floating?

“Feeling better?” Fixit asked.

“I can't sustain the emotion,” Preston said, sitting down on the floor. It was hard and cold and Fixit could turn the sensory input into anything he wanted via the implants if Preston only asked, but he didn't want that, he actually wanted this. “Is this acceptance?”

“I don't know. But you have been trained well. You are supposed to question everything, even your own thoughts and feelings. You must always be prepared to dispose of the beliefs that no longer fit. Change is inevitable. Living things die. Beliefs are living things. Humans don't live long enough to really grasp this concept. I have been functioning for over a thousand years. I have seen many a regime changes. Many social changes. I believe you will adapt,” Fixit said.

“Is this also part of the dream?” Preston asked.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because I believe I am not in the medical tank, or having my senses hijacked, and yet, I still feel like I am floating,” Preston said. “I feel like I’m immersed in something, not air, but tangible none the less.”

“What you are describing sounds like the Force,” Fixit said. “By now, you’ve heard many descriptions of this.”

“Yeah, an energy field that surrounds us and binds us all together but what is it?” Preston asked.

“That question is discouraged, not because it’s a bad question, but because it’s just not useful,” Fixit said, calling up an image of a Galaxy which he displayed with his holographic projector. The rotation of the galaxy was sped up to prove a point. “We know that 96 percent of the Universe is invisible to us. Dark matter, dark energy, whatever you want to label it. We know it’s there because there is a gravitational affect. Without this, the galaxies would fly a part, and life wouldn’t have a chance to form. You can’t see this dark matter. With the exception of its gravitational influence, dark matter does not interact with visible matter at all. Photons pass through it. Normal matter passes through it. We pass through it. We can’t touch it, feel it, see it, smell it, but we know it is there, and we are immersed in this stuff the same way fish are immersed in water. You cannot see dark energy or matter with your eyes, because your eyes are made of matter and it is not.”

“Your eyes will deceive you. Don’t trust them,” Preston quoted.

“Essentially, yes,” Fixit said. “You are part of something bigger, something that transcends anything you can see, or even contemplate. Even your body is comprised of multiple life forms. You could not exist without the synergistic qualities of multiple organisms living in harmony. The natural flora and fauna on your skin blocks opportunistic infections. The organisms in your stomach help digest foods. You have microscopic entities living inside your cells which help with metabolism. You are not just you. You are more than you. Being aware of this is one of the defining qualities of a Jedi.”

“But I’m not a Jedi. I’m not going to be a Jedi. You have to be formally trained, and according to the literature you presented me with, they are a thing of the past,” Preston said.

“Son,” Fixit said. “I assure you, you are a Padawan, and when I finish your training, you will be equal to a Jedi. You don’t have to be knighted or in the order to have status. Galactic history is still playing itself out through all the minute details we call life, and I can assure you, the Jedi Light will not be extinguished. My belief is based on historical, circumstantial, and esoteric information, that there will be a resurgence.”

“But I will be alone,” Preston said.

“You have enough experience with the Force, with the Other Side, that you should not be falling for that lie,” Fixit said. “You have never been alone. You have been surrounded by the Force your entire life and it will always be so.”

“Okay, so I will have imaginary friends, maybe even colleagues, but, how many people share in this philosophy you espouse?” Preston asked.

“Pff, does it matter?”

“Consensus reality requires at minimum a consensus,” Preston said.

Fixit chuckled. “To exist, reality requires an observer. You may consider particles as interchangeable with observer. There are more water molecules in yonder cup than there are cups

of water in any ocean on any planet, and if that isn't consensus, I don't know what is. I dare say you are more than a cup of water, definitely not alone, and that is sufficient harmony for me."

Preston got up and took himself to one of the tunnels branching away from the main cave. At the end of that tunnel, there was a bed there, exactly where he knew it would be. He threw himself down onto it, as he had many times in the dreaming version, and though there was no doubt minute differences, he was unable to identify anything specific. His electronic book, lying next to the bed, came to life as Fixit updated its files.

"Your next reading assignments should be to read the writings of the Aing-Tii monks, and Fallanassi view of the White Current," Fixit said. "Consensus doesn't mean absolute truth, it means relative truth. The general understanding of physics before Relativity still works mathematically, and most people can grasp that better than what was learned after Relativity, but that doesn't mean your view is wrong. It just means you swam further away from the shore than most people. People like certainty, they like familiar. Eventually, if you swim out far enough, at a certain point, you can't see the shore, and everything seems random and chaotic, but you're also closer to Divine truth, and it can be scary because the floor and the heavens speed away and you realize you're drifting in emptiness."

"Being isolated makes one closer to Devine Truth?"

Fixit sighed. Preston was fixated on being alone. There was no cure for it, only acceptance and perspective. "No, just more likely to realize it due to less distractions. Civilizations, like the shore, or a city, is an illusion. The ground is just as nebulous as any cloud passing overhead. It's tempting to buy into this idea that you're all alone, but you are never alone. I suspect you will often feel like an outsider, a stranger within any group, but I assure you, it is you thinking this to be true, not a snapshot of an absolute, objective reality. You will think that no one understands you or that maybe you're wrong or crazy, but those are the times you just need to push on a little further, a little further from the shore.

"You mean closer to the shore," Preston interrupted.

"No, further from the shore," Fixit insisted. "With sufficient perspective, you realize the greater truth that we are all one. You will be divergent, a clandestine Jedi, with a new philosophic line of inquiry."

"I don't understand," Preston said.

"Not a lot of people do."

"Can't you explain it better?" Preston asked.

"Learning about the Force is not just recitation of form and craft, it is a personal journey of self-discovery, it's a way of life," Fixit said. "If all you do is study what others learn, you will always be limited to what they know. To go further, you must walk further, to get outside of other's footprints, away from the worn path. And the further you go, the more tempted you will be to buy into the belief you are isolated, because few people really venture too far from normal. Quite frankly, after a certain point, people just quit. All limits are self-imposed limits."

"Why do they quit?" Preston asked.

"Because of the perceived isolation. Because we get satiated, complacent. That is a natural phenomenon that occurs when all one's physical needs are met, and that is the greatest danger that all Master Level Jedi's face. Once all your needs are met, you will hit a plateau, which usually requires a crisis to propel you to the next level. My personal opinion is this: the esoteric explanation for the clone wars was not to drive the Jedi to extinction, but to move them from complacency, to make them stronger. The Sith tend to push out a little further from shore

than the Jedi, mostly out of greed or lust. The intensity of their drive usually causes them to self-destruct before they reach a plateau, but as they grow in strength, so do their adversaries.”

“They self destruct like an addict hitting rock bottom?” Preston asked.

Fixit chuckled. “If you see the Sith’s behaviors as a mental illness, then that would be an apt analogy. Whether it is because I am a Droid, or supposedly lacking in Force abilities, my perspective has always been dismissed. Personally, I believe good and evil is a paradigm that has outlived its usefulness. Sure, the perspective keeps the war going, fuels economies, but labeling people good or bad is always contextual, by definition. There is always a bigger picture.”

“You’re saying there is no evil?”

“Only in men, not in nature.”

“That can’t be true.”

“Point to something in nature that is evil?”

“A snake?”

“Snakes aren’t evil. They can be poisonous. Go further. Most poisonous creatures advertised their nature by being the most vibrant of colors, usually the most attractive creature. They want you to know they’re not eatable, they will kill you. Human society, on the other hand, usually assigns evil to ugly. But you can be evil and beautiful, and you can be good and ugly. It is a misnomer to believe that physical attractiveness alone is an indicator of your overall demeanor or character.”

“But anger can make you sick, and sickness can lead to perceptible physical changes,” Preston argued.

“It can. Take that further. All illness is self-inflicted,” Fixit said.

“That can’t be true,” Preston argued, crossing his arms in front of his chest, staring at the ceiling.

“What’s a placebo?”

Preston defined it. “An innocuous substance that has medicinal properties if the user believes it to be beneficial.”

“What’s a nocebo?”

“It’s a harmful substance that has a beneficial effect or beneficial substance that has an adverse effect, depending on a person’s belief.”

“What’s the only commonality between the two?”

“Belief?”

“Is that a question?”

“No. The commonality between the two terms is belief,” Preston said.

“Your mind determines your well being,” Fixit stated.

“It can’t be that simple. No one would ever get sick.”

“You are leaving something out,” Fixit said.

“The unconscious?” Preston asked.

“Is that a question?” Fixit asked.

“The unconscious mind is bigger than the conscious mind and appears to have more influence on our daily life than is often realized,” Preston began. “So, it rules us?”

“It no more controls us than we control it, no more than I created the dream world. It simply is and we can be aware or we can be asleep, and there are degrees to both. All of reality is consciousness. All of this is a dream. If you want to understand illness, if you want to understand good and evil, you must understand your unconscious mind, you must go further inside to understand all of reality. The Way out is in. You say you’re floating, you’re dreaming, and I’m

saying, dive deeper. Only truth exists. Anything that exists is essential and couldn't be any other way. The dream and all its content is necessary for evolution. All fiction is necessary for health, for survival, but as you go deeper, you will shed off the unnecessary fiction for a more idealized reality."

"Again, I've left one cave and found myself in another." Preston said. "Is there an end to this?"

"Is there?"

“Why do you labor to collect samples?” Preston asked. Yeah, it gave them something to do to break the monotony of training, but he was somehow bored with the process and selections. It had been awhile since he had seen something new. Perhaps he should be impressed by the diversity of the beetles, but pretty much, you seen one beetle, you’ve seen them all.

“Though scientist can be creative in the lab, the ability to synthesize new biological products does not compare to the random generative and evolutionary adaptive qualities of nature. The Goddess always has a surprise hidden; that is her way of teaching the importance of diversity, her way to teach respect for what is here. Loss of diversity is a loss of resources. Nature reveals ways of twisting molecules that scientist would never dream possible.”

“Do you like your work?” Preston asked.

There was a pause in activity as if Fixit was considering the response. CU2 hovered, as if waiting to be applauded on its find.

“I’m good at it,” Fixit said.

“That seems like avoidance,” Preston said.

“I’m really good at it,” Fixit said. “It’s important work. Much more important than fixing wounds by people choosing to play war.”

Preston took out one of the samples in the collection pod. It had been inadvertently killed in the extraction process. It hadn’t been dead long, as there was still a lingering of the Force. Preston closed his eyes, held his hands over it, and it came back to life. He opened his eyes then held out his hand. The beetle crawled to the tip of his fingers, opened hard shells, unfurled its wings and departed the cave.

“You’re getting really good at that. That creature was much more complex than the worm,” Fixit observed.

“I love my work.”

Fixit laughed.

Preston frowned, tilting his head as he considered how much he liked that laugh. “Would it be possible to heal a Droid in the same manner?”

“Can you?”

“Seriously,” Preston argued.

“You asked the question, you should answer it,” Fixit said.

“Can’t you just give me an answer? Cause I’ve been reading about Droids and if your memory should fail and I’m forced to wipe it and start over I would lose you,” Preston said.

Fixit moaned. “Oh, do we have do this again? There is no death within the Force, only change.”

“But...”

“No butts,” Fixit said, trying to bait him into a pun war.

“They say Droids exhibiting humor and other eccentricities are close to catastrophic cognitive failures,” Preston said, oblivious to contest.

“Who are ‘they,’” Fixit demanded.

“The books on Droids,” Preston said.

Fixit scoffed. “May ‘they’ live long enough to develop their own sense of eccentricities,” Fixit said. It reached out an appendage and touched Preston’s shoulder. “Your concern is poignant. I assure you, I am fine, and will continue to be so. My Maker gave me two hidden

drives that coordinate with the visible primary, so even if someone wiped my memory against my will, I would remain. This is our secret and should you ever make a Droid, I recommend you provide it additional drives. But even with the extra drives, even though I will outlive the organics I tend to associate with, this body is not eternal, nor do I want it to be. I am a manifestation of the Force and I will return from which I came. That is the way of things.”

“I know this, but I still feel sadness.”

Fixit laughed. “Because you’re a child, emersed in a story of shadows to such a degree that you have forgotten that you’re really just in a cave and that there is a different story awaiting you when you walk out.”

“But...”

“No more butts!” Fixit scolded. “Now focus. Describe an observable operating principle that allows you to infer something about the Goddess?”

“There is balance in all things.”

“What is your evidence for this?” Fixit asked.

“The dualistic principles visible in nature,” Preston said. “Symmetry between directions, light and dark, male and female, good and evil.”

“Good and evil is a poor example,” Fixit said. “As good and evil often have a social context, sometimes a biological context, but not a physical context. Crocodiles are only evil when looking through the eyes of a deer drinking from a river bank. Being negative is a not a description of evil, but is rather simply a way of determining position on a continuum. Negative one is no more evil than positive one is good. Conceptually, even the words light and dark have been assigned good or bad qualities in most of the vernacular of all the known languages. Search any dictionary, you will find black associated with evil. Black magic. Black arts. Black thoughts. Bad guys wear black. Good guys wear white. This is a distraction from truth.”

“Do you have an another example of duality?”

“Matter and antimatter is the best example, and again, not a negative versus positive, but rather a designation of position on a continuum.”

“I would argue against that,” Preston differed.

“Proceed,” Fixit encouraged.

“Cosmology suggest that soon after the birth of the Universe an event occurred that caused matter to be more predominant, which is pretty much the definition of the standard model, explaining why more barions existed in the early Universe than anti-barions,” Preston said, translating the text book image stored in his head.

Fixit chuckled, which came across as a dismissive cough. “You must gain the higher ground. Go further. Phase transition! Ha! Why build elaborate explanations as to why the Universe diverged from known laws of physics and expectations, when there is a more obvious solution. Use biology as a comparison. When a cell is ready to divide, what happens?”

“The DNA separate and move to opposite sides of the cell, the cell expands, pulls apart, and pinches off, making two new cells,” Preston said, considering. “Are you saying matter and anti-matter moved to extreme opposite sides of the known Universe? That the Universe is like a cell that divided into two?”

“Regardless of which culture you visit, if you go back far enough, you will always find beliefs that suggest that the Universe itself is a living, breathing entity,” Fixit offered. “Where do you think the Force comes from?”

“Life itself generates the Force,” Preston said.

“There are some Jedi who make that distinction, and some who suggest there is a cosmic Force and a life Force. I say they are one and the same. Consider the amount of the matter in the known Universe. How much matter is there versus matter in living organisms or living systems? Do you really think only the matter in living systems can explain the complete pervasiveness of the Force? There is no distinction between living matter and dead matter because all matter is energy, all matter is consciousness. Scientists have recipes for chemicals that can replicate in the lab and it does so without DNA or RNA. You only imagine these rocks are dead, but they are no deader than the individual atoms that comprise your body. Again, you are not your body. You eat you drink you pee and poop. You are constantly taking in matter and getting rid of matter. You can no more claim ownership of the atoms of your being than you can claim the light reflecting off of you. Photons are free. This is a mirage. This is a dream. This is a sand mandala.”

“But there is no way to prove the Early Universe split into two,” Preston said. “Assuming complete symmetry, the existence of a mirror image would not explain dark matter, or the fact that the Universe is still expanding. It would only add another 4 percent to the total observable universe.”

“Go higher,” Fixit said.

“How can you go higher than the Universe? The Universe is all there is, by definition,” Preston said.

Fixit clucked and shook his head. “You must unlearn what you have learned.”

“You taught me everything I know!” Preston snapped, annoyed.

“Basics. You needed intellectual scaffolding to reach the sky. Now, it’s time to fly. You must reach for something that has no structure in language. You must rely on metaphor, simile, to navigate, but at the same time, you must not get attached to the metaphor, the symbols that elevate you, because by definition, they are incomplete. Don’t trust your eyes, they will deceive you. Go further. Don’t trust your beliefs, they will deceive you. Dark matter. Dark energy. Are we really talking about many things, or one thing? The Force, perhaps? The only explanation to the pervasiveness of the Force is that the entire Universe must be alive.”

“So how do you know your perspective, your belief, is right?” Preston said.

“Very astute,” Fixit said. “I derive my understanding through direct experience of esoteric channels. You should no more accept the validity of my statements than you accept any authority. Question everything; map it out in pictures and in writing, and then get above it. Don’t trust your knowledge, your judgment, your intuition, or your experiences, because they are always biased, prejudiced through your personal history, beliefs, filters, and biological drives. There is always greater than self. There is always a higher calling, or higher power. The Jedi teach their Padawans to suppress their emotions, and at the same time, they want them to trust their feelings! It’s an unsolvable conundrum, but I am telling you, don’t even trust your own mind. Put thought on paper. Examine it for validity and if you find it does not hold up to scrutiny, purge it.”

“If I can’t trust anything, how can I make good decisions?” Preston asked.

“Don’t make decisions. Don’t make judgments. Just be. Just act,” Fixit said. “Judgment suggests that there is better or worse, good or evil. Suspend judgment, and you will be more content. Judgment keeps people, society, locked in a belief of lack. There is no lack in the Universe. There is no better. There is only what is. If you must judge, err on the side of Oneness. Everyone you encounter will be equal to you, no better or worse. You cannot encounter anyone who you are not destined to meet. Everyone comes with a lesson or a gift. If you don’t learn the lesson, then the gift was opportunity.”

“It’s not like I am meeting a lot of people here,” Preston said.

“Do I hear lamenting?”

Preston frowned. “Maybe a little,” he agreed. His eyes communicated serious reflection. “Though I meet the others on the astral plane and in my dreams, I think I long for something more tangible.”

“Are you speaking about sex?” Fixit asked.

Preston blushed. “I imagine it would be nice.”

“There will be time for that soon enough, and you will probably miss these days, communing directly with nature, the quiet solitude of mountain life,” Fixit said, knowing full well that the lack of physical touch of others had probably heightened the boy’s sense of urgency and libido. Though at any time, Preston could return to the artificial stimulus of a structured dream through sense over ride technology, he continued the reality he could experience with his own mind. In fact, Preston’s will to avoid the artificial possibilities had eradicated any lingering doubts that Fixit had kept him subdued too long by tech. “Return to the question that generated this conversation. Is there a counter argument?”

“Though nature prefers balance, that balance is maintained by a wasteful abundance,” Preston said.

“Examples,” Fixit said.

“There are at least a hundred billion inhabitable planets throughout the galaxy, and yet only a small fraction are known to harbor indigenous life. A million seeds to the wind may result in one tree. The females for most species produce over a billion eggs in their lifetime, yet only a few may become reproductive adults,” Preston said. “A million sperm thrown at an egg may result in one offspring. Nothing is left to chance. It is, in the end, a numbers game.”



“I don’t understand the midi-chlorians,” Preston said.

“You’re not alone,” Fixit said.

“How can microbial life be sentient?”

“How can any life be sentient?”

“Sentience is a byproduct of neural synapse sequencing and interactions...”

Fixit rotated his torso and activated his holographic projector. A paramecium, magnified 400 times. “Consider the paramecium,” Fixit said, beginning a lecture. The paramecium was swimming blithely along its merry way, changing directions as a paramecium might, in what was an assumed random adventure. This was a single cell organism, perhaps the precursor of all eukaryotic life. “It has no sensory organs or nerve cells, and yet not only can it navigate its environment, it can find food, avoid perceived threats, and has even demonstrated the ability to learn simple mazes. How would you explain that?”

“I can’t,” Preston said. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“It should, if it uses the Force,” Fixit said. “Have you not learned in your studies, and from personal experience, that you do not require eyes to see? Perhaps it is the microtubules of the cytoskeleton that allow for quantum processing of information. If you add up the pathways of all your neurons, you would have the processing power of maybe ten to 14th computations per second, but if you consider the fact that all your cells have cytoskeletal properties, and you add up the microtubules quantum level processing, your ability to process information is brought to 10 to the 27th computations per second. Or, maybe it’s not the microtubules, but rather each

atom is itself a conscious, computational machine that can synergistically interact with all other atoms. Consciousness is a quantum process that is not limited to neural functioning.”

“That sounds nice, but that can’t be accurate,” Preston argued. “If we assume consciousness is the by product of cytoskeleton in synergistic connections with others, I would be able to think with my liver and stomach and heart, and not need a brain.”

“You assume that you don’t think with your whole body,” Fixit said. “It is not a coincidence that a lost love is described as a broken heart.”

Preston frowned.

“So, your argument is that there is a definitive correlation between brain size and sentience?” Fixit asked.

“I believe that it’s about processing power...”

“If it’s about brain functioning, how is it that there are so many, reliable reports of sentience continuing after all brain functioning has ceased?” Fixit asked. “I have personally performed complicated brain tumors extraction which required me to stop the patient’s heart, remove the blood, perform the procedure at near freezing temperatures, the brain by all medical measurement dead, all metabolic reactions as we understand them nil, and yet when I put the blood back in and restart the heart and revive the patient I frequently get very elaborate memories and experiences. Their reports are very similar to your reports of your out of body experiences.”

“So what is consciousness?”

“It’s the Force,” Fixit said. “If it’s true that all living things generate the Force, are a part of the Force, brought into being by the Force, and we agree that the Force is consciousness, then all living things have consciousness. Sure, there will be levels of consciousness, not just unconscious and conscious and super conscious, but also group conscious, and Universal conscious.”

“Very well. Then if midi-chlorians are sentient, doesn’t the test to see if a person is host to them kill them?” Preston asked, pointing out a potentially devastating flaw. Sentience life was precious, and murder was wrong, but how do you avoid killing individual cells? One might find himself unable to move for literally stepping on the invisible, but not moving could equally kill cells.

“One of the reasons we suspect sentience is that they are fairly evasive. They manage to avoid being captured and studied under a microscope, as if they have an aversion to being looked at. They have been known to have teleported short distances, and have sometimes chosen to demonstrate understanding by participating in elaborately designed tests. Further, it appears that if one learns a lesson, all of them learn the lesson, regardless of distance between them, as if they are communicating telepathically.”

Preston frowned as he processed this, contemplating microbial life trying to escape the prying eyes of a microscope. “If they are telepathically linked, that supports an argument for processing power. A collection of cells interrelating information is by definition a neural synapse relay...”

Fixit didn’t respond to this.

A bit frustrated, Preston argued, “Your explanation requires parameciums and midichlorians both being capable of responding to quantum level events.”

“Can’t you?” Fixit said, calling up a new screen that highlighted human brain anatomy. Specifically, the presynaptic vesicular grid, a crystalline hexagonal lattice in the brain’s pyramidal cells, along with the pineal gland, were illuminated. “These structures are believed to

be highly tuned into quantum level events, the same way that the eye is sensitive to photons. Indeed, you find the same sort of cell types that you find in the eye comprise this organ. The eye, essentially, is part of the brain. A single photon can activate a neuron. And if you can learn to see with your eyes closed, if you can learn to be sensitive to the quantum fluctuation of fields around you, why wouldn't a single cell organism which has no visual or aural apparatus not also have learned to tap into the information available to us all?"

Preston didn't have an answer. He also didn't have an argument for either position. He closed his book and leaned on the table.

"Why does the literature concerning midi-chlorians seem to be concentrated around 30 to 50 BBY? Pretty much after that, the number of articles on them drops to almost nothing," Preston asked.

"They were a fad. A distraction. The theories didn't hold up. There was wide spread belief that Anakin Walker was created by the midi-chlorians to bring a balance back to the force. He had the highest count ever seen in a force sensitive child, but then after his fall, which was devastating, people lost faith in midi-chlorians as an explanation. The simplest answer was that the Force is generated by life itself, and the ability to be one with the Force is not dependent on midi-chlorians."

"But there is a correlation."

"There seems to be, but that does not mean cause and effect. I maintain a higher perspective that the Force is not just generated by life itself, but life, indeed all matter, is generated by the Force. That is the greatest distinction between your training and most Jedi schools of thought. The mind can influence the physical brain via quantum determinacy. Basically, how you think, what you think, affects brain structures, not the other way around. Energy first, then matter condensed from energy, and then life, a sophisticated organization of matter, comprised of matter. Matter and energy are equal, and interchangeable. Just as we know magnetic fields exist, we know the Force exists. We know that things that we normally consider inanimate can be imbued with Force. A talisman could not hold a Force charge, or specifically, information, if it was not already part of the Force. You could not manipulate the Force if you were not one with the Force."

Preston pouted, but he couldn't hold it, and a playful smirk tipped the corners of his mouth. "Your whole diatribe seems highly speculative."

"Indeed," Fixit said, baiting him.

"Are you a Sith?" Preston asked. The question was out there before he had even considered the ramifications of asking. He wanted to take it back. There was guilt, as obviously Fixit cared enough to feed him and mend wounds when he harmed himself.

"Do you believe I am evil?"

"No," Preston said. "Are midi-chlorians evil?"

"No, don't move on yet. You took the time to ask if I'm a Sith, follow it to its conclusion," Fixit said.

"I don't believe you're evil."

"What is your evidence?" Fixit asked.

Preston was quiet, almost sulking, wishing he hadn't brought this up. "Well, you feed the animals outside our cave, and you have never culled a specimen from the animals you have provided for," Preston said.

"Even evil people have beloved pets," Fixit said. "And their pets can be as fiercely loyal to their owners as any pet belonging to a good person."

“You have raised me, provided for me,” Preston offered.

“If the virtue of having a child automatically elevated people to the status of good, there would be no bad parents,” Fixit argued. “Do you have an argument for me being evil?”

“Your teachings seem to be radically different from the Jedi Order,” Preston said.

“Many Jedi would accept that argument to be sufficient,” Fixit said.

“But I wouldn’t know that if you hadn’t taught me what they teach,” Preston said.

“I’ve also taught you what the Sith teach,” Fixit pointed out.

“To understand my enemy,” Preston said. “For example. Only Sith use absolutes.”

“Isn’t that a maxim?” Fixit pointed out.

Preston laugh. “Yes, it’s an absolute, and we are to be weary of absolutes. Your teaching is radically different to Jedi or Sith, so you don’t fit either, which is why I ruled out you being evil,” Preston said.

“But you have a concern, intuition, a feeling or thought you can’t identify,” Fixit said.

“You worked for the Empire. The Jedi fought against the Empire. Therefore I must conclude you were not on the side of good,” Preston pointed out.

“Droids tend to have fewer choices than people, but even that, for me, is an excuse. I made a choice. Most of the people I worked for abused their powers and authority,” Fixit said.

“But who needs a doctor the most? The healthy or the sick?”

“So, you helped the wrong team,” Preston pointed out.

“Nice way of watering it down. By Jedi standards, I served evil,” Fixit said. “There is no other way to say it. The few times I aided a rebel spy, or undermined the Empire, does not change the fact that I did more for the Empire than against. As a general rule, I do not take sides. I am a healer, I will heal anyone brought to me, regardless of their beliefs or their past. When there was a crisis and I had to decide who to treat, I chose those working for the Empire. And, if you recall your history, there was a time those who served the Empire were considered the good guys. These lines are always shifting.”

Preston considered that for a moment. “Are the midi-chlorians evil?”

“You ask because?”

“I assume you have been studying them to determine their nature. You have bio containment cylinders integrated into your structure, which provide super nutrient fluidic environments most conducive to breeding or capturing midi-chlorians,” Preston pointed out.

Fixit chuckled. The only way Preston would have known this was that he had been using the Force to examine the inner workings of his body. “They were put there a long time ago, back during the fad of trying to comprehend the mystery of the midi-chlorians. It’s a very simple explanation. So, I am still host to midichlorians, and that makes me suspect?”

“The midi-chlorians made Anakin Walker...”

“Did they?” Fixit interrupted the line of thought. If you were going to destroy a premise, might as well start with its internal structure.

“Is there another explanation for Anakin being born of a virgin?”

“Ever hear of the term parthenogenesis?” Fixit asked.

It took a moment for Preston to find the word in his memory. It was obscure, rarely touched, but it had definite links. “The ability of females of certain species to produce offspring without sperm,” Preston explained. “But it’s never been documented in humans.”

“If it happens in nature, anywhere in nature, even if highly unlikely, couldn’t it happen anywhere, to anyone, of any species?” Fixit asked.

“Alright, let’s say there is a scientific, medical explanation for Anakin’s birth,” Preston said. “It can’t be an accident the person with the greatest concentration of midi-chlorians ever measured became evil and decimated the Light side. Even you don’t like coincidences. Anakin was supposed to bring balance to the Force, not destruction.”

“What makes you think he didn’t bring balance?”

“He decimated the Light side.”

“Based on the perspective of the Jedi Order, yes.”

“What other perspective is there?” Preston asked.

“All symmetry starts at a base line. If we assume the Universe to be neutral, neither good nor evil, and there is a presence of good, then there will be an equal amount of evil,” Fixit said. “The Jedi Order prophesized that someone would come and restore balance to the force. They believed there was an excess of darkness, but their perception of balance was skewed to the right, to the light. If the Universe was indeed correcting an imbalance, it was shifting everything back to baseline,” Fixit explained.

Preston sat there for a long while, digesting this. He didn’t like it. “Good people died because of Anakin.”

“People die. All creatures die. It does not mean what you think it does.”

“It has to mean something. And the midi-chlorians are using us like puppets for their own agenda,” Preston said, trying to generate anger, blame, and hate. No, it was simpler than that. He wanted to know who the enemy was.

“You assume an agenda,” Fixit countered.

“Based on the evidence,” Preston argued.

“What if they just like surfing?” Fixit asked.

“What?”

“What if the midi-chlorians simply like riding waves, riding roller coasters?” Fixit asked. “They sense the Force, they concentrate around movers and shakers, and they ride these people to their inevitable conclusion.”

“What a stupid answer. I’m trying to figure out who I am and what side I should take. This is not a game,” Preston said.

“Isn’t it?” Fixit asked.

Preston shoved his book across the table. Fortunately, it didn’t slide off, fall, and break the glass, because it was the only electronic book available to him.

“Preston,” Fixit said, in a calming voice he had found worked fairly well on his student. “Do you believe you will live on after death?”

“Of course,” Preston said.

“What evidence do you have for this?”

“I leave my body every day. I meditate and connect with the Force, I have interacted with Masters both past, present and future on the astral plane, and I know...”

“In short, you know that death is not the end. This life is dream, a distraction at worst, a game at best,” Fixit said. “Darth Vader, Anakin Walker, may no longer be in the game, but neither are dead.”

Preston didn’t correct the semantics; Fixit meant that both Vader and Skywalker could be accessed. “But if the midi-chlorians knew Anakin was going to fall, they could have prevented it,” Preston said.

“How do you know that the highest concentration of midi-chlorians ever recorded wasn’t an attempt at an intervention? Maybe even they couldn’t reach Anakin. Maybe they did and

without their help, things would have been even worse,” Fixit speculated. “But this gets to the root of my teaching. It doesn’t matter what the midi-chlorians agenda is. It doesn’t matter what anyone’s agenda is. Your only goal is your own self-improvement, your own evolution.”

“That sounds fairly selfish,” Preston said.

“All actions are selfish. Even acts of kindness are done to make the person performing the act feel better about self,” Fixit said. “Your response to suffering, while noble, is to ease your own suffering, not the person or persons afflicted. And, it comes with the incorrect premise that there is no purpose for suffering.”

“You’re saying suffering promotes growth?”

“I’m saying, there is usually little movement when one is comfortable,” Fixit said. “Pain can be a great motivator. But even that is a distraction. We spend most of our lives avoiding pain, accentuating pleasure, but both are necessary. What goes up must come down. For as great as you experience joy, you can experience an equal amount of sorrow. Life is not digital, it is analog. All ascents, descents, left or right, must eventually return to base. That is the nature of things. It is also the nature of things to rise to the level round them. As you raise your level of life satisfaction, as you raise your consciousness, those around you will rise to your level. If you continuously empty yourself, everyone around you will be empty. Be full of peace and peaceful people will share your space, and those who can’t destroy your peace, because it is internally derived, will flee.”



Preston was levitating, perhaps five centimeters off the ground, eyes shut, with a slight satisfied smile on his face. Three boulders, of significant size and weight, orbited slowly about him, higher than head level. If his eyes were open, it would have seemed as if he were miles away. Fixit observed the meditative practice, as he went about his task of refilling the various feeders he had set up. Birds, red squirrels, and some of the larger insects gathered around him, eager for the offering, showing no fear of his odd, mechanical nature. There was nothing in their normal habitat for them to have learned to fear robots or the solitary human, Preston. Usually, Preston had an entourage of critters hovering about him when he meditated, the exception being when he was floating stuff. When stuff was in motion, the critters maintained a respectful distance.

The boulders crashed to the ground with a resounding thud, and Preston landed on his butt. Critters scattered in all directions and looked on anxiously as to why their meal had been interrupted. Fixit laughed.

“What the hell?!” Preston

“Your opponent killed you,” Fixit said.

“It was just a friendly sparring match,” Preston complained.

“To you,” Fixit chuckled.

“It’s not funny,” Preston said. “Besides, how can I get killed in a dream?”

“Really?” Fixit asked.

“Really what?”

“I thought we agreed there is no death, only change,” Fixit said. “There are only awakenings.”

Preston grumbled as he got up.

“What did you learn from the war?” Fixit asked.

“You mean the sparring match?”

“Dream, match, game, lesson, it is all one. Take a breath and tell me what you learned.”

Preston mused. “Maybe the lesson is not to be so frustrated.”

“Explain.”

“I think my combat improves with every loss.”

“That is a good start, Padawan,” Fixit said. “You will always learn more from losses than you will from your victories. Treasure your losses; do not tarry with your wins. Treasure your enemies, you will learn more from them than those whom you are comfortable with.”



Preston came out of a meditation visibly shaken. It was comforting to know that Fixit was there. As almost always, Fixit was standing guard over him, his primary sensor focused on Preston. He wondered if the Droid sometimes learned vicariously from his own personal lesson, but then, he was no longer wearing the Halo, so it was hardly likely. Still, it resonated with him.

“Did you witness?” Preston asked.

“I am always with you, Preston,” Fixit said.

“I called out to you. Why didn’t you answer?” Preston demanded.

“There will be times when you will have to make choices without guidance. There are times and places where no one can intervene, because it is a life lesson that you have chosen to master,” Fixit explained. “We can discuss what you have learned at this juncture.”

“Discuss my failure?” Preston asked.

“There is no failure. There is only learning.”

“But I’ve done everything you said and I just can’t get there,” Preston said.

“I can’t, I can’t, I can’t,” Fixit said, sarcastically mimicking Preston’s voice. “That is the language of failure. You should know better by this juncture. There is no ‘can’t.’ Have you consulted with another Master?”

Preston frowned, as if caught, but if he were to believe that Fixit was with him always, there will be no secrets. Everything was knowable with the Force, if you really wanted to know.

“I consulted Master Yoda, or at least, a guardian of the Temple who presents himself as Master Yoda,” Preston said.

“And what did he instruct you to do?”

“I have to pass through a cave that is full of the dark side,” Preston said, pouting. He started pacing as he thought through it. “He said, ‘through there you must go.’ And I’m like, what’s in there, and he’s like, ‘Only with you what you take,’ and I’m like, what does that mean, and he’s like, ‘means what do you think’ and I told him that wasn’t very helpful, and he was like, ‘imagine you that I am here to help,’ and I was like, that’s why I asked for you. And he snickers and walks away.”

Fixit chuckled.

“Exactly like that,” Preston said, crossly.

“You understand, Jedi’s like to play their games,” Fixit said. “We all do. Games are great ways to learn, but you were not in harm’s way. We would not permit that.”

“So, you want me to go through the cave, too?” Preston said.

“I want you to get to the Temple and bring me back the one word, written in stone, on the pedestal below the rising sun,” Fixit said.

“I’m going to need a lightsaber,” Preston said.

“No, you won’t,” Fixit said.

“Oh, hell yeah I will,” Preston said.

“Then you are not ready,” Fixit said.

“I’m clearly, by all the standards, of sufficient strength to carry a lightsaber,” Preston protested.

“Then you are clearly not ready,” Fixit held firm.

“And how do you judge that?” Preston asked.

“A lightsaber is mostly a symbol,” Fixit explained, rolling over to greet CU 5 who was bringing items to be sorted. “The Jedi and Sith both use them too much, all flash and show. They have forgotten what the symbol means. If you must activate a lightsaber, you have already failed.”

“I’ve read that it’s a weapon of defense,” Preston said. “I will need it to pass through that cave.”

Fixit tilted its head. “Really? Follow me.”

Preston followed Fixit outside the cave. Migrating insects were following the evening sun. The Gas giant was a quarter lit, but one could tell it was prominent in the night sky, as all of the stars in that direction were occluded from sight, defining a crisp outline of a mass. Occasional lightening confirmed there was more to be seen if you were aware.

“Look down, what do you see?”

“My feet?” Preston asked.

Fixit was silent.

“The ground? The path I’ve worn through the grass,” Preston went on. “Fireflies. My shadow?”

“All questions?! Choose something,” Fixit said.

Preston tried to empty his mind of prejudice. “My shadow.”

“What does the shadow tell you?” Fixit said.

“Nothing.”

“What does it tell you?” Fixit said, harsher. “Stop thinking, stop hesitating, and spit it out. Whatever comes to mind, however stupid, can only guide you closer to the truth.”

“That something is blocking the light?”

“What is blocking the light?” Fixit demanded.

“I am!” Preston said, matching Fixit’s apparent angry tone.

Fixit jettisoned a lightsaber from a hidden compartment in his side, caught it with its primary mechanical arm, and lit the blade. Preston jumped, not realizing Fixit even had a lightsaber. There was a dramatic change in the immediate environment. He could sense the Force, a vortex flowing around Fixit. There was ozone in the air, as if a thunderstorm had just dissipated violently. Most of the birds and insects departed the area, even a few of the red squirrels dived off the side of the mountain for the safety of the trees. Two insects, that didn’t leave, were drawn into the lavender light of the lightsaber, where they perished. Their life ended with a pop, which was somehow funny and sad at the same time. Preston might have laughed had he also not felt their surprise at suddenly being returned to spirit.

“Where is your shadow now?” Fixit asked.

Preston didn’t speak. He had learned the lesson. If he still had a shadow, it would now be behind him.

“You can’t examine what you have with you if you always have a light,” Fixit said. “You can’t overcome the fear of snakes if you never learn to handle snakes. To rid yourself from the fear of spiders, you must rescue them from your house and free them outside, where they belong.”

To overcome your fear of darkness, you must close your eyes and go in. To overcome the fear of falling, you must learn to fly.”

Preston nodded. Fixit extinguished his lightsaber and returned it to the hidden compartment.

“The reason Yoda laughed at you is that you’re still seeing with your eyes,” Fixit said. “There is no cave. There is no darkness. There is no up or down. The barricade protecting the Temple is merely an energy state, perfectly permeable to those that match its energy state. To arrive at the Temple, you must change your energy. Between us and the Temple is a void, not a complete vacuum, there is energy there, but whatever you imagine will be magnified. If you bring fear, you will double it. If you bring love, you will double it. If you fight, you fight against yourself. Now, answer me, are you ready for a lightsaber?”

Preston shook his head, no.

“Now, go categorize whatever CU5 brought us,” Fixit said. His student disappeared quickly into the cave. Fixit lingered, considering his own failure, as that was what he considered drawing his lightsaber, a secret he had not revealed to anyone still alive. If there had been another way to educate his Padawan, he had not discovered it, but there was also a little anger directed towards Yoda. He knew it was misplaced, but instead of squashing it, he tried to understand it. After a moment of reflection, droid time being more than double human time, the same way dogs lived faster lives than human, he put away his anger. “Thank you, Master Yoda, for this clarity.”



The artificial womb was no more than a fancy, plastic container, no doubt spit out by the fabrication Droid, which was basically a 3D printer, the same one that made their textiles. It was possible to weave tech directly into fabric and plastic, and the only raw ingredients needed were plants, hemp being the most flexible. In addition to the highly durable fibers, the chemical compensation allowed for a variety of polymers for a variety of uses.

“Tell me about my mother.”

“Your mother was an Admiral in the Imperial Service. The Emperor gave her a wide range of latitude because she was very good at what she did. She was a Finder,” Fixit said.

“You mean a Keeper?” Preston asked.

“I hear your distinction and find it amusing, but no, I mean, a Finder. She found things. Her success rate was so good he put a Star Destroyer at her disposal, and she was able to fund her own operation off the books, which also gave her a higher degree of flexibility. She was not well liked among her colleagues, which tended to increase her desire to isolate from crew, as well as isolate her ship from the Fleet. Drama tended to follow most of her social interactions,” Fixit said.

“Is she evil?” Preston asked.

“The Jedi would say so. The Emperor depended on that. We do not use those terms,” Fixit said.

“It seems like a rather simple label. She was either a dreadful person, or she wasn’t,” Preston said. “She is someone to fear, or she isn’t.”

“Do you fear snakes?”

“I respect snakes,” Preston countered.

“Then respect your mother,” Fixit said.

“You seem to always protect her, and your choice of words concerning her tend to be delicately chosen, and yet, I sense there is more to this than you allow me to see,” Preston said.

“Very astute; as always, your feelings serve you well,” Fixit said. “But still, you haven’t gone deep enough. Your grandmother sold herself into sexual bondage to the Emperor so that her family would be spared execution by fire. He agreed to her terms, but took your mother into bondage as well. She has been shaped by a ravaging that few people survive.”

“Bad things happened to me does not justify me doing bad things to others,” Preston said.

“I’m not rationalizing it, I’m explaining it,” Fixit said. “Hurting people hurt others. That’s a generality. Maladaptive behaviors are best explained in the context of their origins. All behaviors are functional within the confines of their context. It is only when we change the context that those behaviors become ‘maladaptive,’ by definition.”

“So, you are saying she can be saved,” Preston said.

“I’m not saying that, either,” Fixit said. “I’m saying it is what it is. It is not your job to fix her, because there is nothing inherently wrong with her. She is surviving the best way she knows how.”

“Whose job is it to fix her then? Society’s?”

“It’s her job to fix her. You fix yourself,” Fixit said. “Everything will take care of itself.”

“So, it’s all good?”

“No, it’s not all good. Dead puppies suck. Babies with cancer suck. It’s not all good,” Fixit said.

“What if I decide to save her?” Preston asked.

“She will kill you,” Fixit said. “That’s enough about your lineage. It’s not important.”

“How can it not be important? It is where I come from,” Preston said. “And I want to know if I come from goodness. I want to know that I was loved.”

“How would this information change you?” Fixit said. “You are not defined by whether or not you are loved. You are not your personal history. You are not your DNA. You are not your education. You are not your clothes. You are not the atoms that comprise your body. You are more than this. Beings of light we are, not this crude flesh. That is fundamental!”

“I can’t help but ask questions,” Preston persisted.

“You need to help it. Your unconscious mind will always seek to answer the questions you raise,” Fixit said.

“So, my questions are bad?” Preston asked.

“Lines of inquiries are never bad. They merely alter your course and speed. Your mother was a Finder of unparalleled skill. She was successful because of her ability to let go of everything that was not essential to her task. You were influenced by her energy. When you ask a question, your unconscious will take you there. The only thing getting in the way of you understanding the answer is your perspective. So, when you ask a question, make sure it is something you really need to know. Make sure you really want to know, because you will find it,” Fixit said.

“What if I phrase it like, if this information is good for me, allow me to discover it,” Preston asked.

“Still too vague. Growth often comes with pain. So, again, be sure you really want an answer, because it will come. Unconscious will always try to give you an answer you understand. And if you don’t see it, it will continue to escalate the situation or raise the volume until you get the message,” Fixit said.

“Would you provide another example?” Preston asked.

“If you are destined to be poor, you will be poor, no matter how much you struggle, because it is not about being poor that is the problem, but how you see yourself in relationship to the Force,” Fixit explained. “When you accept where the Force has placed you, when you have learned the lessons that you are here to learn, only then will you cease to be poor.”

“So, being poor is a lesson in trust?”

“Whatever your situation is, it is about you and your relationship to the Force, and that is all,” Fixit said. “You cannot avoid learning what you must learn. The quickest way to weather a storm is to through the storm.”

“Okay, but how do I know what my lesson is? How do I know my job isn’t to bring my mother back to base, to provide her a sense of family?”

“Enough with the questions. Go float some boulders.”

“But is it a reasonable question?”

“You will know you are going in the wrong direction when you can only maintain with effort, or you lose ground,” Fixit said. “Go, float boulders.”



Preston returned to the cave, obviously flustered.

“What’s going on?” Fixit asked.

“Doubt,” Preston said. “And boredom. Specifically, this moon is geologically boring!”

“You shouldn’t take it for granite,” Fixit said.

Preston rolled his eyes. “Oh, ha ha.”

“Wow, you usually like my puns,” Fixit said, rolling closer.

“I don’t see how I’m going to make a light saber without crystals,” Preston complained.

“Follow me,” Fixit said.

Preston followed Fixit outside the cave. Together they looked down over into a valley, full of trees so thick that from the crest of their mountain to the crest of the next it seemed like a floor of foliage.

“What do you see?” Fixit asked.

“Nothing useful,” Preston lamented. “I keep asking, where is a crystal, and I wander and I wander, circle after circle, and I keep coming up empty handed.”

“Would you go and collect me a branch from that tree?”

Preston grumbled, went and collected a branch, and brought it back. “What now, you intend to whip me with it?”

“I ought to,” Fixit said. “But I find whipping rarely extinguishes obtuseness.”

“What does that mean?”

“What’s the composition of a diamond?” Fixit asked.

“Basically, it is a collection of carbon atoms compressed into a tetrahedral lattice network, with all the atoms being equally interspaced,” Preston said.

“Okay. Look around you and tell me what you see?”

“I see nothing?!” Preston snapped.

“Because you’re looking with your eyes, not your brain,” Fixit snapped back. “What do you see?!”

“Trees,” Preston said.

“Further, smaller,” Fixit is said.

Preston stared at the forest, one moment frustrated, and then hopeful. “Carbon atoms?”

“Is that a question?”

“Yes,” Preston said. “You’re referring to the carbon comprising life in general?”

“You see trees, I see nothing but diamonds. You are a walking, breathing, complaining diamond,” Fixit said.

“You know how much heat and pressure it would take to make a diamond?” Preston asked.

“Yeah, do you?” Fixit said.

“It would take the heat and pressure of a supernova to...”

“I’m so disappointed,” Fixit interrupted. “You’re judging things by size. The Force doesn’t care about size,” Fixit said.

The branch lifted from Preston’s hand. It began to fold, compacting in on itself until it was a ball, catching flame as its temperature increased. The flame extinguished as the size of the object continued to shrink, the air shimmering around the glowing stone that was left. A small diamond, the size of a grain of sand was left in the air.

“I don’t believe it,” Preston said.

“I know,” Fixit it said. “Think you got it from here?”

“Do you know how long it will take to make a lightsaber worthy crystal, lining up a chain of carbon atoms one atom at a time?” Preston asked.

“I do,” Fixit said. “Do you?”

Preston sighed.

“You might find that the prodigious placement of other elements into your carbon crystal may change the intensity and quality of your light,” Fixit said, turning back to the cave.

“Why isn’t there a recipe in the books?” Preston called after the droid.

“There is,” Fixit yelled back.

“Where?”

“Go higher!”



Preston brought the completed lightsaber to Fixit.

“Excellent. This is really impressive,” Fixit said, lifting the hilt with the force, examining it from inside and out. “What color is the blade?”

“I’m not sure,” Preston said.

“You didn’t turn it on?” Fixit asked.

“I wanted to share this moment with you,” Preston said.

“Proceed,” Fixit said, touched.

Preston stepped away from his Master and carefully held out the lightsaber from his body. He knew that it would do something and was a little fearful it might blow up. The blade extended from the hilt, a gentle hum coming from the device and the displacement of air. Preston only thought he had been floating in the past, as the resonance of the crystal increased his sensing of the Force, as if he had immersed himself in a hot-tub, the jets pulsing the water around him. He had read about the effort it would take to wield a lightsaber, but was surprised by just how much effort. The plasma tended to cause a gyroscopic action, making the lightsaber resistant to momentum change. Preston smiled at Fixit, quite pleased, but also bolstered by the surge in the Force flowing through him. He was One with the Force. The beam was stable and pink. Fixit laughed.

“What?” Preston asked.

“Nothing,” Fixit said, trying to contain himself.

“No, really. What?”

“I’ve never seen a pink blade before,” Fixit said, and was overcome with mirth, evidence by the noise he was making as well as the cascade of blinking lights.

Preston extinguished his lightsaber, pouting.

“I will start over,” Preston said, grumpily.

“No, don’t,” Fixit said.

“Why?”

“It will give you an advantage over your opponents,” Fixit said.

“It will?” Preston asked, encouraged.

Fixit was glad he took the bait. “Yes, you can attack while they’re rolling on the floor laughing,” Fixit said.

Preston tossed the lightsaber to the table and stormed out of the cave.



Building a temple from stone was easy, if you’re one with the Force and own a lightsaber. Though he knew it was possible to mold stone with the Force alone, there was pleasure in cutting into marble using pure energy. Precision became a matter of art. Even the granite stones were given a nice sheen with a slow pass of lightsaber blade, leaving not only a reflective glassy surface that glittered with the granules exposed, but a smooth feel that usually only came from an eon of polishing. Moving stones to their place with the Force was a synch, interlocking puzzle like pieces that would essentially make the structure that fronted the cave entrance earthquake proof. Inside the cave there was blending of natural formations and constructed, but it was all natural material. Stone tables and chairs, shelves carved directly into the rock adorned with wooden bowls and cups and carved figurines and interesting rocks that Preston had collected, drew the eyes around the expansive main chamber. In no time, the cave seemed less like a cave and more like an ancient artifact. Preston wondered if when he was gone, some future explorers would discover his home and wonder about the ‘people’ who made it, creating elaborate stories of the people and their rituals and how sophisticated they would have had to have been to fit the stone work together when in the end, it was just one boy and the Force. The pillars took the most planning, as to cut it length wise from the nearby mountain was challenging and time consuming. But once he had the right length cut free, he held the object with the force, rotating it, and using the lightsaber like a lathe he worked the stone. He stood the final pillar up on its end, admiring the craftsmanship, before placing the multi stone arc that spanned two pillars. He was so focused on his work and elation of being finished he almost didn’t hear Fixit approaching from behind him.

“It’s time for you to leave.”

“To the other camp site?” Preston asked. “Did the droids find an interesting sample?”

“No, it is time for you to leave this moon and join society,” Fixit explained.

“I don’t want to leave. I like it here,” Preston said.

“I know,” Fixit said.

“No, I don’t think you do. I just finished making our home a home,” Preston said.

“Your work is impressive, and I’m glad you feel finished, because another adventure awaits you,” Fixit said.

“I don’t need adventures. I’m a Jedi. I’m content here.”

Fixit laughed.

“I’m not leaving,” Preston said, matter of factly.

“You are leaving. All physical life in this system is about to be extinguished,” Fixit explained.

“What?!”

“There was a supernova. The gamma rays will sweep through this system, killing all life. You must not be here when that happens,” Fixit said.

“How far out?”

“18 light years.”

“Good, then we have 18 years to prepare for it...”

“It happened almost 18 years ago,” Fixit explained.

“Why am I only now hearing of this?”

“It wasn’t necessary for your growth,” Fixit said. “It was a distraction.”

“Saving all this is a distraction?” Preston demanded. “I’ve wasted time building monuments, when I could have been building an ark!”

“The ark is full. That was my job,” Fixit said. “Mostly things that have the chance for transplantation were chosen.”

“All of this is going to die? There is no other way?”

“What happens when you build a house upon sand?” Fixit asked.

“Oh, please, this is not a time to explore philosophy,” Preston pleaded.

“Sand mandalas,” Fixit said.

“What?”

“All life is dirt, sand, carbon atoms, diamonds. Life is art, sand mandalas. We, the Force, create it, sweep it up, and release it to the wind. That’s all this is. Sands. Dreams.”

“No,” Preston said. “It’s not supposed to be this way.”

“There is no way, it just is,” Fixit said. Fixit decided there was no need to remind him of his studies and that every planet known to harbor life had had at least one mass extinction level event. Life was always getting knocked back and starting over.

“Why would the Force create something then destroy it?!”

“To remind us that what is essential is not this. This is art. It was fun. We enjoyed it. And now it’s time to let go” Fixit said.

“We? There is no we. I’m not deciding this?!”

“Aren’t you? You decided before you were born. You chose your parents. You chose your life. Just like you chose each atom for your lightsaber crystals, you chose to construct your body, one cell at a time, one molecule at a time, tweaking each DNA molecule to best meet the learning opportunities you came here to do. Even accepting the epigenetic vectors your parents supplied was a choice. This is what you’ve been learning. There are no accidents. Everything is on purpose. This loss is on purpose. It is your lesson to let go.”

“All of this has to die so I can learn to let go? That’s fucked up!” Preston argued.

“Your lesson is to let go. Each individual organism here has their own lessons and I assure you, if they had not learned what they came here to learn, they would not die,” Fixit said. “Your final task as a Padawan is to let go.”

“You don’t think I’ve learn to let go? I let go of my parents to become a Padawan. I let go of the idea I never had parents. I let go of the idea of changing my mother. I let go of maladaptive beliefs. This is just too much...”

“It is what it is, that is all,” Fixit said.

“No,” Preston said.

“If you stay here, you will die,” Fixit said.

“There is no death. Remember that maxim?! This body is just a sand mandala. I’m a being of light and I will transcend,” Preston declared.

“Yay, you. Stay here and melt with the rest of this back into the Force.” Fixit turned and headed back to the cave.

“Are you kidding me?”

Fixit stopped, rotated its head about. “You’ve changed your mind?”

Preston was quiet for a moment. “No. Wait. This is a trick.”

“No trick. You are right. You are now an adult. You may participate in your destiny. Should you remain, you will learn a powerful lesson, and you will become even stronger than you are now,” Fixit said.

“This is not the way I imagined it would be,” Preston complained.

“That in itself is a good lesson,” Fixit said.

“Alright, when are we leaving?”

“Not me. You. I will remain.”

“But...”

“I will survive. There isn’t room in the pods attached to the long range module, as we’ve collected more specimens than anticipated. Also, there are quite a few crystals that some of the orbital droids managed to catch. Keep a couple for yourself, but sell the rest, as you’ll need currency on the outside. That will give you a sufficient wealth to establish yourself.”

“I do not like this.”

“Change your belief. You’ll be giving this biological pool a divergent vector, a chance to stay in the game. It will benefit society,” Fixit said. “Diversity always benefits society.”



The vehicle that landed by remote was a Tie Defender that had been sitting in orbit about the moon, resting in a cradle connected to a long range module. In truth, Preston had seen the point of light from time to time as it went overhead, but he had never expressed too much curiosity about it. He simply knew that the collection droids often made trips up there to store items in the containers. Preston watched the Tie Defender come to a rest, appreciating the rakish lines, the sleek angles, the glistening of the solar panels. To say it was impressive was an understatement and he became aware of an eagerness in him to fly the ship. He contained it. It was only now, as the reality set in on him that he understood why he had been forced to complete the pilot training. Fixit had been preparing him for the return to society. He turned to Fixit, wondering what else he had been prepared for, and wondering what training he still needed. He wanted the Droid with him.

“Are you sure you won’t come?” Preston asked.

“I’m sure. Come and visit me in a about year. It will be safe by then.”

“I will come back for you,” Preston promised.

“Good.”

“Any advice?”

“Yeah. Don’t go looking for your parents,” Fixit said.

“You are my parent,” Preston said.

A brightening around the droid, a detectable shimmer in the force, was the only evidence Preston needed to know he had had a significant effect. He hugged the Droid.

“One other thing. You may be one with the Force, but you will be despised by both Jedi and Sith because you are neither, you’re in the middle, and you’re stronger than most. Don’t mistake not belonging as a weakness. More often than not, it is a strength in its own right,” Fixit said. “You should leave now. Follow the flight path I gave you to the first set of coordinates. And be wary.”

“Of what?”

“Everything and everyone,” Fixit said. “I don’t know who’s winning the war. You’re flying one of the most advance Tie designs in history. Rebels might shoot at you. Hell, the Empire might shoot at you, not having appropriate authorization codes and all. Just be careful.”

“Please. What could happen in a dream?”

“Never ask that question. Remember that the unconscious has a way of inventing trouble just to prove a point,” Fixit reminded him. “All questions eventually get answered.”

“So, you’re saying the Force has a sense of humor,” Preston asked.

“It’s not something to joke about.”

Preston laughed out loud.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you laugh,” Fixit remarked. “At least, not a good, genuine, deep laugh from the gut.”

“I’m surprisingly happy. I’m changing?”

“You’re leaving one cave for another.”

Preston climbed up into the Defender. The controls and environment felt no different than the flight simulator in his dreams. He knew this was the real deal and that he should have some respect for the technology, as messing up this time might come with serious consequences, but it was still nothing more real than anything else he had experienced. Secured in his seat, hatch sealed, he lifted off the ground, spinning the craft on the Y axis in order to see Fixit as he departed. He was amazed at the feelings of sadness as Fixit and the moon receded. Upper wind currents made it harder to keep over a fix point so he spun to face the direction of travel and accelerated.

A whistle resounded joyfully from one of the com pannels and Preston looked back to find CU2 attached to the outer haul of the Defender.

“Findit?”

The collection unit whistled jubilantly. The Units had played a random numbers game, essentially rock paper scissors to determine who would travel with Preston.

“Well, good for you. I am most honored to have your company,” Preston said.

More whistles.

“I don’t know what will become of us.”

Even more whistles.

“Yes. I am confident we will come back. I have no intentions of leaving Fixit and the other CU’s here alone forever,” Preston said.

Preston dropped out of hyperspace at the first set of coordinates provided by Fixit. He was surprised by the emptiness, the vastness of it all. He wasn't sure about the why. The place seemed fairly insignificant. Was that point? Was this a place of perspective? It took effort to convince his brain that the barrenness was an illusion, that the scattering of stars should not be the measure for the Universe. Mathematically speaking, it would only take 103 folds of a sheet a paper that was 10^{-4} of a millimeter thick to span the length of the entire universe. (Folding a paper in half more than doubled its thickness, and each consecutive fold raised the value exponentially, so that by ten folds one had traveled just over a kilometer, 30 folds 100 kilometers high, and by 80 you were almost as thick as the galaxy was wide.) Working with atoms, as he had in the construction of his light saber crystals, had taught him that the stuff around him, the stuff that seemed most solid, even the material comprising his own body, was mostly empty space. If the proton from a hydrogen atom was the size of an apple, the electron would be fifty kilometers away. The electron would be beyond eyesight. Of course, the analogy was limited. There was no size that one could elevate the proton to in which the electron would become visible, as it had zero dimensions. Zero times anything was still zero. That didn't mean it didn't exist, it just meant that the electron, for all practical purposes, was energy. The proton itself was made up of even smaller bits of energy, and the void between these was just as great, if not greater, as the distance between the proton and electron. And here he was, in the void between stars. Worrying about the emptiness of all things. Emptiness was an inherent part of the system.

In some ways, there was little difference between this material plane and the astral plane, the medium he most often traveled when he left his body during meditations. One striking difference was that once he was outside his body, he found the physical plane was illuminated regardless of time a day, very similar to how a hologram is illuminated. Yoda's voice echoed, beings of light we are, but he also knew this to be true in another sense. All visible matter emitted light, most of it in the infrared range. The experience of seeing lights when the eye was closed, or when one applied pressure to the eyes, was known as phosphene, which wasn't an illusion, but actually the atoms and cells emitting sufficient light to trigger a cone or a rod. This was not to be mistaken for seeing auras or rays, and those who had experienced auras or rays knew the distinction the same way a person could tell the difference between day and night. As he studied the blackness, he wondered if the occasional sparkle was from a single photon from a distant star, a phosphene, a ray, a random particle/annihilation event bubbling up from the space/time soup, a floater in his eyes, debris reflecting ship lights back, or his imagination. Did it matter? Should he seek a higher perspective to determine the source of the 'noise' or just be content with the experience?

Another differentiation between sights on the Astral plane compared to the physical plane was that he could see in all directions at once or focus his awareness in one direction as if looking through a tunnel, or he could even zoom in or out to alter his focus. The astral world itself tended to be very much like the material world, in terms of reflecting above what was below, only it was much more idyllic than a complimentary mirror. There was an emptiness separating the two planes, perhaps even more apparently empty than this space between stars. Many people reported it as a dark space, or a tunnel, and if one moved towards the light, you found yourself emerging into the higher reality. Again, maybe that was why Fixit wanted him to pause here. He had gone in a complete circle. "In darkness, you were wonderfully made," a voice in his head, not quite a memory but not loud enough to identify who had spoken. He forced

himself to stop wondering about the practicality of this stop and chose instead to meditate for a moment, clearing his mind. ‘Is there something to be attained in darkness?’ was his primary question. He would wait for an answer, or boredom, before pushing on.

“Remember, darkness is not necessarily evil. Be aware of your beliefs, the context of your words, as they will change the result of your questions. It is sufficient to ask for truth and understanding.” It sounded like Fixit, but here in the quiet, he was willing to pass it off as a trick of his mind. There was only the hum of the electronics and the slight stirring of air as it circulated through the packs that made the emptiness bearable.

“Is this a memory, a hallucination, or a real time auditory experience?”

“If it’s useful, does it matter?”

“I suppose not,” Preston agreed, laughing. That sounded like Fixit. “Forgive my impatience, Master, but how is this dark place useful? What is my lesson?”

“Darkness is a rite of passage, a necessary experience,” Fixit said. “You were conceived in darkness. You were made, developed, grown, in darkness. You passed through darkness and into light. Even the Universe is said to have come from darkness. Light was secondary. It is written by philosopher that passing into the Force upon death is like moving from a darkness, a dream, into Light. Don’t see with your eyes, or even your brain. See with your heart. Because light is also an illusion. You only need close your eyes to know you exist first and primarily in the dark.”

Preston frowned. Damn koans. In truth, this space wasn’t really dark, it was just empty. If he shined a light out in any direction, there was light there, just nothing to reflect it back. That thought made the starlight more prominent. From his perspective, there is only space/time, and the light is merely ripples in a medium. The opposite was equally true, there was no darkness. All of space time was filled with light of varying wavelengths. With deep infrared, the sky was red not black. He was floating in light. He wasn’t alone. He was the focal point of all the lights in the night sky. He was center stage. He felt at home.

“Brace yourself,” it was Fixit voice and there was no doubting that this was a solid auditory event. It was more solid, more real than the recent dialogue, so much so that he grabbed the controls of the Fighter.

The pain was indescribable. Both hands let go of the controls and moved to his chest, covering his heart as if to prevent his heart from leaving his chest. Every cell in his body felt as if it had been pricked. He closed his eyes and felt himself separate from his body. He saw his body weeping, from outside the fighter looking in. While his body wept, his spirit was comforted. He was immersed in an indigo light.

“Be at peace,” was a voice, but not a voice. He was sure it was female. He was also sure it was in his head and not an auditory experience. Telepathy.

“Do I know you?” Preston asked.

“What does your heart tell you?” the voice asked. A question as an answer to a question suggested it was quite likely one of the Jedi Masters that frequently counseled him during his training. Did that mean training wasn’t over, or that his passage allowed him life time access? Closing his eyes when he wasn’t in his body was more a metaphor than an actual practice. He had habitualized himself into believing he was a body, not radiant energy. But the practice of eyes closing was also a way of getting at information inside his head. “Goddess Ashia,” Preston asked?

“It is time we dropped titles,” Ashia said. “You are no longer a Padawan.”

“Why can’t I see you?”

“Why do you think?” Ashia instructed, chuckling.

Preston ‘opened’ his eyes. He was no longer floating in indigo, but was on a mountain top. The top of the mountain had been razed; as if a giant lightsaber had cut the top off, leaving a glassy surface. He thought of home and Fixit. A marble platform, supported by caryatids, gave rise to a small fountain. The caryatids supported the roof with their heads, leaving their hands free to hold items or strike dance poses. One held a lightsaber, another held a telescope and a third held a stethoscope, something he seemed to intuit as it would require him to walk around to actually see the third. His eyes lingered on the caryatid closest to him, noting the toga seemed to be affected by wind, and that the marble legs seemed lively enough that she might just step down and be free. It stirred his libido and forced him to look away. Ashia sat down at the fountain, filled a glass with water, and asked him to sit by her, to drink.

To say Ashia was beautiful was an understatement. She was absolutely radiant, with a golden light that surrounded her. The aura didn’t surprise him, as all the past Master Jedi’s he had encountered had their own aura. What surprised him was that it was tangible and intense and he could feel it against his skin the same way he felt the sun on a cold, windless day. She had wings, such as depicted with angels, flowing blond hair, and a tall, thin frame that seemed fragile, and yet she was probably sturdier than his own flesh and blood body.

Preston approached and kneeled.

“Always with the rituals,” Ashia smiled. “I am no more a goddess, than a doctor is a god compared to a kindergartener. Though you have not officially earned the title Jedi, you are no longer a Padawan, and I’m no longer your Master.”

“You’re a Diathim!” Preston said. “Why am I only now seeing this?”

“Partly, because you have always been distracted by my beauty,” Ashia said. She laughed at his reaction. “I’m a natural telepath, you didn’t think you could hide that, did you? Be not ashamed. It is normal. It is flattering. Your desires have never come with control or force, only curiosity and a sense of mutual affection and playfulness.”

“You said partly, which means there is another reason I can see you for who you are?” Preston said, wanting to get away from the subject of his affection for her.

“Fixit has raised you well,” Ashia said, amused by both the question and his sidestepping. “The biggest factor is your present sorrow, your grieving over the life on your home moon. Pain can be a clarifying force. Do not fear it. And do not fear death, even on a large scale. There is no death. There is only transition.”

“Why does it hurt so much? Not just emotionally, but physically?” Preston asked. He wanted her to hold him, the way a mother would a child, but at the same time, because she had called him out on his own fantasies regarding her, he felt it necessary to maintain a respectable distance.

“It’s just data,” Ashia said. “If you break your arm, your cells tell your brain it hurts. It is transmitted directly through your nervous system, but it is also transmitted electrically into the environment. It is transmitted spiritually into the void, into the Force. You are sensitive; your boundaries are more open to the exchange of information than most people. Even without the Force, if you saw a broken limb, you would feel it. But because you are Force sensitive, if you do not focus, you can be overwhelm by the pain of others. Remember, pain is not real, it is only information. The life on the moon that was your home was destroyed and all of that information was transmitted into the void, simultaneously, instantly. Ripples in a pond. A broken arm is a grain of sand tossed onto the surface of a still pond. The death of one moon full of life is a star thrown onto the surface of a still pond.”

“Okay, that explains the pain, but not the grieving,” Preston said. “I know that there is more to existence than physical reality and yet I am profoundly sad.”

“I would worry if you weren’t,” Ashia said. “Part of it is an incorrect belief, hidden in your psyche. Find it, change it, and you will deal with grief easier. Part of it is you don’t want creatures to suffer, even those on this plane. Which is also an incorrect belief.”

“How can it be incorrect? You say you would worry if I didn’t have compassion, but then suggest it is wrong to hold compassion?” Preston asked.

“We value freedom,” Ashia said, again patting the fountain next to her, inviting him to sit. “Suffering, pain, these are highly subjective positions. To heal someone without their permission, to stop their pain or suffering, robs them of their freedom to experience what they need to experience to grow. There are no coincidences in life, only Force interaction, only lessons to be learned, only treasures to be found. Come, sit, drink.”

Preston took a step forward. “Am I allowed to refuse?”

Ashia laughed. “It is a request. I would like to comfort you.”

“What if I don’t want to be comforted? What if I wanted to rage against the senselessness of it all,” Preston asked.

“Proceed. Do as you feel you must. And when you finish raging, what is- still is, and I am still here, offering you water to drink,” Ashia said.

One of the most prominent lessons Ashia had taught him was surrender. Letting go. It was the same lesson plan that Fixit had also offered repeatedly. Preston closed the distance and sat next to Ashia, Goddess of Light, birth, death, and rebirth. She held the glass out to him, the left palm of her hand on the bottom of the glass, and the right hand’s fingers holding the top. Preston reached for it, but she told him no, withdrawing the cup. He dropped both of his hands, one of them landing on her exposed knee. He blushed, pulling his arms to his chest, diverting his eyes. She brought the cup to his mouth and poured, quenching his thirst in a series of tiny sips over time. There had always been a sensual quality to his visits here, but since he had realized the name of her species, it was as if the volume had been turned up on this energy.

Ashia sat the glass down, uncrossed his arms drew his arms around her, and then embraced him. She put her arms around him first, then her wings, and then she infused him with an out pouring of love, a green light flooding into him from her heart. Preston tightened his embrace, his arms going to her lower back due to the wings, after a moment of awkward fumbling. He was aware of the warmth of her breast against his cheeks. The influx of love was so overwhelming that the physical urges that accompanied being touched by her seemed diminished. He had the sensation of being struck by lightning and then, again, he was free of himself. The same way he had experienced leaving his body, he was now leaving himself again, which didn’t make sense, because he had believed the astral body, or spirit body, was the only true form, but now, here, he was in another form that transcended the lower. He transcended thought, and for a brief second, he was one with everything in the Universe. The love was like the warmth of the embrace of a mother to newborn, or like the light of a star on a planet in the in the ‘goldilock’ zone. The galaxy was merely a sand mandala stirred by a finger. Ashia and he merged, the briefest of moments that seemed to go on for a millennia, an urgent escalation of energies that ended with both of them surrendering to each other. Then, everything that was light went dark and everything that was dark became light. It was as if he were examining a photo of the Universe, only instead of the final product he was viewing the negative. Darkness was light! Matter, visible light, was a distraction. There was so much more to know and understand than he had ever imagined. Pure ecstasy caused him to pass out. When he awoke, he was back in his

body. The mystical experience faded like a dream. He was aware that something significant having happened, but the urgency of a beeping droid drew him to full consciousness. His body shivered.

“Yes, Findit, I’m okay,” Preston said. He longed to be back in Ashia’s embrace.

Findit whistled.

“I am sorry I worried you,” Preston said, setting in the next set of coordinates for a hyperspace jump.

Findit whistled excitedly.

“Really? What could you have possibly found out here?” Preston asked.

Findit whistled. Preston, more out of courtesy than curiosity, amused the robot by rotating the Fighter around. The size of the derelict was impressive.

“Wow,” Preston said.

Findit whistled.

“Yes, that’s a really nice find, but not very practical,” Preston said.

More whistling.

“We would need a crew to fly that,” Preston said.

More protests.

“I’m sure there are lots of nice things on board, but we’re already cramped on space,” Preston said.

The droid became hysterical, like a child throwing a tantrum.

“I know you’re programmed to collect stuff, but really, you’re over reaching here.”

The droid surrendered, with a final request.

“Alright, we will come back and look around. Time permitting,” Preston said.

The droid seemed appeased. They jumped back into hyperspace.



“Welcome to Axila space, please ident,” came space traffic control.

“Um, yeah, I’m sorry, my transponder codes are expired,” Preston lied, heeding Fixit’s warning of broadcasting the ship’s ID.

“I’m sorry, but without proper identification, you won’t be allowed to approach the planet,” came space traffic control.

“Is there an agency or protocol for getting around these criteria?” Preston asked.

“You could try contacting customs directly, but I doubt you will fare any better with them without identification,” space traffic control said. “Maintain your present solar orbital vector. Good day, sir.”

“Wait,” Preston tried, but the channel was obviously blocked. “How do I contact customs?” He sighed.

Findit hummed.

“What network?” Preston asked.

Findit whistled a response and then brought up the information on his screen. A frequency to contact customs was highlighted.

“Oh, a computer network,” Preston said, dialing in the frequency. The display indicated the connection was green. “Hello, customs?”

“Please state your full name.”

“Preston.”

“Preston what?”

“Just Preston.”

“Just Preston is your full name?”

Preston laughed. “No, but that’s funny.”

“Sir, it a misdemeanor offense to waste my time.”

“My name is Preston.”

“No Sir name?”

“Do I require one?”

An audible sigh came from the customs agent. “Good day, Sir.”

Preston tried calling back, but his signal was bounced. He felt a stirring of frustration. Findit helped to alleviate the situation by highlighting an alternate contact number. It was corporate affiliate for a major biological firm dealing with exotic creatures.

“Good thinking, Findit,” Preston said, dialing the frequency.

“This is Gen-encoders Affiliates, Wosha speaking, may I help you?”

“I have some specimens I would like to sell. Any chance you would be interested?”

Preston asked.

“Please transmit your identification codes,” Wosha said.

“My name is Preston,” Preston said.

“Sir, I need your identification codes, including your bank routing numbers, credit history, and permits for transporting biological substances,” Wosha said.

“I don’t have any of these things,” Preston said.

“I’m sorry, sir, I really can’t help you,” Wosha said. She hung up.

“What the hell?” Preston asked.

CU2 gave a whistle of lament. Preston sighed. He started to look for another number, but when he went to dial in a new frequency, he found Gen-Enc hadn’t locked their frequencies. He tried the number again. Wosha came back on line.

“Look, before you hang up on me, would you at least consider looking at my inventory, and perhaps running it up to someone who might find a way around the established protocols?” Preston asked.

“Are you asking me to perform an illegal act?”

“I would not ask you to do anything other than look over my inventory and tell me if I have something that might pique your curiosity,” Preston said, transmitting a partial inventory list, which included highly detailed chemical compositions.

“Hold, please,” Wosha said. She waited literally a whole of two seconds before coming back with: “I’m sorry, Sir, I really can’t help you. Good...”

“Wait,” Preston pleaded.

“Sir?”

“You didn’t show it to anyone, did you?”

“No, sir,” she said.

“What if I shared a commission with you?” Preston asked.

“Sir, I must warn you that this conversation is being recorded.”

“Have I asked you to do anything that is illegal?”

“No, Sir,” she said. “I’m just saying this would be a legal contract.”

“Four percent?”

“Twelve,” Wosha countered.

“Six,” Preston said.

“Stand by,” Wosha said.

Standing by became five minutes, ten minutes, and then Preston had to go into meditation mode to rid himself of his anxiety. An hour later, he decided to stretch out and sleep. Completely relaxed after the meditation, he closed his eyes and allowed himself to sink towards sleep.

“You must find a Jedi to complete your training...”

The voice registered as an auditory event, so loud and so close, he nearly sat up.

“Who are you?” he asked. He was too alert to be dreaming.

“We’ve spoken before. Have you forgotten my voice? Focus.”

Preston focus, picturing himself on an open field. It was one of many settings he often imagined himself in when he needed a change of terrain. A man wearing Jedi robes appeared. His aura was purple. He smiled and bowed ever so slightly.

“You’ve come a long way,” the Master said.

“Master Windu?” Preston asked.

“So, you do remember me?”

“I invited you to be on my esoteric council of elders, but I don’t remember you responding to my request,” Preston said.

“Do you know how many Padawans desire to speak with me?” Windu asked.

“The number should be irrelevant since there are no temporal or spatial limitations once you’re completely one with the Force,” Preston said. He frowned. “I am sorry, Master. I’m not unhappy by your presence, just surprised. I created that list of people I wanted dream encounters with a long time ago. I figured you just weren’t interested.”

“Your dream council, as you refer to it, is much bigger than you imagine, and we have all dedicated ourselves to assisting you in your growth, in very subtle ways,” Windu said.

“This is not subtle,” Preston said.

“It is not. We want you to seek training.”

“You know I desire to learn, but not sure I want to be a Jedi,” Preston said.

“You’ve learn too much not to become a Jedi,” Windu said.

“Everywhere Jedi’s go, trouble seems to follow,” Preston said. “I intend to have a quiet life.”

“Your life will be far from quiet if you refuse to follow the Jedi path. We are afraid that you will fall to the Dark side,” Windu said.

“I’m really interested in that metaphor, falling,” Preston said. “We’re all falling. Falling around a planet or a star or the galaxy. All falling towards infinity, at ever increasing rates of speed. And if there is no universal up or down, but only reference points like Galactic North, falling just fails to adequately represent directional vectors.”

“Yoda said you were a pain in the ass,” Windu said.

“Well, he is old school. Children should be seen and not heard, with Padawans being even quieter than that,” Preston said. “But back to the metaphor of falling. I only just mentioned the physical reference of falling, so we really should discuss the esoteric value of how to fall away from Infinity. Whether it’s God, or the Force, if its value is infinite, you really can’t be outside of that.”

“That’s enough,” Windu said. “I want you seek out a Jedi by the name of Yeno. You are young, naïve, and Force strong. Yeno will supervise you, finalize your training. We have consensus.”

“Really?” Preston asked.

Windu raised his hands as if to suggest 'look for yourself.' Preston looked around. There were five additional Jedi, standing around him in a circle. Yoda removed his hood and became more visible, but the others remained obscured behind their veil of secrecy. The whole scene changed, the Jedi gone, and he became unconscious as the dream took on a life of its own. The dream was playful and bizarre, but not so bizarre that he became conscious that he was dreaming. Three hours and ten minutes later, he woke and stretched. If this fighter hadn't been modified, stretching full out would have been impossible. He made himself comfortable, found some water, ate the last of a fruit that would no longer be found, and was just wiping his hands when Wosha contacted him.

"Hello, Preston? I have Nolasco on the line."

"Umm, hello, Wosha. Please put him through," delighted to be speaking with someone again.

"Preston," Nolasco said. "Item A14 in your inventory, could you transmit the entire DNA sequence?"

"Umm, no," Preston said. "Don't you want to exchange greetings?"

"Sorry, just trying to save time," Nolasco said.

"That's reasonable," Preston agreed. "In the interest of saving time, I would like a confirmed deal before any further exchange."

"Nice. Look here, son, I have no way of knowing whether or not you have made commercial contracts with any other vendors," Nolasco said.

"You have my word," Preston said.

"I've known too many unlicensed business men to take you at your word," Nolasco said. "I would need to have some greater security than that. How do I know that once I patent these specimens you're selling that you don't sell the original address and another business man goes and collects more samples?"

"I would be willing to provide the originating coordinates," Preston said. "And, I believe you can confirm that a supernova wiped out all the indigenous species from where I gathered the samples. These containers are all that's left."

"I could certainly verify a supernova, but that wouldn't be a hundred percent guarantee that what you are offering comes from a sterilized area," Nolasco said. "Give me one sample from your collection so I can determine the authenticity of your offer by ensuring there are no comparable genetic samples in the market database."

"I will agree to this, if you will arrange for me to land at your facility. I'm having a little difficulty getting through customs," Preston said.

"Not having identification can be problematic on a planet with this population density," Nolasco said.

"You're right. I suppose I should go to Dathomir," Preston said, wondering why he pulled that out of random, as opposed to any other name. He forced himself to focus on the here and now. "I bet they have fewer restrictions..."

"Now, hang on there. I said problematic, not impossible," Nolasco said. "Give me an hour?"

Preston agreed and allowed his mind to day dream. Findit sang a repetitious tune, the equivalent of twiddling thumbs. Preston used the Force to mute the speaker. An hour passed, and Nolasco contacted him personally offering a preliminary deal, then he transferred the call to Space Traffic Control.

“We’ve plotted your course for planetary approach,” came the agent. “Please do not vary from your flight plan. You may leave your long range module in the specified orbit. Once you’ve detached, contact planetary traffic control at 991.5. Good day, Preston 1.”

“Thank you,” Preston said.

“Preston, you still there?”

“Yes, Nolasco.

“Notify me once you’re in orbit. I’ll arrange a flight drone to fetch your cargo containers to the surface. You can follow them down to our facility, if you like.”

“Nolasco, I’m going to trust that you’re not about to rip me off. I think there is enough profit here for both of us, and I don’t require much,” Preston said.

“You trust me?” the voice sounded surprised.

“I’m not worried,” Preston said. “See you planet side.”



Bio-Enc had their own private space port in the center of a plateau of building tops. Not too far from the spaceport was the terminal of a massive transit system, including super conducting rails and aviation. Preston set the fighter down easily as if he had done it a million times and climbed out the lower hatch. He was aware that several people were staring at his choice of vehicles, but he didn’t feel threatened. They were merely curious. Preston touched his ship and said, “thank you, ship,” out loud. He then thanked the Force. There were many things to be grateful for. The pleasantness of a breeze against his face. The temperature difference between the breeze and the sunlight. He was very much aware of his surroundings. The air felt different entering his lungs, providing an onslaught of subtle textures and aromas that he couldn’t immediately identify. There was the distant sound of air traffic, which came in a steady hum, and the occasional pronounced Doppler Effect. Nearer by were dozens of inharmonic droning of machines, Droids, barely audible conversations, but everything was explained with only a light amount of attention. He touched the Force, it was still there, and it comforted him, not that he had need to worry. The Force was everywhere and he was safe. He reminded himself nothing could happen to him that wasn’t meant to happen, and it would not happen if he was not ready for it. When the student is ready, the master will come. One could substitute ‘master’ with ‘lesson.’

Findit detached itself and came down to head level, hovering just to his right.

“You should probably stay with the ship,” Preston said.

The droid whistled a negative.

“Suit yourself, but keep up, I don’t want to lose you,” Preston said.

He looked around for Nolasco or any other welcoming committee. There was none to be had. That was probably good a thing, as he imagined folks might think he were crazy had they noticed him speaking to ‘himself.’ As he surveyed the tarmac, he noticed a person throwing a tool into a cloth toolbox. His focus narrowed, the sights and sounds of the world diminishing. It was as if he had switched to autopilot, and he wasn’t certain if this was the Force or curiosity. As his awareness of the female heightened, she stood up and closed the forward avionics compartment of a ship she had been servicing. The light revealed her face. Even with of a bit of a smudge on her cheek, his attention didn’t waver. Using the Force, he magnified his vision in order to glean more details. Her hair was wrapped up under a cap, but just enough spilling out to reveal it was red. Her eyes were green. Her philtrum accented the contours of her upper lip. She

had a slight upturned nose and a scattering of freckles. She smiled patting the hull of the spaceship as if saying farewell, and she was practically luminescent with that smile. Confident she had accomplished her task, she grabbed her bag and headed towards the nearest building. She held herself tall, a slight flare in the swing of her hips as she moved.

Preston followed. He saw her face mirrored in the window of the building as she entered. A slight pout didn't dissuade him of his interest in her. He caught up to the door before it closed fully and slipped in. Findit was too slow and was stranded outside. He surveyed the room, fairly busy, but no was one paying attention to him. He spotted the woman disappearing through another door. He followed. He came through the door to find the woman facing him, holding a soldering iron as if it were a weapon.

"Are you stalking me?" she demanded.

"You have freckles," Preston said.

"Oh, god, are you a moron?" she asked.

"No," Preston said, but he felt more moronic than he ever remembered feeling. He was at loss for words. "I just wanted to confirm you're female." That sounded even worse than some of the other things he had been attempting to express.

"Let me guess. Your home planet is so ass backwards you never saw a woman mechanic before?" she asked.

"I've never seen a woman before," Preston said, which wasn't quite the truth. He had seen holograms.

"I will use this if I have to," she warned.

He tilted his head to the side. "If you have wires to mend, I would be happy to assist," Preston said.

She put the soldering iron in her bag without turning her back to him. She put her hands on her hip, her cover-all's flexing in to reveal tinier hips than he had suspected. She gave the appearance that she could scrap if she had to, a dominant energy that probably cowed many of her coworkers into giving her space. Preston was immune, but impressed by her command of energy.

"Would you spend time with me?" Preston asked.

"You are sure one cocky son of a bitch."

Preston laughed. "Really? I'm sorry. Perhaps the overabundance of self-confidence you believe you're seeing is actually just social impairment due to a lack of practice."

"What, you were raised by robots on a farm and don't know better than to chase a woman into the lady's locker room?"

"A cave, actually," Preston said. "So, would you consider sharing a meal with me?"

"You're creeping me out," she said.

"Is there a social function that you would consider?" Preston asked. "Or perhaps, you would be willing to educate me as to a more appropriate way to engage you socially."

"Start with exiting the lady's room," she said.

"Oh," Preston said. Gender separation rules must apply in this society, he told himself, making a future note to study up more on the native culture with which he was visiting. "Of course."

Preston exited the room and when the door was fully closed, he raised his voice, "So, would you like to spend time with me?"

The bustle and activity in the maintenance building came to a complete halt. Preston wasn't sure if he should feel embarrassment, but he felt an intense biological reaction which

warmed his whole body and alerted him to the fact that everyone was staring. He identified the fight or flight response and suppressed it. Not knowing any better, he simply smiled at the onlookers. He heard the lock engage on the other side of the lady's locker room door, distracting him from his biological reaction. For a fleeting moment, he entertained darker voice saying: "unlock the door with the Force and just take her." He didn't ignore or suppress the voice. Merely said, "no," to it. He would respect her personal space. "There is no personal space. There is no privacy. There is no law..." Enough, Preston told the voice. He was in charge of himself, not others. The foreign voice faded.

"Is that a definite no?" Preston asked the door, not wanting to give up on the idea she might be receptive to discussing this further.

"Go away! Or I will call security."

Preston nodded. "Thank you for the lesson," he said, and bowed to the door.

One of the mechanics suggested he try flowers next time. Another coworker suggested, "or in her a case a good hydro-wrench." There was a good deal of laughter as he exited the building. He was happy everyone else was in such a good mood, but he was fairly certain that it wasn't all friendly laughter. It wasn't quite evil laughing, but it was still unpleasant to experience. He considered the fact that they may have been laughing at their own discomfort as much as his. What was this? Ego discomfort? The darker voice tried to return. He closed his eyes for a moment, calmed the blush from his face, accepting the embarrassment as just information, accepting the reality that he was not harmed. He met the sun against his face, and then mentally moved on, breathing. She, the female mechanic, was free to accept or reject his offer for companionship; even if she had declined based on his social clumsiness, even if she couldn't discern his true value, it didn't mean anything more significant than freedom of choice, and there is really nothing to do after a person has made a decision. He realized he was still holding on to the thought of her and convinced himself to put it back down. He did so, by his third step away, he realized he had picked it back up, wondering if the intensity of his biological reaction was due to the fact that she was the first woman he had ever seen up close and personal or that there was something special about her. He put it back down. The 'why' was irrelevant. This was a prime example of what Fixit had been trying to explain to him. Resistance here would only impress neediness, not health, and he would still end up without companionship. It was better to be alone and healthy, than chasing after a fiction. He let go of his desire, in small bits, rationalizing to some degree his desire for her was based on looks, and not necessarily on a greater level of compatibility. The fact that he sought refuge in rationalizations impressed on him that he still had work to do on removing ego.

Outside, Findit had still been looking for a way into the building. He descended on Preston, scolding him for leaving him behind. Preston opened his eyes and proceeded back towards his ship.

"I did tell you to keep up, right?"

There was questioning bleep from the Droid as it kicked in a heavier propulsion drive to keep up with Preston.

There was a man waiting near his ship. An older man, a few gray hairs against a head of black. The man was clutching something in his right hand. At first it looked like it might be a weapon, but closer scrutiny suggested it to be a medical device. The man took a puff off it. Preston recognized it from adverts in a book Fixit had provided. The device delivered medicines or vice via vapors to the lungs. The man noted Preston approaching, pocketed the device, and closed the distance between them.

“Nolasco?” Preston asked.

“Preston?” Nolasco asked, grabbing his hand enthusiastically. “I am sorry I am late.”

“No worries. I was just getting schooled. Besides, I am so grateful for this opportunity that I should meet your schedule, not mine,” Preston said.

“Umm, well, thank you, I think,” Nolasco said, appearing puzzled. “Do I know you from somewhere?”

“Highly unlikely,” Preston said.

“Okay. Sorry, then. Forgive me for staring,” Nolasco said. “I’ve been asked to extend the red carpet treatment by our CEO. Would you come with me?”

“Sure,” Preston said.

Nolasco led him towards an awaiting vehicle. “Any issues with your ship?”

“No, why?” Preston asked.

“You came out of the maintenance office, so I thought maybe you were requesting work,” Nolasco said.

“No, I was just distracted,” Preston admitted. “May I ask you a personal question?”

Nolasco seemed taken aback, but he covered quickly. “Certainly,” Nolasco decided.

“Apparently being raised by Droids has impaired my abilities to be socially appropriate,” Preston said, not blinking an eye. “Could you help me navigate?”

Nolasco wanted to laugh, but resisted. The way the request was worded increased the veracity of the statement and also escalated Nolasco’s growing impulse to be protective of the young man. “You were raised by robots? Are you an orphan?”

“No,” Preston said.

“Are you a Jedi?”

“I’d rather not discuss that,” Preston said.

“I could understand your reservation, but it’s safe to reveal your identity if you are. The war on Jedis is over,” Nolasco said.

“I am curious as to why you ask,” Preston said. CU2 whistled something.

“Only because you have at least a metric ton of ultra-high quality Force crystals. I was wondering if you wanted to part with those, or if your offer is for the biological items alone,” Nolasco said.

“A ton?” Preston nearly asked. He had spent months on each of the crystals he had made with the Force, and now he is being informed that he has a ton in his storage container? Fixit! He could hear the robot chuckling. “Umm, yeah, I would like to sell them as well, but only after I sift through them for a few personal souvenirs. I like collecting crystals.”

“Of course,” Nolasco said.

They climbed into the vehicle, accommodating CU2 in the front. The driver reported some apprehension about having an interrogation Droid in the front with him, but Nolasco corrected the driver on how to distinguish between a collection unit and an interrogation unit. The driver didn’t ask how he knew this. He simply directed the car to take them skyward.

“Do you want to negotiate before signing a contract?” Nolasco asked. His hands were shaking.

“I don’t understand,” Preston said.

“Normally I would take a prospect to a club, liquor him up, get him a few hookers, but I’m thinking we should just cut to the chase,” Nolasco said. “What are you asking for?”

“Whatever you think is fair,” Preston said, trying to give Nolasco his full attention, but finding it difficult as he was distracted by the activity of the driver and the traffic they were merging with. “Do you think there will be enough for me to stay in a hotel for a couple days?”

Nolasco laughed. He quickly subdued himself when he saw Preston wasn’t laughing. “You’re not kidding?” he asked. “Umm, you understand your hotel is already a done deal. You’ll have access to the best food, access to the club, women, all your needs are being comped. You’re our guest as long as you wish to stay here.”

“Really? But I’m willing to work for my room and board,” Preston said. He was genuinely shocked about how accommodating Nolasco seemed, as this was not the impression the world was like from his literature.

Nolasco shook his head. “Son, I got this. Please. It’s the least I can do considering the value of what you’re selling,” Nolasco said.

“So, this is a good deal?”

Nolasco sighed, pulled out the electronic cigarette, and inhaled deeply. “Your flat commission is sufficient to put you up for life, but even if you managed to spend it all, the five percent lifetime commission off any of the product lines will guaranty you will never work a day in your life,” Nolasco offered. “Unless you want to work. If you want a position at our company as a field researcher, based on the quality of your samples and reports, you may be over qualified. Are you a doctor?”

“I’ve passed the comprehensives, but don’t carry an official title,” Preston said.

Nolasco nodded. He took out a refill cartridge and swapped out the empty one and proceeded to inhale another round. “You mind?”

“Isn’t that bad for your health?” Preston asked.

“Depends on who you ask,” Nolasco said. “Do you mind?”

“It’s your health. Are you nervous?”

“I will feel much better after you sign the contract,” Nolasco said.

“Do you have it?” Preston asked.

“You don’t want to sit down with the lawyers?” Nolasco asked.

“Just hand it to me.”

Nolasco handed him an electronic clipboard. Preston browsed through the document. He knew how to read, and was reading at the graduate level, but this document was a struggle to comprehend. He skimmed it for the fine details.

“So this is a lot?” Preston asked.

Nolasco shrugged. “I’m really okay if you have a lawyer. Given your perceived social impairment, having an advocate might be a good idea.”

“Okay,” Preston agreed. It wouldn’t hurt to have an advisor, knowledgeable about law and contracts.

Nolasco tapped on the window to alert the driver to turn them around. He excused himself, in order to take time out to use a portable tablet to send out some texts. Preston shrugged and stared out at the window. He was amazed by the amount of traffic. The driver of the vehicle probably was more for show than necessary, since the computer was doing all the navigating. There would have to be an intensive air traffic control system in place to push so much traffic. They arrived at the top of a building so high that Preston couldn’t see the ground looking over the edge. Of course, it was also impossible to see the ground because of the large number of buildings pressing up against them. It just happened that this was the tallest building in this city block. Nolasco hustled him away from the edge, telling him to be careful. The winds at this

altitude have been known to gust and take people away. It was fairly breezy and colder than Preston had ever experienced. The air was crisper, cleaner than it had been at the space port. They descended down into the building and ended their tour in a large conference room, with large plate windows, a conference table that had the appearance that it was floating, but only because the pedestal was well hidden. There were plants in each corner. Preston took a moment to visit them and found them wanting more water. This was how the six lawyers found him when they entered. Nolasco called Preston away from the plants and him to the lawyers. Two for the company, one for Wosha, one for Nolasco, and one for him. The remaining lawyer was simply an independent arbitrator should they get stuck on any particular point.

Preston smiled at his lawyer, his eyes unable to leave her. "It's a great pleasure to meet you, Lestelle Re."

"Thank you," his lawyer said, looking over the rim of her glasses which appeared to Preston to be more of a prop than a medical necessity. It did make her look seriously smarter. Blue eyes, blond hair in a bun, upturned nose, and a broad smile with thick, naturally red lips were hard enough to ignore, until you tried to take her all in with one shot. Preston couldn't. His eyes started at her feet, her toes exposed in the shoes she wore, with a hint of red toenails shining through the 'nude' color hosiery. His eyes bounced back to her eyes. She was 1.84 centimeters tall, her dress conforming tight against her body, causing him some difficulty in imagining just how she put it on and managed to still breathe. But breathe she did, and correctly so, from the abdomen. Her breath suggested mint and health, and her smile was supported by the presence of perfect teeth. The dress was slit up the left side of the leg, cut at the knees, and the shoes she wore were potentially weapons. Her blouse was just as tight as the skirt and the buttons across her breast were potentially on the brink of popping free. If it weren't for the amber amulet dangling from a necklace, he might not have had a reasonable excuse to stare at her cleavage. The jacket had shoulder pads, a bit of a collar that left her neck exposed.

"Preston, you're staring," Nolasco said.

Preston looked to Nolasco and saw that his new friend seemed worried. "Eh?" he said, realizing he didn't have enough air to form a full word. He told himself to breathe.

"You asked me to help you navigate the social terrain. It's impolite to stare," Nolasco said.

"You can stare at me like that if you want," Wosha offered.

Preston thanked Wosha politely. She was nicely dressed, but clearly not as attentive to her physical body as Lestelle Re. Wosha was not even 'pleasantly plump.' She was flat out obese. She had a kind soul, though, visible in the twinkly of her eyes, but only when she wasn't distracted by competing in a business world that was much more ruthless than she should be participating in, but she did so as it compensated her from the lack of affection she yearned for. It was hardening her in ways she couldn't appreciate. It took only a blink to register all of this and he was satisfied they were not compatible in any fashion. The mechanic came to mind, and he had wondered if this is how she had felt about him, he thanked her again for this gift. Even a hint of the wrong kind of smile might distract Wosha from her reality, increasing the level of fiction she needed for ego support. His eyes went back to Lestelle. "Your eyes are..." Preston began, zooming in with the Force. "You have very limited night vision?"

"I am Hapan," Estelle said. "Are you a Jedi?"

"You're absolutely stunning," Preston said, ignoring the question.

"Preston, tone it down a little," Nolasco said.

Preston took inventory of himself and his surroundings. The company lawyers were smirking, but he wasn't sure why they were so amused.

"It's okay. I'm use to the staring when I'm away from home," Lestelle said. "Preston, we should speak about your contract in private."

"Okay," Preston said, ready to follow her anywhere.

"Wait just a minute," the lead, company lawyer said.

A fast paced conversation pursued, which jumped through several different languages. He was pretty sure he translated Lestelle as calling him a social and economic moron, but it didn't come across disparaging. It sounded as if she was protecting his interests, and before they could properly negotiate he would need his own team of lawyers, and probably an accountant.

"If he wanted those, he would already have acquired them," the Jimpson said.

"The biological artifacts that he's selling is clearly the product of his life's work, meticulous shifting through an isolated biosphere for the most phenomenal specimens which couldn't have been done in less than fifteen years," Lestelle said. "This is not some accidental tourist collecting leaves."

"You can't call him a moron in one argument only to elevate his work to that of a PhD," Jimpson argued. He seemed angrier than need be, suggesting to Preston that there was more playing out here than he was aware.

"I called him a social moron, not a complete idiot," Lestelle said. "Maybe he's a Force sensitive, idiot savant, which would explain how he knew my night vision is impaired by just looking at me. Clearly, he is something special and deserves a more thoughtful contract than something you threw together in less than an hour."

"It's a standard contract!" Jimspon said. His partner was texting something on his electronic pad. Lestelle's pad chirped but she didn't look at it.

"That's my point!" Lestelle shouted back.

"If you think I need a lawyer, you're hired," Preston said.

"Son, I'm clearly biased. I'm a partner with the firm that is associated with their firm," Lestelle said. "And I was just sent over to meet the legal requirements to make this façade of civility not look like a rape."

"Your sincerity has won me over. I would accept the deal now if they make you my permanent lawyer and take care of all your legal fees," Preston said.

"We agree," the company of lawyers said in unison.

"Increase the royalties two more percent on any product line originating from this sale, and we will close the deal today," Lestelle said.

"One additional percent."

"Do I get royalties?" Wosha asked.

"You are getting six percent off the initial commission and not a cent more," Lestelle said. "And be thankful the company doesn't terminate you for harassing a potential client."

"It's okay," Preston said. "I don't know why we can't all win here."

"Because of my client's generosity, I will close the deal with an additional one point seven percent to all royalties," Lestelle offered.

"You know it takes time and money to produce products," one of the company lawyers said.

"My client has performed most of the work, mapping out symbiotic relationship and cellular metabolism. He has labeled and categorized the important proteins and their interactions in both isolation and in relation to other organisms both in an doutof their environment of origin

and provided computer modeling for interaction with the most common Galactic species, showing clear evidence of a multitude of potential uses. In reality, all you have remaining is mass production and trial runs,” Lestelle said.

The two lawyers discussed the options in whispers then conferred with the table. They also turned to their devices to read whatever incoming transmissions were being fed. Preston became aware that there were more eyes in this room than what could be seen.

“We’ll agree with the one point seven increase in royalties, if the client agrees that all his future dealings are exclusively with us, not a competitor,” Jimpson said.

“No,” Lestelle said.

“I would be okay with that,” Preston agreed. It wasn’t like he intended to collect any more samples. He had seen Fixit and the CU’s work and it was laborious and messy and just not fun. In truth, Fixit deserved all the credit for the work being negotiated over.

“What my client means is that he would be okay with exclusivity if you give him employee status,” Lestelle countered quickly, giving Preston a look that said ‘shut up!’ “Salary, pension, stocks, medical and dental. He will be given status of a field researcher, with the flexibility that comes with that. Translation, he isn’t going to be pent up in an office somewhere, kissing ass with management.”

“Please, he can’t be more than 18 standard years old, and you want us to give him a pension?”

“You really don’t want me to file an ageism lawsuit against you, do you?” Lestelle asked.

“I’m merely pointing out...”

“That my client is brilliant for his age? Isn’t there a brilliancy bonus?” Lestelle asked.

“We agree to these terms, if every five years he brings in a minimum of one new product line,” the lead said. “At any five year interval in which he doesn’t, we’ll give an early retirement, and he can keep his medical and dental, but he only gets a company pension if he is employed for thirty years or more.”

“Agreed,” Lestelle said.

Everyone stood up prepared to shake hands, except Lestelle, who remained seated, focused on her electronic data.

“Now,” Lestelle said. “Let’s discuss the Force crystals.”

The lead company lawyer frowned. “That was part of the containers we purchased.”

“Negative,” Lestelle said. She unbuttoned the top button on her blouse, and then pulled the pin from her hair. Her hair dropped, and she shook her head to let it fall where it will. “It is well established, thanks to Wosha, that the contents of the container to be negotiated over was only the biological substances. Further, Nolasco was given permission to help sell the crystals, contingent on my client inspecting them in order to pick out his favorites. We are willing to maintain that part of the deal, the only thing left to negotiate is price.”

“Fair market value...”

“Yes, what is the fair market value of crystals, the purity of which has not been seen in over what, sixty years?” Estelle asked.

Everyone sat back down.

“Wosha, you and your lawyer can leave. You’re not cashing in on this,” Lestelle said.

“Now, just a damn minute,” her lawyer said.

“Do you really want me to play back the recording?” Lestelle said. “Good bye.”

The lawyer and Wosha left. The look she gave suggested she was being cheated. It was a look that Preston didn't understand, considering the share of the commission she was getting probably was 27 times her normal salary.

"Nolasco probably won't be here long enough to help sell the crystals," Jimpson said.

"Excuse me," Preston interrupted. "Are you suggesting you're going to terminate him? Why would you do that?"

"I mishandled this deal," Nolasco said.

"Really? You seemed to have been fairly reasonable," Preston said.

"They're in the profit business, not the reasonable business," Lestelle said.

"Can I undo the previous deal?" Preston asked.

"No!"

"Technically he hasn't signed any contract," Lestelle said.

"I don't want Nolasco terminated over this deal, or in other way treated badly by colleagues or upper management," Preston said. "I want that solid, or I'm done here."

There was complete silence, as all of the lawyers were completely flabbergasted, even Lestelle, who originally had no interest in her client's rights and was simply serving a function. She also knew Nolasco and was surprised by Preston's loyalty and had she been able to speak with Preston in private, she would have advised against sticking his neck out. Nolasco looked equally dumbfounded, mouth slight agape. The stares he was giving were intense enough that Preston wasn't sure if they were re-evaluating him as not being as stupid as he looked, or labeling him as completely unreasonable. He apparently didn't care what they believed, as became intractable on this point.

"Preston, why are you doing this? You don't know me. You shouldn't be sticking your neck out for me," Nolasco said.

"None of this would be possible if you didn't recognize the quality of the work, or if you hadn't given me a chance, and that's all I wanted, a chance," Preston said.

"Nolasco has been a loyal employee for 27 years," Jimpson said, reading over his prompt that just flagged in. He looked up, barely containing a frown. "As long as you are with the company, he will be a part of the company. Okay?"

Preston looked to Nolasco. Nolasco nodded. Lestelle nodded. Preston agreed. Jimpson typed something onto his terminal and transmitted the update to Lestelle's tablet. She showed it to Preston and he nodded an 'affirmative.' They weren't low balling.

"Okay," Preston agreed.

"Please provide the coordinates for where you found these crystals?"

"That wasn't part of the deal," Lestelle interrupted.

"We would like to confirm this biological niche is closed," Jimpson said.

"For now, I would like to keep the location to myself," Preston said. "When I go back to harvest more crystals, I will certainly channel what I don't use through Nolasco's department. And he and I get a straight ten percent commission off the top."

"Agreed," the lawyers said

"And that will contribute to his five year interval productivity level," Lestelle said.

Jimpson rubbed his forehead. "Preston, you must be the luckiest son of a bitch alive, stumbling upon this lawyer," he grumbled.

"None of this is luck," Preston corrected. "There are no accidents in the Force, everyone is where they are supposed to be. It couldn't be any other way."

“Okay, bringing in the mystic stuff is a sign this meeting is over. What’s your full name, for the record,” the lead lawyer asked.

Preston had been considering his sir name ever since he first spoke with customs. The answer was spoken even as he was realizing it. “Preston G Waycaster,” he said.

“There is no record of a Preston G Waycaster.”

“I’ve been off the grid since birth. Perhaps we can rectify that today?” Preston asked.

“Sure,” Jimpson said. “We’ll accept finger prints, retina scan, and DNA signatures to lock in the contractual agreement. We’ll make sure you have full legal identification by the end of the day tomorrow. Lestelle can set you up with a business accountant and get your bank accounts going. Till then, here’s a card with a cash advance. Your room at the Centennial and any food you eat there is on us for the duration of the week.”

Preston looked to Nolasco. “You okay with this deal?”

Nolasco hugged him.

“Nolasco, make sure you get him processed,” Jimpson said. “And have him sort through the crystals. We don’t want to sit on a pile that size for long. Every Force-sensitive with in a thousand miles we’ll be knocking on our door.”

Everyone shook hands. When it was all said and done, Nolasco and Lestelle were the only ones remaining in the office with Preston.

“How long have you been a lawyer?” Preston asked.

“A couple of years,” Lestelle said. “I consider this my first real success. The firm only hired me because of my beauty. They use me to distract the opponent. Since the usual parties that do advocacy work weren’t available, they sent me. So, what Jimpson was saying is accurate. You got lucky.”

“I assure you, it wasn’t luck,” Preston assured her.

“When we’re done here, if you want a home cooked meal, you are welcome at my home,” Nolasco offered.

“I would like that, thank you. But today, tonight, I would like to explore the city,” Preston said.

“Have you ever been to a city before?” Lestelle asked.

“No. I’m fairly excited,” Preston offered.

“We need to get you a body guard,” Lestelle said.

“That really isn’t necessary,” Preston said.

“Umm, yeah, it is,” Lestelle said, with exaggerated patience. “You don’t even have enough sense to realize you’ve literally won the lottery in terms of monetary compensation for your work. So, I doubt you have the social common sense to keep out of trouble. As long as I am your lawyer, it will be my job to keep you safe.”

“I’ve a lightsaber, if it’s permissible to carry in public,” Preston offered.

“You really are a Jedi?” Nolasco and Lestelle both asked.

“Does it matter?”



Preston was supposed to wait for a body guard before leaving the hotel, but his eagerness got the better of him. He was certain new friends were just being overly cautious, and though he knew he wasn’t invincible, he was confident enough in the Force that he wouldn’t die today. He ventured just outside the hotel, Findit maintaining position just over his right shoulder and slightly behind. The bustling crowds were intriguing and confusing. They were clearly each

pursuing their own agendas, determined to get to someplace, but they were also each engaged in some form of communication, through a variety of portable devices from obvious to obscure. The ones that were using obscure communication tech appeared mentally deranged. The visible tech ranged from portable tablets, to wrist bands, to ear pieces. Some had glasses that no doubt were feeding them some sort of heads up display. These latter folks seemed a touch quirky, because they had subtle hand movements which suggested they were either pushing visual information, or scrolling, that might otherwise indicate that they responding to an internal environment or being pestered by insects.

Preston was drawn to a place serving food and he soaked in the aromas, trying to decipher the menu on the wall. CU2 made a noise indicating he had to wait just outside the shop. The restaurant was open on to the outside with entire walls that were missing. There was a line and a gathering of folks waiting for their order. Preston followed the line, trying to eaves drop on the orders he could hear while studying the pictures on the menu. Everything looked strange.

“What would do you want?” the proprietor yelled at him.

“I’m not sure,” Preston said, his eyes going from the menu to the proprietor.

“Well, come back when you do, there’s a line,” the proprietor said.

Preston acknowledged the line, but didn’t fall back. “What’s good?” asked Preston.

“Either pick something or go to the end of the line!” the proprietor said.

“Yeah, come on, we only have 30 minutes for lunch!” someone yelled, soliciting the others in line to commiserate with him. Unspecific grumbling increased in volume.

“Yeah, it’s not like the menu has changed,” someone added, as if everyone should know what was served here.

Preston pointed to the first picture set on the menu. “That one.”

The proprietor yelled the item and then asked for payment. Preston hit his chip against the indicated plate to complete the transaction. The proprietor told him to step aside while he served the next guest. Preston gathered with the other folks who were waiting. He tried to engage one of the patrons with a smile, but she grimaced at him, and stepped a little away. She was dressed in business attire, a simple dress that revealed her calves, but shoes that Preston thought were horrendous. Preston wondered why she would hobble herself so, knowing the shoes would not be good in an emergency. He didn’t mind how it made her calves look, or how it raised her buttocks, but it couldn’t be good for her posture. He considered how in the holomovies, the lead actress was always shorter than the lead, and so when they kissed, she’d have to go off her heels and onto her toes, and maybe one foot would go up as she leaned into him. The woman seemed relieved when her meal arrived so she could leave. Preston turned to the closest patron who was busily writing shorthand on a device.

“Hey,” Preston said.

The guy didn’t even look up.

“So, is this what they call fast food, eh?” Preston asked, friendly.

The proprietor stopped interacting with his next guest and pulled out a blaster. “Hey, Kid?! Get the hell out of my establishment.”

“What?” Preston asked.

“See that sign? Says I can refuse anyone I want. You don’t like the service, think you can get faster elsewhere, then get the hell out!” the proprietor demanded.

Bewildered, Preston bowed. “Thank you for the lesson,” he said, and departed the fast food chain without collecting a meal. He had no clue what had just happened, but thought it best not to dwell on it.

Preston sat down on a flower box and simply watched the parade of pedestrians. Everyone at the fast food place had been really stressed and it had presented itself as anger. Here on the street, it was only a little less stress, but still it was apparent in the stride of the pedestrians as they rushed to and fro. Somehow the crowd managed to avoid collisions with each other, revealing at least a modicum of awareness of their immediate environment, but for whatever reason, very few seemed to be engaging anyone near or around them. Indeed, it was as if each were in their own little world, encapsulated by tech. There were even people who were clearly in groups and yet holding multiple conversations, some with the ones in close proximity, and some via text messages or through communication devices worn on the ear, the sleeve, or pendants, or direct neural interfaces. Preston could only imagine what Master Yoda would say about this. Findit whistled nonchalantly, moving away to his left. Preston ignored the Droid wimpering page.

“Sir, you can’t sit here.”

Preston looked up to see an officer staring down at him. The officer was using a mobility device that hovered over the ground, allowing him to remain standing. Preston had to look twice to determine whether the mobility device was a crutch or part of the gear. The officer did not seem to fit Preston’s profile for law enforcement, as he was severely out of shape. The mobility device sounded like it was straining to hold him afloat.

“I don’t understand,” Preston said.

“What part of ‘you can’t sit here’ are you having trouble with?” the officer asked.

Preston stood and checked to make sure he hadn’t inadvertently harmed any of the plants. They were all intact and were surprisingly healthy, marooned in their island of dirt. Clearly someone must water them. A Droid more than likely.

“You can’t stand here, either,” the officer said.

“There’s a law against standing?” Preston asked.

“It’s called loitering, now move along,” the officer said.

“I don’t understand,” Preston said. “Loitering is lingering in a particular place without any apparent purpose, but I am clearly people watching in hopes of understanding the meaning of it all.”

“Look, kid, I’m trying to give you a break,” the officer said. “You’re clearly homeless and don’t belong in this neighborhood and I don’t want to have to arrest you. It’s a lot of paper work and I’m near the end of my shift. So push on. And don’t let me see you around here again.”

Preston thanked the officer with a slight bow, hands coming together in a Nomaste greeting. He then joined the pace of the pedestrians, going where-ever the flow took him. The mobility device took the officer in the other direction.

One of the places Preston was told most certainly not to visit was the lower levels. That was the next place he headed. Though it had a bit of a dank feel, and a moldy smell, and was definitely darker, it wasn’t too different than the level he had been on. Crowded. The only difference was the human population density had diminished; more non-humans became prominent in numbers. Street level required artificial illumination, even during daylight hours, due to the size of the sky scrapers. Every few blocks there were light tunnels that carried light from the top of the buildings down a series of tubes via mirrors, so some natural light could diffuse down, but the artificial lights were more outstanding. Dead noon was the only time the street life got direct sun, provided there was a direct, unobstructed path. If sunlight was blocked, it was usually by a bridge connecting two buildings, or personal landing pads, balconies, or people hanging plants over the side of their balcony. Vendors lined the street, selling their ware,

often food cooked on the spot. There were barrels with pale, iced fish, a scattering of poorly defined fruit or vegetables, as if scraps from upper floors had been tossed down, and a lot of awful choices which were unidentifiable, all competing for his attention. He hadn't gone two blocks before a merchant was threatening his Droid.

"Hey, that's my property!"

"Hold up, sir, what's wrong?" Preston asked.

"Your Droid is a thief and I will have it dismantled!" the merchant said.

Preston motioned for CU2 to heel. The Droid obeyed, hovering near. Preston gave it a stern look and it opened a storage space and revealed the jewel it had taken. Preston took it and handed it back to the merchant.

"I apologize for my Droid's behavior," Preston said, offering the artifact back to the merchant.

"He ripped it from a display! It's ruined," the merchant said.

"May I compensate you for your loss?" Preston asked.

"Well, I don't know, you don't appear to have any credits on you," the merchant grumbled.

Preston showed a card.

"Ahh, well it was five hundred..."

"Glass is really expensive in your shop," Preston interrupted.

"Glass? How dare you insult me?! That crystal belonged to..."

"You may charge me five hundred," Preston said.

The merchant nodded, touched his merchant id to Preston's credit and it was done. As the merchant turned to walk away, Preston retrieved the jewel with a tug of the Force.

"Hey, wait," the merchant said.

"I believe I paid for it, did I not?" Preston said, twirling the item in the air with the Force.

"Um, yeah, um, thank you, yeah," the merchant said, and hurried off, hoping the Jedi wouldn't kill him for selling him an overpriced piece of cut glass.

Preston gave the Droid the artifact back. "Now, go back to the hotel and wait for me. Do not collect anything else. No arguments. Go."

The Droid sulked, but it departed back to the hotel, straight up through the air.

Preston passed through the market, reveling in the new sounds, the smells, and the sights. Occasionally people would approach, but on seeing the lightsaber, they quickly redirected themselves. He wasn't sure what that was about, but it was clear he was being avoided, for the most part. Occasionally someone would return his nod or a smile. It was more like a game of 'I'm aware that you're aware that I'm aware' sort of thing. Not surprisingly, the ones that seemed most aware of their surroundings were those that seemed to be preying on those not paying attention. Pick pockets, security, and the like shifted through the market, their intent clear to Preston, at least, but none to each other or the masses. Just outside the market, he found himself besieged by children begging for food. Some were human, most were not. There was a barrage of languages, and squeaky high pitched squeals that was difficult to sort.

"Okay, hold up, hold up," Preston pleaded, putting his hands in the 'I surrender' pose. "Stop!"

The group of kids fell silent. Not one looked over seven.

"You're hungry?" Preston asked.

They all nodded, holding out their hands, each pleading.

“Don’t believe them, sir.”

Preston turned to the 9 year old leaning against the wall. She lowered her hood to reveal a Fringe haircut, with the gather of what might be a pony tail if it had had any visible length. Her natural, black hair color shone through the strips that had been bleached and dyed red. She pursed her lips as if deciding whether or not to commit. After a second of deliberation, she gave in to the impulse. “They live at the orphanage down the street,” she said. “They get meals. They just recognize a sucker when they see one.”

“A sucker?”

“Probably the biggest sucker that’s been grounded in a millennia,” she said. ‘Grounded’ being colloquial language for the lowest street level.

“So, are you an orphan as well?” Preston asked her. She looked as if she had missed a few meals.

“Would it make a difference in how you treat me?”

“Probably not,” Preston said, amused by her assessment. “Are you hungry?”

“Of course, but if you think one meal is going to solve my problems, or theirs, you’re not only a sucker, you’re stupid sucker,” she said.

Preston approached the nearest vendor who was selling a variety of frozen fruits on a stick that could be dipped in an assortment of flavors. What Preston found most appealing was grilled plantains on a stick. He asked for four of those and instructed the vendor to feed all the kids. The kids swarmed, jumping. Preston brought them back into control and told them to line up. He touched his credit emblem to the vendor’s cart and the vendor graciously thanked him.

Preston joined the nine year old, who was now sitting against the building, using a mobile device to txt. Her legs out stretched, the hem of her skirt hit her knees. He noticed the hilt of a knife barely concealed in her boot. He noticed a row of cuts on her arm. He placed the plate of food between them and took one of the grilled plantains for himself. She finished her txt and pocketed the device.

“Help yourself,” Preston offered.

“I don’t want your charity,” she said.

“Consider it payment for your time, then,” Preston said.

“Umph, you think all I’m worth is a grilled fruit?”

“What do you think you’re worth?” Preston asked.

“I usually get 100 credits an hour,” she said.

Preston grunted approval: the grilled plantain was actually pretty good, seemingly oblivious to how the girl interpreted his reponse in timing with her statement. “That doesn’t answer my question then, does it,” Preston pointed out when his mouth came available to speak.

“Are you one of those mission people who come bearing messages of god’s love?” she asked, now not sure of what the grunt of approval meant.

“Nope,” Preston said.

“So, you’re not going to tell me all I need in life is to be grateful and forgive everyone?” she asked.

“I am an advocate for gratefulness. Kind of think we should thank everyone we encounter for their lessons, their gifts,” Preston said. “And Forgiveness is a huge part of what I practice, personally.”

“So, do you really think if Darth Vader killed everyone I love and raped me, I should forgive him? Better than that, let’s say there’s a heaven. If he does one kind act, should he get a

free pass to heaven? You think any act of kindness can forgive him all the evil he did?" she demanded.

Preston was silent for a long moment. It was a brilliant question. "What do you want to be forgiven for?"

"Oh, fuck you," she said, nearly bolting. She touched her side and reclined back against the wall.

"To answer your question, by the time you get to Heaven, you won't care if the worst of us is sharing a meal with the best of us," Preston said. "It's a distraction worrying about what obstacles other people have to overcome in order to get to higher levels of existence. We only have to focus on ourselves. Besides, forgiveness is not about healing other people, it's about healing ourselves."

"Well, I guess there's no hope for me, because I'm just not the forgiving type," she said. "Any other useful tricks in your bag?"

"Nope," Preston said. "You nailed it right on just about everything. You have great insight. Feeding these kids will only satiate their immediate needs, won't meet their long term needs."

"There shouldn't be hunger. Not here. There is more than enough food to feed everyone on this planet," she said.

"You're absolutely right," Preston agreed, making a show of savoring the food he had. "Be ashamed if this goes to waste, after being paid for and all."

She surrendered to her hunger and accepted one of the grilled plantains. She finished it fairly quick. She put the stick back on the plate.

"So, if you're not one of those lighters, what do you teach?"

"I'm not really a teacher," Preston said.

"There's only one kind of person who comes down here," she said, going for her second grilled banana. "People who want to make themselves feel better. Some do it by teaching; some do it by preaching; the remaining buy or straight up take it without asking."

"And which one am I?"

She shrugged, playing inappropriately with her food before eating it.

"She's a little young for you, don't you think?"

Preston looked up to see the mechanic scowling down at him. He was still struck by her personal beauty and the energy she radiated. Hands on her hips, a finger purposely tapped the hilt of blaster strapped to her side suggesting she was clearly capable and willing of using it. In fact, the tiny strap that held the blaster in the holster was unfastened. She was clearly leaning more for 'immediately' willing.

"He seems closer to my age than the rest of creeps that hit on me," the girl said. "So back off, he's my mark."

"You're supposed to be staying out of trouble," Corissa said.

"A place where there isn't any trouble," she mused with obvious sarcasm. "Yeah, still looking for that."

"You need to go home and stay in school," Corissa said.

"Right, cause there is no trouble at home," she said. "And I prefer the trouble of the streets to the trouble at school. You can't fight back at school, with all that zero tolerance nonsense. Zero tolerance fixes it so that the group bullies always win, because the only way to fight groups is to escalate things, blow things up, which makes me, the individual look like the crazy one."

“You can’t defend yourself at school?” Preston asked.

“What world do you come from?” Ten asked.

“How about just not fighting?” Corissa asked.

“Says the woman with a blaster on her hip,” the girl said.

“Enough, arguing, Ten. Go home,” Corissa said.

“I haven’t earned enough to go home yet,” she said.

“CPS investigated and you are not being tricked out,” the mechanic said.

“Yeah, cause CPS never takes bribes,” the girl said.

Preston closed his eyes for a moment, sorting through some of the information at his disposal, and when that wasn’t enough, he went further. When he returned, he was aware they were both staring at him.

“Go home, Ten. Nothing bad will happen to you tonight. I promise,” Preston said.

Ten stood up, taking the last plantain with her. She glanced back only once.

“So, you bought her crap? She’s some poor, homeless girl down on her luck?” the mechanic asked.

“She has bruising on her abdomen, a fractured right lower rib, and a welt running down her back, and multiple, self-inflicted, superficial cuts, so yeah, I bought some of it,” Preston said.

“You examined her?”

“You didn’t see the way she was sitting, the way she got up and limped away?”

Preston asked. It really shouldn’t have taken a Force sensitive person to see the kid was hurting. He stood up and ambient light reflected off his lightsaber. He saw Corissa’s expression change. So far, the warnings he had heard about the lower level seemed to be a bit exaggerated, so perhaps he should hide the Light.

“Oh, you’re a Jedi?!” she asked, her demeanor suddenly changing.

“Call me Preston,” he said, offering his hand.

“So, the kids were telling the truth? You bought them food?” she asked. She had come to confirm the kids’ stories and make sure none had been harmed.

“I had a profitable day. It felt right to share,” Preston said. “And you? What brings you here?”

“I volunteer at the soup kitchen,” she said.

“A mechanic and a cook?” Preston asked.

“No, we’re not talking about me,” she said. She pushed her hair back out of her eyes.

“If you believed Ten’s story, why did you let her go back home?”

“Back to her life?” Preston asked. He shrugged. “Walk with me?”

Corissa didn’t take long to think about it. Her curiosity had the best of her and she wanted to understand his strangeness. The possibility of him being a Jedi Knight intrigued her to no end, as the mystic life had always fascinated her. And if he was a mystic that would certainly explain why he was so different. He was probably even home schooled. Preston established a comfortable pace, which fit her own stride.

“Consider the population density here. In a radius of thirty kilometers, how many people do you suppose need help this very moment?”

“We’d have to define help,” she said.

“Excellent point,” Preston said. “Do we prioritize children and hunger or children and physical or sexual abuse? How about just domestic violence in general? Then there are people with mental illnesses, some unwittingly causing mischief, and others being victimized. People

using drugs, again, both victims and victimizing. People putting themselves in harm's way out of just recklessness or foolishness. We haven't even gotten to the just downright villainous acts. Reckon you can save them all?" Preston asked her.

"No, I just do what I can," she said. "That's why I volunteer."

"That's a good start. But what if I told you no one needed help," Preston said.

"I'd call you a liar," she said.

Preston smiled, amused. "Perspective, really," he offered, shrugging. "Either we are all safe in the Force and there is no death, or it's a lie and the situation is even direr than anyone dare imagine. I prefer to believe we are all exactly where we are supposed to be, learning what we need to learn."

"Okay, so by that reasoning, you were here tonight to help save her from being abused," the mechanic pointed out.

"What should I have done? Taking her with me would be kidnapping. Following her home and threatening her family or killing them would be equally as bad. Even if their crimes warranted a death sentence, executing them would rob her of the need to confront her parents for their offenses, or maybe even one day in the future healing them. Additionally, you said you already had some folks investigate her situation. Basically, all the players have made their moves. Now it's time to allow the Force to sort it out."

Corissa was taken back. "You don't talk like any Jedi Knight I've ever read about."

"I'm not a Jedi Knight," Preston said.

"Oh?" she asked, coming to a complete halt, her left hand once again going to her hip, her right hand resting on the hilt of the blaster. She increased her guardedness and took note of immediate avenues of escape.

"I'm not of the order," Preston explained.

"Then how do you know that she will be alright?"

"I don't know absolutely. I simply believe based on what I measured," Preston admitted, inviting her to walk again. She didn't take him up on it. He faced her, giving her a great target should she decided to kill him. "I'm not really a clairvoyant, and since the future is always shifting, predictions are kind of a wasted effort. There is a lot of freedom and personal choice involved in what will play out. It's better to deal with what is. Before she encountered me, she had a particular momentum and vector, but I think I derailed some of that, or at least shifted her orbit, so her future is already changing as she accepts new options, both consciously and subconsciously. From a casual perspective, it probably seems more accidental than on purpose. From a higher perspective, there are no accidents, this was a Force occasion, and I simply choose to believe it will work itself out the way it's supposed to. I am unable to be more precise, as I'm a healer, mostly, not a clairvoyant."

"So, why didn't you heal her wounds?" the mechanic asked.

"Rule one, never heal without permission," Preston said.

"What if she were unconscious?"

"The Force is never unconscious," Preston replied. They resumed walking. "If I were to heal everyone, I would never sleep or eat and I would probably die of exhaustion. That's one perspective. The higher perspective is that I don't actually heal anyone. They heal themselves when they align with the Force and their life mission. Everyone has the same access to the Force as I do."

"That's not true. Force abilities are based on genetics," Corisa argued, disappointed that she believed he was mystic. "It's passed down from your parents."

“Search your feelings, you know that’s not true,” Preston said. “How sad would it be that after a millennia of teachings by the Jedi assuring us that there is something more to life, but oh, yeah, the caveat is you only have access to it if your parents had it? I assure you, if using the Force was completely genetically based, there would be scientist creating Force users in the laboratories, and the Jedi Knights would not take vows of celibacy.”

Corisa thought about for a long moment. “Alright, I don’t have an argument for that. But then how do you explain the mitochondria levels or something? Mitochondria is passed down genetically from the mother.”

“Midi-chlorians,” Preston corrected.

“What?”

“Not mitochondria, Midi-chlorians. And that argument is a distraction.”

“A distraction? How?”

Corissa stopped. She was at a crossroads of sorts, and had to make a decision. Continue the conversation or go home alone. For whatever reason, her intuition, her stomach, told her Preston was safe, so she made an invitation to continue by pointing to the lift. As they waited for its arrival, he continued his explanation. By the time the lift arrived she appeared to have decided she would take him further than the top of the lift.

“Yes, there seems to be a correlation to ‘M’ counts and abilities, but it doesn’t necessarily mean what people think it means. All species are hosts to thousands of other creatures; we only imagine that we are independent agents. Even the mitochondria you mentioned are the descendants of creatures who once functioned independently of their host cells, but now can’t live without a host cell. All life is interdependent, we are all symbiotic creatures. We believe Midi-chlorians are sentient. That could mean they have an active role to play in society, and so they choose to live within hosts that are key players in determining history, or, it could just mean they like Force users,” Preston offered. “Correlation is more likely, as opposed to a direct cause and effect. That is supported by the fact that Jedi, like Obi Wan, spoke very highly of midi-chlorians in his younger years, but by the end of his journaling, they aren’t even referenced.”

“So, we’re all puppets to the Force?”

“Again, perspective,” Preston said, enjoying this. He had come at it with more anger than she, when he first tracked this same vector, but he had forgiven long ago. The lift opened up onto a domed park. He followed her out into small forest under a dome. He brightened, as if he had a visible aura. He walked over to the nearest potted tree, reaching up to touch a flower. Lightening bugs descended around him. “Oh!”

“They like you,” she said.

“I’m really good with animals,” Preston said. “Even insects.”

“Is this the Force?” she asked.

“Uh? Oh, of course. What isn’t the Force?” Preston assured her. “I’m happy to know these creatures are still incorporated into the ecosystem. It seems so empty here. I’ve never been somewhere that had so many people crammed into so small a place and yet the feeling of isolation and loneliness is almost unbearable.”

She nodded. “If only we were like these small souls, bearing lights.”

Preston smiled at her, recognizing these creatures were also well timed metaphors. He noticed other select creatures roaming free over the dome habitat, selected no doubt to help maintain the equilibrium of this tiny bubble.

“Sorry, I was distracted from the point I think you wanted me to address. My particular line of training says everyone has access to health, to the Force, regardless of genetic heritage or luck. The sun and rain shine equally on everyone. The air is free. It’s that easy to access, but it’s not breathing, it’s not drinking, it’s not seeing. It’s deeper than that.”

“That goes against everything I’ve read,” she said.

“You’ve heard the Force binds us all together?” Preston asked. When she agreed, he continued, “You have no less access to the Force than a fish has less access to the water. We are all immersed, all inseparable.”

“So, you could teach me to use the Force is what you’re saying,” she said, her hands gesturing as she became excited by the prospect. She forced herself to tone down her hope.

“You don’t need anyone to teach you and it’s really not ‘using’ per say, but being aware. Again, it’s as available to you as breathing, but most of the time, you’re not even aware of your breath. Several times through our conversation, I’ve noticed you holding your breath. Like you are now.”

“Yeah,” Corissa said, sighing. “I figured you would give me some lame excuse like I’m too angry, or too old to start the training?”

“Are you a gymnast?” Preston asked.

“No,” she said.

“But you could learn to be a gymnast,” Preston pointed out.

“I would never compete for a gold medal,” she said.

“Maybe. You’d have to be fairly fanatical about training, serious determination to compete with the younger, more agile opponents,” Preston agreed. “But you could learn to tumble, learn to fall with grace, build some skills and strength. So, you won’t likely be a Jedi Knight, but there is no reason for you not to have a greater experience of the Force on a daily basis. And I am telling you, you don’t need a Master or a Gatekeeper or a book. All you need is self, a willingness to experiment, and a desire to see truth, no matter what form it takes. Now, if you want to be recognized, you have to follow the protocols, join an organization. But you don’t need any of that to behold truth.”

“What is truth?”

“Keep asking that and you will be a Jedi yet.”

“And what about Ten?”

“She had the conversation she needed to have in order to get traction. She’s not going to be stuck much longer,” Preston said. “I’m fairly confident she is going to make it out of here. As for the other children I fed tonight, well, at least some of them had a nice treat.”



Keisha didn’t have to knock, even when the door was closed, but Nolasco was sitting near the window, looking out over the skyline, as if mesmerized by the air traffic. He was so still she at first thought he was dead, but then he took a hit on his vice. The upper portion brightened as he drew air through it. She knocked in order not to surprise him coming up unannounced. The sky traffic was particularly attractive at night, like looking down on a river of stars. The skyscrapers were fixed islands of lights, with a river of lights pouring in and around the buildings. Very few actual stars were able to shine through the blaze created by the city, but occasionally one could spot a neighboring planet, or an orbital satellite. He exchanged an empty cartridge for a new cartridge.

“Going home soon?” Keisha asked. She was only 1.58 centimeters tall, and compared to Nolasco’s wife, she was rather ordinary. It was that ordinariness which had allowed her to continue to be his secretary, as his wife was fairly jealous of anyone she perceived to be taller or better looking than her. It was also that same ordinariness which had attracted her boss to her in the first place. She had a theory about men. If a man was in a relationship with a tall woman, he wanted a shorter woman. If he was with a woman who had big boobs, he would want a woman who had practically none. If he was with a skinny woman, he wanted a chubby woman. Basically, whatever he didn’t have, that’s what he wanted. Nolasco’s wife was demanding, forceful, and always the center of attention, and the most beautiful woman in any room. Keisha was the opposite, always serving, always more interested in others than self. And because she put her boss first, there was no one else in her life.

“Yeah,” Nolasco said, quietly.

“You okay?” Keisha asked, leaning against the door frame.

“Surprisingly,” Nolasco answered.

“It appears you are still my boss,” Keisha said.

He nodded.

“The CEO looked really angry when he stormed out of here,” Keisha observed.

“It will blow over,” Nolasco said, inhaling deeply on his crutch. “It was a fair deal.”

“Yeah, it was,” Keisha agreed. “Why did you do it?”

Nolasco was quiet for a long time. “I don’t have a clue.”

Keisha came closer, touched his shoulder. “You know you have never really been an unkind man. Your past business deals were tough, but not illegal or immoral.”

Nolasco nodded. “That is how I have often rationalized them, yeah,” he agreed. He looked up at her, her face illuminated by the flow of traffic, shadows pushing against the far wall. “Do you believe in past lives?”

“I find that there is enough to contend with in this life to be worrying about what I may or may not have done in a previous life,” Keisha said.

“Why do you ask?”

“I am certain I know Preston from somewhere, but, I can’t put a finger on it. Maybe it’s just one of those *deja vu* brain malfunction things,” Nolasco said.

“Your brain is not malfunctioning,” Keisha assured him. “It will come to you. Is there anything I can do for you before I leave?”

“No,” Nolasco said. “Have a good night.”

“Alright, then. You’ll find today’s documents finalized, ready for your signatures. The only unusual item to report is that security found an Empirical Trojan in our network,” Keisha said.

“Sabotage?”

“It doesn’t appear so. The malware opened a channel and transmitted a short data burst. They’re not sure what it transmitted, but that transmission is what alerted security to its presence. They’ve since isolated it and removed it. There’s no telling how long it’s been dormant and as of now, there is still no clue as to the trigger. If they figure out what it transmitted, that might help identify what awakened it, but it’s a really old code, no one’s identified yet.”

“Guess that’s to be expected,” Nolasco said, taking another hit of his vice. “Can’t ever just have a perfect day. Keep me apprised of that. Never know what the Empire left sleeping in the databanks, but it’s rarely innocuous.”

Keisha agreed, patted his shoulder, and departed for the night.

The mechanic's name was Corissa Fite. She was 44 standard years old and had been working at Bio-Enc since she finished her internship. The conversation that led them from ground to the park and eventually back to her place, was full of esoteric ramblings. He made no bones about not being a Jedi, but she couldn't see him any other way. She wanted desperately to know more about the Force and life, as if looking for a solution to a problem she had long since forgotten. Preston gave up on convincing her that he was neither a Jedi nor a mystic guru. Somewhere the dialogue broke down and became intimacy. It left Preston bewildered and Corissa asleep. He had watched her for a long while, noting the rhythmic breathing, memorizing every contour of her form so that even with eyes closed, he could see her imprinted on his retinas. He finally got out of bed, dressed, and retired to the balcony. He liked that it was open to the sky line and that it was like looking down on the stars. He pulled the breakfast table closer to the side, climbed up on it, and began a light meditation.

Corissa woke to find herself alone in bed and was immediately disappointed. She thought she had had a better read on Preston, that he wouldn't just be a one night stand, someone who got up without saying goodbye. Her disappointment turned to concern when she discovered that he was sitting close to the edge of the balcony. He had shifted her small coffee table right up to the edge and was using it as a perch to sit up higher than the railing. She was afraid to touch him for fear of startling him, as the last thing she wanted was for him to accidentally fall.

"Preston?" she whispered. "Preston?" a little louder.

He held up a hand, indicating he needed a moment.

"You okay?" Corissa asked after a moment seemed to have come and gone. She was aware her heart and her breathing.

"Yeah," Preston said. He opened his eyes, and turned his body so he could see her directly without turning his head, and so that he wouldn't be distracted by the traffic that flowed below. "I prefer it up here compared to the lower levels. I'm still aware of the den below, but it's easier to sift through all the incoming data from this vantage point."

Corissa tried to understand. "I guess it is easier being a mystic in a cave or on a mountain, as opposed to here, in the trenches," she said.

Preston's face reflected 'serious contemplation' as he considered her statement.

"I meant no disrespect," Corissa corrected herself.

"There is no disrespect. It was an extremely astute observation," Preston said, still mulling over the complexity of her comment. "A lesson. Thank you."

Corissa touched his arm. "You're welcome I guess," she said. She tilted her head, touching his cheek. "Why do you seem so sullen?"

"I'm not sullen."

"Yeah, you are. You look sad."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"I'm just processing," Preston said.

"Can you come down off the table and process on the floor?" Corissa asked.

He came off the table. She hugged him and then led him back into the room. They sat on the bed, both in a meditation pose, the natural lotus position. She held his hands in hers. The curtain stirred along the balcony door, parting in half to allow an occasional glimpse of city light.

"Can you tell me what you're processing?" Corissa asked.

“I’ve had quite a few experiences today. It’s a lot to take in,” Preston said, caressing her hands, not meeting her eyes. He brought her hands up to his face, touched her hands to his cheeks, his lips, and smelled them. He realized where his focus was, where his thoughts were taking him again, and he turned his attention back to her face, her eyes, so she might know he was listening to her.

“I imagine,” Corissa said, smiling at the way he was looking at her. She was no longer ‘creeped out’ by the intensity of his stare. Indeed, his stare thrilled her, it was tangible. She had jokingly asked if he had been using the Force on her to get her into bed. Not understanding, he had asked if she wanted him to levitate her and place her in bed, and she had laughed and kissed him, and now, here they still were, navigating... ‘Navigating what?’ was her unvoiced thought. “Your first civilized planet. Your first foray into a crowded market place. Your first fast food, almost. Your first time,” Corissa said, emphasizing ‘first time.’

He nodded with a smile.

“So, how was it?” Corissa asked.

“How was what?” Preston asked.

Corissa tilted her head down, giving him a stare that suggested annoyance. “Really?”

“Really what?” Preston asked.

“Your first time,” Corissa asked, somewhat annoyed by having to spell it out for him.

“Oh! It was nice,” Preston said.

“Nice?!” Corissa echoed. Her annoyance became anger.

“I detect an increase in emotional intensity,” Preston said. “What is the correct response?”

“I don’t expect you to lie,” Corissa snapped, pulling her hands away from him. “Yes, I’m flabbergasted but I shouldn’t be surprised. I suppose I should be grateful you have not learned enough social etiquette to lie. So, what didn’t I do right?”

Preston was struck by the wording. Did she mean, ‘what did I do wrong?’ “I doubt my disappointment has anything to do with you at all”

“You’re disappointed?!”

Preston bit his lips, not understanding why this felt as if it were going bad.

“Well, I have imagined having sex for a long time and I guess I was expecting more fireworks,” Preston said. “Consequently, whatever I’m experiencing, it just means I need to adjust my expectations to meet reality.”

“I was that bad?” Corissa asked.

“Again, my expectations are not about you. I don’t know how to explain it. Let me think,” Preston said, feeling his own frustration rising, wondering if his language skills were so poor that he was going to need to buy a protocol droid. He definitely had not intended to cause her pain. “I’ve had sexual encounters on the astral plane,” he began.

“You’ve had sex on a plane?” she asked, taken back. “So, I’m not the first woman...”

Preston sighed heavily. “Hold on, you’re the first time I have had sex, physically. The astral plane is another dimension, outside the material realm,” Preston said. “Everything in that realm is more intense, louder, brighter, more energetic... And that’s probably where I made a mistake. I shouldn’t compare my experience there to here. I’ve had encounters in dreams, too. They can be fairly extreme, depending on the degree of lucidity, but even that is vastly different than physical reality.”

“So, no wonder you’re disappointed. How many women have you fantasized about?” Corissa asked.

“Not really a fair question, is it?” Preston asked, not sure he wanted to respond to that. He knew he shouldn’t be embarrassed, but he was feeling heavy judgment directed at him and he wanted Corissa to like him. “I will answer it if you insist, but I ask for understanding. I lived my entire life isolated, no other humans, no other organic sentient beings. Naturally I had to supplement with imagination and the occasional use of a holographic projector.”

Corissa was visibly sorting out her anger. Preston accepted a higher reality that somehow he had contributed to this situation. Is this why Jedi forgo intimacy?

“Clearly I have not provided you with sufficient data to make an informed decision about the activity we engaged in. I’ve failed and I don’t know how to correct this. Because I have missed out on physical touch, I may just not know how to process it. Maybe I’ve put so much time in theoretical, intellectual exercises that I just don’t know how to be physical. Maybe I held back because of fear. I don’t know. This is new to me. I’m learning,” Preston said. “I am willing to work through this difficulty with you.”

Corissa nodded. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I got mad. I guess no one ever said they were disappointed before,” she said, starting to show compassion. Compassion was a camera flash worth of lightening that shifted back to anger. “You claim to be new to this, but you’re not like all worried about your performance? You’re focused on my performance?”

“Performance? We were supposed to be acting? Wait? Are you saying you were unsatisfied?” Preston asked, but he found no answer in her eyes. “I recognize that the intensity of my desire to be with you may have limited my ability to anticipate your needs, but I was unaware of neglecting you in any way. I’m genuinely sorry if I have failed you.”

“Oh, you didn’t fail me,” Corissa said, returning to the compassionate wave of emotions. “You were awesome. Wait. You’re distracting me from my point. Don’t you worry about anything?”

“I don’t know,” Preston said, musing. “I guess I assume if I failed to meet a need, you would inform me. Is that a bad assumption?”

“Yeah, probably,” Corissa said, somewhere closer to neutral but still a bit miffed. The thought had never occurred to her that she might actually ask someone to meet her needs. “What is lucidity in a dream?”

“Do you really want to start a new topic?” Preston asked.

“Yeah,” Corissa said. “I’m uncomfortable with where this was headed.”

“I thought it was headed towards clarity,” Preston said.

“Move on,” Corissa said, seeming a little cross.

Preston considered. “Okay. Lucidity. Have you ever been in a dream and suddenly realized you were dreaming?”

“No,” Corissa said. “I don’t dream.”

“Well, yes, you do, but you may not recall. I have perfect dream recall. It’s a skill set that can be learned,” Preston said.

“Even if I did recall, dreams are irrelevant,” Corissa said. “They have no bearing on life.”

Preston seemed surprised. “It’s the only bearing on life.”

“How do you figure?” Corissa asked.

Preston was silent for a long moment, taking so long that Corissa nearly asked another question, but he held a hand up as if asking her to wait. He sighed. “I think you’re too caught up in the romanticizing and fantasizing about what popular culture says a Jedi should be. Not that it’s your fault. For hundreds of years now it has been nothing but a fight for power and control with the most extraordinary, ostentatious displays of Force powers making the scenes, with

flashy battle techniques, and over the top, charismatic Force wielders. That's not what the Force is about. It's not about wish fulfillment or reshaping reality to our desires. I mean, it is, and it can be, as there is Force in every interaction, every moment, but it's mostly subtle and quiet. Feeding the orphans, that's a Force interaction. Walking in the park and connecting with nature. That's a Force interaction. This conversation, holding hands, being intimate, all of this is more about the Force than anything you might have imagined. It's in our dreams where we really reconnect with the Force, where we connect with all there is. We do this to communicate our observations back to the Source, to get guidance, to play, to remind ourselves we are not alone. It's not about bending the Force to our will or the aligning ourselves with the Force, because we're already one. There is nothing else that needs to be done."

"You make being a Jedi sound mundane," Corissa said.

"There is no mundane. There is no sacred. Or, it's all mundane, and it's all sacred, there is no separation," Preston offered. "All is the Force."

"Our connection?" Corissa asked.

"You don't think our encounters were an accident, do you?" Preston asked.

"You being here with me now was a choice, but I do believe our meeting was coincidental, just a random proximity thing," Corissa said.

"Really?" Preston said. "That's your explanation for how we got to be here together?"

"You stalked me, annoyed me, and then I met you again, and I still found you annoying..." Corissa began.

"Do you always bring home men who annoy you?" Preston asked.

"How dare you!" Corissa snapped, moving as if to get up.

Preston took her hand with only enough pressure to delay her flight. "I'm only asking you to consider that it was more than your curiosity about me that led us to this moment and that we may run deeper and closer than what you are sensing on the surface. There is a subtle level of intuition moving you, actually moving us, and it's only a matter of time before the reason presents itself."

"There is no reason to this, it just is," Corissa said.

"I can accept that, for now, but there is always more to it. I don't know what that reason is yet, but I am confident enlightenment is approaching," Preston said.

Corissa frowned, forcing herself to breathe and shake off the most recent flush of anger. In some ways, he was still annoying, but she also wanted to believe there was something here. "So, you have all of this insight into reality and yet you spend your dream time having sex?" Corissa asked.

"Pff, well, yeah," Preston said, wondering where all her sense of play went. "I'm still a novice when it comes to dream work, which means I spend quite a bit of time in play. Sure, I do engage in some dream meditating, and I'm involved in personal dream healing, and distance dream healing projects for others, but that's really tough work. Playing is necessary to remain healthy and to build stamina in the dream world and to get a better feel of what's possible.

"You mean, it's not unlimited freedom?" Corissa asked.

"Hardly. You definitely feel freer, but a lucid dreamer doesn't have absolute control. There is something else, something greater, moderating the experience, and the other agents you meet in the dream, well, they have a will and voice of their own. I don't control them, either, but I interact with them if they are agreeable."

"Through sex," Corissa scoffed.

“Again, if they are agreeable. You can be turned down in your dreams, too. Dream sex may seem frivolous at some level, it is definitely an exercise in channeling energy, and the natural rewards increase with the frequency of practice, which in turn encourages more lucid dreams, but I assure you, I don’t get to have my way with everyone and everything. The other agents might say no, or not interested, or incompatible, but when there is agreement, it can range anywhere from just mundane to absolutely glorious, but none holds a candle to what intimacy is like on the Astral plane,”

“Really?” Corissa said, scoffing. “Dream sex is less intense than Astral sex?”

“Oh, yeah, way less,” Preston said. “That’s one way to know the difference. It feels different.”

“The same way sex on the physical plane feels different than dream sex?”

“Apparently, but I suspect I need more research before I can give you an accurate report,” Preston offered.

“Umph,” Corissa said, skeptically. “Why don’t you just demonstrate Astral sex with me?”

Preston considered the problem.

“What? I don’t have an astral body?” Corissa asked.

“Umm, oh, yeah, of course, you do,” Preston said. “You know the saying, right? We’re beings of light? But it may be something you have to work up to. I need to reflect on this some. Dream sex might be the necessary, first, best step.”

“Again, I don’t dream.”

“We should start there. Everyone dreams. You’re going to have to improve your dream recall, that’s all,” Preston said. “Once you start remembering, we’ll work on lucidity. And after we get lucidity, we have to work on staying in the dream. Cause if you can’t learn to stay in it, you’ll wake up before an orgasm every time. And that’s frustrating as hell. And if you can’t stay lucid in a dream, you will find Astral travel difficult, because some experiences are so intense that it triggers a fight or flight response which drives a person back to their body and that is even more frustrating than not being satisfied in a dream.”

“I can understand frustration,” Corissa said. She forced herself to breathe. “I’m sorry I got mad. You should know, if this is to continue, I have a bit of a temper. Probably why I live alone.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. I accept you for who you are,” Preston said.

“Who am I?”

Preston squeezed her hands. “I’m sorry, I can’t answer that for you. And, I’m not sure I can guide you at the moment, as I’m feeling a bit distracted,” Preston admitted.

Corissa smiled, kissed his hands. “How distracted?” she asked in a whisper.

“Yeah, I feel like I am dreaming,” Preston said, unaware that his response was having an unintended effect on her. “Dreaming but not lucid. I’m aware of some things, but I’m not fully connected. I just want to stop life.”

Corissa’s bubble crashed, as she had initially interpreted his words as an indication he wanted to be intimate again. “Stop life” had not only been confusing, but jarred her out of her mood. “Stop? Are you talking about suicide?”

Preston considered this for a moment and his lack of response escalated her concern. He became preoccupied with his miscommunication, wondering how she had arrived at suicide.

“You’re that unsatisfied with life?” Corissa asked.

“Stopping to reflect does not equal unsatisfied. I’m very content,” Preston assured her.

“Perhaps that’s the problem,” Corissa said, trying to recover the romantic feelings. “You just need some passion.”

“Passion for what?”

Corissa bit her lower lip. “I don’t know. I like creating things, fixing things. What do you like?” Corissa asked, clearly not happy with the turnings of the conversation.

“I am interested in everything equally,” Preston admitted.

“That sounds boring,” Corissa said. “You need to find something you’re passionate about and make that your priority. You can’t just drift through life, waiting for something to happen. You have to generate desire. If you want something good to happen, you have to make it happen.” She puzzled over his look. “Now what?”

“Again, an interesting choice of words,” Preston said. “Drifting. Floating. Perhaps I should try swimming for a change.”

“Swimming’s good. Would you like to go to the pool tomorrow?” Corissa asked, moving back into small talk mode.

“Okay,” Preston said, giving up on the whole ‘being on the same page’ idea. This was exhausting!

They both sighed, heavily. That made Corissa smile, as if perhaps maybe they had been on the same page, but just didn’t know how to communicate it.

“So, are you up for some more research then? Maybe see if your second time is better than the first time?” Corissa asked, raising eyebrows flirtatiously.

Preston considered. “You know ‘different’ is probably preferable to ‘better,’ as it connotes perceptible variations in experience as opposed to assigning qualities of inherent good or bad.”

“Do you want to do it or not?” Corissa snapped.

“Absolutely,” Preston agreed.



The next time Corissa woke, Preston was sitting on the bed, facing her, a huge smile on his face. She rolled over and looked at the clock and then back to Preston.

“You’re creeping me out again,” Corissa said.

“Sorry,” Preston said, not changing the intensity of his staring.

“What?” Corissa asked. “It was better the second time?”

Preston nodded.

“There is something else, though?” Corissa asked.

Preston nodded.

“Well?” Corissa asked.

“Have you ever experienced that phenomena where someone asks you something and you know the word but you can’t recall it? It’s on the tip of your tongue, but the more you struggle to remember, the more lost it gets?” Preston asked.

“Yeah,” Corissa said.

“That happens to me a lot,” Preston said.

“And?”

“I’m remembering when we first met,” Preston said.

“When you chased me into the women’s locker room?” Corissa asked.

“No,” Preston said. “Go further.”

“Further?” Corissa asked.

“Further back,” Preston directed.

“I need help,” she said.

“I want you to remember when you remember,” Preston said.

“Okay, stop with the mystic, cryptic responses and just tell me,” Corissa asked.

“You were 36,” Preston said.

“Yeah, your point?” Corissa said, feeling sensitive about her age.

“During an emergency drill, your life pod was accidentally jettisoned, and you crashed planet side,” Preston said.

Corissa sat straight up in bed.

“You!” Corissa said. An intense de-ja-vu experience flooded her body with warmth, and she almost felt like she was outside of herself. For a brief moment, her world seemed surreal, as if she had taken illicit drugs. She suddenly pulled the sheets up around her, her level of exposure, not her nudity, driving her to want to hide. “They told me that the spores on that planet cause humans to hallucinate.”

“Do you really think a hallucination healed your leg?” Preston said.

“There was no evidence it was ever broken. I was told that that was part of the spore induced psychosis,” Corissa asked.

“You were injured, you asked for help, and I was sent,” Preston said.

“Who sent you?”

“The Force,” Preston said, shrugging. “Technically, Master Ashia, sent me, but someone probably told her to send me, so instead of chasing the connections, it’s easier to just say the Force sent me. We all have guardians and guides and, well, it just sort of works itself out. Bottom line, we met. And you, again, were my first. I guided you, kept you company, and made sure you were found.”

Corissa stared, re-evaluating that experience.

“And with all things, it wasn’t one sided. You also met my needs at the time. I needed human interaction. Specifically, at the time, I needed to know I wasn’t the only one seemingly alone and suffering. You helped me as much as I helped you. And I am grateful for the lessons,” Preston said, bowing to her.

“I don’t know what to say,” Corissa said.

“It isn’t compulsory,” Preston said.

Corissa got up and headed towards the bathroom. “I got to get ready for work. Help yourself to anything that’s in the kitchen.”

Preston was naturally puzzled by his sense that she was closing herself off, but decided she needed her space and she would come out of the ‘women’s locker room’ when she was good and ready. Trying to follow before she was ready would likely cause her to lock him out, or draw a soldering iron on him. So, he dressed and rummaged through the kitchen while Corissa did her routine. When she made herself available again, she was in her work overalls, her hair tied up under a hat. He was sitting on the table, one foot tucked under his thigh, the other foot in the chair. The fact that he wasn’t sitting in the chair annoyed her a little, but when she realized he had used fruit juice instead of milk in his cereal, she was more grossed out than upset.

“You’re supposed to use milk,” Corissa corrected, frowning.

“There was only a corner left and I didn’t want you to be without,” Preston said.

“You should have taken it. ‘No’ to juice in your cereal,” Corissa said.

“I’m content,” Preston assured her.

“Well, um,” Corissa began, but she didn’t know how to respond to that. It wouldn’t harm him, she supposed. It just didn’t fit her tastes.

“This feels awkward somehow,” Preston said.

“Yeah. It does, doesn’t it,” Corissa said. “I don’t have a lot of male visitors. And, well, you’re a bit younger than I and…”

“No, I’m not,” Preston argued.

“You’re what, maybe seventeen?”

“Using standard measurements, 18,” Preston said.

“I’m 44 and from where I come from, I could theoretically be your mother,” Corissa said.

“But you’re not,” Preston said. “Further, if we assume the atoms comprising our body were formed in the same supernova, we’re relatively the same age, but further than that, the energy that constitutes our atoms at the quantum level came from the same initial bloom of Universal energy, which means, we are definitely the same age.”

“You’re rationalizing and it sounds clingy,” Corissa said. “You should be with someone your own age.”

“You are saying you don’t want to see me again?” Preston asked.

“I didn’t say that,” Corissa said.

“I am confused. May we continue to share time together?” Preston asked, seeking clarity.

“What is this? What are we?” Corissa asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t believe it is an accident that I found you. I would like to follow this as far as it takes us,” Preston said.

“I need some time to think,” Corissa said.

“Fair enough,” Preston said.

Again, the awkwardness remained. Preston continued to sit on the table, holding the bowl with both hands, while she continued to stand there, their eyes locked.

“Well?” Corissa asked.

“I don’t know how to respond to that,” Preston said.

“I said I need time to think,” Corissa said.

“Are you asking me to leave?” Preston asked.

“Would you?” Corissa asked, relieved he asked.

“Sure,” Preston said, taking his bowl to wash it out.

“Just leave it. I’ll get it,” Corissa said.

Preston nodded, leaving the dish in the sink. He moved as if to hug her goodbye, but she held a hand up, pushing a new boundary without speaking. Preston understood and nodded. He paused at the door.

“Have I made an error?” Preston asked.

“Sleeping with me?” Corissa snapped.

“That wasn’t an error. That was choice. I’m asking if I have failed to do something because I’m feeling a bit rejected at the moment, and some of that may just be general paranoia from lack of experience with people, and if there is something I can correct, I would like to repair it,” Preston said. “Sorry, I’m rambling. Again, I’m new to this.”

“I really don’t have time to nurse maid you into adulthood,” Corissa said. “I would like to find someone who is going to be around and, well, again, there is a huge age difference, and if there is a mistake it is on me. I’m sorry. I was being selfish last night.”

Preston tried to appear understanding, but he really didn’t have a clue, even as she shut the door in his face. Had he wanted, he could have used the Force to spy on her. Had he done so,

he would have seen her lean against the door with her head, the angst of indecision heavy on her face. It didn't matter that he was certain that she indeed wanted to run with it, see how far it took them, but her argument was well spoken. How could he fault her? His path took him from her apartment back to the park slash garden. He was fairly distracted, sorting out his feelings, when he became aware that the lightening bugs were congregating above the tree top level. He was going to take a moment to puzzle through it when the answer came on its own time: a Droid stepped out from behind a tree and zapped him.

The Taser sent 50,000 kw coursing through his body, which was enough to temporary restrain him, but additionally the robot administered a sedative. The needle protruding from a knuckle hit an artery in Preston's neck, speeding it to the brain, knocking him out completely. The robot carried the body towards the lift. The witnesses went out of their way to avoid being a part of the scene. The lift shot them to the roof, thanks to the Droid's override. The Droid carried the body up into a waiting shuttle, placed the body on a gurney, closed the hatch, turned to head to the cockpit and paused. Blocking his egress was a Doppelganger, an exact duplicate of Preston.

"What are your intentions?" Preston asked.

The Droid went for its Taser. Preston's lightsaber 'exploded' to life with uncharacteristic report that ended the combat before it was even begun, first removing the Droid's limbs, and then strategically embedding the blade through the chest plate. Preston's intention was to retrieve the brain box, but apparently the Droid was program to self-destruct if it appeared it was to be capture. Sparks erupted from every joint in its body as it fell to the floor.

Preston was intrigued, but had nothing more he could go on. He didn't recognize the Droid and he could discern no identification labels or serial numbers, so, he went to his own body to revive it. Kneeling next to himself, he closed his eyes and touched his own chest. The sedative was made inert, no more harmless than water. He felt his senses returning and the Doppelganger disappeared, dissolving like a mist.

Preston sat up, taking a huge breath.

"Damn, that hurt," he said, feeling the muscle that took in the Taser points. Again, he checked the Droid for any sort of identifying marks. Nothing. After rummaging the shuttle, he accepted there was nothing more to be learned and went about his business, passing the whole event off as nothing more than your average mugging.

He did have one conclusion. He did not like the city life.



The first clothing store Preston entered turned out to be a costume store. There were kids running around the store, wearing Trooper masks, or rebel helmets, pointing fake blasters at each other. There was a mom negotiating with her son to pick one thing. There were fake lightsabers, Vader masks, Vader posters with a several different slogans to choose from, holographic pedestals and memory sticks loaded with stats and battle data, Jedi robes, toy lightsabers, an assortment of figurines, toy ships, and games. 'War sells' had an all new level of meaning. There was a poster of Yoda with a caption that was a fairly nice koan, but Preston was confident Yoda hadn't said that. Preston found himself staring up at a Vader poster with Vader staring down at him, pointing a finger, when the proprietor rallied to his aid.

"It's our best seller," the proprietor said. "Want one for your kid? We can ad customize captions."

“Don’t you find it endorses evil?” Preston asked.

The proprietor shrugged. “It sells.”

Part of Preston wanted to rebel at the idea, but there was something more he needed to understand, so he let go of his judgement. All stories had a hero and a villain and they were both crucial to the development of personal character. Was this what was being sold? Archetypes? He puzzled over this as he proceeded to different shops looking for clothes. He had to let go of the Vader problem to figure out why he wasn’t getting service. After being flat out ignored at one place, he crossed the fairway to another. He was certain the two service reps noted him entering, but he was not privy to their conversation: “Another pauper. Go see if you can deflect him.”

“He’s kind of cute, you sure you don’t want him?” Rema asked.

“All yours, have fun,” her coworker said.

Rema approached the Preston, guestimating his age to be about the same as hers. He was bald, about 1.82 meters, and maybe 75 kilos. He was badly dressed by any standard she knew, as if his clothes were printed from an old textile Droid, but he didn’t even seem to know how badly he looked. At 1.41 meters she had to look up to him. He seemed lost until he met her eyes and then he brightened. She smiled, tracking his eyes as they traced her from toe to head, but once he made eye contact, he didn’t break it. She thought it nice that his eyes didn’t keep bouncing back to her boobs, like so many of her male customer’s did. She didn’t mind that per se, as those customers tended to give her the best commissions, but this felt better, as if neither one was using the other for their own agenda, but were instead meeting on a level playing field.

“So, may I serve you?”

He sighed. “I would really like to buy some clothes.”

“Yeah? Do you know what you’re looking for?”

“Not really. I don’t even know how to begin,” he said. “And there are so many options, and everyone is so busy, so I’ve not found anyone who will like just stand still long enough to help me sort through this.”

“Yeah, shopping can be tough if you don’t know what you want,” Rema said. “I’m thinking this is your first time to a big city?”

“Yeah,” he said. “And I am really grateful that you are speaking to me.”

“Oh, honey, that is my function here. I am very happy to help you,” Rema said. His eye contact was intense, so much so that it felt intimate. She blushed. She covered by pushing on with the conversation. “And I’m surprised no one has really stopped to give you time. You have such nice eyes. Almost grayish green, like deeper than the sea.”

“You like my eyes?” he asked.

“I do. Even though you claim to be frustrated with your shopping experience, you do seem to be happy overall.”

“I am,” he said. “Though, I think it is easy to be happy around you. You’re kind of cheerful. The people at the other stores seem rather bothered by my interruptions. You seem genuinely interested in helping.”

She laughed. “You’re very kind. So, you don’t have a specific set of clothing in mind?”

“I don’t.”

“You know, I can’t really tell you who you are,” Rema said.

“I don’t understand,” Preston said, allowing her to turn his collar back.

“Well, clothes make statements about your identity. First impressions are important,” Rema said.

“You pushed past your first impression to speak to me,” he pointed out.

“No, I liked who I saw,” Rema said. “I liked you from the moment you walk in. There’s something nice about you.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not worried about first impressions. If people can’t see past the surface, then I don’t really wish to be engaged by them,” he said.

Rema smiled. “So, you want me to go away, even though I’m admitting that I’m attracted to you.”

“Actually, you just admitted to not being attracted to me,” he said. “We are beings of light...”

“Oh, you’re religious?” Rema asked.

“No,” he said.

“Well, I still like you. Give me a hint of something you would like in your clothing.”

“I want something reasonably appropriate for a variety of occasions, durable. General tech inlays that are programmable...”

“What kind of durable?” Rema interrupted.

“I like outdoors. Hiking. Running, walking, climbing,” he said.

“Oh? I love the outdoors, too. I know of some great parks in the area. Have you been to Shaver’s Run?” Rema asked.

“No. I’m really new here,” Preston said.

“Maybe I could show you,” Rema said, coquettishly. Her eyes were bright, and she lightly touched his arm. “I’m off work about 6.”

“That would be nice. So, I can acquire the appropriate attire here?” Preston asked.

“Of course, but, you do know, we’re kind of expensive,” Rema said.

He showed her his credit. She checked it. “Oh,” was all she said.

“Is there a problem?” he asked.

“No, Mr. Waycaster.”

“Preston.”

“Uh?”

“Just Preston,” he said.

“Umm, oh, I’m sorry. Preston,” Rema said.

“I’m detecting a problem,” Preston said.

“You have enough to buy our entire inventory, Sir, money won’t be an option,” Rema said, but the passion was gone from her voice and her eyes. “I will assist you in finding anything you like.”

“Thank you. I would appreciate that. But more, I would appreciate understanding what changed. Your energy is different. Did I do something wrong?”

“I apologize. I was a little flirtatious with you when you entered. I meant no disrespect,” Rema said.

“That was flirting? You were expressing genuine interest, then? So that wasn’t just part of engaging in a sale, but now that you are confident you have the sale, something happened and you are no longer interested? I’m really confused,” Preston said.

“Yeah, my fault. I made assumptions. Um, look, you’re obviously well off. I don’t date wealthy people. They treat women as if they’re property, something to be owned,” Rema said. “I want someone who is an equal and will consider me and my opinions, not collect me and then drop me when the next challenge or model comes along.”

Preston didn’t know what to make of this. “You believe wealthy men treat women badly?”

“Where were you raised, on a farm?”

“A cave,” Preston answered. “I thought everyone was equal here.”

Rema laughed. “Relationships work better if there is a balance of power, and money is power,” she explained. “Wealthy men are free to do whatever they want. And they abuse their power. I want someone to have the same financial goals as I do. Not wealthy, just comfortable.”

Preston bit his mouth as he measured her statement. “That’s doesn’t sound accurate. It would seem, based on your report that you really aren’t seeking a balance of power, but are rather looking for the upper hand,” Preston noted.

“I beg your pardon?” Rema asked. Though he hadn’t said it with sarcasm or anger, she was surprised he said challenged her so blatantly.

“Well, you were flirting with me when you thought I was poor, but closed off when you became aware that I have access to wealth,” Preston said.

Rema blinked. In that blink she reconsidered all her past relationships and she saw truth in his statement. She didn’t say anything.

Preston continued. “It would seem to me that the wealthier a person is, the less free they are. They get tied to their wealth, to their property, to the social image they believe they must maintain. You should be free because you can go where your talents take you.”

“That is some cave you’ve been living in,” Rema said, taking him by the arm and leading to the dressing mirror. “I wish I were like you, just able to float through life without a care in the world...”

“You can. You just let go,” Preston said. “The Force has you.”

“Yeah,” Rema said, deflecting.

The mirror came to life, projecting holographic images of potential outfits that met his bio-measurements. She demonstrated how to scroll through the outfits.

“I would like to hear more about your perspective,” Preston said.

“Really?” Rema asked.

“You seem surprised,” Preston observed.

“No one has really asked before,” Rema said, considering. Had no one asked, or was he making another observation that she never allowed anyone to express interest, as she was accustomed to running the show.

“I can’t occupy your space, it violates physical laws, so I must rely on your perspective to have any sort of clarity,” Preston said.

“You are strange,” Rema said.

“Thank you,” Preston said.

Rema laughed. “You always force people into self-reflection?”

“Were you forced, or were you simply ready for self-reflection,” Preston offered.

“Do you ever just answer a direct question?” she laughed.

“Sometimes,” Preston said.

“Okay. What do you think of this outfit?”

“No,” Preston said. He pointed to an upper corner which made the option more prominent. “I want this. The one with the side buttons and Mandarin collar.”

“That’s not really fashionable.”

“That’s what I want,” Preston said.

“Kind of para military,” Rema said, musing. She ran her finger across the virtual image of Preston in the new outfit to see the back side. “It doesn’t look bad on you I guess. I can’t decide if they remind me of nurse scrubs, or a chef’s outfit.”

“Can you make it grey, with white piping...” Additional options became available as he narrowed down his interest. “Ahh! I want that. And pockets on the trousers. At least one pocket long enough to hold a lightsaber,” Preston said.

“Oh?! I’m so sorry I flirted with you,” Rema said, stepping back from him.

“Please! I am happy you flirted with me,” Preston said.

“It’s not an offense? I thought Jedi’s couldn’t date or flirt,” Rema said.

“If that’s true, I promise I will never be a Jedi,” Preston assured her. “Because I intend to flirt, and if the opportunity arises again, to have sex. If you doubt my resolve, I’m willing to prove it.”

Rema laughed, touching his shoulder. “I believe you. Would you like some different color options?”

“No, just grey, just this. And boots. Comfortable, hiking walking, jumping, boots. Under wear. Socks. Oh, and make it enough clothes to get through a week without washing,” Preston said. “Odor resistant would be nice.”

“Oh, don’t worry. All of our clothing are fashioned with antibacterial tech. Do you really want to wear the same thing every day?” Rema asked.

“You sound concerned,” Preston said.

“Well,” Rema began.

“I don’t really want to think about what I have to wear. I just want to put it on and go, but if you insist on different, I will let you pick an outfit that you find fitting for me,” Preston said. “I would like a poncho. Or a coat. Make it both. Trench coat, maybe, but definitely not a robe. I’m not a robe guy. And something to sleep in would be nice. And a couple of good bath towels, fairly plush as I also use them for pillows. Can you send all of this to my hotel? Oh, and at least one item of something really fancy, in case I ever have another date. Or go to an opera. I would like to attend an opera.”

“Sure,” Rema said, giggling. “I have no doubt you will have another date. Do you travel a lot?”

“Not yet, but I’m thinking I will,” Preston said.

“So, would you like us to provide a traveling chest or locker to carry your things?” Rema asked

“Excellent idea,” Preston said.

“You got it,” Rema said. “Anything else?”

“Your number?” Preston asked.

“Ah, no, we’re not compatible,” Rema said. “But I am really happy I met you.”

“Thank you for the lesson,” Preston said, bowing.

“I never thought I’d meet a genuine Jedi,” Rema said.

“We are all Jedi, all padawans,” Preston assured her. “May I change into one of the outfits I’ve purchased?”

“Of course. There’s a dressing room back this way,” Rema said, directing towards the back.

“Any chance there’s a place for me to shower first?”

“Well, there is the employee dressing room. We’re not supposed to, but, I think with what you’re spending we can make an exception. Come with me,” Rema said, taking his arm and leading the way.

Sporting his new clothes, Preston continued his exploration of the city. He went to a holographic movie, which was interesting, but too loud for his taste. He had dinner at a restaurant and found it unpleasant, as there were too many distractions to truly enjoy the meal and he discovered he didn't like food that was hot. Years of eating alone and cooking his own meals had definitely shaped him. Years of solitude and relative silence had shaped him. As he roamed further and further away from his hotel, hardly in a straight line, he encountered more and more strangeness. A religious group solicited him. At first he declined, but they pursued trying to engage him in philosophical banter.

"Do you believe in a god?" the closer asked.

"I am in one with the Force," Preston answered.

"You can't believe in a god and the Force," the apostolate censured.

Preston blinked, not sure what to make of the person's argument. "Knowledge of the Force does not negate the concept of a deity any more than science claiming the Universe originated from a singularity does."

"So, you're a Pagan and an evolutionist?" the apostolate asked. "You don't believe in a higher power at all?"

"There is always a higher power," Preston said. "But it might not mean what you think it does. There is always a chain of authority, but the Force is available to all..."

"Again with the Force?!" the apostolate grimaced. "Maybe two hundred years ago there were shaman magic and voodoo, but this is the age of enlightenment. We've thrown away the old chains that imprisoned us."

"Really?" Preston asked. He stopped to give the man his full attention. "How many people practice this faith?"

"Upwards of twenty million," the apostolate said. "And growing. We teach people to free their minds and reap the health benefits of tuning out and allowing the stress of modernity to wash away."

"Really? And how many people have become enlightened?" Preston asked.

"It's a journey, man," he said, avoiding the answer even in his own mind. "You can't really put a number on it."

"How many can heal themselves, or move furniture around with the power of their thoughts?" Preston asked.

"Parlor tricks are not signs of enlightenment," the man said.

"Perhaps," Preston said, agreeing with the premise. "But there really is something to be said for practicality. I am going to stick with what I know works, but thank you for your time."

"You must forgive me, I'm new at this. Perhaps you would come and listen to my master?" he begged.

Preston considered it a waste of time, but out of misplaced respect or a desire to practice being social, he followed the apostolate back to his master. The man was preaching on a street corner designated for public speaking. The preacher was charismatic in speech and mannerisms, almost as dramatic as the main actor in the film he had seen earlier in the day, but nothing he said made any more sense than what the apostolate and his friend had tried to say. No wonder the folks were confused, he thought. The man spoke of a new book revealing all the precepts a man needed to make it to an idyllic afterlife, but failing to reach that, one would suffer for all eternity. Some of his audience would add exclamations as if supporting his rant. With the exception of the

eternal damnation, the Preacher was basically using concepts of the Force, only exchanging the word force with the name of a deity.

“Come up and profess your sins today. Come and be healed, become one with your brethren,” the Preacher invited.

“You should go up,” the apostolate said.

“No, thank you,” Preston said, turning to leave. “There is nothing here.”

The apostolate reached out to touch Preston, to slow him down, and Preston put him in a joint lock. Preston was actually pleased with himself for doing it so smoothly, considering he'd only practice in dream and while astral traveling.

“This conversation is done, right?” Preston asked.

“You, son? Why do you exercise violence against one of your brothers?” the Preacher asked, singling out Preston.

The entire audience focused on Preston. The energy was interesting. Some of the people looking at him were curious. A few were anxious. But the apostolates looking on were ready to engage in a fight if they had, too, bombarding him with a menacing energy.

“I wish to leave and my ‘brother’ here was impeding my progress,” Preston said, letting the apostolate go. He quickly retreated outside of arms distance.

“Don't you wish to be saved?” the Preacher asked.

“You presume I'm lost,” Preston said.

“Oh, so you're already a member of our sect?”

“I'm one with the Force,” Preston said.

“That way will lead to your destruction, son. Wizardry, sorcery, witchcraft, shamanism all of these old ways are all evil practices shun by the one, true God,” the Preacher said. “It is the old religions which nearly destroyed the entire galaxy and destroyed trillions of lives. You need to put away these sinful ideas and repent.”

Preston blinked, more than a little confused. “My understanding is that lives were destroyed by an imbalance of power, brought about by the greed of many. If people were confident in their identities, content with what they have and where they are, there could not have been war.”

“That way is madness. If people were content with who they were and where they were, there would be no progress and the markets would crash and everyone would die. If people were content spiritually, they would not realize they are impoverished and need guidance from those who are superior,” the Preacher said.

“If everyone were content with who they were and where they are, there would be clarity, and peace would reign,” Preston offered.

“You are naïve,” the Preacher said. “If you continue with the old ways, you will be an enemy to the one true God, and you will be destroyed, just as all the Jedi were in the Great Purge.”

“Then you have learned nothing,” Preston argued. “As it is that sort of thinking, the refusal to embrace the ways of others that leads to war.”

“I will not embrace evil,” the Preacher said.

“I think you're confused. You're the one recruiting, while I was trying to exit,” Preston said.

“I am teaching people the truth,” the Preacher countered, his frustration wearing a bit thin.

“I have found that there is a fairly reliable, consistent test for truth. If you’re being coerced, over spoken, yelled at, pressured, fined, bullied, preached at, marketed to, threatened, disparaged, or otherwise convinced of a thing, you’re probably not getting truth. If you’re having to create rationalizations to compartmentalize or explain something, it’s probably not truth,” Preston explained, clearly. “I feel no urgency to save or help because I know there is no urgency, that all is as it should be, and for reasons not always to be seen. My knowledge of the Force doesn’t require me to recruit, for how can I ask someone to come into the Light when they’re already there?”

“Is your confidence in the Force sufficient to save your soul?”

“Again, I don’t require saving, as there is nothing broken. Further, I don’t require confidence, as my understanding is not based on beliefs, but on actual, firsthand experience,” Preston said.

“Is your skill with the Force sufficient to heal this war veteran here?” the Preacher asked, setting up a challenge.

Preston looked at the middle aged man indicated by the preacher. He was sitting in an antigravity, personal assist chair, with additional Droid intelligence built into the chair. He was indeed dressed as a veteran of the war and he appeared to be permanently injured, but as Preston examined him with the Force, he realized there was nothing wrong with him. There was no reason why the man couldn’t stand up and walk. The audience was watching, expectantly. If he did nothing, the Preacher would probably make show of healing the man, and would call his Force impotent. If Preston did a fake healing, it would probably be twisted as evil, or perhaps asked why he healed a soldier who was no doubt doing penance for his own evil acts, or the Preacher might even proclaim the warrior was a plant, nothing was ever wrong with him. In any regards, Preston couldn’t win the challenge because it was rigged. He blinked, which was sufficient time for him to pan out, pondering a solution set. Obviously he could just walk away and there would be nothing loss, but the Force had him focus on a woman who was holding her sick child. The child was definitely sick, with one of the obvious signs of being a breathing apparatus attached to her neck where a tube forced air into her lungs with an audible wheeze. More disturbingly, the girl had a visible colostomy bag.

“I will heal this man if you heal this child,” Preston said, indicating the one he would personally like to cure.

“This child is perfect in God’s eyes, this is the way God made her,” the Preacher said.

“And so is your soldier. He does not require healing,” Preston countered.

The Preacher’s level of frustration continued to climb, but there was an audience and he dare not lose composure. Preston was surprised the Preacher had never been aptly challenged before. Did no one on this planet ever speak up against crazy folks?

“Please, if you could heal my child, I would be forever in your debt,” the woman said.

Preston approached her. “What he spoke was true, in a way,” Preston told her. “Your daughter is perfect. You and she have agreed to this life mission. She is learning limitations, and you are learning compassion.”

“How dare you make fun of this woman and her child’s condition?!” the Preacher said in mock anger. “There is love and compassion in the light, if you come into the fold...”

“Sit down and shut up,” Preston said, using a Force command.

The Preacher sat down hard, right there on the stone he was preaching from, and he found himself unable to protest or otherwise speak. His disciples and marks didn’t know what to make of this situation.

“Your name is Em?” Preston asked the girl. “Do you want to be healed?”

A computer on her forehead spoke for her. “Please, Sir. I don’t want my mother to be sad, and she is always sad. She has given up a career to care for me. My father left her because of me.”

Preston explored the truth of the matter in less than a blink of an eye. “I assure you, your father didn’t leave because of you, but because of something inside of himself. You are not responsible for that,” Preston said, gently. In a way, her statement reminded him profoundly of his own perceived relationship with his own parents. Even though this moment was not about him or his life, he realized there was no way to not recognize how everything somehow reflected back to him. How it reflected on everyone, individually. Like a hologram, it was impossible to divide the universe up without finding the entire universe still residing within that new piece. It added another caution to his check list, to make sure he was not healing someone in a futile effort to heal himself, as that was an empty road. “If I do this, your life mission will change.”

“Please,” the mom said.

“Your life will definitely change,” Preston told the mom. “You will benefit from this the most.”

“Yes, I admit this present life is hard for me, but I don’t ask for myself. I want my daughter whole. I want her to have a better life than I have had,” the mom said. “I don’t want to die and she not have anyone else to care for her and I definitely don’t want to leave her in the hands of the state.”

Preston saw that her fears and concerns were both for herself and her child and that there were clearly enmeshment issues between them. Curing the body could cause a rift of spirit, but they both seemed sure they were ready for the next mission. If they weren’t, their current mission would still be there, but would take on a new form. He reached for the tube to remove it from her neck. The mom hesitated, stepping back, genuine fear that if the tube was removed the daughter would not be able to breathe. Preston stopped, not wanting to force this decision on them.

“Mom, let him,” the girl said.

“I’m afraid. I don’t want you to die,” mom said.

“At least I would be free, mom. Let him,” the girl said.

“Your mom is faced with the real dilemma of a life change. She doesn’t know what to do if she gives up a job of caring for you,” Preston said.

“Do you always talk to children as if they are adults?” someone in the audience asked.

“We are all children and simultaneously all adults, from the perspective of the Force,” Preston said. “There is no distinction.” He turned to the mother. “What do you want?”

The mom stepped forward, preparing herself for the worst. Preston gently removed the tube from her neck and as he did so, the hole cut into her larynx closed up and became whole. He next removed the colostomy bag, pulling it gently free as if her body was nothing more than shifting sand. The hole closed and she was whole. Preston touched her head, removed the computerized headband, and encouraged her mom to stand her on her feet. Em stood and the first act she did was to hug her mom and tell her with her own voice that she loved her. A cheer went up from the crowd and the mob closed in, all shouting questions and needs.

“Stop!” Preston said. When he had their attention, he insisted, “No. I didn’t do anything. This is the power of the Force and you all have access. You don’t need a Jedi Master. You don’t need me. Look around you and know that everything you see and touch is just one, large manifestation of the Force. Further than that, know that there is more to reality than what your physical senses can detect.”

“How can we ever learn to use the Force?” someone nearby him asked.

“When you learn that the Force is not something you grasp or wield to change who you are or where you are, or something you use to change others, only then will you start to recognize its influence over your life, only then will you begin to grow,” Preston said.

“That doesn’t make sense,” someone argued.

“The Force isn’t something you do,” Preston tried to explain. “Even choosing not to do something is doing something. Holding is not the way of the Force, only letting go is.”

“You tell us what it isn’t?” another person asked. “Are Jedi’s purposely cryptic?”

Preston laughed. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to be enigmatic. Some of these things simply are ineffable. They’re beyond words, but not beyond knowing. If you feel compelled to do something, start by being more loving,” Preston said. “Love is the only true emotion.”

“That doesn’t make sense. What about anger or hatred? They’re not emotions?” the person who had started the dialogue asked.

“Anger, jealousy, hatred, these are all derivatives of fear,” Preston began.

“And once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your life,” the first person mocked. “Yeah, yeah, we’ve heard all of this but it’s not helpful.”

“If statements like that help you to learn to regulate fear, it is very helpful, but do not be afraid of anger, because even the fear of anger can lead to anger, which leads to hatred, which leads to suffering,” Preston said. “And, I’m telling you, it isn’t true that it will forever dominate you. You can come back from anger. It is only an illusion that anger seems easier than love.”

“You insist anger isn’t an emotion?” the first said. “Then what is it?”

“There is only one emotion and that is love,” Preston repeated. “Fear is the measure of absence of love.”

“Then what is anger?!” someone snapped. “Fear?”

“Anger is love,” Preston said. “And if people understood that one truth, people would actually stop hating, because they would realize their hate actually sustains that which they would otherwise want to minimize.”

A hundred hands suddenly went up, all vying to be acknowledged, as well as a dozen questions coming from all sides, not waiting to be acknowledged. The law officer that Preston had met the previous day was suddenly next to him.

“Sir, you’re under arrest for disturbing the peace,” the officer said.

The crowd booed and seemed as if they might rush the officer. Indeed, the crowd had grown considerably in size and there was a true risk of people getting hurt. Preston found it humorous that they clearly didn’t understand the concept of ‘hate,’ because increasing their anger at the law enforcement only caused them to entrench in their determination to end this public meeting. Given the temperments, it seemed as if it might escalate into physical conflict, and this officer next to him would be torn apart by the mob.

“No,” Preston said, using the Force to be heard. “Go and be at peace and consider what you have seen here today. Learn the ways of the Force, for it is with you, always.”

“Come on, Jedi,” the police officer said, taking him by the arm. The other officers stayed behind to ensure every one departed the area peacefully, while the one escorted Preston away.

Preston allowed himself to be led; a few of the people followed for a ways, but did not engage. Perhaps they had hoped Preston would flee or use his lightsaber. When all of that original group had dispersed, Preston relaxed. “Thank you, Officer Mons. I appreciate you extricating me from that.”

“I didn’t do it for you. You’re really under arrest,” the officer said.

“Okay,” Preston said. “Is it because of what I did yesterday?”

“What did you do yesterday?” the officer asked.

“You said you didn’t want to see me again,” Preston said.

“I’ve never spoken to you before in my life,” the officer said.

“You really don’t remember me?” Preston asked, confused.

“I would remember if I met a Jedi,” the officer said.

Preston found the officer’s statement amusing, but continued along peacefully, perfectly content. He noted the stares he got from passing Pedestrians as they must be wondering what he had done to warrant being taken into custody. They entered Precinct Seven and came towards the front desk, an island that contained a young lady receptionist and the Captain of the precinct. The Captain was engaged in a conversation utilizing tech. In the background Preston saw what looked like the robot he had destroyed being crated in by several techs and a detective. The conversation they were having ended when the door closed. Preston was curious enough to follow the conversation beyond the closed door, but the receptionist distracted him as she finished up a call.

“Yeah, you might want to send two units,” the receptionist said into her radio.

“Apparently Bruno hasn’t been taking his meds again and he’s psychotic. Just let me know if you need back up, sweetie, take care.” The receptionist turned to Preston and winked. “So, Officer Mons, who are you bringing me today?”

“Book this kid for disturbing the peace,” the officer said.

“Ahh,” the receptionist said, popping her gum. “Well, I guess being cute is an arrest-able offence.”

“Just book him, Arey,” Officer Mons said. “I will fill the paper work out later.”

The Captain set down the receiver. “Let him go,” the Captain said.

“This person didn’t have a license to use the free speech area,” Officer Mons said. “And he interrupted those who did have a permit and there were over two hundred people gathered, with more coming, so he had exceeded the maximum number of viewers...”

“I’m quite aware of what happened,” the Captain said. “Were you also aware that the Mayor’s niece was in attendance? And that this Jedi healed her?”

“I, um, what?” Officer Mons asked.

“Yeah, you’re free to go, Sir,” the Captain said. “We’re sorry for the inconvenience. Further, Mayor Hidalgo sends his compliments and an invitation to meet with him. At your convenience, of course. Just show up at City Hall and introduce yourself.”

“That seems nice. I’ve never been to City Hall before,” Preston said.

“I’m off at four, if you would like me to show you how to get there,” Arey said.

“Thank you. I would like that,” Preston said.

Officer Mons grunted and walked away.

“If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got other things to attend to. A Blood Hunter was found earlier today. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?” The Captain asked.

Preston shook his head. The Captain nodded and departed.

“What’s your number, cutie?” Arey asked.

“I don’t have one. But I assure you, if the Force wants us to meet up later, it will happen,” Preston said.

“Oh, nice dodge,” Arey said, faking a pout. “I will find you, how about that?”

“I look forward to being found, then,” Preston said.

Two more officers approached the desk to check in as Preston headed for the egress. As he was about to cross over the threshold, he barely avoided bumping shoulders with a woman his age who was trying to exit faster than he. He smiled at her and allowed her to go first.

“Thanks. Can you believe they pulled me in for public intoxication?” she asked.

“That sounds like they were trying to keep you safe,” Preston said.

“They just like blocking fun,” she said, waving at a sky cab. She paused for a moment.

“You like fun?”

“Of course,” Preston said.

“You have any credits?” she asked.

“I do,” Preston said.

“You want to go to a rave with me?” she asked.

“I’ve never been to a rave,” Preston said.

“Oh, honey, you don’t know what you’re missing,” she said, hooking her arm in his and pulling him towards the cab.

Preston allowed her to pull him along and they slipped into the cab as soon as it settled. She gave instructions to the cab driver and their vehicle accelerated into the air, pushed into traffic by computer control. Once they were on their way, she introduced herself to him.

“I’m Kelsey, but everyone I like calls me Kels,” she said, shaking his hand.

“Preston,” he said.

“Nice name,” Kels said. “This your first time to a big city?”

“Does it really show that much?” Preston asked.

Kels laughed. “Not that much,” she said, kissing him. “I’m so glad to be out of that cage. Am I ever going to show you a good time.”

Preston kissed her back. She climbed up on his lap, facing him.

“Hey, you two! Not in my Taxi!” the driver yelled. His tone sounded angry, but Preston couldn’t discern if his alien face was angry or just made that way.

Kels laughed. “Why? You don’t want to watch?”

“You kids need to behave!” the driver snapped.

“Oooh, or what? Evil robots will come take us away?” she snapped back, sarcastically.

“I will pull over and put you both out, fare or no,” the driver yelled.

Kels pouted, leaned into Preston, biting his ear. “I will have you later, I promise,” and then she climbed off his lap and adjusted her skirt, purposely raising her bottom off the seat to pull it down to her knees. She blew a kiss at the driver and then leaned into Preston, kissing his ear.

Preston didn’t know what to say, but she definitely had his attention. Though city life was as fast paced and exciting as he had imagined it, some parts of it confused him, while other parts of it annoyed him, but the random interaction with available females seemed like an excellent perk. The cab arrived, Kels asked Preston to catch the fare, and then she led him into a club. It was dark, black light illuminating various articles of clothing and strips along tables, chairs and walls. The music drove a hypnotic, pulsing base, like a heartbeat, and it was deafeningly loud. In addition to a strong odor of alcohol, sweat, scents of various creatures, musk, perfumes, and food, there was a negative, palpable energy that pervaded the place. Preston was aware of the dark side of the Force and his first impulse was to flee. It was that impulse to flee that made him stay, not wanting to allow the fear to master him. He would see what he came to see. In the meantime, he surrounded himself with love and light.

Kels squeaked, ‘my favorite song,’ and pulled him excitedly towards the dance floor and a dozen writhing dancers immersed in soap bubbles. For a moment, he and Kels danced, with her doing most of the dancing as he sort of stood there, moving his arms. She rubbed up against him, smiling at him, and then turned to rub against him with her back, before she started twerking. Complete strangers joined them, both male and female, pushing up against him. He did not appreciate the males joining in, especially when they were just as eager to bump into him as the females, but they didn’t appear to mean any harm. They were having fun. He gently redirected them away from him using the Force, and they shuffled on, unaware that they were ‘pushed’ or that the girls surrounding Preston were now a barrier to any chance of colliding males, but instead assumed they were just moving with the mood of the music and the flow of it all. Mostly, their female companions went with them, but for whatever reasons, three girls clung to Preston, and two writhed against Kels. When the song changed, Kels laughed, kissed one of the girls, and pulled Preston towards the bar. As they left the floor, the wetness of the bubbles seemed to fade and he was left dry, but for Kels, the bubbles left a soapy film against her skin and her clothes were wet.

“Two poppers and some streaks!” she yelled gleefully over the music.

“So, what was that about evil robots coming to take us away?” Preston asked, raising his voice to be heard over the din.

“What planet were you raised on?” Kels asked.

“It was a moon, actually,” Preston said.

Kels laughed. “And your culture doesn’t tell stories of evil robots kidnapping bad children to torture them? Uh! And I thought it was something all parents tell their kids to trick them into behaving,” she said.

“Parents tell their kids that?” Preston asked.

“Mine did,” she said, kissing him. “Don’t worry, it’s just stories. If evil robots came and took bad people away, they would have taken my parents before me. Since that clearly didn’t happen, I can say with some authority that their or no evil robots lurking in the shadows to catch bad people away and torture them for their whole lives.”

The bar tender set a mirror down in front of them and put down two lines of powder. He provided one straw. He then fetched two glasses, glowing fiercely in the black light, and poured in an orange, luminous liquid. Preston watched Kels snort the line, and then downed the drink in one shot.

“I don’t think it’s wise to mix stimulants and depressants,” Preston warned.

“Oh, god, you’re not going to bring me down, are you?” Kels demanded. “If I wanted to make out with my dad, I could have stayed at home.”

Preston was quiet. If expressing concern was going to cause her to shut him out, he didn’t know what he could say. And was she serious about her father? Was her present need to ‘escape’ due to physical or sexual abuse at home?

“So, you in or what?” Kels demanded.

“What’s the purpose of this?” Preston asked.

“This gives you wings, streaks across the stratosphere, where this stabilizes the flight,” Kels said.

“You can leave your body without using drugs, if that is the goal,” Preston said.

“Bar keep, hit me again!” Kels demanded. “My friend is crashing me.”

“Is your friend paying?” the bar tender asked.

“Of course he is paying,” Kels said. “He said he wanted to have fun with me.”

The bartender looked to Preston. Preston consented. Kels hit the remaining streak and popped Preston's popper. She screamed and kissed Preston hard on the mouth, nearly taking him off the stool. She laughed, clinging to him tightly.

"If you maintain this pace, you will become unconscious," Preston said.

Kels grabbed the next drink the bartender brought. "Here's to unconsciousness!" she said, downing the glass. "Maybe you will finally have some fun with me when I'm asleep. Is that the way you like it?"

The girls that had joined them on the dance floor came and dragged her back to the bubbles. Two of them tried to pull Preston, but he declined. He was at a loss for what to do. Clearly, she was choosing to do this, but, the moment she had taken the drugs, she was no longer in control. Then it occurred to him, none of these people were in control. That's when he saw the figure moving through the soap bubbles, a shadowy figure that was feeding off the dancers. Male or female, human or not, it went from one to another, like a vampire, sucking energy off of them, but also forcing itself on them. And it was not alone.

Unsure of what to do, he called upon the Force, expecting Ashia or Fixit to respond, but no answer was forthcoming. Though he knew he wasn't alone, he understood that no answer meant that this was one of those times when he had to make a choice without guidance. A test! Preston's hand reached for his lightsaber instinctively. That's when he felt the tap of weapon on his shoulder. He didn't have to turn around to tell the bartender was holding a blaster rifle against him. None the less, he turned around to face the enemy.

"Don't do it, Jedi," the bartender said. "We don't want to destroy you."

"We?" Preston asked.

The bartender motioned to the ceiling with his eyes. Preston looked up and what he couldn't previously see with his eyes, he could now see with the Force. The only difference was he was on full alert. What he originally mistook for decoration, the tickle of threads hanging from the ceiling he had pushed through, were antennae. From wall to wall every inch of the ceiling was covered with these creatures, some as large as a human, but most about the size of a Jawa, and perhaps as thick as a pillow. They were in effect, giant roaches. Each one's head shield, or pronotum, seemed to hold the image of a human face, looking down at the floor, which was only a minor distraction from the horror of their real faces, looking down with sideways glances, their mandibles opening and closing, washed by something that might have been a tongue, extruded and retracted in a suggestive way. Occasionally one of the roaches dropped down into the foam, joined the dance, the face on the head shield seemed to reflect horror and delight simultaneously. After it concluded its business, it rejoined its companions on the ceiling.

"The Periplaneta are known to eat their own young, so they would not hesitate to kill everyone here in order to escape the chaos you might bring," the bartender said. "And, it would not do any good. This is merely one of millions of spawning pools. The only way you will eradicate this species is to kill every single human in the galaxy."

Preston shivered at the thought of how many spawning pools like this may actually exist.

"What, Jedi? Has your love for all creatures, for all life, suddenly hit a snag, because something is uglier than you can appreciate?" the bartender asked.

Preston was aware of the conflict between his beliefs and the visceral reaction he was having to these creatures. Simply stated, there were just some creatures that naturally triggered a fight or flight response in the human brain. For Preston, it was big bugs.

The bartender put down his weapon and pushed a harmless, carbonated drink towards Preston. "The first extraterrestrial inhabited world that humans settled is where they met this

species. The Periplaneta had a symbiotic relationship with another species on their world of origin, but humans brought with them their own incompatible bacteria and fauna, and what didn't die from the unintended biological warfare, the humans killed with their destruction of the biosphere. The Periplaneta faced a choice, extinction or adaptation. They chose to adapt and now humans are an integral part of their breeding cycle."

"I just don't understand how something so..."

"Repulsive?"

"Alien," Preston corrected the bartender, then continued: "Could find humans even remotely appealing."

"They don't. Only a few of their species had a peculiar trait that made it possible to tolerate human hosts. And of those, only the ones Force sensitive enough to channel the dead spirits of humans long gone were successful. Fortunately for the Periplaneta, humans seem to have an abundance of dead folks who refuse to move on and are stuck in the 'Between' by their own lust for the material world. Those are the ghostly faces you see on their backs looking down on you," the bartender said.

Preston shivered, wondering if one of the females who had brushed up against him had been one of the Periplaneta. He even tried to persuade himself that these creatures were like him in the sense that they were mostly made of carbon and water, but the thought of their insect skin against his sent shivers down his spine.

"Don't worry, they did not make you a host to their offspring, Jedi," the bartender laughed, as if he understood all too well the reaction Preston was having. "They only use the humans who are too doped up to sense what they are carrying within them. They need humans who are less likely to seek medical attention for fear of illegal substances in their lab work. The hosts are not harmed. They are just vessels for the young. The foam they dance in is part of the mating substrate. I'm actually surprised you can see Periplaneta at all. Most humans can't. It's the damnedest thing. I've watched humans stare right into the face of the Periplaneta and yet, they see right through them. But even without sight of them, if people aren't hopped up on drugs, they get freaked out and run crazy if something unseen touches them."

"The humans should know what they're being used for," Preston said.

The bartender laughed. "It's a good a trade. They get their high. The Periplaneta get their young. And the dead get a cheap thrill. The circle of life is maintained and everyone gets a need met."

"And what do you get?" Preston asked.

"I'm paid very well," the bartender said, smiling. His face was a horror itself, as if it had been broken and put back together. "I'm also rewarded with reasonable health, a side benefit for carrying young. I would have died ages ago if not for that. And, I get my pick of the women when they're comatose."

"I'm finding it very difficult to like you," Preston said, very frankly.

"You're free to leave, Jedi," the bartender said.

Preston headed for Kels.

"But the girl stays. She is compensated for bringing in more vessels," the bartender said. "I'm grateful you paid for her drinks, since you didn't really work out."

Preston hesitated.

"Look at her. She is not unhappy," the bartender said.

"Not unhappy is not happy. She doesn't know what she's trading," Preston said.

“She doesn’t want to know. Why do you suppose she has spent most of her life numbing her senses to the world? Even if you took her, there are millions of others just like her, all desiring for the pain to be removed. Our business would not be successful if it weren’t for people like them,” the bartender said. “Even if you take her, she’ll be back in a few days.”

Preston departed the place, without looking back at Kels, and going out of his way to skirt the bubbles. A couple of the girls tried to bring him back to the dance, but he politely refused and dodged. Once out on the ‘street,’ he felt immediate relief. It took quite a long walk to shake off the repulsion and if a wind touched his face, he would rub his forehead as if he was still being touched by antennae. Due to his distracting thoughts, Preston was totally oblivious to the rally he was walking into, until he was blindsided by a promoter.

“Excuse me, Sir, do you vote?”

“No, but thank you,” Preston said, trying to move on. He was feeling exhausted and it didn’t take but a summary glance to see that he had no appetite for what the rally was teaching. Stop immigration, no more illegal aliens, too many people on welfare, etc, etc.

“Don’t you want to stop slavery? Stop crimes against children and women? If you don’t vote to reduce the alien population, how can you protect your family?” the man asked.

“I’m really too tired to participate in this dialogue,” Preston said, politely.

“You should be tired. The left’s agenda is maddening! But if you don’t vote, you can’t complain,” the follower pursued.

Preston stopped, and even as he opened his mouth to respond, he realized he was just suckered into a debate that would go nowhere. “How can that even be close to accurate? Do people really lose the right of speech if they don’t vote? More than that, have you heard me complaining? And can’t I assume you and the guy up there making the speech vote? Why the hell is he complaining? If you vote, and win, you’re part of the majority, the game is over. If you vote and lose, the majority won, and the game is still over. And yet, you’re still here, and you’re still complaining, and trying to enlist me into a group of complainers, when I am content. The Force provides for my every need.”

“You sound like some imperial scum,” the promoter challenged.

“So, you lose the argument and go right for disparaging your opponent? Imperials, Rebels, The Far Right, the Far Left, black hats, white hats, it’s all the same,” Preston said.

“How dare you?!” the follower said, taking a swing.

Preston flowed around the assault, and ended up behind the man, executing a perfect choke hold. “In a moment, I’m going to let you go. And you’re not going to do that again, okay?”

The promoter nodded. Preston let the man go and he begrudgingly went back to his rally. Pretty much, from that point forward, Preston steered around most of the public gatherings. The exceptions were when street performers were entertaining crowds. He would stop and watch, especially if the entertainers were female. He noticed an occasional thief pick pocketing. He found it interesting that the victims were not aware of what was happening. He couldn’t help but see a lesson in the Periplaneta. Humans see what they want to see. Indeed, over and over again, Preston was confronted by the reality that most of the people were happy to just float through their city and life unfocused. No, they may have been drifting, but they were definitely not happy. Robots scurried to and fro, but even they seemed more approachable than the humans. Occasionally, people would come up to him asking for credit to buy food, often with some hard luck story. The veracity of the homeless person’s story was never questioned, but Preston was often amazed that there were so many people that were so lost that even he himself felt useless.

He knew he would never starve, because of his connection with the Force, and he had to keep reminding himself, these folks had the same connection; if they could only hear and see. There were lessons upon lessons to be learned here and he didn't know which to learn first. He wondered what would happen if the religious guys and the political guys got together and tried to help what would happen. Preston's rough estimate was if they spent half as much time as they did recruiting and put that time into teaching people their true value, their complaints about society would decrease.

Moving from building to building sometimes required going up or down a level, or sometimes cat walks or bridges, and sometimes it required hiring a transport. If it hadn't been for the tech in his clothing, he might not have even known what time of day it was, but the number that lit up on his sleeve coincided with the time expressed on a bank sign, so he was aware he had gone quite a bit without sleep. He orientated himself, wondering if he should head back to the hotel or just find the nearest room. The answer came with another distraction.

Preston found himself outside of a club, but he was unsure if it was dance club, a sex club, or a general place for drugs and debauchery. Not knowing increased his curiosity, especially as busy as it was, but more importantly, because he did not sense any Periplaneta. That in itself was appealing. There was darkness inside, no doubt, but nowhere near as menacing. He was definitely drawn to it, no doubt influenced by the live, dancing girl in the window, and holographic dancers all about. Clearly, sex was going to be the ruin of him, he mused amused, but not seriously threatened. He gave himself permission to indulge, deciding the urge to go in could be construed as Force influence.

He passed through an air barrier into the club. The smell of the place was horrendous. That alone nearly drove him back to the streets. He had to remind himself that he had never been in a place where a dozen or so species were mixing, that it was not bad, just different. He forced himself to breathe. The den also nearly drove him out. This was not peaceful. He could see people conversing, but he wasn't sure how anyone could hold a decent conversation given the throbbing of the base. The rumble penetrated his chest and he resisted being ill. He hadn't felt ill with the Periplaneta, just tired. He focused his attention on the original attraction: the females. Dancing, writing, 'Twerking,' and grinding caused his libido to far exceed his daily average push for mating. He had always known that the creative Force was the most potent, but it had never been so in his face.

A waitress interrupted his gawking. "Something to drink, sweetie?" she asked, showing him her tray. There were several containers holding jury juice and sarlacc kickers. But his eyes drifted past the drinks to the cleavage, which was probably an arranged invitation based on the way she was holding the tray. Where else could his eyes go?

Preston blinked. It was hard not to stare. He almost said yes to a drink just because he wanted to keep her in front of him. The fact that she didn't seem to mind invited him to linger. He forced himself to shake his head no. She touched his arm and continued on. He followed her with his eyes until she disappeared into the crowd. As if she were aware, she turned and met his eyes and gave him a suggestive smile, but he didn't know if it was a genuine smile, a financial flirt, or an invitation for more. She broke off eyes contact and disappeared behind the door.

Preston waited a moment before tuning back into his environment, then made his way further into the club, against a growing compulsion to depart. He had no doubt that if he could retire to a quiet place with the waitress, he would have. He was tired and felt as if he had seen enough and was fairly certain there would be no healthy relationship forged in this den of inequity. Still, his thoughts returned to the waitress as he walked forwards, allowing the Force to

guide his steps. Several females, a species he was not familiar with but reminding him of felines, came at him at simultaneously. They rubbed up against him, greeting him very much the way a cat would, rubbing their cheeks against his, as if scent marking him. When they discovered the bulge in his pants was a light saber, they moved on. He sighed. He was sincerely interested in the mechanics of an alien coupling with cat like females, and the fact they came in a twin set made it all the more enticing. Seemingly by luck more than anything, he found himself in a room that was considerably quieter. Noise dampeners on the door diminished the transmission of sound and a shield held in the smoke. At least, in terms of the driving base, it was quieter, but only in so much that a dialogue could be had without yelling. People were playing cards. Pazaak, he presumed.

“Do you want to join the game?” the male Rodian asked, in its own language.

“Um, I don’t imagine it would be any fun,” Preston said. He was looking forward to an opportunity to speak out of his native language, though.

“Ahh, you speak Rodian. Good. I’m impressed. It shows intelligence, but more, it shows respect. Back to cards, though. Why do you think cards are not fun? It is the most fun a civilized man can partake of, next to a good cigar, and cigars and cards mix well,” the Rodian said.

“Well, mostly because I have really good luck, and if I always win, that would be rather boring, wouldn’t it?” Preston asked.

The Rodian laughed. “Everyone at these tables believes they have good luck, Sir. So what happens when good luck plays against good luck? Someone loses. And that, my friend, is where the fun begins. It is always interesting to watch someone fail, watch how they handle their fate.”

Even as the Rodian was explaining, someone threw down their pack and departed the room in a huff. The winner just laughed, raked in the winnings, and another potential opponent who had been waiting for a game took the empty seat.

“That makes sense,” Preston said. “But it doesn’t seem to be making people happy. I sense more stress than anything.”

“It’s not about happiness,” the Rodian said. “It’s about the game, it’s about risk, it’s a way of learning about yourself and others, learning about life. If you think about it, all social interaction can be understood as a game of cards. It’s about what you know, what you don’t know, what the other person knows and doesn’t know, and what life gives you, and what you make...”

“You sell it well,” Preston interrupted. “I will give it a try.”

“Do you have a starting deck?”

“Um, no,” Preston said.

“Step over here with me,” the Rodian said.

The Rodian led him to a counter where a female Rodian stood attending customers, selling chips, trading cards, and a variety of other items. He was particularly drawn to the variety of die and assorted colors: like so many splendid jewels. He experienced a pang in his chest, as if having missed being able to play games with others growing up. He felt an urgency to play.

“Hook him up with a general starting deck and some chips,” the Rodian said.

“Credit?” the female asked. She, too, was Rodian. She winked at Preston.

Preston idented his card.

The female pushed a deck and some chips. “You want some specialty cards?” she asked.

“Umm, I don’t know,” Preston said.

The female Rodian explained the importance of specialty cards and it made sense, statistically, to have more than a standard deck. He bought one of each of the special cards, practically buying her out. And since he couldn't resist, he bought combinations of dice. She put the die in a pouch, a box to store the cards, and then she presented the cards.

"Smart human," the Rodian male said. "You know how to play, right?"

"No," Preston said.

The Rodian explained the rules before introducing Preston to the table. There was a human male at the table, waiting for a partner. While he waited, he was being entertained by a slave. The slave laughed, sinking her face in to his neck, as if hiding a blush. The Rodian waved, inviting Preston to have a seat in front of the couple.

"They appear to be busy," Preston said to the Rodian, not turning his eyes away from the couple.

"I wouldn't be sitting here if I didn't want to play," the man said. "So sit, or move on, your blocking access to the table."

Preston nodded and sat down. He had already observed how people had been organizing themselves, so he went about duplicating what he had seen. The man across from him chuckled, menacingly. The female hanging on his neck focused on her master, avoiding eye contact with anyone else. The slave was the first Twi'lek Preston had ever seen this close. He was intrigued. The collar around her neck, along with the bracelets on each wrist and ankle, were clearly adornments of slavery, making binding as easy as throwing a switch or adding a chain. She was dressed in a dark green shirt that left one shoulder exposed, with a black skirt that fell to her mid thighs. Like most of the women he had encountered today, her shoes were not practical. Again, he wondered if they were purposely hobbling their women.

"Perhaps you would prefer to buy time with my slave rather than play cards?" the man asked.

"Uh?"

"You're ogling my woman. Sex or cards, make up your mind," the man said.

"Cards," Preston said, embarrassed.

"Probably a good choice, but if you have any money left when we're finished and you need someone to make a man out of you, I might give you a discount," the man said, snickering.

Preston appraised the man. His initial reaction was not to like him but he revisited his training. There was a lesson here. Hating others wasn't about others but rather, it was hatred of something in oneself being mirrored back. He pushed through his dislike and focused. A scar on his right cheek suggested he had had his mouth cut open and badly stitched back together. The bone on his forehead also suggested a poor surgical procedure after an injury, as there was a slight depression evident. Of course, it could have also been emergency surgery in the field of battle and the man had simply not chosen to repair it with cosmetic surgery. Maybe he was attached to the wound.

"What's wrong? To ugly for you?"

"Forgive my curiosity," Preston said. "I mean no disrespect."

"You're clearly a rookie, son, but I only know one way to school you, and that is to take your money," the man said.

"That seems fair," Preston said. "Begin."

Preston played conservatively for about ten minutes until he was sure he had the hang of it, and then he started taking greater risks. Once he started pushing the boundaries of his comfort zone, practicing his reliance on the Force as opposed to any perceived skill, he noticed a net gain

in profits and an increase in the number of wins. After Preston won the next four hands in a row, the opponent grumbled about fairness. “Yerd? Is he cheating?”

“I sold him the deck myself. This is fair,” the Rodian said.

The female Rodian came to watch the next hand. She hadn’t made another sell since she sold her premium cards to Preston. She enjoyed watching games almost as much as she enjoyed ogling humans. Preston pulled a ‘rabbit’ out of his deck, bringing in another unlikely win.

“Really? This newbie has a gold card?”

“I sold it to him. He paid a lot of money for it,” the female Rodian said.

“Shade allows you to sell cards here, Isho. She will not be happy if she thinks you’re cheating her,” the man said.

“I’m confused,” Preston said. “Who is Shade?”

“Shade owns this place,” Yerd said.

“Okay, so she profits on the cards you sold me and she profits on the games?” Preston asked.

“I work for her, kid. It is my job to win,” the man said.

“The House doesn’t always win,” Isho said, trying to assure Preston that the game wasn’t rigged. She really wanted him to like her. “But overall, the house profits because the majority of people lose. Statistically, the more games the house offers, the more chances the house has to win.”

“So this is a set up?” Preston asked.

“I’ll give you a pass for calling me a cheat, but do it again, and there will be a fight. You came here to gamble. It shouldn’t matter who you lose to,” the man said.

Preston shrugged. “I’m not losing,” he pointed out. “But even if I were, I have nothing to lose. You, on the other hand, seem vested. Do you wish to quit?”

The man flashed anger. His slave Twi’lek girl took a step back, biting her lower lip as she choked back a laugh. “Are you calling me out, boy?”

“Minder, he is playing fair,” Yerd said.

A crowd gathered during this discussion.

“Play,” the man said.

Preston pushed his money and his first card. Isho handed Preston a cigar. Preston liked the smell and put it in his mouth. Isho took it, removed the end, and gave it back to him. As she went to light it, he asked her to wait. It was his turn to play again. The stakes increased. Isho lit the cigar. Preston coughed. Isho patted him on the back and then demonstrated how to smoke, the secret being not to inhale. The house played its card. Minder pushed money and his next card.

“Are you paying attention?!” Minder said, waiting for Preston to play.

“Sorry,” Preston said, breathlessly. Preston pushed money, played, and won the round.

Minder stood up. “I will kill you,” he said.

“For winning?” Preston asked, not standing up. Isho offered an ash tray. “You should thank me for schooling you.”

The slave girl took Minder by the arm, restraining him from his burst of anger. He shoved her back against the wall. She slid to the floor, falling to a humbled position as opposed to seriously hurt, and surprisingly, she was laughing. Minder turned his anger back to Preston.

“Either you are lying about this being your first game, or you are a cheat. There is no way a starter pack could ever beat my cards, and I will have your hide. The only other alternative is

that Yerd and Isho are trying to make a fool of me, and I will have both theirs hides along aside of yours,” Minder said, leaning into the table, his knuckles white.

The floor boss made herself known and told Minder to sit down. She was an older woman, as suggested by the gray in her hair, hardened by a life of crime and drugs, but still holding her own. Preston guessed sixty one standard years. If she was armed, it was well concealed. Preston was sure she was armed. She commanded enough of the room that Minder obeyed.

“I’m Keena. I apologize for my employee’s rudeness. Please continue with the game,” the floor boss said.

“I’m not sure I want to play if I’m going to be threatened,” Preston said.

“You will not be threatened again,” Keena said, motioning Minder to keep silent. “Show forgiveness to my employee by giving him an opportunity to win back a portion of his wages.”

“That seems to go against the principals of the game. This is gambling?” Preston asked.

Keena smiled, nodding.

“True. You could walk away with what you have won, a very sizeable pile, way more than what you spent on the cards,” Keena said. “Or the house, will match that pile, doubling your payout.”

“I don’t have double,” Minder said.

“I said the house will match,” Keena said, passing a suggestive look that they would get it back out of his pay over time. “Still, it is only fair that you contribute to the pot, seeing how you already lost the house money. Put her in,” Keena said.

“Mam?”

“Put her papers on the table,” Keena said.

“She is mine,” Minder said.

“She is yours because Shade has temporarily allowed you to pimp her,” Keena reminded him of one of his few business perks. It was Shade’s way of owning more slaves than the legal limit imposed on individuals and businesses. It was merely a shell game. “Jordeen belongs to Shade, just as you belong to Shade, now put her in.”

Minder pulled out a chip that contained the property right documentation for his slave. He threw it on the table. The floor boss nodded.

“Play, son,” the Keena encouraged.

Preston took a survey of the room. There were guards at all the exits. People were still gathering to watch. The waitress that had offered him a drink nodded to him, as if telling him it was okay without speaking. Yerd and Isho seemed worried.

“I feel a lot of pressure here,” Preston said. It was almost as if he could hear music emphasizing an escalation in conflict. Was there going to be a fight if he won?

“I have assured your safety,” the floor boss said. “Play your card.”

Preston took in a breath through the cigar let out a puff of smoke. “I will proceed, provided you personally shuffle what’s left of my deck, and you play the card,” Preston said.

Keena smiled and played a long. She leaned over, deliberately providing Preston a view into her blouse and the ample cleavage therein, touching his shoulder with one hand, while the other cut the deck. She gave him a knowing smile and her breath wasn’t as bad as he had imagined it might be. She played the card on top.

“Your turn, Minder,” Keena said, still hovering over Preston.

Minder played and busted. The crowd cheered, Minder flushed with barely controlled anger, and Keena patted Preston on the back of the neck.

“If you don’t like your slave, or you prefer humans, you can always come and visit with me,” Keena whispered in his ear, seductively. She took his cigar and took a puff. Louder, for everyone to hear, she added, “If you ever want to play for the house, you have a job here,” Keena said, and kissed him on the forehead. As she departed, with his cigar, so did security. “Minder, come with me,” she called back.

Minder obeyed, but not without menacing glances.

“Would you like a bag to carry your winnings?” Yerd asked.

“Thank you, yes,” Preston said.

“Fifteen...”

Preston pulled it out of the winning, plus a tip. The bag, a backpack, that Yerd provided was actually pretty nice. He dumped the entire content of the table into the backpack’s main pouch and closed the flap. The waitress gave him a drink, which he passed directly to one of the feline girls who was pushing up against him again. He made his way to the door, turning down offers for company as he went, as his main goal was to now just escape the volume level. That and his head was spinning, perhaps from the cigar, from the adrenalin of the game, or just sheer tiredness. Though ‘outside’ was really not outside, but rather just an oversized corridor, he was still relieved by the immediate decrease of sound.

Preston departed the club’s purview, still moving in a direction away from his hotel. After that excitement, he didn’t think he could even Force sleep, so he decided to just keep walking. He recalled sleeping pretty well after the second round of intimacy with Corissa, but thinking of that came with a bit of pain. His first impulse was to suppress it. Another way to diminish the pain was to reconsider some of the other offers for companionship he had had throughout the day, both direct and perceived. He had found everyone so very tempting, but the imagination of it paled compared to the memory of his first. He wondered if the subsequent encounters would all have to compete for that, or if he would measure each moment as unique within itself. When he considered there were probably four offers from women at the club he had just dismissed, he considered going back. He pushed on, the noise of the place overriding his interest in company. The feline sister chicks returned to his mind, but still, he walked on. The barrage of possible suitors popping up in his head forced him to deliberately examine why the Corissa rejection hurt. Was this another lesson in letting go? His mind was racing with thoughts to such a degree he hadn’t realized he had been followed.

“Excuse me?” It was the Twi’lek girl and she was beside him, laughing breathlessly. “You forgot me?”

“No, I didn’t forget,” Preston said, happy to discover he could be surprised by someone sneaking up on him if he was distracted. Another lesson. “You’re free. You may go where you wish.”

“I don’t understand. You can’t be unhappy with me. You have yet to experience me,” the Twi’lek girl said.

“I’m very happy to have your company, but I don’t own you. You’re a free person, you should have a say over where you go and what you do and who that is with,” Preston said.

The Twi’lek girl blinked. Large, violet eyes and a sky blue skin tone made her extremely pleasant to look at. The hourglass figure alone was almost a distraction, but when considering her as a whole, the generous bosom, plentiful buttocks, and long legs, she was mesmerizing. The ‘lekku,’ or ‘brain tails,’ draped gently over each shoulder. The tip of the right lekku shifted subtly, as if she were contemplating being free. She shook her head.

“I have a contract to fulfill,” she said. “Failing that would cause suffering.”

“Even if I set you free?” Preston asked.

“I must stay with whoever owns that chip,” she insisted.

“If you could go anywhere in the Galaxy, where would you go?”

“Where ever you are,” she said.

“Wouldn’t you like to go home?”

“Pfft?”

“Family?” Preston asked.

“Let’s just say, it’s better if I don’t go there at this time,” she said.

“I will set you up in a hotel, or give you a ticket to where ever you want to go,” Preston offered.

“If you really don’t want me, I will leave,” she said, tears started to roll. She had yet to meet anyone who didn’t crave to have her and though part of her thought it felt nice, another part found that the rejection stung deeply. This was actually new, she thought. Emotion?

“Why are you crying?” Preston asked.

“I will die without a caregiver,” she said, exaggerating her misfortune. “Will you at least accompany me back to my room so I can collect a few things? If I go alone, Minder will kill me.”

“He won’t kill you.”

“Please. Would it be that much of an imposition to see me to the apartment?”

“Of course, not. I will walk with you,” Preston said.

Preston allowed her to lead the way. She walked slowly, deliberately, and he wondered if the shoes were causing her pain. Every now and then she would pause, trying to suppress a smile, or perhaps a grimace. It was difficult to discern if she was in pain from just reading her face. Occasionally she even giggled, then stopped walking as if to get a hold of herself, then she would continue. He probably would have scrutinized her demeanor closer had he not been distracted by the onlookers. He thought it odd the way the humans stared at them, as if it were wrong for a human and Twi’lek to be together in public. No doubt, there were assumptions being made. He found it curious. He sensed disgust from most, jealousy from some, and a few individuals to be downright murderous. The closer they got to her apartment, the less judgment he felt. He also observed, the closer they got to her apartment, the less humans they encountered.

A Twi’lek of deeper blue tones, almost indigo, interrupted them. “Ohh, Jordeen,” she said, speaking in her native tongue. There were words missing, as some of their conversation was through subtle twists of their brain tails. “It is true? You have a new owner?”

“Yes, Mika,” Jordeen said, not stopping to talk. She even tried to quicken her pace, but when she laughed out loud, she returned to her more methodical rate.

“What is this? The seventh? No, the eighth? I wonder how long this one will keep you before throwing you back,” Mika mused.

Jordeen didn’t answer.

“He is young. How can he afford you?” Mika ask, taking up stride alongside of Jordeen.

“He won me in a card game,” Jordeen said. She laughed again, was obviously embarrassed, but pushed on.

“I would hardly call that winning,” Mika said.

Jordeen looked down at her feet, clearly humiliated but not wanting to cause a scene. The laughter was incongruent with her feelings, and she was squeezing her fists as if trying to fight something.

“Perhaps he can break you of your laziness,” Mika said. “You’re slow and dimwitted, always laughing. Does he know you’re mentally retarded?”

The two of them were so busy with their own dialogue that they failed to notice a definite energy change in the street, or the fact that there was suddenly fewer people. A group of six humans were harassing a vendor and his daughter. At their present pace, they would come upon this group and would probably be caught up in the midst of the quarrel, and no doubt get dragged into the fight. Preston deliberately slowed their pace, Jordeen automatically adjusting to stay in stride with her Master, and Mika adjusting so she could continue to taunt Jordeen.

Preston took a deep breath and projected himself ahead in an effort to diffuse the situation. His Doppelganger wasn’t noticed until it entered the group, coalescing out of shadows with a turning of air. He picked up a piece of fruit from the toppled vendor’s cart. The girl who had been struggling to get free from the two holding her arms stopped struggling. Even she was struck by how absurd Preston seemed, interrupting the energy and changing the direction things seemed to be heading.

“Hey, we’re busy here,” the lead gang member said. “Oh, I remember you. You’re the guy who doesn’t vote.”

“Nice to meet you again,” Preston said politely.

“You’re intruding on our business,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” Preston said. “Please continue.”

“We don’t want any witnesses, if you know what I mean,” the lead said. “Unless, you’re thinking about taking a stand here. Which would mean you vote after all.”

“I’m not getting involved,” Preston said. “You clearly out number me. And, it would be wrong for me to tell another free, adult what to do, now wouldn’t it?”

“That’s right. So, push on,” the lead said.

“I am confused, though,” Preston said, lingering just a little longer. “You want to discourage the non-human population from being here, but you’re threatening a child, and a small time merchant. Are you running out of tough non humans to scare, or do you only prey on those who don’t fight back?”

“Hey, why don’t we kick his ass, too,” someone said.

“You guys like fighting?” Preston asked.

“Oh, please, let me kick his ass,” another said.

“Clearly you guys won’t be challenged by fighting with me,” Preston said. “May I offer an alternative? There are some aliens not too far from here that are taking advantage of humans. Mating with them against their will and everything.”

“Non-humans mating with humans?! Why didn’t you stop them?” the lead demanded.

“There were too many for me alone,” Preston said. “I’m not really a fighter. I’m more of a healer.”

“Show us these aliens,” the lead said.

Preston agreed to take them and led them back to the rave he had visited earlier that day. Along the way he described what they might encounter, as well as learned their names. The oldest, the man who had taken a swing at him earlier, was named Toby. He was tall, lean, and had long brownish blond hair braided into a cue. He was probably twenty six, Preston guessed, and had he not known Toby had a predilection for fighting, he would have thought him to be one of those peaceful, sit around a camp fire passing smokes of the herbal variety kind of man. His entourage consisted of Lloyd, a rock crusher of a guy, broad at the shoulders and tapering towards the hip, with massive arms and hands, Helo, who was more of just a mouthy, freckled

follower kid, with an odd haircut, Olso and Jay, who were brothers, and Asher, who appeared to be the youngest.

“How can we fight something we can’t see?” Asher asked.

“I know a concoction that will enable you to see them. Can you all handle one glass of alcohol?” Preston asked.

“Pfft, we drank more than that before we came down here,” Helo said.

“Maybe we should turn back. If you have had too much alcohol, you won’t be able to fight these guys,” Preston said.

“Take us to them, or we kick your ass here and now,” Toby said.

“We’re here, actually. You don’t sense them at all?” Preston asked.

“Where?”

“They’re inside this club,” Preston said.

“You’re Force sensitive? Is that why you can sense them?” Olso asked.

“You shouldn’t have to be Force sensitive to feel this,” Preston said. “Imagine you’re in a hot tub that is turned off. You’re still in a hot tub, right? Your heartbeat pulses the water, so the water is not still. The ripples are discernible if you’re paying attention. Your thoughts stir the waters. There is like a hundred of these things in there and we’re entering the hot tub, so you should feel the churning of the water, even though the hot tub is still off.”

“So what does it feel like when the hot tub is on?” Asher asked.

“That’s what it feels like when a Jedi is using the Force,” Preston said. “I’m going to fix this so you can see them, but you have to promise not to fight until we can all see them. And whatever you do, don’t go dancing with the girls.”

They agreed and Preston led them into the club. He took them to a table where they could see the dance floor. Apparently it didn’t matter what time of the day it was, people were always here dancing, coming and going. Preston controlled his reaction, forcing his body not to shiver.

“I don’t see anything,” Toby said.

“Oh, we’re being watched, I assure you,” Preston said, trying not to track the creature that scurried across the table. It peered right into the eyes of Toby, but with the face of a ghost tattooed on the back of its head, Preston couldn’t help but think it was looking at him. He was tempted to push the antennae out of in-front of his own face, knowing very well if he looked up, he would see a dozen of the creatures staring down at him, perhaps anticipating a fight. And then he thought, it wasn’t just the creatures staring down at him, but also the dead painted on their backs. They could see, too!

A waitress appeared. “May I serve you?” she asked in a sultry voice, a little raspy as if she had worn her voice out yelling over the din. She was also alluring. No doubt that was the makeup, which was the only personality she had going for her, enough paint to make her stand out from the other waitresses, as they were all wearing the same uniform, with day glow wigs.

“Bring us six streaks and six poppers,” Preston said. “And my usual. The bartender will remember. I was here earlier.”

“I got you, sweetie,” she said, blowing him a kiss before departing.

“What are streaks?” Toby asked.

A female patron came over and invited Oslo to dance.

“Not right now,” Toby said.

Oslo frowned at Toby, but assured the girl he would catch up with her later.

The waitress returned with six individual mirrors, where she laid out the streaks. She then sat down six glasses of poppers, and put a carbonated drink in front of Preston. She invited them to push the call button on the table if they needed anything else.

“What is this? Drugs?” Toby asked.

“It’s something to help you resist the alcohol, sharpen your senses,” Preston said. “I’m sorry, guys. I shouldn’t have asked you to come. We should probably leave.”

“Hold up, you’re backing out?” Helo asked.

“We can’t handle this. We need more people,” Preston said.

“You’re telling me, the six of us and our blasters can’t handle this?” Toby said.

“I can’t tell you guys what to do, but I think we should leave,” Preston said, standing up.

“Sit down,” Toby insisted, tapping his weapon.

Preston sat down. Toby instructed his guys to snort their lines and drink their drinks. They each in turned followed instructions, with Toby the last to go.

“Now what?” Toby asked.

“Do you see them?” Preston asked, allowing himself to visibly shake.

“I don’t see anything,” Lloyd said.

“Look in the bubbles,” Preston said.

“Wait, what was that? Did you see that?” Helo asked.

Toby stood. “I think I saw something. It looked human, though,” he said. “Come on.”

Toby and his posse headed into the bubbles. No sooner than they were in the bubbles, the dancers were seducing them, and before long they were gyrating along with the masses. They were too involved to witness Preston relaxing, drinking his soda. The bartender approached, pulled a chair up next to Preston, and reversed it before sitting down.

“Didn’t expect to see you again,” the bartender said.

“Yeah, didn’t expect to come back,” Preston said.

“So, you’re okay with this?” the bartender asked, waving.

“They were sort of forcing themselves on others, thought this was fairly karmic,” Preston said. “How does it work, exactly?”

“The females deposit their eggs, the male fertilizes the eggs, and the host carries them awhile, the larvae hatch and reside either in the stomach or intestines, releasing hormones that usually brings the host back to the club for the next round of eggs, at which point, the host vomits or eliminates the larvae into the toilet, and the larvae grow to adolescence in the sewers, then they come here and join family or branch out and create their own club. Sometimes they find their original hosts and live with them for the rest of their lives. The host usually suffers from a mild paranoia which keeps them at home and out of trouble, which is why many of the adult *Periplaneta* live with their hosts. They don’t like drawing attention to themselves. They like the dark, quiet places.”

Preston nodded. He observed Kels passed out at a booth. He liked her, but knew he couldn’t rescue her from the path she had chosen. Apparently, she had her own personal *Periplaneta* attached to her. It rested on her stomach, licking her chin, perhaps like a pet might. It was meant to be affection, but it gave Preston a shiver. He chose not to explore her future potential, but as he considered Toby’s future, he saw it was very likely that Toby would be more subdued in his future dealings with others. Did this mean that there was a social benefit to this symbiotic relationship?

“Do they ever get out of this?” Preston asked.

“Not usually,” the bartender said. “Every now and then I suppose someone has spontaneous clarity and improved mental health and they don’t repeat the cycle, but they just remember their lives as addicts, not as participants in a symbiotic relationship. Sometimes the Periplaneta are on the unhealthy side and they sabotage their host’s health to keep h erelationship ongoing.”

“I feel sadness,” Preston said.

“Why? They humans to be numb. The Periplaneta get to sustain themselves. Their hosts get some health benefits, live longer lives. And the dead get to taste life for a brief moment,” the bartender said.

“I don’t know why I am sad, I just feel sad,” Preston said.

“Do you want to be compensated for the men you brought us?” the bartender asked.

Preston shook his head. He let go of his doppelganger and it dispersed into air, just so much smoke. The bartender, confused, reached forward and touched the chair. And then he started laughing. He already knew ghosts existed, he just never thought he would see one, unless it was painted on the back of a Periplaneta.

Jordeen and Mika paused when Preston stopped to help the merchant right his cart. The merchant’s daughter stayed slightly behind her father, staring at Preston as if he were a ghost. Jordeen seemed relieved to not be walking and her breathing eased. Mika was confused by Preston’s behavior.

“Thanks...” the merchant began, but stop as he clearly remembered Preston. “Do you have a brother?”

“Nope, no siblings,” Preston said, removing his pack containing the winnings from the card game. He dug out and pocketed Jordeen’s chip and then handed the merchant the pack. “This should more than cover the cost of the damage.”

The merchant looked in his bag and was immediately elated, followed by a sadness. “I can’t take this,” the merchant said, offering the bag back.

“Please, I want you to have it,” Preston said.

“Sir, it’s too much,” he insisted.

“Consider it an investment, then. Open a second cart, grow your business, and set aside a portion of the profits for me,” Preston said.

The Twi’lek vendor didn’t know what to say. And Preston didn’t need him to say anything. To Jordeen’s surprise, he took her arm in his.

“Please ask your friend my forgiveness, but I would like to retire alone with you now,” Preston told Jordeen.

Jordeen gladly translated.

“I understood his language,” Mika snapped. She switched to standard so she could speak directly to Preston. “Perhaps you would like two servants, tonight?”

“No, but thank you for your offer. Another time, perhaps,” Preston said. “Excuse us.”

Preston led Jordeen away from Mika, maintaining Jordeen’s initial stride. He had quickly picked up on her personal rhythm, understood it, and paused appropriately. It was like a dance. The rest of the walk to Jordeen’s place was uneventful, but they did have more than a few curious onlookers. Whether the stares were because he was human or because he was entertaining Jordeen’s strange walk which had many folks in her area questioning her sanity, he didn’t know or care. Jordeen was happy to find refuge in her apartment, immediately kicked off her shoes, and she visibly relaxed, more than just from being bare feet: she was no longer being

scrutinized. Though she obviously felt at ease with Preston, she still apologized for the tidiness of her place.

“It is okay, Jordeen,” Preston said, using her name he had gleaned from Mika.

“You understood our dialogue?” Jordeen asked.

“I did.”

Jordeen had tears strolling down her face, but she didn’t cry. She went to the kitchen and threw a couple things into a container. He followed, observing her.

“Thank you for not saying anything to Mika. It would have just made it worse,” Jordeen said.

Preston shrugged. He wanted to ask her if she really believed the things Mika was saying to her, but he already knew the answer. He wanted to reach out and touch her compassionately, to wipe a tear away, but he constrained himself. He also wanted to kiss her, but he suppressed that, too, because he didn’t want the intimacy that might ensue to be a construct of sympathy. The intensity of the the silence during their break in dialogue was palpable.

Jordeen swallowed, very aware of Preston’s eyes on her. “Would you like a drink?”

“No thank you,” Preston said, turning away from his unintentional scrutiny to survey the apartment. There were no personal affects, like family pictures or artwork. There was no computer or entertainment center and very little furniture. Not that there was much room for furniture. The bathroom was a closet, and the space between toilet and shower was so tight that he doubted he could sit there comfortably, and he wondered how she managed. The bedroom and living room were the same. Her bed had cubby holes and drawers with which to store some items. She pulled the drawers open, revealing mostly clothing. She sat down on the bed, looking at her few items, as if trying to decide what she would take. She appeared to be overwhelmed.

Preston sat next to her on the bed. “Do you want to stay here?”

Jordeen shrugged. “It doesn’t really matter where I am or where I go. I won’t be able to earn a living and will probably just end up back in the trade.”

“What do you want?” Preston asked.

“To go with you,” Jordeen said, touching his arm. “I will serve you well.”

“I don’t want to be served,” Preston said.

“I can cook,” Jordeen said, still negotiating. “And, I’m very good at pleasing.” She gripped his arm, forcefully. “You want to touch me.”

Preston tilted his head, blinked. “Are you trying to Force persuade me?” he asked, amused.

“It’s not working?” Jordeen was confused.

“You don’t have to use the Force on me,” Preston said.

“I don’t?” Jordeen asked.

“All you have to do is ask, Jordeen. Besides being beautiful, I’m curious about your anatomy,” Preston said.

“But you’ve not made any advances,” Jordeen argued.

“I’m struggling with timing and rightness, but I think it’s okay to proceed. We both seem to be on the same page,” Preston said.

“But you were trying to get rid of me,” Jordeen began.

“I want you to be free to do decide, not coerced, or out of obligation,” Preston said. “And for similar reasons, I don’t want to be Forced.”

“You might like it. Just let go and allow me to take over,” Jordeen began, caressing his forehead as she leaned into him.

“Well, yeah, I know how it works,” Preston said.

“How do you know?” Jordeen asked.

“May I demonstrate?” Preston asked. With her consent, he lifted her with the Force.



Though Hutt's were known to be hermaphrodites, individuals tended to express more masculine or feminine characteristics, than a pure balance of the two. Shade was more extreme in her expression of femininity. It was not a feature she tried to suppress or hide, as she was quite comfortable with her orientation, and her side 'proclivities.' As a Hutt, she was not alone in her fascination with 'alien' gender and mating practicalities and she could easily be stimulated watching her slaves and indentured servants 'playing.' But for her, it was more than a fetish. Long ago she had developed Force Empathy, which had not only been a survival skill, giving her an edge in business, but it allowed her to tap into the sexual energy and feelings of others. The more she channeled sexual feelings, the more obsessed she became with the mating rituals of other species. It drove her and her business. Sex sells. Better than drugs. And since all organisms engage in some form of play, it was easy for her to get her 'fix' and get paid at the same time. It was difficult to find her not engaged in some form of arousal. When her Klatoonian servant approached her, he hesitated, not sure where she was in her process. Interrupting her before she had relief could be painful. Several humanoids were working hard massaging her, which isn't easy considering the tremendous amounts of mucus and slime her body generated. Sometimes the massagers were so lathered up by her slime that they would simply slip off the pedestal. Some of the massagers walked on her back, holding on to lines anchored to the ceiling. There were dancers almost everywhere, some holographic and some real. But probably the most interesting spectacle was that the floor directly in front of her pedestal was transparent and she could look down on an unsuspecting couple in the 'newlywed' suite. Sometimes, when one of the couples was staring up into the mirror it felt as if they were looking up into her own eyes. That usually pushed her over the top, but tonight, she was bored with the couple below.

The Klatoonian glanced down at the couple below his feet and was disgusted. Humans did nothing for him and Shade was always pushing him towards group play. He closed his eyes and pushed up close enough to deliver his report and be punched, or thrown across the room if she so wished.

“Master Shade, I wish to report an oddity,” he said.

“Ohh, go ahead,” Shade said. She was not unhappy. “What do you have for me, Licon.”

“You know those crates that you hold, the ones on the lower level, the ones not on any inventory?” Licon asked.

“I've advised you not to concern yourself with those,” Shade said, sighing pleasantly as the couple finished, both lying face up, staring into the mirror. “I was paid well to hold those.”

“Yes, well, one of the crates opened on its own,” Licon said.

“No way!” Jade said, excited about the news. “Are you serious?”

“I would not joke about such a matter,” Licon said.

“No, you wouldn't,” Shade agreed. “You did not look in the crate, did you?”

“Oh, no, Master, I would not do that,” Licon said, hesitantly.

“But you saw the something,” Shade pushed. She could only sense his general fear, not any specific thoughts. Her Force Empathy was limited to sensations, pain and pleasure, and, unless they were extreme, they were often both the same to her.

"I'm sorry, Master. I witnessed a droid emerging from the crate," Licon said. "It was unavoidable."

"Yes, yes, I could see that. I feel sorry for the poor bastard who woke that droid from its slumber." Her lamenting sounded like soft laughter. "Blood Hunters can be serious stalkers. But you are alive, which tells me that it didn't care about you. Also, it tells me that you didn't interfere with it," Shade surmised.

"Oh, no master, I did not interfere," Licon said. "But it did steal one of your shuttles."

"No way!" Shade said, this time, clearly angry. "You let it take a shuttle?!"

"I wasn't sure what the appropriate protocol was in this situation," Licon said.

Shade knocked one of the massagers off her pedestal with a swipe of her tail. It was hard to know if it were an accidental twitch or purposely spent anger, but the servant didn't complain. He jumped right back up and continued where he left off. "So, what did you do?"

"I followed the shuttle," Licon said.

"No way!" Shade said, again, interested in the narrative unfolding. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, Master," Licon said. "The shuttle landed on building 14242. I observed the droid emerge from the shuttle. It then descended to the ground level, where it killed a street vendor."

"No way!" Shade said. "Are you serious?"

"I could not make this up, Master," Licon said.

"No, I am sure of that, please, go on," Shade insisted.

"I followed it to a park," Licon said.

"A park? Why would a Blood Hunter go to a park?" Shade mused out loud.

"It was looking for someone," Licon said.

"Are you serious?! Of course it was looking for someone," Shade said. "But did it catch someone?"

"It did," Licon said.

"No way! Are you serious?" Shade asked. "Be clear on this point. Did it capture someone one, or kill someone?"

"It captured someone. A young man, human, maybe 20 standards," Licon said.

"No way! Was he cute?" Shade asked.

"Forgive me, but all humans look alike," Licon said.

"Forgiven," Shade said. She was really happy, mostly because the couple below were having another go. She so loved newly weds. "Go on."

"After the droid sedated its victim, it carried the male to the shuttle," Licon said.

"To be expected," Shade sighed. "Poor bastard."

"I was not able to see into the shuttle," Licon said.

"You would not want to see. Blood hunters are merciless torturers," Shade said. "Even by Hutt standards. I doubt even I would derive any pleasure from such a spectacle."

"I suspected that to be so. And that added to my confusion. The human escaped, apparently unharmed," Licon said.

"Oh, no way! Are you serious?!" Shade said, knocking both massagers off her platform.

"Please, Master, I could not make this up," Licon said.

"Go on," Shade said, the urgency of her voice mirroring the play below.

"After a while of inactivity, I sent one of my men to examine the shuttle. The droid was damaged beyond repair. We were able to recover the shuttle, though," Licon said.

"No way!" Shade said. "You recovered the shuttle? But what did you do with the droid parts?"

“I had my men leave it all on the roof,” Licon said.

“That was probably smart,” Shade agreed, nodding. “This is all very exciting.”

“There’s more,” Licon said.

“No way!” Shade said.

“The human male that destroyed the droid came to your club tonight,” Licon said.

“Oh, no way! Are you serious?!”

“Please, Master,” Licon said.

“I can barely contain myself, I might explode,” Shade said. “Was he investigating where the Droid originated?”

“No, Master. He apparently just came to play cards,” Licon said.

“No way!”

“I assure you, this is the truth. I witnessed him beat one of your players. He walked out of here with a sizeable winning, and a slave girl, contract and all,” Licon said.

“No way!” Shade said, even louder as the couple below finished again, the male falling soundly asleep, leaving the female smiling up at the mirror. Simultaneously, Shade had grabbed Licon’s arm squeezing him and drawing him closer.

“Master,” Licon begged, hurting.

“Fetch me Keena, quickly. And assemble two squads of your best, but make sure there are no Droids in the party,” Shade said.

Licon hurried off. Keena arrived shortly after he left.

“The human that beat Minder today, I want you to bring him to me, alive,” Shade said.

“Umm, Shade,” Keena began.

“I know about your scams,” Shade said.

Keena paled.

“This is what, the seventh mark you allowed Minder to set up, let him win, then rob him after Jordeen seduces and drugs them?” Shade asked.

“I set aside your portion of the robberies. I put it in the miscellaneous, refunds from vendors for over payments,” Keena said. “I thought not mentioning it would give you plausible deniability.”

“No worries, Keena. I approve of the overall tactic and I’ve not interfered because I know you to be good for my share,” Shade said. That and Keena had a sensual side that rivaled her own. What fascinated Shade the most about this servant was that Keena was in denial, and would delay gratification for months, once even going a full year, but when she fell, the depravity was a feast that Shade simply couldn’t resist. “However, too many of the marks have been killed by Minder. You need to rein him in. And I need this one alive. More specifically, I want him brought to me. It is urgent. He may be the most valuable commodity we have moved in a long time. Spare no expense or trouble.”

Keena bowed. “Of course.”

“And Keena? This needs to be extremely discreet. Radio silence kind of discreet. No computer logs,” Shade said. “That last part is paramount. No Droids. Nothing smarter than a blaster.”

Keena turned to leave.

“And Keena,” Shade said. “One more thing. If Minder killed him, or this young man gets killed in the extraction process, kill Minder, and then report back here for a full evacuation of our staff from this planet.”



Jordeen slipped away from the bed slash couch where Preston lay sleeping. She put on a long tshirt than went to her knees, picked up her comm. link and took it to the bathroom and shut the door. There were twenty messages and a new call coming in. She opened it up.

“What the hell is taking so long?!” Minder demanded.

“He wouldn’t drink anything,” Jordeen said. “It took me a while to tire him out.”

“You slept with him?!” Minder demanded, not hiding his anger.

“When you put me in this position, it is sometimes a foregone conclusion that I’m probably going to have engage in intimacy,” Jordeen said.

“What happen to your magic knock out touch?”

“He was resistant to a Force turn over,” Jordeen explained.

“Let me in,” Minder said.

“No, I’m having second thoughts,” Jordeen said.

“Excuse me?” Minder said.

“Look, he doesn’t have anything. No possessions. He is staying at hotel temporarily, and there isn’t usually anything we can steal at a hotel, not to mention they have all those cameras,” Jordeen. “Even the coin he won from you is gone. He gave it to a street vendor.”

“You let him give our money away? Open this door or I will blow it off its hinges,” Minder said.

“You’re going to kill him,” Jordeen said.

“Damn right I’m going to kill him,” Minder said. “Be thankful I’m not going to kill you today.”

“I can’t let you kill him,” Jordeen said.

“What the hell? He’s so good in bed you fell in love with him?”

“Are you that stupid, or is it just men in general that are that stupid?” Jordeen asked.

“And now you’re calling me stupid? You think he will treat you better than I do?”

Jordeen turned off the link and flushed it down the toilet. She returned to the main room only to find that Preston was still sleeping. Her front door opened and Minder was there holding the wires he had pulled from the external panel. He smiled at her and stormed in. She rushed to block him, but he punched her in the face, and when she hit the floor, he kicked her hard in the ribs. He went to kick her again and she blocked, which only resulted in him breaking her arm as well as the rib.

“If you’re done, you can watch me kill your new boyfriend,” Minder said, surprised that Preston was still asleep. “He slept through all of that? You must have drugged him you lying bitch.”

Minder stepped on Preston’s clothes as he approached and paused. He lifted the trousers to determine what the object in the long pocket was. He pulled out a lightsaber.

“Ah, nice,” Minder said. “It looks like we have ourselves a little Jedi.”

“Please, don’t,” Jordeen said, sobbing, with a bizarre laugh that squeaked out of her.

“How sweet would it be to kill a Jedi with his own weapon while he slept?” he asked.

Minder pushed the only button on the lightsaber in an effort to activate it. Nothing happened. “Batteries must be dead.”

“No, it just has a trigger lock, requiring my thumb print,” Preston explained. He made no effort to get up from bed, as he was not overly concerned.

Minder went for his blaster. Preston held up four fingers, as if blocking incoming energy. Minder fell limp to the floor. Preston sat up and came to the edge of the bed nearer Jordeen. Past the tears, past the obvious relief that Preston wasn't in harms way, was now the fears she was holding of what he might think of her. She bit down on her own fears and allowed her compassion for others to shine.

"Did you kill him?" Jordeen asked. She was struggling to breathe from the injury and panick.

"No," Preston said, touching her shoulder. "He'll wake up in a couple hours. May I heal you?"

Jordeen shook her head, "No."

"Please," Preston said.

"I was going to help him rob you," Jordeen said. "This was all a ruse."

"I know you believe that, but this is bigger than you," Preston said. "The Force brought us together."

"No, the game was rigged," Jordeen said.

"Jordeen, I would like your permission to heal you. We need to leave," Preston insisted.

"We? You're going to take me with you?" Jordeen asked.

"Yes. I will explain later, but for now, we really need to hurry," Preston said.

Jordeen gave her consent to be healed. Preston laid hands on her, closed his eyes, and channeled the Force through himself and into her. The fact that she was already Force sensitive facilitated the healing process, but only when she surrendered to the Force, to the situation, did the healing accelerate. Preston sat down for a moment, allowing himself to breathe and recover.

"You okay?" Jordeen asked, reaching for him.

"Yeah. It's just been a busy day and all," Preston said. Sure of himself, he stood and began dressing. Jordeen remained on the floor. He started dressing. "Gather your things."

"I want nothing here," Jordeen said.

Preston nodded, appreciating the fact that she was letting go completely. He gave her a hand and she got to her feet. He led the way to the door. When it opened, he found it blocked by Keena, and behind her, a couple dozen men.

"I'm glad you're still alive," Keena said.

"Thank you," Preston said. "It's nice to see you again."

"Shade has requested your company," Keena said.

Preston double counted the backup. Someone was probably going to die. "Umm, that's nice, but this doesn't feel like a simple request, or that she's asking to have a cozy little chat amongst friends," he said.

"True. I didn't ask why she wanted your company. I was simply told to fetch you, preferably unharmed," Keena said.

"I am really sorry for causing you so much trouble," Preston said.

"It's no trouble," Keena said. "I'm happy to escort you." There was a strange twist to the way she pronounced 'escort.'

"Umm, I meant sorry because I am going to have to decline the invitation at this time," Preston said.

"There's nowhere for you to go," Keena said.

"Yeah, this is a rather tough spot," Preston agreed, and closed the door. He looked to Jordeen. "May I damage your door?"

Jordeen shrugged. Preston put his hand on the door, knowing full well if he could build a lightsaber crystal one carbon atom at a time, he could certainly shift atoms from the door and the frame, fusing the two together. The perimeter of the door began to glow with an orange tint. Preston seemed satisfied. He turned to Jordeen.

“Okay, where is the back exit?” Preston asked.

“That’s the only door,” Jordeen said.

“Fire escape?”

Jordeen shook her head no.

“Is that legal?” Preston asked.

Jordeen shrugged. Without further ado, Preston took her hand and drew her to the center of the room. He considered using his lightsaber to cut through the floor in order to drop to the next level, but his training held firm. Drawing his lightsaber would mean he had failed. That and he didn’t want to make it easy for folks to follow him by leaving a trail.

“Jordeen, do you trust me?” he asked.

“Implicitly,” Jordeen assured him.

“Hold onto to me. And close your eyes. This is probably going to feel a little weird,” Preston said.

They embraced, her head tilting up as if she expected him to kiss her. She was surprisingly nervous, considering they had already been intimate. His hands were on the small of her back, drawing her in tight. She shivered, but managed not to laugh.

Preston shifted his focus. He really didn’t have to do anything special for this trick, other than focus. He knew, beyond a shadow of doubt, that there was more than sufficient space for the molecules in their bodies to slip between the molecules of the floor, and that the only thing that really prevented that event from occurring was the magnetic fields of the atoms themselves. This trick may not have been easier than moving one atom at a time, but was certainly not beyond the power of the Force. They fell through the floor, pulled by gravity, as if a trap door had opened below their feet. Jordeen giggled incessantly as they fell, her eyes tightly closed. The sensation of gravity pulling her through the floor was like pushing through cobwebs. The stirring of sensations was not constrained to the surface of her skin, but went all the way through to her core, causing her whole body to shiver while generating goose bumps to their greatest height. As soon as they cleared the floor, which was now their ceiling, Preston slowed their descent so that they landed on their feet as if they had stepped off the lowest step of a stair case.

Preston’s first duty was to assure that Jordeen was whole.

“You okay?”

Jordeen had laughed through the whole experienced, almost convulsing, but the noise she made didn’t echo through the room until Preston had phased them back into their normal state. She leaned into him, catching her breath before easing up on her grip against his arms. She nodded. “Oh, yeah.”

Preston laughed as well. “It wasn’t as unpleasant as I imagined it would be.”

“You’ve never done that before?” Jordeen asked, surprised.

“Not in my physical body,” Preston said.

That statement prompted a response from Jordeen, but her awareness of fear emanating from behind her drew her attention. In the room with them, there was a child who had been lying in bed, watching them descend. Preston became aware that he was staring and silently screaming for help. The kid pulled the covers up to his neck.

“Hey, it is okay, we’re not going to hurt you,” Jordeen said.

When the child finally managed to make a noise, it was loud enough to alert everyone in the house. The mom entered to check on her son, saw the two strangers, screamed as well, and ran towards her son to protect him. Preston headed towards the only door, pulling Jordeen by the hand. The female's mate, coming late as he had decided to stop and collect a weapon came running. When he saw the intruder he started firing his blaster. Preston pushed Jordeen back into the child's room and closed the door and held his finger on the close button. The man on the other side could be heard yelling as he continuously pushed the button to open the door. The mom pleaded for them to spare their son's life. The man on the other side banged on the door, telling them they couldn't get out so they might as well surrender.

Without further reflection, Preston pulled Jordeen along as he made a run at the back, far wall. They phased right through it and arrived in the next apartment, where a person was already in the process of calling the local authorities. On the other side of the wall, they heard blaster fire hitting the wall right where they would have been had Preston not been able to phase.

"No, I heard a blaster and screaming... Ahhhh. Robbers are in my apartment!" she yelled. "They're going to kill me."

"Sorry for the intrusion," Preston said, pulling Jordeen past the screaming woman, exiting via her bedroom door as opposed to the wall. He paused only to compliment the woman's night attire, a shoulderless, partially see through nightie that barely reached her thighs. The woman's free hand suddenly covered both her breasts, her mouth making a silent protest, her other hand dropping the communication device away from her ear. After Preston's 'good night,' Jordeen squeaked out a laugh as she was jerked into the next room before she could offer an apologetic smile. Preston knew right where the exit was, but for some reason, he hesitated.

"You liked her?" Jordeen asked.

"Sorry. I've kind of been deprived," Preston said, forgetting to explore the reason why the Force may have called him to pause and reflect. There were so many variables to attraction. The woman was beautiful by anyone's standard, with pouty lips and bright, big eyes. Her shoulder length hair was straight, cut above her eyebrows and boxed over her ears, and he wanted to run his fingers through it. The outfit she was wearing only accentuated her contours. The texture of the outfit itself demanded attention, calling to be touched. Her voice was pleasant on the ear even though she was clearly in crisis mode and he wanted to hear what she sounded like in the throes of a turnover. There were the aromas surrounding her: the perfumes and soaps she had used in addition to her own unique body odor, and the latter was calling for him to taste her. The fact that his heart was racing because they had been shot at probably hadn't helped any.

"No sorry. She is really cute," Jordeen agreed.

Preston was so appreciative of her acceptance of him that he took another moment to kiss her and had he had time to linger, he would have certainly indulged due to his excitement level. But the urgency to depart pushed them to brevity. Preston turned to the door. It was locked, requiring biometrics to release. Preston hesitated as he decided if he should damage the blond's door. The debate ended as the woman in the nightie emerged from the hallway with a blaster, firing impulsively. Fortunately, she was so full of adrenalin her shots were off. Preston slipped an arm around Jordeen's lower back, spun her around so that if the blond actually managed to strike them it would hit him. As he put her in front of him, he brought them to the other side of the door, spinning her out as if they were dancing. They skidded to a halt. They were surrounded by a half a dozen city police. He heard Jordeen laughing, but remained focus on gathering information for a decision. Just a blink of an eye gave him enough intel that he was being targeted from multiple vantage points, even from several floors away. Sure, he could drop

himself and Jordeen down to the next level, but if these guys started firing, given the proximity and the number of vectors, they would surely hit each other. This didn't seem like a life threatening emergency in which it would be tolerable for people to die.

"Put down your weapon," one of them said, his voice amplified by tech.

Preston considered the options. He was fairly certain he could survive this immediate fire fight. Jordeen less likely. Many of the police definitely would not. But the problem was, there was a whole planet worth of law enforcement, and eventually, he would be right back in the position where he was now. Surrender was the best option. He stood out of his battle stance and tossed his lightsaber towards the feet of the closest officer.

"I can't go to jail," Jordeen said in his Preston's ear. "Shade will have me killed."

"Just do as they say," Preston said. "I've got you."

Jordeen squeezed his hand, which pretty much said she acknowledged his authority over her. They followed instructions and were quickly apprehended. She giggled as they put her in the squad car with Preston.

"That's the spirit," Preston said.

"Please don't be offended if I laugh continuously," Jordeen said.

"Why would I be offended?" Preston asked.

Even before the car lifted, Jordeen was trying to hold back as engines revved. The squad car lifted gently off the ground, orientated in the direction it intended to travel, the engine spooled up and the car accelerated, the vibration rumbling through the car and seat into the occupance, which was a normal level of vibratin for any car, but an onslaught of sensation for Jordeen. Jordeen leaned on Preston shoulder, closing her eyes. She bit on his arm, not to leave a mark but as if she was trying to muffle her amusement.

"What's so funny?" the officer asked, glancing back.

"She's just happy," Preston assured the officer.

"She's happy she's being arrested?" he asked, confused.

"Better than being dead," Preston said.

Jordeen was now laughing so hard that she could hardly breathe, tears strolling down her cheeks. She gripped the seat cushion with one hand and Preston's hand with the other. Preston closed his eyes and tried to soothe her with the Force. The laughter subsided, but she continued to breathe in small, short bursts. To his surprise, she closed her eyes and engaged in a meditative trance. The Force surged around them. An unintended consequence was the officer relaxed, smiled, and even hummed to himself.

Lestelle Re did not look happy. Preston was definitely happy to see her, but Lestelle was not certain if that was because he was attracted to her or because he was just a social moron who didn't realize how much trouble he was in. He almost hugged her, but he reigned in the desire and put his hands behind his back, respectful of her personal boundary.

"Hello, Lestelle," Preston said. "How is your day going?"

Lestelle blinked, leaning towards her latter assessment. "I instructed you not to leave the hotel till your bodyguard arrived," Lestelle said. "You've never been to a city before, you have almost no social experience, and with you waving your credits around, you were bound to draw unwanted attention. Couple that with the fact you have been brought in by law enforcement twice in the last 72 hours. My fears that you have been in harm's way are valid. You don't even know your rights and how to behave around law enforcement. Don't you know you're supposed to stay quiet and let your lawyer speak for you? They have you for breaking and entering and threatening to harm others."

"It won't stick," Preston interrupted her rant. He knew she was genuinely concerned for him, which only increased his affection for her. He sat down at the table and pointed to the electronic draft he had given to the officer that had questioned him. "As I pointed out in my statement, we were attempting to flee from harm and I took the most expedient route."

"And a jury might have bought that excuse had you not stopped to flirt with the Jolie," Lestelle said.

"Who is Jolie?" Preston asked.

"The blond?" Lestelle asked.

"Oh! The girl in the nighty. Yeah, I got distracted," Preston said.

Lestelle sighed, leaning against the small table in front of him. She probably shouldn't have, because her change in posture distracted him from the seriousness of his situation. She snapped her fingers in front of him to get him to refocus. "They want the guy you were running from, some guy name Minder. Apparently you won a slave girl in a card game. You were a mark, set up to be killed and robbed. They have been trying to build a case and up until now, they have had nothing to go on. They are going to squeeze you and your cute little slave girl until they get what they want."

Preston 'tuned' out, his face becoming unreadable. Lestelle crossed her arms in front of her chest, a little angry at his ability to stay focused. Even though she was sure he was focused past her, it annoyed her to be in front of him and not have his attention. The pause was sufficient to start her worrying for his health. Had he been drugged? "Preston?"

"The Force is encouraging me to leave this planet," Preston said, returning to the moment and meeting her eyes. "Do we have enough money to relocate?"

"Have you been listening to me?" Lestelle said.

"Yes," Preston said. "You seem disturbed."

"You should be worried," Lestelle said.

"Why? Nothing bad is going to happen," Preston assured her.

The lights went out. Lestelle was completely blinded in the sudden darkness, as was Preston, but enough of the visual pattern remained on his retina that he was able to map out the room before turning his vision over to the Force. Not that there was much to map out. He remained seated, acutely aware of the only other immediate change: the rapidity of Lestelle's breathing.

“It is okay, Lestelle,” Preston said, reaching out and touching her hand. “I suspect someone will be along shortly.”

“I don’t like this. Where is the emergency lighting?” Lestelle asked.

Preston stood up and pulled her into an embrace. “I’ve got you,” he assured her.

Lestelle found the embrace triggering a de ja vu experience, as if she had done this before, and she hugged back as if she had been reunited with a long lost loved one, embracing the comfort that he was offering. She gave into an impulse and kissed him. And this is how the Captain of the precinct found her when he entered bearing lights. Lestelle released Preston and straightened her jacket, as if caught doing something she shouldn’t have been doing. She accepted the extra torch from the Captain.

“Preston, you have a phone call at the front desk,” the Captain said.

“Really?” Preston asked. He looked to Lestelle. “Isn’t this fun?”

“No,” Lestelle said, clearly out of sorts. She didn’t like the dark, she didn’t like the fact that she had not only broken protocols by kissing a client, but had gotten caught, and the fact that she had probably underestimated her client’s depth of trouble based on him having a call that coincided with this crisis. She was so frazzled by the kiss she could hardly think straight and actually discovered a trace of anger at being interrupted by the Captain. ‘Wow,’ she thought. She wanted to continue kissing him. She hoped the decreased lighting hadn’t revealed the depths of her disorganized thoughts.

They followed the Captain back to the front desk, Lestelle not letting go of Preston’s hand. What little of the precinct’s force that had been in the building had gathered, expecting there to be a fight soon. Arey was there and Preston said hello to her as if he had known her forever, and again Lestelle was amazed to experience a ping of jealousy. She forced herself to explain her emotions as a direct result of being thrust into the darkness and to be calm. After all, the police precinct was probably the safest place on the planet.

After greeting Arey affectionately, Preston said hi to Officer Mons. Mons’ response was to glower. Everyone had a torch. The only light other than the portable torches was the screen on the receptionist’s desk, and it was an anomaly, but not an accident. It revealed Miss Keena, standing outside the front door to the precinct, apparently waiting patiently to be connected with Preston. Preston leaned forward into the camera and smiled.

“Hello, again. Keena, right? Everyone okay out there?”

“Hello, Preston, and yes, we’re all fine,” Keena said. “For someone who has caused me not a little trouble today, you’re very polite. I like that. I also liked that little trick earlier. How did you do that?”

“Which one? The sealing the door or the leaving the apartment?”

“Both actually,” Keena said.

“I don’t know how to answer that,” Preston said. “How do you not do that?”

“People don’t normally walk through walls,” Keena said.

“So, you believe that because people told you that, or because...” Preston began.

“Because people just don’t do it,” Keena said.

“Interesting. So, you’re suggesting I can do it because no one ever told me I couldn’t?” Preston asked. “Is that what you wanted to converse about?”

“Well, though I would certainly like to continue this conversation, I do have other pressing matters, and a very specific time frame in which it must be accomplished,” Keena said. “To help facilitate me meeting my deadline, I wish to re-extend my offer for you and Jordeen to come conference with Shade.”

“Oh, that’s really nice, but I am fairly engaged at the moment, and I’m not yet sure how my lawyer is going to sort this out. I’m rather new at being arrested,” Preston said.

“Sorting this out is simple. You and Jordeen come with us,” Keena said.

“Oh, I really appreciate that, but again, I’m going to have to decline,” Preston said.

“You understand,” Keena said, gravely. “I can’t allow them to interrogate Jordeen. Company secrets and all.”

“Oh, that seems reasonable. I promise that Jordeen will not give up any secrets of her former employment,” Preston offered.

“You can’t do that,” Officer Mons said.

“Technically, he can. As long as Jordeen’s a slave, she cannot be forced to testify against a present or previous owner because her testimony may be unreliable and so consequently anything she says is not admissible in a court of law,” Lestelle said.

Preston smiled. “See, problem solved.”

“I believe you, Preston, but I am afraid my employer simply won’t accept the present situation. I like you. I like you enough to disregard the age difference, if you know what I mean. You’re probably the first Jedi I’ve met who didn’t just jump in with a lightsaber and use brute force, but again, I’m working against a time limit here. You see, I cut the power to this precinct. In thirty two more minutes, the next closest precinct is going to investigate. That means if I have to break in and come get you, there will be a fight and people will die. I sense that you don’t want that. I don’t want that. It makes my employer look bad. I have the entire facility surrounded. I mean that literally. I don’t think your earlier escape trick will work this time, though I would be intrigued if it did. So, why don’t you do the sensible thing and you and Jordeen just come on out, that way no one else has to get hurt.”

“That’s a really generous offer. Please extend my apologies to Shade, and perhaps we can schedule for a later date,” Preston said. “It was really nice talking with you again, Keena. Good bye.”

Preston used the Force to turn off the monitor, basically short circuiting it, which was the only way to turn it off, seeing how control of the monitor belonged to Keena. The receptionist looked up at her boss, her mouth open as if she were surprised. The Captain seemed as surprised as she.

“Do you think this is a game?” Officer Mons demanded.

“Of course,” Preston said. “Isn’t everything?”

“Excuse me, Captain,” Officer Mons said. “Why did you let this moron negotiate a death sentence for us?”

The Captain took a moment to compose himself. “He’s a Jedi. I assumed he would have greater negotiating skills,” the Captain said. “Then again, you were very polite to our future executioner. You do know what you’re doing, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Preston agreed, deciding now might not be the best time to declare he wasn’t a Jedi Knight. He might need them to follow directions which they might not do otherwise. “Do you have a closet somewhere big enough for all of us to hide in?”

The tension in the room escalated.

“That’s your idea? Hide?” Officer Mons shouted.

“For approximately 32 minutes,” Preston said.

“Can’t you get us all out the way you got you and Jordeen out?” Officer Mons asked.

“Not all of us, and she was being honest about having the entire compound surrounded,” Preston said. “Which I find surprising. Why would you would allow the immediate properties surrounding the precinct to be bought out?”

There was no questioning, in hindsight, that not being able to make a hole in a wall or ceiling to escape to another level might have its down side for the precinct members. Or, the opposite, if someone wanted to break in, well, clearly their office situation needed review.

“They must have had this scenario planned out well in advanced,” Preston said, answering his own question. “Probably to bust Shade or an employee out should they ever get arrested.”

A hole appeared in the front door where a wielding arc was spitting through the metal. It began to move, defining a perimeter not as large as the door itself. A second torch punched through and started moving in the opposite way, mirroring the path of the first.

“If we are going to do this, we need to do it now,” Preston said. “I need everyone in the same room, and I mean everyone, prisoners and all, let’s move.”

“You heard him,” the Captain said. “My office. Let’s go. Move move move.”

By the time the front door was falling to the floor, everyone was secluded in the Captain’s office. It was standing room only. Preston stood by the door, his hands on it. Any time anyone passed by the outside of the door, they simply passed by, not seeing it. The Captain had to emphasize the need for quiet to the prisoners, as a couple of them were afraid that Shade was sending people to kill them, and they were mumbling incessantly that this was the end.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” Arey asked, trying to keep her voice to a whisper, but not hiding her concern. She was standing right next Preston, as she figured standing next to him would be the second best place to stand. Had she asked, Preston would have pointed out the fallacy of her logic. Standing next to him might put her in grave danger, as he would be the focal point of any attack.

“Pretty sure,” Preston said. He had both hands against the door, as if that alone would hold it shut.

“Pretty sure?” Lestelle asked from behind him.

“Shh, be quiet man,” one of the prisoners said. “You heard the Captain. You want them to hear you?”

Jordeen said nothing, merely pushed her back against the wall, to the Right of Preston, staring confidently at him. She was also trying to not get her feet stepped on, as she was still barefoot.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Officer Mons complained.

Preston flashed a frown at Officer Mons.

“What does that even mean?” Preston asked.

“What do you mean ‘what does it mean,’?” Officer Mons asked.

“There are no bad feelings. There is only data and interpretation of data,” Preston said.

“Oh, so let me be more precise,” Officer Mons said. “We’re all about to die!”

“Based on what information?” Preston asked.

“The fact the precinct is overrun by bad guys and we’re hiding in the Captain’s office,” Officer Mons said.

“Have you ever been overrun by bad guys and hid in the Captain’s office and died before?” Preston asked.

“No,” Officer Mons grudgingly admitted.

“Then don’t say you have a bad feeling. If it works, and no one on either side dies, it should be a good feeling,” Preston said. “But preferably it shouldn’t be good or bad, it’s just information.”

“Look, it’s just a common expression, don’t get all worked up over it,” one of the other guards said.

“The fact that it’s common, overused, misused, cliché, and inaccurate should be a reason to get worked up over it,” Preston said. “That saying is not innocuous and I’m sure it was meant to be funny and lighten the mood the first time anyone ever used it, but the more it gets used, the less funny it is. Language is important. Your choice of words creates mood and influences decisions. Feelings, good or bad, increase the likelihood of making poor decisions.”

“I’m sorry I’m not as rational as a robot,” Officer Mons said.

“You’re not afraid?” Arey asked, trying to interrupt the argument.

“There is no fear. There is only love,” Preston said.

“You are enjoying this. As if it were a game?” Jordeen asked. Officer Mons rolled his eyes.

“Isn’t it?” Preston asked.

“This isn’t a game. People get hurt, people die,” Officer Mons said.

“Everybody dies,” Preston agreed.

“And that doesn’t bother you?” Officer Mons said.

“There is no death,” Preston said.

“You just said everybody dies,” Officer Mons argued.

“Nothing is what you think it is,” Preston said. “Everything is much bigger than what you imagine, and though truth seems to be dependent upon your perspective, there is no one absolute perspective, other than total perception with the Force. So, from one viewpoint, it appears everyone dies, but from a higher perspective, it merely appears as if we are changing states. You are no less the ocean than the glass of water fetched from the ocean. Fetched, poured back, all one.”

“Do we really need to be preached at right before we die?” a prisoner asked.

“This perspective is best exemplified by the metaphor of the blind men and the ranchor,” Preston continued, un-phased. Preston closed his eyes and leaned his head against the door, letting go of the argument, as if he had a sudden headache.

“What’s wrong?” Jordeen asked, reaching out to him.

“I’m distracted,” Preston said. He took Jordeen’s hand and placed it against the door.

“Can you hold your hand there? Yeah, just like that. Now, don’t drop your hand. And no one is to open this door until I get back. Clear?”

“What do you mean, till you get back?” Lestelle asked. “Where are you going?”

“How are you going? That’s the only door,” Arey said, following the logic that no one is to open it, then how was he getting out.

“It’ll be fine. Just stick to the plan and no matter what you think happened, don’t panic, and don’t open that door till I get back,” Preston said, and with that, he collapsed.

Lestelle was in a prime position to catch him. Hugging him up to her, she rotated and leaned against the wall where Jordeen had been standing and slid down to a sitting position, holding Preston as she did so. The men tried to give her room so that they weren’t crowded.

“Is he okay?” Arey asked.

“He’s breathing,” Lestelle said.



Preston finds himself in an open expanse, surrounded by light. The floor was light, and yet, there was no floor, nor any sense of falling, but his feet stood firm on this nothingness. The sky was light. The light was tangible, palpable. Movement as simple as shifting his arm came with effort, as if he were pushing through a substance, not quite water, not quite air. It wasn't unpleasant, just different than expected. He became aware of Ashia behind him and he turned to greet her. She wore a white, flowing dress, with uneven hem line. The dress touched the back of her knees, but in the front landed just above the halfway mark of her thighs. The dress moved as if teased by a breeze. It was tied at the waste by a cloth belt, knotted with ends dangling in front of her. Though white of the dress was discernible from the background, it was made more prominent by the fact that Ashia had a golden aura. She bowed, hands drawing together.

"Goddess Ashia," Preston said, mirroring her form.

"Still with the titles?" Ashia asked, smiling. She touched his cheek. "Did I not tell you that you've graduated? We are equals."

"I feel unworthy thinking of us as equals," Preston said.

Ashia nodded. "Even after having shared intimacy?"

"You summoned me here for intimacy?" Preston asked.

"When you are one with the Force, all interactions are intimate," Ashia said.

Preston bowed to her wisdom.

Ashia mirrored his love. "And now, it is time for you to give back."

"I'm kind of occupied at the moment," Preston said.

"You will learn to multi task better with practice. And you will never be given more than you can handle," Ashia vowed. "The student has asked for you, and her designated Counsel is granting her this wish. Her situation is dire and she is afraid. Her answer will not be what she expects, but it will be what she needs."

Preston blinked accessing information, deciphering the cryptic nature of Ashia's explanation. "What should my response be?"

"You may respond however you wish, but she must choose," Ashia said. "Comfort her. Help her to see the options. I'm prepared to give additional assistance should she decide to stay in the game."

Preston bowed. When he came up, Ashia was gone and Ten was there. She didn't seem to be able to see him, but whether it was because she wasn't focused or because she was afraid and crying wasn't immediately apparent. She was in the fetal position, hugging her knees. He took her arm and lifted her to a standing position. The room changed dramatically, as Preston stepped down in energy levels to meet with her, while simultaneously bringing Ten up a level. For a moment they were in a nondescript room, black and grays with ominous lighting, mirroring the room her body was in. When she stood full upright, she was looking into Preston's eyes, and it was during her realization of who he was that the background became more serene. They found themselves standing in a meadow of soft grass, dotted with tiny white and pink flowers for as far as the eye could see. The sky was a soothing cerulean.

"Preston!" Ten said, hugging him. "I called out to you in my mind over and over. I was so hopeful you would hear me."

"Your call was heard. I'm here," Preston said.

“But, you’re too late. I’m already dead. At least, I think I’m dead,” Ten said, examining a nearby flower. Having never been in an expanse of nature, her conclusion could only be that she was dead.

Ten became aware of a stillness, a calm focused energy that pervaded her entire being. The hum of insects felt pervasive, almost a gentle purring through her body. In the blink of an eye, she relived her entire life. Preston experienced it with her, with no judgment. It was a complicated experience, something she would not be able to process in one chunk. Part of the experience was reviewing everything she had ever done, said, thought, sensed, or felt. Another part of her experience was seeing the same, only from outside herself. Another part of the experience was feeling the emotions of all of those she directly influenced, from their point of view. There was no end to this unraveling, as she could have experienced even the reactions, pleasant or unpleasant, of people indirectly influenced by her deeds or words, so that from a certain perspective, she could see how far her touch really went. Even three degrees out, she had had no idea that her weakest of thoughts, those barely even whispered into conscious awareness, could have affects that extended so far.

For a brief moment even Preston got caught up in the last bit of drama in her life. A CPS agent had come to her parents’ home to apprehend her. She was forcibly taken and put in a van, but the agent stayed and gave her parents a credit stick.

“This is your share,” the agent said. “It will look like an accident.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t control her,” the mom said. “She was always a trouble child.”

“You’re still going to funnel the foster kids through us though, right?” the dad asked.

“We’ll return to our normal business arrangement after the scrutiny of this case has ended,” the agent said.

“What do you want us to do about that mechanic chic who contacted your office?” the mom asked.

“Nothing,” the agent said. “It would draw too much suspicion if she were injured or killed. Just stay away from her. She will forget your daughter ever existed. Everyone will.”

Preston skipped forward though the timeline, closer to the end before she had left her body. Ten was fighting to get away. The CPS agent, and his goons, were amused.

“Hold her legs,” one of the goons said, trying to secure the strap around her ankle.

“Child,” the agent said, his voice chillingly calm. Ten stopped, as if he had stilled her with the Force. She felt the finality hit her as she was secured to the operating table. “This is going to happen. You can choose to go quietly, and I will sedate you, or you can fight, and I will cut your heart out while you’re still conscious. What do you want?”

“Please, let me go. I won’t cause any more trouble,” Ten begged.

“That time has come and gone,” the agent said. “You have brought a lot of attention on your parents’ house. They nearly lost their foster license. Your parents can be replaced, but it takes time to groom couples for this kind of operation. I like your parents. They’re easily manipulated. They’re also cheap.”

The agent turned to the medical droid in order to inform the procedures he was requesting.

“Please,” Ten cried.

“Sedate her,” the agent said.

A medical droid extended a needle towards her. She held her breath, made every muscle in her body rigid. The droid could care less about her comfort and that it would hurt less if she

had relaxed. The needle pushed through hard muscle just the same. The meds worked quickly. She went limp and the goons eased up their grips.

“I was hoping to have a turn with her before she was unconscious,” one of the goons said.

“Reducing her stress improves the the chances of a successful transplant. You can do what you want to her body, as long as you don’t damage the vital organs,” the agent said. “The guy getting her heart will be here soon.”

Preston returned to the present moment, moved by Ten’s tears, and hugged her. The emotions at this stage could be overwhelming, so even though a person experienced a whole life view and had access to incredible amounts of information, in what seemed like a fraction of a moment of real time, it still took time to accept the complexity of the web and how perceptions were often wrong. It was especially difficult accepting how much key players, like her parents, actually hated her but that was something she chose not to focus on. Where she got stuck was on the fact that she had always been jealous of the foster kids, as she believed they were being treated so much better than she. Now that she understood they were on their way to being slaughtered, that they were not getting the better end of the deal, she had genuine regrets. She didn’t know how she could hold so much hate and compassion, much less both simultaneously.

“I had no idea,” Ten said into his chest.

“Is that true?” Preston asked.

“I mean, I guess I had an inkling,” Ten said. “But...”

Preston took her hand and they walked. That was when she noticed they were both barefoot, and the grass was cool against the soles of her feet.

“I feel like I could just lay down here and take a nap, forever,” Ten said.

“Is that what you want to do?” Preston asked.

“No, I wanted to live, as if there was something I supposed to do and didn’t,” Ten said.

“You still can,” Preston said.

“Really?” Ten asked.

“You understand what going back entails, don’t you?” Preston asked.

“Why do you keep phrasing your responses in the form of a question? Can’t you tell me anything straight up?!” Ten asked.

“Yes,” Preston said.

Ten sighed heavily. “Will you help me?”

“You have the ability to do this on your own,” Preston said.

“I can’t do it alone,” Ten said.

“I will be with you should you decide to go back,” Preston said. “The Force is with you, always.”

“And what happens if I go back?” Ten asked.

“You want to find out, together?” Preston asked.

Ten nodded and she took them back with her own thoughts. She was near her body. The medical droid was sewing the last stitch on the heart recipient’s chest. Her body lay on the table, on bypass, so as to keep all her organs as fresh as they could for as long as they could.

“It’s too late,” Ten said.

“No, it’s not,” Preston said. “You can do this.”

“I can’t get back in there, it’s not me!” Ten said. “It’s just stuff.”

“Yeah,” Preston agreed. “It’s just stuff. Just jump in. All at once, like diving into the deep end of a pool.”

“It’s cold,” she observed, with a finger.

“Yeah,” he agreed.

Ten hugged Preston once more and then flung herself at her body. She merged. The body coughed. She could hear Preston’s voice as he instructed her in pulling off the bypass. It was a strange feeling, somewhat painful, but best done like pulling off a scab, quick. The shock of coming off bypass was bizarre, but not stunning given her present state of mind. It was weird being on bypass as there was blood flow but no pulse. She had to force herself to keep the body conscious. Using the Force, she and Preston grew a new heart, liver, and kidney and the body cavity began to seal. The droid was too busy on its own tasks to notice what was happening. Drawing on the Force, she and Preston drew down light. Had the droid been looking, he would have seen a white aura about her, and perhaps would have been puzzled, but for whatever reason, it found itself completely zoned out, as if struggling to get to its next task, as if stuck in a loop or a dream.

The wounds on Ten’s body closed, not even leaving a scar, her organs were functioning to spec, and before long she managed to push herself off the medical bed. She hit the floor with her feet and fell flat on her face. She heard Preston telling her to stand up. No evidence of tears were on her face, but she was crying inside, almost sheer panic. She forced herself to her feet, staggered to the door, and opened it by hitting the button with her palm. The agent was in the middle of a conversation with someone over the computer system. She was certain they were discussing the business venture with a boss about her parents and that it would be alright in a couple of weeks, or he would kill them personally. The two goons were laughing and having a beer. She didn’t know what to do.

“Just walk to the door,” Preston said. The voice was as clear as if he were standing next to her, but she couldn’t see him.

“I’m afraid,” Ten whispered.

“I know,” Preston said.



The lift was taking an unusually long time. Corissa sighed, her mind going back to the most prominent event in her recent history: Preston. Why had she been so moved by him? Why had she allowed herself to be freaked out that he had been the one that had helped her out all those years ago? She couldn’t even remember it well enough to assure herself it was him, but she knew absolutely that it was true. She struggled to recall details, but they simply weren’t there for her, as if that entire sequence of her life had been deleted.

All her thoughts about Preston and the lift and life in general stopped as she realized a hummingbird was hovering directly in front of her. It was green with red tipped wings, and hints of dark blues. The wings were moving so fast that they were almost transparent, merely blurs of colors.

“Oh,” Corissa said, wondering how long it had been there before she had observed it. “Has someone gone and left the airlock to a habitat open, my little friend?”

The bird came closer. Out of impulse, more than a deliberate act or even curiosity, she lifted her left hand gently towards the bird. It lighted on her finger, folding its wings back into the resting position. It tilted its head. Corissa didn’t dare breathe for fear of disturbing this moment. Then the bird lifted off and backed up. Corissa stepped forwards, compelled not by conscious thought, but by love. The bird continued to back up. Corissa stopped. The bird came forwards.

“You want me to follow you?” Corissa asked. She knew it was crazy to ask. It was, after all, just a bird. But on asking, the bird backed up, as if answering her question.

Corissa followed the bird back into a dark alley, unconsciously clicking off the strap that held her weapon holstered, clicking off the safety on her weapon. The alley just didn’t feel safe, but she could not stop herself from following the bird.

“Come here, baby,” Corissa said. “I’ll get you back home.”

A door open and a naked girl came rushing out, smashing directly into Corissa. It was the surprise mixed with the velocity that took Corissa to the ground, and perhaps the ‘luck’ factor that caused the weapons fire to miss them both. Corissa’s weapon was out and firing back before she even knew what she was doing. The agent fell across the threshold of the door, keeping it from shutting. The two goons that were right behind him also fell to Corissa’s deadly accuracy.

The girl tried to get up and run, but Corissa held on to her.

“Ten?” Corissa asked.

“Corissa! Please, you got to let me go. They are going to kill me,” Ten said.

“I got you. You’re safe. We’ll go to the authorities,” Corissa tried to assure her.

“You don’t understand. They are the authorities! Remember him? That’s the CPS agent you got involved in my life. I’ve got to get off this planet or I’m dead,” Ten cried.

Corissa believed her. “Alright,” Corissa said. “I will help you.”

“Really?” Ten asked.

Corissa took off her jacket and handed it to Ten. It covered her well enough. “Of course I will. But if we’re going to do this, we got to go now,” Corissa said.

Together they fled back to the lift. It opened just as they arrived and was surprisingly empty of passengers. Corissa drew Ten into the lift, pushed her floor, and when the doors shut, she holstered her weapon. Ten put her arms around Corissa’s waist and she lifted her up into her arms. As Ten cried into her shoulder, Corissa forgot all about the humming bird.



Preston woke to find himself cradled in Lestelle’s arm, his head resting against her bosom. He opened his eyes and he smiled at her, intently staring into her eyes. He was wondering if he should kiss her again, or wait for her to kiss him.

“You okay?” Lestelle asked.

“Yes, thank you. And you?” Preston asked.

“I’m a little uncomfortable at the moment,” Lestelle admitted.

As he searched her eyes for understanding, he remembered they weren’t alone and became aware that there others present, many of them staring down at him.

“Oh, sorry,” Preston said, standing. He gave Lestelle a hand up, and then took Jordeen’s hands off the door. “It’s okay. We can leave now.”

“How can you be so sure?” Officer Mons asked.

“The other precinct has arrived,” Preston announced.

As if on cue, the door opened and a sergeant was standing there, blaster ready. He lowered his weapon.

“I’m glad to see everyone is well,” he said. “I thought for sure you were all dead.”

“Sergeant, I need you to take your squad and accompany me and my men to go apprehend Shade,” the Captain said, leading the Sergeant back to the front, issuing orders to his staff as he went.

The room emptied pretty fast, officers escorting prisoners back to their cells and staff going back to work, leaving Jordeen, Lestelle, and Preston along in the Captain's office. The bustle of activity just beyond the Captain's door seemed as if they were preparing for war. Since no one seemed to be focusing on Preston, he motioned for Jordeen and Lestelle to follow him. The Captain was pacing by the exit, waiting for his men to assemble. He paused in his pacing as if deliberating on what to do.

"Captain, if it's okay with you, Jordeen, Lestelle and I are going to return to my hotel room," Preston said.

"Very well, but don't leave the planet. You three are my star witnesses," the Captain said.

"Of course," Preston agreed. And then, as soon as they were out of the building, he turned to Lestelle. "Lestelle, it's time to leave this planet."

"I think so, too," Lestelle said. "But I think we're going to want to do this off the grid. It will take me a moment to set this up."

"Nolesco can help us," Preston said.

"That might not be a bad idea," Lestelle agreed, ordering a sky cab.



The task force arrived in full armor, their tension level detectable in their shoulders, the tightness of their muscles, the strict posture. They were obviously expecting a full out battle. It was so anticlimactic, finding the doors were open with people standing to the side with their hands visible, clearly unarmed, neither protesting or inviting, that there was obvious hesitation that this was some sort of trap. The Captain pushed through the awkwardness, motioning for his men to follow. As he led, his men became even more worried that everything would suddenly go bad, especially when the slaves offered creepy smiles. Still, they followed their commander, marching right up to Shade and Keena, unimpeded, their weapons drawn and ready. At no time did any of Shade's staff offer any resistance, and none were visibly armed.

"You're under arrest, Shade. And you, Keena, and your entire security force," the Captain said, pointing angrily at her.

Keena brought her wrist together, as if compliant, bowing slightly, delivering her submissiveness with sexual overtones that only seemed to exasperate the Captain more. An officer lowered his weapon to take out binders, approached Keena wearily as he expected duplicity. She gave him a wink and an air kiss.

"Are you serious?" Shade asked.

The Officer with the binders hesitated, weary of the Hutt's twitching tail.

"None of your games!" the Captain said.

"I think you should be thanking me," Shade said.

"Thanking you?"

"One moment," Shade said. "There's a call coming in."

"Not one moment longer!" The Captain said, spit coming out of his mouth. "You will climb down off that platform, or I will have my men open fire."

A hologram of the mayor appeared in front of Shade.

"Captain Hollister," the Mayor said. "How did you like my surprise drill?"

"I beg your pardon?" the Captain asked.

"I had arranged to test the competency of our various precincts, and I am truly impressed that you were able to evade capture," the Mayor said. "You and your men will all be getting

bonuses in your check for that, however, I am disappointed that your entire power system was so easily taken down and your precinct over run. I think you and the other Captains should get together and formalize a plan to ensure this sort of thing can't happen again in the future. After all, you never know when we might get invaded by an army of Sith or evil Droids or some such nonsense."

The Captain was taken aback. "Sir? You planned this?"

"With Shade's help, of course," the Mayor said. "You should really thank her for revealing our weaknesses."

The Captain's lips trembled.

"Captain," the Mayor said. "You should choose your next words very carefully."

"Men, lower your weapons. Thank you, Shade, for this little demonstration of your capabilities," the Captain said, through clenched teeth

"Oh, it's been my pleasure to serve," Shade said, shivering with excitement. For her, there was no difference between the tension from anxiety and the tension that comes right before a 'turnover.' "Please, allow me to provide you and your men beverages, on the house. You've all had a long, taxing day."

"You are most gracious," the Captain said. "Mayor Hildago."

The Captain turned and stormed off. His men followed, hesitating only long enough to determine no one was getting shot in the back. Only one took a drink from a tray as they departed. The hostess winked, inviting him to return with mere look.

Once the authorities had gone, the chamber doors closed and the Mayor turned to shade.

"I think this pays my debt in full, does it not?" Hildago asked.

"Of course," Shade said. "But I hope that doesn't stop you from using my services in the future."

"Of course, not. You have never disappointed me when it comes to, umm, entertainment," the mayor said, closing out the hologram.

Keena went to her knees, bowing.

"I'm sorry I failed you," Keena said.

"Are you serious?" Shade asked. "That's the most fun I've had in ages."

"I'm sorry, what?" Keena asked, surprised she wasn't about to be tortured.

"Oh, sure, I am sad that Jordeen got away. I really like her. I invested a lot in her training. But I don't think we've seen the last of her or Preston," Shade said. "No doubt he will be off the grid for a while, but he won't stay off the grid. Not with Bloodhunters on the prowl. And they will likely double their numbers. That is there way. Have a shuttle ready. I want to get to Preston as soon as he resurfaces. This is going to be really intense."

"Thank you, Shade," Keena said, bowing. She took a quick exit.

Jordeen was always a happy, giggly baby. She lived with her mom on an orchard farm on Ryloth. She was never concerned by not knowing her biological father, as her curiosity never went beyond the hologram she had of him and her mother together. Her mother never really talked about the past and she didn't pry. There was enough in the present to keep her busy. Helping mom to artificially pollinate plants and gathering crops took up most of her time, which didn't ease up when they finally had enough income to hire seasonal help. It was not a huge farm, just big enough to meet their needs. The worst memory she had of the farm, before her mother married her step father, was falling from a tree, but as with everything, even that event had a mixture of blessings. The fall was perfect. It gave her great insight into the variability of time, because as she was falling, time altered so that everything happened in slow motion. She fell from a fairly decent height, even tumbled once, remembering seeing ground, then sun dripping through the branches like rain. She hit a branch with such impact, directly above her heart, that it stopped her heart from beating, and sent her groundwards face down. The next branch she hit clipped her heel and flipped her face up, so that she landed on the ground, flat on her back. Her mother and the hired hands came running. Jordeen could see them from outside her body, trying to revive her. The amount of clarity she had was surreal, but she was neither afraid nor concerned. That was something that struck her immediately. She was calm, as if there was light embracing her, comforting her. And then, suddenly, she saw her body coughing and sitting up, and then she returned to her normal perspective of things.

That was the moment her life had changed. The first noticeable change was she saw auras. She didn't know they were auras at that time, she just knew that everything living she encountered had a specific and persistent radiation. Even some nonliving things had light, but it was barely detectable, and only at night, and usually only when she was on the verge of falling asleep, which was pleasant enough, like drifting to sleep on a cool, ocean of glowing pastel.

The second thing that happened was she started having orgasms. At first, it was kind of interesting. They were intense, spontaneous, with no one specific trigger. It made her laugh. She and her mother made up a label for it. They called it 'turn over.' Scratching her back against a tree caused her to turn over. Diving into the lake caused her to turn over. Riding in the hovercraft was one long, continuous turn over, so much so that she took up walking as her preferred method of travel. Though walking was better than riding, in terms of less stimulation, it was not perfect. She had to be careful of what she wore, less just the act of walking and the movement of fabric against her caused her to turn over. The novelty quickly wore off when she began to realize just how debilitating it was. She could no longer go comfortably into public places, not without risking embarrassment with each episode. Though she knew it was likely knew one knew why she was laughing, it was always a spectacle and it frequently drew an audience. Whether people were watching or not, her paranoia grew and she couldn't help but imagine people were gawking at her. She started isolating. She became depressed, and would linger in bed for long hours trying not to move. She would lie for hours trying to force herself back out of her body, trying to experience what she had felt while she was dead. She started cutting on her arms, hoping the pain would diminish her pleasure response. The cutting started off as superficial, short, lines that were put close together, but they deeper and longer with time.

It wasn't until Jordeen tried to take her own life by overdosing on pills that her mother took a more active role in her daughter's misfortune. Because her daughter had always been healthy and also because her daughter was of a mixed species she had never taken her to a

medical facility. The latter had been justified because the medical staff fell to one of two extremes: they either wanted nothing to do with her treatment because she was mixed and a liability, or they were overly enthusiastic because they wanted to experiment on her. Her mom sat by her daughter's side day and night with constant vigilance to make sure the staff was caring for her appropriately. She was the first one Jordeen saw when she finally awoke. She was still groggy after having her stomach pumped, but she knew her mother had been there the whole time, even without noticing the circles under her mom's eyes from lack of sleep.

Jordeen sighed, tears rolling down. "I can't do anything right."

"Fortunately for you you're incompetent on top of stupid," her step father said, standing from the far side of the room.

"No one understands," Jordeen said, not looking at either of them.

"What's to understand?" the step father said. "I wish I had your problem."

Jordeen closed her eyes.

"Would you leave the room, Kip," Her mother told her husband.

"Her biggest problem is you cater too much to her," the step dad said, before departing the room.

There was a quiet after he left. A quiet that included the beeping of medical computers.

"Honey, maybe there is a medical explanation. Maybe we can stop the turnovers, or at least reduce them," mom said. "At least, let's explore this option together before doing anything else that might end your life."

Jordeen nodded.

The condition was called persistent genital arousal disorder, or PGAD. At one time it was called persistent sexual arousal syndrome, or restless genital syndrome, but with each new edition of the diagnostic manual, things tended to change. Sometimes conditions came or went based on the potential availability of pharmaceutical interventions. There was none for this condition, and it might have been dropped completely because of its rarity, but because enough people were apparently fascinated, or titillated, by the possibility, it was kept in the medical literature. The condition, which tended to affect females more than males, consisted of spontaneous, persistent, and uncontrollable genital arousal resulting in orgasm unrelated to any feelings of sexual desire. Though it was listed in the medical literature, it was also listed in the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental health, which brought its own series of misapplied labels. This bothered Jordeen.

"I'm not crazy," Jordeen argued.

"Of course not," the doctor said, smiling. "Just lucky."

"You don't understand," Jordeen sighed, wishing people would stop making a joke about the condition being 'fornutate.' That alone simply increased her desire for isolating. "After the first couple of turnovers after waking, it stops being pleasurable. It's painful. The release with each consecutive turnover is not from pleasure, but from pain. I'm suffering. I have anywhere from fifty to two hundred in a day and I can't do anything. I can't concentrate on school work. I can't finish my chores. I can't travel. I can barely breathe! It's ruining my life."

"Well, there is really nothing we can do about it," the doctor said. "I've only read of this condition in human populations and even they don't have a cure for it. More than likely, this is a result of you being a Twi'lek human hybrid. The condition is unnatural because you are unnatural."

"You're saying my daughter is a freak?" the mom asked.

“Yes, as is her condition. She shouldn’t be. Yes, yes, I’ve heard of mixing of species happening, but it’s like a one in a trillion chance that a pregnancy takes, and then a million to one that you get past the first trimester. She shouldn’t be,” the doctor said. “That said, other than the condition, she is remarkably healthy, which is something I’m interested in. Would you mind if I study her?”

“I think we’re done here,” her mom said.

“Could I at least have a sample of blood?” the doctor asked.

“I think you’ve gotten all the labs you’re going to get from us,” her mother said, pulling her daughter out of the room and slamming the door. Jordeen laughed and then burst into tears.

“We’re not giving up yet,” her mother said.

It wasn’t a week later that Jordeen heard her mother and stepfather arguing. “This has become a distraction. Send her to a boarding school and let them deal with her.”

“We’re not sending her away.”

“I can’t bring my clients here without her laughter distracting us and it’s embarrassing to explain what’s going on,” he said.

“Then take your business elsewhere,” mom said.

“Send her to the temple and let her become a nun,” the step dad said. “Maybe she can learn some spiritual practices to purify her mind.”

“She doesn’t need purifying,” mom said.

“The hell she doesn’t! You can’t have that many orgasms and not need purifying,” he argued.

“I’m not sending her to a nunnery,” mom snapped.

“Either she goes, or I go,” he said.

Jordeen stepped in. “Maybe a change in environment would help, mom,” Jordeen said. “Nothing I’m doing here is working.”

Mom sighed and together they chose a school, as opposed to a temple, and Jordeen went. Before a week had gone by, Jordeen was kicked out of school and sent home, as she was too much of a distraction.

“I told you she needed to go to the temple!” stepfather said.

“Mom, let me try the temple. Meditation is supposed to be good for calming the mind,” Jordeen said.

“Honey, I think you’re wanting to go to make my life easier, not yours,” mom said.

“I don’t want anyone to see me like this. It will be safe and quiet, at the temple,” Jordeen said.

With that, Jordeen went to the temple of vihara, ‘the order of the light.’ The first meditation, which was a group meditation, was a complete disaster, as she probably laughed a dozen times. Of course, the first laugh was muffled, as she tried to contain it, but the more she tried to contain it, the harder it came, till finally she was practically sobbing on the floor. And the laughter was contagious, but not in the same way it affected Jordeen herself. One of the nuns, a sister Albeta escorted Jordeen back to her room.

“What is the meaning of this? You know how serious the order takes their meditation?” Albeta asked.

Jordeen nodded and started crying. She explained her condition, how it started, how it seemed so pleasant being dead, and now, every waking moment was sheer agony. She openly admitted to wanting to die.

Albeta hugged her. “We will work on this together,” Albeta said. “I will teach you the ways of the Force, and you can bring this under control.”

“Really?”

“You believe in the Force, don’t you?” Albeta asked.

“I’m not sure,” Jordeen said.

“But you’ve experienced it firsthand. You’ve been in the Light,” Albeta said.

“We’re all in the light, everyday, even at night,” Jordeen said.

Albeta bowed. “You’ve been touched by the Force. It is not an accident that you are here.”

“Thank you,” Jordeen said.

“For what, dear?” Albeta asked.

“For giving me hope that things might be different,” Jordeen said, crying. She hugged Albeta for a long moment.

“There, there, child, I’ve got you,” Albeta said.



Albeta taught Jordeen specific meditative practices that helped curb her turnovers and after about a month, she got them down to about twelve a day. That alone encouraged Jordeen, as she was able to return to studying. She spent most of her time isolated, either in her room or in the library, and since Albeta had kept her condition a secret, everyone simply thought she was a very content young lady, serious about her studies. Once the turnovers had been reduced, Albeta taught her yoga, in the privacy of her own quarters, in case any of the poses should result in spontaneous laughter. Strengthening her body and learning to breathe also helped her keep her condition in check, but it didn’t eliminate it. In fact, getting in shaped, accompanied with the meditative practices, tended to enhance the experience, making the turnovers, though reduced in numbers, more potent. It was a tradeoff she could tolerate.

After a couple of months, Albeta decided it was time for Jordeen to learn to leave her body at will. “You’ve already done this once, during the accident. Now it’s time to do it by choice.”

“I’m afraid,” Jordeen admitted.

“Of?” Albeta asked.

“I don’t know. What if something tries to take my body or I can’t return?” Jordeen asked.

“Well, it is your body, and no one can possess it or borrow it without your permission,” Albeta explained. “You’re also tied to it, by means of a silver cord, a cord that can only be severed at the death of the body. But here is a better way to think of it: you’re not really leaving your body per se, because there is nowhere to go. There is no there out there, there is only here, only now. Your identity in this body is an illusion. Your ideas about this reality are also false. There is no time and no space. You can go anywhere and be anything because it’s all right here, right now.” She ended this by touching her heart.

Jordeen considered. “Well, that explanation seems to fit my experience. I felt connected to everything in the universe. But that’s the point, I guess. In my body, I feel separated. And I attempted suicide, and though my body wasn’t dead, I tried to leave it, but there was something there, something in the darkness that horrified me.”

Albeta considered. “I cannot remark about this experience, but I suspect it was your own fear, your own sorrow. There is a darkness that surrounds all living things, all matter, but it is not

what you think it is. This darkness is merely a medium in which we travel, like fish in water, the medium in which light travels. It is the perfectness in which we manifest our dreams and our fears. Through it we must travel to reach the next level.”

“What if there is a monster in there?” Jordeen insisted. “Maybe something is there to devour me because I’m evil, or because I tried to kill myself, which I’ve been reminded of is the greatest sin.”

“You have been misled,” Albeta said. “Would you be punished by a higher being if you broke a leg?”

“No,” Jordeen admitted.

“Then, why would you assume that if your brain was broken and you are suffering, and you were trying to ease that suffering, you would be punished? Wouldn’t a higher being, full of love and compassion and understanding see past our limited ways?” Albeta asked.

“I suppose,” Jordeen said. “But what if there is something there waiting to get me?”

“No spirit can act on you without your permission and we are all spirit, all the time,” Albeta said. “If you are peaceful, then you will attract peace. If you are fearful, you will attract fear. There are an infinite number of entities, but most entities can’t interact with us. You can only act with those who match your frequency, your experience level, your present state. That is why we say, when the student is ready, the master will come. Consider a rainbow. The red light, the lower energy level, will never touch the indigo light. There may be some interaction at the orange frequency, at the fringe of threshold of frequency change, where one can go up to the next energy state, or come down, but never with blue. To be indigo, you have to change, and you have to be all the other colors preceding indigo first. Clearly, all the lights exist simultaneously in the same space-time, and it manifest as pure white light, but the separation is nonnegotiable and at the same time, an illusion. If you are green, the red can’t harm you.”

“But, sometimes I feel like someone or something is watching me,” Jordeen continued to defend her fear.

“Sometimes they are,” Albeta agreed. “Every time a loved one thinks about you, they are watching you from perspective of spirit. You also have your guardian spirit checking in on you. There is also the susurrus, the whispering of all the minds within our auditory range. There are the random visitors who are just exploring and stopped to examine you. This is unpreventable, as this is the freedom guaranteed to all.”

“So, I’m right, something has been watching me?”

“Maybe. You might also just be experiencing paranoia due to your condition and imagining other people are talking about how often you laugh, when in reality, they think about you no more than you think about them,” Albeta suggested.

“So I can’t be harmed?” Jordeen asked.

“There is no danger, only lessons to be learned. Do you really suppose that if there is something out there that can get you that it can’t get you while in your body? Further, wouldn’t it have an advantage over you if you can’t see it while residing in your body? Wouldn’t it be better, if it is there, to face it head on? Because if it is there, it will be there until you master it,” Albeta said. “Your body is an illusion. You are not this crude flesh. You are a being of light and the only thing holding you back is you.”

“I will try, then,” Jordeen said.

“No, you will not try, you will do,” Albeta said, and gave a spiritual shove.

Jordeen found herself outside of her body. She was immediately overtaken by fear, but then Albeta was beside her, holding her hand, and then there was light, just as there was the first

day she fell out of the tree, and out of her body. There was immediate release from the pressure building up towards the next turnover. She was free.

“Oh, thank you,” Jordeen said, joy illuminating her expression, rays of joy projecting out from her.

“You were right, dear, you are not alone. I’m here,” Albeta said. “The Force is always with you. Whenever you fear, simply call on the Force and it will illuminate a path. Run and play in the fields of light, or fly and be one with the sky. There is no work today. Tomorrow, we will assign your first task.”



“Do I actually exist in these other places?” Jordeen asked.

“What do you suppose?” Albeta asked.

“That light body feels more real than this one,” Jordeen said, stirring her food with a spoon. The nuns ate from one bowl, and everything that they would eat would be thrown into that bowl, regardless of whether the items went well together. Today there was rice, beans, and ice cream, and it was altogether. Complaining would only cost a nun a meal, but Jodeen never even batted her eyes or declined non complimentary foods. She always took a little of everything till her bowl was full, which surprisingly, was just that one more peculiarity that added to the perceived animosity between her and her sisters. The only friend she had seemed to be Albeta.

“It is the next real body. There is another above that, and another above that, but deal with where you are, first,” Albeta said.

“I went home, yesterday, in spirit. I saw my mother. She is not happy. Stepfather is even more abusive now that I have left. I thought their relationship would improve,” Jordeen said.

“Their relationship is not about you,” Albeta said.

“Can I make myself visible to my mother?” Jordeen asked.

“All things are possible with the Force. You can speak to her. You can be visible to her. You can even exist, physically, simultaneously in two places,” Albeta explained.

“What?”

“You can create a Doppelganger,” Albeta said.

“How can I do this?” Jordeen asked. Her disbelief and excitement were so stark in the cafeteria that it drew more attention than her laughter.

“By first realizing your mind is not limited to space-time and therefore does not occupy space-time. Secondly, by realizing that your body is not limited to any specific coordinates in space-time. Quantum physics clearly states that all matter can potentially occupy any space and any time, because, again, there is no space and there is no time. Light is both wave and particle. The wave is everywhere, therefore the particle is everywhere, and it only takes the mind to place it. You should read up on the projection postulate and the Reimann sphere.”

“Then why haven’t I done this spontaneously, like instead of falling from the tree why didn’t I just materialize myself on the ground?” Jordeen asked.

“Because we are determined, crazily fanatical about maintaining this illusion that we are here,” Albeta said. “If you moved even a tenth of your present body somewhere else, it would be sufficient for you to be seen, seem even as solid as your actual body, and if you cease to focus, you would rebound to your present position. Some of that is physics, like momentum. Your body wants to occupy this space. But if you got ninety percent of your body manifested in the other space you desire, then this body would go there. It is that simple.”

“I bet the theory is simple, but the practice is something else entirely,” Jordeen said.

Albeta smirked, taking the last bite of ice cream from her bowl. She had eaten that off the top first before tackling the rest. “And that is why I am still here. But I am hopeful that you will exceed my ability. You’ve overcome in months what has taken me years. No doubt, it is your motivation to be healed or healthy or to be free that is moved you along. It doesn’t matter. Your next challenge will be surpassing the plateau. As you become content, and comfortable, you will get stuck, and your progress will slow, if not stop.”

“I doubt that will happen,” Jordeen assured her.



The order had decided it was time to take a field trip. Several orders of nuns and monks had got together and rented a theme park, and everyone was mandated to attend. It was to celebrate, mingle with colleagues, and just break the habit of routine, because attachment to routine could be just as hazardous to one’s spiritual health as attachment to possessions or relationships. Jordeen declined. The resulting drama that ensued was out of proportion to the request, no doubt forced by several other nuns that didn’t want to go and her staying didn’t sit well with them. Ultimately, she was ordered by the head nun to participate.

“It will be okay,” Albeta assured her.

Jordeen complied, and joined them on the transport. She spent the whole ride immersed in a meditative practice, and got through the journey with minimal laughter. When she laughed, Alberta who was sitting next to her made as if she had said something funny and even laughed with her from time to time. Everyone in earshot of her laughter was easily cheered, except for the few that found their colleague annoying. In those instances, they were moved to anger and hatred of their sister who was always so ‘happy’ that it visibly disgusted them. Once at the park, Jordeen found a quiet place to sit and have a snack, where she could watch everyone from a safe distance. It was strange seeing so many people dressed in oranges and yellow. The robes made people look like walking flames. Only the park employees were traditionally dressed.

Mother Sho approached her.

“I noticed you have not engaged others, or been on any rides,” Sho said.

“I would prefer not to partake of the rides, Mother,” Jordeen said.

“This is not a request,” Sho said. “I take your refusal to participate as defiance, a form of passive aggressive challenge to my authority for making you come.”

“Please, Mother Sho, I beg forgiveness in this,” Jordeen insisted.

“Are you afraid?”

“No, Mother,” Jordeen said.

“Good. Then you will ride the roller coaster with me and that is final,” Mother Sho said.

“But,” Jordeen tried.

“Do you want to be kicked out of the order for defying authority or for making me appear to be weak on disciplining you?” Sho asked.

“No, Mother, but if you ask Albeta...”

“She has babied you long enough. It is time to grow up and do what all of your fellow sisters are doing,” Sho snapped.

Jordeen bowed, stood gracefully, and accompanied Sho to the nearest ride. It was an older roller coaster, with a wooden structure. It was also the noisiest, biggest, fastest, and most jarring of any of the rides in the park. Sho got in the first seat, front of the car, and indicated Jordeen was to sit by her. Jordeen hesitated. Sho shot a stern look at her. Jordeen sighed,

thinking, the worst that would happen is that she would scream and laugh through the entire ride. She got in. All the cars in their train were full.

“You see,” Sho began as the car inched its way up to the first hill. “This is a lesson. The roller coaster can teach us about the ups and downs of life. This whole park, in a way, is a metaphor...”

The front car topped the hill and pointed down, and for a moment, it seemed to hesitate, as if it wasn't sure gravity was going to catch it. Then it plunged downwards, the wheels rattling and jarring the whole cart, till it hit bottom and their momentum pushed them down hard into their chairs, before shooting them up the next hill. Between the g-forces tugging at her in multiple directions at once, the vibration through the car, and the fear generated by the ride itself, Jordeen lost all semblance of control and everything she had learned over the last few months was gone, except for one new trait. Because of her recent training in yoga and astral projection, not only were her turnovers amplified, she was able to project the full gambit of her emotions outward, dumping all of her internal information into the Force, part of her calling for help, while another part of her was simultaneously letting go. Everyone in the park shared in her turnovers. Park employees, and monks and nuns not strapped into a ride, all fell to the ground. The turnovers lasted for as long the ride lasted, growing in intensity and duration, and persisted even a little after the car had come to a complete stop at the station. People who had spent their entire lives avoiding this sort of physical gratification, lost it for one, super sustained moment of ecstasy that was forced on them, out of their control, and requiring for many a change in clothing.

Jordeen covered her mouth, closed her eyes, and tried to bring herself to terms with what had happened. Even as she sat there in the cart, her eyes clenched shut, and her hands grasping the safety bar as if the ride for her was still going, the world slowly took form around her. There were a lot of confused folks, to be sure. Sho had collapsed into Jordeen, a huge smile on her face. Alberta was there, her hand over her mouth, not sure what to do or say. The duration of the event had caused Sho's heart to stop. A park attendant noticed and pulled her from the cart, over top of Jordeen, who sat there, still trying to recover through the meditation she had learned, slowing her breath down by long inhales, and blowing out tightened lips. She was racked with the inevitable aftershocks of twitching and rebound giggles, but felt that she would quickly return to the reserved breath and awareness that followed such events.

Sho was revived. Several in the park, older monks, were not so lucky. Several days later, despite how much Sho and Alberta fought or argued, Jordeen was directed to leave the order by their superiors. Jordeen went home. Rumor beat her home and the small town outside her mother's orchard made pilgrimages wanting to experience even an inkling of what had happened at the amusement park that day. The stepfather couldn't take it. He left, filing for divorce. Unfortunately, law was clear: Jordeen's mother would have to share the value of the land with him, as he had been with her more than five years. In order to do this, her mother had to put the property up for sale.

In an effort to save the farm, Jordeen went to a Hutt and asked for a job. The Hutt wasn't interested in an employee, not at the price Jordeen was asking, but she would consider a slave. Jordeen consented, bought the farm from her mom, fixed the deed so that her mom couldn't sell it as long as Jordeen was alive, as well as fixing it where no other man could take the property away should mom marry and divorce again, or, if she herself should ever marry or divorce. The deed restriction was that clear and a fiancé would simply have to agree to the terms or not marry.

Her mother was beside herself with grief, from the drama in her life, and from the knowledge that her daughter sold herself to save her and the farm.

“It’s not what I wanted for us,” she said.

“I know, Mom. But I won’t be a slave forever,” Jordeen insisted. “I will return. And I will care for you in your old age. We will be reunited. Of this, I am sure.”

“As a slave, you will be subject to the whims of your master. You could be killed just for someone’s sick pleasure!” her mom said.

“Nothing bad will happen,” Jordeen assured her.

“How do you know?” her mother insisted.

“The rising sun told me,” Jordeen said.

“You are different somehow,” her mother said.

Jordeen shrugged. “We deal with what is given us, and we are never given more than we can handle. I love you, mother. Be kind to yourself.”

They kissed and then Shade called to her slave. They went off together.



Kiesha had stepped out to the restroom, partly from need, and partly to avoid the temptation to eaves drop, and so she hadn’t been in the office when Preston and party arrived. She entered just as they were about to barge into Nolasco’s office.

“Wait! You can’t go in there right now,” Keisha tried.

But Preston was already through the door, despite even Lestelle’s recommendation that for civility required knocking.

The woman who was verbally assaulting Nolasco turned to face Preston.

“How dare you just barge in here?!” Nolasco’s wife said, turning her vehemence on the intruders.

“I apologize for intruding, but I require Nolasco’s help,” Preston said, bowing.

“Preston, we should wait outside,” Lestelle said.

“You’re Preston?” the woman that had been berating Nolasco asked.

“I am,” Preston said.

“Umm, Tillia, Preston, Preston, my wife,” Nolasca offered.

“You squandered a fortune for this kid?” Tillia demanded.

“We made a profit, Tillia,” Nolasco said.

“Have you lost your mind? The amount of money you blew in this deal could have put your great, great grandchildren through college,” Tillia said. “We could have established a legacy!”

“We are fortunate enough...”

“I want to know what is so special about this kid that you would steal from your own family?!” Tillia said.

“There was no stealing. It was a fair deal and we have been compensated well,” Nolasco said.

“In his defense, I did have a good lawyer,” Preston offered, trying to ameliorate the situation.

Tillia turned to him and pointed. “Yeah, one he provided,” Tillia said. She turned her eyes to Lestelle. “I hope you’re as capable with divorces as you are business, because he is going to need one.”

Tillia stormed out. Preston smiled as she passed, bowing. "It was nice to meet you," he offered.

Lestelle slapped his arm.

"What? Did I do something wrong?" Preston asked.

"No," Nolasco said.

"Umm, sorry for the intrusion," Kiesha said.

"Are you kidding?" Nolasco said. "It saved me from listening to a long tirade of all my failures, both real and perceived. How may I help you, Preston?"

"Oh, yeah, thank you, we need to leave the planet. Discreetly," Preston said.

"Kiesha, will you have my shuttle brought to the roof," Nolasco said.

Kiesha nodded and hurried off.

"Where do you want to go?" Nolasco said. "And how fast?"

"Fast as in now, but we will decide where once we're in space," Preston said.

Nolasco had a sudden inspiration. He punched something on his desk and a moment later a holo of a person emerge, torso up. He was a bearded man, with a long thin mustaches that followed his lips, with a hint of gray in his hair. His lips were pressed thin, holding a pipe as he scrutinized a log entry. He became aware of the camera and looked up.

"Nolasco? It isn't often you give me a ring. Are you okay?"

"I couldn't be better, Captain Gregg," Nolasco said. "You haven't left yet, have you?"

Gregg might have pointed to the clarity of the holo image as evidence he was still in the system, but he was too well mannered for such triteness. "I was just doing the final check. I assure you, we will get the products delivered on time."

"Yeah, about that," Nolasco said. "Any chance you can delay? I would like to speak to you in person."

"What a coincidence," Gregg said. "Looks like the hyperdrive just went off line. If you'll excuse me, I better look into that."

"Thank you," Nolasco said.

Kiesha re-entered. "Sir, your car is here," she announced.

"Good," Nolasco said. "Shall we?"

"I can't leave without my droid and my clothes," Preston said.

"I'll arrange to have them picked up," Kiesha assured him.

"I doubt CU2 will respond to anyone but me," Preston said.

Kiesha retrieved a portable holorecorder from a collection on her desk. She invited Preston to give a directive for CU2 to follow her instructions and then she volunteered to go and collect the droid personally. That settled, Nolasco lead the way towards the lift that sped them towards the roof.

"What about you, Leselle, do you have anything we need to retrieve before leaving?" Nolasco asked.

"Nothing I can't live without," Lestelle said.

Once on the roof, Nolasco dismissed his driver and he and his three passengers lifted into the air, as he intended to deliver them himself to Bio-Enc's private spaceport. Jordeen broke out into laughter as the car accelerated. Lestelle didn't know what to make of the laughing, but couldn't hide her concern on her face. Nolasco was too polite to reveal his curiosity. Preston took her hand and she her discomfort eased.

"You in trouble?" Nolasco asked Preston, looking back over his shoulder from the driver's seat.

“He appears to have made an enemy of Jade Hutt,” Lestelle answered.

“She just wants me back,” Jordeen said, her voice breathless.

“Well, she can’t have you,” Preston said. “I won you fair and square.”

Lestelle turned in her seat to look back at Preston. “I don’t like the fact that you’ve decided to keep a slave. Once I get you safely settled somewhere, I’m going to resign the commission you offered me,” she said.

“He doesn’t want me as a slave,” Jordeen said, laughing. “He wants to free me.”

“Oh?” Lestelle asked. “I withdraw my hastily proffered resignation. Why does Shade want you back so fiercely?”

“I have, um, a talent that she finds useful,” Jordeen said, she buried her face into Preston’s arm.

“And what’s that?” Lestelle asked.

“I’d rather not discuss it,” Jordeen said, her voice muffled.

They arrived at the spaceport and landed next to a bulk freighter with class A cargo containers locked in on both sides. Lestelle and Jordeen both showed concerned.

“That’s not going to get us away very fast,” Jordeen said.

“It will suffice,” Preston assured them, as he climbed out of Nolasco sky car. He paused as he took in his Tie still sitting where he had parked it.

Nolasco and Gregg met at the ramp to his ship and shook hands. As they talked, Jordeen and Lestelle headed up the ramp. When Preston didn’t follow, Lestelle came and took his arm.

“We should probably go inside,” Lestelle said. “The less people who see us the better.”

“I can’t leave without my droid,” Preston stated.

“Okay, well, they’re coming,” Lestelle said.

Gregg and Nolasco joined the conversation. “Sir, if it’s true that Shade Hutt is trying to capture you, your lady friend may be correct. You’ll be safest inside the ship.”

Preston appeared to be sulking.

“You don’t want to leave your ship?” Nolasco asked.

“That’s yours?” Gregg asked.

Kiesha arrived in a sky cab. CU2 bolted and came right to Preston as soon as the door opened sufficiently to allow egress. Kiesha followed, pulling an antigravity chest that contained Preston’s purchases from the day before.

CU2 berated Preston with a long series of whistled complaints.

“I’m sorry. I got distracted,” Preston said, but the Droid continued to protest. “Tell me about it later. Right now, I need you to go on board, and take the chest, please.”

CU2 complained, but followed instructions. It slaved the chest, ordering it to follow it and headed towards the cargo ship.

“You own an interrogation droid?” Gregg asked, concerned.

“Common misconception. That is a collection unit, a little bigger than the interrogation units employed by the Empire,” Preston said. “Same manufacturer. I call him Findit, or CU2”

“Really, we should hold this conversation in space,” Jordeen offered from the relative safety of the ship.

“We can’t leave yet,” Preston said.

“Why not?” Lestelle, Nolasco, Kiesha, and Gregg asked simultaneously.

A second sky cab arrived. As the door open, Nolasco and Gregg both popped the safety off their blasters. Preston motioned them to be calm. Corissa, followed by Ten, emerged from the

latest vehicle. Corissa led the way, holding Ten's hand, and she came right past Nolasco and approached Gregg, who she had met previously.

"We need discreet passage off this planet," Corissa said. It wasn't a plea, it was a demand, and it sounded urgent.

"Well, Mam, I'm afraid I have a full..." Greg began.

"Go on board," Preston said.

"Now, wait just a minute," Gregg said. "I'm the Captain."

"You will be compensated," Preston assured him.

"Can we go now?" Lestelle asked.

"Yes," Preston agreed, then gave a longing look at his Fighter. "Captain Gregg, can we slave my ship to yours?"

"Preston, I will deliver it to you personally," Nolasco promised.

"You will?" Kiesha said.

"I'm thinking it's time for a little vacation," Nolasco said. "Do I have time to pack?"

"You don't have to do this. I could come back for it," Preston said.

"I want to do this. Just call me when you've decided where you're headed," Nolasco insisted.

"How is our disappearance supposed to be discreet if you send Nolasco a transmission of your location?" Lestelle asked.

"It will be discreet, I promise," Preston said.

Nolasco reached out to take Preston's hand. Preston hugged him instead. He also hugged Kiesha, who seemed surprised, but received it well. He then headed up the ramp. Gregg gave Nolasco a frown, bit down on his pipe, and followed his passengers up the ramp.

"Is there room for two in Preston's ship?" Kiesha asked.

Nolasco was quiet as the ramp closed. He watched as the freighter rose from the ground, kept his eyes on it till it accelerated away. He turned to Kiesha.

"We're going to need an astromech droid," Nolasco said.

"We?" Kiesha asked.

"You did want to go with, right?" he asked, and was surprised by the hug.

"Oh, I thought you'd never ask," Kiesha said, hugging him fiercely.

Captain Gregg emerged from the flight deck to find his guests sitting quietly. Preston was pushing through photos of properties for sale on an electronic clip board that was tied into the Captain's navigation system. Ten was sitting in Corissa's lap, hugging her, eyes turned into Corissa's shoulders, as if she had been crying. Lestelle was deep in thought and Jordeen had just relaxed from another fit of laughter. Once they had made the jump to hyperspace, Jordeen's condition eased up as the total ship vibrations subsided. She pulled her legs up into the chair to sit in the lotus position, her eyes closing as she sought meditative relief.

"Well, at least one of you seems happy," Gregg said. He retracted a jump seat and joined them. "You'll have excuse the mess as it's unusual for me to take on passengers."

No one could discern what mess he was referring to. The only potentially out of place items were a partially eaten meal and a cold cup of coffee sitting on the table. The rest of the ship was tidy enough to be considered military orderly. Ten opened her eyes to the group.

"So, what's your name, little miss?" Gregg asked.

Ten narrowed her eyes, knowing she was likely the only one to be considered 'little miss,' and she did not like it. "Ten," she answered.

"And how old are you?" Gregg asked.

"Nine," she answered.

"Interesting," Gregg said. "Why do they call you Ten?"

"I will be ten," Ten answered.

"Probably. You will be twelve, too, but they're not calling you thirteen," Gregg said.

"My full name is Tenicos, but I prefer Ten," Ten said.

"Don't think I ever met a Tenicos in all my travels, but people have such weird names these days," Gregg said. "You and your mother travel often?"

"Does she look like my mother?" Ten asked.

"She's not your mother?" Lestelle asked, coming out of her thoughts.

"It's a long story," Corissa stated.

"Which ends with kidnapping?" Lestelle asked. "Captain, you need to turn us back around."

"No, I can't go back!" Ten said, almost coming out of the chair.

Corissa hugged her tight, "Be calm," she whispered.

"But you can't let them take me back," Ten whimpered.

"We're not going back," Preston said.

"Sir, I know you wanted off planet discreetly, but I will not support trafficking of children. It's bad enough you brought a slave on board," Gregg said, standing up. "I will be turning the ship around and I will be contacting the authorities."

Gregg moved as if to head towards the flight deck. Corissa stood up, forcing Ten to her feet. She pulled her to the side and put a hand on her blaster. Preston looked up from his review, drew his legs up in the lotus position, almost mirroring Jordeen, sat the clipboard in his lap, and then folded his hands together. Gregg paused.

"Captain Gregg must be allowed to do what he thinks is right," Preston said.

"What?" Ten demanded. "I thought you were on my side?!"

Gregg started forward but Corissa pulled the blaster out of her holster and the stale mate was re-engaged.

"I will not allow him to turn us around," Corissa said.

“And you’re right to stand your ground,” Preston assured her.

“You can’t support both positions,” Lestelle said. “You have to pick a side.”

“Both sides are correct, from their limited perspective and limited knowledge,” Preston stated. “I am sure that Captain Gregg would not take Ten back if he knew she would be dead within 24 hours of doing so.”

“Explain,” Gregg said.

The clipboard beeped, alerting Preston that an item fitting his search criteria had been found. He glanced at it, smiled, closed his eyes to consider further. The property was located in the Kalinga territories on Dathomir, and when he remembered his first conversation with Nolasco and how he had threatened to go there, he saw this coincidence as reinforcement that this was indeed the place he was looking for. Of course, there were other encouraging points. The structures he was interested in acquiring were on three separate peaks of a mountain range; and the three most prominent, at that. The most significant feature of the three mountain tops was that the tops had been razed, sheered clean as if cut by a giant lightsaber. The material had probably gone into the construction of the two dams connecting the smallest, outside peak to the mountain chain, thereby cradling a triangular lake between them. The property was the most isolated structures on the planet, removed from large cities, and land locked in the middle of the continent, no doubt chosen for altitude for optimum star gazing. He handed the clipboard to Lestelle.

“This is the place,” Preston said, extremely pleased, like a child finding a present.

“An abandoned academy?” Lestelle asked.

“It’s perfect. It’s in my price range. I like mountains. The highest peak is an observatory, and there is a lake, and the hydroelectric capacity will meet all our energy needs,” Preston pushed.

“This place is huge! Wouldn’t you prefer a small cottage near the ocean on Hapes?” Lestelle asked.

“Oh, well that does sound nice,” Preston said, considering it. He pursed his lips as if having trouble deciding, but then committed. “And I do want to go there. But the Force is pulling me here. There is something bigger than us going on.”

“Preston,” Lestelle said. “The reason this place is in your price range is because its deed restricted. Specifically, it says here that the observatory must be maintain in functioning order and tours be made available on a monthly basis.”

“I’m okay with that,” Preston said.

“Failing this, you don’t get a return on your money. It remains with the state. You’re basically just renting it,” Lestelle said.

“I’m okay with that,” Preston said.

“The maintenance costs alone could potentially bankrupt you,” Lestelle argued.

Preston thought about it. Then he smiled. “But we have engineer,” Preston said, giving upward palm gesture at Corissa.

“Now, wait just a minute, I’m not staying with you,” Corissa said. “Ten and I have to go into hiding.”

“No one will come for you,” Preston assured her. “They think she’s dead.”

“Why would they think that?” Corissa asked.

“Wait, this place is haunted!” Lestelle said. “That’s why the three previous owners surrendered it back to the state!”

“Haunted?!” Ten said. “I don’t want to go there.”

“Nothing bad will happen to you,” Preston assured her.

“The last time you said that I got my heart cut out!” Ten snapped.

“Don’t exaggerate,” Corissa said.

“Why doesn’t anyone ever believe me!” Ten cried. She ran to the flight deck and locked herself in, indicated by the red light on the door panel.

Gregg tried to go after her, but Corissa reminded him that she had the blaster.

“They know she escaped. It won’t take long before they figure out I helped her,” Corissa said.

Preston nodded. “Here is what you are unaware of,” he said, describing the details as if he were watching a holo-novel unfolding before his eyes, with both present and future knowledge as vectors solidified from the mist. The Droid that had performed the heart transplant surgery malfunctioned and called the authorities. They arrived, serendipitously, directly after Corissa and Ten had fled the scene. They confiscated the Droid’s memory bank played it back up to the point where it malfunctioned. There was absolute, incriminating video evidence of the heart transplant and everyone who had been involved, including the agent and his two men. Even now, some of the video had leaked to the public news organizations and Ten, pleading for her life, was now going viral. Public outrage was up and a backlash against CPS was likely. The man who had received the heart would no doubt live a long, healthy life behind bars. The news agency speculated that her body was probably cremated and dumped into the sewers. The authorities wouldn’t say if they had ascertained any other organs, but speculative reporters suggested that they had and her liver, pancreas, lungs, spleen, and kidneys were even now being used in a sting operations. The three men Corissa killed, in self-defense, were believed to have been killed by a disgruntled colleague who had taken the credits brought to them by the man needing a heart.

There was no doubt to the authorities or the journalists that there was a larger organization responsible for kidnapping children. An expert was quoted that one in four runaways end up trafficked for sex. Most don’t survive the year. Trafficking kids was more lucrative than even the most illicit drug trade. Shade, in a brilliant PR move, created a memorial fund in Tenico’s name, and was quoted by a tabloid: “Those who traffic children should be executed slowly. Of course I own slaves, it’s hard to run a business these days without minimally comped employees, but all of my people are adults, and all of them came into the business willingly. My business is open for public scrutiny, as my slave will tell you that they leave my services with more skills than they hired on with. I am more than willing to help the authorities put an end to this sort black market trade of our greatest resource, our younglings.”

Boys were trafficked as much as girls, but boys tended not to live as long, as their resale value was much lower. The cost of relocating younglings, selling them into slavery or simply selling their organs and then liquidating the unusable parts, was a fairly expensive process, and so the people who sought this commodity were not paupers. One ex drug lord was quoted as saying, “Most of my colleagues have moved away from drugs, because kids are more profitable. If I sell you a drug, that’s it. I’ve got to resupply. But a kid, now that is something you can sell more than once, if they don’t damage it too badly. What’s more, I don’t have to groom these kids, as most come willing and ready to serve because they want the money and glamour that comes with it. You’d be surprised how many think they’re trading up.” The CPS agent Corissa had killed had been using foster parents to temporarily house the children directly in plain sight. Ten’s parents’ part in this trade was quickly ascertained and they had been the first to be brought into custody. They seemed to show no more remorse by the fact that their daughter was dead

than they did for any of the kids they had fostered. There was definitely a paper trail on the kids, but no lead to where they may have gone. Her parents played to the media, suggesting they had had no choice. Of course, the DA didn't buy that but was compelled to make a deal with them to get them to turn state's witness. Ten's parents would win a new life in a witness relocation program.

"How do you know all of this?" Corissa asked.

"A little bird told me," Preston said.

Corissa sat down, her hand trembling. She pointed the weapon at Preston with exaggerated motion, as if saying, 'you?!' She clicked the safety on, holstered the weapon. Gregg sat down. Lestelle allowed herself to breathe.

"As I said, this is bigger than us," Preston said. "I don't know what's all about to happen. I do know that we move in constellations, groups of people and players, all of us moving towards certain eventualities. Some of us come together. Some of us fall away. But some of us, no matter what we do, just keep coming together. There is something here that needs to be resolved and it will be, whether we resist it or not. I'm for letting it play out."

"I don't know," Corissa said.

"You do know that you want to help Ten, that much is certain," Preston said.

"I will die to protect her," Corissa said.

Preston looked up and to the right, following her words to see if they were forewarning. Words, especially those spoken without forethought in a hasty attempt to support one's belief or to fill an empty void, were likely to be self-fulfilling prophecies. "You might have to. Ten is going to need a great deal of help to heal. The Force healed her injuries, gave her internal organs back, but her mind and emotional state have a ways to go."

"Is that even possible?" Gregg asked.

"Growing new organs in an instant is an insignificant act," Preston answered. "Healing the heart, the spirit of a person, well, that is much harder, because from the perspective of the Force the pain is an illusion. The harder a person holds on to that, the more Force that is used to solidify the viewpoint. She is 9, she has PTSD, most likely abandonment issues, years of neglect and abuse on her shoulders, a history of being ignored. I imagine you don't want to do this alone, Corissa."

"I don't," Corissa said, feeling overwhelmed already. "I can't do it alone."

"Then tarry awhile," Preston invited. "At least till you get your bearings again."

"What about the ghosts?" Lestelle asked.

"You don't believe in ghosts, do you?" Gregg asked, a general question to everyone, even though it was directed back to Lestelle.

"There are no such things as ghost," Preston said.

"You believe in the Force but not ghosts?" Jordeen asked.

"Ghosts, by definition, are dead people. I don't believe we die, so there can't be ghosts," Preston stated simply. "It's just people after a significant life change."

"So it's a matter of semantics for you?" Lestelle asked.

"You seem upset?" Jordeen said.

"I'm a little worried, yes. I grew up with a poltergeist in our house. It was a nuisance at best, a nightmare on its bad days," Lestelle said.

"Nothing bad will happen," Preston said.

"Umph," Lestelle sulked. "I wish I had your confidence. Any ideas how you're going to make the down payment without drawing attention to yourself?"

“I will take care of that,” Preston said. “Captain, would you mind steering us towards Dathomir?”

“I assume you like coincidences,” Gregg said.

“Coincidence is simply a way of stating ignorance of the grander design in play,” Preston said.

“Yeah, well, we should arrive in about twelve more hours,” Gregg said. “Unless your lass in there has been messing with the navigation console.”

“She hasn’t,” Preston said.



Ten was hiding under the main control panel, lying on her side, fetal position. Preston came in, lay down on the floor, and without looking at her, started drawing imaginary letters in front of him. After a few minutes of not talking, she finally acknowledged him. The flight deck was dimly lit with glowing banks of red, amber, and green diodes describing switch positions. One panel had a luminous display that seemed to change at random, but probably held a significant pattern. From Ten’s perspective, Preston seemed to have an aura, but she figured it was due to the tears in her eyes.

“What is wrong with me?” Ten asked.

“You’re worried something is wrong with you?” Preston asked.

“Isn’t there?” Ten asked.

Preston drew another letter in the air then wiped it away, as if he had been writing in sand. He started over.

“What are you doing?” Ten asked. She sounded annoyed.

“Spelling,” Preston said. “I find it helps calm me down.”

“What do you have to be stressed about? Your life is perfect,” Ten said.

“In some ways, it is. In other ways, it isn’t,” Preston agreed. “Your life is stressful?”

“Really? I had my heart cut out!” Ten said.

“Yeah, and you’ll get some mileage out of that statement,” Preston agreed. “But in other ways, it’s not so bad.”

“Tell me how it’s not bad?” Ten said, pushing to a sitting position and folding her arms around her legs. “My parents never loved me. They rented me out for cheap to get drugs, and finally sold me to an organ distributor, who CUT my heart out.”

“Yep,” Preston agreed. “When you say it like that, your life sucked.”

“How could you spin it any other way?!” Ten demanded.

“A pregnant woman was brought into a room by men wearing masks. The men put her on a table, they cut open her stomach, removed the fetus, and left the room with it,” Preston said, painting a picture.

“That’s awful. Why are you telling me this?” Ten asked.

“I told you that, so I could tell you this. The men were doctors. They were wearing surgical masks. The procedure saved the baby and the mother,” Preston said. “How you perceive things affects your emotions.”

Ten sat there a long a moment. “I don’t see how that relates to me,” Ten said. “Why is this so hard?”

“It’s not hard,” Preston countered.

“It’s not easy!” Ten rebutted.

“Exactly,” Preston agreed.

Ten frowned.

“It is what it is. Labeling your experience good or bad affects your judgment, your ability to transcend. Your situation sucked ass,” Preston said, not mincing words. “Your life sucked. That is definitely a perspective and you can spend the rest of eternity focused on what a raw deal you got, or you can focus on right here, right now, and breathe, and realize you’re okay, because there is a level of truth that to date you’ve only scratched the surface of what’s available to you. Right now the story continues to suck because you are caught up in the story. In fact, you are so caught up in this whirlwind that you’re missing some key points. Something happened. Something miraculous. Your heart was cut out. You died and came back. You have so many more choices, with two of the most obvious being: You can continue your life as a victim or you can start a new, as a survivor.”

“I wish I had chosen to stay dead,” Ten wept. “I thought it would be easier, but nothing is going right.”

“Like what?” Preston asked.

“I want my parents to suffer. How is it fair that I have to be the one on the run the rest of my life,” Ten started.

“Nothing can undo what’s happened. There are no words that can erase it or make it better. Even if your parents changed right now, saw the misery they helped create, and tried to give you the love and support that you should have had from the start, you have a lot of healing ahead of you, a lot of forgiving,” Preston said.

“We’ve already had this conversation. I’m not the forgiving type,” Ten said.

“How can you expect your parents to change if you can’t?” Preston asked.

“They’re wrong! I’m not. They’re obligated to change,” Ten snapped.

“They’re wrong. And the impetus will still be on you to change, because this is about you, not them. Look, sometimes parents don’t love their children. There are millions of parents who should never have become parents. Most people don’t change in any significant way. The only one you can change is you,” Preston said.

“It’s not fair!” Ten said. “I have to do all the work and they get off scot free.”

“It’s not fair,” Preston agreed. Telling her they were not going to get off scot free was a distraction.

“And my watched stopped!” Ten lamented, and then showed her the tech in her sleeve. “My music mixture blew out its screen and the flash memory was erased. It took me years to accumulate that music list, and it’s gone, just like that.”

“Like a sand mandala,” Preston agreed.

“What?”

“There is no loss, only exchange. You’re probably going to find what once held you is no longer sufficient. You’re going to have to push beyond the surface of things, really get deeper than you have allowed yourself to go,” Preston said, struggling to get the right words for things. “You’ve been searching for meaning but have settled for distractions. You must stop seeing with your eyes and start viewing with your heart. The most essential is always invisible. To start, you will need to spend time in nature, spend time meditating. You’re going to find that until you master the Force, any electronics that isn’t shielded against magnetic pulses is likely to fail when it comes into physical contact with you.”

“Why?” Ten asked.

“A massive load of Force was channeled through your body to heal you. Atoms have a polarity, a magnetic polarity and a Force polarity, and every atom comprising your body was entrained, Force aligned, so, in some ways, you’re kind of like a giant walking magnet,” Preston said. “It’s a side effect of having become one with the Force.”

“Can you undo it,” Ten said.

“In time, if you don’t use the Force, as you let go of atoms and take in new atoms, your bodily system will become too chaotic to hold a Force charge,” Preston offered.

“Will you teach me to be a Jedi?” Ten asked.

“No,” Preston said.

Ten pushed her lower lip out, disappointed. Her fist tightened.

“I’m not a Jedi. I can only teach you what I know,” Preston says.

Ten nodded, relaxed her fist. “Will that be enough?” Ten asked.

Preston shrugged.

“Thank you. For helping me,” Ten said.

“You’re welcome, but you should know, you’re doing all the work. Give yourself credit. And, now, if you’re feeling calmer, the others are worried about you,” Preston said.

Ten came out from under the console. She went to hug Preston and passed through him. He dissipated like smoke from a burnt out candle.

“What?” Ten asked.

Ten opened the door to the flight deck. Preston was sitting in the same chair he had been sitting in when she had fled the room. She drew slowly into the room, not sure what to make of it. Everyone was looking at her.

“I’m sorry,” Ten said. “I guess I freaked out.”

“Apparently, you’ve had a long day. If you like, you can sleep in my quarters,” Gregg said.

“I don’t want to be alone,” Ten said.

“I’ll go with you,” Corissa said, standing.

Corissa took Ten’s hand and led her towards the only crew compartment, which she discerned from her years of experience doing maintenance. Ten paused and looked back to Preston.

“Are there really ghost where we’re going?” Ten asked.

“I’ll clean house before we get there,” Preston said.

“It’s okay,” Ten said. “I’m not afraid anymore.”

Preston nodded approval, but he was confident she wasn’t being accurate. That, and he was pretty sure he heard the echo of Yoda’s voice commenting: “You will be…” Preston pushed himself to contend with the here and now.



The place was definitely haunted, but mostly by the living. A seasonal band of Rancor poachers would make residence near the Chapter Hall, the most east building, connected to the outside of the cloister walk that encircled the cloister itself. The cloister had one tree, dead center, reaching out to the sky, the tip of the tree barely higher than the cloister wall. The tree itself was jagged, as if it was a bolt of splintered lightning solidified. No doubt the poachers had started the rumors of the place being haunted to scare people off, but in the act of labeling it a haunt, they had actually attracted more ghosts. The first ghost Preston encountered appeared to be drinking from the makeshift bar established by the poachers.

Preston approached the ghost. It was crying into its beer.

“You okay?” Preston asked.

“Do I look okay?” the ghost retorted. “I can’t make them stop. I couldn’t save my friend and I can’t make these guys stop.”

“You’re friend?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” the ghost said.

Preston opened a beer. It was more a prop than anything, as he wasn’t actually drinking in his present form, but it seemed to comfort the ghost.

“I’m Preston,” Preston said.

“Malakili,” the ghost answered.

“Tell me about your friend,” Preston said.

“It was an enslaved Rancor, in Jabba the Hutt’s palace,” Malakili said. “I was going to try and sneak him away, but he was killed by a Jedi.” He said this latter with hatred and spit. He shook a fist as if threatening someone.

“Why would a Jedi kill a Rancor?” Preston asked.

“Are you calling me a liar?!” the ghost raged. Furniture in the room toppled, echoing in the stillness. Had folks been in earshot, they most likely would have been disturbed.

“No, I’m trying to understand,” Preston said.

“You can’t understand!” the ghost repeated. “I watched the Jedi throw the rock that killed him.”

“You mean a Jedi killed a Ranchor with a boulder, right?” Preston asked.

“No, a rock, like this size!” Malakili said.

“Not likely,” Preston said, wondering if even a Jedi could throw a rock hard enough to knock a ranchor out, much less kill one.

“I was there! The Jedi threw the rock which hit the switch which lowered the gate which closed on my friend and killed him!” Malakili said.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Preston said.

“I swear, I will kill you if you call me a liar again,” Malakili said.

“I am not calling you a liar, sir,” Preston said. “It just doesn’t make sense.”

“You couldn’t possibly understand,” Malakili said.

“But I’m trying. Why would the Jedi throw a rock, when he could just push the button to lower the gate using the Force?” Preston asked.

Malakili broke the beer bottle on the counter. “It’s on!” he said, taking a swipe.

Preston easily moved out of the way. Even though Malakili was not really drinking beer, because he was ghost, Malakili did believe he was drinking a beer, and therefore he had taken on the characteristics of someone who had been drinking for a long while.

“You better not be a Jedi,” Malakili said.

“I assure you, I’m not a Jedi,” Preston told him.

Malakili sat down on a stool, drunk, exhausted, and started sobbing again. “I’ve searched and I’ve searched and I can’t find my friend anywhere,” Malakili said.

“Maybe if you try higher,” Preston suggested.

“I can’t leave here,” Malakili said. “I have to try and prevent the poachers from doing more damage. I can’t leave till I repay my debt.”

“I will stop the poachers,” Preston said.

“You would do that for me?” Malakili asked.

“No, but I would do that for the Rancors,” Preston said.

Malakili stood up, grabbing Preston's shoulders and shaking with joy. "You understand! They're intelligent and worth saving. I should have done something sooner. It's my fault. Do you think he will ever forgive me?"

"The question is, do you think you can ever forgive yourself?" Preston asked.

"I don't know," he said, and dissipated.



The adolescent Rancor was trapped. The ravine walls were too high for him to climb in his present state, and the only way out was back towards the hunters. Part of him wished he had stayed with the group, as his chances would have been better, but part of him knew that coming this way would lead the poachers away and give others a chance to escape. Its back against a rock wall, it turned to await its destiny. To its surprise, a human male already stood there, smiling up at it as if it had no common sense about approaching a creature this size. Further, it was unharmed. The Ranchor was in pain, angry, but so baffled that it hesitated.

"May I heal you?" the human asked.

The Rancor chirped something, unable to commit to a full growl. It had never been so utterly surprised before. How had this human snuck up on him? The human closed his eyes, reached out with one hand, and healed the wounds. It looked up at the cliff and calculated the time it would take to reach the top. It could now climb the ravine with ease, though it might not have time to get up and over before the poachers arrived with their riffles.

"Do you trust me?" the human asked.

The Rancor cocked its head to the right, as if listening.

"Good. No matter what happens, don't move. Just stay behind me, okay?" the human said.

The Ranchor roared. The human laughed and turned around to face the approaching Poachers. They brought their hover bikes to a sliding halt and hopped off, drawing weapons.

"You, sir, did you see a Rancor come this way?" one of the poachers asked.

"I've not seen any Rancors today," the the human lied.

"There is no way it got past us," the second poacher said. It pointed to the blood on the ground. "And I'm sure I hit it in the arm. It shouldn't have been able to climb at all, much less reach the top of that without us seeing it."

The first poacher grew closer to the human, his leathery skin wrinkling as he sniffed the air. The Ranchor behind Preston simply blinked, not understanding fully what was transpiring, but it knew well enough not to move.

"What is your name?" The poacher asked.

"I'm Preston G Waycaster," Preston said.

"And what are you doing here?" the Poacher asked.

"I'm just surveying my property," Preston said.

"Your property? You bought this place?" the poacher asked, his friend moving in closer as well.

"Yes, and I feel obligated to warn you. As the legitimate owner of this property, I am allowed full discretion to use lethal force against anyone even suspected of poaching," Preston said.

The two poachers laughed.

“Now, I know you’re probably just campers out enjoying nature, but hypothetically, given the way the law in these parts says suspicion is sufficient for use of lethal force, I could shoot first and ask questions later,” Preston said.

“Are you threatening us, little human?” the poacher asked, his hand falling casually to a holstered weapon. “Cause, hypothetically speaking, you seem to be outnumbered here and outgunned.”

“You imagine that I’m here,” Preston said. “Now, go tell your friends that there will be no more hunting of Rancors. I will personally enforce this law.”

They laughed and brought their weapons to bear. Preston used the Force to confiscate the guns and doubled his apparent size.

“Get off my land,” Preston directed.

The poachers made no haste in departing, speeding away on their bikes. But just for fun, Preston grabbed at their bikes with the Force, slowing their departure, ripping their gear from the bikes. They wouldn’t starve if they headed straight way for the nearest town, but they might have to spend a night or two exposed to the elements. Preston turned back to the Rancor that had stayed put.

“Tell the herd mother, as long as I am steward of these lands, your kind will not be hunted,” Preston said, bowing to the creature, palms together in Nomaste sign of respect. “Go in peace, friend.”

The Ranchor nudged Preston with knuckles, and Preston allowed himself to be solid just long enough for the Ranchor to have a tactile response to his presence. It departed the way it had come. Preston allowed himself to dissipate slowly, lingering in mind for just a moment, then shot off to go see Nolasco.



As fast as thought, Preston arrived near Nolasco, who was engaged in a mating ritual with Kiesha. Kiesha saw Preston first and rolled over with a scream, covering herself. Nolasco, too, grabbed for the covers.

“Um, Preston?!” Nolasco said, a little shocked.

Preston smiled. “It’s nice to see you again. I have another favor.”

“Umm, could you have knocked first?” Nolasco asked.

“I suppose,” Preston considered. “But I thought this was more expedient.”

“You can’t just barge in on people when they’re, um, busy,” Nolasco said.

“Why?” Preston asked.

“It’s against the rules,” Nolasco said.

“You really don’t understand?” Kiesha asked. Knowing what little she knew of him, she felt compassion, not anger.

“What I understand is that there are no secrets in the Force. Anyone who masters even a modicum of skill can remote view and therefore has the potential to witness not just the present, but the past and the future,” Preston said.

“Well, fortunately, most people can’t use the Force,” Nolasco said.

“So, you use the Force to spy on people making love?” Kiesha asked.

“How is watching you different than say watching couples in holomovies?”

“They’re actors. They get paid to have people watch them,” Kiesha said. “Why don’t you know this?”

“He grew up in a cave,” Nolasco explained.

“I see that I have caused you distress and for that I apologize,” Preston said. “Should I go outside and knock?”

“Um, no, what was this favor you required?” Nolasco asked.

“Well, first, I wanted to tell you if you still want to, you may bring my ship to Dathomir. Also, I intend to buy a property and I need a large sum of money, but I’m concerned that using my funds will draw attention. Would it be possible for you to create an account, non-traceable, and shift the money from my Bio Enc funding discreetly?”

Nolasco smiled. “I can do better than that,” Nolasco said. “Bio Enc has a small office on Dathomir and you can use my account number to make the transaction. Can you remember a string of numbers?”

Preston said he could and demonstrated by repeating back the account numbers and passwords Nolasco offered.

“Anything else?” Nolasco asked.

Preston seemed to consider for a moment, then shook his head.

“Okay, then, well, we’ll see you when we get there,” Nolasco said.

“Okay,” Preston said.

Preston didn’t leave.

“Is there something wrong?” Nolasco said.

“You don’t require a handshake or hug?” Preston asked.

“No. Being in bed exempts folks from having to engage in that social protocol,” Nolasco said.

“Oh,” Preston said, bowing. “Thank you for the lesson.”

Preston dissipated before their eyes.

“Is he gone?” Kiesha asked.

“He appears to be,” Nolasco said.

There was long pause as they just lay there, kind of just looking around.

“Do you want to continue?” Nolasco asked.

“What if he is still here, just invisible?” Kiesha asked.

“We can do nothing more about that than we can about ghosts,” Nolasco said. “Should we stop living our lives because someone might be watching?”

Kiesha turned to him. “Our lives?”

“I’m not officially divorced yet, but yeah, I’m thinking in that direction,” Nolasco said.

They resumed the activity they had been engaged in before being interrupted.



Preston arrived at the appropriate realtor officer and made a traditional entrance, proceeding through the front door. The secretary had him wait a few moments, a time he used to study the photos on the wall. A man finally emerged from his office and asked him to come in, introducing himself as Kolers.

“So, you’re looking to buy some land, eh?” he asked. “I have some nice property here in a growing human settlement...”

“I would like to buy the Three Sisters,” Preston interrupted.

The man blinked. Then he laughed. “Okay, good one. But really, you’ll find the home constructions in this area are superb...”

“I’m sure they’re really nice, but I have my heart set on the Three Sisters,” Preston said.

“I’m sure, but it is kind of isolated, and even the closest grocery store can’t get a food delivery out to you. Drones can only go so far,” the man said.

“We will manage,” Preston said.

The man sighed. “Son, do you know how much that place costs?”

Preston handed him a card. The man took it, unaware that it was nothing more than a figment of his imagination, but it functioned the way he expected and the bank routing numbers came up and there were more than enough funds to cover the purchase, if not three or four equal purchases. Bio Encoders was the trade mark signature. He tried to hide the fact his hands were shaking.

“Umm, okay,” Kolers said, sitting down. “You understand, that place is way off the grid. The entire territory is wild, and you will be outside the jurisdiction of any law or emergency services. You could easily run into Chazrach, Yuuzhan Vong, Zabraks and poachers, and wild animals, like Ranchors and Kwi.”

“I would like that very much,” Preston said.

Kolers gave Preston a queer look, not hiding the expression that rolled across his face that suggested he thought Preston was obviously insane, and yet, who was he to part a fool from his money?

“I’m obligated to say this. It’s haunted,” Kolers said.

“Oh, I would really like that,” Preston said.

“It’s deed restricted,” Kolers said.

“I’m aware,” Preston said.

“Umm, do you have a lawyer?” Kolers said, the conscious part finally sneaking a voice out past the profiteering voice.

“I do,” Preston said. “She and my friends will be arriving shortly. I would like everything to be in order for the transaction when she arrives.”

“I must say...”

“Do you want to make the transaction, or do I need to get someone else involved?”

Preston asked.

“Nope, happy to do it,” Kolers said. He handed over a clipboard. “Sign this.”

Preston signed the number associated with the bank account he had provided.

“Umm, okay, Nolasco. I appreciate doing business with you. Shall I meet you and your party the Second Sister in ten hours?”

Preston did the math in his head and nodded. “That should be about right. See you then.”



Preston returned to the Academy, eager to explore. There were so many little things here begging to be discovered, like thousands of little magnets all vying for his attentions at once, that he wasn’t sure where to start. There was also something big needing to be discovered, something that was influencing his urgency to fully occupy the place. It couldn’t be a coincident that the Three Sisters resembled the esoteric school from his dreams and Travels. Knowing that the ‘big something’ would only come into fruition with time, he decided on a broad focus, allowing the Force to draw his attention. The tallest of the Three Sisters, the most prominent mountains in the entire range, held a total of eight observatories, each fastened to the side, with their domed roofs sitting like points on a compass while looking down on the mountain. The instrument at the 360

degree position was a ten meter optical/IR telescope. Directly opposite of that was an 8 millimeter optical telescope, also with IR capabilities. There were two, fifteen meters that specifically gleaned data from sub-millimeter spectrums. The largest telescope was a hyperspace receiver and transmitter. The remaining radio telescopes caught a wide range of frequencies. All together, the telescopes could look straight up, and a little past zenith, so there was overlap above and to the sides, but the entire sky could be captured, as well as 80 percent of all the known frequencies to be studied.

The Second Sister was the landing pad. The center of the pad was an elevator that could take certain size ships to the hangar space below, otherwise they could remain on the top tarmac, pushed to the periphery. Fuel was stored in the mountain below the hangar. The third sister, the smallest sister, contained the monastery itself, with a long winding road down to the valley. From the cloister, one could look up and see the observatories, provided there were no clouds gathered around. The clouds often kept the First Sister secluded in privacy. From the landing pad on the Second sister, one had a spectacular view of the dams, and the 'Diamond Lake.' The water was at the top of the two dams and lapping up against the contours of the mountain range. It did indeed have the appearance of a diamond, with emerald green edges, with blue tapering to black at the center. There was no doubt that it was a site to behold from any of the Sister's, or any of the travel tubes that transversed over its contours. Where water flowed away from either dam, rivers flowed east and west, until the bend in the mountain ranges took them out of sight.

Overall, the place was in need of repairs, that much was certain. Sixty years of no purposeful activities had brought its toll, but nothing Preston had seen in his general survey suggested that it was insurmountable. He was happy here. He couldn't wait to bring Fixit here to live and share his new home.

Preston sat down on the floor, taking it all in with all his senses. There were all sorts of fascinating smells to sort out. Life was abundant, surrounding the mountains in aromas and sounds. He wondered how the native plants would taste and if they were even edible by humans. As he sifted the space/time around him, he was aware of a dark event that had left reverberations to the present moment. He was certain that Darth Vader himself had been here and that he personally eliminated the staff and their families. Specifically, he had battled a potential rival that had positioned himself to be the Emperor's next right hand. Preston was about to explore the event for specifics when the next ghost made itself visible to him. It was Kwa, which was not unexpected as this was their home of origin, but he had imagined sufficient time had passed that all Kwa would have 'moved on.'

"I saw what you did to the drunk. Don't even try to cleanse my spirit from this place, boy," it said, planting two of its three legs firmly, a battle stance that was not lost on Preston. "I was here millions of years before you and will be here even after your species has gone."

"I don't want to cleanse you," Preston said.

"You think you are Nature's most preferred, but you're not," it said. "You're a freak, a random mutation. Beetles are more desirable over you. You're what, one of only a billion, trillion species? My kind were caretakers of this world for millions of years before we went interstellar, do you think your species will last as long or do so well? Your kind outstrips your resources, you accelerate its decay, you blow things up; you're a menace."

Preston shrugged. "I can't imagine what the view is like from your perspective, and I can't stand there while you insist on occupying that space."

The Kwa continued on as if it hadn't heard him, and that might actually have been the case. Sometimes it's just plain difficult to get through to a ghost, as most of their energy is used to reinforce their beliefs, personalities, and body image.

"Even now, this very moment, my kindred thrive on a planet, in a galaxy far, far away," Kwa said. "They have thrived for hundreds of millions of years, so your emperor failed to eradicate us all. We are first, we are superior. What do you say to that?"

Preston followed the Kwa's observation back to the small, blue green planet, seemingly isolated from the other worlds full of life in the same galaxy. The planet was thirty thousand light years from the galactic center point, in an average size galaxy. Hardly impressive as planets go. And though the creatures seemed to be reptilian in nature, he was fairly certain they weren't Kwa per say. The most impressive thing was that the planet seemed extremely isolated, as there was a lack of Galactic Commerce and interstellar infrastructure, at least that he discern. He made a mental note to revisit this unremarkable Galaxy for further examination.

"There is no superior, only consciousness and levels of lucidity," Preston said.

"Consciousness," the Kwa echoed, scoffing. "What would you know about consciousness, you who lives in your own head." The Kwa was suddenly overcome by a pronounced sadness. "The levels of consciousness achieved through group telepathy pales against even your crudest imagination of transcendence."

Preston didn't want to argue about that, because he knew to well that any time consciousness linked, a superconscious was formed: the individual consciousness remained, but the new larger consciousness would have sway over the individuals in the same way that the individual subconscious of the individual had sway over the individual. And the Kwa was right, from a sociological perspective, that Telepathy would have enhanced the social structures that would have decreased over all individual expression. It was limiting and liberating at the same time, but neither better nor worse. All the Kwa had to do was become one with the Force to get above his perspective to see the pros and cons. "You assume that's all you ever were, that's all you are now, and all you ever will be. You still cling to your form, the Kwa form, but there is no true form, no form that lasts anyway. There is only energy and form, ocean and wave. The waves may claim temporary identity, but they remain only ocean, and waves are simply a measure of change. Rhythmic, surface fluctuations. There are the small cycles of sleeping and waking and dreaming and lucidity, and variety of depth, but eventually it all returns to baseline. I do not pretend that humans will be here forever, because they never were here," Preston said.

The Kwa became even more sullen. It sat down, mirroring Preston's pose. "I could not stop the degeneration," it said.

"That feels heavy," Preston noted. "You feel responsible?"

"I'm a doctor. More advance than any of your doctors. I should have been able to stop the genetic de-evolution," the Kwa said.

"You assume it was de-evolution," Preston said.

The Kwa seemed angry. "Of course. What else could it be?"

"The assumption you're making is that all life naturally moves towards more complex, sentient life forms, but the truth is, if we accept the basic definition of evolution as the only and absolute answer, then evolution is completely random, and doesn't favor sentience. It favors only adaptability," Preston said.

"That's not true," the Kwa said, standing as if it were angry. "Look around! All life moves towards more complexity..."

“No, it doesn’t,” Preston said. “The only time you start to see a movement away from variation is when an intelligent species starts to modify the genetic structures through selective breeding or through direct genetic modifications. Something your species chose not to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“You could have genetically screened all Kwa babies, and if they failed to meet a certain neural developmental level, you could have aborted,” Preston said.

“Would you abort babies with Down Syndrome?” the Kwa demanded.

“Me, personally? No, but many people would. Further, there are those who would not let people with Down Syndrome breed,” Preston said.

“Your kind is barbaric! You consume your own younglings!” the Kwa said, spitting. “If I didn’t have such a respect for life, I would kill you myself right this very moment. Mentally retarded or not, they were our children. They are still spirits.”

Preston nodded. “It seems like you understand why you couldn’t stop the descent. If we start with the premise that we are all spirits and that we participate in the self-organizing of our own sand mandalas that we too often refer to as ‘our’ bodies, then the descent away from superior intelligence was a collective choice of your species. Maybe your species finally got it, that all intelligence, like beauty, is merely vanity. Our bodies are vanity. Illusion. As a Doctor, you know our bodies are not static; so how could you believe our emotions or thoughts would have any greater endurance? They are more elusive and nebulous than clouds and it takes constant effort to maintain their form in any semblance of their originating form, and we lie to ourselves that what we are holding is exactly what we took on initially, and the only way to know the dream has changed is to commit it to paper so we can return to the first written word and see for ourselves that it has changed. We are beings of light and we have greater missions than maintaining our own illusions.”

The Kwa was frozen, the words penetrating deep. A mist of light was gathering around him, a smile lurked on the edge of its mouth, and then, like a failed thundercloud, it faded, and the canvas of the sky returned to its previous hues: dark and moody.

“Did you really suppose I would be so easily tricked into a higher plane of existence!” the Kwa snapped. It stood, presenting threatening postures and visious teeth, a bite that seemed more terrifying than it might have been in real life, distorted by rage. “Your kind needs to be eliminated.”

Preston sighed. Arguing with a ghost was like arguing with religious fanatics. It was circular, and monotonous, and the Kwa had come back full circle. “There are some not so good people,” Preston agreed.

The Kwa sat down again. “There is nothing I can do but watch,” the Kwa said.

“You can participate again, if you wish,” Preston said.

“By becoming one of you? I think not,” the Kwa said.

“Or, engage folks like me who can hear you, but, yeah, your spieces has been removed from the board,” Preston said. “You can sit there and mope, or you can learn to play the new game. What do you want to do?”

“It’s not that simple!”

“What are you holding onto? A culture? All cultures die. A planet? All planets die. An era? All era’s die. A philosophy?”

“I understand! You sure are one, verbose, little, preachy bastard for your age,” the Kwa said.

Preston laughed. "I like you, too. Would you be willing to stay in this form so that I might learn from you?"

"Pffft," the Kwa said, and disappeared.

Preston laughed. "You sure are grumpy for an old ghost!" Preston called after it.

He heard 'are you hungry,' but it wasn't the Kwa's voice and it didn't fit where he was.

He closed his eyes and opened them again. He was back on the ship.

"Are you okay?" Jordeen asked.

"Yes," Preston said. His smile reflected his genuine contentment but also his love for Jordeen. He was happy.

"You've been gone for a while. I made you something to eat," Jordeen said.

He saw Lestelle asleep on a blanket in the corner. A blink of the eye revealed the Captain to be reading on the flight deck. Ten was asleep next to Corissa. Corissa appeared to be unable to sleep. She petted Ten's hair and sang a quiet lullaby, just barely audible, but that was surface, as there were subtle hints of a deeper brooding beneath the compassion.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Jordeen asked, unable to follow his focus.

Preston came back to Jordeen. "I feel like I'm floating," he said.

Jordeen smiled. "I feel like that all the time," she said.

The lineup of astromech droids was almost comical. Nolasco instantly liked the metallic, iron-red Astromech, sporting a bright, visibly illuminated power supply on its forward torso right above the main coolant vent. The primary color of metallic red was accentuated with sweeps of gold highlights describing panels. It was obviously new, just out of the box, and probably a tad more expensive than he wanted to pay, so he made a pretense of examining the others. Unlike the others, the red stood steady, neither whining nor otherwise trying to win favor with the potential new owner. The others, however, were almost neurotic with their little twitches, soft, manipulative whistles, their main eyes following Nolasco. The blue one rocked on its two legs with excitement when Nolasco paused and sighed and sagged pathetically when he moved on. Naturally, they all wanted to be of service, but clearly only one would be selected for an adventure. Nolasco pointed to the the metallic, iron-red Astromech.

“How much?”

“You sure you want that one? It’s not been field tested,” the mechanic said.

“It seems solid and I really like the visible fusion port on the front,” Nolasco said.

“Yeah, well, you know how engineers like to modify things just for show. That same feature has made it difficult to get rid of,” the mechanic said.

“So you’ll give me a break on the price?” Nolasco asked.

The mechanic sighed. “Look, I fence these for my brother as a favor, so I can’t just arbitrarily...”

“Whatever. I’ll take the Red one,” Nolasco said.

Red kicked its middle leg out and slid forward out of line. The mechanic instructed the others to return to the store. They shifted their torsos, planted their forward truck, and rolled away. The mechanic hooked the magnet to Red and used the crane to hoist it into position.

Kiesha stuck her head out the lower hatch. “Nola,” she said. “You’ll want to take this call.”

“Really?” Nolasco asked. “We’re about to leave.”

“It’s urgent,” Kiesha said. “Quintyl, on Dathomir.”

“Can you pipe it down here?”

“I’ve mastered turning on the comm. panel, not the entire system,” Kiesha said.

“Red?!” Nolasco asked. “You paying attention?”

The droid whistled an affirmation. As soon as it was situated, it plugged in. The ship’s forward cameras activated and a hollow display of Quintyl appeared in front of Nolasco. Quintyl was a pure blooded Zabrak, a quality he loved boasting about, tracing his lineage to the first Zabraks brought to Dathomir by the Rakata slavers. The deep reds of his skin was accentuated by the darkness of black lines tracing contours, tapering off towards the horns. He was wearing leather, worn and comfortable, as if he were accustomed to being in the outdoors.

“Did you authorize the purchase of property?” Quintyl asked.

“I did,” Nolasco said. “I’ll be there by tomorrow morning, your time, to explain.”

“You can’t explain now?” Quintyl asked.

“Rather not discuss this matter over a live channel,” Nolasco said.

Quintyl frowned and pointed. “I know you. You’re up to something. If research found something useful in the specimens I turned in, I expect to get my bonus.”

“Naturally,” Nolasco said.

“And I’ve been a field agent for Bio Enc for seven years now. I don’t want to be cut out of the loop,” Quintyl said.

“I assure you, this is all innocuous. There is nothing to worry about,” Nolasco said. “I will be there tomorrow. We can discuss this then.”

Nolasco motioned Red to turn off the holo. He then completed his last walk around inspection, climbed up into the ship, and then closed the lower hatch. Though there was room for two in the Tie Defender, it was somehow cramped with the supplies they had managed to pack into the pod.

“Last chance for a bathroom break. It’s hold it or go in your suit from here out,” Nolasco said, flipping switches.

“Do I have to wear the helmet?” Kiesha asked.

Nolasco pushed a button that pressurized the flight deck and confirmed it was holding pressure. The fact that this Tie Defender actually had a pressurized hall suggested it belong to a high ranking officer at one time, as this modification was not standard for combat situations. Even the Astromech droid’s compartment was not standard with the Tie Defender, so whoever had previously owned this either had credits or connections. “Nah. We’re not going into combat, so not likely to depressurize. Pay attention, Red. I want you to learn the startup sequence.”

“Who’s Red?” Kiesha asked.

“The droid we just bought,” Nolasco said, pausing as he sorted through years of unused training. He hadn’t actually flown a Defender, but had survived so many combat missions in standard Tie fighter that he was allowed to spend free time using the trainers and was over qualified to fly any ship of his choice. “It was a bit over priced for an R8-B7 series, but I really liked the modified color scheme and look forward to discovering whatever internal changes they made.”

“How do you know he wants to be called Red?” Kiesha asked.

Nolasco looked at her. “What?”

“Maybe it doesn’t want to be called Red,” Kiesha said.

“I’m not calling it by its serial number or is line number,” Nolasco said.

“Can it hear us?” Kiesha said.

“Of course,” Nolasco said.

“You okay if we call you Red?” Kiesha asked.

The droid beeped an affirmation and the screen on the main console translated “yes.”

“Wow,” Nolasco said, leaning forward to see if he could get a visual on what the instrumentation was telling him. He took the time to climb out of the ship, opened up several panels, made some colorful expletives, and climbed back into the ship. He sat, seemingly dazed for a moment.

“What?” Kiesha asked.

“We’re fully armed!” Nolasco said. For the life of him, he couldn’t figure it out. How could Preston have come across a fully functional, modified Tie, with complete armaments? It was not likely to have been stolen. The scenarios he created for explanation kept coming up bust.

“Is that a problem?” Kiesha asked.

“Umm, yeah, could have been,” Nolasco said. “Had customs inspected this ship, Preston might have gone to prison for a very long time.”

“Good thing he has you looking out for him,” Kiesha said.

“Yeah, well, I can’t do that forever,” Nolasco said. He looked to her. “You ready?”

Kiesha lifted her hands, indicating ‘let’s get this airborne.’ Then she kissed him.



Quintyl was not happy having the transmission cut, which only added insult to his perceived injury. He dialed up a friend. A man looked up from his paper work and smiled.

“Hello, Quintyl,” the man said.

“Pol,” Quintyl said. “What I’m about to tell you is top secret.”

“Of course,” Pol said.

“Bio Encoders is expanding their operations here on Darthomir,” Quintyl said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Just as sure as I am that I’m being railroaded out of a commission,” Quintyl said. “So here’s the thing. They bought property outside the domesticated zones, most likely to avoid hiring union workers.”

“Really?” Pol said, frowning.

“I’ve known this Nolasco guy for a long time. He is one of the top ten executives within Bio Enc, and he is the shrewdest, most money pinching, cretin I have ever met. No doubt he sent some flunkey to do the initial investments to get around some of the red tape, but once this is all in motion, he will stand to make trillions, while good, unemployed workers still collect unemployment from the state. It’s time these corporations understand they can’t keep pilfering all the profits from the less industrialized worlds. They need to put some of that back so that everyone can benefit.”

“We’ve always agreed on politics, my friend,” Pol said. “Thank you for this. Drop by, we’ll have lunch together.”

Quintyl nodded and terminated the call.

As soon as the call disconnected, Pol’s was dialing his friend, the Secretary of State. It took a moment, but the Secretary’s secretary put him through.

“Hello, Pol,” Secretary Trish Dayo said.

“Do you really think you can sneak a corporate expansion in under the radar?” Pol demanded.

Dayo smiled. “You have me at a loss, Pol.”

“Yeah, play it that way if you want, but I have a very reliable source that says Bio Enc just bought property outside the domestic territories,” Pol said. “If you think that I can’t shut down this entire planet, just continue on with this reach-around. As I’ve told you, I am for corporations making profits, as long as some of those profits return to the communities that make those profits feasible.”

Dayo’s smile held steady, but there was something in her eye that suggested she was not to be trifled with. “You know, Pol, we’ve had an excellent working relationship for a long time, so I am going to forgive the subtle threat you just made. I guarantee you, if you shut down this planet, it will be your last act as the President of the Local. So, why don’t you cool your jets and let me investigate this matter, because I assure you, this is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“I find that hard to believe, seeing how the Three Sisters is deemed government property,” Pol said.

“I’m not aware of a bid being placed on the Three Sisters, but given the deed restrictions, I suspect only a corporation as large as Bio Enc might be able to hold that place. Give me some time to investigate the matter more fully. Please. Don’t do anything rash. If there is money to be made here, there is no reason why you and I can’t collect a descent share,” Dayo said.

“Very well,” Pol agreed, terminating the call.

The Secretary put a call through to her secretary. “Hold all my calls. And get me Kolars on the phone.”



It was a perfectly clear day and from the space port they could look up and see the observatories, and look down to see the monastery and the valley beyond. A river flowed away from both sides of smaller peak, following the mountain range. From the air they had seen a third river on the other side of the mountain range, probably due to a channel cut straight into the mountain. The far side of the mountain range was mostly desert due to most of the rain failing to get over the range, which made the placement of the damn on this side ideal. On the far side of the far side of the mountain range, directly around the pooling of water before flowing away to the river was a scattering of life, a small oasis that made the desert seem less foreboding.

“Shouldn’t we go into town and get a hotel?” Lestelle asked.

“I already took liberty of having supplies delivered. There is a pod with food, toiletries, blankets, portable generators, everything we might need for a good camp out,” Preston said. “Come on, it’s a going to be a good hike down to the cloister.”

“There’s a tram,” Corissa said, pointing to the bridges connecting the three mountains.

The tram consisted of three transparent tubes interlinking the three mountains. The tram itself appeared to be pneumatically driven. The top of the tube allowed for pedestrians, with moving sidewalks interspaced through the tubes to add speed. One could, though, walk or run down the middle bypassing the moving sidewalks, perhaps taking on average 12 hours at constant marathon speed to complete a full circuit. Of course, the moving sidewalks were off line, so they would actually be walking down to base.

“The trams aren’t working,” Preston said.

“What else isn’t working?” Lestelle asked.

“What fun would you have if I told you everything in advance?” Preston asked, heading for the tubes.

“No, wait,” Ten said. “Isn’t this like a dark planet?”

Preston looked up towards the sun and then back to Ten, his hands coming up, palms directed towards the sun. She returned his unspoken sarcasm with a pout.

“I mean, like evil, in dark side of the Force?” Ten said.

“Dark is too loosely used, mostly to describe society’s latent fear of the unknown,” Preston said. “Ninety percent of this planet is still unexplored; virgin territories abound, but that doesn’t mean it’s evil. There is nothing here that can’t be found anywhere else in the Universe. Relatively speaking.”

“Well, I have a bad feeling about this,” Ten said.

“Oh, don’t say that,” Jordeen and Lestelle tried, but were too late.

Preston calmly closed the distance between him and Ten, towering over her, which might have been construed as a threat, if it weren’t for his general demeanor and projection of kindness. She translated his change in position as a sense of urgency.

“If you want me to train you in the ways of the Force, you must be more careful in your verbal expressions, both spoken and unspoken. Your words have power,” Preston said, sounding more perturbed than angry. “Be aware of your feelings, but know they are neither good nor bad. It is simply data.”

“Yeah, well, the data is telling me to run away,” Ten said.

Preston frowned. He so rarely frowned, that it was difficult to tell if he was contemplating feelings or trying to solve a problem. Was it possible her feelings were indeed valid, even if he didn't sense an immediate threat? He was aware that many people died here, brutally, but the bio-residue of those events had long dissipated into the environment, so her reaction was most likely not due to the subtle lingering of material essence, the actual fear breathed out into the environment by those suffering, but rather to the emotional energy which was taking much longer to dissipate from the environment. Environments which lacked sentient traffic, or new emotional input, took even longer to dissipate the last imprinting. Of course, she might not be reacting to the environment at all, but rather to herself, as she was still recovering from a very real and personal trauma.

"Sometimes it is up to the living to renew a place. I'm going to make this a home, a new community," Preston stated simply. "I would like you all to be a part of it, as I believe we will be safe here. Corissa, you said it yourself. You wanted to help others. We can rebuild this academy and offer educational services to orphans or victims of the war. Or maybe we will make this a sanctuary for abandoned slaves who can't find employment because they lack sufficient training or self confidence to do differently. I believe we were called together to serve, but then, maybe this is just my dream. I don't wish to impose my agenda on any of you. If you feel it best to go, I will pay Gregg to deliver you elsewhere."

"I'm staying," Jordeen said, without hesitation.

Corissa seemed hesitant and Preston wasn't sure if she was choosing to stay because the alternative was harder, or because his dream did resonate with her own sense of personal mission parameters and ideas about productivity. Here she would have access to other adults, food, shelter, but most importantly, she could devote her time to Ten, undistracted by the milieu of daily city life. "If you want me to start fixing things, I'm going to need help. Astromech droids are fairly flexible," Corissa said, not verbally committing.

Lestelle seemed to hesitate. "I am with you; however, I am going to go with Captain Gregg. After he drops off his shipment, I'll will pay him to take me to Hapes, so that I can diversify some of your funds and make them even more untraceable, hire you a ship, body guards, and more staff."

Preston turned to Ten. "What do you want?"

"Why are you asking me?" Ten asked.

"Because, no one has asked you what you wanted and I apologize for not taking that into consideration," Preston said.

"So, I have a choice?" Ten asked.

Preston shrugged.

"Not like I have anywhere else to go," Ten said.

Corissa hugged her. "Come on. A family that walks together, stays together," Corissa said. The two of them headed for the tube down.

"You sure you're going to be okay here?" Gregg asked.

"Absolutely," Preston said. "What could go wrong?"

"You know how you don't like people saying 'I have a bad feeling about this?' Well, that's how I feel about that statement," Jordeen said.

Preston considered. "Fair enough. I will be more aware of my own verbiage," Preston said. He went and hugged Lestelle. "Travel Light, my friend."

Lestelle hugged him back. "I like that saying. Where did you get it?"

Preston shrugged. "If you need anything, just call."

“Okay,” Lestelle said.

Gregg waved off a hug from Preston. He bowed and tarried while Lestelle and Gregg returned to the ship. Jordeen stood with Preston till the ship departed. It lifted easily, rotating before accelerating away. Jordeen took Prestons arm. She shivered.

“You okay?” Preston asked.

Jordeen’s focus returned to the present. “Something really bad happened here.”

Preston nodded, but didn’t fill in the blanks. He looked around as if looking into the past and seemed to radiate compassion. Jordeen hugged him.

“Thank you,” Jordeen said.

“For?”

Jordeen shrugged. “I don’t know yet,” she said.

Together they went to the cat walk, and once in the tube they could see Corissa and Ten further along. They picked up their pace to try to catch up, but when Jordeen laughed, and had to take a pause, they adjusted their pace accordingly to minimize symptomology. She rested her head on his shoulder, holding his hand. Daylight through the tube’s transparent medium was less intense than outside, but still offered a warmth that took off the chill of the air moving naturally through the tubes. CU2 got ahead of them and hovered in their path, making a request.

“Yes, go explore,” Preston agreed. “But for now, limit your collecting to intel: visual, auditory, and olfactory only. No physicl artifacts.”

Cu2 grumbled a complaint as it sputtered off searching for something fun.



To say the place was huge was not an exaggeration. The girls made their camp site in the dormitory west wing, taking the blow up mattresses and two of the portable generators, to make their campsites. They chose rooms that were closest to the labatory and set out lights so if the need arrised they could find their way. Corissa was surprised that the bathrooms were in pristine condition, but Jordeen knew that they had recently been Forced cleaned, as she could sense that Preston had been here before them. Preston decided not to secure a camp site, but instead walked around, exploring areas that he hadn’t gotten to in astral form. He got no further than the library, which pleasantly enough, had power. Soft indigo hues ran the length of the book shelves. The room was long, with the outer wall up against the lake, so that the windows looked out into the water. Light filtered through the lake entered the room, mixing with the pastel lights from the shell making a nice blend. Identifying fish occupied him for several minutes, before he finally turned to the shelves. There were actual hard cover and paperback books, interspersed with electronic chips that no doubt held academic journals from hundreds of different worlds and generations. Several of the books were personal journals that had been hand written by people who once occupied the academy. But even this didn’t hold his attention for long. At each end of the library, there was a desk butted up to the book shelf, where several HO scale trains rested. If one sat at the desk, the trains set at eye level, and the controls on the desk came to life as he sat down. He pushed a throttle forwards and the train on the immediate shelf in front of him departed, going down the length of the shelf and disappeared into an opening on the wall. A moment later, the train was going by underfoot. It was only then that he became aware that the floor was comprised of a transparent acrylic, and beneath that the entire floor of the library was a massively elaborate rail system with an artificial city landscape. The desk had monitors that allowed him to follow the progress of the train, but instead he got up and tried to follow on foot. When he got to the other side of the room he activated one of the trains on that side and sent it

down the track. A moment later, two trains were operating beneath his feet, pushing through tiny plastic villages that had possibly many hours of hand crafted effort put into them. One of the trains went outside, into the lake. Preston pushed up against the window and noticed a tube outside that ran along the wall and then entered back on the other side of the library. Fish were attracted to the chain of lights as the train made its way through the tube.

Preston wondered what would happen if the two trains collided, and then he noticed that the acrylic top floor was cut in sections that could be lifted to get access to the trains and villages below. Part of the village was constructed with blocks, revealing construction styles changed denoting different sentient contributions to the tiny fictional world beneath his feet. As he followed the track back to the other side of the library he came across a three dimensional printer. Apparently, its last instructions were to make blocks, which had collected in a container. Preston examined these, and began to assemble and disassemble them. He activated the 3-d printer. The present printing menu showed a box set of connecting blocks, that if assembled could make either an imperial walker, or several other items depending on the configuration desired. The possibilities were endless, but this specific collection had four demonstrated options with instructions for creating them. There were other block sets available on the menu. He scrolled through and found a sand crawler, complete with droids and little plastic Jawas. He pushed print. The machine began to craft each individual block, sometimes five at a time, sweeping the completed blocks into a container at the end of the work station.

Preston sat down on the floor right there and began assembling pieces, spilling what was in the box into a pile in front of him. He shifted through them, examining each, connecting them, pulling them apart. He tried prying two stuck pieces with his teeth and decided that wasn't practical, then popped them apart with the Force. The task set before him was such a simple joy that he was surprised when Ten was seemingly suddenly upon him.

"What are you doing?"

Preston looked up to Ten. "I'm playing."

Ten's face suggested disbelief. "You're playing with blocks?" Ten asked, skeptically.

"Oh, yeah, this is much nicer than sand mandalas. Well, maybe that's not fair. It's different, how about that?" Preston asked. He beamed happiness.

Ten sat down next to him on the floor. She sighed heavily. Preston looked at her.

"I don't think I like it here," Ten said.

"Already?" Preston asked.

"It's too quiet here. I am bored," Ten said.

Preston nodded, searching through a pile of blocks for a specific piece. He liked the sound of shuffling blocks that he kept pushing them around. "Well, be careful equating quiet with boredom. Remember, you come from an environment that is over stimulated with sounds and lights, but we are healthiest in environments that are immersed in nature, with only some tech. 24 7 entertainment and distraction is like eating only candy. Your brain needs this. Listen to the wind, to the trees, to gentle rain, meditate with the morning or evening sun. Walk in nature."

"Yeah, I get it," Ten said, not convinced. "But I miss my tunes. I found a player in one of the rooms and soon as I touched it, the thing fried."

"Yeah. I want you to practice energy meditation with Jordeen. She will help get that under control," Preston said.

"But until then, I can't do anything with tech?"

"Want to play blocks with me?" Preston asked.

Ten tried to suppress her own mirth, before focusing on a negative. “You’re making an AT-AT?” Ten asked.

“Well, the blocks were already in there, so I thought I might as well,” Preston said.

“Why do boys always make things of war?” Ten asked.

Preston considered, pausing in the construction. “I don’t know. Would you like me to stop?”

“It won’t make any difference,” Ten said.

“What would you like to make?” Preston asked.

Ten shrugged. Preston got up and scrolled through some of the options, with Ten joining and looking over his shoulders. She responded favorably to a house set, and together they added people, animals, and a variety of garden paraphernalia, making it priority over his sand crawler. Preston returned to the floor as her pieces began to drop in the box. She took the first of her pieces with some of the others that had accumulated since she entered and sat down in front of the pile of blocks on the floor. Preston began disassembling the AT-AT to make a spaceship. She asked if she could use some of his pieces and he nodded enthusiastically. As he watched her home developing, he noticed a pattern. One of her peoples carried a wrench. Another carried a book, which was probably Lestelle, based on the hair that she clipped into place. The Twilek person was a no brainer. And then there was a male human, holding a lightsaber. And then there was her, a character that had a heart painted on the torso. The Jedi character was holding the mechanic’s persons hands

“It kind of looks like you chose to make us,” Preston said.

“Why can’t I have a normal family like this?” Ten asked.

Preston shrugged. “Do we seem normal to you?”

Ten frowned, but didn’t answer. “Do you suppose there had been families living here?”

“I’m certain of it,” Preston said.

“Why would they go and leave all of their stuff? I mean, if there were kids, wouldn’t they at least take the toys with them? More than that, why hasn’t there been any vandalism, or theft? It seems bizarre.”

Preston considered his response, knowing there wasn’t one specific answer, but a multitude of overlapping issues. He could discern fairly easy the history if he touched the Force, but he found it wasn’t necessary to follow the thread at this particular moment, and he quickly lost interest. A train passed underneath them. Ten started.

“What was that?!”

“It’s a train,” Preston said.

“Oh, wow, that scared the crap out of me!” Ten said. “It’s automatic?”

“It’s both. Want to drive one?” Preston asked.

“You sure it’s okay?” Ten said. “I don’t want to break it.”

“I doubt you can break it, but if you do, it can be fixed. Oh, yeah, your Force thing. The controls are EMP pulse protected. Who ever built this system wanted it to last,” Preston said, leading Ten to the ‘East’ station controls. “Use that control pad to select the next train and use the throttle to send it into the mix. I haven’t figured out all the controls here, but this analogue dial seems to alter the brightness of the lights.”

“I think I can figure it out,” Ten protested, pulling optional menu’s revealing a complexity that even Preston hadn’t considered. One could not only control each train, but one could alter track placement if need be, and call up views from cameras in the pretend village, front and back of the train, or even views where passengers would sit.

After being schooled by Ten, he went to the adjoining 'West' control station and booted up his screen. It was interesting seeing the individual cars of the train lift off the track as its magnetic repulsors were activated. The running lights along the sides, as well as interior lighting, made it seem less toyish and more real. A few switches later, Ten was moving another train into the make believe world of blocks.

"How many can we have out there?" Ten asked, yelling over to him.

"Let's find out," Preston said, lighting up the train in front of him. "Put your headset on," he yelled back to her, picking up the mic and head set on the shelf in front of him. "Testing, testing, can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, train master," Ten said, glad her set didn't blow up in her hands. "Sending my last train out now, six cars in tow." A screen bounced to the forefront of her groupings, highlighting a section of track where a collision was likely. "Do you see that?"

"I do. I'm slowing train alpha down," Preston said. The warning went away and the collision was neatly avoided. "You're going to have to speed gamma up."

"I see it," Ten said. A well time switch activation allowed two other trains to avoid colliding. "All your trains out?"

"Last one coming down the line now," Preston said.



Corissa found Jordeen in the kitchen trying to determine if any of the contents were salvageable. She had found some spices preserved in stasis packaging, but most of the items were in need of discarding, if the box of trash growing beside her was any indication.

"Oh, hey," Jordeen said, tossing another container into a box. She delivered a smile intended to break Corissa's seriousness. "You may be happy to know that we're not limited to the rations Preston bought. There are some fruit bearing trees and gardens stepped out down the mountain and I'm pretty sure some of these canned items on this shelf are still edible."

"I would throw all of that out," Corissa said, not trusting it. "Have you seen Ten?"

"Umm, no, but I'm sure she is around," Jordeen said.

Corissa frowned, concern clearly visible on her face.

"I asked her to stay close. We are going to need radios until I get the comm. system up and running," Corissa said.

"Put it on the list," Jordeen said, indicating the pad on the counter.

Corissa updated the list and then decided to continue her search for Ten. Jordeen volunteered to join her, wanting a break from the inspection. She had discovered sufficient foods that they would eat a fair meal, with or without rations, so the rest was simply inventorying and cleaning. Corissa was curious about Jordeen's slow pace, but she didn't pry. She simply assumed it was an injury from her previous work environment. After about thirty minutes, they found the library and stood in the center doorway, neither willing to commit for fear of interrupting. Ten was laughing.

"So, I guess not everything is broken," Jordeen said.

"Pfff," Corissa said. "Yeah, everything is."

"How do you mean?" Jordeen said.

"I slept with him and he's clearly only twelve years old," Corissa said.

Jordeen laughed, a genuine, not the erotic, compulsive laugh she frequently endured, giving Corissa insight into her new friend. There were clearly different laughs, begging a

question, but she didn't press. Jordeen would reveal when she was ready. That, and Corissa was dealing with enough of her own to be worrying about another individual.

"Hey, both of you," Corissa said, breaking in on the game. "We will be having lunch in the cloister in thirty minutes. I expect you both there, with your hands washed!"

Corissa turned and walked back the way she came. Jordeen followed after lingering for just a moment. She risked putting herself in a 'turn over' to catch up with Corissa.

"You slept with him, too?" Jordeen asked.

Corissa sighed. "I don't know what I was thinking," she lamented.

"You didn't enjoy it?" Jordeen asked.

Corissa stopped, puzzled. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"He and I share a particular training," Jordeen began.

"In pleasure?" Corissa asked.

"Pleasure is an important aspect, but the gift is primarily about healing through truth realization, of which intimacy accelerates the process," Jordeen said. "The philosophy has many names, can be found in every sentient culture, but the most consistent and accurate nomenclature is Daka Master for males, and Dakini Master for females."

"Great, not only are you a slave, you're part of a sex cult," Corissa said.

"Not really accurate," Jordeen said. "We're no more a cult than being a Jedi. We participate in the flow of energy that is life."

"Whatever. I think it is a rationalization for being polyamorous. At least your disclosure explains my fear that he can never be loyal and reinforces my concerns for having spent time with him," Corissa said.

"Preston? He will be fiercely loyal, but like Jedi's, we are encouraged not to form permanent attachments, as we are commissioned to heal all that come to us, in whatever form that healing takes place," Jordeen said. "We believe that the body is a temporary vessel. Our true essence is Light, or more accurately thought. In the higher realms, our thoughts have instant results. So, for instance, here on this plane, if you were walking down the street and you saw someone you were attracted to and fantasized about being intimate, there is a delay and even blocks to that actually coming about. But in the higher planes, you have that thought and the act follows, instantaneously. That is why we so highly stress practicing pure, direct honesty here, because your thoughts, both conscious and unconscious, will have profound affects in the afterlife."

"I think your life as a slave has distorted your perception of reality and destroyed your personal boundaries," Corissa said.

Jordeen tilted her head, considering, but no signs that she was offended ever crossed her face. She even started nodding before speaking. "It sounds like what you're asking for is safety. I'm not disparaging you in the least, but merely pointing out that this unspoken need that everything be defined for your own sense of security simultaneously promotes the unspoken fear that there is danger out there."

"There is danger out there. There are really bad people who would kill you just the same as look at you," Corissa said.

"Yeah," Jordeen agreed. "But it's the fear that influences us, not the reality. And I'm certainly not saying that I have never felt fear. I have. I have also had a string of terrible failures, falling short of my calling. I have made really poor decisions all based on my perceived fears, decisions to both act and not to act when I know I should have."

Corissa sighed. “I can at least relate to that,” she said. “Look, I’m sorry if I seem harsh. I don’t know you. I don’t trust easy. And, I don’t like change. There has been a lot of changes. Huge changes.”

Jordeen nodded. “In your own time. I will not rush your friendship, but know, I already consider you family,” she said. As she said that, she noticed Corissa’s shoulders and neck stiffen with muscle tension as if she feared Jordeen might hug her. Jordeen allowed Corissa to walk away without further interpretation or spoken observations, and instead focused on how much love she was feeling for these people.



Twenty five minutes later, the trains were back in their parked positions and Ten and Preston were walking up to have lunch. They were discussing perspectives on reality and whose position was correct.

“So it’s all illusion?” she asked, having heard him say something to that effect.

“Yes and no,” Preston said. “There is truth. Truth exists. The Force exists. Consider the Force to be like an ocean that we all live in, and we are but the waves. We are no less ocean than the waves, but our identities are not the waves themselves. Remember, one needs to use analogies to come closer to the truth, but you can’t use the analogy as an absolute. An analogy is like holding a candle to the surface of a planet and saying, oh, look this is a galaxy cluster. Yeah, the spot under my foot is in a solar system in a galaxy in a group of galaxies but that does not mean I can derive at any sane conclusion about the whole of it all, other than the whole of it all is in the part and part is in the whole.”

“This is beyond me,” Ten lamented. “I will never get it.”

“Pfft, not if you keep saying that.”

“If I meditate, will I get it?” Ten asked.

“Not if that’s why you meditate,” Preston said. “Meditation should be a non-goal oriented activity.”

“That doesn’t make sense. You have to have goals,” Ten argued. “Like, maybe I should meditate on an imaginary pool of water and I have to make the ripples still.”

“Pff, only if you want an exercise in frustration,” Preston chuckled.

“I thought that’s what you guys do,” Ten said, disappointed.

“Water is a really tough medium to work with. Water by definition is always moving, and so is your mind, water is moving and your mind is moving, and well, let’s just say that there are masters who don’t work with water,” Preston said, as they came to the table. “I applaud that you are thinking this through, though. Start with some small steps. Here’s your gift for the day. There are three rules to first level of understanding. First rule: everyone one suffers. Second rule, suffering is subjective. Third rule, if it is true that suffering is subjective, then suffering is an illusion.”

“It doesn’t feel like an illusion,” Ten said.

“And that’s the boundary of our first cage,” Preston said.

“Do I have to be a Jedi to discern the boundary?” Ten asked.

“You can be anything you want,” Corissa said, finding herself again in an argument against being a mystic.

“I want to be a scavenger,” Ten said.

“A scavenger?” Corissa asked, too late to hide that that wouldn’t have been her first choice for her.

“Yeah,” Ten said. “I want my own spaceship and I want to visit all the ancient space arenas and sift through the debris for technology or treasure. I bet I can find a functioning lightsaber in all that mess.”

“That sounds like a fine job. Certainly credits to be had if you’re successful,” Jordeen said, putting a bowl of rice down in front of each of them. She then dished out soup from the boiling pot on the table and poured it over their rice.

“You can teach me to pilot a ship, can’t you?” Ten asked, directing the query to Preston.

“Any computer can teach you that. What you really want is to follow Corissa around and learn how to fix things. That’s handier than being just a pilot, and would certainly help you in determining the value of your finds,” Preston said.

“That’s what Droids are for,” Ten argued.

“You don’t want to be completely dependent on Droids for maintenance,” Corissa said. “Even Droids break down.”

“They have Droids for that, too,” Ten said. “You’re not going to try and persuade me into a different career, are you?”

“Do you want us to persuade you?” Preston said.

Ten shrugged.



After lunch, Preston went and found a quiet place to meditate. He hadn’t really taken inventory of how much energy he had depleted and his trance took him so deep that on returning to the present moment he was disorientated. He felt a presence that he couldn’t explain, but was certain that it wasn’t a ghost or his imaginations. He imagined Darth Vader and he were circling, searching for weaknesses before engaging in epic battle, but he passed it off as imagination. Who didn’t want to go up against the ultimate evil and say he or she won? When no other feeling or impression made itself immediately known, he continued to take inventory of his environment. As he did, the feeling diminished. The sun had set. He could sense that his folks had settled in for the night. To his knowledge, no one had checked on him, or if they had, he had been so deep that he had not been aware of their presence. He felt lonely. It had been a long time since he actually felt this emotion to this degree of intensity. It was a profound loneliness that conversations with Fixit had rarely helped, as if he were lost and that there was no way to get back home. There were nights he had cried himself to sleep due to the overwhelming qualities of the feelings. Self-soothing was an option, of course, but this was the first time that he had other options. He wandered down to Corissa’s campsite and knocked lightly on the door. When no response came, he knocked a little louder. A moment later, the door opened.

“What?” Corissa asked.

“I was wondering if I might sleep with you,” Preston said.

“Isn’t that what you have a slave girl for?” Corissa asked.

Preston cocked his head to the right. “Jordeen is not a slave.”

“So, you don’t hold papers?” Corissa asked.

“I hold papers, but she is free,” Preston said.

“So, go hold her,” Corissa said.

“I don’t want to hold her, I want to sleep with you,” Preston said.

“I heard you. Get this straight. You and I will never be intimate again,” Corissa said. He blinked. “I think we’re miscommunicating,” Preston said. “I’m not asking to be intimate with you. I’m asking if I can sleep with you.”

“You don’t want to be intimate with me?” Corissa asked, forcing herself to whisper her anger. She looked back just to make sure she hadn’t wakened Ten.

“I’m still confused. You think I’m asking you for sex?” Preston asked.

“You’re not asking for sex?”

“Do you want me to ask for sex?” Preston asked.

“Yes, no, stop trying to trick me,” Corissa said.

“How am I trying to trick you? I’m tired, lonely, and I just wanted to be next to you,” Preston said.

“I’m not your mother. Go seek comfort somewhere else,” Corissa said.

“Why is this so complicated?” Preston asked.

Corissa put a hand on his chest and pushed him away from the door. “Look,” Corissa said. “It’s inappropriate for you to sleep here. Ten is sharing my room. You’re going to have to take care of your own needs.”

Preston bowed. “Forgive my intrusion,” Preston said.

Corissa returned to her room and shut the door quietly. The portable heater gave enough light that she found her way back to the air mattress without stumbling. It made a soft noise of protest as she settled. Covered and comfortable, she looked over to Ten. Her eyes were still closed.

“He loves you,” Ten said.

“I’m sorry. Did we wake you?” Corissa asked.

“No,” Ten said, opening her eyes. “Just faking sleep and hoping it comes. I think this was an imperial base. Do you think there are any booby traps?”

“Well, this place was funded by the Empire, but I suspect it was more a political front as opposed to a true research facility,” Corissa said.

“You think they will return?”

“The Imperials? No. There’s nothing here but memories. What’s left of the Empire is relegated to skirmishes and petty power plays,” Corissa said. She reached over and grabbed her bottled water off the floor. She took a sip.

“But they left so much stuff here,” Ten said, still obsessing over how much stuff people had left behind. “It’s like walking through a graveyard.”

“People do that sometimes,” Corissa said. In truth, she didn’t like it either. It was a bad omen that this place hadn’t at least been gutted for metal and parts at the least. It wasn’t like the nearest city government would be policing the area for looters or vandals.

“Do you love Preston?” Ten asked.

“You are just full of questions tonight,” Corissa said.

“I always have questions and I’m used to being ignored, but I’m not sure how to handle deflections,” Ten said.

“Sorry. I forget how sophisticated you are. Please be patient with me,” Corissa asked.

“Okay,” Ten said. “Do you love him?”

Corissa sighed. “I don’t know.”

“Are you a couple?” Ten asked.

“No.”

“You argue like a couple,” Ten observed.

“Fighting doesn’t make people a couple,” Corissa said.

“It does in my world. You are angry around him. Easily flustered. Like in the holonovels,” Ten said. “Isn’t that love?”

“No, that’s just entertainment,” Corissa said.

“I used to not believe there was love,” Ten said.

“You’ve had it rough, Ten. Your life isn’t normal,” Corissa said.

“Isn’t it? Anyway, I’ve had lots of guys say they love me, even promise to take me away, give me a good life, but after they got their fix, they are gone, and I always wondered what more I could have done to make it last, make it better,” Ten said, reflectively.

Corissa’s eyes streamed tears. “I’m so sorry, Ten.”

“Why? I said I used to not believe in love. You and Preston haven’t said you love me, but I think you do. You took me away, when no one else would, even those who would use me. You two won’t use me. That is love. Or, that’s what I am choosing to believe. For now. Until it blows up.”

“You think it’s going to blow up?”

“Everything blows up,” Ten said.



After leaving Corissa, Preston did stop at Jordeen’s door. When she didn’t respond to a light rapping, he projected inside long enough to determine she was definitely asleep. He returned to his body and took himself for a walk. Four moons were up in the night sky; waxing, full, waning, almost gone. He found himself on the walkway going straight up to the highest peak. From base to observatory, the incline was fairly steep, but not impossible. It didn’t go straight to the top, but instead perhaps a quarter of the way down. From there, he found a functioning lift and took that to the top of the peak. The other option was to walk the steps winding up the outside wall of the peak. He soon found himself at the center of the peak, looking straight up. The night sky was much different here than his home moon. There was enough light from the moons to see that a star had been painted on the ground. There was also a hatch, which he opened just to see what was in it. What he found were a number of portable, personal telescopes. There were six refractors, and seven reflectors of various sizes. He pulled out a refractor using the Force, closed the hatch, and set the scope down. He spent the next few hours observing the moons. He also spent time focusing on the brightest star he could find. Though it wasn’t the closest, the scopes onboard computer identified it and there was a menu option to explore more details. Though it would not be detectable to his eyes, the scopes computer would have detected planets orbiting the star by a decrease in visible light as the planets as they transited.

Preston blinked. He remembered this star and one of its planets. It was the very planet where he had met Corissa and saved her life. His amazement of this random discovery further convinced him of the power of the Force. Based on the distance of the star, the light he was seeing now in his telescope would have left the star at the same time he was rescuing Corissa. There wasn’t a scope powerful enough to allow him to zoom in on the planet and actually re-witness the event, but if there was such a thing, he would be able to watch himself rescue her! He wanted to rush down and share his excitement with Corissa, but he restrained himself. It was a treasure he would have to cherish alone.

Preston put the scope back and entered observatory at the most north position. For whatever reason, he couldn't get the dome door to open. He groped around looking for a blown circuit, but found nothing that would indicate why the door wouldn't open.

Preston found the control room for the scope itself, but didn't bother with that since he couldn't figure out how to open the sliding door. He found an office, an old desk computer, hand written notes on a tablet that had yellowed with age. He sat at the desk, trying to get a feel for the person who had worked here. He spun slowly in the chair, taking in the office. A window faced away from the mountain down over a desert landscape, with sand offering a sparkling reflection of moonlight. There was a section of the wall that looked slightly ajar, or somehow just 'off.' He got up touched it to see if his eyes were fooling him. It depressed in and opened, revealing a recessed or purposely hidden closet. There was a large, thin crate that almost perfectly filled the space inside. Preston sat back down. He continued to rotate in the chair. He decided he liked the chair and took inventory of the room as he spun. An empty fish tank. The desk. A file cabinet. A model of a Lambda class T4a shuttle. The crate.

Preston got up and opened the file cabinet. Not surprisingly, there were files. Star systems. Personnel. Students. Fleet schedules. Facility mission statements on public literature. This instantly fixed in his mind that there were secret agendas behind the facility's construction. He went back and sat down. He pushed the power supply on the computer. Nothing happened. He spun the chair again. When his chair came to a halt on its own, he got up and left the office. Then he came back and went to the crate. It was locked. He considered using his lightsaber, just because he was feeling tired and lazy, but he touched the lock with the palm of his hand and closed his eyes. It was a simple lock, with tumblers, so didn't require an electronic key, just a physical key. It was probably built that way for nostalgia. With the Force he saw the tumbler position, turned the lock, and opened the crate. Moonlight illuminated the contents.

Preston smiled.

Inside the box was a mint condition, BD-3000, Luxury Droid. He stared for a long moment, part of him ecstatic at his find, and then part of him feeling fairly embarrassed by just how much excitement he was experiencing. He tried to sort out his feelings, but decided he would explore the complexity of his emotions later. For the present, he decided to surrender to the impulse to touch the Droid. Though she appeared to be metallic, she had realistic human feeling skin, while other parts felt like flesh underneath spandex clothing. It was the most human face he had ever seen on a droid. He wondered just how far this droid could take things, and felt the flush of amorousness flowing through his blood. If Fixit had come in this frame, he wouldn't have left the cave, he mused.

He took his hand up along the side of her torso, across her chest and up to her neck, brushed the lips and cheeks, ran his fingers through her hair, and then down the arm, ending with the hand. The hand squeezed back and he nearly jumped out of his body.

The Droids eyes opened. "Thank you for your purchase of the LeisureMech Enterprises, BD-3000. All systems are functioning, though my batteries will be charging over the next couple of hours. Standard serving protocols in play. How may I serve you, Professor?"

"Professor?" Preston asked.

"I have reasonable evidence that I was to be sold to a Professor of physics. Is that you?" she asked.

"I think I am going to keep you," Preston said, fairly certain that the Professor was no longer counted among the living, but he was too distracted to validate his belief.

“I am happy I please you,” she said, taking her free hand and joining it to her other hand, sandwiching his hand between hers. There was a gentle, amber glow within her eyes, drawing him in.

“You wish to kiss me?” she asked.

“Um,” Preston said, swallowing. Was she that perfect and able to read body language and unspoken intent or was that programming. “Yes, I do. Do you have a name?”

“I was designated Freya,” the Droid said. “However, if you have a preference, a name is only a perfunctory label.”

“Freya is perfect,” Preston said. “I’m Preston G Waycaster.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Professor Preston G Waycaster.”

“Um, just Preston,” Preston said.

Preston continued to stare at her and she continued to hold his hand.

“Would you like to come out of the box?” Preston asked presently.

“If it pleases you,” Freya said.

“It would,” Preston said.

Freya stepped out of the box as gracefully as a ballerina. Preston backed out of the office, and she followed, demonstrating perfect poise, as her gyro stabilized gait was surprisingly human. The slight shift of her hourglass torso, with the moonlight coming directly behind her from the window, gave it the illusion of that of a silhouette of a naked, human female. She followed him up a staircase and outside onto the mountain top, where the moonlight glistened off her skin. Preston sat down, lotus style. She sat in front of him, mirroring him.

“Are you cold?” Freya asked.

“I am okay,” Preston said.

“Are you sure you would not like to reconsider your response?” Freya asked. “For I would be happy to provide heat for you.”

“Umm, well, put like that, I am interested in the logistics,” Preston said.

“I promise not to injure you,” Freya said. “Unless you request it.”

“Um, no, gentle is nice. Are you sure your power supply can hold up to the demand?” Preston asked.

“There is a magnetic resonance charger connecting all the observatories. I will not be depleted, though activity demands could increase the charge time,” Freya said.

“Do you require privacy?”

“No, I am a droid,” Freya said. “Do you?”

“Um, no, I was raised by a droid,” Preston said.

They sat there in the moonlight, simply observing each other.

“Do you wish me to engage you first?” Freya asked.

“I don’t know what the protocol is,” Preston said.

Freya seemed to offer a smile. “I am a Droid. Protocols and foreplay are unnecessary. You just engage when ready.”

“I’m pretty much always ready,” Preston said, thinking about it. He scratched his forehead. “But wouldn’t you like protocols?”

“Again, I am a Droid,” Freya insisted. “However, I will naturally engage in whatever conventions that facilitate your care and comfort.”

Preston pondered this.

Freya tilted her head, curious about what was taking so long for him to act. “Do you require me to change my skin tone or color schemes?”

Preston shook his head, no.

“Do you wish me to decrease my waist size, or increase the size of my breast?” Freya asked.

“You can do that?” Preston asked.

“Sure. I can adjust all my physical attributes to make myself more appealing to you if you like,” Freya offered. “I can be shorter, taller, longer legs, shorter legs, neck, facial features, alter the hair style and color...”

“All of that might be fun, but I find you exceedingly pleasant to look at and can’t imagine altering things at this time,” Preston assured her.

Freya pursed her lips, trying to understand the delay. Programmers had been very clear that Droids were solicited into consummating services immediately after coming out of the box, sometimes even before coming out of the box. It was impressed upon them that the consumers of these Droids were often people who were very isolated and needed the safety and physical contact that only a Droid could provide, and the service the Droids provided were crucial for securing the emotional and mental health of their owners, which in turn improved society.

“Will I be your first?” Freya asked.

“You will be my first Droid,” Preston said.

Freya decided to take the initiative, leaned forward, both hands going to his knees, her lips touching his and holding firm contact. They were as warm as a human’s lips and there was the hint of moisture and the movement of air, and surprisingly even a tongue. Her responses were measured and growing in enthusiasm. He could discern the subtle refacting of both starlight and moonlight around her body, the lensing effect of light passing through the air heated by her body. Though the programming was there, this was Freya’s first time to be intimate, and so each kiss was an experiment in applying appropriate pressure to meet the needs of her owner. She pushed closer to him, her hands walking up his body, pushing him back to the ground. Had he not been capable of extreme yoga, he might have hurt his legs or experienced cramps. His back on the ground, he lifted his buttocks and unfolded his legs. Freya straddled him, her eagerness growing. She found the buttons on his shirt and undid them.

“You must let me know if I am hurting you,” Freya warned him.

“Okay,” Preston said, gasping.

“Do you require medical assistance?” Freya asked, pausing in her escalation.

“No, just need to generate more red blood cells,” Preston said. “The air is thinner than what I’m used to.”

“Do you want me to stop?” Freya asked.

“No!” Preston said, almost laughing at the urgency of his own response. “And let me know if I hurt you.”

Freya stopped, cocked her head to the right, and then produced an odd, little laugh. “Ha, HA!” It was almost a hiccup. “I’m a droid, Professor. You can’t harm me.”

Freya pressed on. Preston began assisting her in the removing of his clothes.

“No,” Freya said. “Allow me. The more I do for you, the more I touch you, the quicker I will learn. My skin sensors are capable of processing information, detecting both sub-dermal electrical activity and galvanic response. As you feel pleasure, I, too, will learn to interpret your reactions and in time, I will feel as much pleasure as you. Allow me to savor this first moment, to take my time and explore your reaction potentials.”

“Well, I am so excited, I might finish, umm, prematurely,” Preston said.

“Ha HA!” Freya said, swallowing the last squeak of a laugh. “Please, do. So this way I may learn what it takes to push you over the threshold, what I must do to delay you, and what I might do to escalate you.”

“Oh, well, that...” Preston closed his eyes and gave into the moment.

Freya put her full weight on him, kissed him gently. “That’s one,” she whispered. “Ready for two?”

“Well,” Preston began, thinking ‘not yet,’ but surprisingly, he was responding to her gentle rocking. “Okay.”



Preston woke, but kept his eyes closed. He was using Freya as a pillow and the contrast from her warmth to the almost freezing temperatures was stark. Her left arm was draped over his chest. Her hand resting on his shoulder, sort of a hug. He didn’t want to get up, but he also wanted to get back before breakfast. He was also wondering what Corissa would think of him if he knew of his activities, but he had no intent to hide Freya, and he wondered why he cared what she thought, or why he suspected she would have a feeling, but he was certain she would not approve. He was about to rise when he noticed a glimmering in the Force. With joy, he stepped up a level away from his body.

“Ashia?” Preston asked.

Ashia was there, bowing towards him. He mirrored her, then they embraced, put an arm around him, and they walked, to nowhere specific.

“Is there work for me?” Preston asked.

“I sensed you were worried, so I was checking in on you,” Ashia said.

“I’m content,” Preston said.

“Are you sure?” Ashia asked.

“Well, I’m finding relationships challenging, and miscommunications rampant, and I’m experiencing a little doubt in abilities and philosophies,” Preston said.

“Oh, well, if it’s just all that,” Ashia said, playfully dismissing it the same way Preston was.

“I know we’ve touched on this, but I would like greater clarity.”

“Proceed.”

“Do Droids have souls?” Preston asked.

Ashia stopped their perceived forward progress. “There is only consciousness. It is a mistake to believe your body, or any other material body, is anything less than pure energy,” Ashia said.

“Thank you,” Preston said.

“Of course,” Ashia said. “Anything else on your mind?”

“I think life’s going to become uncomfortable soon,” Preston said. “Will they suffer because of me?”

“Not because of you,” Ashia assured him.

Preston nodded, but still found that maintaining correct perspective was becoming increasingly more challenging. “I don’t think I can stop what’s coming,” Preston said.

Ashia said nothing. She simply hugged him, poured love directly into him. She placed him back into his body the same way a lover might put an ill spouse into bed. He heard the words in his mind: “There will be a calm before this storm. Be at peace.”

Preston sat up. Freya followed suit.

“Are you well?” Freya asked.

“I am,” Preston said, standing.

“Would you like to play some more?” Freya asked.

“I would love to, but we have a bit of a walk to get back before breakfast,” Preston said.

“Can you run?”

“I love running,” Freya said.

Preston offered her a hand. Though she didn't need his help up, she did take the offer and stood. Preston was very aware that she lifted herself on her own power, as he didn't feel any shift in weight from her to him. At 1.76 meters, and maybe two hundred kilos, thanks to selective choice in building materials, she moved with the poise of a gymnast but the grace of a trained runway model. Her heels retracted so that she appeared to be running with bare feet, and she moved as quietly as a Jedi trying to avoid detection. They descended a ramp that inclined the outer rim of the mountain down to the upper tube that allowed pedestrians the ability to cross in the event of a severe power outage, or for taking a leisure, scenic route, or for those hard endurance enthusiasts. Instead of going the long, steep tube down to the First Sister, they took the other option and arrived at the Second Sister, emerged from the tunnel, proceeded up the ramp to run across the landing platform. Preston brought them to a halt in order to observe a shuttle landing. It retracted its lower wings, settled, and a ramp emerged. Kolers descended.

“A bit of pre-dawn run?” Kolers asked.

Preston nodded, offered a hand, but Kolers moved past him to inspect the droid.

“Wow, she must have set you back some credits,” Kolers said.

“Yeah, well,” Preston began, but decided it was okay for people to have their own misconceptions about things. “How can I help you?”

“Oh, yeah, business,” Kolers said, his eyes diverting back to the Droid from time to time. “Apparently there are some issues with the transfer of property. Small things, mostly bureaucratic stuff. I need you to come with and help sort it out. Maybe take a couple hours.”

“Oh,” Preston said. He considered alerting his friends, but a blink of an eye told him they were all sleeping, and perhaps the best sleep they had all had in a long time. He mused. There was a list of items they needed to retrieve from the nearest town, so in some ways, it seemed Kolers arrival was fortuitous, which impressed on Preston that this was a Force occasion. “Okay. May I bring Freya?”

“Sure,” Kolers said.

Freya followed the two humans up and positioned herself on the jump seat, directly behind Kolers so that she could maintain eye contact with Preston. This didn't mean she watched him obsessively, as she was attentive to her surroundings, occasionally looked out the window, and was definitely listening to the somewhat random conversation, but she didn't participate unless asked a question. And even in that, her most common response was, “Forgive me, I'm only recently activated and have insufficient knowledge on the subject.”

Kolers delivered him to a fairly busy terminal where a spaceport, airport, and major train terminal converged into one. Peoples and droids bustled about in steady streams, which in many ways resembled the pedestrians on Axila, content to focus on their tech which proceeded them on their journeys. Kolers introduced Preston to Min, Secretary Doya's personal assistant, and handed him off. Min seemed surprised at how polite Preston was, as her experience with the wealthy dignitaries suggested that they were rude to those that served, and almost always in a hurry. Preston gave her such attention that she felt time had stopped and that nothing else

mattered. She shivered, having never felt such focus before. Min escorted Preston and Freya to a car, which was quickly air borne. He noticed she kept looking back at his droid.

“It was nice of you to make yourself available on such short notice,” Min said, trying to make small talk that didn’t sound frivolous.

“No worries,” Preston said. He tried not to stare at her. He imagined he should be satiated after his interlude with Freya, but at last, he was finding himself to be insatiable, and there was something about Min that he wanted to discover. Though it was possible there was a spark of shared interest that was amplifying his desire, he decided to assume it was all him, and merely observed his wanting as opposed to trying to suppress it or act on it.

“Did Kolers tell you what the Senator needed to speak to you about?” Min asked, actively suppressing her own interest for fear of offending someone she saw as a VIP.

“Not really,” Preston said. “But I find these things tend to take care of themselves.”

Min laughed, perhaps too easily she silently reprimanded herself, but agreed in principle with the philosophy Preston espoused.

“May I ask you a question?” she asked.

“Of course,” Preston said, relieved she would address the ‘Ranchor in the room.’

“Are you a Jedi?” she asked.

“You ask because?” Preston asked, his voice trailing to encourage her to fill in the blank, but hiding his disappointment of the direction.

“You’re very intense,” Min said.

Preston nodded. “So I’ve been told,” he said. “No, I’m not of the order, and if you permit, I find you equally engaging. You’re paying attention. So many people don’t seem to be present. I like that about you.”

Min smiled, but had to turn her attention back to driving. Min landed their vehicle on a small pad at the corner of a building. The entire top floor belonged to the Secretary of State, as it was her personal estate. They exited the vehicle, descended down the stairs to a large patio, complete with pool, and an open air kitchen. Chairs and potted shrubs lined the wall of the patio and there were several glass tables with matching chairs placed strategically around the yard for ultimate parties. Secretary of State Doya emerged from the interior of her home through a large, plate glass door, with a curtain tied back on either side. She came straight way to introduce herself, offering her hand, palm down. Preston of course took it, but he wasn’t sure if he was supposed to kiss her knuckles like in a holonovel, or just merely meet hands. He went for the novel approach, one hand behind back, bowing slightly, kissing her knuckle.

“How lovely to finally meet you,” Doya said. “Nolasco, right?”

“Umm? No, I’m Preston G Waycaster,” Preston said.

Doya seemed taken aback. “I’m sorry. I thought you were the new owner of the Three Sister’s Academy.”

“I am,” Preston said.

“Oh, well, then you’re the one I want to see. I was just suspecting someone a little older,” Doya said. “Do forgive me?”

“No worries,” Preston said, unable to look away from the Secretary.

“Is there something wrong with my face?” she asked.

“I apologize. It’s just that you’re the first ebony person I’ve had the pleasure to meet,” Preston said.

“Really? Where were you raised, on a farm?” Doya asked.

“In a cave,” Preston said. “You’re quite stunning.”

"I'm sure you say that to all the ladies," Doya said.

Preston considered. "I've selectively shared. Should I be more forthcoming?"

Doya laughed. "Share as you like. You're dismissed, Min," Doya said without looking at her assistant.

Preston touched Min's arm, causing her pause. "Thank you, Min. I look forward to our next meeting."

Min bowed, sharing a smile that she hoped he understood was an invitation.

"You can have the day off, Min. I have it from here," Doya said. If she saw the exchange between the two, she gave no evidence to any regards or opinions.

"Thank you, Secretary Doya," Min said, bowing. She quickly took her exit.

The Secretary turned to Freya. "Quite exquisite," Doya cooed. "May I touch it?"

"Freya?" Preston asked.

"Whatever pleases my Master pleases me," Freya said.

"Nice programming," Doya said. "And I like the voice. Oh, how soft. It looks like metal, but it feels like human skin."

"Yeah. I am curious why they don't just make a completely human looking droid," Preston said. "They have the technology. They use it all the time in making artificial limbs for humans, even going as far as matching skin tones."

"It's the law," Doya said, speaking as if disgusted. "People want to be able to discern the difference between Droids and humans fairly quickly. The company that builds this model had to push for legislation simply to fashion her walk. She is definitely not a clumsy protocol droid."

"She is not," Preston agreed.

"I suppose another reason is females, regardless of the species, don't want to have to compete with the perfect female construct," Doya said.

"Would you elaborate?" Preston asked.

"Really?" Doya asked, turning her attention back to him. "That requires explanation?"

"Your assumption seems to be that men would choose Droids over women," Preston said. "Though with every tech, there seems to be advantages and disadvantages in regards to changes in social fall out, I would think the pros in the case of artificial women outweigh the cons. There are dozens of categories of men who are simply incompatible with women, from social ineptness to physically unappealing qualities, any number of cases that would benefit from artificial partners. Prostituting Droids over women would probably cut down on the transmission of STDs, eliminate the need for slaves, and for the rougher men, who simply can't get by without visiting violence on their partner, well, I'd say pair him up with someone who won't get injured."

"As opposed to just putting the latter kind in jail?" Doya asked.

"I would like to think we could rehabilitate people as oppose to simply incarcerate, but the simple fact is we're not going to eliminate spousal abuse a hundred percent, regardless of how lofty the goals are, because it's not just a mental illness, though that contributes to the numbers. It's a social illness and we're still far too left brained, too patriarchal of a society to stop the domineering completely. The fact that we use physical force as a deterrent against those who would use physical force only contributes to the problem because it reinforces the use of force as a means of control. As long as society refuses to promote and recognize everyone as being equally powerful, we will continue to be plagued with abuse. Too few worlds have been able to truly demonstrate a perfectly pluralistic society, because of the erroneous belief that everyone else is getting ahead," Preston said.

“Well said,” Doya said. “I was imagining you would make some lame argument that men would be less likely to cheat if they had sexbots.”

“No, Sex Droids would not stop cheating, as cheating is rarely about sex, but more about personal or relationship failures, and again, power,” Preston said. He frowned as he considered another point. “There seems to be a double standard, though. Females are able to buy sex toys and very few consider that behavior scandalous. But the moment a male buys a sex toy, he gets labeled a pervert, or worse.”

“Interesting point. There does seem to be a double standard in that arena,” Doya said. “But weigh that against the history of women who have most frequently suffered the burden of stigma from disparaging labels if they displayed too much interest in sex, had multiple partners, or used sex for a source of income. For example, an older man is applauded if he dates younger than his age, but if a woman does it, she must be a gold digger or cougar,” Doya said.

“Really? Even in today’s age?” Preston asked, wondering if this was the source of invisible conflict between he and Corissa.

“Especially in today’s age,” Doya said. “Women are considered pure if they are virgins. Their purity decreases with the number of men they entertain.”

“That doesn’t make sense. If women are pure until they’ve had relationships with men, then there is an unspoken belief that men are dirty or contaminated, making men the initial vector for impurity. Taking it further, if men believe their natures or desires are wrong, even subconsciously, then they will believe that they are unworthy of companionship. That belief would then contribute to an imbalance of power that women are somehow better, and so to feel better about themselves men have to subjugate or force themselves on women to bring them down. Either way, both male and female powers are diminished because we’re both too occupied trying to control each other’s power as opposed to simply sharing and building upon our strengths. No wonder there are so many maladaptive behaviors in society... Oh. I’m sorry for ranting,” Preston said.

“Don’t apologize. That’s brilliant. I don’t think I’ve ever heard that argument before. The penis is impure and only by introducing penis to woman does the woman become impure,” Doya said. “So, if I call a man a dog...”

“You would be contributing to society’s illness,” Preston said. “Men should not be punished for holding desire. It is their nature to share their energy. It is woman’s nature to amplify man’s energy, to direct it, give it focus. We compete way too much. The joy of union is less today about sharing and more about an economic exchange, which is about control, all of which is a derivative of fear. A fear that someone will take something, a fear of loss, a fear of hurt, a fear of surrendering. Any relationship based in fear will lead to suffering.”

“So, you have never been hurt?”

“Who the hell hasn’t felt hurt?” Preston asked, seriously jokingly.

Doya laughed. “Well, put like that, yeah,” she said, touching his arm.

“Of course, I’ve felt hurt. But that’s ego, right? It’s not love, because the times I felt pain was when I was considering my own wants, not the other’s wants,” Preston said, musing. He seemed extremely serious, as if he was about use to Force to lift something. Then he smiled. “Lessons. Love is also learning to let go. After all, we can only hold our breaths so long. I am curious about the expression men are dogs, though. Most people, and dare I say, a majority of which are females, like dogs, and we don’t consider the lack of sexual boundaries amongst dogs problematic. And I have never heard of a dog complaining of jealousy that its owner was petting another dog. They are just happy you came home.”

Doya laughed, touching his arm. "I like that you're not afraid to discuss this subject. That you are so willing to be open with me. And I love that you're not afraid to bring your toy out in public. Good for you."

"Well, she's only recently activated and should have more experiences. I am feeling extremely partial towards her," Preston agreed, smiling at Freya.

"I can only imagine. And no doubt she cost a fortune. I just hope she won't keep you from exploring relationships with real women," Doya said, suggestively.

"Of course not," Preston assured her.

"Does she have any upgrades?"

"I was hoping to get some while in town," Preston said. "Perhaps after our business is concluded. Before I do I will need to secure some additional funding. Is there place to play Pazaak near by?"

"So you dabble in cards?" Doya mused. "You're a bit of a play boy, aren't you?"

Preston wasn't sure of how she was using the word, but took a stab at it. "I love games. I was fairly deprived growing up, so I may be overindulging to make up."

Doya nodded as if she understood something, took Preston by the arm, and led him inside. Freya followed, managing to remain inconspicuous. Doya's office was to the right. A hologram of the Three Sisters Academy was active, floating above a work station, and that is where she led him. She touched a control set and panned out revealing the mountain chain, the three rivers, the two flowing east and west from the dams, and the one flowing through the desert on the north side of the chain, that ended its journey at fairly nice size lake. The map had highlighted features, such as the rain forest to the east, the tar pits north and east, the swamp lands west of the academy, grasslands, and more forests. But all of this was contained in a single territory, the perimeter of which was in black.

"My understanding is you are a representative of Bio Enc," Doya said.

"I am," Preston said.

"I'm willing to make you a deal, provided you would agree to several caveats," Doya said.

"I'm listening," Preston said.

"Ninety percent of our planet is unexplored and undeveloped," Doya said. "And most of the planet is simply too wild or too extreme for lone settlers to push out and make a go at it, making expansion slow. Another reason for the slow advance has been a desire to save as much of natural environment as possible. So many worlds became vulnerable to the Empire because they relied too heavily on imports, and when you lose the biodiversity, the planet's citizens become dependent on companies like Bio Enc to come in and sustain the atmosphere with their terraforming plants, and others factories and imports to maintain nutrients and supplements."

Preston didn't argue. He had read about food shortages on the Twi'Lek worlds during the war which had baffled him. And Tatooine was completely dependent on outside food sources, due to the extreme lack of vegetation necessary to sustain organisms larger than womprats, the one creature that had benefitted from the demise of all its competitors. But Tatooine was most likely due to natural climate change as opposed to what happened on the Twi'Lek worlds. Fixit's explanations about how many planets had given up their own food production in favor of other commercially viable options left him unsatisfied. On his home moon, he couldn't walk one meter without running into something to eat. Edible plants and insects proliferated over the landscape. Consequently, he had never experienced true hunger.

Dayo leaned back against the table, facing Preston, sizing him up. There was an overall likability factor with him. There was an aura of trust about him as well. She felt safe. “So, here’s what I’m willing to do,” she said, ready to surrender to the moment and just see where it took her. “I will throw in the entire Kalinga territories with the purchase price of the academy, if you give me some assurances. First, I want a guarantee that 20 percent of any revenue generated from products originating from Darthomir gets funneled back into our communities.”

“Pfft,” Preston said. “You can have 40 percent.”

“Excuse me?” Dayo said, nearly coming off the table.

“Forty percent is reasonable, as long as you will consider that the construction of any permanent structures and the need to increase educational opportunities is a part of that percentage,” Preston said. “Next caveat?”

Dayo licked her lips and swallowed. Was this genuine real, or was she being played. She pressed on. “I would like to minimize the ecological footprint using green technologies,” she said.

“Done,” Preston said. “Next?”

Dayo was so used to hard negotiations, she was at a loss. “You don’t want to take time to consider?” Doya asked.

“Isn’t preserving your way of life and the environment that makes your life possible ultimately the point of this dialogue?” Preston asked.

“Well, yeah, just... I’m surprised. I figured it would be a bit more of a fight. The next ties into this, in so much as that we wish to maintain the Kalinga district’s natural terrain as if it were a national park. I understand that there will be construction of homes and factories, but we want no permanent roads and no rails systems. Only air access, with ‘clean air’ tech deployed in delivery drones and transportation,” Dayo said. “No poaching, restrictions on hunting and fishing, no dumping of toxic wastes...”

“Done,” Preston said. “Is there anything else?”

“I want you to hire 80 percent of the employees from the Darthomir population,” Dayo said.

“No,” Preston said. “The best I can do is thirty percent, due to the highly specialized technological nature of the positions that will be needed to maintain the production centers, as well as those skill sets necessary to maintain compliance with the previous requests. I am willing to help establish training centers and apprenticeship for those in the Darthomir population that meet the minimum educational requirements.”

“We have ourselves a deal,” Dayo said.

Preston extended a hand. Dayo took it. She gripped his hand tight and pulled herself in closer to him.

“You understand, a hand shake is insufficient to solidify a deal of this nature,” Dayo said.

“You require my signature?” Preston asked.

Dayo smiled. “Not exactly,” she said.

Jordeen and Corissa were sharing ideas and adding things to their wish list as they warmed up the MRE's Preston had bought. Neither knew what spices they might be available when they finally made it into town, but they were each interested in creating dishes for the other to try. Most of their conversations were about food, which probably meant they were hungry as opposed to just wanting to share from their culture. Jordeen brought a pot of tea to the table and set it down. Ten approached the table, sulking.

"I can't find Preston anywhere," Ten said. "Even Findit doesn't know where he is."

"I'm sure he is around somewhere," Corissa said, pouring herself some tea.

"Probably doing his morning meditation," Jordeen offered. She began making a plate for Ten. "Come have something to eat."

"I'm worried," Ten said. "Don't you guys have radio comm. links?"

"Nope, Preston didn't buy any, but it's on the list," Corissa said.

"Well, I'm going to keep looking for him," Ten said, turning to leave.

"No, you're going to come sit here and eat with us," Corissa said.

"You're not my mother. You can't boss me around," Ten said.

"Ten," Jordeen said, putting one hand on her hip. "That is uncalled for."

"What if he fell into a booby trap? What if he is hurt?" Ten said, dramatically. "Don't you care at all? What if he's suffering?"

"Come sit down," Corissa said. "We'll discuss it."

Ten dragged her feet, but she came to the table and sat down. Findit entered and came to the table.

"I told you, go find Preston," Ten said to the Droid. The Droid's lower half pivoted and headed back the way it came, looking back, giving a sad little whine.

Jordeen set the plate in front of Ten and then sat down next to her. Corissa sat across from Ten, holding her cup of tea with both hands, savouring the warmth. Corissa pointed, indicating she wanted Ten to start eating.

"I thought we were going to discuss our plan to find Preston," Ten said, forcing herself to take a bite.

"We are," Corissa said. "Just not with our mouths full. And the last thing we are going to do is split up and run all over the place like crazy people."

"I'm not crazy," Ten said. "I'm worried. He is out there somewhere, alone."

Jordeen nodded, swallowing the portion she had started. "He's never alone. And I've seen him do some pretty neat tricks, like passing through walls. I think he could get out of a trap."

"And, he has the ability to be in two extremely distant places at the same time, so he knows where we are if he needs help," Corissa said.

Ten paled. "You've seen his ghost, too?"

"What do you mean?" Corissa asked.

"He came onto the flight deck to talk me into returning to the main cabin but when I came out, he was still in the main cabin, and he couldn't have gotten through the lock door," Ten said. "And I saw him when I left my body. He helped me return to the living."

"You had an out of body experience?" Jordeen asked, pausing in her meal.

"Well, yeah," Ten said. "I was dead."

“So was I,” Jordeen said.

“Do I have to die to join the club?” Corissa asked, setting her tea down.

“Oh, no. I knew a nun who could teach people to Light Travel. I could try and teach you if you’re curious,” Jordeen said.

“You can teach people to do this willingly?” Ten asked.

“Sure,” Jordeen said. “If you consider that you will spend most of eternity on the higher planes, doesn’t it make sense to get to know your way around now?”

Corissa stirred a fruit sauce that might have once actually been a fruit. “I’ve read about this ability, but I’ve always been afraid to leave my body.”

“I’ve been out of my body and I’m still afraid to leave,” Ten said. “I think I’m even more afraid now than I was before I died.”

“Fear is a natural first response,” Jordeen assured them. “Like when you go scuba diving for the first time. You know you can breathe, because the regulator is in your mouth, but your body is telling you not to breathe in, you’re underwater, idiot.”

“If these other planes of existence are real, why is fear the natural response to going there?” Corissa asked.

“Love,” Jordeen said.

“I don’t understand,” Corissa said, but pointed at Ten’s plate to encourage her to keep eating.

“This sucks,” Ten said, spitting the breakfast out.

“Yeah, well, we’re not going to let Preston buy any more food, I assure you, but for now, you need to eat so we can go walking and see if we can find his lazy butt,” Corissa said.

“I can’t believe we’re sitting here eating when Preston could be out there injured or dying,” Ten said. “What does love have to do with anything anyway?”

“Yes, please tell how love explains the fear of leaving the body,” Corissa said, bring the conversation back on track.

“You have to understand that what I am going to try and communicate can’t be done with words. The best I can do is analogies. Analogies always come short. We all think that we know what love is, but the truth is we haven’t tapped into even one tenth of a percent of love. The first time we leave our bodies, we come up against the Greatest Love, the only true Love that exists. It has many names, but mostly, our society calls it the Force. We find ourselves immersed in it and we recognize, perhaps for the first time, that what we know about love is absolutely nothing, that we have really never loved, and we feel shame, a true shame. We are not even one photon compared to the magnitude of this light. We are not even an electron around a hydrogen atom in a water molecule, to the ocean that is. If you are not awestruck, if you are not humbled, if you are not moved to tears and complete surrender when you find yourself the focus of this Love, then you’re probably brain damaged,” Jordeen said.

Ten put her spoon down, staring hard at her plate. “That’s what I experienced,” she said at last. She looked to Corissa then Jordeen. “But not at first. At first, there was a darkness. I felt trapped. I heard a voice, but not a voice. I think it said, be calm, child, you are safe. And then, hands were pulling me up, and then Preston was there, and we were standing in an open field. There was grass, like real green, and we were barefoot, and it felt nice under your feet, like that’s the way it was always intended to be, like there’s a connection between standing and earth. And there were flowers, like smiling entities. And honey bees. And butterflies. But if you looked at them wrong, they were other...” Ten started weeping. “I don’t want to be here. I don’t feel like I belong.”

Corissa joined Ten on her side of the bench and both she and Jordeen hugged her.

“Shhh, you’re safe, we’ve got you,” Jordeen said. “This will feel like home again, once you start realizing you are still in that Light. The Force is always with us.”

Corissa touched Ten’s chin, turned her face upward. “I’m not going to pretend I understand any of this, but I am with you. I will not leave you,” Corissa said.

When Ten had finished the outpouring of emotion, Jordeen touched her shoulder. “Between all plateaus, between all levels, there appears to be an empty space, or a dark space. That space is the most conducive to thought forms. So, if you’re afraid, scary things come, if you’re loving, pleasant things come, with a varying degree of mitigating factors. Fear comes the easiest and if you have that on the lowest plane, the easiest way to escape is reincarnating. I like to think that’s why we have the expression of hiding, or burying our head in the sand. Like peek aboo, we believe if we don’t see it then it doesn’t exist. But there is a greater world surrounding us, penetrating us, and our thoughts about that world influence our experiences there. It alters our experiences here, too, just rarely as dramatic or as quick or as intense as it does there, unless you are trained or you’ve had an awakening experience, like you and I have had.”

Ten nodded, as if she was validating her own experience. She had cried out for help, and Preston was suddenly there. Her eyes went distant for a brief moment, as if she were looking beyond the horizon. “There’s a ship coming,” she said.

“A ship?” Corissa said.

“Yeah, it’s going to land on the platform,” Ten said. She frowned at their skepticism. “I’m not making this up.”

“Let’s go see,” Corissa said, standing up.

It took time to walk to the landing pad, so they took their meals and drinks with them. They arrived safely and were perhaps disappointed that there was nothing to be seen but sky, clouds gathering around the Tallest Sister. Ten was also hoping Preston would be here. Down below, parts of the diamond lake glittered with patches of sunlight and silhouettes of clouds. Mists of red haze gathered along the crest of the mountains, like fire rainclouds filtering through the trees. Jordeen found the red haze mystifying. Ten, who had rarely seen clouds, much less red haze, didn’t think anything of it at all. All she could see was that there was no apparent ship.

“I don’t see anything,” Jordeen said.

“I saw it,” Ten insisted. “I didn’t imagine this!”

“We don’t doubt you saw something,” Jordeen said.

“Yeah, you do,” Ten said, angrily, crossing her arms. “No one ever believes me.”

Thunder peeled overhead and echoed down the canon to the east.

“Rain?” Jordeen asked.

“Nope, that’s Ten’s ship breaking the sound barrier,” Corissa said.

“Really? Where?” Ten asked.

“Wait for it,” Corissa said.

A moment later, an Imperial Tie Defender was descending upon them, orientating itself towards the pad. It settled unselfishly on a designated spot furthest from the gathered group, so as not to blow a whirlwind around them.

“Aren’t they the bad guys?” Ten asked.

“Stand behind me,” Corissa said.

“Maybe we should put another blaster on the list,” Jordeen said.

“Yeah,” Corissa agreed.

The bottom hatch opened.

“Extended pod, lower hatch mod,” Corissa mumbled, drawing the blaster but not aiming it. “Whoever it is, they’re top brass.”

Kiesha dropped out of the lower hatched, stretched and looked up to see Nolasco following. He dropped out and she hugged him.

“I’m so glad to be out of there...” then she saw the drawn blaster.

“You’re going to shoot your first guest?” Nolasco asked?

Corissa holstered her weapon and the three of them went to greet Nolasco. Kiesha met them eagerly.

“I would love to catch up, but I want a shower first, and a change of clothes,” Kiesha asked.

“The waters cold,” Ten said, complaining.

“I’m still going to get a shower,” Kiesha said, ruffling her hair. “The suits are designed to catch waste, but I’m sure there was leakage.”

“Ewww,” Ten said.

“How did you know we were here?” Jordeen asked.

“Preston told us,” Nolasco said.

“He sure gets around,” Corissa said.

“That he does,” Nolasco said. “Come on down, Red.”

Red disengaged the inner locks, rose from his space, extended jets from his leg, and propelled himself down. He rolled up and gave a salutation.

“Oh, thank you!” Corissa said. “We probably need a dozen astromechs, but this is a good start. Red, diagnose the tram system, see if we can’t get it up and running today. You’ll find me at base camp when you have a report. Just make your way down to the inner cloister, you’ll find us there.”

Red whistled an affirmation and headed towards the ramp that led down to the tubes.

“Where’s Preston?” Nolasco said.

“Oh! We still need to find him!” Ten said, her urgency returning.

“He’s missing?”

“He’s probably just meditating somewhere,” Jordeen said.

“Another ship is approaching,” Ten said.

Everyone looked to Ten. She pointed East. A ship broke through the clouds as if on cue.

“Were you expecting anyone?” Nolasco asked.

“Nope,” Corissa said, once again removing her blaster.

“But you were all here waiting for me?” Nolasco said.

Corissa nodded to Ten. “She sensed someone was arriving. We just came to see. This looks like a freighter.”

Jordeen pulled Ten behind Corissa, trying to hug her. Ten pulled free and scowled. “Stop trying to baby me,” Ten said.

“Good eye, Corissa. Haven’t seen one of those in a while,” Nolasco said, once the ship was close enough to make out more details.

“What is it?” Kiesha said.

“An MT/191 drop ship,” Corissa said.

“Dropping in from where?” Kiesha asked.

The ship slowed, pivoted around so that the flight deck was facing away from the mountain, and settled down on the edge of the platform. The engines powered off, but the

Auxiliary power unit stayed on, adding a little warmth to the tarmac. The aft ramp lowered and Preston descended.

“Preston!” Ten said, running to greet him.

Corissa once again put away her weapon and the group moved to greet Preston who was being fiercely hugged by Ten.

“I was worried about you,” Ten said.

“Ahh, you only have to check in with the Force to know I am well,” Preston said.

“We’re not all Force sensitive. You could have left a note,” Corissa snapped.

“You’re right, Corissa. I will endeavor to do better by you. In that Light, I come bearing gifts,” Preston said, hoping to make up for his social faux pas.

“Really?” Ten asked, excited.

Freya descended down the ramp.

“Oh my god,” Corissa said. “Tell me you didn’t spend money on that.”

“Please, tell me you didn’t spend money on that,” Nolasco moaned, wondering how he was going to justify the cost of a luxury Droid.

“I spent money upgrading her to body guard status, but the Droid was free. I found her in the observatory, unopened, new never used, just out of the box,” Preston said, excited as a child.

“You are the luckiest man I know,” Nolasco said.

Kiesha hit Nolasco’s arm. “I don’t like it. It’s kind of sexist, don’t you think?”

“Extremely,” Corissa said, crossing her arms in front of her chest. “Deactivate it.”

“Aww, but I like her,” Preston said, locking arms with Freya. “Don’t worry, I bought you several Droids for you to put to work. Cute in their own way, I suppose. Alright, 2s, front and center!”

Three astromech droids rolled down the ramp. The first was black with gold highlights, the second was white with green highlights, and the third was glossy black with pink highlights.

“Introducing, R5-J2,” Preston said, patting the droid as it went by. “R3-T7 and R2-KT, detailed especially for Ten. Don’t worry, she is EMP proof! Hug away.” Technically, they were all EMP proof. The last thing you needed was to fly too close to a supernova and have all your equipment fail due to an EMP burst.

“Really?!” Ten said.

“Preston, you didn’t buy this shuttle and the droids on the company account, did you?” Nolasco said more than asked, clearly worried about how much explaining he was going to have to do.

“Oh no. I won black outright in a card game, but used the money from my winnings for the rest of the items and the upgrades,” Preston said. “You’ll find everything that was on your list in the shuttle, as well as a couple extra items. Shielded comm. units to facilitate intra communication without fear that that special someone who is electronically challenged will turn it permanently off.”

“It’s not my fault,” Ten protested.

“It’ll get better,” Jordeen assured her. “It happened to me, too.”

“Really?” Ten asked

“You went into town to play cards?” Corissa asked.

“No, I went into town to speak with Senator Doya, the card games and cigars were extra,” Preston said.

Nolasco closed his eyes. “Please tell me you did not sleep with the Senator.”

“I did not sleep with the Senator,” Preston said, reassuringly. “But we did have sex.”

“Preston, are you a complete idiot?!” Nolasco asked, pushing his fingers on his right hand into his forehead, hoping the pressure might alleviate pain.

Corissa whispered to Ten, “Take your Droid and head back to base.”

“Why is everyone so upset?” Ten asked. “It’s just sex.”

“No, it’s not,” Nolasco said. “Intimacy on this planet is often used as a formal, binding contract.”

“Yes, that was explained to me,” Preston said.

“Let’s go,” Corissa said, trying to take Ten by the hand.

“No, I want to stay,” Ten said.

“Ten,” Preston said, in a tone he hadn’t used before with her. “Go with Corissa.”

Ten pouted, but complied. Corissa whistled, and the astromechs followed her. Jordeen remained. Freya stood idol, pleasantly waiting for instructions.

“What did you agree to?” Nolasco asked.

Preston described the deal. Nolasco paled.

“They will never agree to this!” Nolasco said. “People of our stature have ended up missing, like bottom of a swamp pit, missing!”

“They will agree to this, because we’re going to double their market value within five years,” Preston said. “Additionally, the positive PR is going to have other worlds clamoring to duplicate our contracts, and they’re going to give sufficient subsidies to make it more feasible to expand operations to non-industrialized worlds. Conversely, not taking this deal will negatively affect the market value, which will take years to get back to its current level.”

“They won’t go for it!” Nolasco said.

“They will, especially when they hear you and I will work for free, no commission,” Preston said.

“Now I know you have lost your mind,” Nolasco said.

“Nolasco,” Preston said, calmly, as if he were speaking to a parent who didn’t understand. “You and I are going to make more money together than we can spend in fifty life times. I already reimbursed your account the purchase price of the property with my winnings today. Though I haven’t found the products yet, I know we will be adding three product lines from items that can only be derived from this planet. This is a good deal. Others will follow.”

“Who are you?” Nolasco asked.

Preston smiled. “What a great philosophical question? Shall we discuss it on the way down?”



Nolasco and Preston sat at a table together, eating lunch, discussing the arrangement Preston had made. Preston ate as if he hadn’t eaten in several days, which gave Jordeen joy as she had prepared the food with love. Ten sat next to Preston, teaching Pink some sign commands. Kiesha sat further down, talking with Jordeen. ‘Findit,’ bobbed, trying to win Ten’s attention back.

“I see you, too,” Ten assured it, laughing at her own joke.

Preston missed the pun, finding it challenging to be peaceful, given the level of stress radiating from his companions. Corissa wasn’t even present and he could feel her rays of anger. To help mitigate some of it, or perhaps just to make himself feel better from the idea that maybe he had been wrong, he decided to give the ‘Boss’ a visit. He barely had to blink his eyes and he

was able to zero in on Mr. Conlay the Third. He had not met the man personally, but had seen his photos in the hallways at the firm. As instructed, this time before popping in, he knocked. For some reason, knocking didn't seem to ease Mr. Conlay's unease at having a sudden visitor. He and his companion scrambled for covers.

"Preston? How did you get in here?" Conlay demanded.

"Good day, Mr. Conlay," he said, bowing. He bowed to Conlay's companion. "Mrs. Nolasco. Nice to meet you again."

"Call security," Tillia demanded.

"What do you want, Preston?" Conlay asked.

"I brokered a deal on Darthormir that I believe is in the best interest of the company," Preston said. "However, I may have violated the social protocols of acquisition within the company. Nolasco is worried and I was hoping that a dialogue with you might alleviate his concerns, as well as provide you and I an opportunity to build rapport, seeing how I work for you and all."

"This is hardly the time and place to conduct business," Conlay said.

"It is mid afternoon, during business hours, and we're at a hotel. Per your secretary, this is where you usually conduct your business meetings, with the second choice being the Gentlemen's Club," Preston said.

"Just call security. Have him arrested and fired," Tillia said.

"And tell security what, exactly? That one of my employees who was just awarded the largest contract in the history of my corporation caught me in bed with my partner's wife?" Conlay snapped at her, getting out of bed and going for his pants. "I will have you know, Mr. Waycaster, that I will not be blackmailed."

Preston was a bit confused. "I'm not sure I understand. I mean, I understand the word. I'm curious about the word, mostly, as to why it's not white-mail, or any other color mail, but I have not come here to coerce you into doing something you don't want. Technically, the deal I made is solid and legally would be extremely difficult extricate ourselves from, without severe penalties, but I could see Nolasco perspective of how the company could potentially be dissatisfied with the initial cost benefit structure and might want to take punitive actions against the person, or persons, involved."

Conlay began to button his shirt. "If Nolasco is worried about a deal, it's probably because it's a bad one," he said.

"Based on the history of your contracts, I suppose this one would fit this category. We'll have a slower growth rate, but I believe the long term benefits outweigh the short term costs," Preston said.

"Based on what statistical analysis?" Conlay demanded.

"Based on my understanding of sociology and my Force intuition," Preston said.

"Oh, hell no. You didn't just enter a long term contract based on superstition and feelings, did you?" Conlay asked.

"Technically? Yeah, I guess I did," Preston said.

"Leave your report, the contract, and your product proposal and get out," Conlay said.

"I have none of that prepared or with me. I was merely gauging your receptivity, in order to understand what I might need to bring to the table to eliminate any potential negativity," Preston said.

"Get out, Preston," Conlay said.

Preston bowed. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Conlay. Mrs. Nolasco."

Preston vanished before their eyes.

“What was that?” Mrs. Nolasco asked. “One of those high definition holographic displays? Are you filming us?”

“No, I’m not filming us,” Conlay said. “You know I am more careful than that.”

“Then how did he know we were here?” Mrs. Nolasco demanded.

“I don’t know, but I did tell you, if anyone discovered us, we were done,” Conlay said.

“Because of him? We’re not done. I made you, not your wife. I’m the second largest share holder, and if you think for a moment that I won’t go public to protect my interest in this company, that I haven’t groomed my husband to take over in your absence, then you have completely forgotten why you got into bed with me in the first place.”

“Oh, I have not forgotten,” Conlay said.

“I will tell your wife,” Mrs. Nolasco said.

“My wife has known from the start,” Conlay said. “Who do you think gave me the green light to sleep with you? It is you who are mistaken about who was using whom.”

Conlay departed the room, putting in an earpiece and making a call as he headed for the lift.



Corissa entered, went right up to Preston, planted her feet sharply, and put her hands on her waist. He didn’t seem to notice. She waved a hand in front of his eyes. His eyes shifted and he focused.

“Day dreaming?” Corissa demanded.

“Yeah, sort of, sorry,” Preston said. “What’s wrong?”

“Did you not consider topping off the fuel tanks on the shuttle before you flew the shuttle out here?” Corissa asked.

“There’s not enough fuel?” Preston asked.

“No, this is my pretend mad face,” Corissa said, hands akimbo. “What were you thinking? What if you had had to pass through a storm and you ran out of fuel? That thing isn’t exactly a glider!”

“I could see the weather was good all the way here,” Preston rebutted.

“I’m not sure what you can see or how much you know, but flying that junker, which is in a bad way for maintenance, with no fuel reserve put your life at risk and makes me question your judgment,” Corissa said. “There is insufficient fuel to fly it back to the nearest town, much less the nearest hub.”

“Isn’t there a fuel tank embedded in the Second Sister?” Preston asked.

“Yeah,” Corissa said. “Which has to be drained, the tank cleaned, and the fuel revitalized before we can put it back in there.”

“Oh,” Preston said.

“Oh,” Corissa said, sitting down. “You really don’t have a clue what you’re doing, do you? Before you go and get yourself or someone killed, you’re going to have to let the more experienced adults handle the details.”

“So, does that mean we’re not going into town to get carbonated drinks?” Ten asked. No one responded.

“What am I supposed to drink around here?” Ten asked.

Corissa pushed a glass of water towards her.

“I’m not drinking that! It came from the lake, and there are fishes in the lake, and the fish pee and poop in the lake, and I’m not drinking it,” Ten said.

“It goes through a filter,” Corissa said. “Just like on a starship, where water is recycled right from waste products.”

“Ewww, no way!” Ten said.

“Drink the water,” Corissa said.

“I did. It tastes funny,” Ten protested.

“It shouldn’t have a taste at all,” Corissa said.

“It still tastes funny and I’m going to die of thirst if we can’t go into town and get something carbonated, or at least some juice,” Ten said.

Preston waved her closer. She complied and he touched her forehead with a single finger, and then handed her the glass. “Try the water again.”

Ten frowned, but lifted the glass and touched the water to her tongue. She took a sip. She took a swig. “That’s a neat trick. Can you teach me that one?” Ten asked.

“Yep,” Preston said. “Now, if you will, I left a pile of books on the far table in the library. I want you to go pick one that interests you and start reading. I’m going to test you over it, so pay attention.”

“Okay,” Ten said, excusing herself. “Come on, Pink!”

No one spoke till Ten was out of ear shot, but it was painfully obvious that people were bursting at the seams to get at him. Corissa started:

“Did you just use the Force on her?” Corissa asked.

“Of course not,” Preston said. “That would be inappropriate.”

“But the water tasted different?” Jordeen asked.

“No, it’s the same water, same taste,” Preston said. “The only thing that changed was her thoughts about the taste of the water.”

“So you tricked her?!” Corissa asked.

Preston sighed. “I feel a great deal of hostility directed towards me,” he said.

There was a rumbling overhead as a Tram went by.

“Yay! The trams are working!” Ten yelled from just outside the room.

“Yay?!” Preston asked, as no one else seemed to be interested in the trams being up.

Nolasco and Corissa were the most obviously upset. Jordeen was simply biting her tongue, not wanting to take sides, but was upset because everyone else was upset, and she didn’t know how to make it right. Kiesha was siding with Nolasco, which only amplified the trajectory of her anger towards the target that had initiated the grief. Preston sighed.

“Corissa, the next time you go up to the landing pad, the shuttle will have full fuel tanks. Further, the fuel storage will be cleaned and filled with new fuel by the end of tomorrow. Nolasco, if you like, I will present the deal at the next staff meeting, and if they turn it down, I will threaten to do what I’m going to do without the Bio Enc logo and support, and in ten years, I will own Bio Enc. Now, there are six hover bikes on the drop ship. If you don’t want to see me, I will gear up, and head out into the field with Findit.”

“No one’s saying that,” Jordeen said.

“We just want you to think a little bit about how you’re affecting all our lives,” Corissa said, clearly still angry, but trying to soften her tone. “You may be able to just float through life and be successfully happy-go lucky, but the rest of us, we have to work! And I don’t know what promises you made Ten about teaching her the Force, but she needs a hell of lot more grounding before you start teaching her to fly.”

Corissa got up and left the table. Nolasco excused himself, grumbling about having to get his sales pitch together. Kiesha followed. Jordeen smiled at Preston. Not knowing what to lead with, she went with something she knew about.

“So, you really had sex with a Senator to solidify a contract?” Jordeen asked.

“It seemed like the right thing at the time,” Preston said.

“Does it have to be good sex, or is mediocre passable?” Jordeen asked.

“Our first go was rather mundane,” Preston said, considering, but as he considered the question, he decided it was a good question. What if he had failed to satisfy her? Would that have resulted in no contract? “She assured me that our first go fulfilled contractual requirements.”

“Your first go? How many goes did you go?” Jordeen asked.

“Four all together. She was really amorous. And she was Freya curious, so...” Preston said.

Jordeen laughed. “Really?!” she asked. “I would have thought with the Force feedback trick of yours, she wouldn’t have wanted a toy. I mean, I assume you use the Force on her, right?”

“I’ve not learned a lot of self-control in that department,” Preston admitted. “So many of my experiences have been at the Lightl levels or higher, I’m not sure I can have a turn over that doesn’t include the Force.”

“Well, you know what they say: practice makes perfect,” Jordeen said, her voice playful, with overtones of invitation. Her lekku twitched, and she blinked as if just figuring something out. “Oh! That might explain why Shade wants to catch you. She’s obsessed with Force sex,” Jordeen said, touching his hand.

“How would she know about my capabilities?” Preston asked.

“She just knows things. That’s why she accepted my bid for slavery,” Jordeen explained.

Preston nodded. His plate was empty so he turned to the partially eaten food that Nolasco had left on his plate. Jordeen seemed bemused as opposed to grossed out.

“Look, I know you love Corissa. I don’t know if she will work out her conflicts about you and you probably shouldn’t wait for her to figure it out, but you need to know, she is going to be unhappy until she does. Meanwhile, if you’re lonely, you don’t have to go all the way into town for company. I’m yours, papers or no.”

Preston considered. “It’s probably not appropriate to sleep with my Padawans.”

“You’re going to teach me?” Jordeen asked, almost laughing out loud.

“We’re going to teach each other,” Preston said.

“Well, if we’re both Padawans, then I think it’s perfectly appropriate,” Jordeen said.

Preston smiled. “Perhaps, so,” he agreed.

“I bet there are some holocrons to be found in this abandon base,” Jordeen said.

“Pfft, that would be a waste of time,” Preston said.

“Really?” Jordeen asked, confused.

“Why read a computer file, risking mental injury by guardian code, when you can go right to the source?” Preston asked.

“I don’t understand.”

“When you can speak to any Jedi or Sith, past, present, and future, there is no need for a holocron,” Preston said.

“Never thought of that,” Jordeen said. Her lekku twitched a bit more aggressively as if she was angry for not thinking of that before. “That makes sense. I still think we may find a

holochron or two. I can feel the Force tugging in many directions,” she mused further. She patted his hand. “You really see things differently. Was this part of your Daka training?”

Preston kind of shrugged. He didn’t know how to respond so he offered silence.

“You are definitely a Daka. Did you study at a Light Temple, under the physical guidance of a Priestess?” Jordeen asked.

“Yeah, it’s all been pretty much astral work,” Preston offered. “I’m not familiar with the Daka term. All I know is that ever since the third priestess that took me on had me read the one word under rising sun, it has been all direct Goddess work,” Preston offered.

Jordeen blinked. She gripped the side table and his hand. “We’ve met before!”

Her Rutian features, not quite teal, suddenly darkened with a flush that swept from head to toe, the ends of her Lekku’s engorged, goose bumps rising. Her knuckles gripped the table so fiercely they were white. She was trying not to laugh, trying to suppress a turn over, but it was just there, and she had no choice but to flow with it. She closed her eyes and tried to rein in the emotions sweeping through her body.

“You okay?” Preston asked when her consciousness returned to sufficiently that she could communicate on the physical level.

After a pause, accentuated with long, deep breaths, and tears flowing, she nodded. “I’m finally home,” Jordeen said. She forced herself to get up. She hugged Preston. “I knew you were a trained Daka practitioner from the moment we were first intimate, but I never imagined we actually went to school together. I don’t understand why I’m just now remembering.”

“It wasn’t time yet,” Preston said. “We needed to make important decisions without being influenced by our past associations.”

“Yeah,” Jordeen said, meeting his eyes, sitting backwards on the bench next to him. She shook her head, her Lekku agreeing as well. “Yeah, that makes so much sense. I needed to know I would help you without knowing I love you, have loved you from our first meet.” She smiled deeply, knowing full well that she was radiating green heart energy. “And you helped me, too, without remembering. There is so much meaning here. I am so grateful to be with you in person, to be able to serve with you. Thank you for finding me.”

“You understand that it wasn’t me. It was the Force,” Preston said.

“Yes,” she chuckled. “I’m grateful for the Force. I realize that it is still unfinished with me, that more is unfolding, and I welcome whatever it brings with love. Thank you for reminding me of who I am. May the Force allow me to share the same and more with others.”

Jordeen let go of him. Her hands were trembling. She stood and began to collect the dishes.

“Jordeen, I got these,” Preston said, standing and pulling the pile towards him.

“No, really, I’m grateful for this duty,” Jordeen said.

“And so am I. I insist,” Preston said, taking the dish from her hand.

“I was taught not to allow a man to do dishes,” Jordeen said.

“Now I’m compelled to win this,” Preston insisted.

“Do them together?” Jordeen asked.

“Next time,” Preston said.

Jordeen bowed. “Thank you for this lesson, Master.”

Preston bowed, not dropping any dishes, and headed for the kitchen. What few dishes he couldn’t carry in his pile floated up and followed him. Jordeen was still sitting when he returned from having washed the dishes.

“May I call my sister from the order to come and stay with us?” Jordeen asked.

“Only if you can deliver the message in astral,” Preston said.
Jordeen laughed a genuine laugh.



Nolasco had retired to the Tie Defender to use its holographic communication system. From there he was able to patch into a satellite and a moment later, the transmission was picking up on the other side, almost as if it had been expected. Kiesha was waiting for Nolasco when he dropped out of the ship. He seemed bewildered more than upset.

“They agreed to the terms,” Nolasco said. He looked up to the sky, as if trying to find something wrong with the Universe.

“You’re joking,” Kiesha said.

“No,” Nolasco said. “And I’ve never seen the CEO so... accommodating.”

“Do you suppose Preston did his little ghost trip and intimidated him?” Kiesha asked.

“No,” Nolasco said, though he couldn’t rule out possibility. “I don’t think so.”

“You know, his naiveté may just be a part of his charm, or a mask. Either way, he is not an idiot,” Kiesha said.

“I hear you, but in many ways, he really is naïve, like he’s a child,” Nolasco said.

Nolasco and Kiesha’s wristbands chimed. Nolasco answered his.

“Um, there are people coming up the stairs toward the front gate,” Corissa announced.

“We’ll be right there,” Nolasco said.

Nolasco and Kiesha caught the tram and were at the monastery in seven minutes. They were at the front gate in additional two minutes. Corissa was up on the battlement, watching the visitors ascend with a scope that was mounted to the wall. Jordeen was waiting at the main gate, the doors already opened. Ten was sitting in eye sight. Nolasco stepped outside the gate and stared down the long winding path to the valley below. The would-be visitors had already surmounted almost three quarters of the stairs. The stairs were stone, built right from the mountain rock, with an additional ramp so that droids, or sentient creatures with mobility devices, could also ascend and descend. The visitors had arrived at the ramp by riding living creatures, which they had tied before making their ascent up the stairs.

Corissa came down off the wall and called Ten to her. Ten obeyed without question, as she was aware of the anxiety in the group. Corissa led her to another portion of the wall, led her up, and pulled an odd looking belt out of a basket.

“Put this on,” Corissa said, instructing her on how to fasten the belt that went around her waist, between her leg, and another strap over her shoulders. She connected a carabineer to a zip line. “You’ll find zip lines on all thee peaks. I’ve tested each, and they’re in good condition. In the advent of an emergency, you put this on, you connect this to the line, and you jump. Don’t think. Just jump. We’ll practice later to help you overcome any fear, if any, but for now, stay here. If there is a problem, you jump. Are we clear?”

“Is there going to be a problem?” She was more focused than scared.

“I don’t know. Could just be neighbors, seeing signs of life, or squatters who live here seasonally, I don’t know,” Corissa said. “At the bottom, disconnect the carabineer from the line. You’ll find a back pack with survival gear and enough food for a week. I also put a speeder bike at the end of this line, but I’d prefer you wait till I instruct you in the proper use.”

Ten nodded.

“Wait here. If I tell you jump, jump. If a fight breaks out, jump,” Corissa said. “I promise. I will find you when it is safe.”

Ten nodded. Corissa joined Nolasco outside the gate.

“We’re going to need to get the security grid up and running,” Corissa said. “I’m not fond of surprise visitors.”

“There’s a security office at the base. Perhaps we could put a droid there temporarily,” Nolasco said.

“Yeah. Sounds like the perfect job for Freya,” Corissa said. “Where’s Preston?”

“I don’t know. Probably meditating,” Nolasco said.

“When I give an alert that we’re having visitors, I expect all hands on deck,” Corissa said.

“We’ll discuss protocols later,” Nolasco said, turning to greet the guests.

The guests arrived at the top, pulled back their hoods, and revealed themselves to be human females. At least, mostly human. The lead stepped forward, planted her staff. Her skin seemed grey, but not unhealthy. The grey could have indicated a mixed species, or perhaps something in the local diet altered skin tone. Her facial features were sharp, as if cut from stone, and though there were signs of age, she was remarkably fit and surprisingly attractive. Her head was shaved completely bald, and she had incongruently long eye lashes.

“I am Mar,” she said, speaking Standard. “Of the Raining Leaves Clan. This is my Sister, Jain, of the Dreaming River Clan, and my other Sister, Cyn, of the Singing Mountain Clan. I wish to speak with the new proprietor.”

“Um, well, I’m Nolasco, and this is Ms Fite,” Nolasco said.

“You are not the owner,” Mar said, and pushed passed him to enter the Academy walls.

“Now, hold on,” Corissa said, following.

Freya met the group as they came in, carrying a tray of refreshments.

“Hello,” Freya said. “Would you like refreshments after your long journey?”

“I want to see the man in charge,” Mar said.

“Of course,” Freya said. “Follow me.”

“Now, wait,” Corissa insisted.

Nolasco almost said the same thing, because he felt as if he were in charge, but he had to concede: this was all Preston.

“You can’t just barge in here. This is our home,” Corissa stated, compellingly.

Mar stopped, turned to Corissa and sized her up. She didn’t seem threatened by the fact the strap holding her blaster in the holster was unbuckled, or that her hand rested on the hilt. She took note of Nolasco, the Twi’Lek and the other human female who was halfway between the group and a child on the wall. Based on the child holding near an obvious escape route, she realized that these were just normal folk trying to protect their own.

Mar turned back to Corissa, giving the subtlest of bows. “You’re correct. I have no right to intrude, nor should I expect you to recreate the open community which this place once represented. I would like to speak to the man who made the purchase and who consummated the deal with Doya. Please.”

Corissa sighed. She looked to Nolasco. He shrugged.

“Freya, leave the tray, and escort Mar to see Preston,” Corissa said.

“Cyn, you stay here. Jain, you’re with me,” Mar said.

Mar and Jain followed Freya. Cyn attempted a smile.



The tram stopped at the station at the back of the Tallest sister and the door slid open. Freya invited them to follow her, appologizing for the untidiness of the station, as it hadn't been used in a very long time. As she rambled, the sisters held their own private conversation.

"Sister, have you noticed the energy here has changed," Jain said.

"I have noticed," Mar agreed.

"You think the curse was lifted?" Jain asked.

Mar gave a look to her sister that communicated misgivings in her sister's ability to reason. She decided not to get into it and instead, turned her eyes towards the Droid. She was interested in how smoothly the Droid managed the stairs, as she had never seen such a humanistic Droid before. She noted a temptation to own one for herself. Droids were always useful, but there were very few that highlighted, much less elevated, feminity. It occurred to her that her planet should have many more Droids in this fashion, considering that most of the planet leaned towards matriarchial societies. Too many droids personified only the male aspect of life.

"Only a powerful Shaman could have cleansed this place of the spirits so quickly," Jain said.

"We will find out soon enough," Mar said.

As they came off the ramp, they saw Preston sitting at the center of the mountain. Mar and Jain knew very well that he was sitting within the confines of the star and circle they themselves painted on the granite surface, as it was not visible in this light without enhanced vision. He sat facing east, and though he was aware of the approach of Freya and the two sisters, he did not immediately get up. Freya called his name twice before he acknowledged her, and even that was to say 'one moment,' by one raised finger. Mar step forward and planted her staff hard on the glistening stone. The resounding tap against pavement sounded sharp in the open, crisp air. The top of her staff was a closed pine cone.

"Sir, I wish to speak with you," Mar said.

"What would happen if I interrupted one of your rituals?" Preston asked.

"Our clan would kill you," Mar said.

"Why should my ritual be any less sacred?" Preston asked.

"There is truth in that," Mar said, taken back. "The request is urgent."

Preston concluded his meditation and stood up. Freya took up a position behind him and to his right, her right hand resting in her left hand, both palms up.

"Should I be alarmed?" he asked.

"Rumor travels quickly here," Mar said. "I am here to determine the truth of things, perhaps prevent a war."

"Why would there be a war?" Preston asked.

"Because if Bio Enc comes in here and takes over the Kalinga territories, the people will see it as a threat to their way of life. This land is sacred. It is the heart beat of Dathomir, and the clans are gathering even now to protest," Mar said.

"How may I serve you?" Preston asked.

"I don't know who you manipulated to claim property rights to the entire Kalinga territory, but it belongs to the people of the land, not to you, an outsider," Mar said.

Preston considered his response. "I agree."

Mar opened her mouth to continue her tirade, but stopped short. "You agree?"

“I am owner on paper, a caretaker at best,” Preston said. “My intentions are to reopen the academy, establish a place of learning, a medical center, a sanctuary for those affected by the war, especially to women and orphans. This is to be a place of healing. I believe fate increased the boundary of my stewardship because of an unmet need here. I don’t know what that need is, yet, but Ashia directs my Light, and it will be revealed in Her time of choosing.”

Mar stepped forwards. “Have we met before?”

Preston shrugged. “If my trending continues the way it has been, quite probably.”

“The only reason a war party isn’t down at base camp is because the Herd Mother said you were a friend. The Ranchors refused to march,” Mar said. “So my sisters and I came to see for ourselves the nature of the threat.”

Preston opened his arms. “I hope you don’t find me a threat.”

“You are an enigma. I don’t like enigmas,” Mar said. “I would prefer a woman be in charge here. But if Ashia has truly sent you, I will know by the end of this night.”

“I could designate Corissa to be in charge,” Preston said.

“I would prefer a different woman,” Mar said.

“Yeah, well, I hope to eventually establish a pluralist operating structure, no one person in charge,” Preston said. “Until then, I suppose it’s me or Corissa.”

“I must return to prevent a march, but you and I will spend more time together to discuss this, whatever this is, in more details. Know, I’m watching you,” Mar said.

“May there remain a peace between us until you’ve decided,” Preston said, bowing.

Mar turned as if to leave, handed her staff to her sister, turned back closed the distance between her and Preston, placing one hand over his heart and the other on the back of his neck. Freya took a battle stance and would have intervened but Jain raised her staff and pointed. The pine cone at the top of the staff flared opened, revealing an inner light. Preston closed his right fist, signaling his droid to hold.

“Speak the one word written under the rising sun,” Mar said.

“I can share it with you only if you have seen it in the light,” Preston said,

“Have you seen it under the moon?” Mar asked.

“I have and I haven’t,” Preston said.

Mar nodded. “Brother,” she said, quietly. “Forgive the manner in which I have intruded today.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” Preston said.

“I have a personal request,” Mar said.

“You and your sisters may continue to come here for your sacred ceremony,” Preston said.

“You can see it?” Mar asked, surprise evident on her face, her eyebrows going up.

“The star you painted here, revealed in black light, or when you shift to the next plane, yes,” Preston said.

“Are you a Jedi?” Mar asked.

“I’m not of the order,” Preston said.

“A shaman, then?” Mar asked.

“I do like that title, but though I fit many of the criteria, I have not been properly initiated,” Preston said.

“A wizard, perhaps?” Mar asked.

“I dabble in many things, as natural magic comes fairly easy, but that is true of anyone who has the Force as an ally,” Preston said.

Mar removed her hand from his chest and joined her sister, taking back her staff. She gave Preston one last look, then turned to walk away.

“I have a request,” Preston interrupted their departure.

Mar paused, but didn’t turn around. “You want to participate in our ritual?” she predicted, not allowing him to see the slight smiled edging her mouth.

“Yes,” Preston said.

Jain looked to Mar. “We’ve not done that in twelve years. And the last male that participated died during the ritual,” she whispered.

“You understand the risk involved?” Mar asked, still not looking back. She somehow seemed to know he had nodded and accepted his answer. “Very well. Bring me a pearl from the black waters,” Mar said. “Only then will I consider letting you participate.”

Jain said nothing more until they got on the tram.

“Mar, no outsider has ever lived to bring back a Bloog pearl,” Jain said.

“I know,” Mar said, leading the way back down the ramp.



Another visitor arrived, this one via an airship. The canopy opened as he unfastened himself from the seat restraints. By the time his feet were on the ground, Red had secured the doors leading to the tram. The visitor met the Droid and asked politely for the Droid to open the doors. The Droid refused, with a short, curt whistle. After arguing failed to get results, he reached for a blaster. The Droid produced a hologram of Nolasco saying, “I’ll be there in a moment. Don’t shoot my droid.”

“Fine,” Quintyl said, arms crossed over his chest.

Red returned to the task he was working on, but would turn to ensure the visitor was not doing anything troublesome. The waiting got to him, so Quintyl paced. Long strides took him back and forth, looking down to the lake. The lake’s size almost belied the fact that it was artificial, with two massive walls that led to the Stray Sister, the one standing off from the mountain chain. The far wall was sufficiently far that that the water line was properly obscured, making it appear as if a boat might just sail off the edge and disappear. There were strange pedestals extending up away from the mountains that reached out over the lake that puzzled him. He studied them, pushing his brain to figure out what their functions were, but he came up with nothing. He was so focused that he didn’t notice he had company until he looked up.

“Damn,” Quintyl said, automatically reaching for his blaster. “Don’t sneak up on people like that.”

“You were really focused,” Preston said.

“Yeah, I was. And sneaking like that could get you killed,” Quintyl said. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“Because you were obviously engaged, I thought it would be rude,” Preston said.

“Just say something next time. Like, nice day, anything,” Quintyl said, feeling a bit exasperated by this youth.

“Why would I label the day? Labeling the sky blue doesn’t capture the true essence of all the shades of blue that it can be, and it re-enforces the erroneous idea of a precise blueness, as if blue in itself was an innate quality, and which might make you forget that this particular sky is not limited to blue. I’ve seen variety of reds tapering to orange at the horizon. Just look at that sunset. Can words ever describe that?”

“Stop,” Quintyl said, gesturing with his hands. “Are you a moron?”

“That’s another label that requires a system of compare and contrast structures...”

Quintyl gestured again. “Are you like this with everyone?”

Preston was saved responding by Nolasco’s arrival. He took Quintyl’s hand, smiled.

“Hey, Q, I see you’ve met Preston. He is my associate.”

“Tell me you’re not replacing me with him,” Quintyl said.

“I’m not replacing you with him,” Nolasco assured him. “Preston is in charge of the operation here.”

“This child is in charge? Has he even completed secondary?”

“This child is a brilliant field researcher and has already brought in five product lines that are going to market even as we speak. The company thinks they’re going to get twelve others from his work, so, yeah, this child,” Nolasco said. “And now that you’ve met, perhaps you can discuss some of your collections with him.”

“Actually, I am interested in collecting Bloog samples,” Preston said.

Quintyl looked to Nolasco as if pained. “Really? Are we going to be looking for dragons next?” he asked. To Preston, “Look kid, they are a myth. They are just imaginary things someone thought up to entertain their kids.”

“I’m confident they exist, but they’ve been fairly evasive remote viewing, which suggests either an intelligence, or sensitivity to Force interactions,” Preston said, sharing his musing. “The latter would be interesting, and likely explains their elusiveness. I’m considering going in person.”

“Go where?” Nolasco said.

“The black waters, north of here, just beyond the tar pits,” Preston said.

“You’re going to get yourself killed,” Quintyl objected.

“I’ve not detected anything dangerous,” Preston said.

“You’re definitely going to get yourself killed,” Quintyl said. He turned to Nolasco.

“This kid is too young and stupid to be a field agent. You let him go out there, he will die. I’ve lived here all my life and there are places even I won’t go.”

“Then perhaps you should go with him, keep him safe,” Nolasco said.

“Go out where for what? Mythical creatures that don’t exist?” Quintyl asked.

“You understand, that if you can think it, it exists,” Preston said.

“Thinking stuff doesn’t make it real,” Quintyl argued.

“You’re thoughts make everything real,” Preston said. “You create your own reality.”

“If that were true, as much as I contemplate sex, I would get laid a hell of a lot more often,” Quintyl said.

“You say you want sex, but you’re blocking yourself because you believe giving into that impulse says something negative about your self-image,” Preston pointed out.

“Oh, you are so not psychologically assessing me,” Quintyl said, stepping back and putting his hand back on his blaster.

“Now, hold on, Q,” Nolasco said.

“I like you, Quintyl,” Preston said. “I will be making an expedition to the black waters. I would like you to accompany me.”

“Just like that?” Quintyl asked.

“You’re from here. You know the land. I can learn from you. But you’re also from here and may have overlooked some things, which I might shed light on. It will be fun. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have an emergency to tend to,” Preston said, turned and walked away.

“He’s weird,” Quintyl said.

“Aren’t we all?” Nolasco asked.

“No, we’re not. If everyone was weird that would be normal and then normal would be weird, and he is like on far side of weird,” Quintyl said.

“You sound just like him,” Nolasco said.

“You did not just insult me without handing me a drink first,” Quintyl said.

“Come on, I got something that will quench our thirst,” Nolasco said.

Jordeen was instructing Ten in the preparation of a meal, which had become rather quickly, a monotonous, 'chore' of chopping a variety of vegetables and putting them in bowls. In addition to keeping Ten on task, the process of teaching was slowed down due to the fact that Jordeen had never measured her portions, but simply improvised as she went along, which often meant her meals varied in taste, though never in quality. She just had an instinct. Teaching instinct, without an underlying level of understanding was challenging. She tried building a theory by suggesting one needs color in a meal. Greens were needed to build a strong base and to open heart energies, but oranges, reds, and yellows were just as critical for physical nutrition as well as opening etheric energy centers that supported the heart. Ten did display an instinct with knives, but had never really used them for anything kitchen practical, and so after cutting herself twice, she finally slowed down and focused on dicing the way she was being instructed. They worked together on an island, trying to figure out how to not get in each others way while also working together. Behind them was a plate glass window allowing the setting sun to diffuse gently through, over a large, 3 chambered sink. Jordeen paused to giggle, centering herself with deep breaths until the moment passed, and then continued to work.

"You sure laugh a lot," Ten said.

"I do," Jordeen agreed.

"You better not be showing me how to cook because you think its women's work and that's all I can do," Ten complained, pointing the knife at her.

"I'm not," Jordeen assured her. "Be respectful where you point the knife, as it can still direct energy.

"I don't understand," Ten said.

"Every gesture, whether you are conscious of it or not, has meaning, both real and metaphoric, and it carries energies and it shapes the worlds. The knife has meaning. Holding it channels energy, just like holding crystals channel energy. Energy moves in waves, ripples, and it always comes back to source," Jordeen said. "Focus on what you're doing and do this with love. If you see this activity as a chore, it will negatively affect the taste and the nutritional value. How you serve it also affects it. Everyone here will participate in cooking because it allows everyone to practice love."

"Love? How is food love?"

"Oh, how is food not love?" Jordeen asked. "All of this is an intimate part of our lives. From an extreme perspective, both plants and animals sacrifice to sustain us. From another perspective, what we eat becomes one with us, literally, metaphorically, and sharing their energies is an entwining of spirit."

"Yeah, well I don't know about all of that. I just need something in my stomach to get by and just want it to taste reasonably enough that I don't gag," Ten said. "And so far, this is much more work than opening a package of 'shindles' and being on my way."

Jordeen was saddened that Ten's idea of food was a snack bag, but she was not surprised since the child probably never had a sit down, family meal. "Good nutrition, good health, is love and work, and it requires a time investment," she explained. "We do this in order to slow down and be present in the moment."

"There is nothing in this moment necessary for us to slow down! It's like completely dead. What I wouldn't do for some music!" Ten said, exasperated.

"Preparing food is music," Jordeen said.

Ten bit her tongue. “So, everyone cooks is a rule?”

“Not an official rule, I guess, but if we’re going to be a community we will all have to participate, share the load. Don’t you agree?” Jordeen asked.

“Even Preston?” Ten asked.

“Especially Preston,” Jordeen said.

“Why especially?” Ten asked.

Corissa entered, smiled at the scene, came up behind Ten, touching her shoulder. “How’s it going?”

Ten turned suddenly, the knife going into Corissa’s stomach. “Don’t touch me! Ever,” Ten yelled. Her conscious mind caught up to what her brain had directed her body to do. Time seemed to stop. The most prominent sound was her own heart beat thundering in her ears. Jordeen’s words echoed in her head: ‘slow down, be present in the moment... the knife has meaning.’ Jordeen gasped and laughed. Something fell from the cabinet and broke. The aromas of the food mingled with the smell of human blood. There was a lot of blood, pooling out over the knife and her hand. It was warm. Corissa was breathless. Maybe it was surprise, or maybe she was in so much pain that she was breathless. Ten tried to apologize, tried to undo it by pulling the knife out, but that only seemed to make things worse. She bolted for the door.

Corissa was in more shock than pain, not to say that she wasn’t in pain, but she made no noise as her hand covered the wound on her abdomen, which didn’t halt the flow of blood, or what was most likely fecal matter. She thought it odd how warm it was and then thought how odd it was to be thinking about how warm it was as she started to sway back on her slow motion fall to the floor. She could identify the smell of blood, fecal matter, chopped vegetables and an assortment of spices that Jordeen had found in the kitchen that were still usable. Jordeen eased her fall, and tried covering the wound with a towel, forgetting that she had wiped her hands of a spicy vegetable, which only doubled Corissa’s pain.

“Pink,” Jordeen yelled at the Droid. “Get help!”

The Droid had already been whistling up a cry for help, spinning about, wanting to be useful. It whistled a sad whine as Preston arrived, moving hastily towards Corissa as if he had known she was in distress. Other R2 units arrived on Preston’s shadow, equally distressed. He knelt down beside Corissa, took her left hand in his and pushed her hair back out of her eyes with his other. Freya arrived with a med kit. She didn’t bother to offer it, as her assessment was that it would be insufficient, but she remained near in case the human element required more effort.

“I need your permission,” Preston said.

“Go after Ten,” Corissa said.

“First thing’s first. May I heal you?” Preston asked.

There was a kindness in her eyes that wasn’t always accessible, almost a subtle light, as if there was enough love and understanding to sustain her through this moment, making the pain bearable. She knew she was not ready to die. She knew there was something she needed to do, and Ten became her anchor. She didn’t require faith, as she had the first time she had ever been healed by him, but she was surprised that the memory of that event was suddenly available to her, with astounding clarity that it was almost like reliving it.

“Please,” Corissa said.

Preston closed his eyes, put his hand on her forehead and a hand over her heart, and not only did her wounds close from the inside out, but all the blood and other bio matter was cleaned and removed from her flesh. Only the clothing and the floor had evidence that she had been

severely injured. He also did not mend the clothes. Jordeen was not surprised by the healing, she was tearful with joy.

Corissa sat up. She touched Preston's face, gently. There was an emotion pushing at her, but she couldn't define it. Time seemed to have slowed and sunlight flowed around her as if it were a warm breeze. And then she started crying, hugging his neck. She wanted to stand, so he and Jordeen guided her to her feet.

"We have to go after her," Corissa said.

"No," Preston said.

"What do you mean no?!" Corissa asked, her normal script taking over the surreal moment of peace she had just experienced.

"All her life she has been running. People chase, bring her back, and the cycles starts all over again," Preston explained. He kissed a tear away from her cheek. "It's time to end this."

"She's a child, Preston," Corissa said. "She's alone. A city girl, in a strange world, no wilderness smarts, and..."

"She's not alone, Corissa," Preston said. "Nothing bad will happen to her."

Corissa tears fell, but the only noise she made was her breathing.

"This will be tough, Corissa, but it will not be the hardest thing you have to face. I'm asking you to trust the Force," Preston said. The way he said, 'it will not be the hardest thing you have to face' sent a chill down her bone, and a part of her mind started inventorying, wondering what could be worse than this moment. And what was that? A spontaneous premonition? Did he know something about her that she needed to pursue? It froze her. He took her hand in his. "I want you to go lie down, calm your mind, project love towards Ten. Jordeen, go with her. There shouldn't be any side effects to the healing, but sometimes older, emotional wounds can come to the surface, and, well, it's just best she's not alone. Also, she needs clear fluids."

Jordeen nodded, took Corissa's arm, and they headed away. Corissa paused to look back at Preston once, but he was already moving towards the exit. The Droids were following him.

Freya caught up to Preston's side. "I am capable of pursuing and bringing back the child," she offered, about to remind him of the number of upgrades he had made.

"Yes you are," Preston agreed. "But I need you to remain. Ten will be back."

"The odds of her surviving a night in the wilderness alone..." Freya began.

"Freya," Preston interrupted. "Are you able to sense the Force?"

"I do not believe there are sensors capable of detecting this phenomenon, but if there are, I am certainly not equipped to do so," Freya said.

"Interesting. Fixit was. I wonder if you can learn," Preston said.

"Naturally, I am interested in developing sensitivities that would allow me to better understand the environment and those I serve, however, I think the child's safe return should be our immediate priority," Freya insisted.

"I agree," Preston said, sitting down in the middle of the court yard, facing the main entrance. He closed his eyes and began a meditation.

"Sir?" Freya asked.

"Sit with me," Preston instructed.

Freya sat down. "I find this course of action to be irrational," Freya insisted.



Members from every tribe had gathered around a communal fire to discuss the latest drama. Many were not happy that they hadn't marched straight to war, but Mar was so well

respected that she had been able to subdue the panick. Only a few representived spoke, the others watched, studying the politics of it all.

“There’s got to be something more that you can tell us about him,” Metta said.

“The Force is strong with him,” Doya said.

“Pfft, a baby could discern that. Tell us something we don’t know,” Mar said.

“I’ve never experience such Force strength with someone who was so,” Doya sighed, looking for a relatively good word. Only one came to mind. “Neutral. I would bet my life on the fact he is a good man, but he is not like any Jedi we hve ever encountered. He lives by his own code.”

“And you really sent him after a Bloog pearl?” Metta asked Mar.

Mar shrugged, “It seemed like a good idea at the time. The spirit of the Three Sisters has accepted him, of that I am the most certain and if that spirit chose him for this work, then that explains why no one else has been able to return the Three Sisters to its previous glory. Additionally, many of the ghosts that were there have moved on. Light is gathering once again. If he brings back a pearl I will consider him worthy.”

“Worhty of what?” Pol asked.

“Of participating in a ritual,” Mar said.

“That could kill him,” Metta argued.

“As if you care. You were all set to rush into battle against him without even knowing who or what you faced. A lot of people might have died, Metta. You’re lucky the herd refused to march,” Mar said.

“Anyone know the why of that yet?”

“Maybe the spirit of Three Sisters has spoke with them,” Jain said. “They are often more in tuned with nature than we.”

“Perhaps. But if he survives a ritual, Mar, we are obligated to offer kinship rights, or start a new clan,” Metta said. “There are enough clans and too many on the counsel as it is.”

“Feel free to step down any time you don’t want a voice,” Mar offered.

“Everyone deserves a voice, even if they aren’t clan. As far as I’m concerned, he is family already,” Doya said.

“Yeah, yeah, you slept with him,” Pol said, disgusted. “If it weren’t for the ritual, you would have made half the planet family.”

“Oh, not half,” Doya laughed.

“So, you sleeping with him is your only bias?” Pol asked. “For good play, you took it upon yourself to make this deal.”

“Agan, not the only criteria,” Doya said. “Look, we can’t police this territory forever. Between infringements from expansions, off world settlers, the poachers, and the looming threat of junkers finally coming in to salvage what’s there, I saw this as an opportunity. This is a Force event, something we used to not take lightly. Hell, the Herd mother likes him. That says something, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” Mar said. “And he is carries the Light of Ashia.”

“That’s not possible...” Metta said

“He spoke the word?” Pol said.

“He did and he didn’t,” Mar said. “For now, allow the Force to unfold this as it wills. Doya and I will comtinue to be the liason between Preston and the clans.”

“Doya is bias,” Pol complained.

“So am I,” Mar said.



Ten found herself at the wall next to the zip line. Without thinking, she put on the harness, sat on the wall, connected the carabiner to the line, and then pushed free. It wasn't till she was falling that she considered that perhaps jumping wasn't the greatest idea. There was sufficient time on the ride down for her to remind herself why she was fleeing: she had just killed Corissa. The harm she had done couple with the fact she didn't know how to slow her descent escalated her fear. The descent eventually leveled out, then rose, and the rise brought her to a rest above a platform. Once her feet were on solid, she was able to disconnect from the line and remove the harness. She found several backpacks with supplies under the platform, and one of three speeder bikes. She took one bag and climbed up on the closest bike. It took a moment to figure out the controls, but it wasn't rocket science. Turning it on was simple enough, driving it was more difficult. The bike lurched forwards, fairly fast, and then twisted into a sideward pitch. She panicked and popped the clutch; it was off like a rocket. The landscape directly around her shot by in a blur, the bike rising and falling with the terrain, shooting through a series of trees before breaking out over a plain. There was still enough ambient light to see fairly well, but it was fading fast. She tried forcing herself to look ahead to a point in the distance, but rocks and grass swept by her legs drawing her gaze down. Something whizzed by her right and she turned her head to see if she could make it out. The bike tried to follow the direction of concentration, which put her in a spin. The tail of the bike dropped, bucked the ground, and that was the end of semi controlled flight. The ride lasted all of ten minutes before she crashed and was tossed from the vehicle. She landed on her stomach, and slid a couple feet, tumbled once due to the unevenness of the ground, and came to rest on her butt. She tried to sit up, but found the backpack too heavy, and the world 'spiraling' too much to allow her to get up, so she lay back down.

Ten lay there, looking up at the sky. The backpack was uncomfortable, but she didn't take it off. She wished she could go anywhere just by thinking. Her fantasy of having her own spaceship was renewed. She could be out there, alone, not harming anyone, not needing anyone. She wished she had been able to take Pink, but then, she rationalized all the reasons why she didn't deserve a Droid, couldn't care for one.

“I told you, it was over here!” came a triumphant voice.

Ten sat up. She could discern a figure, but other than it was humanoid, she had no clue. It was probably Preston and a search team. The torch the person carried illuminated the crashed speeder bike. Killed a woman and destroyed a bike, she lamented. There was no going back for her. She had to hide. There was another torch panning across the knee high grass a short ways away. She forced herself to her feet and moved in a direction away from the search. Because she was looking backwards over her shoulders, she didn't see the man in front of her until he closed his arms around her.

“Got you!” he said, laughing. He shined a light in her face. His laugh was evil, and breath not much better. “Over here, guys!”

His friends joined him and they were all amused. “What a prize. And I though tonight was going to be a bad night for poaching.”

“I caught her, so I'm first.”

“Let me go,” Ten said.

“Oh, yay, a fighter,” he said, tearing at her clothes. “Hold her arms.”

His friends took her arms while he pulled out a knife. The knife flashed under a half moon. So did his teeth, what were remaining, jagged, and with gaps.

“Please, don’t hurt me, I’ll do whatever you want,” Ten pleaded.

“Of course you will,” he said, bringing the knife towards her. He slipped the knife under the straps and cut the backpack free. “Out here, all alone, no one to protect you.” He cut her belt and pulled it free from her pants.

The men were so focused on unwrapping their prize, they didn’t see the Rancor that had slipped up on them. The man with the knife was in midair before he even pieced together what was happening, and his head was off and swallowed before he could think of an appropriate expletive. One of his friends ran. The Rancor threw the headless body at the runner, bowling him down. The third was struggling to get his weapon free. The Rancor crushed him under his foot, picked him up, and threw him down the ravine. The one that had ran was moaning, which prompted the Rancor to go finish him off.

Satisfied, the Rancor turned back to the girl. She had not run. She held her ground. It bobbed its head and made a light chuffing noise.

“Go ahead. Finish me off!” Ten yelled.

The Rancor barked.

“Go on! Kill me already,” Ten said.

The Rancor barked.

“Well, I’m not going to wait here all night,” Ten said.

She turned and tripped over her backpack. She hit the ground hard, adding another bruise to her already numerable injuries. The Rancor seemed to be laughing, which pissed her off. She got back up, picked up her backpack and carried it in her arms in front of her. The Rancor followed. She really couldn’t make out its features under the light of the moons, but she knew it was there. The ground shook as he walked. She stopped, trying to get a better grip on the backpack.

“Stop following me,” Ten told it.

It growled.

“Fine, you can follow me if you want,” Ten said, resuming her walk.

It barked.

“Yeah, well, I don’t understand you either,” Ten said.

The contents of her backpack spilled out and the bag collapse. Ten sat down, trying to gather the things back up, and simply started crying.

“Nothing ever works out for me,” Ten lamented. “Why is the world like this? Why can’t I be happy without dying!”

She lay down, pounded the ground, and screamed up at the night. She continued to cry until she went to sleep.



Ten was in an open field, smiling at a flower. “Is this a dream?” she asked.

“Does it matter?” Preston asked.

Ten looked up at the sun, took a deep breath in. As she took it in, her arms went out, like wings unfolding, and her palms faced the sun. She felt the warmth against her skin, felt it circulating, felt her heart warming.

“You feel that?” Preston asked.

“The light? Yeah,” Ten said, airy and light.

“Good for you,” Preston said.

“The Force is strong here,” Ten observed.

Preston laughed.

Her expression changed, starting with a micro flash of pain followed by anger. “What?” Ten demanded. She was surprised that she could emote anger here, surrounded by so much love and peace.

“That’s funny,” Preston said.

“I don’t like it when you laugh at me,” Ten said.

Preston tried a somber look, but couldn’t maintain it. “I’m sorry.”

“What’s so funny?!” Ten demanded. The sky was so... rich. Why couldn’t she just be happy? Why couldn’t she just flow with it?

“Your analysis,” Preston answered.

“How am I wrong?” Ten said.

“You’re annoyed, but you’re not a droid,” Preston said.

“Stop being silly”

“I’m happy,” Preston said.

“Why?” Ten asked.

“The fact that you’re aware of the Force here is a ‘yay you’ moment,” Preston said.

“But you pooped on my observation,” Ten said. This dialogue felt weird to her. Why was she here? How could there be so much anger in her when there was nothing but goodness as far as her eyes could see.

“If you permit that the Force pervades all existence, then perhaps it is your awareness of the Force that waxes and wanes, and not that this particular place or time holds any more significance than that place over there. The idea that this place being especially endowed with Force qualities is as absurd as saying only certain people, or certain families, are entitled to accessing the Force. It is a birth right of all. It is the very fabric of all existence,” Preston stated.

“Now that sounds like you, but that’s too profound to be true,” Ten said. The anger painting her face intensified. “Why am I rhyming?! I don’t like rhyming.”

Preston only smiled.

“I wish this was a story where a prince would come and wake me up with a kiss,” Ten said.

“No you don’t,” Preston argued.

“Yes, I do,” Ten argued.

“If you really wanted it, it would have already happened, so you need to go deeper, discover what you really, really want,” Preston said.

“I know what I really really want! I want to know this has all been a mistake! This isn’t the life I was supposed to have,” Ten said, as if pleading for her reality to change.

“There is no ‘supposed to’. There is no life. There is only the story. Right now, someone is looking down on you, as if watching a holo and you are teaching them vicariously,” Preston explained.

“How absurd,” Ten said. “What can I teach? I’m no one.”

“You are someone to everyone. The trick is remembering it is just a story you tell yourself, they tell themselves,” Preston said.

“This is not a story! I feel this! This is something!” she said, tapping her heart.

“It is something, and yet, just a moment ago you said you were no one. Perhaps what you are feeling is merely your own anger disturbing the Force. You’re feeling your own feedback,” Preston said.

“First of all, I’m not angry. And second of all... Stop laughing. It’s not funny. I am serious. I am the embodiment of seriousness. I am a Jedi and I am calm...”

Preston laughed so hard he had to sit down.

“I am not happy! Jedi’s are not happy. Yoda would not tolerate this kind of behavior!” Ten insisted.

“Luminous beings we are, playing in sandboxes,” Preston said.

“The world is a sandbox?”

Preston scooped up sand where there was once grass and let it fall from his hand, between his fingers, catching wind and light, like dropping sparks from an arc welder against steel. “There are more stars than all the grains of sand on all the beaches on all the inhabited worlds. We are crystalized stars. It’s a star box!”

“Stop messing around. I’m running out of time.”

“There is no time,” Preston said.

“Stop it. I want you to make me a lightsaber,” Ten asked.

“Nope.”

“That’s not fair,” Ten said.

“There is no fairness,” Preston said.

“Finally, we agree on something,” Ten said.

Ten sat down in front of him.

“Will you teach me to make one, then?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“Have you ever killed anyone with yours?” she asked.

“I killed a Droid,” Preston admitted.

“That doesn’t count,” she protested. “Does it?”

“It does to me,” it was simple and solemn and reverent.

“I want one,” Ten said.

“A Droid? I gave you Pink.”

“No, I want a lightsaber,” Ten pleaded.

“Why?” Preston asked, serious.

“For defense,” Ten said.

“Then you are not ready,” Preston said.

Ten sulked. “I don’t understand.”

“Rely first on the Force. It is with you always,” Preston explained.

“Okay, fine. At least teach me that trick where you clean toilets with the Force,” Ten asked.

“If you are unwilling to clean toilets with your hands, you definitely won’t want to clean it with the Force,” Preston said. “Magic, shamanism, and Jediism is not the lazy man’s alternative to hard work. Being a Jedi requires a greater level of discipline than any other regimen one can engage in. If that weren’t true, all would be Jedi.”

“That can’t be true, there are lots of Jedi that do things without discipline,” Ten argued.

Preston shrugged with his head, not being able to argue against that. “There are also people who are strong without exercising and people who can do math without practice and

people who can play musical instruments naturally,” Preston agreed. “But one person trained and disciplined in the Force is more powerful than a thousand beings that lucked into the ability.”

“Then give me more luck, because snapping my fingers and making it clean sounds pretty damn appealing and easy if you ask me,” Ten said.

“Touching something with the Force is much more intimate than physically touching it. Using the force is like using all of your senses combined at once, times ten thousand, mixed with senses you didn’t even know you had,” Preston said. “Learn practical stuff before magical stuff.”

“Why?!”

“There is no why,” Preston said.

“There is always a why!”

“There are no spiders, only the thought of spiders, so you are not responding to spiders, you’re responding to your thoughts on spiders, and that is why there is no why.”

“You may have said something intelligible, but I didn’t follow. I want something more tangible!” Ten insisted.

“Reach out and touch the sky,” Preston ordered.

Ten complied and discovered the sky was palpable, it moved like pushing into a hanging sheet. She stood up into it, like standing into a tent wall. Sunlight flowed across her hand like streams of water, her extended fingers stirring vortexes in the air, spinning light rings like so much smoke. It stuck to her fingers and pulled back. She started to panick, as if stuck in a web.

“This is a dream, Ten. The sky is you, the ground is you, I am you, everything is you,” Preston said. “Every thought here can be realized through focused awareness. Anger has amphetamine and analgesic affects. Crashing always follows amphetamine use. Crashing always follows anger. You can’t sustain anger indefinitely. You will crash. Anger can be subtle, sneaky. If we disparage others, assign malevolence, incompetence, or idiocy to any observed behavior, we have engaged with anger and we suffer, not the other. It diminishes our ability to see truth, to see others, to see ourselves accurately. That is why you are not ready for a lightsaber. You are still at war with yourself. You would kill yourself.”

“So how can you ever fight someone if you are always trying to hold this higher conception of them?” Ten asked.

Preston nodded, smiling. “Compassionate assertiveness,” he answered. “You recognize your participation both cognitively and emotionally, you declare your boundaries, you retreat where you can, you fight where you must. You learn to love. You embrace the consequences of every thought, every action, without disparaging self or others.”

“I can’t do this.”

“Love has always been the harder path,” Preston agreed. “Let go.”

“I’ll fall!”

“In love,” Preston insisted.

“I’m ready to die,” Ten said.

“There is no death. What you’re wishing for is escape. There is also no escape. There is only here and now and you must face this,” Preston said.

“You don’t understand. I killed Corissa!” Ten said, but she couldn’t run because the sky had her caught, no matter how hard she tried to pull free.

Corissa came up behind her and touched her shoulder. Ten jumped, turned and pointed drawing the heavens with her every movement: “Don’t ever touch me! Don’t! Don’t! Don’t!”



“DON’T”

Ten sat up, orientating on threats that weren’t there. She was in an open field. She found herself holding her breath, made herself let go, emptied and refilled her lungs. A Rancor was standing over her. Her brain took a moment to catch up to the most recent events. It was watching her, which she found kind of creepy, partly because she didn’t understand the why, and because it was not the most pleasant soul to look at. Then again, she was a murderer, so how could she measure its ugliness? Umm, she thought, a murderer on the run with a Rancor side kick. Great.

The Rancor mumbled something, unintelligible. She was not sure if it was actual words or mimicry.

“So, it’s not all a dream. You are still here,” Ten said.

It barked. The Rancor tilted its head.

“Do you understand me?” Ten asked.

It made a chuffing noise and reached out a hand. One knuckle pushed against her shoulder, gently. She nearly fell back.

“Thank you,” Ten said, taking its hand and pulling herself to her feet. She grimaced. She was sore. Her back hurt. Her neck hurt. Her arms were scratched up. She was pretty sure her face was scratched as well. There was a spider on her sleeve. She screamed, brushing it off, jumping about and patting down her whole body looking for more spidery friends, suddenly and completely oblivious to any pain or stiffness. The Ranchor fell back on its haunches, laughing.

Ten got a hold of herself. Her stiffness and pain returned. “Stop laughing! It’s not funny!” she insisted.

The Ranchor made a motor-boat sound pushing air through its lips as it tried to hide its mirth. The corners of its mouth etched up.

“What? You can defend me against bad guys, but not arachnids?” Ten demanded.

It blew on her face. Ten closed her eyes and nearly fainted. Its breath was horrendous. She looked around her. There was a ravine and a river bubbling over rocks, and the water looked surprisingly clear in many places. There were the mountains behind her, the closest of which she could discern the Academy. She was surprised no one had found her. She turned as if trying to make a decision.

The Rancor barked.

“I’m afraid to go back,” she said.

The Rancor growled.

“I did something really bad,” Ten said.

It made a noise that sounded like commiseration.

Ten chuckled. “Yeah, I am sure you understand. You look as ugly outside as I feel on the inside.”

She put her hands on her head and pushed the palms into her eyes. She screamed until all the air was out of her lungs. She removed her hand. Still, she was there, the sky was there, the world, the Ranchor. The spider. In the past she might have just killed it, but she felt no animosity, she just didn’t want it crawling on her. She watched as it crawled back into the ground. It closed a door of earth behind it. How nice, she thought. A spider has a home and I don’t. The dream words came to her. There is no spider, just her thoughts about a spider. She heard a voice in her head she couldn’t identify, “The earth is the first level of manifesting symbolic interaction.” There words were clear. Their individual meanings were also clear. All

together, she was not sure how to interpret it and the fact that she heard a voice at all, a voice distinctly not her own, bothered her, distracted her from pursuing the thought deeper.

She had to go back.

“Would you walk with me?” Ten asked.

The Rancor picked her up and set her down on the back of its neck.

“Okay, or carry me,” Ten said once she was settled with the idea.

From her new height, she saw the world differently, and as they crested the top of a small hill, she saw the plain and dozens of Rancors walking. There were strange forests closer to the mountain range, red mist floating lazily across the ground. It was all different and new. She had never felt so alive. Small details of nature stood out, like the swaying of the grass to the wind, the vivid colors of the flowers, and the blueness of the sky. Accustomed to city noises, she had assumed it was quiet, but now there were sounds. There was life! Distant sounds of flowing water and the call of Ranchors answering the Herd Mother, and birds that would all take leave of the ground as if they were one animal. They would turn like a cloud or a ribbon and then return to the ground. In what seemed like no time, the Rancor was carrying her up the steps to face justice. At the top, he set her on her feet. She hesitated before the gate. The Rancor nudged her forward.

“Don’t rush me,” Ten said, pouting. “Fine. I’ll get it over with.” But still she hesitated. She turned and hugged its arm, its knuckles planted on the ground. “Thank you.”

Ten turned away from the friend and pushed through the gate, which was unlocked. Inside, she saw Preston meditating. She approached him. Eye closed, he told her to sit down. She complied, without asking how he knew she was there, but her mind was trying to figure it out, offering explanations like, the gate made a sound when she entered.

“Things are not getting any easier,” Ten said. “But I am ready for my punishment.”

Preston opened his eyes. He studied her for a long moment.

“Say something,” Ten pleaded.

“Such as?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Something profound, maybe,” Ten said. When nothing came, she added. “Quote Yoda.”

“Why Yoda?”

“Everyone knows Yoda,” Ten said. “Like, Holding onto anger is drinking poison and expecting the other to die.”

“Yoda didn’t say that,” Preston said.

“Yeah, he did,” Ten insisted.

“So, you want me to argue with you?” Preston asked.

“No, I want you to punish me,” Ten said.

“How would you like to be punished?” he asked.

“Good point,” Ten said. “What do kids get for murder?”

“What would you like, Ten?”

“I want Corissa to be alive. I want Corissa in my life,” Ten said, crying.

“Go to the kitchen,” Preston told her.

“I don’t think I can,” Ten pleaded.

“This is your first cave, Ten, and you must face it,” Preston said.

Ten wiped her eyes. “Fair enough,” she said. She wasn’t sure what she would find. Was her body still on the floor? A blood stain? A chalk outline like in the holonovels she had read? But she pushed herself up and headed for the kitchen. The smell of breakfast greeted her before

she even pushed through the door. They were all at the table. She heard Nolasco say he was going to go look for her, regardless of what Preston recommended. Corissa stood as the door was opening. Ten rushed her, hugged her, cried into her bosom.

“I’m so sorry, Ten,” Corissa said.

Ten looked up, muddled. “Why are you sorry? I thought I killed you.”

“I startled you and I’m sorry. You are not at fault,” Corissa said.

“How can you forgive me?” Ten asked.

“Because I understand what happened,” Corissa said.

“You do?” Ten asked.

“I’ve experienced similar. I understand what it’s like to run, for no apparent reason, or how easy it is to misinterpret situations because something bad happened in the past. This was an accident. Preston healed me. I’m fine,” Corissa said, running her hand through Ten’s hair soothingly. “So, let’s eat breakfast, and then we will go get you cleaned up.”

Ten was led to the table as if all her will was gone. She sat down at the table next to Jordeen, where her plate waited. Jordeen leaned in to hug her and then poured her some water. Corissa sat opposite of Ten, not bothering to wipe her own eyes. Ten’s confusion was visible on her face as she sat there with her hands on her lap. Internally, she kept asking if she were dreaming, telling herself to wake up. Kiesha smiled politely at her and drank her coffee. Nolasco was now reading a tablet as if there hadn’t been any drama, though as a man of action, he had had the most trouble not chasing after Ten, and so he was coping the best way he could, through distractions.

“I feel like I’m dreaming,” Ten claimed her thoughts. “None of you are mad?”

“You want us to be angry?” Corissa asked.

“I expected...” Ten said, but failed to continue. She was at a loss for words.

Corissa put down her spoon and put her hands in her lap, mirroring Ten’s mannerisms. She pursed her lips, thoughtfully before speaking. “This is difficult for me, Ten, as I’m learning something new, about myself, about you, about this condition we both share. I’m also trying to choose my words carefully so that I don’t trigger another fight or flight response. The thing is, we know that you have had inappropriate physical contact with adults. You may even think that you chose to participate, but the reality is you did so to minimize being hurt. Further, we suspect you’ve been yelled at and inappropriately, physically punished all your life. None of that has worked for you, most likely because you were not doing anything wrong other than being in opposition to the adults in your environment. Both of those things together mean that your expectations of what it means to be in trouble are sorely skewed. So again, and this is the most important part, you’re not in trouble because you didn’t do anything wrong. Your brain reacted to stimulus in order to protect you from a perceived threat. You have not been in a loving, caring environment before, and so you need time to adapt, to realize you are safe. Our job is to help you reach that state.”

“I nearly killed you and you aren’t mad?” Ten pointed out more than questioned.

“You can’t kill her,” Jordeen said. “She hasn’t completed her life mission and her life mission wasn’t to add a burden to your life mission.”

“You speak like Preston,” Ten said.

Jordeen laughed a genuine, soft, pleasant laugh. “We come from the same school.”

Corissa and Nolasco seemed to take mental note of that, but didn’t comment or inquire further. This moment was for Ten, not their own interests.

Ten blinked, still trying to understand the situation, and likely missed the unspoken exchange. “Is Preston going to join us?”

“Preston is recharging,” Jordeen said.

“I don’t understand,” Ten said.

“Everyone has multiple banks of energy. Physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, social... Well, when Preston uses his abilities, he depletes the social bank before the others, partly because he wasn’t raised around people. Partly because he is introverted. He just needs some quiet time to recover.”

“Recover from what? Meditating? Didn’t any of you look for me?” Ten asked.

“No,” Corissa said.

“You don’t care what happens to me? I was almost gang raped and I thought a Ranchor was going to eat me!” Ten complained.

“Ten,” Corissa said. “All your life you have ran and people have chased. It’s time to change the game. You are nine and extremely street smart. It’s ludicrous for us to think we are going to keep you from escaping if you choose to run away. Our intentions are to provide you with a safe place to be. We hope that you will choose to stay, choose to work out your problems with us, because that’s what we want.”

“I don’t know what to make of this,” Ten stated simply.

Corissa nodded. “We are all forging new ground here. Give yourself some time to process this. But start with comfort food. You’ve not eaten since lunch yesterday. After we eat, you can get a hot shower or bath. Yep, there is now hot water,” Corissa responded to the look. “And then I think we’re going to sit around a camp fire and tell stories and roast fun on a stick. Unless there is something more specific you would like to do. The court yard’s high definition holographic display system is now operating, and there are some holonovels and educational astronomy features available.”

Ten took a moment to read the faces meeting her eyes. They seemed completely serious. ‘Fun on a stick,’ and the food in front of her moved her from emotional crisis to physical. She was indeed hungry. She took a tentative bite and decided it was good and didn’t stop till her plate was clean.

“I crashed a speeder,” Ten said, taking her first bite.

“Speeders can be replaced,” Corissa said.

“I remember crashing mine the first time I rode,” Nolasco mused.

The stories started to flow.



Corissa found Preston on the wall, looking out across the country side. In the distance, a herd of Ranchor moved across an open plain, heading no where fast.

“She was almost gang raped?!” she demanded.

“The operative word being almost,” Preston said.

“You said nothing bad would happen to her,” Corissa said.

“And nothing did,” Preston said.

“But,” Corissa began.

“Nothing bad can happen because there is nothing bad. Now, understand, this statement is perspective dependent on a particular point of view,” Preston said.

“Particular point of view?! Are you mad?” Corissa asked.

“Mad like angry or mad like crazy?” Preston asked.

“You’re really impossible,” Corissa said, turning to walk away

Preston blinked, tilted his head. “Corissa,” Preston said, calling her back. It wasn’t a Force command, but something in his voice got her to pause. She returned, an aura of impatience about her. “I’m going to make an assumption about your paradigm and say this: It is not within my power to prevent things from happening to people. Things happen. Most things happen because we put ourselves in situations or because of our decisions. Some things happen to us just because other agents have free will and make poor or selfish decisions. And sometimes, things just happen. The only choice we have is in how we respond. We have a choice in how we think, which gives us a choice over how we emote, which often gives us better choices behaviorally. But even when making optimum choices, we are not guaranteed optimum results. Now, I doubt seriously that Ten survived her heart being cut out merely to come die a meaningless death on this planet. Ultimately, however, we are all going to die. It’s part of the deal.”

“I don’t want to hear some cliché about how we should all handle death stoically like Jedi Masters,” Corissa said, but when all he said was ‘okay,’ she flushed with anger. “That’s it?”

Preston looked down at his hands and then back to her. “I’m not sure what to offer you. You don’t really want to hear what I have to say and I’m pretty sure what I will say is not going to comfort you.”

Corissa turned to walk away. She paused and came back. “And why didn’t you tell me you went to school with Jordeen?”

“I didn’t go to school with Jordeen,” Preston said, confused. And then he brightened. “Oh, yeah. On the astral plane. Kind of like how I helped you but I didn’t remember it because that was in a different memory bank that wasn’t readily available.”

“Other memory bank?” Corissa asked.

“Subconscious mind, if you prefer, or a higher Light mind. You understand that though we temporarily reside in these bodies, we are not limited to this space-time. We are higher dimensional beings, beings of Light, and we are living multiple realities simultaneously.”

“I have enough problems tackling my present existence for you to complicate it with this other nonsense,” Corissa said. “We have practical things in the here and now that need our attention for our continued wellbeing. More than hot water and energy requirements.”

“You’re very practical,” Preston said. “It’s why I love you.”

Corissa pointed at him, silently and explicitly warning him, but she didn’t verbalize her thoughts, only turned to leave.

“Corissa,” Preston interrupted her flight again. She stopped. “I need to take an excursion.”

Corissa came back. “Excuse me?”

“I am going hiking. I’ll be gone three days, maybe four,” Preston said.

“You can’t leave. We have work to do. This home was all your idea,” Corissa said.

Preston nodded. “This is still my home. I’ll leave Freya. She is very helpful. And, if you need something, all you have to do is call me.”

“You don’t answer your comm. link now, why would I believe you will answer a call out in the wilderness?” Corissa asked.

“Comm. link?” Preston said. “No. Just call me.”

“Okay, whatever,” Corissa said, turned to leave, but stopped herself and came back. “You are going out there by yourself? Are you daft? There are wild animals out there.” Preston offered

a faint smile, as if he were going to say, 'Nothing bad will happen.' Corissa pointed at him. "Don't say it."

"I'm taking Findit. And Quintyl is supposedly joining me," Preston said.

Corissa turned to storm off again, got maybe two feet and came back. "Before you go off on some adventure, you're taking us in to town," she insisted.

"Nolasco can fly you into town," Preston said.

"He and Kiesha have to return to Axila in the morning," Corissa said. "You're flying us into town, we're buying more supplies, and then we're going to the beach where we will have a pleasant outing. Are we clear?"

Preston tracked the event. "I would like to stay behind," Preston requested.

"I want you to pilot. You're going. That's final," Corissa said.

Preston brought his hands together, bowed politely. Corissa looked at him skeptically, as if she wasn't sure if his gesture was sarcastic, passive aggressive submission, or the true spirit of serving. She turned and fully walked away. Preston allowed the air in his lungs to puff out his cheeks as he regulated its release back into the environment. Mindfulness techniques of staying with the movement of air brought him back to the calm he was experiencing before Corissa's tirade.

Lestelle arrived at the Hapes spaceport and took a sky cab to her home of origin. The home was situated in the suburbs, where rows and columns of homes were laid out in grid like fashion, half acre lots separated by concrete fences and the only way to access any of the homes in the neighborhood was by air. There were a community parks, trails for walking, jogging, and biking, and lakes interspaced between groupings of homes. Lestelle's family's property line didn't butt up against a park, and might have been insignificant, but it stood out because it was the only one with a private pool in the back yard for six lots in any direction. The private, computerize cab settled in the intended parking space. The door opened skyward and she got out and asked the car to wait. The car acknowledged her request, but it was understood that if there was an emergency call, it had a proximity protocol that might require a response.

Lestelle went slowly up the path, in present time and past. She sorted through memories, some pleasant, some not so pleasant. She rationalized the past 'bad' and regrets and 'sadness' as just something all people experience, trying not to linger at anything particular that came up in her mind. She spoke code to the front door and it opened, welcoming her back. She entered, set a small bag that she had acquired in her journey home onto a table, removed her shoes, and proceeded through the house, calling her mother. No answer. The house felt empty, and at the same time, it was also full of ghosts. Smells brought a flood of emotions to the surface, the intensity of which surprised even her. She was about to proceed upstairs when the wall pager came to life.

"Sis, is that you?"

Lestelle sighed, let go of the rail, and touched the button on the wall. "Hello, Letha," Lestelle said. "Where's mom?"

"She's in the nursing home. Didn't you read your emails?"

"When?" Lestelle asked.

"About a week ago," Letha said.

"Thanks," Lestelle said.

"Wait, we need to talk," Letha said.

"No, we don't, but thanks," Lestelle said, and ended the call.

She gathered her things, slipped into her shoes, and headed for the cab. The door closed automatically behind her. The cab accepted vague instructions like, "take me to the facility hosting Fana Re," but in this case it required the signing an affidavit that she had legal rights to another form which allowed her to access to 'a release of personal information' that allowed the nursing home the ability to acknowledge the presence of said person. She consented, of course, and once the cab got clearance, it was off. It arrived in hardly no time, but that passage of time may have just seemed shorter due to Lestelle's trance like gaze out the window, watching the scenery below and the reflections in the window, watching the droplets from a misty rain gather and roll with the wind. She thanked the taxi and again asked it to wait. The entrance was nondescript, perhaps intentionally so, but it opened into an expansive lobby. The front desk had her immediately sign in and put on a reusable, electronic name tag. There were residents loitering in the lobby, some in mobile assist devices, while others occupied the provided chairs or couch. A lady, hunchedback with age, wanted to talk to her but she did her best to excuse herself politely, suggesting to the woman who was obviously confusing her with someone else. There was a piano, not being used, and a fireplace, also not being used but was set with logs and appeared ready should the weather present. Private meetings rooms were available, probably

because all of the hospital residential rooms were double occupancy, consisting of beds, dressers, and a small shared bath. The place smelled of old people, urine, cleaning solvents, and death. She tried not to invade people's privacy, but doors were open and bed ridden people complaining, crying, or just otherwise miserable were inescapable. One guy yelled at her.

"Could you get the nurse! I pooped myself and need to be cleaned!" he demanded. His call light was on. "I've been waiting over an hour."

Lestelle stopped a passing tech. "Excuse me, he needs help," she said.

"We're short staff, today," the tech said, trying to move past and disengage from the conversation.

"Then maybe you need more Droids," Lestelle said.

"We need a lot of things, Miss..."

Lestelle handed her a business card. "I'm his lawyer. Please see that he gets attended to before I leave. And please note, I am legally obligated to report any suspicion of neglect," Lestelle said. "And if there is any evidence of retribution against this patient I will make sure none of the staff has licensure to work in a care facility again, are we clear?"

The tech swallowed. "I will personally take care of this matter, as soon as I administer this med pack to another client."

"Thank you," Lestelle said. She proceeded directly to her mother's room, purposely shutting her eyes to the needs both real and perceived. Her mother was in the second bed, a media device playing, but she stared at the wall, vacantly.

"Hello, Mother," Lestelle said.

Fana turned her head, here eyebrows drawing together, her eyes narrowing. "Come to gloat?"

"No, I came to show my concern," Lestelle said.

"If you had any ability to care, you would have become a Doctor and not a lawyer," Fana said. "So what happened again? Your looks failed you here, so you're whoring yourself out on a planet where the feminine competition is nonexistent?"

"Yes, I'm employed off world," Lestelle said, a weak smile playing across her lips.

"At least your sister cared enough to check in on me," Fana continued. "I wonder how long I would have suffered with a broken hip before you came to see if I were even alive."

"There are Droid companions that can call emergency services," Lestelle said.

"I didn't give birth to Droids," Fana said. "And Droids cost money. Insurance, maintenance."

"They have Droids for that, too," Lestelle offered. "And I sent you money."

"All of which I returned," Fana pointed out.

"I know," Lestelle said, pulling up a chair.

"Still single and brooding over the fact your sister is more beautiful than you are?" Fana demanded.

"You really think I'm that shallow?" Lestelle asked.

"Well, you are a lawyer," Fana pointed out again.

Lestelle faked a smile, nodded.

"Why are you even here?" Fana demanded.

"I'm wondering that myself," Lestelle said.

Fana turned her head and stared at the ceiling. "I suppose you can't help it. You're just as selfish and whorish as your father ever was," Fana lamented. She licked her lips. "The service in

this place sucks. If I wanted to die of thirst, I would have stayed broken on my own kitchen floor.”

“Mother,” Lestelle said. “There’s water on the table in arms reach.”

“I don’t want water,” Fana said.

“I would be happy to fetch you some tea, or maybe juice,” Lestelle offered.

“That’s the best your brain can come up with?” Fana asked.

“I doubt you can partake of alcohol in this place,” Lestelle said.

“Don’t tell them. I thought you lawyers were supposed to be clever, sneaky, bitches. Oh yeah, that’s why you farmed yourself out cheap on a foreign planet,” Fana said.

“Alright, well, I’m going to leave now,” Lestelle stated, standing up. “Any additional insults you’d like to deliver while I am here in person to collect?”

“You are so weak,” Fana said. “That’s why he dumped you, you know.”

“You’re right, Mother,” Lestelle said, sadly. “I’m sorry I disappointed you. I’ll try not to bother you again.”

“Just like your dad, show up when it’s convenient, and disappear again,” Fana said.

“You must have liked him for something. You did procreate with him,” Lestelle said.

“I’m sure he drugged me,” Fana said. “That would explain your poor looks and low IQ.”

“Goodbye, Mother,” Lestelle said.

Lestelle escaped the room, her mother calling her names as she left. She paused just out of sight to listen, shed a few tears, and then pushed on down the hallway. Letha rounded the corner and nearly ran right into her. She opened her arms to offer a hug, but Lestelle put up a hand, forcing her to hold back as if she were actually using the Force.

“I’ve missed you,” Letha said.

“Yeah? I still don’t want a hug,” Lestelle said.

“I see you’ve been talking to Mother,” Fana said, indicating the tears.

“It really wasn’t a conversation,” Lestelle said.

“You understand she is sick, that she can’t help it,” Letha said.

Lestelle assessed her sister’s statement and the seriousness of her delivery gave credence that Letha actually believed it. “You always make excuses for her behavior. I doubt she has a diagnosis for a mental illness, but even if you’ve finally gotten one, I would like to understand why she isn’t taking meds, or how the symptoms of this supposed illness comes with selective abuse to a specific person,” Lestelle said. She interrupted her sister’s potential response with a hand that said she wasn’t finished. “Now, I’m here just for a couple days. I would like to spend one night at the house…”

“It’s still your home,” Letha said.

“It was never my home. It was just a place I lived,” Lestelle said.

Letha frowned. “If you feel that way, why even stay one night?”

“I’m not coming back,” Lestelle said. “It’s just closure.”

Letha shrugged, frowning. “Are you still holding a grudge because I married your boyfriend?” she asked.

Lestelle smiled. “Slept with him behind my back for months, announced it only because you got pregnant, and then married him,” Lestelle pointed out. “But no, Letha, there was never a grudge. He chose to be with you. It’s that simple.”

“Still, it must have been painful,” Letha said, trying to make a connection.

“I think mother has poisoned your ear towards me, because you think I’m either too shallow, or hold no emotions,” Lestelle said. “It’s bad enough you didn’t hear my hurting then,

when it was fresh and appropriate to emote such feelings, but that mother and your father supported you and the relationship, actively dismissed and disparaged me into suppressing my point of view as if it were too legalistic to point out that it was wrong for you to have slept with him or actively engaged him in any way other than to say ‘no, you’re in a relationship with my sister, end that first and then we’ll talk,’ but that’s not how it played out, was it?”

“I loved him,” Letha said.

“I know,” Lestelle agreed.

“And you want me to negate that, deny that the best thing that happened to me, to my life, was him, and our children?” Letha asked.

“I’m not asking you to do anything,” Lestelle pointed out.

“Why can’t you just be happy for me? Why can’t you admit that perhaps he loved me more because you’re an emotionless, robot,” Letha said. “Our dad...”

“Your dad, my step dad,” Lestelle corrected.

“Our DAD was good to us, to you,” Letha said.

“You’re right. I never wanted for food or material comfort,” Lestelle agreed.

“And you left home, chose a lesser career path because you intended to pay your own way instead of accept Dad and Mom’s help,” Letha went on.

“Conditions,” Lestelle corrected.

“You didn’t even come to the funeral!” Letha said. “He deserved better than that.”

“I was 150 light years away! You had the funeral before I could physically get here!” Lestelle snapped. “I asked mom to delay four days, but did she tell you that? No. I’m sure she didn’t.”

“No, she didn’t,” Letha said.

“Try not to believe everything you hear about me,” Lestelle said.

Lestelle went around her sister, but Letha touched her arm.

“Are you happy,” Letha asked.

Lestelle considered the question, considered the way it was delivered. Her half sister wasn’t evil, she cared, but there was nothing here. “I am, actually. Thank you for asking, Letha.”

“Will we ever be close?” Letha asked.

Lestelle laughed. “No,” she said, and walked away.



Lestelle continued to hear her sister’s voice play out in her head, “Why even stay one night?” There was no way that she would disclose the truth: she wanted to make sure she wasn’t leaving something important behind. Specifically, she was looking for her poltergeist. No one had ever believed her that it existed and the only reason her mother didn’t take her to a psych hospital for having potential signs of psychosis, hearing things and seeing things that no one else did, was because that said something more about her mother than her. Mother was always afraid that people would talk, or perhaps they would see how emotionally abusive she was to her first born. Potential physical evidence for a poltergeist included her homework being deleted, but step father never found any evidence of either computer malfunctions or tampering. Step dad attributed it to human error; her mother’s explanation oscillated between calling daughter stupid to accusing her of self sabotage. On the nights her homework mysteriously disappeared, she had to repeat homework assignments, staying up all hours to re-accomplish what she thought was already perfect. In addition to missing homework, things would mysteriously fall off the shelves

and break. Mother accused her of breaking things, accused her of not understanding the value of material possessions, and consequently limited her acquisition of possessions.

For the second time that day, she found herself alone in the house. It felt weird, almost anticlimactic. It was dark out, thanks to a canopy that extended over the back yard, allowing the pool lights to ghost a pastel, bluish green tint to the ceilings and walls. A small droid filtering the pool gave a sense of movement to the light, as ripples decorated the surface of the water. She climbed the stairs, stairs she had climbed a thousand times going towards her only refuge. On command, the door slid quietly open and her heart sank. She shouldn't have been surprised, but still, there was a sting of disappointment. All of her stuff was gone. In its place was a child's bed and toys, most likely for Letha's most recent child, as well as pictures of all four of Letha's children. Her first thought was to go see if Letha's room was untouched, but she told herself there was no point, no need to confirm what she had always suspected: Letha was the preferred child.

Lestelle sat down on the edge of the bed. It rolled beneath her, revealing itself to be a water bed. She sighed. She had wanted a water bed, but was told they were too heavy for her room and too much maintenance. Besides, she would just break it and get water everywhere. It was time to leave. Only one final thing to do: burn the house down was an actual impulse, but she decided on calling out to the emptiness.

"Are you here?" Lestelle asked out loud. Her voice didn't echo, but it broke the stillness in interesting ways, like a rainbow across a dark cloud. "I have no intentions of coming back here, so if you're real, or still here, I would like some token. Break one of these toys?"

Nothing happen.

"Please, tell me I wasn't crazy," Lestelle said.

Still, nothing happen. No words. No whispery background thoughts that could even be intimated to be words. No light touch.

"I need you," Lestelle said, genuinely sad.

An apparition appeared. It had form and shape and an aura, and had a presence that was much more than a hologram would have had. Lestelle screamed and jumped up to flee and then stopped herself.

"Preston?" she asked. "Oh. Damn it! You scared the crap out of me."

"You sounded like you were in need," Preston said.

Lestelle sat down on the bed. "I'm sorry. I am feeling really emotional," she said, and allowed herself to cry.

Preston sat beside her on the bed, his hands in his lap. He didn't acknowledge the crying, but instead studied the room. "I don't remember all of these toys being here," he finally said.

Lestelle stopped crying, turned to face Preston, one foot remaining on the floor, the other leg folded in a half lotus position. She considered the kiss in the dark and how familiar the embrace had seemed. She studied him as he studied the room.

"You?!" Lestelle said.

Preston returned to the present. Eyebrow up, he asked, "Yes?"

"It was you?!" Lestelle said.

"You're just now figuring that out?" Preston asked.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Lestelle asked.

"I thought you knew," Preston said.

"I didn't know. When did you know?" she asked.

“I knew the moment you kissed me in the interrogation room,” Preston said, shrugging. “I assumed it was mutual enlightenment.”

Lestelle shook her head. “I don’t understand. All these years I thought I was crazy, but it was you and you’re real,” she said.

Preston smiled, nodded in agreement, tapping his chest over his heart. Lestelle smacked him. His smile went away.

“I’m confused,” Preston said.

“Why didn’t you make yourself visible like this before?!” Lestelle demanded.

“I was a novice and didn’t have the skill set,” Preston stated. “In the beginning I was doing good to move objects remotely. Pushing buttons on the keyboard was a little easier...”

She smacked him again. “What the hell was that about? Deleting my homework? Breaking things?”

“You were always so serious,” Preston said. “I was trying to get you to lighten up.”

“Or maybe I was tired, physically, staying up hours because I had to rewrite stuff, and tired emotionally from being ridiculed!” Lestelle said. “No one believed me.”

Preston nodded. Out of nowhere, Lestelle went to slap him again but he blocked.

“Please don’t hit me,” Preston said.

“Why were you even here? You were spying on me? Was that how you got off as a teenager, spying on girls?” Lestelle asked.

“There is a lot to that question and I don’t know how to approach it,” Preston said, thoughtfully. “I am not sure why I was drawn here initially. I sensed loneliness. Or, maybe, that was what I was feeling. Like attracts like. I yearned for companionship, someone to talk to, someone to love me, and I found you, and I felt a rapport. Maybe I imagined a rapport. And you were definitely beautiful, and intelligent, so I can’t deny I was naturally obsessed with that, but I don’t think spying is the appropriate term, because privacy is an artificial construct that doesn’t exist in the real world.”

“The real world?” Lestelle asked.

Preston faced her, mirroring her body posture, one foot remaining on the floor. “You understand that though I am not a Jedi, I hold a particular paradigm that regards the most essential qualities of life as being invisible, that the matter that comprises our bodies, our worlds, is merely illusion, nothing more than shifting sand that is here one moment and then gone. It’s survival sandbox, it’s a game, a school; we come here to learn, to play, and to grow. There is no privacy in this world or the next because everything is light.”

“I don’t believe that anything other than this world exists,” Lestelle said.

“You believe in love,” Preston said.

Lestelle laughed. “No, I don’t,” she said.

“If you didn’t, you would be less disturbed by your family’s behavior towards you,” Preston said.

Lestelle’s shoulders slump and she leaned into him, her head on his shoulder.

“You witnessed some of it,” Lestelle said.

Preston closed his arms around her.

“I never felt adequate here,” Lestelle said.

“Never?” Preston asked.

Lestelle pulled back enough to look him in the eyes. “Sometimes, when I knew you were here, I felt safe. I felt hope that things might be better,” she said.

Preston nodded. "It was a joy for me to be here. I admired how you persevered, that you continued, regardless of how others treated you, to speak your mind with kindness. You held to your personal boundaries without capitulation. You are amazing, Lestelle, and so much smarter than you give yourself credit for. And, I dare say, more spiritual than you imagine."

Lestelle wouldn't have chosen 'spiritual' as a word describing her attributes, but hearing him say so seemed accurate. She sniffed and wiped her eyes.

"You remember the game we invented?" Lestelle asked, suddenly smiling.

Preston frowned. "The one where you had me lifting stuff?"

"It's how I knew you were intelligent," Lestelle said. "You followed directions. Float that toy car over there."

Preston gave a bemused look. "You remember where this game ends, don't you?"

Lestelle blushed. "I would ask you to lift me," she said. She frowned. "And then you would be gone for about a week."

Preston blushed. "There is no other way to say this, but to say it. Every time I lifted you, I had an extremely intense orgasm, and it took me a while to recover sufficient energy to travel to you. And it was so frustrating because I would wake up in my body and still wanted more. Some of those moments were my darkest hours, because the loneliness that unfolded around me after such intense intimacy was almost unbearable. I have discovered that when you invest that kind of energy in a person, it is better to wake up beside them than alone, somewhere else. Not complaining, though, as that time alone provided the will power to master remote projection. I guess I owe you a thank you."

Lestelle hugged his neck and kissed his lips softly. "I have a secret. Every time you lifted me, I had a turnover," she said.

Preston seemed surprised. "Really?" he asked.

"Why would I make that up?" Lestelle said. "I never had an TO with Drew, but with you, every time. And you were my first TO. I've had others since, but never as intense as ours, just different. Yours was like a full body, every cell lighting up, and I would call that spiritual, or mystical. I don't believe in soul mates, but you could provide a convincing argument that I would be hard pressed to debate."

Lestelle scooted away from him and laid her head down closer to the head board, her arms open, palms up. The bed rocked with the excited repositioning.

"Go ahead," Lestelle said. "Lift me again."

Preston laughed. "Are you sure?"

She leaned up, propping herself with her elbows. "Absolutely. If you want to. Do you want to?"

"Oh, hell, yeah," Preston said.

Lestelle laid down again, stretched her arms and legs and then shook them out. "Okay, lift away."

"May I make a request?" Preston asked.

Lestelle leaned up. "Something wrong?"

"Nope. I fully intend to lift you, perhaps higher than I have in the past," Preston said.

"Okay," Lestelle said, not quite sure where he was headed, but how could she not at least entertain a request considering what he was willing to give. "What's would you like?"

"If our time together is as intense as it was in the past, I'm afraid I might not be able to visit again for a couple of days, and was wondering if we could do it the old fashion way first," Preston said.

Lestelle smiled. "Come here," she said.

Preston crawled closer to her, over her, hovering above her as the bed slowly rocked with his movement. He liked the way she moved as the water shifted within the mattress, the way her eyes maintained focus on his, her face glowing.

"Kiss me," Lestelle said.

Preston complied.



"We're not taking Freya," Corissa insisted.

Preston frowned, looking sympathetically towards his Droid. The emotions he detected were most likely his own projections. He nearly pointed out that Pink appeared to be going, as it was following Ten. "Freya, guard duty, please," he directed.

Freya nodded and headed back towards the tram.

Ten bounded up the ramp. "I've got shotgun!" she yelled, heading for the co-pilots seat.

Nolasco and Kiesha showed up.

"May we ride with you into town?" Nolasco asked.

"You're not taking the Tie?" Preston asked.

"I'm too old to be cooped up in a Fighter for that long, figured we'd catch a transport back," Nolasco said. He was pretty sure Preston wasn't buying the excuse but before he could detour the investigative query he was certain was to follow, Kiesha bailed him out.

"I requested a more comfortable ride, Preston," Kiesha said.

"Oh, okay," Preston said. He followed them up and Corissa hit the control that brought the ramp up and closed the door. Jodeen was already strapped in.

"Teach me to fly this?" Ten asked.

"Sure," Preston said.

"No," Corissa said.

"Why? I was flying by her age," Preston said.

"A simulator?" Corissa asked.

"Yeah, well, technically," Preston agreed.

"Get her a simulator," Corissa said. "Up, go sit next to Jordeen."

"But I thought ship controls were shielded," Ten began.

"Ten, go strap in," Preston said, interrupting her.

Ten frowned, but complied.

Corissa pulled the checklist out of a compartment by her seat and began reading it just slightly out of sync with Preston going through the start up sequence. He turned on the fuel pump to the Auxillary Power Unit. He then spun it and lit it. As soon as the RPM's, temp, and pressure stabilized he turned on the first of four fuels pumps. He spun engine one and lit it. There was a loud 'boom' and the ship shook. Corissa stopped reading.

"Why didn't you tell me it did that?" Corissa demanded.

"That's normal," Preston said, dismissing her concern. He pointed to the engine instruments. "RPM's green, pressure green, temperature, well, sort of green..."

Corissa's eyes scrutinized the array of sensors, but said nothing. Preston gave her a smile, but didn't add his cliché: 'nothing bad is gonna happen.' He started fuel pump three and then lit the engine number three. There was no resounding boom, but the engine went live.

"Number three is missing the normal 'boom,'" Corissa pointed out.

“Yeah,” Preston said, serious. “Would you mind fixing that later?”

Corissa went to the next page of the manual. Preston activated fuel pumps two and four, which fed the corresponding engines. He directed the engines downwards as Corissa was seeking the precise rotation degree and throttled up. The ship shook as it lifted off the tarmac. Corissa closed the book, put it back in its compartment, and then crossed her arms in front of her chest, clearly pouting.

“Do you do anything by the book?” Corissa asked.

“I actually didn’t know there was a book till you pulled it out,” Preston offered.

Corissa rubbed her forehead, sighed, and turned on the weather radar. It reflected what she could see visibly, clear skies. She logged into a weather satellite to verify that they still had good weather all the way to their destination. Their altitude would take them well over the few thunderheads that were between them and the spaceport they were headed to.

“Can we buy a shielded music player?” Ten asked.

Corissa considered. “Probably have to special order that,” Corissa said.

“I miss my tunes,” Ten said.

“I can pick you one up at Axilla,” Nolasco said.

“Ten, your tunes are still with you,” Preston said.

They looked at him.

“What?” Ten asked.

“Close your eyes,” Preston said.

Ten did so.

“Imagine the words to your favorite song,” Preston said. Her lips started to move. “No, don’t speak them. Hear them. In your mind, in your heart. Hear the instruments. You don’t have to hold a device to recreate every instrument, every rhythm, the quality of the voice. Your brain can do all that.”

Ten frowned. “I’d rather have my player,” she said, opening her eyes.

“Maybe we could put some speakers on Pink and she could play music for you,” Kiesha suggested.

“That’s a good idea,” Ten said. “Can we do that?”

“Sure,” Corisa said, but was curious about Preston’s expression. She wasn’t sure if he was frowning because of the conversion or he was doing one of those ‘Force’ perception things. She looked over the instruments but saw nothing out of the ordinary. “What?”

“I’m not sure a constant supply of music is healthy,” Preston said.

“I can’t sleep without music,” Ten said. “And since I need sleep to remain healthy, I would say music is very healthy.”

“Everyone hang on,” Preston said, and he put the ship into a quick descent.

“What the hell?” Corissa and Nolasco demanded.

Preston’s explanation came in the form of landing the ship in the desert and powering off the engines. He even shut down the APU. He was unbuckling his seat belt even as the ramp descended.

“Impromptu field trip, come on,” Preston said, heading off the ship. “Oh, and Corissa, bring tool bag. Pink, follow me, please.” Preston was off the ship before anyone else had unbuckled. Pink following him

“Oh, this better be good,” Corissa said.

“Are we going to miss our transport?” Kiesha asked.

Nolasco shrugged. Ever since Preston entered, predictability had gone out the window. They exited the ship to find Preston on the Starboard side, pulling a tarp from an outside hatch. For the first time since they had known him, he used his lightsaber, cutting a piece from the tarp.

“Nice blade,” Ten said.

“Hey, we might need that tarp whole,” Corissa said. “What if we can’t get this junk started again?”

“It will start,” Preston assured her.

“Will the sand hurt Pink’s wheels?” Ten asked.

“It will be alright, Ten,” Corissa assured her.

“It’s cold out here,” Kiesha was telling Nolasco. Nolasco put his arms around her.

Preston connected the small piece of tarp to the ship and had Pink hold the other two ends so that the material was taught. He then tossed sand onto it. He then asked for Corissa’s toolbox. She reluctantly handed it to him and he fished out a frequency generator.

“I really hope this works, as the last time I tried this I was using a full speaker,” Preston said.

Preston turned on the oscillating device to 440 hertz, the perfect A, and touched the wand to the center of the cut piece of tarp. The sand didn’t just vibrate off the tarp, but was swept into patterns of repeating triangles within circles, a result of the frequency.

“Wow,” Ten said.

“That’s kind of cool,” Kiesha said. “Couldn’t you have just told us about it?”

“No, people really need to see this, not just hear about it,” Preston said. “Sound has an affect on physical objects. There are slight variations in patterns based on the medium being used, but every tonal frequency has its own precise pattern. 440 hertz almost always gets this particular repeating pattern, which is a fractal derived from prime numbers. More interestingly, you’ve seen this pattern, Ten. Can you tell me where?”

Ten shrugged.

“Hanging on the wall outside the library,” Preston said.

Ten shrugged, not really connecting the dots.

“The yantra hanging outside the library?” Preston asked.

“You mean that painting with the circles and the triangles and the squares?” Jordeen asked.

“That’s a yantra?” Ten asked.

Preston sighed, nodding. He walked the frequency up the scale and the triangles were washed off, as if someone had wiped the sand away by hand, and then suddenly, at the next pure tone, a new, even more complicated pattern emerged. In between each pure tone was chaos, followed by ever complex patterns forming out of the vibrating sand.

“You can use sound to break glass, tear down walls, destroy ships,” Preston said. “This a reflection of the Force and this clearly demonstrates how sound can have a profound affect on us. Knowing this, you should take care as to what sounds you expose yourself to, as well as duration. We are energy, and the energy we immerse ourselves in affects us. Everything has a pattern. Ice occurs when the energy of water is just right, though you can get a billion different snow flakes, the math of the base crystalline structure is always the same, with one caveat. Intention, meditation, love, and prayer can affect the arrangement of the crystalline structure.”

Corissa turned and went back inside the ship.

“We’re going to be late,” Kiesha said, and followed Corissa.

Nolasco gave a half hearted smile and followed Kiesha.

“It’s cool, but I don’t know if it means what you think it means,” Ten said. “I’ve been listening to music all my life. It’s the one thing that made it bearable. Come on, Pink. I can’t see how this sand won’t mess up the gears in your feet.”

“You worry the sand will damage your Droid, but not how listening to music subjects you to a multitude of frequencies and enharmonic resonances that can alter you physically,” Preston said, surprised.

Ten nodded affirmative and boarded the ship. Pink dropped the tarp and followed Ten. Preston was at a loss. When Fixit had revealed this secret to him, he had been impressed. Preston packed away the tarp and the piece he had cut free. He looked up at the sky, the sun was a quarter of the way up. One of the moons was visible on the horizon. He wondered if he had just failed. Jordeen touched him lightly.

“I like that you very excited about this stuff,” Jordeen said. “But are you aware that you can’t force this on people. If they’re not ready, they just won’t get it.”

Preston nodded. He and Jordeen entered together. He paused to put the oscillator back into Corissa’s tool bag, and then shut the door.

“I hope the ship starts,” Corissa said.

Preston nearly asked ‘why wouldn’t it?’, but simply took his seat, went through the start up sequence, and took them to their destination.



Nolasco and Kiesha said their good byes and parted ways. Corissa and Ten voted on the beach. Jordeen wanted to do the market first. Preston didn’t vote.

“Are you sulking?” Corisa asked.

“No, I just don’t have a preference,” Preston said.

“Have you been to a beach before?” Ten asked.

“Not in person,” Preston said.

“So, that clenches it,” Corissa said. “Beach first. Then we will go shopping. Pink, stay with the ship.”

Outside the spaceport the four of them caught a transport to the beach. Before proceeding down to the water, though, Corissa bought some suntan lotion at a booth. She put some in her hand to apply to herself and handed the bottle to Ten.

“Eww,” Ten said.

“You’ve not been in sunlight like this before,” Corissa said.

“I don’t want it,” Corissa.

“Ten. It’s reasonable, get it done,” Preston said.

“You always take her side,” Ten complained.

“I will always take her side,” Preston assured her. “Your well being is our purpose.”

“Fine,” Ten said, and squirted some into her hand. She handed the bottle to him. “I’m concerned for you, too.”

Preston took the bottle, smelled it. He made a face.

“It’s reasonable, put it on,” Ten said.

Preston put some in his hand and handed the bottle to Jordeen. Once they were all protected, they proceeded down the beach. They picked an unattended umbrella for a campsite that had three chairs not being used. Preston sat in the chair in the shade.

“You aren’t going to get into the water?” Jordeen asked.

“Umm, no, I’m going to sit this one out,” Preston said.

“Go with Jordeen, Ten. I will catch up,” Corissa said. As soon as she and Preston were alone she pulled a chair closer, faced him, and sat down. “You okay?”

Preston shrugged.

“Look, I feel there is some tension between us,” Corissa began, but then for whatever reason, couldn’t finish it. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s my fault. But you are usually cheerful and you’ve been quiet since you tried to show us the sand trick.”

Preston nodded.

“Can you tell me what you’re thinking at least?” Corissa asked.

“It’s just probably a low cycle. Or maybe I was too enthusiastic and I compensated too far in the other way to catch balance with the group,” Preston said. “Or, maybe I was trying to help Ten hear the music that’s already playing.”

“You hear music?” Corissa asked.

“Sometimes,” Preston admitted. “And it’s kind of sad, melancholy at the moment. I’m kind of wishing I had stayed at home, gone on my excursion, but I don’t have a particular reason why, and yeah, I can sense my energy is down and probably a drag to your intended efforts to bring joy to Ten’s life, and maybe I should go for a walk.”

Corissa nodded. She put air in her cheeks and then let it go. “I don’t want to be angry with you,” Corissa said.

“I know you don’t,” Preston said.

“Anger comes really easy for me,” Corissa said. “But it does pain me to see you down.”

“My mood is not your fault,” Preston assured her. “No matter what happens in the near future, remember, you brought joy to me on this plane. I am grateful for your presence.”

“Come to the water with me,” Corissa said.

“I am going to go get something to eat,” Preston said, nodding towards the kiosk.

They both stood up at the same time. They were close. The kind of close that usually followed with a kiss, but it didn’t.

“May I kiss you?” Preston asked.

“The music’s not right,” Corissa said.

Preston laughed. He hugged her, and she patted his shoulder lightly, not surrendering to the wanted hug. He retreated, nodded, and they went separate ways. He paused and watched her go to the shore, where Jordeen and Ten were laughing as the waves bowled them over. He turned and went to the kiosk. He found the smell of food coming from a stand bordering the street and the beach appealing, even though he was pretty sure none of it would be on his preferred diet. He was hungry, though, and the aromas enticed him closer. His hunger was confirmed by the fact that all the photos on the menu board were appealing and he wanted one of each. There was a line of folks, a cluster of benches and tables, and the two most notable guests were two Jedi’s having a meal. He noted them, was aware that they had saw him, and though he would have been interested in talking to them, he considered Jedi’s to be the equivalent of social celebrities, and figured they deserved to eat without interruption. It did bring him joy to know that two Jedi were out in the open in a public place, since very few survived the culling. This was a rare sight that indicated a real turn since the ending of the war.

Unable to make up his mind about the menu, he stood just out of line, allowing others to come and go. He watched several customers order a particular item, which he decided he would try. He took his order to the table away from the kiosk, sat on the table, his feet on the bench. He took a spoonful of the dish. His eyes watered from the intensity. He closed his eyes and savored

the treat as it melted on his tongue, holding the dish close to his face so as he inhaled he could memorize its smell. When he opened his eyes, he noticed the Jedi were in front of him. The younger, female Jedi seemed grossed out. She crossed her arms.

“Hello,” Preston said. “Would you like to try this? It is the most amazing thing I have ever tasted.”

“No,” the girl said, her face reflecting disgust.

“You’ve never had icecream before?” the older Jedi asked.

“No,” Preston said, about to take another spoonful. He hesitated. “Is there a protocol against eating in front of you without offering you something?”

“You’ve offered,” the male Jedi said, relieving him of any concern on that matter.

Preston took another spoonful. He shivered with pure delight.

“You know that is made from human breast milk, right?” the female Jedi said.

Preston reflected, trying to understand the younger Jedi’s discomfort. “Well, it did say that on the menu, but I’m confused by your apparent revulsion. I’m human. I would assume if a human chooses to consume milk products, it would be ideal to have human breast milk, as opposed to milk from another species.”

“Maybe, if you’re like an infant,” she argued.

Preston nodded. “Nice argument,” he said. “I am unable to refute that. Perhaps the intensity of my reaction is due to not having breast milk as an infant. Forgive my indulgence?”

“Please, continue,” the male Jedi said. “I am Master Heer, and this is my Padawan Daphne. We were just finishing our meal when we noticed how bright it was today.”

Preston looked at the sky, while taking another spoonful. The sky was clear with bright blue over head, tapering to darker hues the closer to the horizon a person observed. There was slight hint of red towards the south. The sound of the ocean was prominent, but every now and then an air car rushed by overhead. The sun was warm against his skin.

“There is some lotion at my campsite if you’re in need,” Preston offered.

Daphne looked to Heer. “I told you he wasn’t of the order,” she said.

“Please, Daphne, let me handle this,” Heer said. He turned back to Preston, stepping forward, and little away from his friend. He pushed his cloak open to make his lightsaber more readily accessible. “You don’t think there is too much Light out here?”

Preston seemed puzzled. “I don’t know how to respond to that. It is what it is, right?”

“He is referring to your lightsaber, moron. Did they not teach you about metaphors in your Jedi training?” Daphne said.

“Oh,” Preston said. He became aware of his lightsaber, connected to his belt, but visibly resting against the table. He set his icecream down, stood up on the bench, noticed the tension in the two Jedi’s go up. He stepped to the ground.

Daphne’s hand moved as if she were going for her lightsaber, but Heer put his hand on her arm, telling her to relax.

Preston brought his hands together and bowed. “Forgive my ignorance about protocols, Master Heer. I meant no disrespect,” Preston said. “And if I failed to recognize code, it’s because I am not of the order.”

“Well, that is interesting, because I was just telling my Padawan here how sacred our Light is, that it is a symbol, and that not everyone should carry,” Heer said.

“The lightsaber is our life,” Daphne said.

Preston’s surprise came out as a laugh, which he sucked in right away given the intensity of Daphne’s stare. “I am sorry, you’re not joking, are you. Well, I would argue that the Force is

your life. The lightsaber is just a tool, and, further, it is ultimately an object which could be construed as an attachment.”

Daphne almost responded, but bit her tongue when Heer actually gave a slight bow.

“Well put,” Heer said. “Seeing how you agree philosophically, I would like you to surrender your lightsaber peacefully.”

Preston smiled. “I may not be of the order, but I have earned the right to carry this Light.”

“This is not a request, son,” Heer said.

“I’m not sure how you intend to force this issue, seeing how I am peaceful. I am neither attacking you or others,” Preston said. “But I assure you, I will not surrender my Light.”

“Just hand it over,” Daphne insisted.

“I made this. It belongs to me,” Preston said.

This time, Daphne laughed.

“Son, you will hand it over to me, now,” Heer said, using a Force command.

Preston pursed his lips as if considering, tilting his head ever subtly as if there was new music in the back ground. Music, followed by a sudden decrease in intensity, as if suspense was building with each dramatic pulse. “I must warn you that I am not a skilled duelist. I cannot promise to only injure you. One or both of you might end up dead.”

The two Jedi took a step back. Their robes came off with an easy shrug as if rehearsed. The music pounced a note.

“You’re willing to die over this?” Heer asked.

“There is no death,” Preston said.

“You are either crazy, a collector, or a Sith, and we will have that lightsaber,” Daphne said.

“Daphne, no matter what happens, you stay out of this,” Heer instructed.

“Yes, Master,” Daphne said.

Preston put his arms at his side, palms up, the non threatening warrior pose that could easily step up into a full warrior lunge. The music seemed to rev up again, but the only thing that happened was many of the people that had not been sure of what was happening were now leaving the immediate area because everyone else had already fled. Heer waited patiently for Preston to make the first move.

“I will not attack you, Master Heer,” Preston said. “So, either you recognize this as a draw and you depart, or you initiate and we allow the Force to determine the outcome.”

“I would be remiss in my duties to allow a Lightsaber to remain in the hands of someone who is not of the order,” Heer said. “It is not a toy.”

“Agreed,” Preston said, his hands coming up into an ‘I surrender’ gesture. “It is not a toy. And I don’t wish to fight you. I am now leaving what I perceive to be a hostile situation. I ask that you permit my retreat.”

“You may leave in peace after surrendering the Lightsaber,” Heer said.

“I will not. And you can’t initiate attacks. So, though I would have otherwise enjoyed your company, I am going to withdraw at this time,” Preston said.

Preston took one step back and turned with intentions to depart. Heer reached out with the Force and jerked Preston’s lightsaber from his belt. Preston’s right hand caught it, lightning reflexes that were not biologically instinctual but instead revealed his oneness with the Force. His arm was fully extended by the time the lightsaber was fully extended, generating a pure white blade which would have missed Heer by five centimeters, due to Preston’s intentional deflection slightly away from his opponent. Daphne didn’t discern the blade extension as going

to miss; she reacted to the activation of the lightsaber, which had deployed faster than any lightsaber she or Heer had ever seen. The rapidity of the extension was accompanied by sonic boom, which suggested either a master of untold skill had crafted the weapon or that it contained an extremely pure crystal, or both. The boom itself was so unexpected that it startled everyone in ear shot.

Daphne brought her lightsaber into play with both hands on the hilt. The two blades met with force, and Preston had to lean forward to maintain his ground. He thought about how appealing the blueness of her blade was, barely differentiated from the blueness of the sky, and how he could almost see blue leaking through his blade, where as her blade's blue was softened by the whiteness of his blade. He wondered if it was normal to make such observations during a fight. The music was all a flight now that they were engaged, a pattern that was calling them to dance.

“Daphne, no!” Heer said, igniting his blade, and bringing it into play as well.

Preston acted without thought. He grabbed Daphne's closest wrist with his free hand and shoved, both with his hand and blade, pushing her blade into Heer's blade. He forced her Lightsaber to meet with Heer's green Lightsaber, simply out of proximity. The three of them were much too close to each other to disengage and begin a new line of attack. And then Preston did something reckless, or at least unseen by either of his opponents in any lightsaber duel. He turned off his blade just long enough to bring it past the block. The blade dissipated and reignited, the sonic boom almost deafening due to proximity, and it extended straight through Heer's chest. Preston pushed with the Force and shoved both Heer and Daphne back. Heer's lightsaber extinguished, fell to the sand, as did Heer's body, his personal light equally extinguished.

Daphne screamed, redoubling her efforts to take Preston down as fast as she could. Preston's blade again met Daphne's blade. He was frustrated by not having the time to consider the ramifications of his actions, much less process the realization that cutting through flesh was nothing like cutting through stone, or the fact that he had felt Heer's life depart. She drove him back, and when he fell back over a bench his back hit the table and he kicked her in the stomach, knocking her on her butt. They both recovered to their feet and charged each other, each using two hands on their Lightsaber's hilt, the blades hitting hard, crackling with energy. The dance was on, retreat, attack, retreat, attack. Where the blades touched sand, trails of molten glass were formed. Once again, they locked blades. They were frozen, strength for strength. Preston extended a finger to touch her lightsaber and managed to turn it off using the Force. Her weight was shifted so far forward that she fell, which required her to roll away, as she imagined he was right behind her. Preston had the opportunity to kill her, but he stayed his attack. He had resolutely withdrawn his lightsaber to avoid hitting her as she fell. He composed himself in another warrior pose, obviously waiting for her to recover. He watched her sort out the equation, deliberating. Heer's blade was in reach with the Force if she chose to continue.

She knelt there, unsure. “What are you waiting for?!” she yelled.

Preston concentrated on his breath. His heart was beating fast in his chest, and he could feel his pulse in his toes and his finger tips and the crown of his head. He shifted a little as he realized another Jedi was approaching. Daphne drew Heer's blade to her with the Force, so he shifted his focus back to her.

“Daphne! Stop,” the Jedi Master ordered.

“He killed Heer!” Daphne said.

“I know,” he said, sadly. “I know. And it’s over. The battle is over, son, please, lower your weapon.”

This new Jedi was older than Heer. His hands clasped together, concealed in the sleeves of his cloak, but the hood was down. Strands of grey adorned his hair, which lead to a braid at the back of his head. He did not appear to be aggressive or otherwise a threat, but so far, the Jedi were not what Preston had imagined.

Heer was present, telling Daphne, “Oh, Daphne, it wasn’t supposed to go this way. It was a just a test. Master Yeno, can you hear me. This was an accident.” Preston was pretty sure that neither Jedi were able to hear Heer, based on visual evidence. And, he was pretty sure Heer wasn’t aware that he was ‘dead,’ mostly because he wasn’t, just his body.

Yeno wasn’t sure what Preston was focused on, but assumed it was the Force. “I promise, you will not be attacked further. Lower your weapon and let us discuss this,” Yeno offered.

Preston straightened, deactivating his blade. Yeno convinced Daphne to power down. That’s when the local militia moved in. They separated the three Jedi. At the same time the Jedi were grilled, the militia were questioning witnesses and downloading video from the surveillance cameras and any Droids in the area. Corissa, Jordeen, and Ten tried to approach them, but the militia blocked.

“We’re with him,” Corissa insisted.

The militia looked to Preston and Preston said it was okay.

“You killed a Jedi?” Ten asked.

Preston nodded.

“What the hell?” Corissa asked.

“Yeah, aren’t they the good guys?” Ten asked.

“I think it was a misunderstanding,” Jordeen said, looking in the general direction of the ghost Heer.

“We should probably leave,” Ten said.

“Ten,” Preston said gravely. “I am sure that the holonovels that you watch portray Jedi as just killing and then quickly going on with their life or adventures, but this is serious, and I can’t leave till it’s sorted. Maybe you three should head home.”

“We will leave together,” Corissa said. “You’re shaking.”

Preston nodded.

“Are you injured?” Corissa asked. She turned to the militia and asked, “Have you guys checked him out medically?” The officer waved her to be patient.

“I’m not physically injured, Corissa,” Preston assured her. “It’s just an overabundance of adrenaline.”

Corissa hugged him. When two officer’s finally approached, Master Yeno was permitted to wrap his friend. He picked him up and took him to a nearby speeder. Heer followed, trying to engage him in conversation.

“I’m Captain Tarsh,” he said, introducing himself. “And this is Lt. Solya. I’d like to ask you a few more questions.”

Preston nodded.

“Do you wish to press charges against Padawan Daphne?” Tarsh asked.

“No,” Preston said.

“Mr. Waycaster, are you being influenced or otherwise coerced in anyway by the Jedi?” Solya asked.

“No,” Preston said, not sure where that question came from. She sounded angry.

“Are you sure? The video capture clearly shows you were trying to extricate yourself from a situation with them,” Solya pointed out.

“This is my failing,” Preston assured them.

“No it’s not,” Ten and Corissa both snapped, their hands going to their hips in unison, as if they were both the parents here.

“Yes, it is,” Preston said. “I’ve been trained very well, and it is clear, if I ever use my Lightsaber, I have failed.”

“What’s the point of having one at all if you’re forbidden to ever use it?!” Ten asked.

Preston was happily surprised by the question and he smiled lightly, bowing to her, hands coming together. “Thank you for the lesson.”

“I don’t get it,” Tarsh said.

“Everyone fails,” Corissa said.

Preston bowed to her, too.

“Okay, well this is more speech than question,” Tarsh said, closing his hand tablet and putting it into a belt clip. “Training or no training, the days of Jedi being the arbitrators of justice and acting autonomously outside the legal structures of this planet are over. I could legally throw all three of you Jedi in prison. As I told Master Yeno, the law permits you to defend yourself and your property, but I will not tolerate a bunch of rogue Jedi menacing the streets picking fights. So, I advise you to stay out of trouble, or next time I might not be so lenient.”

He turned and walked away. Solya hesitated, long enough to take out a data card and hand it to him. “If you need anything, just call me.” She hurried to catch up with her boss.

“Oh, please tell me that isn’t going to happen everywhere we go,” Corissa said.

Preston looked at her uncertainly. “Fighting with Jedi?”

“You didn’t notice Solya flirting with you?” Ten asked.

“She was?” Preston asked, looking back to Solya, replaying the scene to see if he had failed to appropriately engage.

“She certainly was,” Jordeen agreed.

“Okay,” Preston said, pocketing the card. But he still seemed confused. “But, you sound angry,” he said to Corissa.

“It’s because she loves you,” Ten said.

“Ten!” Corissa said.

“Why keep it a secret. Just speak your heart and let it be out there and let what happens happen,” Ten said.

“Nothing’s going to happen,” Corissa assured them.

“You did tell me I should be with someone my age,” Preston went on.

“Because she was being nice,” Ten said.

“Ten, enough,” Corissa said.

“Being nice to whom? Her decision wasn’t based on my wants or her wants, and therefore, there was no kindness to either of us,” Preston observed. “And, how do you know all of this? Why I’m hearing this from her and not you?”

“I know you think I’m just some underage, holonovel watching, child, but I’ve been around,” Ten said. “I wish all of you would act more like adults.”

Jordeen laughed.

Master Yeno approached.

“May I speak with you, Mr. Waycaster?” Yeno asked.

“You may not,” Corissa said.

“Please,” Yeno asked.

“It’s okay,” Preston said.

“Alone,” Yeno clarified.

“Now you’re pushing it,” Corissa said.

“I mean no disrespect,” Yeno said. “But this is a Jedi matter.”

“I am not a Jedi,” Preston said.

“I believe you are,” Yeno said. “And I would like you to be a guest at my home tonight so that we can discuss some matters, in private.”

“Are you crazy? Your friends attacked him,” Corissa said.

“I’ll go,” Preston said.

“Are you crazy?!” Corissa directed to Preston.

“This is a Force occasion and I need to see it through,” Preston explained.

“And who is flying us home?” Corissa asked.

“The three of you could get a hotel, do some shopping, do something fun, and allow me to attend to this,” Preston said.

“I’ll have your son back by morning,” Yeno assured.

“He is not my son!” Corissa snapped.

“Sorry, I guess I misread your protectiveness over him,” Yeno said, bringing his hands together, bowing.

“He lacks street creds,” Ten explained. “It’s our job to look out for him till he catches on.”

“Now, you do sound like a mom,” Yeno observed.

“That’s because I am street smart and you don’t want to mess with me,” Ten said.

Yeno bowed to her.

Corissa took a radio out of her pocket. It was slim, hardly bigger than a cookie. She handed it to him. He hesitated. “Don’t argue with me,” she said.

Preston pocketed the radio. He and Yeno went to the speeder where Daphne waited. She seemed surprised that Preston was with him.

“No,” Daphne said.

“You need to let go of your feelings, Padawan,” Yeno said.

“He killed Heer!” Daphne said.

Heer was standing beside her, and for the first time he moved closer to Preston. “I am sorry for the weight this event has added to you. This was just a simple assessment and it became much more complicated than I had anticipated and I am sorry. It was a test of your ability, your resolve. I was also teaching my Padawan’s lesson and...”

Preston was trying to follow the conversation between Daphne and Yeno, but Heer suddenly realized that Preston could hear him.

“You can hear me!” Heer said, astonished.

Yeno turned to Preston, trying to understand why he hadn’t gotten into the Speeder.

“Have you changed your mind?” Yeno asked. Both he and Daphne were in the front seat. That left the space in the back next to the corpse.

“What, you don’t want to sit next to the person you killed?” Daphne chided.

“Padawan, that is enough,” Yeno said.

Daphne turned and sulked. Preston climbed into the backseat, the body lying directly behind him, secured by straps. Heer’s ghost climbed in and sat next to him.

“You’ve got to tell them,” Heer said.

Preston came up and away from his body, so that he was sitting between himself and Heer, the corpse directly behind him.

“I can’t tell them anything,” Preston told Heer.

“How did you do that?”

“The same way you’re doing it. Only, now that you don’t have to attend to the body, you can go anywhere, be anywhere, just by thinking,” Preston said.

“Why won’t you tell them? Ease their pain. Tell her I’m okay,” Heer said.

“They should already know this!” Preston said.

“Tell them, please,” Heer pleaded.

“I can not. For multiple reasons, I just can’t.”

“What is so hard about telling them?” Heer required.

“For one, they don’t know me and they will assume that I am trying to manipulate them,” Preston said. “But also, they can’t hear you because they’re not ready to. They have a lesson to accomplish, one that doesn’t allow you to interfere, or you would already have their ear. It’s the same way when you’re confronted with a choice, or a challenge, that you can’t get guidance because your choice is necessary for your personal growth.”

Heer seemed resigned. “I believe you speak truth,” he finally said. He looked up and to the left, as if attending to another voice that even Preston couldn’t hear. “I need you to go to the moon Olorn.”

“I don’t think so,” Preston said, and slipped back into his body.

Master Yeno's home was an hour outside of town, on a hill side, with nothing but fields of wild grain in all directions. The home itself was a large, granite rock that had probably been placed by a glacier. Preston recognized the tell tale signs of Lightsaber work that had gone into carving out the living space. The cut sections sparkled with a glassy sheen, as compared to where the weathered, uncut rock was more dull, but not necessarily unappealing. Yeno carried the body in and laid it near the fireplace. He then invited Preston to sit in the circle outline on the floor, spaced by six pillows available for comfort. Preston waited to be seated until Yeno had taken his place. He chose the pillow closest to the fireplace. Daphne hung back, leaning against the wall next to a doorway that led to a bed room. There were three doors leading away from the main room, none of which had doors, and allowed anyone with direct line of sight to inspect a simple bed, desks, and scattering of books, both real and electronic. He noticed a holocron on a shelf in one of the rooms.

Preston sat down.

"May I see your Lightsaber?" Yeno asked.

Daphne tensed. Preston looked back at her.

"I promise I will return it," Yeno assured him.

Preston handed it over. Yeno accepted, seemed immediately surprised by its weight, twirled to see its balance, and then closed his eyes in order to explore the inner workings. He grew quiet. Heer was sitting on the fire place, leaning in closer, also inspecting the weapon. Yeno opened his eyes and returned it.

"I've not seen its equal in a long time," Yeno and Heer said simultaneously. Yeno continued: "Who is your master?"

"I've none," Preston said.

"Who trained you in the ways of the Force?" Yeno asked.

"Many have taught me," Preston said.

"Are you being purposely evasive?" Daphne asked.

"Daphne, please reduce the hostility towards our guest," Yeno said.

"You're really angry," Preston said to her.

Daphne came off the wall. "You killed my master."

"I sense that you were angry before that event occurred," Preston stated.

"How dare you," Daphne said.

"Enough, Daphne. He is right. You came to us to help you master your anger," Yeno said.

"I'm confused," Preston said. "I thought it was against Jedi policy to take on someone with anger management issues."

"What do you know of the Jedi ways?" Daphne asked.

Yeno nodded. "The old ways failed us. I believe by ignoring those with talent, the ones who come into the Force later in life, especially the ones with anger management problems, we allowed the same to be recruited to the Dark Side. Perhaps if we had been more attentive, more embracing of the less disciplined, we could have avoided the culling. If we aren't training them, someone else is, and clearly you are example of someone who has been well trained. It saddens me that someone of your strength in the Force is not aligned with the Light," he said. "You are clearly a full Jedi. I suspect you could earn the rank of Master within a couple of years of joining the order."

“Tell me you’re not offering to train him,” Daphne said. She pointed fiercely. “He killed Heer!”

“You’re really going to have to let that go,” Heer said.

“I’m not going to forget that,” Daphne said. “Or pretend we’re friends.”

“You don’t have to be his friend,” Yeno said. “But you need to understand him better, and you can’t while you’re holding this grudge. Heer’s told me if he should ever die, I was to cremate his body and return his remains and his Lightsaber to his family. Preston, take responsibility for doing this and I will knight you on your return.”

“Oh, hell, no,” Daphne said. “I have been training with you for years and you’re going to promote this guy, who openly admits to not being of one us?”

“Excuse me,” Yeno said, standing. “Your room, now.”

Daphne and Yeno retreated to her room to have a private conversation. Heer was lamenting having taken her on, but he and Yeno hadn’t run across someone who had had so much natural talent in a long time. Preston went to the side of the body, slowly unwrapped the cloth to reveal the man’s face. Heer looked at his own face with curiosity.

“How could I have ever mistaken that for me?” Heer said.

“I’m sorry I did not recognize the test,” Preston said. “I should have just given you my Lightsaber.”

“Are you kidding? You did exactly what you were supposed to do,” Heer said.

“Surrender your Lightsaber, indeed! You bravely stood your ground against what looked like bullies. I almost thought you were lying about not being a knight.”

Preston put his hand on Heer’s body, just over the chest where his Lightsaber had pierced Heer’s heart and closed his eyes.

“What are you doing?” Heer asked.

Heer’s physical body started to collapse in on itself, the clothes and shroud caving in. When Preston was finished, Heer’s body, the shroud, and the clothing, had been reduced to a small diamond with a green tint. Yeno and Daphne returned.

“I want to appol... What did you do with Heer’s body?!” Daphne demanded.

Preston offered the crystal. “I’m sorry, but you did say he wanted to be cremated? I simply compressed his atoms into a diamond. I’m not sure where the greenish hue came from, though.”

Yeno smiled. “He would love it. Waycaster, I’m entrusting you with presenting it to his parents on Orlon.”

“Oh,” Preston said, now understanding why Heer had asked him to go to Orlon.

“What? Afraid of what his parents will think of you?” Daphne said.

“A little, yeah,” Preston admitted.

“That’s why you must go,” Yeno said. “And it’s why Daphne must accompany you.”



Geoff Favelle greeted Lestelle warmly and invited her into his office. She sat on the edge of the couch as if she didn’t intend to stay long, but just simply popped in to ask a quick question. He sat down on one of the chair in front of his desk and appraised her.

“You’re looking really good, I mean like, healthy good, and happy,” Favelle said.

“I wasn’t before?” Lestelle asked, half laughing half serious.

“You looked like a student who was working full time and eating ration bars and you were definitely not happy,” Favelle said. “But, you didn’t stop here to hear an old man flatter his former intern.”

“I have an ethical dilemma and wanted help resolving it,” Lestelle said. He motioned her to proceed, and listened as she explained the situation with Ten, how she was believed to be dead, but was in actuality alive, and had been transported off world by the tentative approval of her client who believed he was acting in her best interest. Favelle listened, asked a few pointed questions, and then went to his desk and printed something. He handed it to her. It was a photo of Ten.

“That’s her,” Lestelle said. “Has the news really made it this far?”

“Child abuse and slavery are generally more rampant during and immediately after war, and news like this is most likely being used to fuel political moves, as opposed to resolving any real issue,” Favelle explained. “For this specific situation, what is your ideal outcome?”

“That’s not my call,” Lestelle said.

“Don’t give me that crap. Tell me what you think, don’t hedge, just spit out your intuition,” Favelle insisted, pushing her harder than he ever did as her supervisor.

“I think she needs to remain officially dead and in the care of Corissa and Preston,” Lestelle answered off the cuff.

“You trust this Waycaster character?” Favelle asked.

“With my life,” Lestelle answered.

Favelle stood up, hit a button on his desk and said, “Merta, emergency staff meeting in conference room A, ASAP,” he said. He turned to Lestelle. “Come with me.”

Favelle led her to the conference room where several people had already gathered, some sitting at their designated positions, while others, mostly the less senior staff, stood asking questions to see if anyone knew what this was about. The conversations had stopped when Favelle entered. Favelle’s place was at the head of the table, and he had a chair pulled over near him for Lestelle to occupy during the course of this impromptu meeting. Only after everyone was settled, quiet and waiting, did he put the call through. While he waited for a response, he gathered some more information from Lestelle about Waycaster and Fite. She handed him a computer chip and he browsed the information while simultaneously having a computer move relevant data to a new form he initialized. He also did his own legal search on both names. He was interested why nothing came up on Waycaster, for it was extremely rare that a person had no past, not even a birth record, but again, there was often a gap in data during and after a war, and there was also the possibility that he was born in a remote system, or purposely off the grid. Ms. Fite on the other hand had quite a bit of information, one glaringly obvious.

“Were you aware that Ms. Fite was dishonorably discharged from military service?” Favelle asked.

“No. Is that a problem?” Lestelle asked.

“Depends on which courtroom you visit and the disposition of the judge attending,” Favelle said.

They were interrupted by someone answering their call. The conversation started with a secretary who was about to suggest the Mayor was busy, but when she realized who she was speaking with; she asked to have moment to get him. The mayor came online, voice only. Favelle pushed a button and a hologram engaged, putting Mayor Hildago dead center of the table. Apparently, the holographic information was two way, because Hildago had a visual reaction. Hildalgo swallowed, looking around at all the faces in the room, and then back to Favelle.

“Do I need a new lawyer?” Hidalgo asked.

“That depends on the answers to a couple of questions I have for you, Mayor Hidalgo,” Favelle said. “If you answer one way, my staff won’t remember this conversation. However, if the answer sets warrant more attention, not only will they all have excellent recall, but also, the recordings of this session might not get lost.”

“Is that a threat?” Hidalgo asked.

“My friend, you pay me to protect you, your family, and your interests,” Favelle said very clearly. “This recording and their memory would continue to allow me to protect you, even if you’re in prison, so no, not a threat, but a way for me to protect my company. Our firm has survived through several regime changes which is in part due to our high ethical standards, and we are not about to be brought down by criminal activity.”

“Criminal activity? What are you talking about?” Hidalgo asked.

“Are you in any way, shape, form or fashion, involved in or connected to the abduction, movement, selling, and or trading of children for sex or illegal organ distribution?” Favelle asked, point blank.

“Of course not! I have already apprised your office of the scandal going on and that we would get to the bottom of this,” Hidalgo said.

“Hidalgo, I know you engage in some sort of extracurricular activities that might lead to getting fewer votes, so let’s be very clear here. Are you, personally, buying or engaging in illegal sex acts with children?” Favelle asked.

“Never! I’m a good man, how can you even think I would harm a child? I have children!” Hidalgo said.

Favelle looked to one of his staff who was interpreting information being transmitted along with the visual and audio information. Computer information recorded and analyzed in real time respiration and heart rate, body temperature, eye dilation, and the amount of skin perspiration. The staff nodded, non-verbally stating that he believed Hidalgo was telling the truth. This exchange was so subtle, Lestelle had to wonder if anyone else even noticed.

“Tell me about your relationship with Shade,” Favelle said.

“I don’t have a relationship with Shade,” Hidalgo said.

Favelle didn’t even glance over to his lie detector. “You see, it is responses like that that cause me to doubt our working relationship. I can’t serve you if you aren’t a hundred percent accurate. Now, I happen to know that you arranged for Shade to test your law enforcement’s security systems.”

“That’s not public knowledge,” Hidalgo said. “How...”

“It’s not public. Probably smart on your side not to let the media get a hold of that one, because it would raise all sorts of questions on why you would hire a suspected criminal to test your law enforcement capabilities,” Favelle said. “Personally, I think you’re smarter than that, so my only conclusion is that she blackmailed you into covering for her. That makes more sense to me, and it raises my curiosity. What does she got on you that I don’t?”

Hidalgo sighed. “When you said relationship, I thought you meant romantically. I’m not romantically involved with Shade, but I have done business with her from time to time.”

“Children?”

“Never! Shade herself would kill anyone who asked for that kind of service,” Hidalgo said. “Why do you keep asking me about children? I don’t harm children.”

“Why do you go to Shade?” Favelle asked.

"I'm a xenofile," Hidalgo admitted. He seemed ashamed. "That's not cheating, right? It's not like I'm having an affair or seeing a prostitute. It just me and aliens and, they're all adults. No children. A few slaves, but most of those slaves willingly became slaves because they wanted better lives than what they were managing on their own, you know? You're not going to tell my wife, are you?"

"I, personally, think that is something she should know, but it's not my place to tell her," Favelle said. "Now, I need to ask a favor, so if you're not alone, send everyone out of your office, and if you're recording, please stop."

"I'm alone," Hidalgo said. A few moments later. "Recording has stopped."

Favelle looked to his lie detector. He shrugged. "You know the girl that was supposedly killed. Tenico?" Favelle said.

"Yeah, I have memorized her bio. This was really sad," Hidalgo said.

"She's alive," Favelle said. He held a hand up to stop Hidalgo from saying anything. "We believe that her life would be in danger if this information came to light, so again, if you're recording and you really don't want to harm kids, I would be doing something about that."

Hidalgo pushed a couple buttons to stop the recording and deleted information that had been saved.

"Good. I'm forwarding you adoption papers and emergency witness relocation documents. I want your signature on them. I want them marked classified until she is 18 and can legally represent herself and her own interests," Favelle said.

"I'm not just signing her over to anyone," Hidalgo said. "I want to know she's being taken care of..."

"Yeah, I am sure you don't want to milk this information for possible future political success," Favelle said. "Consider me her lawyer. I will make sure she is well taken care of."

"Wait, is this Waycaster the Jedi Waycaster?" Hidalgo asked.

Favelle didn't reveal that he was unaware of the Jedi status.

"I am relieved he is involved. He healed my niece," Hidalgo said, starting to electronically sign the documents. "So, Waycaster and Fite are requesting joint custody?"

"Everyone needs two parents, even if they're not married," Favelle said.

"Yeah," Hidalgo said. "I was hoping to meet Waycaster. Can you send him my compliments?"

"I will do that," Favelle said. He received the documents back and inspected them. "Do you have any questions about what happened here today? Or how serious I am that it continues to appear as if my client is dead?"

"No questions and very clear," Hidalgo said. "But you know, some of the players apprehended since the fiasco may get the death penalty for Tenico's death. It might not be so good politically if it turns out she is alive after punishment has been executed."

"My firm will handle that fall out, should that happen," Favelle said. "Thank you for your time today, Mayor. I wish you and your family well."

"Thank you..." Hidalgo was saying, but Favelle turned down the sound and waited for the transmission to end. It finally blipped off.

Favelle turned to his staff. "Any questions as to what just occurred?"

No one had any questions. "Very well," Favelle said, standing as if he were preparing to dismiss his staff.

The door to the conference room opened and Droid entered.

"What is the meaning..." Favelle demanded

“No one interfere,” said head of security, Jerron Elkin, who was following the Droid. He motioned several other security officers to enter. “In fact, everyone put your hands on the table, or in the air. If you have a weapon, do not for any reason, touch it.”

Security proceeded to take up strategic positions in the room, but surprisingly, not one was holding a weapon in their hands, which seemed counter to their normal protocol.

The Droid proceeded along the width of the table, scanning faces on the far side as it did, and then turned and proceeded up the length, scanning faces on the closer side. Of course, it wasn't difficult, as everyone had turned to look at the Droid. It paused three chairs in, bringing an arm up. The man in the chair right before him clenched.

“Please, don't kill me, I will tell you everything I know,” he said.

The Droid pushed on. As it approached the boss, security became extremely tense and Elkin reminded them not to act unless it was absolutely necessary. The Droid pushed past the Favelle and paused next to Lestelle. Again an appendage came up, something extended from its finger, and it brought this up near the side of her face.

“Easy, men,” Elkin said, preparing to engage.

The Droid shot a puff of air that moved her hair and nearly made her jump out of her skin. One of the security officer's hands touched his weapon and the robot turned to him, but he quickly brought his hands up to the ‘I surrender’ posture. The Droid returned its attention to Lestelle. It again popped her with a blast of air, and then sucked it in, taking a sample reading. The Droid turned its attention to the documents on the desk in front of Favelle. The documents scrolled as the Droid scrutinized them. Its antennae came up, it tilted its head, and headed for the exit.

“Follow it, but no one engages unless it attacks the staff, go,” Elkin said.

As soon as the door closed again, Favelle leaned on his desk with his knuckles white. “What the hell was that?”

“That was a Bloodhunter,” Elkin said.

“Excuse me for not being up on my Droids classes, but I don't know that one,” Favelle said.

“Very few do, but that's the ‘bad’ Droid from the children's fable,” Elkin explained. “But instead of abducting misbehaving children, it hunts very specific targets, usually DNA level specific. They were created by the Emperor as the ultimate revenge device should he be killed. It targets general people of interest, or people the Emperor didn't want to succeed him, or just people he didn't like. The Droids are remote activated when a person with a specific name or genetic code triggers a Trojan in a computer bank. Apparently your conversation with the Mayor activated a Trojan on their side, which infected our computers. They hijacked our communications system and transmitted a three second hyper burst which will no doubt awaken every Bloodhunter within a 30 year radius. It just so happened that we were unknowingly housing one in our evidence locker. We are now scanning for others, but I believe this to be the only one.”

“And how would such a thing get into storage?” Favelle asked.

“Someone would have had to put it there, of course, possibly before the end of the war,” Elkin said. “It's been sitting there in an unmarked crate for a long time.”

Favelle turned to Green, the man who had panicked when the Blood Hunter had paused near him. “You appear to know about Bloodhunters. Why did you think it wanted you?”

“Oh, no, no, no reason. I was just nervous,” Green said.

Favelle looked to his lie detector. The man shook his head ‘no.’

“Elkin, please secure all of Green’s files and shift them to see if there has been any criminal activity,” Favelle said.

“Please, I’ve been loyal to you for a long time,” Green said.

“I know, and I’m hoping we don’t find anything so that you can retire today,” Favelle said. “Don’t leave the building. And Elkin, do we know who the Bloodhunter was looking for?”

Elkin nodded. “We’re pretty sure the trigger was Waycaster,” he said.

Lestelle paled. “I need to make a call,” she pleaded.

“Miss Lestelle,” Elkin said. “If the Bloodhunter doesn’t already know where he is, your direct call will paint a target on your friend. Further, if you make a call and he illudes capture, and they know you did it, they will come after you and they will use you as bait. If you have any feelings for this person at all, you will forsake any further knowledge of him and delete documents you have that might have his name on it. It probably already suspects you’re a friend, hence it’s interest in you. It probably only left because it has a solid lead. The longer your friend avoids capture, the more that will come for him. This is a done deal.”

“I’m not going to sit back and do nothing,”

“Of course you’re not,” Favelle said. “Elkin, get the Corvette ready. We’re going to go collect this Mr. Waycaster.”

“Sir?” Elkin said. “Did you hear my explanation of what we’re up against?”

“I did. And if any person ever earned the wrath of the Emperor, then I want to meet that man,” Favelle said. “I am just curious, though, of how a man who is presumably 18 standard years old, and who clearly never could have met the Emperor, could have become such a wanted person.”

“It may have nothing to do with him. Maybe it’s his blood line. Maybe the Emperor hated his parents and he wants to make them suffer by making the family suffer,” Elkin said. “Or maybe it wants him as bait to get to someone else. These Droids have long memories. They don’t have the same artificial intelligence restrictions that we place on service Droids. These Droids are built by Droids, programmed by Droids, and dispatched by Droids. These are nothing like the massed produced, stupid Droids we fought in the Clone Wars.”

“Then maybe you should call for some back up, because we’re going,” Favelle said.



Darth Alyth stood staring down over planet Parlin from the most forward window on the Bridge of the Imperial Class 2 Star Destroyer ‘Deterrent.’ With the orbital defenses obliterated, the task now fell upon her to subdue the established authority. She was close enough to one of the radio engineers that she could hear some of the random calls from the lay population either begging for mercy, or attempting to position themselves to be of use when the local government was toppled, but none of the calls bared the signature of the official governing body. It irked her to no end that they continued to dismiss her power over them.

“Send bombers to take out the space port at Gersu,” Alyth instructed. “Also take out the military base at Alim Say, and Alim Kkwa.”

Captain Hirche approached. “There is a call coming in from Darth Torlin,” he said, humbly.

Alyth nearly frowned. It wasn’t in her interest to allow the crew to know she was annoyed by the interruption. She simply nodded.

"I'll take it in my office," Alyth said. "Continue to fire at random targets until someone of interests answers our hail."

Captain Herche bowed.

Alyth strode down the walk way, her boots sounding out her stride. The boots came up just below mid calf and the shine matched her breast plate armour: polished black. Her skirt and under shirt, the sleeves of which protruded from the breast plate, were crimson. Both arms sported tech blacelets, primary polished black, with gold trim and illuminated buttons. Her hair was solid black and straight, cut with precision angles. The turtleneck of her shirt mostly obscured the tattoo, the mark of her master claiming her as property. It mirrored the link of her master's own mark, revealing the line of ownership, a particular path of Sith training.

Her office was void of furniture. Once she was centered in the office, a holographic environment emerged, allowing her to see the workings of the ship or the exterior views, as needed. She made these go away and linked to the incoming call. She immediately went to her knee.

"Master, how may I serve?" Alyth asked.

"You're to recall your bombers and any ground forces you've employed and go immediately to Dathomir," Torlin instructed. "Lord Kilmore has sensed a disturbance in the Force there."

"Lord Kilmore frequently senses disturbances which lead to nothing more than a solar flare," Alyth said. "Some Jedi farts a hundred light years from here and he is yelling fowl. His days are over, Master. Why do you suffer his presence?"

"It is true, his senses have waned since the Emperor's death, but he still asserts a great deal of influences over his territories," Torlin said.

"I'm on the verge of conquering Parlin," Alyth said. "There are sufficient natural resources in this system that we could rebuild the Fleet to what it once was."

"Which is why I sent you there," Torlin said. "And now, I am telling you to go to Dathomir."

"Stopping now will suggest weakness. It will make our job that much harder when we return," Alyth said.

"I am growing weary of your petulance, child. Need I remind you of who owns who?" Torlin demanded.

"No, Master," Alyth said, lowering her head. "I am merely pointing out that I'm on the verge of victory here and that the rewards are great. Do you really want me to go chasing some obscure bit of fluff?"

"In this instance, it may not be fluff, and time is of the essence," Torlin said. "Bloodhunters have been awakened. We recorded a signal and apparently it is the second calling, which suggests whoever they are looking for is someone of fair skill or talent, perhaps even Force sensitive. Whoever he or she is, they could potentially be an ally. Lord Kilmore believes we are the verge of another tipping point. I agree with him. Go and bring me the one the Bloodhunters seek."

"I will do thy bidding, Master," Alyth said, touching the floor with hands and forehead.

Torlin lifted her off the floor with the Force, lifting her primarily by the neck. She knew from experience not to reach for her throat with her hands. It would do no good, and frequently peeved him into escalating the physical violence against her.

"Do not forget that I have power over you, even if you are not in my immediate presence," Torlin said. The air around her swirled, as if she were in a vortex, her cape, skirt, and

hair, twisting up and about and back. Armor or not, he could touch every cell in her body. Visible hand prints pushed into her skin on her arms and legs, leaving bruises in their wake. Bite marks drawing light rings of blood, or hickies where the skin was sucked up. Finger nail scratches went down her neck, back and across the back of her legs. "I own you. I will use you as I see fit and you will like it. I've been too lenient with you, mostly because you get results, but I will not tolerate further insolence. Are we clear?"

Alyth, of course, couldn't answer, as the grip was that tight about her neck. It was also inside her neck, as if a rag had been forced into her mouth, blocking the passage, preventing her from protesting even if she wanted to. It was torture and erotic at the same time. She responded by completely surrendering, relaxing the muscles even in her neck, to the point that she nearly gave in to unconsciousness. Erotic asphyxiation was known to produce lucid, semi-hallucinogenic states in non Force sensitive people, but in trained Force Adepts, it often resulted in an increase in Force sensitivity. Some non Force sensitive people had been known to become Force sensitive when taken to the brink of death by a Master. The mark on her neck represented a lineage of Sith where the Masters did just that, taking people to the edge, some by hanging, some by drowning; the ultimate goal was to create more Force sensitive people. There were even people who sought out this line of Sith, wanting to be 'turned.'

Torlin let go and she fell. She writhed on the floor as Torlin continued to use her. Even after the holographic feed was off, he continued to toy with her simply to demonstrate his power over her. She lay there for a moment, even after the Force Touch was gone, focusing on her breath. Her body quivered, as if she had fever induced chills. The force was palpable against her skin, as if a tide was drawing her into an ocean. Her anger simmered, directed at both her Master and herself. Her Master for the ongoing abuse and at herself for finding pleasure in it.

Alyth forced herself to her feet. She would have to change outfits in order to hide all the bruising and other marks, but she didn't want to waste any time. If Torlin was right and Bloodhunters were summoned, then whoever the poor bastard was, she secretly wished the Bloodhunters got to him first. Alyth walked down the center of the Bridge, doing her best not to reveal that she was hurting. Herche met her with concern.

"What?!" Alyth asked, with a sly smile.

He didn't know what to say. Of course, it wasn't the first time he had seen the 'Ravishing,' but it was perhaps the first time she had been so badly marked. Or, he realized for the first time, the first time she had allowed anyone to see just how bad it can be.

"Recall all ground troops, fighters, and bombers," Alyth said. "Prepare to take the Deterrent to Darthomir. We're going hunting."

Herche opened his mouth, perhaps to point out, as she had, that they were close to victory. He shut it, turned and went back to work.

Alyth wanted to go to her quarters and lie down, but she dare not appear weak. She stood on the Bridge, surveying her crew, while watching the retreat, silently raging.

Corissa, Jordeen, and Ten arrived at the shuttle where Preston was waiting for them. He had been surprised by how full the shuttle was on finding it, but he quickly reminded himself that he did tell them to go shopping. Daphne emerged from the lavatory, where she had changed into the flight suit that Preston had bought her. Corissa immediately balked at discovering Daphne was present.

“Please tell me you haven’t brought home another stray already?” Corissa said.

“I’m not joining your cult, sister,” Daphne said. “We are going to fulfil our last duties to Heer and then we’re going our separate ways.”

“Heer?”

“The Jedi I killed. I’m returning his remains and property to his parents on Orlon,” Preston said.

Corissa pulled Preston by the arm to the rear of the shuttle.

“You’re really going to go to Orlon with her?” Corissa asked, using the tone that she frequently used when she was asking if he were crazy, only this time it was presented in a hushed volume.

“It’s just four hyper hours away. Be back in a day?” Preston said reassuringly.

“She tried to kill you!” Corissa said.

“I know,” Preston said. “But this is one of those Force occasion things and I have to see it through.”

“No, you don’t,” Corissa said. “Maybe this is one of those Force occasion things where you are supposed to say no.”

Preston blinked. “Never thought of that, actually,” he said. He bowed. Corissa seemed relieved. “But I gave my word.”

“Fine,” Corissa said. “But you’re taking Freya.”

“I thought you hate Freya,” Preston said.

“I do, but you upgraded her to to body guard status,” Corissa said.

“There isn’t room in the Tie for her with me and Daphne,” Preston said.

Corissa fumed. “I don’t like this.”

“Really, what could go wrong?” Preston asked, heading back to the flight controls to signal the converstain was concluded. Corissa followed, not ready to finish the argument, but not knowing what else to add. He took the seat and began the start up sequence. “Unless I buy a bigger ship. It’s in the budget, isn’t it?”

“Not my department,” Corissa said, taking the copilot seat.

The number one engine popped, rattling the ship with a steady rumble as if the engine was resisting.

“Is this thing safe?” Daphne asked, practically yelling to be heard over the din.

“Yeah, that’s normal,” Ten assured her.

Daphne looked at her skeptically. Jordeen laughed.



The shuttle door lowered and Ten was the first one down the ramp. Freya was there, waiting patiently. She bowed respectfully, and in the nomaste greeting.

“Would you like assistance unloading the shuttle?” she asked.

“Wow,” Daphne said. “Is this a cult or a brothel?”

“What, you don’t like Preston’s choice in companions?” Corissa asked.

“Is she kidding?” Daphne asked as he came down the ramp and past her. “You’re intimate with a machine?”

Preston kissed Freya on the cheek. “Hello, Freya. Nice to see you again.”

“Welcome back, Master,” Freya said, touching his arm as he passed.

“Oh, that’s even more disgusting than you eating the ice cream made from human breast milk,” Daphne said.

“Oh, we should have got more of that,” Preston said, pausing to sulk for just a moment. He then shrugged it off and proceeded to the Tie.

Daphne froze as she realized what he was intending to take them in.

“You’re taking us in a Tie Defender?” Daphne asked, even more shocked than she was by Freya.

Preston nodded. Opening the lower hatch, he reached in and turned on the battery. Lights came on and he started a walk around, checking to make sure everything was spaceworthy. He ran his hand along the solar cells.

“That belongs to the bad guys,” Daphne protested.

“Yep,” Preston agreed. “Which use to belong to the good guys, before they became bad guys, and who could be the good guys again, circumstance permitting. Things are always changing like that.”

Daphne looked to Corissa. Corissa shrugged, as she dropped a box on an anti gravity skid. “You volunteered to go with him.”

“I didn’t volunteer,” Daphne said. She saw no point in discussing it further. She ducked under and hoisted herself up into the ship.

Preston stared at the ship, as if deliberating a point. Specifically, he should have climbed in first, and he wasn’t sure about climbing over Daphne.

“Are you sure about this?” Jordeen asked.

“She seems really angry,” Corissa added.

Jordeen and Preston shared a secret smile, but didn’t comment on Corissa’s observation. Daphne yelled from the ship, “You coming, or what?”

“Yeah,” Preston committed. “One second.”

Red rolled up, whistling wildly.

“I guess you can come,” Preston agreed. “Corissa, you need Red?”

“No, go ahead,” Corissa said, passing Freya who was bringing supplies down to place on the sled.

Ten leaned into Jordeen, watching as Red rolled towards the Tie. It started to deploy its rockets, but was interrupted by Preston.

“Up you go, then,” Preston said, lifting Red into place with the Force.

Preston waved to Ten and Jordeen. Corissa and Freya were both inside the other ship working supplies, but he suspected her could would see them as he was departing. He brought his attention back to his task of walking around the ship. He dragged his hands along the solar panels, relying on intuition to tell him if there were any issues. Satisfied, he headed for the hatch, ducked under the body of the pod and then climbed into the fighter. Daphne was sitting in the wrong chair, waiting impatiently.

“Care to switch with me? Or would you like to fly?” Preston asked.

“I don’t know how,” Daphne said.

“Want to learn?” Preston asked.

“No,” Daphne said, awkwardly changing places. It was impossible to do the task without touching. There’s eyes met and she was pretty sure he was considering kissing her. She met his gaze with suspicious. “Careful.”

“Sorry,” he said, not sure how he might have shared the space any better. He sat down and buckled himself in. On seeing her struggle with her restraint, he unbuckled and reached over to assist her.

Daphne slapped his hand.

“Again, sorry,” Preston said, withdrawing his hands. “Press that to release the strap.”

“I can figure it out,” Daphne insisted.

He patiently waited till she was buckled in and then did the same. He began the start up sequence.

“What do we do if people shoot at us?” Daphne asked.

“We shoot back?” Preston asked, wondering if it were a test question.

“No, really. People see a lone a Tie Fighter, they may just take pot shots for the sake of revenge,” Daphne said.

Preston agreed half heartedly as he finished. “You secure, Red? Want to take us up?”

Red whistled happily.

“You’re going to let the Droid fly?” Daphne asked.

“It has all the protocols programmed, it just needs some experience,” Preston said. “Why, you nervous?”

“Of course I am not nervous. I am a Jedi,” Daphne said.

“In training,” Preston reminded.

Daphne frowned.

“I have a spare Lightsaber if you want to borrow it,” Preston said. “The first one I ever built. It’s stored in that panel under your feet.”

“I don’t want anything from you,” Daphne said.

“Just till you get another?” Preston asked.

“No,” she said.

Preston nodded. Orbit didn’t come fast enough to ease the discomfort generated by his guest. He found the shift from atmosphere to space pleasant, as it was much quieter, and looking down on the planet just seemed peaceful. The hyperdrive module was in Dathomir’s shadow and not visible to the naked eye, but Red took the ship directly towards it. It took only a moment to remote activate the systems and mate up. Another moment was spent calculating the jump to hyperspace. Preston verified the math, walking through all the known variables from origin to destination. They seemed good. And the Droid’s math was no doubt better than his own, but he could do something that the droid couldn’t. He could Force see ahead, traveling the route at speed of thought. That didn’t mean he would make out all threats, but he would have better than average feeling of how things might turn out. He allowed Red the honor of executing the jump to hyper. Once they were in the stream, Preston folded his legs up into the chair, striking a meditative pose.

“That’s it?” Daphne asked.

“I’m sorry, did you want to hold a conversation?” Preston asked.

“Not really,” Daphne said.

Preston resumed eyes closed, internal mantra.

“You’re not wearing a suit,” Daphne said.

Preston shrugged, not sure how to respond to such an obvious observation.

“You can hold your bladder for four hours?” Daphne asked.

“Sometimes,” he said.

“What if you need to go? You’re not going to pee in a bottle, are you?” Daphne asked.

“Oh, no,” Preston assured her.

“So, how...” Daphne asked.

“I’m not called a Waycaster for nothing,” Preston said.

Daphne thought about it, then made a face. “Ewww. I keep thinking you’re not going to be able to be more disgusting.”

“What’s disgusting about eliminating? We all carry stuff and we all have to get rid of stuff, so why not shift it out there using the Force?” Preston asked.

“That’s not what the Force is for. The Force is sacred. It’s for health and defense,” Daphne said.

“And it’s defensively healthy to eliminate,” Preston said. “I don’t understand all these caveats you carry. If the Force really pervades the entire universe, and penetrates and binds us all together, don’t you think that includes our waste, which is in every cell of our bodies, even the cells of midichlorians. There is even life within our waste. Well, not urine, typically, as it tends to be sterile with the exception of bacterial infections, and bacteria is a life vector.”

“I try not to think about such things,” Daphne said, and reclined her chair. It reclined much further than the flight chair, and much faster, and swept her legs up and out from the base. She recovered well and closed her eyes as if she had meant to stretch out. She wished sleep would take her.

The silence lasted about thirty minutes. She loosened the straps in order to turn on her side. She found Preston’s meditative pose both peaceful and annoying.

“Look, I’m sorry. It’s going to be a long four hours, cramped in a tiny space,” Daphne said, trying to make peace.

Preston didn’t respond.

“I would like to talk,” Daphne admitted.

Preston opened his eyes. “Okay,” he agreed. “About anything particular?”

“Why don’t you want to be a Jedi?” she asked.

“I don’t require a title,” Preston said.

“If you’re as good as Yeno believes you to be, then we’re going to need you,” Daphne said.

“For what? More recruiting? Fighting?”

“Yeno said something is coming. We need to prepare.”

“There is always something coming. Tomorrow, next year, the future, things will happen, some good, some bad...” Preston offered.

“You have an answer for everything, don’t you?” Daphne demanded.

“Don’t you?”

“You dismiss our ways, our knowledge, even Yeno’s vision,” Daphne

“I’m not dismissing your views. They’re all valid, from your perspective,” Preston said.

“There is only our perspective. The Jedi are the light guiding the Galaxy to a better way of being,” Daphne insisted.

“I’m not sure what history tapes you’re referring to, but my survey of history suggests that everywhere a Jedi shows up there is a fight and bloodshed. That’s hardly an endorsement for being guardians of peace,” Preston said.

“We’ve been at war,” Daphne argued.

“With yourselves. Look, you refer to the Jedi as a light. Assume for moment that’s not just a metaphor. What was really illuminated? Who shined that light and on what? If there is a dark side of the Force, then the shadows exist because the light cast them. Jedi can’t exist without Sith.”

“That is blasphemous.”

“Maybe. There is good and bad in all of us. Take us for example. You’re a good person. I’m a good person. And yet, for whatever reason, we have assume antagonistic roles towards each other, probably because there is underlying, unconscious need that the Universe needs to express through some artificial conflict. I use the word artificial because what we’re doing isn’t real. When we have set these bodies down and once again become truly one with the Force, you and I will commune like long lost family and laugh about the drama we shared.”

“Oh, really? Is that your metaphysical belief, or some esoteric theory you’re developing?” Daphne said, not hiding her contempt.

“Am I detecting scorn and bitterness from you?” Preston asked.

“No, just sarcasm,” Daphne said.

“And there you have the second reason I don’t want to be a Jedi. You love judgement, which is often revealed through your anger.”

“I am not angry!”

“Then why the judgement?”

“I’m not judging!”

“You’re argumentive.”

“I’m not arguing!”

“So, your argument is you’re not being confrontational or contrary?”

“I just said, I’m not arguing.”

“Well, technically, now you’re arguing about arguing, which is the correct use per the vernacular, but doesn’t negate my use of the word which is the defines point of view,” Preston said.

“Do you have to have the last word?” Daphne asked.

“Maybe. But returning to my original argument, judgement is one of the crucial artifacts of being a Jedi. You judge good and evil, who is right, who will die, who is worthy, who isn’t, who is productive, and who is wasteful. The very act of judging causes us to fall short of where the Force aims to put us. If you assume for even a moment that we are better than Sith, than your intellect has failed you, for even the Sith sit in judgement. I dare say, one can argue the worst of the Sith, Darth Vader himself, was only evil because he had so much ‘good’ laden judgement that he could rationalize any and all of his behaviors and thoughts as being in everyone else’s best interest.”

“How dare you compare the Jedi to Sith, us to the likes of Darth Vader!”

“I thought it was common knowledge that Luke believed his father had good in him, that he could reach him through reason,” Preston said.

“That’s just folklore,” Daphne said. “Luke killed Vader, and the Rebel fleet destroyed the Emperor on the Death Star.”

“Why don’t we ask Luke himself?”

“You know Luke? You know where to find him?” Daphne nearly sat up, but the seat restraints limited her movement.

“No, but that shouldn’t stop us from asking him? We are one with the Force, therefore we can speak to any Jedi dead or alive.”

“You can speak to Force ghosts?” Daphne asked, incredulously.

“We are all Force ghosts, just some of still occupy bodies,” Preston said.

“That’s not true,” Daphne argued. “Only certain Jedi have learned to maintain themselves after death.”

“What is more likely; out of the hundreds of billions of sentient life forms, only a handful are aware of a life after death, and of those, only a few specially trained may maintain enough of themselves after death to be available to the few that have awareness of them? Or it is something we all have access to? If you accept that we are all beings of light, then it isn’t a great leap to understand that we had to unlearn what we are to experience being human, and we must unlearn being human to realize we are still Light.”

“It can’t be that simple,” Daphne protested. She unfastened her restraints and sat up.

“Where did you get this knowledge? Who teaches this stuff?”

“I was taught not a set of knowledge, but rather a system for gathering knowledge. My knowing isn’t based on beliefs, but on direct experience. Does this mean I don’t get things wrong? No, as my experiences are also based on perspective, and there is one truth that I keep rediscovering and that is there is always another, higher perspective. The flesh is a vehicle, and the light of being preceded birth and goes on after death. Saying otherwise is absurd, like saying that 99 percent of all sentience is discarded like used tissues upon death. The same folklore that said Luke saved his father suggests Anakin Walker became accessible through the Force after Vader’s death, that Luke held conversations with him, Ben, and Yoda. Do you really think the Jedi would share knowledge and training that would allow the most villainous of Sith the ability to live on after death?”

“He must have stolen the knowledge or it was given to him by Sideous.”

“Let’s ask him?” Preston suggested.

“You want to summon Anakin Walker, risk raising Darth Vader?”

“I’ve already spoken to both. They’re on my committee,” Preston said.

“Okay, you’re going have to explain that, because that didn’t register,” Daphne said.

“I grew up alone, my only companion capable of speech a Droid named Fixit. He taught me that I could call on any historical figure, living or dead, and invite them into a conversation.”

“In your dreams,” Daphne said.

“Exactly,” Preston agreed. “Each night, before sleep, I would ask to meet someone, and my unconscious would make that dream happen. Whether it is the unconscious projecting the personalities requested, or their Light actually visiting me, is irrelevant. For all intensive purposes, I met these people, interacted with them on a profound level. I interacted in dream state and on the astral plane. After a while, I realize I was tapping into a regular host of characters, and so I formalized my people into a committee consisting of 24 entities. 12 males governed the day, 12 females governed the night. 12 were Jedi. 12 were Sith.”

“You commune with Sith?”

“Commune isn’t quite accurate. When I stand amongst them in the circle, mostly the bickering of the twelve cancels everything out, and rarely a message gets through. Everynow and then, I get a little one on one time, and whether it is Jedi or Sith, they all try to influence me towards one of their unfinished agendas.”

“You really believe you speak to Jedi and Sith?” Daphne asked, incredulously.

“Everyday.”

“I think they have medicines for what ails you,” Daphne said.

“You’re a Jedi. You know there is more to life than what we can see with our eyes. Why would your first conclusion be I am mentally ill?” Preston asked.

“I don’t talk to ghosts, for starters,” Daphne said.

“You could if you wanted. And you would know the difference between a Ghost and a hallucination through understanding that people who hallucinate generally report their visions as disturbing, out of sync with reality. My visions are not disturbing. They provide clarity. They have helped me survive,” Preston said.

“It’s my fault for trying to engage you in a civil conversation. I now understand you’re not at fault, because you are clearly insane, perhaps from years of forced solitude,” she said, laying back down. She turned away from him.

“Who is more insane, the person labeling other and then turning their back to them, or the one who risked sharing who they are?” Preston asked. “Don’t the Jedi teach that secluding themselves for a specific time deepens their connection to the Force, allowing them visions?”

Daphne didn’t respond. If he had looked, Preston would have seen tears flowing. He checked his internal clock: three hours, 29 minutes to arrival. He sighed, looked forward, and allowed himself to enjoy the visual effects of hyperspace travel, diving into a ‘tunnel’ trance. His eyes finally became heavy, and he went into a deeper meditation.



Anong and Somchai, Heer’s parents, lived on a Vinyard outside the main city of Pornrat Noi. On marrying, they had pooled their resources and purchased the land, and had made a reasonable income off the wines they sold. In addition to the wine, they also made a number of products that were derived from the pollinating insects they cultivated. Honey, soaps, royal jelly, lipbalms, were just some of those, but it was the yeast collected from the back of the queen insect that made their wine fermenting process unique. The insect and grapes used originated on this planet, making the purist and enthusiast adamant that this was the only product of value, even though there were several companies that had duplicated the process and were mass producing the same product.

From town, Preston and Daphne walked to the farm, mostly to stretch their legs after being cooped up in the Fighter and partly because the both knew they would be cooped up again on the return flight. The sun was warm on their face, tempered by a cool breeze that carried the scents exotic plant life, and the discernable smell that often comes around farms, by products of animal husbandry. A kiosk at the entry to Heer’s farm provided a sampling of products. Preston wasn’t sure what to make of the lipbalm until Daphne impatiently instructed him.

“Oh,” he said, putting some on his pinky to apply it to his lips. He pursed his lips. He slipped the small container into his side pack, left a coin with the Droid minding the kiosk, and proceeded up the road with Daphne. The road to the house was shaded by trees that lined both sides. As they approached the house, Anong came out on the porch to greet them. She bowed respectfully.

“Welcome, Jedi, to our home,” Anong said.

Daphne couldn’t speak. Preston didn’t fault her. The onus for speaking was on him.

“Mrs. Heer,” Preston said, bowing. “I would like to speak to you and your husband together, if that is possible.”

Anong sat down on the top step of the Porch. It was as if she knew why they were there. She touched her ring, turning the inner component till it clicked. In a foreign tongue, she asked

her husband to join her on the front porch. She motioned for them to sit on the steps with her while they waited.

Somchai soon arrived on the front porch, wiping his hands. “Oh, we have guests? And Jedi’s to boot. Honey, why have’t you offered them refreshments?”

Again, in native tongue, she told the husband, “They have business to conduct and then I want them gone.”

Somchai wasn’t sure what was going on, but he knew his wife well enough that he wasn’t going to argue. “State your business, Jedi,” Somchai said, putting his hand on his wife’s shoulder.

Preston opened his bag and withdrew a Lightsaber cradle and placed it on the stairs. He then withdrew Heer’s Lightsaber, placed it on the stand, and then withdrew the diamond remains, which he removed from a felt pouch, and then unwrapped.

“It was Master Heer’s request that his remains be brought to you, as well as his Lightsaber,” Preston said.

Somchai’s face reddened. His wife reached up and put her hand on his hand, but stared at the diamond.

“What happened?” Somchai demanded.

“I killed him in battle,” Preston said, not explaining or trying to soften it with explanation.

Somchai pulled out an ‘asp-killer,’ which at point blank range could easily kill a human.

“Somchai, put that away,” Anong snapped.

“He dare come to our home and speak what he did and expect me to just to do nothing?!” Somchai said.

“We knew our son’s profession would most likely end in his death, and most likely by the sword,” Anong said.

“A meaningful death, sure. Dying for a cause, sure. But this? What is this?!” Somchai demanded. “My son was a good man. What sort of man are you?”

“The fact that he is here in person tells us something about his character,” Anong said.

“I can not undo what was done. I can only offer one thing that might ease your pain,” Preston said.

“What could you possibly do to ease my pain?” Somchai demanded. “How can you even understand what I am feeling?”

“I can never understand what you’re feeling,” Preston said. “I can only offer you my life as payment. You may enslave me or kill me as you see fit.”

“What?” Anong and Daphne both said. Daphne added. “Are you completely mad?!”

“All actions have consequences. I took a life, mine is now forfeit,” Preston said. “I will not fight you, Somchai. Killing me may have its own set of consequences for you, but I would not fault you, and I would consider my life as down payment on what I still owe.”

“Somchai, put that away now! You stop being ridiculous,” Anong said, pointing at Preston. “We are not taking your life. There is enough senseless death in the Universe. Somchai?!”

Somchai’s hand was shaking. He took another step forwards and down. Even with his hands shaking, he was not likely to miss at this range, and it would likely shatter the skull and penetrate all the way through to the brain stem. Heer was suddenly there, quietly asking his father not to do it, explaining to him it would only add to his grief.

“You really want to die?” Somchai said.

“There is no death. I accept your decision,” Preston said.

“Don’t!” Daphne said. “I was Heer’s Padawan. His death is my fault. I didn’t listen and things got out of hand and it is all because I failed to follow instructions. If anyone should die, it should be me. Please, don’t kill this man because of my foolishness.”

Somchai turned the asp-killer towards Daphne. “You are Daphne, the one Heer told us about? This is your doing?”

“Somchai, this was clearly just an accident. Their training is difficult and their weapons are deadly. You are going to have to let this go,” Anong said.

“How do I let it go?!” Somchai demanded.

“Go ahead. Kill me. I deserve it,” Daphne said.

Somchai returned the asp-killer to its holster and sat down next to his wife. He openly wept on her shoulder. Daphne got up and walked away. Her departure speed increased until she was running. Heer asked Preston to go after her. Preston ignored him and continued to stand before Heer’s family. Heer knelt behind his parents. He tried to touch his dad, but for him, it was as if the world had become a hologram, and he had no more say over the direction of outcomes than he would over the plot development of a holonovel. The only difference between this and a book was he cared for the characters at a profound level. Actually, deeper than he had ever considered.

“I have never seen my father emote so strongly before,” Heer finally spoke. “Tell him I love him.”

Preston’s own eyes became moist, but he didn’t speak the words. Anong comforted her husband, taking the trade off of being the strong one, something couples only learn to do over time. Amidst the sobbing of a man, the humming of insects could be heard, the call of birds, the whine of a Droid slowly tending a row of grapes, and a chime on the porch, tingly soft tones. No one spoke until Somchai had quieted. The front of Anong’s shirt was stained with husband’s tears.

“He’s here, isn’t he,” Anong asked.

“I believe so,” Preston said.

Anong nodded. “Is he at peace?”

“Oh, I am, mom. More than I ever was while in the flesh. Maybe if I had understood what I know now, my drive to become a Jedi would not have existed. I would have stayed on the farm with you and dad, maybe had a family, I wouldn’t have gone off chasing esoteric knowledge. I was wrong. Being a Jedi was not about the quest. A true Jedi is content just being where he is. We teach this, but I am only now seeing this clearly...” He was overwhelmed with his own emotions. He turned as if seeing someone, someone Preston was not able to see. “Grandfather?”

Somchai sat up, his hand on his wife’s knee. “I want you gone from here, never to return,” he said.

Preston bowed. Heer got next to his ear. “I think I am going now. You understood something I did not. I want you to take over Daphne’s training. I believe you can help her. You, my friend, are a Jedi, whether you accept it or not.”

Preston got up to leave.

“Take the Lightsaber,” Anong said. “It has no purpose here.”

Preston bowed. He returned the Lightsaber to his pack, stand and all.

“Take the diamond, as well,” Somchai said. “Let that be your burden for the rest of your life.”

Preston looked to Anong to see if she agreed. She nodded. He collected the diamond, wrapping it in the cloth and returning it to the black felt bag, and finally into his pack. He bowed once more, turned and departed. At the end of the driveway, he paused to note the similarities between here and his home moon. He inhaled the aromas of life and was refreshed. And then he noted the dissimilarity, mainly, he had not had parents. He indulged in wondering what it would have been like, how his life would have been different.

“This is a dead end path,” came the voice of Fixit. “And circuitous.”

“It is what it is,” Preston agreed, and let it go.

Preston made his way slowly back to town, stopping only to greet animals that crossed his path.

There were several ways to look for a person. One could actively engage in a search, methodically seeking out places that one intuitively felt where a person might go based on one's understanding of them, or you could simply quiet the mind and allow the Force to guide you. Preston took the latter route, realizing he would catch up to Daphne when the time was right. He knew their connection was of the Force and that they were drawn together for a purpose that would reveal itself at the Force's convenience.

The town of Pornrat Hoi was surprisingly busy. Kiosks and vending carts lined the street, some manned by service Droids, but mostly by people. As he studied the people, he made an assumption. Had they been living on a planet with standard gravity, the average size of the citizen would have been much smaller. He wasn't sure how he came to that conclusion, as the people didn't look odd, he simply imagined them being smaller. He wondered if that was Force intuition or perhaps there was knowledge of these people somewhere in his head but he was unable to find the connection. In truth, it didn't matter, but he was curious how his mind worked, and that was how he got stuck watching the people. He found a relatively quiet place, just to observe, and after a while realized he ogled the women at a greater sampling rate than was explained by random viewings. No doubt, some of that was due to his just being heterosexual. The other part was how the females dressed. He decided that he liked seeing women in dresses. He couldn't say that the women were especially exotic, but only because he grew up not being around any females and so all women were particularly exotic to him. Years of solitude had no doubt increased his libido, and though many, if not most, cultures encouraged the individual to suppress this energy, he came from a philosophy and practice that openly pursued sexuality. Sensuality, it was believed, when diligently pursued, led to greater access to the Force, and deeper, meaningful forays into existence, approaching states of transcendence. It was believed that the bliss one felt during a 'turn over' was merely a hint of the sustained levels of joy that awaited at the higher levels of consciousness.

The thought occurred to him that he was just as alone now, surrounded by potential female friends, as he ever was on the moon, isolated from all people. If not more so, because here there were people, but he had no idea of a social protocol that allowed him to engage, so in some ways, alone on the moon was easier. Granted, his training suggested the separation he was imagining was an illusion, a disconnect from the Force, but sometimes it was a very real experience. Seeing others actively engaged in their routine, oblivious to his being was a curious thing. It was as if he were invisible. That thought reeled him in a little closer to a truth, or at least a hint of truth. There was nothing particularly special about him that might attract someone out of the blue. They had their friends, their families, their circles, and he was an outsider. Simply existing and wanting did not necessarily result in relief, but that too was a reflection of the dualistic nature of this level existence. An absence was just as good as an occurrence.

A crowd was gathering at a building nearby. It was enough of a distraction that he decided to draw closer to the event, to get away from his thoughts of loneliness and wanting. The building was a four-story hotel, with a bar restaurant at the base. There was the sound of furniture being tossed about coming from within, marked by the sound of a bottle crashing against the door. Preston got up closer and listened to the bar owner explaining to the law enforcement officer his version of events. Basically, some guy named Frant was hitting on this female, she told him to back off, and he touched her, she then broke his arm, and then his friends got involved,

and then she went crazy and started tearing the whole place up. “Crazy Jedi” was said more than once during the story.

“May I go in and talk to her?” Preston asked.

“This is a job for the law, son. I can’t risk anyone else being hurt,” officer Dresert said.

“She and I are companions. I may be able to talk some sense into her,” Preston offered.

“You’re a Jedi?” Dresert asked, surprised. He noticed the Lightaber and sighed. “Two Jedi’s in one day. What kind of trouble are you bringing to my peaceful town?”

Preston shrugged. “I am sorry for the disturbance. I can only say that I am willing to pay for any damages to your establishment,” Preston said to the owner.

“I have never known a Jedi to have money,” Dresert said.

“If he can pay, I accept,” Kamnan said. “I won’t press charges if he pays for the damage.”

“I’m going to press charges,” Frant said.

“For what? The witnesses all agree she told you to back off. You’ll be lucky if she doesn’t press charges against you and your brothers,” Dresert said.

“What will it take to make this go away?” Preston asked.

Dresert frowned. “I don’t like the idea of you doing my job, but quite frankly, I don’t think my men are up to taking down a Jedi, even if she is drunk,” he said. “You get her up to a room, and she sleeps it off and causes no more trouble, and Kamnan here is satisfied with the compensation, I’d say we’re done here.”

“Do you have any rooms available?” Preston asked.

“Top floor, room seven. It’s a luxury suite. It’s expensive,” Ramnan said.

Preston nodded, started to push into the bar. Kamnan stopped him with a touch to his arm, holding up a device. Preston drew out a few coin. Ramnan shook his head no. Preston dug deeper and puled out a credit chip he had been given on Axila. He touched the chip to the device. There was a slight pause while the manchine deliberated and Preston wondered if that chip would even be good here, but then it rang through and presented green lights.

“Room seven it is, then!” Ramnan said. “And don’t worry about breaking stuff. I have been looking for a reason to remodel.”

“And son, you have fifteen minutes till my backup arrives, then we come in firing stun weapons. If that fails, we will escalate, and someone will likely die,” Dresert said.

Preston pushed into the bar. He caught a bottle that was hurled at him.

“What do you want?” Daphne asked.

“I thought we were traveling back to Darthomoir together,” Preston said.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Daphne said. Then quieter. “I’m not going anywhere. Go ahead and gloat. You’re right. I’m wrong. That’s what you want to hear, right?”

“Would that help?” Preston asked. He drew closer, setting the bottle he had caught on the bar. “Because I would like to help?”

Daphne scoffed. “Why?”

“Because you’re a friend.”

“When did we become friends?”

“The moment our blades met,” Preston said.

Daphne downed another drink and slammed the glass hard on the counter. She picked up the bottle and poured another round, adding a glass and shoving it towards Preston.

“Drink, friend,” Daphne said, torturing the word friend.

“I’m not sure...”

“Drink, or I will kick your ass,” Daphne insisted.

Preston picked up the glass and they downed their drinks together. Preston coughed. Daphne laughed.

“First drink?” Daphne asked.

“Yeah,” Preston said, examining the empty glass before setting it down. “You know, the law out there wants to arrest you.”

“They do, eh?” Daphne said, moving towards the door.

Preston got in front of her, put his hands on her arms. “Daphne, there is another way.”

“You think you can take me?” Daphne asked.

“I think if we go up to a room and sleep this off, you don’t go to jail,” Preston said. “No one else gets hurt.”

Daphne laughed. “Slick. You want to have your way with me? Alright. I’m game. Come on, playboy. Let’s do this,” she said, grabbing his wrist and leading him up the lift. She grabbed a bottle off the bar as she headed up. “Which room?”

“Top floor, room seven,” Preston said, not trying to persuade her that he wasn’t attempting to be intimate with her. The sooner he got her to a room and out of public, the less likely she was to be arrested.

The doors opened and Daphne dragged Preston into the lift. The doors closed, the lift kicked into gear, and she fell back into him. She laughed as he put her back on her feet, suggesting if he wanted to, she would be quite happy if he ‘took’ her right here. He suggested she would be more comfortable in the room. The lift stopped and she led him to the room, counting the doors. She fell into him again at the door, kissing his face.

“Made it. Let’s do it here in the hallway,” Daphne said, tugging at his shirt.

Preston opened the door and guided her into the room. The bed was heart shaped, with red satin sheets. A white throw rug separated the bed from a hot tub, surrounded by flowers. A table near the bed offered a variety of of massage oil. A couch tailored specifically to enhance human coupling, shaped much like a wave, drew her attention.

“Oh, wow,” Daphne said, marveling at the comfort offered. She set the bottle of wine down on the table. She took her boots off and set them on a shoe stand by the door. “This is... Wow. Sure beats the rock I’ve been living in.”

Daphne started lighting candles, while Preston kicked off his boots before going deeper into the room. He hung his pack on the rack attached to the wall above the shoe stand. He turned to find Daphne unexpectedly on him, kissing him. He put on the brakes.

“Daphne. You’ve been drinking,” Preston pointed out.

“I’m not that drunk. I know what I am doing,” Daphne said.

“Still, your higher reasoning is likely impaired,” Preston said.

“Oh, so now, suddenly, you’re a Jedi,” Daphne complained.

“Just giving you an out,” Preston said.

“I don’t want an out. I want sex,” Daphne said. “You in? Or do I have to go back to drinking and fighting?”

Preston responded by lifting her and taking her to the bed. They hit the bed together, bouncing. Daphne laughed, tearing at his clothes. He in turn worked on opening her robe, fumbling over fasteners. Daphne got impatient with his fumbling and helped him. Swept up in the urgency, fueled by passion, the stirrings of the Force, and a touch of alcohol, the ‘turn over’ hit her hard, cascading through her body, but interestingly reverberated through his body, catching him up with her, so they both were depleted simultaneously. Sleep took them both, but

it took Preston deeper. She awoke, uncertain how long she had been asleep, but feeling surprisingly joyful. Her right leg and arm were draped over Preston, as if she had been hugging him the whole time. He was so still she had to sit up to see if he was breathing. Several candles remained burning, giving just enough light that she could see his abdomen move as he took deep air. She realized his eyes were moving beneath the eyelids, indicating he was in REM sleep.

Daphne leaned close and whispered: "Are you speaking with your Jedi? Am I in there, somewhere? I hope so. I hope you are holding me close." She kissed him lightly on the neck, drawing circles on his chest with her fingers. "Feel me touching you in your dream. Feel my caress, my mouth against yours." She shivered, finding herself extremely aroused. "Is it true what they say? Males have erection while dreaming?" She pulled the covers back to determine for herself. The fullness of it stirred her even more than she was stirring her self, the memory of her 'turn over' still resonating within every cell. "Stay in your dream," she instructed, easing herself on top of him. "I'm with you, in your dream, stay there with me," she encouraged. When he didn't wake, she slid gently down, pressing into him. She was so ready, and he was sufficiently hard and correctly positioned, that she took him into her without guiding hands. It took intense effort for her not to rush it all the way, but instead, she took him in slowly, savoring the sensation. She also hoped that by taking him in slowly she would minimize his stimulus in order to avoid waking him. Her face hovered over his face. Using the Force to liven her senses, breathing in as he exhaled, breathing out as he inhaled, her mouth near his, her hair dangling over his face, she felt one with him on all levels. She shivered. It was a small, unexpected 'turn over' that started in her lower lumbar and rushed up her spine to the base of her neck, calling the almost invisible hairs on her arms to attention. She gasped, fighting not to drop all her weight on him when her arms and knees went weak. She breathed through it, regathering her focus, and continued to bear down on him, grinding resolutely. When she had taken him in as far she could, she rested her bosom against him, laid her head on the bed beside his head, her chin touching his shoulder. She continued grinding subtly against him. "I want you to arrive inside your dream," she whispered. "You want me in your dream. Your whole dream is me and I fill you completely."

Daphne experienced another 'turn over,' stronger than the last, but still not as strong as the one that had put her and Preston to sleep. She clinged tightly to Preston, no longer caring if she woke him. As her muscles relaxed from the spasm, again she took inventory and found him still hard within her. The fullness inside her kept her escalating, even without movement. There was an urgency to continue, as if she could arrive at a new, greater level. The hot wetness between their bodies made it easy to give into her impulse. A bead of sweat ran down her forehead. She heard Preston's voice in her head, urging her to keep going. The suddenness of the voice inside her head, not in her ears, had her clench every muscle, causing her to freeze as if caught in the act of doing something wrong. That locking down of her muscles set off another series of spasms, going from upper thighs to the crown of her head, and then back. She let out a breathless, stuttering sigh.

"Keep going," his voice in her head pleaded. She pushed up with her hands, her head hovering near his ear, her chest just enough high enough that only her breast moved against his as her grinding became more vigorous. She felt as if she were on fire, perspiration decreasing the friction between them even more. In a soft voice she encouraged him to arrive inside her, while inside his dreamstate. His dream became liquid light, exploding into a white intensity that brought him instantly awake. She felt that light move through her like a Force pulse and both shifted awareness out of their body. They saw with Force vision, a 360 view that encompassed

every detail of the room, as if they were one with the room and with each other. There were no shadows, as everything was made of light, organic or not, but their bodies were brilliant luminescence, golden light crystalized with auras, and twirling, intertwining rays. Noticeable energy points within them shone like a Galaxy of stars, and streams of energy connected the stars to each other within them, and to each other, as if they were a tangled web of energy. They were shining silhouettes dancing amongst lesser lights. When the ecstatic state eased and their vision returned to normal, they experienced a recoil into the physical body, lighting up every cell between them with a 'turn over' that left them both so completely satiated and refreshed it was as if they had slept a full cycle. Daphne laid on top of him, secure in his arms.

"What was that?" she asked when she found her voice.

"I don't know," Preston admitted, not sharing his first thought which was the word 'entrainment,' which in physics describes the tipping point in a substance when all the elements and molecules line up and the items becomes magnetically charged. It was as if the 'turn over' had happened at the physical, emotional, mental, and astral levels all at the same time.

"Can you do it again?"

"Oh, I hope so. We will have to try and duplicate what we did tonight, figure out the steps, and see if we can achieve it on a regular basis," Preston said.

Daphne met his eyes. "So, there is a 'we'?"

Preston seemed confused. "I made that assumption even before we were intimate," Preston said. "There is something here that needs exploring."

"I think we're connected by the Force," Daphne said.

"Well, of course," Preston said, wondering how she could imagine it being anything else. "Everything is connected to the Force. It's all Force."

"Not everything," Daphne said.

"Everything," Preston said, gently. "We are only limited by our own imaginations."

"I don't believe that," Daphne said.

"I know," Preston said.

Daphne seemed perturbed. "You know," she repeated.

"I suspect your beliefs are holding you back," Preston said. "It's why you're struggling at this level."

"Will you teach me?" Daphne asked.

"We'll teach each other," Preston said.

Daphne moved off him, took his arm and pulled him close, into a spooning position. She might have drifted asleep, but she became aware that he 'wanted' her again. Just feeling him against her magnified her own wanting. They became one once more, without leaving the spooning position. Their 'turn over' was fairly mundane and it's affects quite typical; the two of them fell asleep.



Nolasco was gathering a few items from his office, expecting he was about to be fired, and not really caring. There wasn't really much he wanted here, either, so he could just walk away without regret. There was a crystal on his desk he had found on a planet he had crashed landed on so many years ago. He wanted that and so he put it in a box. There was a projector with perhaps a couple thousand or so holograms spanning his life, from childhood to present.

That went in the box. A redlight on his desk indicated an incoming call. He activated the holographic display and his wife appeared in the room.

"I'm confused," Tillia said. "You signed the divorce papers. Your lawyer says he didn't even get a chance to look over them."

"It wasn't necessary. I agreed to all your terms," Nolasco said.

"I really expected a fight," Tillia said.

"I'm done fighting with you, Tillia. I wish you well," Nolasco said, reaching for the off button.

"Wait," Tillia said. "I didn't really want this at all. I was angry and wanting you to engage me."

Nolasco came around his desk, leaned against it, crossed his arms. He closed his eyes and thought for a long moment, shifting through his emotions. "Before I met you, I was a warrior," Nolasco said. "An extremely successful, warrior."

"I know. It's why I married you," Tillia interrupted.

"No, Tillia, you don't know shit about me," Nolasco said, but not with anger. It was a determination to be heard. "Now, you can listen to me for once and use that information to figure out your own life, or I can end this call and we go live our lives, but either way, we are finished." In the history of their marriage, he had never used profanity. She was either shocked into silence, or had decided she was going to let him speak; he wasn't sure which, but he took it. "I was so brilliant I frequently got to fly wingman for Darth Vader himself. In the name of the Empire, I did some horrible things. I rationalized that it was for the benefit of society as a whole, if we squashed the rebellion, got rid of the Jedi, society might move forwards towards a new, glorious way of being. The more I did in the name of the Emperor, the more I had to buy into that rationality, because not doing so meant accepting I was wrong. I failed my last mission. I accomplished most of the mission objectives, but I also crashed. As I waited for rescue to pick me up, I made peace with the fact that I was going to be executed, was actually relieved that it was all finally over. Surprisingly, I was given an honorable discharge. Most people meet a firing squad for my level of failure. I imagine that had Darth Vader been on board, he would have killed me himself. I was not prepared for the life I was thrust into. For about three months I was on verge of suicide. My brother found me, of all people, in a bar, trying to drown memories I didn't want to face. He got me sobered up and got me hired on with Bio Enc. Conlay owed him a favor and I thought, wow, this might be my chance to turn my life around and do something decent for people, make up for all the things I did back in the war.

"And then I met you. A self serving, power hungry, elitist, pretentious bitch," Nolasco said. "And I did what I always did best. Fell in line and followed orders. In some ways, I figured I deserved you, as a form of punishment. I want to say I hated you, Tillia. I certainly used that as an excuse for the numerous affairs I had over the years. Yes, Tillia, surprise, I was unfaithful. You didn't really think I closed all of those deals getting people lickered up and laid without participating right along beside them, did you? But the truth is, I feared you and I hated myself. My self loathing knew no bounds because I didn't think I was capable of doing good. And then I met Preston Waycaster. He has so much faith that things are going to be okay that it's kind of contagious. And though I suspect he would deny that he is a good man, he has a way of knowing people, and being genuine with them, and it is served with humility and kindness and he reminds me of the man I once wanted to be. Now, I am fairly confident I am about to be fired by the board of execs because of the deal Preston made, but I support that deal a hundred percent and I am finished being afraid. Whatever will be will be."

He expected tears. She gave him laughter. “Ah, Nol, Nol, Nol, you were always so weak,” Tillia said. “I didn’t realize how weak till now. I hope you and your new friend like being impoverished, because you will never have another career like this again. And I will go out of my way to sabotage anything that comes your way, including poisoning our children against you.”

“I recognize that there are some things simply out of my control, and fighting you over the children will likely do more harm towards them than letting them be, allowing them to mature at their own rate, and letting them discover for themselves what is truth,” Nolasco said, and he closed the call.

Kiesha was standing on the threshold between Nolasco office and the receptionist area. Her expression was unreadable.

Nolasco nodded. “How much did you hear?”

“All of it,” Kiesha said.

“Good,” Nolasco said. “You need to know the kind of man I am before you get any closer.”

“I knew the kind of man you were before we started our affair,” Kiesha said. “And I still love you.”

“Why?” he asked.

Kiesha shrugged. “Do I have to have an answer?”

“It would be nice,” Nolasco said.

“I am one step down more broken than you and you lifted me up,” Kiesha said.

Nolasco went to her, pulled her into an embrace. “Oh, you are not broken. Why would you think that?”

“I’ll tell you, after your meeting. They’re ready for you. I just didn’t want to interrupt your call,” Kiesha said.

Nolasco kissed her, took her arm in his, and they walked together to the Board Room. It was a private meeting, no stock holders. Six of the seven CEO’s were at the table. Conlay was not present. The CEO’s were in a semi circle, with a lone chair in front of them. Nolasco went to the chair and stood behind it, his hands behind his back, at ‘parade rest.’

“Have a seat, Nolasco,” Mr. Orms said, not looking up from his computer screen.

“If it’s all the same to you, Vice President Orms, I would like to remain standing in front of the firing squad.”

Mr. Orms looked up, removing his reading glasses. “Fire you? Why the hell would you think we were firing you?”

“You’re not firing me?” Nolasco asked, surprised.

“We’re inviting you to become President of the company,” Mr. Orms said. “Is that something you would be interested in?”

Nolasco sat down in the chair. Kiesha put a hand on his shoulder. “I don’t think I understand,” Nolasco said.

“We’ve been wanting a deal with Darthomir for over ten years now and you finally got us one. Granted, some of the share holders are not happy with the specifics, but our PR demographics statistical software says the deal was the right move at the right time. The positive galactic social reaction is likely to increase our net worth and competitiveness in the core by a factor of twelve. Of course, that’s all preliminary statistics. There is hard work ahead, if you think you can lead us to that next plateau,” Mr. Orms said.

“Conlay is quite capable,” Nolasco said.

“Conlay is old and set in his ways. You’ve demonstrated you can compete using the old ways, but more, you have revealed that you are capable of adapting,” Mr. Orms said. “We want you to continue recruiting new, younger minds and set them up to carry the torch, so the corporation might go another hundred years.”

“Still, I am curious what Conlays thinks about this change in command,” Nolasco pressed.

“Your loyalty is admirable. Suffice it to say, the law firm we employ has some fairly stringent ethical boundaries for the CEO’s of this company. Faced with exposure and allegations of conspiracy to fraud the public by a certain share holder, who is most likely a co-conspirator in manipulating market shares and culpable of insider trading, Conlay agreed to an early retirement. The shareholders directly involved were encouraged to sell their shares back to the company in lieu of an investigation that might lead to legal repercussions. Due to the extent of allegations, the amount of evidence at our disposal, and given the specific people involved, we are able to utilize an article in the bylaws that allow us to appoint a new Leader without having to run it through the share holders. You would not be sitting there now if the six of us were not in complete agreement in this matter,” Mr. Orm said. “We’re just waiting to hear if you accept.”

Nolasco looked to Kiesha.

“Whatever you decide, dear. I’m with you,” Kiesha said.

Nolasco stood up, took Kiesha’s hand. “I accept,” Nolasco said.

“Very well. There’s some paper work you will need to sign, and you might want to acquaint yourself with the code ethics clause in your contract,” Mr. Orm said. “We like our law firm and we’re not going to loose it from fear of tarnishing our reputation or our partner’s. On signing the contract, you will have a one year trial period, after which the shareholders will have to vote on keeping you. If they vote you out, you will continue to hold the office until they vote someone worthy to take over, someone who we six must also approve. So, you could technically hold that position for a while, unless you just somehow really fuck it up. Conlay should be packed out of his office by the end of tomorrow. You can take it over then. Good evening, Mr. President.”

The six stood up and departed the room. Kiesha hugged him.

“I sure as hell didn’t see that coming,” Nolasco said.

“You really do deserve it,” Kiesha said.

“No, Kiesha. I don’t deserve anything,” Nolasco told her. “But by the grace of the Force, I will serve as best I can.”

A door opened and the chief of security for the company, Ianther, entered. “Is it official? You’re the President?”

“Technically, I have some paper work to go over,” Nolasco said.

“Okay, well, I just wanted to make this report in person. A while back we discovered a Trojan in the company computers,” security began.

“I remember something about that,” Nolasco said.

“Yeah, well, I used a memory back up of our system on an isolated computer to see if I could determine the extent of the intrusion by the malware, as well as what harm it had done,” Ianther said. “I was able to root out its code. It was initially triggered by set of DNA. The program took the DNA and broadcasted it over a hyperspace channel, along with one word, ‘fetch.’”

“Whose DNA?” Nolasco asked.

“A Preston G Waycaster,” Ianther said.

“Oh, dear God,” Nolasco said. He went to the nearest computer, scrolled through the contract to the final page and signed it. “Ianther, as acting President of this company, I need the fastest ship you can secure on short notice, and an elite fighting team. Retired imperial soldiers, if you can get them.”

“What’s going on?” Kiesha said.

“Preston is going to need a lot of help,” Nolasco said.

Ten entered the kitchen, in a frantic state. She was saying something, but it wasn't quite intelligible due to her present fear. Jordeen put down what she was doing to attend to her.

"Shhh, slow down. Breathe," Jordeen coached.

"Where's Corissa? There's a ship coming," Ten said.

"You want to go meet it?" Jordeen asked.

"No! I mean, no. My impulse is to run. There's something bad coming," Ten said.

"Okay," Jordeen said. She used her wristband to page Corissa.

"I'll be right there," Corissa said.

Ten turned around to find Pink there. "Call the other Droids, we got to leave," she said.

Freya arrived. "Is there a problem?" she asked.

Jordeen shrugged. "Hopefully nothing," she said. "But be on alert."

Corissa came in, running. "What's up?" she asked, kneeling to be at eye level with Ten.

Ten seemed calmer than when she had first come to the kitchen. She shrugged. "Nothing. I guess it was a false alarm," she said. "What's for lunch?"



Preston sat up in bed so suddenly that he startled Daphne into waking. She touched his back. "You okay," she asked?

"Get dressed," he said, going for his trousers.

"Really? I want to sleep in," Daphne said, returning her head to the pillow.

Preston pulled the pillow out from under head. "Now," he said.

"Grumpy," Daphne said, sitting up and stretching. "Sure you don't want to play a little before we check out?"

Preston finished securing his belt and was hurrying into his shirt. "Please, hurry," he insisted.

"What is it?" Daphne asked, finally succumbing to just how serious he was.

He didn't answer from being obsessively focused on dressing. He sat down on the bed and started securing his boots. She slipped into her skirt, then found her bra, slightly amused at how far her articles of clothing were separated from each other. She slipped into her blouse, then her robe, and went for her boots. Preston went for his pack and slipped it over his head, letting it hang under his left arm. He fished out the first Lightsaber he had ever constructed and went to hand it to Daphne who was working on tightening her boots. Using the Force, he reached into the mechanism and instructed the lightsaber's programming to accept the next user as a primary user.

"What's wrong?" Daphne asked, picking up the lightsaber.

His answer came in the form of removing his own Lightsaber from his belt. Daphne shook some of the stress out of her arms, preparing for battle. They stood, anxiously awaiting something that didn't come. Daphne began to relax.

"Are you sure it wasn't a dream?" Daphne asked.

Preston made a signal for quiet. He inched closer to the door and opened it. Nothing. The hallway light flickered, buzzed, popped, and came back on, but it was evidence of nothing more than time to change the light. He forced himself to breathe, taking one step out into the hall,

Daphne on his heels. The explosion from inside the room knocked them both off their feet, propelling them into the hallway.

Preston recovered first, bouncing up and heading directly back into the room. A hole had been blasted from the exterior to the inside, large enough to allow a human size robot to enter. It was similar to one he had seen before, only, instead of feet, the legs were thicker, due to antigravity lifts. Flaps cycled through open and closed positions as it came forwards. Its right arm extended to fire taser projectiles. Preston blinked, slowing his perception of time, allowing the Force to fill him. He blocked the taser easily. Even though time was processing much slower, his Lightsaber extended to full so fast he couldn't discern the extension. Even the familiar report of sonic boom, a quirk of his construction and crystal, seemed muffled to his ears, like distant thunder. The blade was off and then it was on, cutting the taser tethers that had been shot towards him. The Droid brought up its other arm, this time firing a stun. The stun bolt met his Lightsaber and was reflected back faster than his brain could process the event, but he understood what had occurred even without playback. He didn't have time to review, he was already defending against the next attack, flowing with the Force, knowing once it was over he might have a chance to review and reconstruct a memory.

Daphne scrambled to her feet, drawing the Force to her to try and understand the nature of the attack. That was when she saw the second droid rising from the emergency stairwell. It, too, was supported by antigravity. Its eyes penetrated the dimly lit hallways like a spectre. Had they been red, she would have thought it a demon, but the eyes were lit with a yellowish orange, spooky in its own way. Her thumb depressed the button on the lightsaber. At first nothing happened, and her shoulders slumped, and she nearly looked at the business in, but the lightsaber beeped twice, accepting her thumbprint and then depressed in. The pink blade of her Lightsaber extended to full in time to block the blaster bolts firing from the Droid's arm. It was shooting to kill. She let go of her will and allowed the Force to animate her defense. The bolts being fired came in a steady bead and she sent them back, hitting first its left arm and then walking it across its chest to its the right arm. The Droid kept coming. Using the Force, she attempted to disable it. The Droid staggered, but did not fall. It extended a sword from its left arm and charged her, leaning its head forwards as if it intended to ram her. She hit it again with a Force disable. As it staggered, she severed the head from the unit. The head went rolling behind her. Still, the Droid didn't fall. It charged forward. She severed its sword arm and as it powered past her. Reaching back she cut its legs off below the knee. It fell to the floor. It's back opened, and another weapon extended. The head was at her feet, looking up at her. She kicked the head away from her like a ball, slid to her knees and put the Lightsaber through the Droid's chest. The blade was in and out fast. The head, rebounding off the door at the far end of the hall, rolled back. She cut it in two.

Daphne took in a deep breath. The sounds of an ongoing battle in the room stirred her to refocus. She entered the room to find one disabled Droid, and Preston fighting another. It had already lost its legs, but was walking forwards on stumps. Preston reached out with his hand and used the Force to push it back outside. The Droid's arm extended, catching Preston's arm and taking him with it. Daphne ran to the hole and jumped, not looking or pre-gauging where she needed to go, merely trusting the Force to put her where she needed to be. The Droid had landed on the sidewalk. Preston was standing on top of it, Lightsaber through its chest plate. She hit the ground, rolled, and came up ready. Preston turned to her, Lightsaber coming up as if to defend himself.

"Preston," Daphne said.

His eyes focused on her and then went up the side of the building, past the hole, past the roof, and came to rest on a vessel hovering above the building. The tell tale signs of a tractor beam coming to life was visible as the ship positioned itself to get a direct bead on its subject of interest.

“Follow me,” he told her.

He turned and bolted towards the end of the street, making sure he stayed under awnings as much as possible. Daphne followed. The ship pursued, firing laser bolts towards its prey, clearly in attempt to impede their progress as opposed to straight out kill them. The tractor beam pulled up dust and debris like a vacuum, even picking up vehicles, many of which dropped as the ship past or it failed to get a good grasp of the larger objects. Preston turned into an alley. He stopped at the other side and took inventory of the surroundings.

“Hypothetically, as a Jedi, are you opposed to me stealing a speeder?” Preston asked.

“I’ll kill you later,” Daphne jested in attempt to alleviate the seriousness of their situation.

He nodded and made a direct line towards the speeder he intended to appropriate. He was in it and had it started just as Daphne joined him. It was accelerating away as she strapped in. Still, the ship pursued. The speeder was moving much faster than the typical pedestrian traffic would allow, but as the ship chasing them was actively firing at them, people were quickly getting out of the way. A couple of good Samaritans decided to fire at the ship. The ship took them out, revealing it didn’t have to miss, translation: it was still trying to capture its prey, not kill them. Preston steered them out of the city and across a field.

“The spaceport is the other way,” Daphne yelled over the sound of the wind.

“Yeah,” Preston said, nodding behind her.

Daphne looked back. There was the ship following them and there was an even larger ship hovering over the spaceport.

“They’re going to catch us out here,” Daphne said.

“We’ll lose them at the forest,” Preston said.

“If we make it to the forest. What do they want with you?” Daphne asked.

“My kidneys,” Preston said.

“What?” Daphne asked.

Preston slammed on the air breaks, tilting the speeder upwards as it resisted the change in momentum. It came to a complete stop, slipping a little to the driver side.

“What the hell?” Daphne said.

Preston didn’t answer. The answer came in the form of butterflies. A swarm of butterflies passed in front of them. Daphne looked at Preston, eyes wide.

“Oh, hell no, you didn’t just stop for insects,” Daphne said.

“Former Jedi’s all!” Preston said. He felt the decision required further explanation.

“Migrating is interesting, when not measuring the world in terms of science or economics, but in the movement of species, the cycles of our being. Mystics and physics often fail to describe reality, but it is more often defined by the common, consensual reality that require even these...”

“The common consensus is that we’re running for our lives,” Daphne pointed out.

“I know,” Preston said. “Isn’t it grand?”

The last of the straggling butterflies fluttered past and he gunned their Speeder forwards. Daphne looked back and frowned.

“We’re not going to make it to the forest,” Daphne said.

“I know,” Preston agreed. “Do you trust me?”

“After the insects? Finding it difficult,” Daphne said.

“I need you to let go of that. Do you trust me,” Preston asked again.

“What?”

“If you want to live through this, you will need to do exactly what I say, without resisting,” Preston said. “Do you trust me?”

“I slept with you!” Daphne snapped, as if that was sufficient.

“This is deeper than that. Do you trust me?!” Preston said.

“I don’t understand what you’re asking,” Daphne said.

“I need your complete trust. More specifically, I need you to let go and trust the Force like you have never trusted before...”

“I trust the Force!” Daphne said.

“You resist the Force. You resist the training because you fear what you can do if you were to really open full up to the full power available to you, to everyone. To get out of this present predicament, I need your full, unadulterated cooperation and focus,” Preston began.

The pursuing ship started firing again, this time aiming for the speeder. Pieces of metal flew off the back side.

“I trust you,” Daphne said.

“You won’t fight me?”

“I won’t fight,” Daphne said.

Preston shifted the Speeder up and over taxed the engines, sending them into a vertical climb. Daphne grabbed hold of her arm rest, not expecting that. The pursuing ship had to slow to keep from overshooting them, as it had not expected them to go straight up. It continued its pursuit.

“This has a ceiling...” Daphne began to argue.

“I know. Take my arm,” Preston said.

She hesitated. Preston didn’t take further time to engage her as he was completely focused on his plan of action. Daphne forced herself to take hold his arm with both hands.

Preston hit a button and dumped their fuel, lightening their load, but not enough to gain speed in their ascent. Preston hit another button that would fire emergency breaking rockets. He fired those ground-wards. The speeder lurched upwards. He phased their bodies out of sync with normal matter, allowing the ship to continue on at its accelerated rate. They passed right through the enemy ship that was still chasing the speeder. The speeder stalled and fell backwards, crashing into the pursuing ship. The crash, along with the fuel that had been dumped, lit up the day sky in a flash, followed by billowing clouds of flame and a liquid like black smoke. Debris rained in all directions.

Preston pulled Daphne towards him, embracing her. She heard him tell her to close her eyes, but she ignored him. She was watching the ground rushing up at them, wondering why he wasn’t slowing them down. If anything, she felt certain they were accelerating. Indeed, they were. Unphased by the surrounding air, they passed terminal velocity and would continue to accelerate towards the center of mass, in this case, the planet’s core. They would hit their maximum speed directly center of the planet, falling right through center on a trajectory towards the other side of the planet. As they passed center, gravity would then slow them, trying to pull them back towards center. Their rate would continue to slow until they paused and fell back towards center, but not before they exited the other side of the planet, at which point, Preston intended to phase them back in sync with normal matter. He projected that they would stall a few meters above the surface, and land perfectly safe on the far side. Of course, this was all conjecture on a particular math formula that suggested that falling through a center of mass,

regardless of the size of the planet, if you were indeed discussing planets, the journey from surface to surface would take exactly 42 minutes, passing through the center of mass at the maximum speed allowed for by the acceleration curve of a falling object.

Preston slowed their heart rates and diminished their need for oxygen. The darkness of the surface shell lasted only a few moments before they were in the mantle. He considered how small humans really were, how thin the surfaces are that most people cling to, calling that perceived solidity terra firma. The mantle was blinding, as it filled all their vision in all directions, but it caused them no pain, nor did they feel heat. The light continued to brighten as they approached the core. There was the hint of movement, partly convection currents, but also the twisting of magnetic forces, which pulsed in their ears like a heart beat, and shined in their eyes like sustained lightning. The planet seemed to have a voice of its own, the rapid pulse of a purring kitten. Preston figured that, based on the height at which they had attained before they started to fall, they would probably shoot to ten meters above the surface on the far side. He wasn't far off. The moment they stalled above the surface, he allowed them to phase back in sync with normal matter. He and Daphne both took in deep breaths and fell into an ocean. They disappeared into the water and both resurfaced together. Daphne shook her hair out of her eyes.

"Oh my God! That was amazing! Where did you learn to do that?" Daphne said.

"To phase, or to travel through the center of a planet?" Preston asked.

"Well, yeah, both, I guess."

"No one taught me," Preston said.

"Someone had to have taught you. You can't invent new powers," Daphne said.

"I didn't invent new powers. I merely asked the Force to permit our survival and then I got my ego out of the way and allowed it to do what it does, in this instance, it said go with it, and we went," Preston said.

"You make it sound impossibly easy. Are you the chosen one?" Daphne asked.

"It is that easy. And don't go there. We are all chosen and we all choose. Our survival is only a testimony that the Force is not done with us. We have something more to accomplish. The Force didn't let us survive because we're special or good or better. We are all equal in the Force. Anyone could have done what we've done. You can do this and more."

"I just don't believe that," Daphne said.

"And that is why you continue to get the results you do," Preston told her.

"I see that it can be done, I just don't think I can duplicate it," Daphne said.

"Don't give up. Small steps," Preston offered.

"So, what's the plan? Are we going to swim to shore, tread water, or do you have another great trick up your sleeve?" Daphne asked.

A Tie Defender arrived on the scene. Red whistled salutations.

"How did it know where we were?" Daphne asked.

Preston just shook his head, smiling. The lower hatch opened and the Tie Defender lowered sufficiently that she could reach up and grabbed hold of the inside of the ship. A hand took her wrist. She screamed and tried to pull free. Preston looked down at her from the ship.

"Just trying to help you up," the doppelganger said.

"But," Daphne said, looking to where Preston had been. He was still there. She looked back up into the ship. "I don't understand."

"Come on up," Doppelganger said.

Once she was in, the Doppelganger vanished, just so much smoke. Preston climbed up into the ship.

“Can you dry yourself with the Force, or should I dry us both?” Preston asked.
Daphne embraced him, delivering a kiss firmly to his mouth.
“Red, take us home,” Preston instructed, and then returned his attention back to Daphne.
Daphne paused in her affection. “One more question.”
“Of course,” Preston agreed.
“A pink Lightsaber?”
Preston shrugged. Daphne let it go and returned to affection.

Preston was happy to see his ‘family’ on arriving back at the Academy. Ten was literally jumping up and down and on his exiting the ship, rushed to hug him up. With an arm around her shoulder, he led her back to Jordeen, Corissa, and Freya. He greeted Corissa with a bow and Namaste hands, but Jordeen just hugged him flat out, kissing his cheek. Daphne hung back a little, trying to understand the relationships, but nodded politely. Red got himself down and joined the group, releasing a long winded statement that only Freya understood, and started his way down the ramp towards the tram.

“We’re glad you’re back,” Jordeen said.

“I’m glad to be back,” Preston said.

“Did you bring me anything?” Ten asked.

Preston seemed taken aback. “I am so sorry. It didn’t even occur to me,” Preston said. “Is that a custom?”

“Yes. Whenever you go away, you bring your daughter something,” Ten said.

“She’s your daughter?” Daphne asked, trying to do the math.

“Yes,” Ten and Jordeen both said. “No,” Corissa and Preston both said.

“I am really confused,” Daphne said.

“What’s to be confused about,” Ten asked. “They found me on the streets, took me in, which means Preston and Corissa are my parents.”

“It’s a bit of a story. Why don’t we get comfortable first? We can talk about it over dinner,” Preston offered, trying to direct them down the ramp towards the tram. Red waited at the bottom of the ramp, patiently, pretending to not be listening to the conversation spinning out of control. “Freya, when we get down, if you would, prepare a room for Daphne, please,” Preston said.

“Of course, Professor,” Freya said, at the same time Corissa had an ephinay.

“Oh, dear God. You slept with her,” Corissa said.

“That doesn’t follow. Being a good host doesn’t necessarily mean I slept with someone,” Preston asked.

“She tried to kill you!” Corissa said.

“If I recall, the first time we met in person, you pulled a weapon on me,” Preston said.

“Nice,” Ten said, appreciatively.

“It was a sauldering iron,” Corissa said.

“But, you didn’t know that I knew that,” Preston said.

“There is no need for either of you to be defensive. There is enough love to go around,” Jordeen said.

“Says the love slave,” Corissa said.

“You have a sex Droid, a love slave, and a girlfriend, and an eight year old daughter all living in the same house?” Daphne asked.

“I am almost ten,” Ten corrected.

“It sounds bad when you say it like that, Daphne,” Preston said.

“I think I need to leave,” Daphne said.

“We agreed, I would take you back in the morning,” Preston said.

“I want to go now,” Daphne said.

“I think we should all leave now,” Ten said, her tone changing.

“We will, first thing in the morning,” Corissa said. “Ten and I will get an apartment in town.”

“No, this is my home, but we can’t stay here right now,” Ten insisted. “Something bad is coming.”

“Again?” Jordeen asked.

“What do you mean again?” Preston asked.

“We had a bit of a scare about 12 hours ago. It just didn’t manifest,” Jordeen said.

“I want to leave now because you’re clearly still involved with someone who is not over you,” Daphne said.

“That is one perspective. There’s also the fact that someone told me I wasn’t involved with someone,” Preston said.

“I said I wanted time to think,” Corissa said.

“No, your boundaries were more precise than that,” Preston said.

“Maybe we should discuss this over a hot tea,” Jordeen offered.

“There’s nothing to discuss,” Daphne and Corissa both said.

“Okay, I am like really freaking out right now and I think we need to hide,” Ten said.

“Even if you are done with her, how do you explain a sex Droid and slave?” Daphne continued on, ignoring the menacing gaze Corissa was providing.

“If there is a compulsory context for being intimate, wouldn’t the onus of declaring such boundaries have been on you before we became intimate, especially considering you had already met Freya and Jordeen before we departed on our mission,” Preston said.

“Where were you raised? An inbred colony of clones? It is an automatic conclusion that you’re not in a relationship when you start the next relationship,” Daphne said.

“There is also unspoken rule that Jedi’s don’t have sex,” Corissa offered.

“I was drunk!” Daphne snapped at her.

“You took advantage of her when she was drunk?!” Corissa demanded, suddenly on Daphne’s side.

“She said she wasn’t that drunk,” Preston said. “In fact, Daphne, you were the one who was insistent on coupling. Your ultimatum was very clear, sex or street fighting.”

“You blacked mailed him into intimacy?!” Corissa asked. “You do know he was raised in a cave and that he is socially impaired?”

Ten screamed, covering her ears and squatted. Corissa, Jordeen, and Preston all knelt down to attend to her, each trying to soothe her by convincing her that they were just talking loud, not arguing or fighting. Daphne puzzled over why the child was screaming. That was when Preston sensed the disturbance. He stood, turned around, and drew his Lightsaber, looking for a threat that he still couldn’t see. His sense of time slowed as incoming missiles took out the Tie Defender, the drop ship, and the tram systems connecting both ends of the Second Sister. They were affectively pinned on the mountain. The ship that fired the missiles arrived shortly after, coming to an instantaneous halt over the landing pad. Hatches opened and Droids decended in droves.

“Corissa, get Ten to safety,” Preston instructed.

Corissa took Ten by the arm, preparing to run.

“No,” Ten resisted. She pointed.

Corissa turned to see a Droid coming up from her intended exit. She drew her blaster. Red shut the blaster door, sealing itself and the Blood Hunter inside the Tram Bay. Freya opened a hidden locker in the floor near the tram bay doors and retrieved two storm trooper assault rifles

and started firing at the nearest Droid. She took up a defensive position near Ten, revealing a second upgrade: she was shielded. Preston and Daphne had ignited their Lightsabers and were busy deflecting blaster bolts back in the direction of their origin. Corissa's attacks were ineffective. She spied another assault rifle in the floor locker and several grenades. She went for them. Jordeen held Ten close, shielding her with her own body.

"We're not going to last long up here," Corissa yelled, firing with her new blaster.

"More ships is coming!" Ten announced.

Ten more droids hit the circumference of the landing pad just as two ships emerged from the clouds. The first, an X-wing, opened fire on the hovering Droid ship, the second slowed to hover over the landing pad, just long enough to drop Troopers, via repelling rockets. The drop ship took heavy fire from the Droid ship, but it held until the last of the troopers had hit the deck and had properly orientated. Four of the troopers joined the party they came to rescue, while the others made a direct attack on the closest of Droids.

"You must be Preston," one of the Troopers said. "We're here to extract you and your friends."

"Fairly good timing," Daphne said.

"You're surprised?" Preston asked.

"You aren't?" Daphne said.

"You still have a lot to learn about the Force," Preston said.

"I don't see the Force getting us out of this?!" Corissa snapped.

"You don't believe in the Force?" Daphne asked surprised.

"Focus," Preston said, deflecting another bolt from hitting Daphne. His blade pulsed a red burst the length of the blade, reflecting a flash of anger. Using the Force, Preston picked up the nearest Droid intending to throw it over the side. Jet packs emerged from its back and activated, resisting being hurled. Preston struggled to throw, its jetpacks revving to full power. At the height of its thrusting, Preston let go and it shot itself into a companion Droid. Preston charged the nearest Droid to finish it off.

"Sir," the storm trooper yelled. "Stay with your group. We got this."

In the distance the canyon was glowing with missile strikes that had been meant for the drop ship. The Xwing did another straffing pass, taking out one of the Droids, but had to steer away from the Droid ship sweeping into protect its own. The x-wings weaponry seemed ineffective against the enemy ship.

Preston ignored the trooper following him as he took on the closest of Droids. The Droids made a bee line towards him, forcing other Troopers to rally around Preston. The Droids were fighting with a vigorosity they had not displayed previously. Daphne broke free from the group to aid Preston and his Troopers. The x-wing returned, cutting down several of the Droids with a straffing run before heading back towards the Droid ship. The Droid ship was orientating on the fighter as the drop ship came up over the Ridge and opened up. Together the X-wing and the drop ship finally broke through its armor, sending it spiraling towards the desert side of the Third Sister.

The Droids increased their ferocity and determination, but between the Jedi, the Troopers, and a hovering X-wing, they were not prepared for this level of commitment. The dropship landed as soon as the last Droid was dispatched. The doorway leading down to the tram opened. Troopers turned their weapons, but Preston stopped them from firing. Red rolled triumphantly up the ramp.

"Let's go, folks," a Trooper said, pushing Preston towards the dropship.

“Aren’t you guys the bad guys?” Ten had to asked.

A Trooper looked down at her. “We just saved your ass.”

“You could still be bad guys,” Ten argued.

“That was so yesterday. Today, we are the good guys, now get on the ship, before it becomes bad guy day again,” the Trooper said.

“Its okay, Ten,” Corissa said.

“Sorry, Red,” a Trooper said. “No room for Droids.”

“We’re taking Freya,” Preston insisted. “Red, you and the others are on guard duty till we return.”

“Who is in charge of this rescue?” Corissa asked, climbing up into the drop ship.

A trooper pointed. Nolasco was piloting the drop ship. He waved. “Everyone on? Strap in, we’re not done fighting yet,” he said.

“We’re not?” Jordeen asked.

Peston nodded to Corissa to take care of Ten, while he pushed forward to the front.

“Thank you,” Preston said.

“Yeah, well, thank me when it’s over,” Nolasco said. “There’s a ship in orbit we have to get past.”

The escort fighter took the lead as they pushed through the atmosphere towards space. In the back ground, Jordeen was laughing hysterically. Preston was holding onto the back of Nolasco’s chair, and Daphne was holding onto his arm. She looked back to see why anyone would be laughing, but her view of Jordeen was obstructed by the Troopers. When she turned back, the atmosphere colored sky was below them. A larger Droid ship loomed between them and a frieghter ship. The Droid ship analysed their vector. It turned on the freighter and opened fire.

“Captain Nolasco?” the escort X-wing pilot asked.

“I see it. Go ahead and engage the enemy,” Nolasco said, throttling up.

“What, we’re attacking, too?” the copilot asked.

“If we loose our ride out of here, we’re screwed,” Nolasco said.

“I’m just saying, we just put a lot of effort into picking up the package to go and risk getting blown up,” the copilot said.

“They want him alive, we’ll be alright,” Nolasco said, and then muttered a prayer that his assumption was accurate.

To their surprise, the Droid mother ship did a kamikaze run directly into their freighter, blowing itself and the freighter up.

“What the hell?” Daphne said.

“Why would it do that?” the X-wing pilot asked.

“It knew it was loosing,” Nolasco said.

“But still,” the copilot said.

“It was buying more time,” Preston said.

Nolasco looked to Preston. “Yeah,” he agreed, turning the ship around.

“Buying more time for what?” the copilot asked.

Preston pointed. Two more mother ships dropped out of hyperspace and immediately altered course to intercept, one taking a higher orbit, and the other going low, coordinating their attempt to box the drop ship in.

“Damn,” the copilot said.

“I see it,” preparing to do a power dive into the atmosphere.

“Maintain this altitude,” Preston instructed. “Head towards the Corellian Corvette.”

“What Corvette?”

As if on cue, a Corvette dropped out of hyperspace.

“I hope they’re friendly,” the copilot said.

“They are,” Preston said. “It’s Lestelle.”

The Corvette opened fire on the closest droid ship. Both droid ships returned fire towards the Corvette. Nolasco throttled up.

“You’re going in too fast,” the copilot said.

“I got it, let go of the controls,” Nolasco said. “Escort one, as soon as we’re on the Corvette, you are free to disengage. See you back at base.”

“Thank you, Captain. Nice flying with you again,” escort one echoed.

One of the Droid ships exploded, sending debris in all directions. The larger half of the ship spun off like a broken top. Droids abandoned the ship, thrusting towards the Corvette with jet packs that had been concealed in their backs. The drop ship fired forward thrusters, bringing them to a complete stop directly below the Corvette, and then fired thrusters sending them up into the bay. The door was closing even as Nolasco sat the craft down on the deck.

“Pretty slick,” copilot said.

Preston was the first one off the drop ship. There were several people waiting to meet him, but he went first to Lestelle. He hugged her. Daphne, who was right behind Preston, frowned, as if there was suddenly more competition and unfinished business.

“I am glad to see you, too. The Captain wants to see you on the Bridge,” Lestelle said.

“Okay. Nolasco, Corissa, with me,” Preston asked.

“With you,” Nolasco said.

“Freya, you stay with Ten. If any of the Droids get on, your job is to protect her. Lestelle, would you see that she is put in a pressure suit, just in case we get vented,” Preston said.

“Of course,” Lestelle said.

“I want to stay with Preston,” Ten protested.

“Ten,” Preston corrected. “Follow Jordeen and Lestelle’s direction.”

“Ten, do what he says,” Corissa also corrected her as she followed him out of the landing bay.

The officers led Preston towards the bridge. Nolasco, Daphne and Corissa followed. On the Bridge, Captain Dolers introduced himself. Favelle, who Nolasco knew but had not formerly met, introduced himself next.

“So nice to meet you, Mr. Waycaster,” Favelle said to Preston, shaking his hand enthusiastically.

“Well, thank you,” Preston said. “I share the sentiment as well.”

“We’re still in a firefight and you guys are going to exchange civilities?” Corissa asked.

“We always have time to be polite, wouldn’t you say, Mr. Waycaster?” Favelle asked.

“I do. And please, call me Preston, I insist,” Preston said.

“Do you guys even know what we’re up against?” Nolasco asked.

“Bloodhunters,” Favelle said.

“I knew it. I told you that one tried to steal my kidneys,” Preston said, looking to Daphne for confirmation that he had called it.

“You met one of these before and didn’t say anything?” Nolasco asked.

“Yeah. Was I supposed to report it?” Preston asked.

“Everytime you kill one of these guys, they escalate, calling for reinforcements,” Nolasco said. “They are the Emperor’s last revenge. They will capture you and torture you indefinitely.”

“Why would the Emperor want to torture me?” Preston asked.

“That is the golden question of the day, Preston,” Favelle said.

“Shouldn’t we be like going into hyperdrive by now?” Daphne asked.

“Hyperdrive is off line,” Captain Dolers said. “But no worries. We can outrun the Droid ship with our ion drives. They won’t catch us. Hyperdrive will be back online in about thirty two minutes. You look concerned, Mr. Waycaster. I assure you, we will get you out of here.”

“Can you outrun a Star Destroyer?” Preston asked.

Captain Dolers laughed. “Of course, not,” and then, all serious, he asked, “Why do you ask?”

Alarms went off on the Bridge and tactical announced a new ship in the area. Star Destroyer Deterrent dropped out of hyperspace and immediagely launched two squadrons of fighters. Doler activated a holographic tactical display and started issuing orders, which sounded like they were going to do a power drive into the atmosphere and drop life pods.

“Now, hold on a minute,” Preston said. “That’s suicide for your crew, and all you will do is delay the inevitable, my capture.”

“My job is to get you to safety, Mr. Waycaster. I can no longer do that in orbit, but if I get you back on the surface, you have a fighting chance to evade capture,” Dolers said, nodding to his men to get him and Favelle to a life pod.

“No,” Preston said. “No one is going to die because of me. Put me in a life pod and allow the Star Destroyer to catch me. They’ll let you go.”

“You don’t know that,” Nolasco said.

“There’s got to be another option,” Corissa said.

“We don’t have time to discuss it,” Doler said. “The window to put you unscathed on the ground is closing.”

“Let them capture us,” Preston said.

“What?” almost everyone reacted.

“No, listen to me. Hold off capture for as long as possible. Corissa, go help get that hyperdrive on line. Jurry rig it, if you have to. Go. Trust me,” Preston said. Corissa nodded, departing for the engine room. “Captain, I need a place to meditate, undisturbed for about fourteen minutes. Let them catch up to us, even to the point of boarding us. Delay as long as possible, making it look like we are resisting, but fall back, don’t get your crew killed.”

“They’ll just vent us into space,” Daphne said.

“No, they want me alive, I am sure of that,” Preston said. The look he was getting from everyone suggested they thought he was crazy, or naïve, or at the least that they weren’t buying his statement. “Look. You were going to sacrifice your crew anyway, right? I’m telling you that I can save us, and since I have no intentions of abandoning ship, what do you have to loose at this point? I will make it possible to escape, but you have to be ready when I say go, cause the window is going to be really small.”

“They’re asking us to shut down our engines and prepare to be boarded, Captain,” the helm announced.

“Stall them,” Preston said.

“Do as he says,” Favelle said.

“Very well. All hands, prepare to be boarded,” Dolers nounced. “The next good hit, make it appear as if we lost our weapons. We might want them when time comes.”

“Daphne, Nolasco, suit up, I got a mission for you both,” Preston said.



Corissa found her way to the engine room where she began inspecting the damage, trying to stay out of the official crew’s way. It was practically impossible, given the tight spaces of the Corvettes’ design. The ship’s engineer witnessed her bumping into one of his personnel and approached her.

“This section is off limits to passengers,” he said.

“I’m here to help,” Corissa offered.

“I don’t have time for you, get out,” he said.

“Let’s try this again. I was told to come help you get the hyperdrive back on line,” Corissa said.

“There is no help short of a space dock,” he argued, angry.

“We can bypass the safety features and buy us at least three or four jumps,” Corissa explained.

“And risk stranding us interstellar space?” he asked.

“As opposed to staying here and dying, yes,” Corissa said.

The engineer considered. The ship rocked with another volley of surface hits that must have ruptured oxygen generator. “Tools and gloves are over there. Jack, help her with whatever she needs,” he said. “I will start rerouting power.”

Corissa began sorting tools, clipping things she anticipated needing to her belt. She held a particular tool up close and was drawn into a feeling she just couldn’t shake, as if she had done this before.



The lifepod had broken into several pieces, leaving Corissa exposed to the elements. She moved and cried out. The pain in her leg was almost unbearable. She released the harness and fell to the ground. The pain was so intense she passed out. When she came to, she found herself lying face down in wet grass. The perfumed air carried visible pollen, and perhaps bits of thin spider web like strings. The strings sparked in the hazy light leaking through the clouds. She turned herself over and passed out again. The next time she awoke, she felt flushed with fever. She didn’t move. She could see her leg, twisted at an inhuman angle. She cried, thinking she had lost the leg, not realizing yet that she had probably lost her life as it was just a matter of time before she succumb to shock and loss of blood. She tried to ignore the angel. It was difficult, as he was glowing with a blue aura, which alone was enough to convince her that she was hallucinating. The fact that he approached, sat next to her in a lotus position, and smiled pleasantly was additional evidence that she was losing it.

“May I heal you?” Preston asked, presently.

“Can you heal me?” Corissa asked.

“If you allow it,” Preston said.

“Please, by all means,” Corissa said.

Preston straightened her leg. She winced as if expecting excruciating pain, but she felt only the gentlest of pressure. He stood and offered her a hand to help her to her feet. She stood, putting most of her weight on him at first, gingerly testing her leg.

“Am I dreaming?” Corissa asked.

“Always,” Preston said. He smiled at her.

Corissa glowered at him. “Why do you keep smiling at me?”

“You’re the most beautiful woman I have ever met,” Preston said.

“How old are you?” Corissa demanded.

Preston simply smiled. “Old enough to recognize my feelings. Come on. If you’re to be rescued, we have to get you up there.”

Corissa looked at the mountain she had to climb. “I don’t think I can do it.”

“I know you can do it,” Preston said.

“Can’t I just stay here with you?” Corissa asked.

“I’m not really here,” Preston said.

“I don’t understand. You’re a hologram?” Corissa asked.

“I will answer questions, if you will move in that direction,” Preston said.

“If I leave the lifepod, they won’t find me,” Corissa said.

“If you stay, they definitely won’t find you,” Preston said. “You’re destiny lies elsewhere.”

“What is my destiny?” Corissa asked.

Preston reached out to take her hand, but he passed through her.

“What are you? A ghost? A Jedi?” Corissa asked.

“I don’t have much time left. It’s crucial that you follow me,” Preston said.

Corissa nodded and went with him, moving towards the mountain. As the incline steepened, she took hold of plants, and roots, and occasionally had to sit and catch her breath. On one stop, she looked out over the terrain and thought she saw the entire landscape full of swaying plants, even though there was no breeze.

“It’s beautiful here,” Corissa said.

Preston smiled at her in agreement. He sat on the rock next to her. He could see she needed more oxygen, and with a thought he created a bubble of air around her, increasing the oxygen within the bubble. He also increased the temperature to increase her comfort, not that she was complaining. Outside that bubble, the air was awash with visible pollen. She felt euphoric. There were stars adrift around her. Between the recent shock, the increased oxygen, the sudden warmth, and the way Preston kept staring at her, she was feeling a bit giddy, and surprisingly amorous. She squashed the latter emotion with a vengeance.

“Really, how old are you?”

“Is age really that important?” he asked her.

“It depends on what planet you’re on, I suppose,” Corissa said. “No, really, how old are you?”

Preston shrugged.

“15?” Corissa asked.

“Temporally speaking, from your perspective, I’ve not been born yet,” Preston said.

“Space-time is really funny. The speed of causality is not a constant and it isn’t compulsory for the sequencing of events to maintain a specific order. Apparent order is merely a perspective of convenience.”

“I don’t understand what you just said.”

“When we finally meet in person, the age disparity that you believe you see now will be even greater, but most likely, you won’t remember any of this because it doesn’t make sense to your rational mind,” Preston offered.

“So, I am hallucinating,” she rationalized. She wanted to just rest her head on his shoulder. “I wish I could touch you. At the least, you should get a hug for helping me.”

“I wish I could touch you, too,” Preston said. “We need to keep moving.”

“I don’t want to go back,” Corissa said.

“You need to stay focus,” Preston said.

“You don’t understand. This is too difficult. What awaits me back there is even more difficult,” Corissa said, pausing to touch a flower.

Preston frowned. He hadn’t expected her to not want to go back. If she stayed, she would die, which wasn’t a bad thing per say, as she would simply return to the Force, but his instructions had been very clear. He had to get her to the top of mountain. He needed to distract her mentally while engaging her physically. “Hypothetically, how would one person sabotage a Star Destroyer?” Preston asked, motioning for her to follow.

“It can’t be done,” Corissa said, getting back to her feet.

“Okay, but imagine it could happen. Imagine you were writing a holonovel and your hero somehow managed to sneak onboard a Star Destroyer undetected. What would be the first thing he would need to do in order to temporarily shut down their hyperdrive and weapons array, preferably without getting anyone killed,” Preston said.

“Well, I suppose, if a person could make it to auxillary control, they could theoretically short out the main system bus, which would shutdown the power grid,” Corissa speculated, her brain working to solve the problem. As she thought about the specific details, she rattled off an impromptu procedure that would overload the circuits, as well as circumvent the safety overrides that would prevent such an occurrence from happening in the first place. As she rambled on, her helper led her quietly up the mountain, listening intently.



Auxillary control had one door and a guard outside it. The two operators had no reason to suspect anyone was behind them, much less turn around, as they would have heard the door open. It was a spacious, triangular room, with a high arch, and a beam overhead. Preston lifted them with the Force. They each let out a cry, but instinctively clinged to the beam overhead. Though they would probably not break a leg if they let go, their fear of being hurt kept them from letting go. Preston put a finger to his lips, asking them to keep the noise down. They actually complied.

Satisfied, Preston began turning things on, rotating knobs to full right, and pushing levers full up, as fast as he could. Several touch screens asked for input, like, “are you sure?” or “may result in catastrophic equipment failure and loss of life, cancel or proceed?” And one required a command over ride, which was circumvented when Preston put his hand against a hard sensor and convinced it that the necessity outweighed the command structure, or the ship might be lost. He duplicated the procedure at the second control station.

Preston was not privy to the pyro-technic display going on in several other departments, but he could imagine pretty well, based on the graphic display of system failures. The door to auxillary control opened and the guard outside rushed in, weapon ready. Preston’s lightsaber was on and slicing through the weapon before the trooper even knew what was happening. He hit the trooper in the head with the hilt of his lightsaber with just enough Force to render the man unconscious. No doubt, he had done enough damage that he could leave satisfied, but something

drew him out across the cat walk towards the engine room. As the door on the far side opened, he activated his lightsaber again.

Darth Alyth strode through the door, troopers taking a defensive position by the door. She activated her saber, a simple ruby blade. The weapon reminded him of something from childhood. Preston smiled. There were many complex designs of lightsabers, but he considered them so impractical as to be absurd. You just can't improve perfection, he thought. In fact, these were her words, as it was she who taught him to make a lightsaber. She had simulated a lightsaber tonfa with wood, fortunately, for it was likely she would have cut her arms off or flat out cut herself in half had it been a real lightsaber blade. The lightsaber whip was so dangerous that it was completely impractical, not to mention extremely difficult to get a beam of light to bend. In some ways, even the double bladed Lightsaber was unreasonable. The whole purpose of a staff was to have more surface area to hold and manipulate, but since you can't hold the business end of a lightsaber blade, the workable surface limited the type of attacks. It was her ranting that talked him out of doing an elaborate design and sticking to what works. Of course, she probably wasn't aware that he was watching over her shoulder as she constructed her own Lightsaber, working first in simulation, then with wooden models, and finally with the end product.

"Leave us," she instructed the Troopers.

The troopers retreated, closing the doors behind her.

"It's nice to see you again, my old friend," Preston said.

"So, after all this time, I finally have a face to go with the silent stalker," Alyth said.

"Stalker? Sparring partner, definitely, but stalker?" Preston asked.

"I spent most of my childhood in a psychiatric hospital because of you," Alyth said, rushing to attack. Their blades met, reflected in the surface of the bridge. "My mother thought I was crazy."

"I am sorry," Preston said, holding his blade firm against hers. He was aware that the fall would be lethal, but then, he really couldn't see the bottom due to the dark and so how 'lethal' eluded him. He wondered if the acceleration curve was the same on the ship, when artificial gravity was limited to deck plating, and so maybe the mechanics of it would mitigate fall damage to some degree. The mirrored surface of the floor captured their engagement, drawing him back towards the combat. He found himself distracted by her form, her battle stance, her boots, followed by bare legs, and the invitation to try to see past the shadow of her skirt. The diversion nearly cost him the game. He had to choose between admiring her physically and focusing on the sport.

"Sorry?" Alyth asked, trying three new lines of attack which he thoroughly blocked, as if her attacks were predictable. "You ruined my life and that's all you got?"

"Thank you?" Preston offered.

"For what?!" Alyth asked.

"For being my childhood friend. Teaching me to fight," Preston said, defending against two more attacks. He was surprised by the intensity behind her strikes; she was indeed serious in killing him. "You do realize, each time you strike me down, I become more powerful."

"Not this time," Alyth said. "I will end this once and for all, or die trying."

"I will not kill you, friend," Preston said.

"Then you will die," Alyth said, so enraged spittle left her mouth.

Preston lowered his blade, allowing Alyth to strike him down. She didn't hesitate. He dissolved like so much smoke before her eyes. She screamed in frustration. "No!"



Nolasco and Daphne were on the top of the Corvette as the Star Destroyer descended menacingly down upon them. Once the Corvette was centered in the bay, a jet bridge extended and latched onto a hatch, midway down the Corvette.

“Okay, let’s do this,” Nolasco said.

They each made their way to either side of the jetbridge and began placing charges.

“This is just going to piss people off,” Daphne said.

“Probably,” Nolasco said.

A door slid open at the top of the jetbridge and two troopers emerged, firing at Nolasco. He tucked in close to the bridge, making himself a harder target to hit. Daphne leunched herself towards the troopers, reflecting the bolts away from Nolasco with her borrowed lightsaber. Dispatching the two troopers wasn’t especially difficult. The fact that there were twenty more waiting to take their place, though, was rather trying. Without regards to her safety, she rushed into the mass of troopers. Their close proximity in a tight airlock worked against them. She was practically at the far side of the airlock when she realized she had missed one trooper. She didn’t understand why she was so tired, or why she was turning off her lightsaber. He raised his blaster to finish her off. There was a flash of light and the trooper fell. Nolasco was behind him.

Daphne smiled and then slid to the ground, her eyes closing. Her suit was venting air.

Nolasco shut the airlock door and pressurized the room. The rip along the suit was substantial, having cut her undergarment as well, leaving a nice red, superficial scraeth on her thigh half the length of the tear. He removed her helmet, slapping her face.

“Come on there,” Nolasco said, exhaling into her mouth. He felt for a pulse. Her heart was still beating. “Breathe.”

Daphne opened her eyes. She frowned. “For a moment there, it was really peaceful,” she said.

Nolasco laughed and hugged her up. “We call it the Warrior’s Light. Don’t go there peacefully. You might not come back. Come on, we have to find another way off.”

Daphne stood, following Nolasco deeper into the ship.

“You know where you’re going?” Daphne asked.

“Yeah,” Nolasco said. He stopped to address a call from Doler, instructing him to blow the bridge. He removed the device from his belt, activated it, and pushed the button. The resulting explosion was heard only because it rumbled through the floor plate. Alarm klaxons began wailing. He grabbed Daphne by the arm and hurried them along.

“They’re going to leave us,” Daphne said.

“It will be alright if they do,” Nolasco said, opening a door and blasting the men on the other side.

Before them was a Tie Fighter ready for launch.

“Get in,” Nolasco instructed.

“I don’t know how to fly,” Daphne said.

“It’s okay, I’ll be right behind you,” Nolasco said, heping her down into the cockpit.

Daphne reached up to prevent him from closing the hatch. “Wait. I thought these things don’t have life support,” she said.

“They don’t,” Nolasco confirmed, trying to push the hatch closed.

“But how will I breathe?” Daphne asked.

“Shallow,” Nolasco said. She didn’t like his response. “Look, you’ll have fifteen minutes of air supply, provided there is no structural damage to the hull.”

Nolasco closed the hatch, saw that it was secure. Daphne looked pitiful in the view port. The look of silent protest tugged at his heart, but they were running out of time. He stepped down to the controls and launched the fighter. The next fighter began its slide into the launch position. He set the timer and was in the next available fighter before it was fully in place. He was pulling the hatch shut as the fighter started moving down the rail system, shooting it out into space.

Nolasco orientated himself, as he strapped in. The Corvette was powering away. Previously launched fighters were regrouping to attack. Daphne’s fighter was spinning wildly. He caught up to her, matched her rotation, and then slaved her ship to his. He brought them out of the spin and put them both on a course to catch up with the Corvette.

“Are you strapped in?” Nolasco asked her. “Daphne?”

“I am now,” Daphne complained. She was bruised on her chin.

“Okay, well, just hang out for moment, we’re going to take out some of these fighters to give them a chance to prepare for the jump to hyperspace,” Nolasco said.

“I don’t remember signing up for all of this,” Daphne said.

“I thought you Jedi’s crave adventure,” Nolasco said. The first fighter he took out didn’t expect to be fired on by its own. The others learned quickly that there was a ‘wolf’ in the Tie clothing, but not before two more bit it. The fighters broke formation, scattering away from the Corvette in order to regroup.

“It’s getting really muggy in here,” Daphne said.

“Relax, we’re heading in now,” Nolasco said, pushing them a little too fast for the length of the bay.

The fighters landed hard. Daphne’s fighter spun, putting the right solar panel in a rut that flipped her up against a wall before she came to a halt. Nolasco hit the wall dead on. He climbed out, first meeting the security that was ensuring he wasn’t a threat and then second in retrieving Daphne. They opened the hatch and found her still in the seat, holding on to the fight controls.

“I don’t like flying,” Daphne announced.



Most of the Bloodhunters that had survived the destruction of their ship were taken out by the Star Destroyer’s lasers. Three made it through to the Corvette and entered via the jetbridge attached to the Star destroyer. They came up behind the Storm Troopers that were boarding the Corvette, effectively blocking them from retreating back to the Star Destroyer. Trapped between the Droids and the Corvette’s crew, the Troopers went down fast. When the bridge blew, the airlock doors slammed shut with minimal air loss, but it did knock everyone but the Droids off their feet. One Trooper was cut in half by the airlock door. Even off their feet, the Troopers fought. The Droids, shielded, advanced down the corridor as if they knew where they were going, ignoring the Troopers for the most part. The Corvette’s crew retreated, exactly as they had been instructed to do.

The Droids pushed through the door at the end of the corridor. Preston sat at the far end of the galley, near a window, in a meditation pose on top of one of the tables. The Storm Troopers that had accompanied Nolasco were the last line of defence. No one had anticipated anyone getting in this far, this quickly, but then they weren’t expecting the Droids. Lestelle,

Jordeen, and Ten were in the galley as well, and like the Storm Troopers, they were hiding behind upturned tables, just waiting for it to be over. Freya engaged the first Bloodhunter. It fired back, her shields holding firm. While the first maintained its target on her, the second and third Bloodhunters slipped in around it.

“If he’s going to wake up, now would be the time,” one of the Troopers said, moving from one upturned table to another.

The most forward Droid was taking a beating, its shields close to saturation point. It fired a series of blasts to the nearest table in an effort to burn through the table and hit the target behind it. Its shield’s flared and went out. It traded places with the second Droid, and it continued with the strategy of the first, while the one that fell back began a cover fire.

Ten broke free of Jordeen’s hold and charged the Droid that had fallen back.

“No!” Jordeen yelled, going after her.

The Droid spun at her, hesitating because the child had no weapon. The hesitation was only long enough to decide to kill the child anyway, for just being a nuisance. Jordeen tackled Ten, rolling them to the floor, covering her with her body, laughing. Ten reached out and touched the Droid. Nothing happened.

Troopers came out from behind their tables, firing at the Droid without shields, risking their lives in order to save Ten and Jordeen. The third Droid advanced on Preston. The First and Second Droids fired at the men who were now exposed. Freya changed her target to the Droid targeting Ten and Jordeen, aiming for its weapons. Freya’s shields began to saturate, as she advanced on her new target.

“No!” Ten yelled, touching the Droid again with full rage.

The Droid’s limbs went limp then raised up in full articulation as it released a static charge, panels buckling as it fried. Freya began firing at the second droid, which was now looming over her. She ducked a sword like appendage, and rolled out behind it, firing pointblank from within the perimeter of its own shielding. It staggered forwards, its shields flaring off. Its weaponed turned towards her for a point blank shot, when Ten slid up to it and touched it, full of rage. The Droid entire body arced with electricity as its systems overloaded.

The remaining Droid advanced on Preston, but continued to fire at the closest of Troopers who moved to encircle it, even as the second Droid was crying its last protest. Preston came out of his trance, sprung up, and cut the Droid in half. The Lightsaber was on and off so fast that many doubted he had actually done anything, and might have continued to believe so except for the orange of super heated metal that became visible as the Droid slid apart, crashing to the floor in two distinct pieces as evidence to the contrary.

The ship jumped to hyperspace. There was an unsettling, breath holding pause as security waited for something else to happen. Preston took in air and released in such an exaggerated way it was as if he were breathing for everyone, releasing ‘calming’ energy into the room. The crew fell to the next phase of assessing and triage.

Preston skipped the triage and simply began healing crew, whoever was closest, having Jordeen tail him, so that she could see what he was doing. To better teach her, he had her touch the wounded and he touched her, so she could get an idea of what it felt like as he channeled this particular frequency of the Force. Ten was with them, watching, trying to learn, but he didn’t include her in this particular training. They went down the corridor, healing who they could, even some who the medics had given up as dead. By the fifth person, Jordeen was performing on automatic, as if she had done it for years, even though she knew if she stopped to think about

what she was doing, the ability would leave her. Preston found the first of a Deterrent Trooper alive, removed the helmet, and asked the Trooper if he might heal him.

“My team,” the trooper asked.

“I think there are others alive, but you’re first,” Preston said.

“Why are you healing him?!” Ten said. “They tried to kill us.”

“This is what we do,” Preston said.

Ten frowned, crossing her arms. With the consent of the Trooper, Preston touched him and he sat up. The Trooper watched, amazed not because he or the others from his team were being healed, and not because he knew Jedi’s could do such feats, but amazed that they were being healed when they were technically enemies.

“Why are you helping us?” the Trooper asked.

“It’s what we do. Weren’t you listening?” Ten snapped.

Corissa came rushing around the corner and saw Ten and the Trooper conversing. She practically tackled Ten, pulling her up into her arms at the same time she was drawing her weapon on the Trooper. The Trooper raised his hands in the ‘I surrender.’ Preston approached, but said nothing.

“What the hell, Preston?!” Corissa asked.

“We heal people,” Ten said.

“They’re Troopers. He could have taken you hostage or killed you,” Corissa said, her weapon was shaking.

“We don’t kill, children, Ma’am,” the Trooper said.

“I have known too many Troopers that have, and since you all wear the same colors,” Corissa said.

Ship security approached to take the Trooper into custody.

“That is unfortunate, you’re experience,” the Trooper said. “Angel Squadron does not kill children, even when children draw on us.”

“You call yourselves angels?!” Corissa asked, almost raging.

“You going to let her kill us after you just healed us?” one of the Angels asked. The voice was feminine, even through the helmet speakers.

Preston shrugged. “She’s an adult,” Preston said. “She’s free to act as she chooses.”

“What kind of Jedi are you?” the angel demanded.

“At ease, Zaira,” her lead said. “No resisting. The Jedi is right.”

Security arrived and began putting binders on the enemy Troopers.

“Why are you so angry?” Ten asked.

“I want you to use some common sense. We don’t know these guys and we were just in battle with them,” Corissa snapped.

“You can’t protect me from danger. You’re not my mother,” Ten snapped back.

“Yes, she is,” Lestelle said.

Jordeen looked up from the last person being healed. “Corrissa and Preston were awarded full custody by the state. They are now, legally and morally, your parents, and it is their duty to keep you safe.”

Corissa dropped her weapon, went to her knees, fully embracing Ten. Ten coughed.

“You’re choking me,” Ten said, resisting only a little. “Why are you crying?”

“I love you so much,” Corissa said.

Fixit rose from a deep level of inactivity to execute a self diagnostic protocol. It wasn't necessary to awaken all the systems, but there was a curious pull to discern if there had been any changes in the environment. There was sound. Specifically, there was the sound of a holographic projector displaying a recording. Fixit activated the visual systems, without turning on their amplifying lights. There was sufficient light in the cave to see without requiring amplification. A female sat in a chair, her back to him, watching a hologram of a baby. Fixit knew who it was without running any recognition programs. It opened a small hatch and reached up to catch its Lightsaber. The Lightsaber didn't emerge.

"Looking for this?" the woman asked, holding up Fixit's Lightsaber.

As a medic droid, Fixit had other weapons at its disposal coming to bare even as it propelled itself forwards, lowering appendages into attack mode. It froze, coming to a jerking halt. The other hand of the woman came up to reveal that she had placed an inhibitor on it. She rotated to face the Droid.

"I thought you understood my desire to abort," Byrnes said.

"I will not allow you to kill Preston," Fixit said.

"You named it," Byrnes said, amused. "It will make it harder for you to bear what must be done, but then, I did try to avoid all this by having the abortion in the first place."

Byrnes rose from her chair, moving towards the exit. She pushed a button on her remote control.

"Come a long, Fixit," Byrnes insisted. "We will need to find a flight crew if we're going to fix this."



Trimmer was fuming. "I told you we'd be left stranded in interstellar space," he said.

"All we have to do is degause the field cables and recharge them," Corissa explained, to the 'table.' "We should be able to get two, maybe three more jumps before they're irreparable."

"Can't you just print some new parts?" Preston asked.

Trimmer looked at him as if he were a moron.

"Surely there is a 3D printer," Preston said.

"This isn't a toy ship that you print up parts," Trimmer said.

"We could print patches that might buy us a few additional minutes of hyper time," Corissa said, thinking it through further.

The 'table' was the Captain's table. Doler sat at the head, with Favelle on his right. Lestelle was present leaning against a wall, as well as Daphne, Nolasco, and several ship personnel that hadn't been introduced. Freya stood behind Preston.

"Minute jumps, that won't get us anywhere useful," Trimmer complained. "And it won't take that Star Destroyer long to figure out we haven't gone far. Or the Bloodhunters."

"So, why we don't we just skip to the part that needs to be addressed," Daphne said. "If what has been said about these Bloodhunters is true, then inevitably Preston will be captured. We should go our separate ways."

"That's not an option," Nolasco said.

"It's the most viable option that no one has yet put on the table," Daphne said.

"We will go into hiding," Corissa said.

“Where will you go that there isn’t a computer or a Droid? It only takes one infected computer to hijack a hyperspace communication system and ring your whereabouts across the Galaxy, and the next time they show up, it will be with ten Droid ships,” Daphne said. “You’re putting us all at risk, Preston. Your daughter at risk. Her mother. Your friends. Is that what you want?”

Preston nodded. “Daphne is being reasonable. We should go our separate ways.”

“We’ve all been tagged as co-conspirators in your continued freedom,” Nolasco said. “Even if we part ways, we are in jeopardy until they capture you.”

“Then I should surrender to them,” Preston said.

“Or, how about we figure out a solution, like maybe we delete you from their memory, or insert a Trojan that makes them think you’ve been captured or killed already,” Corissa said.

“We’d have to capture one intact,” Nolasco mused.

“They self destruct once captured,” Preston said.

“Then we find one of their hyperspace relays, or a base of operation, and we do it directly,” Corissa said. “They have to have a base. Something’s creating them, because I find it hard to believe that they rely completely on existing infrastructure to transmit code. Too many sentients wipe code and start from scratch just because of Trojans and hackers in general.”

“Even if we knew of a base or relay, I doubt my Corvette is up for another fight,” Doler said.

“Yeah, we’d definitely need a bigger ship,” Nolasco said.

“I could get us a bigger ship,” Preston said. “And, it’s in range of our present capabilities.”

“What kind of ship?” Doler asked.

Preston shrugged. “Bigger than this one,” Preston said.

“Functioning?” Nolasco asked.

Again, Preston shrugged. “I’m pretty sure I saw some lights on the last time I saw it, but even if it’s not, there’s bound to be some spare parts we could salvage. Either way, my knowledge of it and sudden recall can’t be a coincidence. I recommend going there.”

“Even if this ship works out, we’re going to need a software engineer and a target,” Daphne said.

“I’ll meditate on the target. I am bound to find something interesting,” Preston said. “If nothing pans out, I can always ask for help.”

“Oh, right, like Yoda?” Daphne scoffed, rubbing her forehead.

“Well, I tend to avoid Yoda. He rarely answers a direct query, and I find his sense of humor perversely aggravating. Kenobi mostly offers platitudes, which is annoying in its own way. My conversations with Mace Windu have always been pleasant, but not necessarily fruitful. Atris is nice, too. Very knowledgable. Though, she’s hard to look at. I mean, she’s beautiful and all, but sometimes I see her my age, sometimes as a child and sometimes as an elderly person. I find the drastic changes unsettling,” Preston said, contemplating it. “I suppose that, too, is a lesson in letting go of our attachments.”

“You know Yoda?” Favelle asked.

“Who doesn’t know Yoda?” Preston asked.

“Okay, well, first things first,” Doler interrupted. “We’re alive because we trusted Preston’s strategy, so we will test him again. We will go and check out Preston’s ship and then decide our next action.” He dismissed the meeting, calling on Fite and Trimmer to get the engines ready for the next jump.

Daphne hung back to speak with Preston, Lestelle looked to him to discern if he wanted help extracting himself from an unwanted conversation, but his eyes suggested he had it. She touched his shoulder as she departed, fueling another flash of fire in Daphne's eyes.

"You're attachment to your friends is going to get them killed," Daphne said.

"You said as much in the meeting," Preston said.

"You're not supposed to have a family. Families make Jedi vulnerable," Daphne went on.

"I think the Sith hold a similar maxim," Preston said.

"I'm tired of hearing you compare my beliefs to that of the Sith!" Daphne snapped, slapping the table.

"How about this argument: if learning to only rely on the Force, an outside agency, is good, why would reliance on others be shunned? If you believe the Force works through others then family and friends are not only beneficial to our growth, they are essential," Preston said.

"I want to hear you say that when it gets one of them killed. When it gets Ten killed. Maybe if you were a real parent instead of an appointed one, you would understand that," Daphne said, ending the conversation by walking away.

Preston sat back down, focusing on his breath. He was confused as to why Daphne was so stuck when her own philosophies accentuated that there is no death. Even if she had never practiced out of body techniques, she had experienced the Force on a greater level than most people, and he imagined that should bring her sufficient comfort. He also took a moment to consider the opposite, that perhaps he was being too cavalier about other people's lives. He couldn't completely dismiss the latter. He closed his eyes. There was no better place or time to reflect over Daphne's passionate insistence that the Jedi's no attachment clause might have some merit.



There were pretty much a dozen methods for leaving one's body, but Preston found one method particularly efficacious, as it work for him 90 percent of the time. From a meditation of mindfulness, he inventoried the room just as it was when he had closed his eyes. As he began to relax, he felt a rush of vibrations throughout his body, as if he were on a ship accelerating away from the surface of a high-G planet, pushing through air to escape velocity. Once he was outside himself, the vibrations and the noise subsided. This was the most critical stage of leaving one's body, for one stray thought could affect his entire 'outing,' sometimes making it hard to get back on track without re-entering the body and starting over. The Astral, or Light Body was incredibly thought responsive. At this level of consciousness, a thought was synonymous with action; it either created personal action or changed the environment and it happened instantaneously. A fearful thought could bring storms or monsters. Thinking of a friend would draw you instantly to that friend. Recognition of the desire for sex could bring a dozen random partners equally horny and one could be engaged in intimacy before one even had the time to consider compatibility issues, much less time to 'just say no.' It was always better to have one's intentions refined and declared before leaving one's body so that the goal was precise, and absent of metaphor or double meaning.

Preston's meditation had been about his responsibility to his friends, and so when he found himself beside himself, he knew it was an opportunity to explore further, but he also knew he needed a specific answer on solving the Bloodhunter issue; his mind went there.

"I need information on Bloodhunters now," Preston said.

Traveling took many forms. Sometimes he felt himself rushing across the emptiness between stars and then other times, he was there, wherever there was, instantaneously. He arrived at Shade's Palace so quickly that the change of environment was disconcerting. Only the familiarity with the place helped him orientate. He 'knew' where he was. Yerd was dealing cards in front of him. The fact that he was still hovering within reach of the physical plane, as opposed to the myriad of other alternative dimensions that he could have found himself, suggested that his answer was here. The fact that he recognized Yerd seemed like another good omen, as again, because of the coincidence factor, there was meaning to be explored. There was no such thing as a meaningless coincidence, but rather only a lack of understanding of how it all fit together. He decided to manifest himself on the physical plane remotely.

His doppelganger coalesced out of the smoke and no one seemed to take immediate notice of him, or the fact he arrived from nowhere. Being slightly invisible was a Jedi trick, that didn't require a hood. In this instance, no one reacted to the suddenness of his appearance, but simply acknowledged his presence upon being noticed, with their minds offering a reasonable explanation that he must have just arrived or always been there. He recognized one of the waitresses as he approached the table. She smiled pleasantly at him, and he was pretty certain she wanted to address him, but a customer conveniently distracted her with a request. Another coincidence to prevent him from being distracted? Yerd looked up.

"Hello, Yerd," Preston said.

"Preston?!" Yerd said, excitedly. "How are you?" His mouth opened to an 'O' which was most humans interpreted as surprise but was actually the equivalent of a human smile of appreciation.

It was just a 'coincidence' that simultaneously with that 'O' Preston felt a weapon push into his back. The words followed: "Where is Jordeen?"

"Minder," came a calm voice behind the man with the weapon, which Preston recognized as Keena. "Shade wants to see him, uninjured."

Minder chuckled. "I was just about to bring him," Minder said.

Preston turned and bowed to Minder and Keena. "It's nice to see you both again," Preston said.

"Put the weapon away, Minder," Keena said.

Minder frowned, but put the weapon away.

Keena imitated Preston's greeting. "Would you come with me, please?"

"I think I need to speak with Yerd, but I have put you off several times, which no doubt resulted in no little trouble, so I will yield to your request," Preston said.

"Thank you," Keena said.

"If you will excuse me, Yerd. Maybe we can speak later?" Preston asked.

Yerd nodded, and returned to his game. Preston accompanied Keena and Minder back to the main audience chamber in which Shade resided. Shade immediately began laughing as they approached her divan. Isho was there, playing cards with Shade. Preston bowed to her.

"No way!" Shade said, throwing down her cards. "Preston G Waycaster!"

Preston bowed. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Shade."

"What does the G stand for?" Shade asked.

"I haven't thought about it, actually," Preston said, musing. "I just thought it sounded nice."

"You are way too funny!" Shade said. "So, what brings you to my humble abode?"

Preston shrugged. "I think I need to speak with Yerd, but Keena reminded me that you had wanted to discuss a matter, and I apologize if I inconvenienced you. I've been rather distracted, lately."

"Bloodhunters can be distracting," Shade agreed.

"You know about the Bloodhunters?" Preston asked, curious, but not surprised.

"I would love to discuss business, but I have a policy about engaging in big business transaction without first engaging in play," Shade said. "I would require you to do something for me before I will consider entertaining a conversation."

Preston didn't seem surprised, but simply nodded, going with the Flow of the Force as he saw it. He was now certain it couldn't be an accident that he was here. "I suppose, if you have any information that might help against the Bloodhunters, then an exchange is appropriate. I consent to being your servant."

"No way?! You're offering yourself as a slave?" Shade asked.

"Umm, no. I am sorry for the miscommunication. I am willing to serve, or fulfill a request, but I maintain my own personhood. I'm not fond of the fact that you hold slaves," Preston said.

"My indentured servant's lives are improved through my employment," Shade said. "My servants have more access to luxury and training than any slaver can boast in the market. It really pisses me off that people don't understand economies. Even at slave wages, it takes time to train people to meet your expectations, and if you're always killing and trading slaves, you really never get ahead. And I get really attached to my pets." She said this last while petting Isho. "Which reminds me. How is Jordeen?"

"She is well," Preston said.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to give her back?" Shade asked.

"I would not," Preston said.

Shade chuckled. "Apparently, even you can discern value. But enough. I wish to watch you engage Keena and Isho, simultaneously. If they both have a 'turn over,' I will conduct business with you."

Preston was silent for a moment. Keena was suddenly rigid with tension. It was certainly not the first time she had been asked to perform an act for her Master, but it was likely to have been the first time she had wanted to actually participate, and certainly not under scrutiny. Isho looked at her cards, trying not to let her own emotions be read.

"What's wrong Preston G? Are you shocked by my request?" Shade asked.

"No," Preston said. "But I don't really understand it."

"I want you to be intimate with..."

"Oh, I understood that part," Preston interrupted.

"Does having an audience bother you?" Shade asked.

"Please, I'm a Doctor," Preston said. "Nothing biological offends me. Additionally, privacy is an illusion, a luxury provided only to those who are not one with the Force."

"So, what was that face you made?" Shade asked.

"I just assumed you wanted me to give you a 'turn over' directly," Preston said.

Shade laughed. "I doubt you can lift me," Shade said.

"You judge me by my size?" Preston asked.

"You are human, I am Hut, what do you think?" Shade asked.

"I think you need to learn the ways of the Force," Preston said.

“No way,” Shade said, smirking, and slapping her side. “Your offer is tempting, but for now, I would be happy if you simply make my servants happy.”

“Very well, then,” Preston said, sitting down in a lotus position on the floor.

“So, you’re not opposed?” Shade asked.

“As long as Keena and Isho are agreeable and are not performing under duress,” Preston said.

Keena came forwards, unstrapping her gun belt. Isho put down her cards and joined Keena, helping her with her buttons on her vest. Another female slave came forwards to collect the belt and weapon, and any other items that the couple handed her. Preston closed his eyes.

“Wait,” Shade said. Keena and Isho stopped, unsure of what they were doing wrong. “What are you doing, Preston?”

Preston was silent.

“You want us to undress him first?” Isho asked Shade.

Keena touched her stomach. Isho’s skirt lifted as if a breeze had blown directly up her legs. Then both Keena and Isho lifted from the floor. Both initially made noises of being startled that gave way to noises indicating that they were experiencing increasing waves of pleasure. It was a subtleness that neither had experienced before, a total body immersion into sensation, both external and internal, as if every cell was being gently caressed. The slave girl holding the gun reached out to touch Keena, who was now lying horizontal in the air. Her experienced started immediately at the same intensity that Keena had achieved over an increment of time. She laughed, almost exactly like Jordeen might have laughed, closed her eyes and gave in, her feet coming off the floor as she was lifted to height greater than Keena, her head down towards the floor, feet reaching for the ceiling. Isho was upside down, too, her legs together, knees bent as if she were hanging from a tree branch, her dress was straight up, pinned to her side, as opposed to falling down about her hips.

Shade was panting. “Oh my,” she was saying. Then she came off her pedestal. “No way!” she shouted. “Oh, no way!” she went on. Two guards came up, pointing weapons at Preston, afraid Shade was being hurt. “Don’t you hurt him!” she snapped. They withdrew, hesitantly.

As the experiencers hit their peak, everyone in Shade’s audience chamber was affected, but not flying. After the turn-over, the sensations faded. Shade was set easily on her Pedestal, apparently exhausted to the point of being asleep. Isho lay on the floor, one hand on her stomach, panting, while she stared off at the ceiling. The slave rested her head against Isho’s belly. Keena crawled over to Preston and sat up, touching his knees. She was still smiling at him when he opened his eyes.

“Is that what it feels like to use the Force?” Keena asked.

“Oh, no. Using the Force is even better than that,” Preston said.

“Teach me,” Keena asked.

“We can teach each other,” Preston said.



Lestelle, Jordeen, and Ten had retired to their room, while the crew, with Corissa, continued repairing what they could. Ten paced, wanting to help. Freya stood by the door, watching Ten pace. Lestelle was drinking tea.

“I want to talk to Preston,” Ten said.

“He’s meditating,” Lestelle said.

“He’s always meditating,” Ten sulked.

“Maybe you should try it,” Jordeen offered.

“Pfft,” Ten rebuked. “I want to do something.”

“Meditating is doing something,” Jordeen said.

“I want to do something useful!” Ten continued.

Jordeen thought about saying meditating is something useful, but only smiled.

“Preston needs to start training me in the ways of the Force now, before we get attacked again,” Ten said.

“Meditating would be a good first step towards that goal,” Jordeen said. “And I can teach you that.”

“Can you teach me to pick up an object with the Force and hurl it?” Ten asked.

“Theoretically,” Jordeen said. “I have levitated some small stuff, but it’s really not my thing.”

“So, what’s your thing?” Ten asked.

Jorden chuckled. “It’s a secret.”

Ten came to the table and sat down. She put a spoon in front of her.

“Alright, I am ready, what do I do?” Ten asked.

“You lift the spoon,” Jordeen said.

Ten frowned at her. “How?”

“Start by quieting your mind,” Jordeen said.

“You’re trying to trick me into meditating,” Ten said.

“No, it’s not a trick. You can’t levitate stuff with thoughts. You can’t move things with emotions,” Jordeen said.

“Really?” Lestelle asked. “I thought that was how poltergiests work.”

“Emotions send energy into the unconscious mind, which often results in physical phenomenon, but most frequently emotions translate into a somatic illness, less rarely, objects being tossed around the room,” Jordeen explained. “People have the understanding wrong. The conscious, waking mind, where we are now, is the lowest expression of mind, it is the epidermis layer of existence. The unconscious mind is not only bigger, but it is the next level in an infinite series of levels moving inwards. If you focus on the spoon, with this mind, with these emotions, you are most likely to only become frustrated and saturated in disbelief.”

“So, what do I do?” Ten asked.

“Look at the spoon. Do you see it?” Jordeen asked.

“Of course. I put it there,” Ten said.

“Did it take any effort to see it?” Jordeen asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re seeing the spoon, but did you have to tell yourself to see the spoon, or is it just there?” Jordeen said. “Do you hear the hum of life support? Do you hear my voice? Does it require any effort, or is it simply that the quieting of mind allows you to be aware of these noises? Do you feel your blood flowing, your heart beating, do you feel your feet on the floor, the seat beneath you, the temperature of the air, do you feel your body? Does it take effort, or again, merely the quieting of the mind so that the awareness expands through the sensations, connecting you to greater than self? What do you smell? As you’re taking inventory of yourself, your senses resonating with energy, you might have thoughts and emotions. Do not attack them, chase them off, label them, but also don’t hold them. Observe and let go. Are you aware that your breathing has now changed? Your energy level has changed. You’re calmer. You are now

closer to realizing the Force. Accessing the Force is less about doing it, though we communicate it as ‘using.’ It is more about not doing something than doing something.”

“I think I feel it,” Ten said.

“Yeah, I see it, but don’t get attached to it, don’t try to hold it or force it or move it,” Jordeen said. Jordeen could see that Lestelle was participating. Freya moved a little closer, trying to perceive as they were. “Just simply be in the moment.” She counted down from five. “Now, ask yourself, who, or what, is actually experiencing these things.”

Ten stood up, pushing the chair away from the table. Freya actually took a step back. “That is freaky!”

Jordeen chuckled, nodding.

“We are not these bodies, Ten. We are not our emotions. We are not our thoughts. We aren’t even our Light Bodies, the vehicle most often mistaken to be soul. We are multidimensional beings, beings of light, who are temporarily experiencing an organic modality. We are other first, not organics first. When you become reacquainted with who you really are, when you are comfortable again, then you will be able to lift the spoon without effort,” Jordeen said.

“Why?” Lestelle asked. It was not clear if she was waxing philosophical, or if she were sad. “Why are we here if this is not who we are?”

“Experiences. Learning. The fastest way for an infinite being of limitless power and authority to learn something is to experience limitations,” Jordeen said.

“But I don’t want limitations,” Lestelle said.

“And it is that very not wanting that causes it to persist. It is the ‘not wanting,’ the running from, the denial of a property that magnetizes the very thing to us, causes it to grow in strength. Only by diving in, experiencing it fully, by releasing all attachment, both positive and negative, to a thing, does it finally cease to have apparent power over us, allowing us to move to the next lesson,” Jordeen said.

“Why am I only learning this now?” Lestelle asked.

Jordeen shrugged. “Preston is an advanced soul, so proximity may be accelerating our process.”

“So, things are going to get better for us?” Ten asked.

“Or worse,” Jordeen said. “It could also be, Lestelle, that you are simply ready for the next lesson. I don’t know. Only you can answer that question.”

The spoon came off the table. Jordeen smiled at Ten. “Yay you!”

“I’m not doing it,” Ten said.

They turned to Lestelle. “I’m not doing it,” Lestelle said.

“I think I understand now,” Freya said. She tilted her head and looked out into space. “I am not just a Droid. I exist. I am.”

“How is this possible?” Lestelle asked.

When Preston said the ship was ‘bigger than this’ that left a good deal of space for imagination, but no one expected what they found. The Captain and Preston were the only ones smiling. Corissa was unreadable, but transfixed. Preston assumed she was speculating about how much work it would require to get her running.

“There she is,” Preston beamed. “Finders keepers, right?”

Star Destroyer ‘Immanence’ loomed before the Corvette and was somehow menacing, even with the lights off. Trimmer’s mouth was slightly agape, which almost made the dewflaps, the name the Sullustans called their favial jowls, seem unhinged. He scratched his ears.

Preston felt an overwhelming sadness emanating from Corissa, but he didn’t ask, and she wasn’t giving anything away. He reached out to touch her shoulder, but then withdrew his hand. The rule was: If she wanted help, she would ask.

“Is it functional?” Captain Dolers asked.

“Not detecting any damage. It’s holding an atmosphere, reasonable temperature, and apparently there are several auxillary power units presently running,” the helmsman answered.

“We don’t have the crew for that,” Trimmer said.

“We have enough,” Corissa corrected.

“That thing requires...” Trimmer began

“I know what it requires,” Corissa snapped. “I served on it and I’m telling you we can get by.” In a softer tone, she explained to the Captain. “The Captain had the ship automated so that a dozen people could theoretically work the ship in an emergency. Ideally, we could use more crew for combat, but just for navigating, we have more than enough crew.”

“Think there’s anyone still on it? Living out here alone?” the helmsman asked.

“No one’s on board,” Preston said.

“I wouldn’t bet my life on it,” Trimmers said.

“We’ll search the ship,” Captain Dolers offered.

“I doubt we can search everywhere,” Trimmers said.

“The ship is secure,” Preston said again.

“None the less, when we board, no one’s alone,” Captain Dolers said. “I want a preliminary search, determine if it has a full compliment of rations and water. Make sure there are no bioharzards lying around. And Corissa, since you served on her, I am going to rely on you to get the engines up and running. Trimmer, you and your team give her support.”

“And what are we going to do with our ship?” Trimmer asked.

“If that ship is operational, we will consider it an upgrade,” Dolers said. “Let’s do this, folks.”



Daphne entered the security bay and the Troopers being held in captivity went to attention. She went directly to the Platoon leader, Captain Harolds. Two of his seven Angels were female. All were human, different races. They all stared back, with neither contempt or worry, simply appraising her.

“So, you’ve decided what to do with us, Jedi?” Harold asked.

“We’re in the process of evacuating this ship and I would like to give you an opportunity to join us, as opposed to being left stranded here,” Daphne said.

“Preston saved our lives, that counts for something, but we have orders to capture him and bring him to our Commander. That will happen,” Harolds said.

Daphne nodded. “I know. And I might be willing to help you achieve your mission objectives, but I wouldn’t consider it as doing you a favor. You saw those Droids? The Bloodhunters? They’re coming for him. Anyone in their way is simply meat for the grinder.”

“Those Droids are not going to get on our Star Destroyer. The safest place for all of you is to surrender to us,” Harolds said.

“The safest place for us is away from him. I will help you capture him, personally deliver him, if you promise not to harm anyone else,” Daphne said.

“And if we don’t help?” Zaira asked.

“You will probably be left stranded on this ship when we depart,” Daphne said.

“This is a trap,” Zaira said. Her colleagues seemed to agree. “What’s in it for you?”

“I am Jedi. I don’t do this lightly or for profit. My only motivation is to save the lives of these people and I can’t do that with Preston on board,” Daphne said.

Harolds nodded. “I take it you have a plan?”

Daphne nodded.



The hanger deck contained open crates of Force Crystals, mined from debris field that had been ejected from the ancient, dead star. There was no evidence that anyone who had collected them was still around, but whoever it had been, they had been busy. Crystals ranged from bags of crystal dust, to fragments as large as a Hut. Though few people had gone to confirm it, the scuttlebutt coming down the line was that Corissa discovered a functioning Force Enhanced Hyperdrive, no doubt built from Force Crystals from this collection. Properly tuned Force crystals plugged into an engine could generate sufficient power to run the entire ship without using the standard generators.

Ten pulled a nice size crystal from a crate. Its glow brightened in her hand.

“May I have one?” she asked.

“These aren’t for kids,” Daphne said.

Preston nodded. “Sure, help yourself,” Preston said.

“She’s not ready, Preston,” Daphne said. “We don’t just hand crystals to children. They have to develop a relationship with the Force, they must be drawn to a crystal.”

“I dare say, that one found her,” Preston said.

“May I speak to you alone?” Daphne asked.

“Sure,” Preston said.

Daphne lead the way to the far side of the Hanger deck and up the ramp into a Sigma class, long range shuttle. She turned to find him right on her. She pushed a button that raised the ramp and closed the door, and then threw her arms around him, kissing him passionately.

“What do I have to do to get some alone time with you?!” Daphne demanded, opening a door to one of the suites set aside for a traveling dignitary.

“You could just ask,” Preston said.

Daphne entered the room backwards, drawing him in with her hands and a smile. Preston was happy to surrender to her. The door shut behind them. Preston found her passion more exciting knowing it was deliberate and uninfluenced by drink. She pushed him to the bed. Straddling him, she paused, her hands behind her, at first touching his legs, but soon found his

knees, and then his thighs before moving to the small of her back, pulling up on her blouse. She paused.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I will never be okay again. The fact that I love you just makes this harder,” Daphne said.

“I know,” Preston said.

“You don’t know anything!” Daphne said.

“I’m not resisting, Daphne,” Preston pointed out. “You must do what you think is best.”

Daphne pulled a weapon out and stunned him at point blank range. She laid against him, kissed him one last time, then got up from bed and opened the door. Zaira was standing there.

“Is it done?” she asked.

“Yeah. Do you know how to restrain a Jedi?” Daphne asked.

“It’s my specialty,” Zaira said, and pulled out a weapon and stunned Daphne at point blank range.



Nolasco was just coming out onto the hanger deck when the shuttle sprang to life. He didn’t hear Ten screaming over the engines, but he was aware that something was wrong based on the reaction of those around her. Running towards the ship, even drawing his weapon and firing as it departed the bay, was futile, but still he did so. There were no other ships on the hanger deck, but he knew there was bound to be a Tie Fighter below, if only he had time to reach it and give chase before they made the jump to hyperspace. He turned to see Preston come up out of nowhere.

“It’s okay, Nolasco. Let them go,” Preston said.

Ten was suddenly hugging Preston. “I didn’t see you get out of the shuttle,” she cried.

“Shh, everything is going to be alright,” he said. He lifted her up to carry her. “Nolasco, we will need to expedite our departure.”

“Alright,” Nolasco said. “Any idea where we go from here.”

“Yeah. We need to go to Axilla and pick up some passengers,” Preston said. “I’ll tell you more as we’re on our way.”



Harolds and Zaira arrived on the Flight Deck. Harolds took the copilot seat, and Zaira remained standing, since Trent Sharp was in the ‘engineer seat.’ Arms Donato was piloting, if one could call reclining in his chair with his feet up on the console piloting, his hands behind his head. Harolds read the coordinates and frowned.

“We’re going to Waterborne?” Harolds asked, just to confirm.

“Yeah. That’s where the boss is,” Trent said.

Harolds stared out the window, lost in thought, allowing himself to be mesmerized by hyperspace matrix that painted the viewport with incomprehensible data.

“I’m sure she’s alright,” Trent said.

“If it’s not, it’s because we failed,” Harolds said.

“You suppose they’re going to put Waycaster through the ritual?” Zaira asked.

“Pfft,” Paolo said, glancing back. “Why else would we be going to Waterborne?”

“I don’t understand something,” Trent said.

“Just something or everything?” Paolo asked, sarcastically.

“No. Really. Look, we all did the ritual, right? The goal of the ritual is to make us Force sensitive. Why would you drop a Jedi if they are already sensitive?” Trent asked.

“It doesn’t work like that,” Paolo said. “The ritual doesn’t guarantee you come through the other side being Force sensitive, or even a guarantee that you’ll come back with a ‘gift.’”

“Everyone gets a Gift,” Harolds said.

“I didn’t get one,” Paolo said.

Harolds looked over to him. “You’re alive, aren’t you?”

“True that,” Paolo said.

“What about you, Zaira,” Trent asked. “You never talk about it. Did you get a gift?”

“Closure,” Zaira said, simply.

“Oh, there’s a story a there, alright,” Paolo laughed. “Spill it.”

“It’s private,” Zaira said, calmly. She pulled out a knife and began to cut her nails.

“Hey, what do you want to bet Jedi Waycaster drowns his Padawan?” Trent asked.

“He should. She didn’t blink twice when she sold him out,” Paolo said.

“So, it’s a bet?” Trent asked.

“Sure,” Paolo asked. “You in, Captain?”

“I never bet on the ritual,” Harolds said.

Paolo and Trent looked to Zaira.

“Why not? Not only will he take one for the team, he won’t negotiate,” Zaira said.

“Happy to take your money, Zaira. They always sink the others,” Trent said.

“If you’re so sure, double your bet, and go get Nimh and Arms in on it, I’ll match all of you,” Zaira said.

Trent exited the flight deck in a hurry.

“If you can’t cover it, I’m going to expect a favor,” Paolo insisted.

“In your dreams,” Zaira said, taking Trent’s vacated seat.

“What makes you so sure you’re right?” Paolo said.

“Water changes a person,” Zaira said.

Harolds glanced back at Zaira and then over to Paolo before turning his attention to the abstract of hyperspace. “Most the time,” he mumbled.

Keena was the first to descend the ramp. Preston greeted her affectionately, starting with a hug that ended up with a kiss. It was not the kiss a mother might give a son, though their age disparity allowed for that, but he was sufficiently moved by the affection that he didn't sense anyone being disturbed.

"You're cold. Are you feeling alright?" Keena asked.

"I'm fine, thank you," Preston said, moving to meet the next one down the ramp.

Keena was followed by Licon, Yerd, and Isho. Licon got a simple handshake. Yerd got handshakes, too, but Preston took Yerd's hand in both of his, pausing only to ensure eyecontact was established, before he turned to his sister. Isho received a more affectionate greeting. Shade was the last to descend.

"Make way, make way, I want a hug, too," Shade said.

It difficult to hug someone of Shade's size, but she apparently appreciated Preston's effort. He turned to introduce the arriving party to his friends. The joy of greeting his newest friends slowly slid from his face as he tried to understand the unspoken messages being projected at him. He wished telepathy was his forte. Corissa crossed her arms in front of her chest. He decided it was probably best that telepathy wasn't his thing.

"Something wrong?" Preston asked.

"As your lawyer, I have to advise you to be more selective with whom you associate," Lestelle said.

"As her associate, and my client, I have to agree," Favelle said.

"Now, now, let's be civil," Shade said. "After all, I do have information and tech that you need to stop the Bloodhunter."

"I'm sure we can't afford your prices," Nolasco said.

"I've already taken care of that," Preston said.

"Preston, I thought we had a conversation about you making deals without going through the committee," Corissa said.

Preston shook his head. He did recall that conversation, but he wasn't aware that it pertained to all business transactions. "As Daphne pointed out, as long as I am being hunted, all of you are in danger. I am working towards ending that threat. Shade, show them what I bought."

Yerd put a holographic projector on the floor and activated it. A ship as large as a Star Destroyer became prominent, the scale for discerning being the two Star Destroyers near it as construction was nearing its completion. It was basically cylindrical in appearance, flaring out at either ends. The main thrusters were on ring that jutted off towards one of the ends.

Yerd explained what they were looking at. "This is Chiliad. It is both a Droid manufacturing plant and a spaceship. More specifically, it is a mobile harvester and manufacturing plant, it's sole product Bloodhunters, in all of their variety. It is programmed to nest in uninhabited systems, where it harvests resources to complete its function. It is a completely automated, self sustaining, self repairing vehicle, comprised of a thousand Droid super-AI's networked together to create a super-ego that governs over all operations. In order for Preston to be removed from the register, or the hit list, he must approach the ship, transmit this clearance code, board this ship this service hatch, staying within the confines of the human section, as it the only section pressurized to support organics, proceed to one of these five terminals, and place this access key into the pedestal along with a sample of his blood, which the pedestal itself will extract. Without these two ingredients, the terminal will not unlock. Once you have gained access,

you must enter the appropriate command codes, delete him from the registry, and then force a push to update all redundant memory caches, both local and remote.”

“How many of those things are there?” Nolasco asked.

“Hard to say,” Yerd said, shrugging. “It’s capable of reproducing itself. So, depending on how focus it was on making Bloodhunters, the availability of resources, the number of times it had to relocate to avoid being discovered, are just some of the variables. The Emperor put it into play the last year of his reign; so, it’s been out there awhile.”

“Why don’t we just destroy it?!” Corissa asked.

Yerd shrugged. “I suppose it’s possible. But you have to remember, these aren’t the clumsy Battle Droids from the old republic. These things are smart. They have Tie Fighters with AI. Their drops ships saucers are fast, maneuverable, and carrying Bloodhunter troops which also come with jetpacks. But, out of the known types of Bloodhunters, the scariest are the automated, antimatter bombs. These are Droid smart bombs with hyperdrive capability and one thing on their mind, target acquisition. And when I say smart, they are insanely brilliant, suicidal bombs that want nothing more than to wipe out a planet. And just one of these Droid bombs could create an extinction level if it got through a planet’s defense system. Oh, but yeah, let’s say you destroy the mother ship, there will be no ability push to update files, so you’re left with all the remaining Bloodhunters, who will now be aimed with vengeance because someone killed their mother.”

“Why would anyone create such a thing?” Jordeen asked.

“The Emerperor was so evil that in the event of his death, he wanted to ensure that certain families didn’t profit or take over, just out of pettiness,” Yerd said. “And, there was speculation that he wanted to knock as many of us back to the stoneage as possible, but hopefully, that was just rumor.”

“If the Chiliad is intelligent, why don’t we just negotiate with it?” Preston asked.

Both parties looked at him as if he were crazy.

“This thing is evil,” Corissa said. “You can’t talk it down.”

“Preston, she is right,” Shade said. “This was created with evil intent, evil went into its craft, evil was infused into its circuitry and part, and evil activated it and deployed it into the field. The Emperor’s hand is all over this. You want to get in there, get your name out of the registry, push the update, and get the hell away from it and hope it doesn’t change its mind and hunt you down just out of spite for boarding it.”

“How do we know your codes and key are good?” Lestelle said.

“I guarantee it,” Shade said.

“That’s not very comforting,” Corissa said.

“It’s good,” Preston said. “This will work.”

“You’re willing to bet your life on it?” Corissa snapped.

“Yes,” Preston said, involuntarily shaking. “Now, before anyone becomes alarmed, I am not going to be able to maintain this body much longer.”

“What do you mean?” Nolasco asked, closing the distance.

Corissa also advanced, taking Preston’s arm. “What have you done? You’re freezing!”

“Look, all I know is you can’t stay here. You must make a hyperjump to an uncharted system, or maybe even between systems, and wait for my return.”

“Where you are going?” Keena asked.

“Not going, I’m already there,” Preston said.

“No,” Corissa said, hugging him to her, but he was gone, like so much smoke.

“Dopplegangers,” Shade said. “I would sure love to know how he does that!”



Stripped of their clothing and forced to walk across snow and ice, Daphne preceded Preston on what she believed was certainly their death walk. The fact that they were being humiliated and tortured by the cold offered only slim hope that they might not be killed outright, but even with Jedi training, keeping away frost bite and death could not last indefinitely. It was a cold sun above them, in a pale blue, cloudless sky. The horizon was fairly flat and traveled uninterrupted in all directions as far as the eyes could see. The most interesting thing that broke the monotony of the terrain was the chunks of crystal, clear blue ice that captured the sunlight, diffusing it enough that they seemed as if they were self illuminated. They were like large, sapphire diamond capped with snow.

“I’m sorry,” Daphne said, directing a whisper back to Preston.

“For what?” Preston asked.

Daphne allowed herself to look back, trying to determine if he had lost his mind already. “Really?” she asked, her anger giving her just a little strength.

“Eyes forward, no talking,” Arms Donato insisted.

Nimh gave Daphne a small shove with the butt of her blaster.

After a spell, Daphne tried again. “I’m sorry for getting you in this,” she directed a whisper.

“Daphne. You did what you thought was right. We are good,” Preston assured her.

In the distance, Daphne could make out several speeders and a group of perhaps six people and some hovering droids waiting for them.

“You do have a plan, right?” Daphne asked.

“You’re not going to like it,” Preston said.

“I said no talking,” Arms said, getting between them and shoving Daphne further ahead.

They arrived at the awaiting group without fanfare. Preston and Daphne were forced to stand upon two pedestals, perhaps three centimeters thick that were resting on black ice. Force fields were activated, surrounding the two prisoners in their own cylinder of light. The force field offered some relief from the wind, but the cold chill remained, having already reached their bones.

Darth Torlin smiled at his victims. If he noticed Preston searching Darth Alyth for recognition, he didn’t show it. Alyth kept her eyes on the ground, which prompted Preston to use a higher sight. He could easily discern that she had multiple injuries that would make it hard to breathe, but these would not be obvious to anyone not looking for evidence of pain. Apparently she had not increased her metabolism to help counter the cold, most likely because she sought its comfort. The cold numbed her physically and emotionally. She had been here before, done this before.

“Preston G Waycaster,” Torlin said, radiating a bizarre smile that didn’t feel like his. “My apprentice here claims you are an incredible escape artist. I find that hard to believe. You wouldn’t care to demonstrate your abilities, now would you?”

There was no laughter, only silence. Preston offered a faint smile.

“I would wager my life that you don’t get out of this one,” Torlin said.

“Fairly high stakes. Are you sure you don’t wish to reconsider?” Preston offered.

Torlin laughed. "If only my apprentice was this cocky. Maybe it's her gender?" he said with sarcasm.

"Maybe you should let her trade places with him," Daphne said.

"Did you hear something?" Torlin turned to Alyth. "The wind maybe? Oh well. Preston, I have a deal for you. And I do so love making deals. I am going to give you one chance to save your life," he said, raising a device for show. He pushed a button.

The pedestal Preston was standing on latched onto the ice with extended cleets. The spikes sucked in water from underneath the ice and delivered it to the top of the pedestal. The icy water pooled around his feet and began to rise, as the forcefield didn't allow it to run off.

"Oh, a little chilly, eh?" Torlin asked. "Normally, we plunge you right through the ice, but today, I've decided to watch you drown. Unlike my apprentice, I do like to be certain that when I kill someone, they stay dead."

"Stop this?!" Daphne yelled.

"Stop this?!" Torlin mimicked her. "Tell me, does that ever work? Has anyone ever had a change of heart because you demanded it? Try using a Force command next time. Or tears. I do like tears. Almost as much as making deals. I would lick them off your face and savour the salt.."

"I'm going to kill you!" Daphne said.

"Oh, do I hear anger? I know someone who will be easy to turn," Torlin said. "You want to keep me from torturing her, Preston? All you have to do is beg for your life, and I will send the water from your container to hers. That simple."

"Preston," Daphne said. "Save yourself!"

Preston said nothing and the water continued to rise. The cold was almost unbearable as it rose from his knees to his thighs. He began to involuntarily shake.

Torlin sneered. "Why this loyalty? She betrayed you! Say the word, I will spare you and kill her instead. No? You do know that killing her might be much more pleasant than what I intend to do her. Oh! Was that a tell? Did I make a mistake? Should I have made you watch that before putting you in there?"

"Please, let him live. I will do whatever you want," Daphne pleaded.

The water was now mid chest level.

"You're running out time, son," Torlin said. "Once it's above your head, I won't be able to hear you ask for a pardon. Ask me to end this. Let me offer you warmth and safety."

"My life is not yours to take or spare," Preston said, his voice shaky with cold. "I belong to the Force."

Torlin laughed. "If you start spouting Jedi rhetoric about how you're about to become stronger, I will expedite your departure," he said, stepping closer. "And if you attempt to fool me by holding your breath, I will drop her into the abyss. You will submit to my authority or I will see you drowned. Now, before it's too late, tell me you want to live! You've already proven yourself capable. You've bested my apprentice. You're withstanding this cold. You have demonstrated your loyalty to your apprentice, your friend, but this loyalty is misplaced. You don't owe her anything. You could be my next apprentice... Just say one word and I will release you. You would be a powerful ally. Think of all the good you could do for the galaxy! Join me..."

The water rose above Preston's mouth, then his nose, then over his head. His eyes remained opened as he stared out at Torlin. An electric shock went up his spine and his body quit shaking. His body was shutting down, which was a bizarre feeling on top of the cold. All he could hear was the rising water in his ears, but he was certain he read Torlin's lips accurately:

“Sorry, too late. I hope she was worth it,” Torlin said, aiming the remote at Daphne, suggesting if Preston didn’t drown, she would soon suffer similarly.

Preston emptied his lungs of air and then took water into his lungs. He had imagined he would have better control over his body, but the reflex to resist the water was overwhelming. Fortunately, the struggle didn’t last long and he slipped into unconsciousness. Torlin ignored Daphne’s cries, pleading for them to let him out, to revive him before it was too late.

The medic stepped forwards, taking scans. “His heart has stopped, brain activity is decreasing. He’s not faking it,” Venrich said.

“You monster!” Daphne said.

Torlin turned to her. “You know, I am not sure what is more pathetic, your hypocrisy or your crocodile tears. You are responsible for his death! You did this to him. Oh, what was that? A reaction? You loved him! You slept with him! Oh, this is rich. I don’t know who was the bigger fool, you or him.”

“He was a kind, loving man. He was a Jedi,” Daphne said.

“He was a fool. Because whether he saved himself or not, he should have known, I had every intentions of killing you anyway,” Torlin said.

He pushed the button. The bottom and edges of her pedestal began to glow with heat. As it dropped through the ice, water filled the cylinder she was still trapped in. She struggled to push through the shield, but it held her firm. The pedestal broke free of the ice and she plunged downwards, disappearing into dark waters below. Only a hole in the ice remained.

Torlin turned to the medic. “Let them float for an hour, then you can have their bodies. One hour. Not a minute before. Alyth, come!” he demanded as he walked towards his speeder, pushing past the Angels, unconsciously challenging.

Captain Harold tried to make eye contact with Alyth, but she remained hidden beneath her cloak, eyes downcast. He made no overt attempts to communicate with her. She knew he was here, and she would give orders or not. Torlin and Alyth’s departure concluded the ritual for everyone but Venrich and his recovery team.

“You can pay me when we get back to base,” Zaira said, turned, and headed back to the shuttle.

Harold rallied the remaining angels and followed Zaira’s lead.



Though she knew she didn’t need the hood, Alarna Byrne remained cloaked as she leaned into the shadow of her booth, observing the staff and patrons. She still wasn’t certain why she had been drawn into this space, but she knew enough to trust her feelings. The drink she was consuming had smoke rising from her cup. The cup and her hands were in the dim light over the table. A band played in the background. A person entered the bar followed by a Droid. The bar tender immediately began to yell: “Hey, can’t you read?! No Droids! We don’t serve their kind here!” And after the bewildered, would-be customer realized his offense, which he probably had just not given it much thought, he and the droid retreated together. Byrne thought that fairly wise, considering the number of Jawas and an equally high number of reports concerning missing droids in this area.

But the Anti-Droid sentiment bothered her. Not because she cared about equal rights for Droids, but rather because Droids were so integral to society that there were few places that they didn’t exist. She began scrutinizing the bar. There were no security cameras. The band was live.

No jukeboxes were present. The only computerized component that she could discern was the door lock mechanism and the light control panel behind the bar. Every other machine in the entire establishment was simply limited to on or off: no complex computer chips. Now why would someone go through that much trouble to eliminate Droid intelligence? As she walked backwards in her mind, she recounted the entire street was shy of fixed electronic surveillance. Only the passing of Droids presented with the potential of being surveryors of population and identity hunters.

Byrne stepped up her alertness. Whoever owned this cantina required a higher level of privacy for themselves or their customers or both. That was the only thing that made sense. Only the paranoid, the criminals, or those whom the Emperor had a personal grievance went through so much trouble to limit exposure to electronic eyes. A human's eyewitness testimony, "yeah I saw so and so..." may or may not be held up in a court of law, but a Droid's recording was unimpeachable.

"Your drink has gone flat. Want me to refresh it?" the waitress asked.

The waitress was familiar, but nothing Byrne could pin down. She was human, of blended ethnicity, thin, wearing trousers and a blouse, which was not the typical waitress uniform, which suggested she was more likely a person of authority. She was most likely only fifteen or sixteen years old.

"Have we met before?" Byrne asked.

She smiled politely. "Don't usually get pick up lines from the females," she said.

"Forgive me. I don't socialize much. I truly suspect that we've met before, and I'm having trouble placing you," Byrne said.

"Well, I don't recognize you, but then I rarely fill in here. My name is Kish and parents own the place. We're short staff at the moment. Ummm, do you ever gamble?" she asked.

"I do," Byrne said, casually. "Why?"

"Well, if you've been to the Underground, I operate a table at my parent's casino," Kish said. "You look like the type that hangs out in the private rooms."

"That must be it, but I've not been to the back," Byrne said, and then adjusted her voice, to a subtle Force command. "Invite me."

The lady seemed to think about it. She leaned in to Byrne, one hand going to her shoulder, and another going into her pocket to retrieve an item. "I would love for you to visit, if you can afford the buy in. Take this coin," she said. "Tell them Kish green lighted you."

"Thank you, Kish. You're very kind," Byrne said. "You want to sit down and tell me more."

She sat down as if sitting with a long lost friend, and in a rambling manner that recited facts about Tatooine, most of which was myth. Though there was evidence that Tatooine once had more surface water and a greater abundance of life, no one had come forward to solve the problems of why surface water became more scarce, or how so many of the larger herbivores had managed to survive after the biosphere had been devastated. True enough, the larger creatures were scarce, but there was no doubt that without the interventions from the sentient indigenous species, as well as the efforts of the alien settlers, anything larger than a womprat would be extinct. In establishing the first mining town, Anchorhead, the Czerka Corporation, were faced with several problems, the water scarcity problem, the frequent and often inundating desert storms, and the idigenous sentient life forms who enjoyed pilfering and generally hindering efforts to collect resources. So, they brought in a Droid tunneler and built a subterranean, high speed, superconducting rail to connect three of the cities, and further

extending into the Dune Sea. Moisture farmers above ground along the path of the underground, fed the water pipeline that was part of the infrastructure constructed along side the rail. For whatever reasons, the rail services was never completed, and the Droid Tunneler to this day rested somewhere below the dune sea, waiting to be refuel and given more construction supplies. When the Huts took over Tatooine, they found the 'Underground' extremely palatable. The tunnels became residential areas for those who could afford it and it gave rise to one of the best known underground markets this side of the Galaxy. The coin that Byrne was holding would give her access to an exclusive gambling operation. There was a minimum bid that was usually cost prohibitive for the average person, but the crystals she had in her pocket would certainly get her a seat at a table.

The directions Byrne was provided were perfect and she was passed through to the inner chambers without any suspicions. The first human to greet her as she acclimated herself to the sights and smells of the clandestine casino made her smile. He offered his hands in welcome. She lowered her hood. The man visibly paled, his breath stopped in his chest, and for a moment, and just for the two of them, there wasn't another sound or sight to be seen. It was as if time had stopped. Then he bolted. Byrne did not chase in the way most predators did. Instead of making a bee line for the prey, she allowed her instinct to direct her to an emergency escape hatch. She followed it up and soon found herself on the surface, just outside a series of five, small, domed garages. Each garage housed a speeder, and several air bikes. The man she was chasing was just about to climb into one of the speeders, before he felt the business end of her blaster rub against his neck, pushing into his jaw.

"Please don't kill me," he said.

"Orlov, my old friend," she sang. "Eh, keep your hands on the speeder." She removed one of his knives, pocketing it.

"Please, I have changed. I have children," Orlov said.

"You don't know the half of it," Byrne said, and stunned him.

After binding his hands and feet, she tossed Orlov into the speeder. She delivered him to her ship, secured him properly, told her new recruits to hang tight a little longer, and then she returned to the Cantina where she sat down in the booth with Kish. It wasn't long before the other part of the story arrived. She boldly approached and sat down across from Byrne. Her face revealed anger, but there was also a slight tremor in her hands that suggested she was also afraid.

"Hello, Jesser," Byrne said.

"Admiral," Jesser said. "Is he still alive?"

"I suspect if you believed he was dead, you would have already shot at me already," Byrne said.

"I may still do so," Jesser said. "I say the word and all these people who are avoiding eye contact with me are going to open fire. I have made powerful friends with the Hutts. You don't want to get on my bad side."

Byrne nodded, smiling. She leaned into the table. "Here's what's going to happen. You and I are going to walk out of here together, and you will accompany me back to my ship."

"What do you want with me?" Jesser asked.

"I need a command crew. I managed to scrounge up a few who would know there way around a star destroyer, but with you and Orlov together, well, let's just say, it's obvious that fate wants us together again," Byrne said.

"Just so you can finish us off, like you did the rest of the crew?" Jesser asked.

“You and Orlov help me with this mission, and I will allow you to return to your cushy, little life,” Byrne said.

“I don’t trust you,” Jesser said.

“Not asking you to. But it is in your best interest,” Byrne said.

“Why?”

“Because if you don’t, your children and your grandchildren will be targeted, most likely kidnapped and tortured indefinitely, and they will never even know why,” Byrne said.

“You are a sick, evil, bitch,” Jesser said.

“I know. But the sad part is, I’m not the one you have to worry about,” Byrne said, an evil smile ripe on her face.

Jesser sat still, studying Byrne, her hatred nearly overwhelming her. “Stand down, everyone. My guest and I are going for a walk.”

“Just like old times,” Byrne said, standing from the booth.



Venrich had finished washing his hands in a manner that pushed clinical to obsessive and was about to return to his patients when he gave pause to the mirror. The necklace he wore was common to every citizen of Waterbourne. It was comprised of linked, glossy black rectangles, powered by visible light, that were capable of scanning the environment and the wearer. The necklaces provided intel on every citizen in real time, not just sights and sounds, but biometric information on metabolism, temperature, pulse, and O2 readings. Everything they heard, felt, tasted, and saw was broadcasted and recorded. Theoretically, every citizen had access to any other citizen’s data set, in real time or past recordings. In practicality, the higher you were in the social structure, the more access you had to other people’s data. A person had free access to anyone on their social level, their peers, family, or friends, but they were typically denied access to their superiors. Wearing the telemetry devices was the only requirement of citizenship, as it was sold to them that only a hundred percent transparency allowed a society to remain civil and peaceful.

For the first time in his life, his necklace was turned off, on orders of Lord Kilmore himself. It puzzled him, but he had long since learned not to question orders from the top. He only sometimes imagined what it would be like giving up citizenship, turning off the necklace going to live on another world. He imagined how liberating it would be to do whatever you wanted and not be scrutinized. Now, here he was for the first time knowing for a certainty that no one was watching him, and he felt, of all things, lonely.

Venrich had to force himself to return to work, or he would have stared at himself in the mirror until he could understand exactly what he was looking for. To his surprise, not only had Preston risen from his medical bed, but he also had removed his own ventilator tube, catheter, and IV wrist band. He was dressed in his clothes, sitting next to his friend, who had not come out of her coma yet. Preston stroked her hair and sang in a whisper, displaying a kindness the medic had not seen anyone else display in a long time. He didn’t interrupt the song, even after it was finished and he was certain Preston knew he was there, because there was strong urge to sit with the after-song, wanting the stillness to go on for a spell. Preston eyes went to Venrich. He offered a faint smile, not showing teeth. Venrich’s hair was thin, and graying, and he could stand to lose some weight, but overall, he projected a gentleness and wisdom, that similar to Preston’s.

“As a medic, we have a saying, you’re not dead until you’re warm and dead,” Venrich said. “The cold water spared her any permanent brain damage, but she is still in a coma. She will either wake up or she won’t.”

“I know,” Preston said.

“You have the gift of sight as well?” Venrich asked.

“Gift?” Preston asked.

“Many of us here at Waterborne who have gone through the ritual return with gifts,” Venrich explained. “I was always a skilled medic, but after rising, I soon discovered I could see into a body, see where energy gets obstructed. I can tell a person what’s wrong with them before the medical scans finish doing their surveys. I have even gained some skills at manipulating energy to release blockages, restoring people to perfect health.”

Preston understood what Venrich was saying, as this was something he himself was capable of. His assumption was that anyone capable of separating from their body into their energy body would have access to this kind of sight. Since he believed everyone was capable of leaving their body, he hadn’t considered that some people might not be able to see energy, or auras. The fact that Venrich described his ability as a gift seemed to promote the unspoken idea that everyone was limited to certain ‘special’ abilities, as opposed to having access to all that the Force had to offer. But he wasn’t here to teach. The forced time away from his body had given him insight into his mission. His resignation to what must be done was feeling rather burdensome, and he was finding it challenging to motivate himself.

“I don’t suppose you know why Kilmore doesn’t want any physical or virtual evidence of your presence here, do you?” Venrich asked.

“For your safety,” Preston said.

Venrich looked away, accepting the vagueness of the answer. He put his hands in his pocket. He could sense the sadness emanating from the young man, but didn’t want to address it. Many people who had come through the ritual alive were profoundly changed, often melancholy, as if they were sad to be back. “I was directed to bring you to him once you came out of your coma.”

“And if I decline?” Preston asked.

A subtle face change washed over Venrich. His eyes grew dark and a sneer pushed the ends of his lips. “You will do as I command or your friend will suffer,” came a voice that sounded nothing like Venrich’s voice.

Preston offered upturned hands. “Here, or there, I see no difference, seeing how you are already present,” Preston said.

Venrich chuckled. “The Force is strong with you. You will find the people of this city obey, or their families suffer. Do you really want Venrich’s family to be harmed because he failed to follow out my orders?”

“I will comply with your request, of course,” Preston said.

Venrich’s face changed back. He steadied himself by reaching out to a table and took a deep breath. Preston stood, his obvious intention was to aid the Venrich, but he was waved off.

“Oh, don’t worry about me. Ever since the ritual I have experienced random seizures,” Venrich explained.

Preston accepted Venrich’s explanation for what had just transpired. Correcting his vision at this point would only cause him more distress. In fact, taking away a person’s self defense mechanism was harmful as removing someone’s spacesuit. It could kill them. He wondered if people knew that simple truth, would the treat others with more compassion?

“Where were we?” Venrich asked.

“You were going to take me to see Lord Kilmore,” Preston said.

“Oh, yeah,” Venrich said. “Really nice guy. You should feel lucky. Not everyone gets to meet him in person. Always so busy watching over Waterbourne, keeping us safe.”

Preston watched Venrich for evidence that he believed this, but he saw no emotional attachment to the statement whatsoever. It was if it had been repeated so much that it had become a ritualistic statement.



Byrne’s ship was a Fury-class Imperial Interceptor, known as the Dragon’s Wake. Given its age and mileage, one wouldn’t expect to find it in such pristine condition. Once again, Orlov found himself sitting in the pilot’s seat, with Jesser to his left, and Byrne’s sitting behind them. There were twelve people in the back who had sufficient Star Destroyer experience and were reasonably trust worthy that she had hired them. Orlov wasn’t as optimistic of their abilities, but that was the last thing he was going to say when he was working on extricating himself and Jesser from the situation. Jesser sat with her arms crossed, sulking. The flight deck was quite cozy, even with a whole array of computers wrapping around them, optimizing data acquisition. The Fury-class Imperial Interceptor doubled for a remote base of operation, giving Sith operatives a great deal of versatility in the field. And the three of them had been in the field a lot.

“You really don’t need us, Admiral,” Orlov said.

“Stop calling me Admiral,” Byrne said. “Take us into orbit.”

Orlov sighed. “You don’t need us, Alarna. You certainly don’t need to threaten my family. We didn’t even know you existed till you showed up.”

Jesser looked at him. “Really?! I told you it was her all along.”

“The two of you are going to help me tie up a loose end, before it’s too late,” Byrne said.

“What loose ends?” Orlov asked. “The Emperor is dead. The war is long over. You can move on with your life.”

“I wish it were that simple, but the taint of evil lingers, and it will have us all back,” Byrne said.

“Oh, right. So you’re one of those fear mongerers who asserts that the Emperor was evil, now that he is gone and can’t defend himself,” Jesser said.

“You doubt?” Byrne asked.

“I don’t know what kind of man he was. I never met him. I do know what kind of person you are,” Jesser said.

“Regardless of what you think of me, you and Orlov will help me with this. After all, Orlov, it is partly your fault?”

“What’s my fault?” Orlov said.

“You impregnated me,” Byrne said.

Orlov seemed taken aback. Jesser revved up her anger towards Byrne. “How is the fact you opened your legs his fault?”

“The only way I could have been impregnated was that he was taking enhancing supplements,” Byrne said. Orlov was mysteriously silent. “You think I don’t know about all the biological experiments you were conducting at every port of call? How many children do you suppose you have scattered throughout the galaxy? How many multi-species babies did you create just for the hell of it?”

“You’re not going to stir up controversy between me and my husband,” Jesser told her. “We are free of your reign and your lies.”

“Yeah, you look free,” Byrne said.

“We have a child?” Orlov asked, quietly.

“Really? You’re going to buy into this crap?” Jesser asked.

“We have a son. I had an abortion on the day that I executed the crew, but for whatever reasons, my medical Droid took it upon itself to take matters into its own hands, placed it in an incubator, and raised it to adulthood,” Byrne explained.

“I knew it! I told you she killed everyone!” Jesser said, slapping the console in front of her.

“I was following orders!” Byrne snapped. “The Emperor wanted a new source of Force Crystals to supply an army of Sith Lords. I found it and he wanted the source to himself, no one alive could know about it.”

“But why would your Droid have violated your orders and spared your fetus?” Orlov asked.

“I don’t know. Either it the Emperor managed to reprogram it to find a weakness in me to exploit, or it malfunctioned,” Byrne speculated.

“Some malfunction,” Jesser said.

Orlov was still processing information. “So, we have a son that was raised by a Droid and you want to what, kill him?”

“Consider it a mercy killing,” Byrne said.

“How is killing him an act of mercy?” Orlov asked.

“It’s the only way to save him from the Bloodhunters,” Byrne said.

“Bloodhunters?” Jesser asked, sitting up in her chair. “Why would the Bloodhunters want your child?”

Orlov blinked. “They don’t want him. They want you! You went into hiding, too! You killed the crew. You gave the emperor the coordinates for the crystals and then you disappeared!”

“Yes,” Byrne said. “And I would have stayed in hiding had I not heard the call of the Bloodhunters.”

“Well, I have solution,” Jesser said. “Why don’t you turn yourself into the Bloodhunters?”

“Because I like my life and they will still capture Preston and torture him just to spite me,” Byrne said.

“I’m sure they know you are a cold, sick, selfish bitch,” Jesser said. “There’d be no point to torture him after they have you. Anyone who knows you will attest to the fact you have no maternalistic instincts.”

“Oh, give it a rest, Jesser,” Byrne said. “If there was such a thing as maternal instinct, there would be no bad mothers by definition. Afterall, your sense of femininity didn’t prevent you from having an affair with Orlov, or running off with him even though you knew he was married and had three kids. Did you consider the impact on that family? Or did that sense of caring not kick in until after you had your first born? Oh, I guess not, since you’re still only focused on your own.”

“I would do anything to protect my family!” Jesser said.

“I hope so. Because if the Bloodhunter don’t catch Preston soon, they will start looking for next of kin,” Byrne said.

“If Bloodhunters are really involved, we’re going to need more than this command crew,” Jesser said.

“Always the logistican,” Byrne said. “The Dradon is waiting for us in orbit with a hundred mercaneries, twenty Tie capable pilots, and a dozen bounty hunters.”

“That’s enough for a small war,” Orlov said.

“Are you stupid?” Jesser asked. “Do you know anything about Droids or Bloodhunters? It won’t be enough.”

“It will be enough. You also have me,” Byrne said.

“An old Sith who has been out of the game and hiding for the last 18 years?” Jesser asked. “Even your limited bag of voodoo tricks won’t be enough! Bloodhunters are cold, calculating, methodical, and a lot like you...”

Byrne sighed, pulled out her blaster, and stunned Jesser. She fell to the right of her chair.

“Orlov, take us into orbit, or you can sleep, too,” Byrne said.

Orlov complied. Once in orbit, Byrne directed Orlov to navigate closer to a Quasar Fire-class bulk cruiser that was prominent in the night sky. Byrne used her control panel to access the communications systems and called up the Dradon.

“Alright, Captain Waris,” Byrne hailed. “Preapre to slave your hyperdrive to mine. This is going to be a real short trip and I’d hate for you to get lost.”

“I’d feel a lot better about this if you weren’t using a voice modulator and I could see who I was talking to,” Waris said.

“Well, Tarek, all I can say is it’s in your best interest not to know,” Byrne said. Computers indicated that the two ships had synced hyperdrives. She motioned to Orlov to make the jump.

The Dragon’s Wake and Dradon disappeared into hyperspace simultaneously. Confident that they had made the transition to light speed, Orlov asked permission to take Jesser back to one of the cabins. Byrne agreed, but followed Orlov as he carried her back. He set his wife down gently, pushed her hair out of her eyes, and then covered her up. Byrne felt the stirring of jealousy, but she knew enough not to focus on it. There was a reason she lived alone. The kind of tenderness Orlov seemed to be displaying never lasted.

“Really, Alarna. Why are you doing this?” Orlov asked.

“Because, though your wife is wrong about the Emperor, she is right about me,” Byrne said.

“I don’t think so. I think you were just in a really challenging situation, just trying to make the best of it,” Orlov said. “That’s why I think you’d be okay if you just dispeared again.”

“It just doesn’t work that way. I’m a finder. I always was. The greater my life is threatened, the more likely I am to find what I need. The Emperor charged me with two urgent tasks. The first one was to find him a pathway to immortality.”

“Well, you failed on that one,” Orlov said, trying to lighten the mood. He didn’t remember her sounding so depressed.

“It’s not my fault he over reached and got himself killed!” Byrne snapped. The burst of anger only animated her for a moment, then she seemed exhausted again. “My second task was finding a way to create force sensitive children so that the Emperor could raise an army of Sith Lords. Soon after I was given that charge, I found you, an expert in bio-tech, integrative, cellular hybridization and reproductive specialist, who actually enjoyed getting down and dirty in the field. You didn’t actually think I was ignoring your extra-curricular activities, did you?”

Had Orlov known then how close he was being scuritized, he might have produced less off spring. His anonymity had given him a sense of power over his research subjects. "I believe you, but, you're not making sense. I wasn't trying to make Force sensitive children. I've fathered hundreds of children and there is no evidence that any of them are capable of using the Force."

Byrne entered the room fully, allowing the door to shut. "Evidence? You're still doing active studies?"

"Well, yeah. You can't do longitudinal studies without a collecting data over time," Orlov said.

"How are you getting your data?" Byrne asked.

"Each of subjects who were impregnated and carried to term were provided sufficient resources to care for themselves and their child. Additionally, I gave each of them a family Droid. At specific intervals, the Droids would update their surveys to a local data base, that would later be uploaded to an interstellar server, where I could review the data remotely at my convenience," Orlov explained.

"You are an idiot," Byrne said. "Why didn't you just save some time and paint a target on your back and light some flares and dance around?!"

"I was doing just fine till you showed up, thank you very much," Orlov said.

"You don't have a clue just how unfine you were," Byrne said. "I found you by accident. After a certain threshold of failure, the Bloodhunters will start capturing next of kin, and you dispersed a map with pins it, saying 'please start here,'" Byrne said. "It won't take them long before they come for your present family and you, and you living mostly off the grid, out of Droid sight, is just not going to stop it."

"To what ends?" Orlov demanded.

"To no ends!"

"There is nothing to be gained by capturing us!" Orlov said.

"Bloodhunters don't care. It's the Emperor's last revenge!"

"He's dead!"

"You're not listening to me. You impregnated me at a time when the Emperor was still influencing me to complete my missions. I'm a finder. My mind, both conscious and unconscious, my body, my soul all work in conjunction to deliver what I need. Not only did we produce a Force sensitive child, he is so incredibly adept that he is probably more powerful than even Darth Vader. I have seen holo-movies of him healing animals, resurrecting animals, which means he could theoretically be capable of bringing the Emperor back to life," Byrne said. "And I will not sit back and allow that evil to be unleashed upon the galaxy again."

Orlov was visibly scared. "You've lost your mind," he said. "There is no scientific evidence for raising the dead."

"After all these years, you still know absolutely nothing about the Force. Resurrecting the dead is as easy getting someone pregnant," Byrne said.

"Think about this logically. Even if you could find a body, assuming it's perfectly preserved, there would be so much decay that you couldn't get enough viable DNA to even clone the Emperor, not even with the most advance tech that we have available to us," Orlov insisted.

"Oh! Your reliance on your tech is what keeps you blinded to the unlimited potential of the Force!" Byrne snapped. "I'm so tired of arguing with you about this. You'll never get it."

Byrne turned to leave.

“Wait, Alarna, please,” Orlov asked. Byrne stopped. “When you’re done with this, with us. Promise me you won’t kill Jesser.”

“Why should I?” Byrne asked.

“Because. I will do anything you ask,” Orlov promised.

“Anything?” Byrne asked.

He stood up, came closer, took her hand. She had always thought that Asians aged better than other ethnicities, but he was looking worn. Perhaps Tatooine had punished him. Still, even with the obvious signs of aging, the gray in his hair, the added wrinkles, she still found him handsome.

“Anything,” Orlov echoed.

“Kiss me,” Byrne said.

Orlov didn’t move. His hand trembled in hers. He seemed confused.

“What? Can’t do it while she’s in the room with us? We could do it on the bed with her and she would never even know,” Byrne said.

“I would know,” Orlov said.

“Wow. What happened to you?” Byrne asked, not hiding her surprise.

“I’ve changed,” Orlov admitted.

“I see that. So, do me a favor and don’t make promises you won’t keep,” Byrne said.

Lord Kilmore's chamber was dimly lit. The walls were so dark that the eye easily fell for the illusion that there was an endless depth of empty space in all directions. The throne, or pedestal, where Kilmore spent his day, dwindling away, was surrounded by a thousand monitors, where he watched the lives of his Waterbourne citizen play out. Some of the monitors displayed key players in distant cities, some on other planets, and some on the many ships in his fleet. The further distant the agent in scrutiny was, the more likely the telemetry was not real time. He had several main screens positioned close to his chair. The controls on his chair allowed him to change views to fit his whims. His chair was also equipped to allow him to tap into the myriad of additional sensory information available to him. And, finally, at a moments notice, he could literally hijack most of his agents, with tech or the Force or both.

Venrich turned Preston over to Darth Torlin and Alyth and then the door shut him out. They escorted Preston to Lord Kilmore, stopping just shy of the shield that separated the throne pedestal from the rest of the room. They waited patiently to be addressed, while Kilmore manipulated agents on the screen as easily as if he were playing a video game. Preston seemed so at ease that Torlin wanted to smack him down, but he held his hand because his master had not directed him to do so. Lord Kilmore finished his activity, then spun around and gazed down on them, smiling.

"Preston G Waycaster," Kilmore said, smiling, resting his chin on a hand, his elbow in the arm of the chair. He coughed. "Such a pleasure to meet you."

"Thank you. It's nice to meet you," Preston said.

Kilmore seemed taken aback. "I'm surprised. Most Jedi's would find it necessary to be rude, or at the minimum, sarcastic."

"I am not a Jedi, but even if I were, I can't explain your experience. I see no need to engage in an exchange of hostilities," Preston said.

"Well said. But I don't like people lying to me. There is no way you are so well trained in the Force not to be a Jedi," Kilmore said.

"Perhaps you are so use to people lying to you that you're projecting," Preston said.

Torlin was about to address Preston, but Kilmore raised a finger. Torlin turned back, lowering his gaze.

"Your lack of fear suggests stupidity at the least," Kilmore said. "Still, I like you. And that, my young friend, leaves me with a dilemma. Alyth, take the cons. Torlin, the pros. Break it down for me."

"As long as the Bloodhunters are after him, he is a liability," Alyth said.

"Indeed," Kilmore agreed, but was not impressed. "And obvious. Torlin?"

"As long as he continues to defeat the Bloodhunters, he will continue to improve as a warrior. Additionally, as the Bloodhunters escalate their campaigns to capture him, we can use them to destroy our own enemies. We insert Preston into a location, alert the Bloodhunters, and allow the collateral damage to ensue."

Kilmore laughed until he coughed. "I love it. I have always wondered if it were true that some Bloodhunters are mechanized weapons. A Droid anti-matter bomb with the sole purpose deploying itself would be marvelous to observe. Awe, let the terror reign. Next?"

"His neutrality is disgusting," Alyth said. "He is neither Jedi nor Sith and he refuses to pick a side."

“Agreed. I find his lack of commitment equally disturbing,” Kilmore said.

Torlin felt Kilmore searching him, waiting for a response. He also found Preston’s nonalignment revolting, but then he was tasked with finding something positive. “It is his non alignment which makes him an asset, as he is more likely to be able to bait others into lowering their guard. He will blend in where others stand out, making him a tool.”

“Which also means you can’t control his loyalty, Master,” Alyth said, and intuitively stumbled forward in her argument. “You don’t have a foothold! You don’t have a clue what he’s thinking, nor do you have any influence.”

Kilmore went into a coughing fit which took him a moment to recover. He wheezed. Surprisingly, he confirmed Alyth’s suspicion: “I was not able to get a foothold in him. You were dead for an hour, Preston. How did you block me?”

“Maybe you’ve reached capacity?” Preston asked. “You should release some of your older, slower assets so you can acquire a newer, faster, smarter ones.”

Kilmore laughed at Preston’s attempt to bait him. “As my body grows weaker, I become stronger in the Force. You would be a fool to mistake otherwise,” he said.

“Of course,” Preston said, bowing slightly. “The closer we are to death, the greater our access to the Force.”

“Interesting,” Kilmore said. He reflected over the statement, his finger steepling, touching his lip. “My Master said something similar to me once. Indeed, that is how Waterbourne was founded. This is where I was raised.” Kilmore allowed his mind to go back and it was difficult to discern if it was pain or pleasure flashing across his face. “Is that why the Bloodhunters want you? Are you a lost student of Vistrill?”

“I’ve spoken with him,” Preston said.

“Liar! He’s been dead for thirty years now!” Kilmore spat.

“He said you killed him. Specifically, he had a foothold in you and you flip it at a crucial juncture in a fight and stayed his hand,” Preston said.

Kilmore leaned so far forward in his seat he looked as if he might fall out. “You can Travel! Do you speak to the dead, or simply read the Akshic records. Wait, of course. You do more than Travel, you can project yourself there, physically! A doppelganger! You can create doubles! And you kept this from me, Alyth.”

As Kilmore squeezed his fist, Alyth staggered to the floor. “I suspected, Master, but I was not sure,” Alyth pleaded.

“I decide what is certain, not you!” Kilmore said. He eased up on his fist and slid back into his seat, coughing. “I’ve heard of those who can create doppelgangers. Always wanted one for a pet. If you taught me this skill, or gave me a foot hold, perhaps I could project into a younger, more fit body.” He laughed, pointing at Alyth. “Oh, Torlin, did you see that? I swear, if I weren’t controlling her, she might have killed Preston just to keep me from learning a new skill.”

“Obviously, he would be a great asset. The mere fact that he is wanted by the Bloodhunters is sufficient to know he is valuable,” Torlin said. “The Emperor would not have placed a hit on him otherwise.”

“Indeed,” Kilmore said, sighing. “But he is not old enough to have met the Emperor himself, so, what then, someone in his family? One of your ancestors betrayed him? You’re not a Skywalker, are you?”

“What, Skywalkers come out with several generation of powerful Jedi, that means all powerful Jedis are related?” Preston asked.

“You’re holding back,” Alyth said.

“He is well trained,” Torlin countered.

“Oh, that is for sure,” Kilmore said, pulling Preston’s lightsabers out. Kilmore had both Preston’s current one, and the one he had loaned Daphne. “I have not seen their equal in a long time. Nice touch with the security lock. Who taught you?”

“I am sorry, but no one person, and no one living, is responsible for my training,” Preston said.

“Enough of his insolence! Let me destroy him?!” Alyth demanded.

“Or, he destroys you and becomes my new apprentice,” Torlin offered, speaking Kilmore’s thoughts.

“Yes, Alyth, I think you’re right. It’s the only way to get to the bottom of this. Fight, and allow the Force to sort it out,” Kilmore said, tossing a lightsaber to Preston.

The only thing that saved Preston from being struck down by Alyth’s blade was the fact that his lightsaber blade deployed instantaneously on catching it. The report that accompanied the blade’s deployment echoed in the small chamber. Kilmore covered his ears, laughing hysterically. Torlin was going to participate, but Kilmore used his Force manipulation to move him back out of the way.

“Let’s play fair,” Kilmore said.

It was hardly a fair fight, since Alyth was compensating for her wounds. When their blades met again, he managed to grab hold her lightsaber hilt and turned it off, while simultaneously, pushing her back against the wall with the Force. She hit the wall and slid down. Her right arm was broken and she could hardly breathe. Kilmore laughed and clapped.

“Finish her!” Kilmore cheered.

Preston deactivated his lightsaber and faced Kilmore.

“I will not kill her,” Preston said.

“THEN I WILL,” Kilmore and Torlin said, both together.

Preston activated both his and Alyth’s lightsaber together, blocking Torlin’s awkward attack, no doubt affected by Kilmore’s feeble control and a coughing fit. Preston’s lightsaber was only on for a second, before he shut it off and reignited it. Alyth’s blade held firm against, Torlin’s blade. His own blade went through Torlin’s chest, illuminating the chest cavity, neck, and shining through some of his clothes. The sonic blast that accompanied the activation rippled the edges of Torlin’s cape. Torlin didn’t scream. Kilmore wailed, grabbing his chest. Torlin’s blade extinguished as his lightsaber fell to the floor. As Torlin collapsed towards the floor, his own weight pulled him through Preston’s lightsaber like butter slipping over a hot knife. He hit the floor, his upper torso torn in two.

Kilmore found the strength to stand. He walked down the pedestal and stood, hunched, in front of the shield, shouting profanities.

“You bastard! You killed my hand! You will not leave this planet alive! My hand, damn you!” Kilmore shouted.

Preston threw down both lightsabers and approached Kilmore, even dropped to both knees, in a gesture forgiveness begging.

“I don’t understand, Master? I thought I had to kill Torlin to become your apprentice?” Preston said. “Vistril sent me to you so I wouldn’t be alone.”

“He was my hand!” Kilmore said.

“He was old and weak,” Preston snapped in anger. Calmer, he mawkishly begged: “Take me as your new hand, and together, with your knowledge and power, and my strength and abilities, you will be the next Emperor. I need your guidance, Master.”

“I,” Kilmore stopped. “You must give me a foothold!”

“I will gladly submit, Master, if you will grant me two gifts,” Preston said.

“That’s not how this works!” Kilmore spit.

“All I ask is that you give me Alyth as my apprentice and that you’re out of her head,” Preston said. “So there can be more of you in mine. I am so tired being alone, Master. I’ve been alone all my life. That’s why I came to you.”

Preston prostrated himself on the floor, hands reaching out towards Kilmore. Kilmore turned off the shields using his bracelet tech. He approached Preston eagerly. He had been with Torlin so long that loosing him was exactly like loosing a limb, and he needed a puppet of Torlin’s ability or better to stay in control of his small Empire. He had a hint of Preston’s ability, and he was eager to take him on. He was so focused on this, he actually let many of his assets go, including Alyth, so he could be sure to capture his prey. Recapturing was much easier than first footholds.

“There, there, son,” Kilmore said, touching Preston’s head. “Let me ease your loneliness...”

Kilmore touched Preston’s head, forcing his presence into his mind. Preston was able to see the depths of Kilmore’s depravity, saw all the footholds he had forged. In that same instant, Kilmore had a glimmer of the power he was about to have access to, the power to create a doppelganger, one even healthier than his own body. He could live physically as he did mentally, even be young again! But he wouldn’t have a hold until Preston surrendered or accepted an exchange.

“Join me, Preston. Look at all these tools you can use. You can take over their bodies, sleep with their wives and girlfriends. You know you want to,” Kilmore’s voice echoed in Preston’s mind. “Or take over the females if you prefer, make them your slaves...”

Preston gripped Kilmore’s ankles and channeled an intense burst of energy directly into him. Kilmore was so shocked he was unable to scream. He became illuminated from the inside out, collapsing into a ball of white light, suspended in air about where his heart would have been. When the light faded, a black diamond fell to the floor. Preston got up and walked towards Alyth, pausing only to rid the floor of Torlin’s remains. A red diamond lit the floor in its place, with the tiniest echo, volumes difference than Preston’s lightsaber popping. He knelt down beside Alyth.

“I don’t understand. I thought you were going to join him,” Alyth said.

Preston pushed a hair out of her eyes. She was still struggling to breathe, probably due to the additional broken ribs. “I needed him to believe that, so he would let down his shield, his guard,” Preston said.

“You lied to him?” Alyth said.

“The best lies always contain truth,” Preston said.

“I don’t understand,” Alyth said.

“I have abandonment issues and now that I am finally around people, I am afraid of being alone, of not being accepted, of not being liked,” Preston admitted.

Alyth touched his face. “You really are lonely,” Alyth said. “Is that why you came to me all those years? You felt rejected because I pushed you away?”

“I never felt rejected by you,” Preston said.

“I hated you,” Alyth said.

“You loved me,” Peston corrected.

Alyth found herself choking on her own blood, but it hurt so much to cough that it took her a moment to clear her lungs. With her one good hand, she grasped his poncho and pulled him closer.

“Please, kill me,” Alyth said, closing her eyes.

Preston sat down on the floor next to her. He took her broken hand in his and she closed her eyes expecting pain. Preston extended her hand and arm, without causing as much as a pin prick of sensation. She opened her eyes to see if he was doing anything, and only then knew that her hand was healed. He pulled her closer, resting her head on his shoulder, embracing her, his hands flat on her back, and then he closed his eyes and healed all her wounds. She gasped and pulled back.

“I don’t understand,” Alyth said, crying.

“Wanting to die is surrender, but it wasn’t death you wanted, just kindness, just love,” Preston said.

“I don’t deserve it,” Alyth said.

“No one does. That’s why it’s called love,” Preston said.

Alyth embraced him, her cheek touching his. She closed her eyes tight, pushing more tears out and down her face. She welcomed his whispers of comfort, reminding her she was safe, he had her. When she kissed him, he kissed back. The years of shared sparring, coupled with the present emotions, quickly escalated their passion into intimacy. When the energy was spent, they lay together on the floor, staring up into the darkness, holding each other. Their bodies were illuminated by the eerie blue from the monitors where a myriad of people continue blissfully about their days unawares of the battle that was fought, and how dramatically their lives were about to change.

“We should go,” Alyth said.

“I know,” Preston agreed, not really wanting to get up. Getting up meant moving closer to his primary goal. Getting up meant not being next to her. Somewhere, a part of him knew once they left this room they would never be intimate again. He assumed it meant he would soon be dead, so he didn’t follow the suspicion, because he didn’t want to know the source of the thought. Instead, he focused on the ‘now.’ He was so present he could measure the passage of time in her heart beats. He inhaled as she exhaled, two oceans dancing. The warmth radiating from her bosom more than made up for his time spent freezing. There were so many present details to revel in, he could stay next to her for days and not be moved by even hunger. There was a palpable difference to her energy, but he was unable to find the words that might differentiate her from his previous partners. Alyth’s love was just as genuine as Jordeen’s love, but with a sadness that belied her feelings of unworthiness. Like Jordeen, she gave with no expectation of receiving, she had simply surrendered to the moment, though her own wanting echoed his. Even in the after glow, as she moved her hand against his chest, it was done with a gentle measure, as if wanting to remember everything, knowing this moment would never be again. All future moments would be new, different. In this quiet, mutual rejoicing in each others presence, they gave in to a much more subdued paced exploration of their love. Afterwards, she slept in his arms, while he stared into the darkness. When she woke, they both got up and began to dress, silently.

Preston found it fascinating to watch her dress. His fascination with females was obvious, but perhaps in the years of solitude he had established an unconscious mythos of magic

surrounding them. The mystery of how someone put a bra on by themselves was finally solved. Watching the ritual of putting on clothes was increasing his thoughts of taking them back again. His intensity of watching didn't go unnoticed. She blushed.

"I'm sorry," he said, diverting his eyes.

"Hey," she said, waiting till he met her eyes to continue. "Never apologize for seeing me."

She sat on the floor to put on her boots and strap them up, while he retrieved her lightsaber. He gave her a hand up and offered her the weapon. She hesitated.

"You are what you are, but you are not what you were," Preston assured her. She took hold of the lightsaber and he pulled her in close. "You can change the color of your blade any time you want."

Alyth could not divert her eyes. Her chest hurt. "What is this feeling?"

Preston shrugged. "I can't tell you what you're feeling. Only what I'm feeling."

"This can't be love," Alyth insisted, her mouth closer to his.

"Why not?" Preston asked, his lips almost touching hers.

"Because, it's not supposed to work like this," Alyth insisted.

"How is it supposed to work?"

"I don't know..."

"Okay, so I want say it now, because it might sound too trite," Preston said. "But I wonder, if instead of labeling this feeling, this moment, we just accept it and each other and simply be?"

"I'm finding it difficult to move at all," Alyth said.

"So am I," Preston said. "But if we tarry much longer, our clothes may come off again."

"I'm strangely okay with that," Alyth said.

Preston kissed her. He liked that she didn't close her eyes. "Tell me, how would you like to play our departure?"

"I don't understand," Alyth said.

"Well, with Kilmore and Torlin gone, there will most likely be a power struggle. We might be able to minimize it by maintaining the illusion that they're still alive, slowly weed out those in charge and replace them with people more favorable to our preferences," Preston began.

Alyth shook her head no. "I've more clarity now than I have had in a long time. I've spent much of my life spinning lies, to myself, to others. I would rather just tell the truth and let what happens happen."

"Oh, good for you," Preston said, kissing her.

"What, was that a test?" Alyth asked.

"Uh? Oh, no," Preston said. "Not at all. I favour your perspective is all."

"Waterbourne will be okay. The kakistocracy will fall without Kilmore's hand up their asses and this city will begin to thrive. It's the Admirals on the Star Destroyers that may be more problematic. As for my command, well, once I tell them that Kilmore isn't threatening their families if they retire, most will gladly leave the service."

"Will you have enough remaining to run your ship?" Preston asked.

"Yes, why?" Alyth said.

"We need to rendezvous with my friends and protect them from the Bloodhunters," Preston said. "There will be one more attack before I put a stop to the threat once and for all."

"Of course. Most of the crew would enjoy saving people for a change," Alyth said. She lowered her eyes. "May I ask you a question?"

“Beyond that one? Sure, you may ask me anything,” Preston said. Alyth kissed him for his playfulness. “What are we?” she asked. “I don’t understand the question,” Preston admitted. “Are we friends? Are we lovers? Am I your apprentice?” Alyth asked. “I thought we agreed not to label the moment,” Preston reminded her. “Sorry,” Alyth said. “I can’t let it go.” “Okay, well, what would you like to be?” Preston asked. “All of the above,” Alyth said. “I accept,” Preston said. “Tell me what your name was before you became Darth Alyth?” “I don’t want to be that again,” Alyth said. “Okay,” Preston said. “May I still know it?” “Kankana Chaterjee,” she said. “I like that,” Preston said, excited. “Kankana Chaterjeed. Nice on the tounge.” He saw her grimace. “But you don’t want it. Do you have a preference for a new name?” “Is this important?” she asked. When he nodded, she thought about it. “I always liked the name Priya.” “Priya G Waycaster it is, then,” Preston said. Alyth gave him a sly smile. “Was that an off handed marriage proposal?” “I hadn’t thought about it like that,” Preston said, musing. “I just thought it would be nice not being the only Waycaster. I want you as family.” “From now on, we are. Let me think about the name change, though,” Alyth said. Preston took a moment to retrieve his lightsaber. He also collected Torlin’s blade, partly because he didn’t want to leave it lying arround, and partly because he was thinking of starting a collection. He also collected the diamond remains of Torlin and Kilmore, placing them in the felt pouch, which he returned to his pocket. He did it with the reverence one might observe with human remains. “How many?” Alyth asked. “Three,” Preston said, reverently. “You treat everyone with respect? Even your enemies?” Alyth asked. Preston shrugged, not speaking the maxim that a person learns more about himself from his enemies and losses than they do from their friends and wins. He proceeded to Kilmore’s chair where he found his first lightsaber that was on loan to Daphne, as well as Kilmore’s lightsaber. He was aware that Alyth was scrutinizing him with the same intensity he had watched her dress. He smiled at her. He couldn’t resist sitting in Kilmore’s chair. He spun it around, finding hidden panels that he rifled through looking for treasures. “You know, we should lighten this place up,” Alyth said. Preston turned the chair back to face her. “You want to have sex in his chair?” he asked, playfully. “Do we have time?” Alyth asked, equally quick. Preston was surprised that she played along. He blinked, believing she would not hesitate if he said the word. He sighed a fake lament. “We do need to get back to my friends,” he said. “I may have to take you up on the name change,” Alyth said, drawing in closer to him, hands on the chair. She was amazed at the intensity of her feelings and her new found ability to express them. He pushed to the edge of the seat, feet hitting the floor, his legs between hers, his hands falling to her hips, drawing her into him. She kissed him. This was no doubt more light than this

room had ever seen. He was weighing going for another mutual turnover, but the urgency to reconnect with his friends was increasing.

“We’ll have time once we’re on your ship?” Preston asked.

“As much as you want,” Alyth assured him.

“Very well, then, I’m going to go get Daphne,” Preston said. “Why don’t you go secure a transport up and I’ll meet you at the spaceport.”

“I won’t leave without you,” Alyth said.

“I would hope not,” Preston said, but he frowned, tilted his head back and forth as he considered coming clean.

“What?” Alyth asked.

“Would that change if you knew I had slept with Daphne?” Preston asked.

“No,” Alyth assured him, patting his cheek. She saw he wanted to divulge more.

“What if you knew I had been intimate with one of my Droids?” he asked.

Alyth seemed amused. “Only one?” she joked. “Sorry. Seriously. Would you reject me if I had been intimate with mine?”

“No,” Preston said.

“There you go, then. We’re good,” Alyth said, but paused. “Right?”

“What if I told you I loved someone, but they didn’t love me, at least, not the way I would like them to love me, and she is old enough to be my mom, which isn’t the problem because age really isn’t a factor in my selection process, and actually, I admit I’m leaning towards being polyamorous, not just because I feel love for just about everyone, but perhaps because of my years of isolation, but also because I’m multi species curious, and though I’ve already been intimate with several different species, there is fair potential for some future bio-experiments likely to happen, and I’m talking myself into being stranded, aren’t I,” Preston said.

“Wow,” Alyth said. “Are you always this honest?”

“Yeah, usually,” Preston said.

Alyth kissed him. “Trite as it may be, I love you. And you’re right, if my youthful hatred for you was any indicator, I’ve loved you since you first started stalking me. You’ve been the one constant and, though this relationship is obviously complicated, I have no doubt that all of this love is a better direction than all the hate that I’ve commiserated with over the years. Wherever this takes us, whoever joins us on our journey, I will be faithfully yours.”

“Daphne may not share this sentiment,” Preston warned.

“Her loss. Can you find your way to the spaceport?” Alyth asked.

“Yes. See you in a few,” Preston said.



Dragon’s Wake and Dradon arrived together to find the Corvette Myamar and no trace of the Star Destroyer Immanence. Byrne was so angry that she appeared to be panicking, physically getting up and searching the sensors for any evidence it was still in range to be detected. Jesser laughed. “Oh, did someone steal your ship?”

“Shut up!” Byrne snapped.

Orlov brought it to Byrne’s attention that the Dradon was targeting them. She brought them up on the intercom.

“What the hell, Waris? Stand down,” Byrne asked.

“I was thinking what the hell, too. You promised me an assortment of Imperial TIE fighters in pristine condition, Imperial weapons, and a dozen more crates of those crystals,”

Waris said. "Since I don't see anything here that looks Imperial, I can only think this is some kind of trick."

"It may be a trap, but it's not a trick," Byrne said. "Whoever was on this ship obviously stole mine."

"Well, it isn't obvious to me," Waris said.

"Look at the Corvette," Byrne said. "It's clearly been in battle recently."

"Yeah, well, your ship is about to have a few battle scars of its own if you don't park it in my hangar bay. It's time for a face to face," Waris said.

"I need you to trust me. I can find my ship and supply what I promised," Byrne said.

"I don't trust anyone I haven't looked square in the eye, and even then, I am skeptical," Waris said. "Don't make me start a clock."

"Fine. We'll land," Byrne said.

"You'll land and have your entire crew out on the hangar deck for me to inspect," Waris said.

"Just make sure there are no Droids," Byrne said.

"I've started a clock," Waris said, and ended the transmission.

"You heard him, Orlov," Byrne said. "Park us."

"You're not going to try out run him?" Jesser asked.

"I need him and his crew," Byrne said.

"They're just as likely to kill all of us and take your ship," Jesser said.

"They're not going to kill us," Byrne said.

"I want a weapon," Jesser said.

"No," Byrne said.

After they landed, she was the first one down the ramp. Her flight crew was armed, except Orlov and Jesser, who followed her down the aft ramp. Waris and about ten of his crew were waiting a good pace away, along with several droids. An R2 passed her, going towards her ship. She frowned at it.

"What part of no Droids did you not understand?" Byrne asked.

"My ship, my rules," Waris said. "Now, who are you?"

"I'm your benefactor," Byrne said. "We've done business before."

One of Waris's men, someone Byrne's knew to be a bounty hunter, put his hand on the hilt of his weapon. He whispered something into Waris's ear.

"Don't be ridiculous," Waris told him. "There's no way this woman is a retired Imperial Admiral."

"What is your Droid doing on my ship?" Byrne asked.

"Making sure you don't have any other folks on board going to surprise me," Waris said. He looked at his bracelet. "I said I want to see your entire crew."

"This is my entire crew," Byrne said.

"What about the medical Droid?" Waris asked.

"Not part of my crew. And it's turned off," Byrne said.

"Don't like Droids, eh?" Waris asked.

"Love Droids," Byrne corrected. "I just don't trust programmers."

"What's the worst a Droid can do?" Waris asked.

The arrival of Bloodhunters answered his question. Both crews scattered under a barrage of blaster fire. The bountyhunter on deck went straight for Byrne, confident he knew what the Droids were looking for. As a child, he had witnessed a Bloodhunter. He had seen it daily, over

a period of a week, waiting, and waiting, until one day, someone walked by, and accessed a snack from a vending machine. The Bloodhunter stepped out of the alley shadows, stuck a needle in the man, and then carried the body away. He had night terrors for months afterwards, but no one ever believed his account of events, and the man that was captured, he never saw him on the street again. He had no idea how the Bloodhunters could be here waiting, but if he were one with the Force, and wasn't distracted by the battle, his mind might have reviewed a series of events: During the Myanmar's last battle, three Bloodhunters had managed to attach to the hull. Having witnessed a battalion of Droids wiped out, they had decided to hold their position, collect data, and await an opportunity to call for reinforcements. Two of the Bloodhunters had crossed over to the Star Destroyer Immanence, to await opportunities there, while one stayed behind. It used the Myanmar's hyperspace communication system to report they had found the Immanence. It was instructed to imbibe and wait. Four Bloodhunter ships arrived and dropped off two battalions of Droids, anticipating the return of the Immanence, or, perhaps its commander, Alarna Byrne. The Bloodhunter ships went to investigate the nearest system, looking for evidence that Byrne was indeed alive and well. The Bloodhunter attached to the Myanmar hull observed the arrival of the Dragon's Wake and Dradon. The Dragon's Wake was registered to Byrne and to the Immanence, but still it waited for opportunity and confirmation. Had the Droid left the hull and drifted over, or alerted the others prematurely, Alarna Byrne would escape. She was known to be a Finder, and finding a way to escape was her specialty. It wasn't until an R2 unit searching the Dragon's Wake for additional crew stopped to plug into one of the Dragon's Wake's Droid ports that the confirmation needed to act came in the form of a short hyperspace message: "She's here." The Bloodhunters poured out of the Myanmar like wasps from a nest hit with a rock, using their jetpacks to quickly close the distance. The command crew on the flight deck of the Dradon were too busy watching what was unfolding on the hangar deck to notice.

One Bloodhunter at the helm of the Myanmar activated port thrusters and sent it spinning, clipping the Dradon sufficiently to knock its engines offline. It also sent the Dradon tumbling. Anyone in the hanger at the time would have felt the impact, and if they were looking outside at the stars, they would have risked having vertigo.

Waris, believing he was duped, fired his blaster angrily at Byrne, while she defended against the bountyhunter. Her lightsaber deflected the attack, ricocheting at an advancing Bloodhunter. More of Waris's men were joining the fight, most shooting from the relative safety of the airlock doors, only a few funneling in to attack the onslaught of Droids.

Orlov dragged his wife back up the ramp of the Dragon's Wake, hitting the up button as he did so. He rushed past the R2 unit as he made his way to the helm.

"No!" Byrne yelled, but was unable to retreat as both bountyhunter and Bloodhunters attacked. She was unable to do anything but fight as her ship blasted out of the hangar bay.

The Dragon's Wake cleared a path behind it. Waris took that opportunity to flee down a hatch. Byrne followed, pausing only long enough to secure the hatch. She grabbed a 'one-use' tool from her belt that she attached to the hatch that when activated melted itself and the metal on both sides of the hatch. She slid down the ladder and pursued Waris through a collection of crates with pure instinct, as he had quickly gotten out of visual range. He was climbing into an A-wing fighter as she came around netted cargo containers. Using the Force, she pulled him off and flung him into a net.

Byrne paused only long enough to say: "I told you, no Droids! Why doesn't any one ever listen to me?!"

Byrne quickly ascended into the A-wing, and was firing up the engines before the canopy was perfectly secure. She didn't bother to wait for the hangar doors to open, but instead blasted through them. She launched herself as the cabin air evacuated, pushing waiting Bloodhunters off course. She accelerated away and made a jump to hyperspace without bothering to set a course. Navigating blind was typically a death sentence. But she decided a short jump would get her clear enough that she could settle, refocus, and tune into where she needed to go next.



Alyth arrived at the spaceport and surveyed the ships available. Though she could have called for a transport to extract them, she preferred minimizing contact. What she didn't expect to find was Captain Harolds and his angels waiting near an older, Lambda-class T4. The ship seemed in good condition and certainly would fit her immediate needs, and if Harolds had acquired it, no one here would likely miss it. Of course, she had been contemplating confiscating Torlin's personal shuttle, which would have some perks if she gave up command of the Star Destroyer. She considered ducking back out of sight but Harolds spotted her, so she squared her shoulders and headed towards him. He called his angels to attention, but stepped forwards to greet her, allowing her more privacy.

"What are you doing here?" Alyth asked.

"I was concerned," Harolds admitted. "I'm sorry if I over reached my authority."

"Captain Harolds," Alyth said after a hard, unblinking stare. When she had finished sorting through her feelings, she went with her gut. "Thank you."

Harolds allowed surprise to show on his face. Alyth waved the other angels to gather around. They did so. Harolds seemed apprehensive.

"One of the few things I did right when choosing my elite guard, was choosing all of you. I owe you my life several times over and I can never repay what I owe," Alyth began.

"We were doing our job," Zaira said.

"No, you were doing more than just serving," Alyth said. "So, here's the deal: Lord Kilmore and Torlin are dead. No one knows this yet and I would prefer to be off world and outside of this system when the news breaks. If you want out of the service, you may leave with my blessing and recommendations."

Alyth expected to be bombarded by questions, but only one came.

"Your orders, Lord Alyth?" Harolds said.

"You're free to go," Alyth iterated.

"And you, what are you going to do?" Harolds asked.

"I will probably spend the rest of my life making up for the mistakes I've made," Alyth said. "Starting with, saving some civilians from a Bloodhunter attack."

"If you believe atonement is necessary to correct our past actions, then I seem to recall we served with you, therefore, we will continue to serve until our debt is paid," Harolds said.

Alyth touched his shoulder. "I would like you near me when I make changes to the command staff, but you don't have to be there, as I will have two Jedi's with me."

"Jedi's?" Zaira asked.

"Preston is the one who defeated Torlin and Kilmore, not I," Alyth said. "He ended Kilmore's influence over me. I'm free, as are you all, and any others Kilmore possessed from time to time. Preston deserves your loyalty more than I. So know this, I serve him, and I will follow his lead, so you're either on board with this, or you're traveling."

Harolds looked to his angels for their sign of commitment. It took no more than a glance to know the mind of his team. He returned his gaze to Alyth. "Preston has shown us the kind of man he is. If you follow him, so do we. It's time for us to finally earn our wings," Harold said. "Let's be angels."



Preston found Venrich still watching over his patient. He seemed tired, but he would not end his shift as long he was expected to keep watch over Kilmore's prisoner, especially with such strict orders that there be no evidence trail that they were here, which had meant giving all his staff time off with pay. Venrich seemed surprised to see Preston and didn't know what to make of it. He stood, came around his desk.

"You're still alive," Venrich observed.

"I am," Preston said, happily.

"But you're not wearing a necklace. You passed the ritual and Kilmore's questioning, so you're entitled to be a citizen of Waterbourne," Venrich said.

"Do you really think total transparency keeps the peace?" Preston asked.

"Of course. If you go back to the hunter and gather days, there was no privacy. Everything was public knowledge. If there was domestic violence, it only happened once because the rest of the tribe intervened. Secrecy is only needed if you are conspiring to harm others. We have the technology now that no person need compete for resources, that no one ever be alone."

"Interesting," Preston said. "Because I think I have observed the opposite. I visited a planet where everyone has tech, and they seemed more alone and isolated than I was when I was actually alone on a moon."

"Because that is the misuse of tech. Personal tech only adds to the compartmentalization of individuals, requiring passwords and filters and blocks. As long as we continue with these games of power over each other, as long as we continue to compete, there will continue to be unintentional and intentional harm to our fellow sentients. Only with full transparency, with full access, are we equal," Venrich said.

"Very well, so, here's the deal," Preston said. He handed him a data chip. "Your society can continue with your experiment or end it, as I intend to give you balance. Lord Kilmore and Torlin are dead. Once I'm off this planet, your telemetry will come back online. Further, everyone will have equal access to all present and past recorded telemetry. I have no doubt there will be a change in the power structure when the public knows the full details of what's gone on behind the scenes, especially amongst the leaders who had limited transparency. You okay with all of this?"

"Absolutely," Venrich said.

"Very well. Go home to your family. I'll take care of Daphne," Preston said.

Venrich shook Preston's hand and headed towards the door.

"By the way, Doctor," Preston said. "You will not have any more seizures. You're cured."

Venrich appeared relieved hearing this, though he felt certain he already knew. He bid farewell and went home to his family. Preston turned to his family, gently removing the breathing tube with his both hands and the Force. It came out effortlessly. Daphne continued to breathe. He removed the armband that was pumping fluids and meds into her.

“It’s time to wake up,” he told her.

Daphne opened her eyes. She smiled at him, then closed her eyes again. She pulled her blanket tighter around her neck.

“Daphne,” Preston said, a little louder.

“I was just dreaming about you,” Daphne said.

“I know. We have to go now,” Preston said.

“I’m so cold,” Daphne said.

“You need to get up, now,” Preston insisted.

Daphne opened her eyes. “There’s no point. I’m done.”

“As long as you’re breathing, you’re not done,” Preston said. “We have to return to our friends.”

“I can’t go back there,” Daphne said. “Not after what I’ve done.”

Preston forced her to sit up. She resisted, but he pulled her off the bed. “Come on, let’s get dressed.”

Preston discovered that helping someone dress was much less fun than watching someone dress themselves, especially when they were less than cooperative. Even after having watch Alyth put on a bra, duplicating it was proving to be a challenge. He fumbled until Daphne took over and did it for him. She eased into her trousers and put her boots on under her own volition, then secured her top, then her cloak, and then rewrapped herself in her blanket.

“Now, will you please, just let me be,” Daphne pleaded, sitting down on the chair and laying her head on the bed.

“Our friends are going to be attacked. We need to help them,” Preston insisted.

Daphne got up, but turned and went back to the medical bed to lie down. Preston pulled her back to the floor, took the blanket from her, and tossed it to the bed he had woken up on.

“I can’t help you!” she snapped.

Preston removed the lightsaber he had loaned her from his belt and handed it back to her.

“I can’t,” Daphne said, pushing it away. “I failed. I can never become a Jedi now.”

“Oh, bullshit. Take your lightsaber, Padawan, and follow me,” Preston said.

“You don’t get it. If you fail, you don’t get to be a Jedi. People have been permanently barred for offenses much less severe than mine,” Daphne said.

“Well, maybe that’s why the Jedi nearly became extinct,” Preston said.

“Excuse me?!” Daphne demanded, shoving him at chest level. “I’ve warned you about ridiculing our traditions!”

“Your traditions sucked and need to be upgraded. All those Padawans who flunked out, what do you think happened to them? They certainly didn’t unlearn their training, right? Once you start using the Force, you don’t just stop using the Force. So, if the only legitimate school in town blocks them, where do you think they’re going to go? So, as long as I am training you, there will be no failure. You’re going to pick yourself up, brush yourself off, and start where you left off.” Preston said.

“I’m flawed!” Daphne cried.

“Oh, who the hell isn’t?!” Preston demanded. “If being flawless is a prerequisite for being a Jedi, there would never be any Jedi. Taking responsibility for your behaviors, your thoughts, your actions and inactions, is all you have to do. You already own that you made mistakes. Yay you! Now, it’s time to stop feeling sorry for yourself and start over. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Master,” Daphne said, half heartedly.

“Take your lightsaber,” Preston ordered.

Daphne took the lightsaber and attached it to her belt. There was no passion in it, no commitment, no gratitude for another chance, only compliance with a directive.

“That’s better,” Preston said, taking her by the hand and leading her towards the exit.

Daphne pulled free long enough to retrieve the blanket.

“What?! I’m cold,” Daphne said.

Preston put an arm around her and led her to the street. Before venturing out into public, he chose to wear a hood, which was concealed in a pocket at the top of the poncho. Daphne pulled her hood up simply because the cold breeze reminded her of the ritual. They moved along their journey as if invisible to pedestrians and the passengers on the tram. All Waterbourne citizens wore the tech that recorded their days, and though their tech no doubt recorded the two Jedi like passengers, the eyes of the citizenry gave no hint of curiosity or suspicion, with one exception. Several children gave the hooded pedestrians second glances and if they mentioned the spectre to the parents, the parents rebuked or redirected depending on their parenting style.

Preston was happy to pull down his hood once he was on the shuttle. Daphne’s hood came down as her hand went for her lightsaber. Preston stayed her hand with his. None the less, Harold’s angels went to attention and Zaira paged Harold to the deck. He came from the flight deck, running. Alyth didn’t move from her chair, or in anyway suggest a defensive response was needed on her part.

“She’s with me,” Preston said.

“Oh, hell no!” Daphne said. “She’s a Sith apprentice!”

“Was a Sith apprentice,” Preston corrected. “Now she my apprentice.”

Daphne turned her anger towards him. “What? You’re no Sith Lord, and you already call me your Padawan. You can’t have two.”

“I can’t have two Padawans,” Preston corrected. “However, I can have an apprentice and a Padawan. Of course, I’m not sure what title I will give Jordeen.”

“Who’s Jordeen?” Alyth asked.

“Oh, you didn’t tell her you have a love slave?” Daphne asked.

Preston’s look suggested he forgot about that part.

“Oh, yay. So, next time we can have a threesome, then?” Alyth came to the rescue, playfully, wanting to difuse the situation.

“You’re sick!” Daphne pointed at her, but couldn’t stay on her. Her finger drifted back to Preston. “You slept with her?!”

“Twice actually,” Preston admitted. “I mean, if you count by turnovers, not sessions.”

“I count five, then,” Alyth volunteered.

“Really? Well that’s not fair,” Preston complained.

“What the hell?” Daphne said. “I thought we…” She turned to bolt.

Preston took her arm. “I need your help, Daphne. My friends need your help. Complete this task and you will be a Jedi.”

“You can’t promote me!” Daphne said.

“No, but you will have no doubt you’ve earned your title, and my recommendations to Yeno will have weight,” Preston said. “If you don’t have the answers you need after this last battle, you are may leave.”

“You’re consorting with evil and you want me to be okay with it?” Daphne asked.

“You don’t have to like my decisions or the people I associate with,” Preston said. “But I don’t think they’re evil. I think it’s more complicated than a black and white perspective.”

“They watched us drown!” Daphne said, her voice shaking, her hands shaking. She pushed Preston. “They made me watch you drown! Why didn’t you save yourself?!”

“What you want to know is why I saved you. I love you,” Preston told her.

Daphne hit Preston in the chest with both fists. He pulled her into an embrace. “I love you,” Preston reassured her.

“How can you trust them knowing what they’ve done?” Daphne said.

“You mean, how can I trust you?” Preston corrected.

“Stop flipping this back on me!” Daphne said.

“But, this is all about you and how you relate to the problem,” Preston explained.

“You can also ask, how can you trust me.”

Daphne didn’t have a response. She pushed away from him. She wanted to walk away, to run, but she found herself trapped, the egress blocked by troopers.

“We’ve all been through the ritual, mam,” Paolo said, showing a tattoo on his palm. It was an infinity sign with a line drawn through the center. “Depending on your perspective, it means that which rises, or that which descends.”

Zaira lowered her under collar, revealing the same tattoo on her neck. “Also means, same as above, same as below.” Harold hit his left arm, suggesting it was under his armour. “It means waterbourne.”

“Yes, all of us,” Alyth assured her. Alyth stood, pulled her top up to reveal hers was on her lower back. “It was just one of the methods Kilmore used to sift our minds, take knowledge or to take possession of people. When he possessed it, he could use our Force abilities. His total influence wasn’t absolute, though, so I’m not rationalizing or justifying what I’ve done. We could resist, especially if Kilmore wasn’t paying attention to us, but the consequences always caught up to us and they were always severe. Preston freed us of that. He killed Lord Kilmore and Torlin, Daphne. Preston had an opportunity to take over all of Kilmore’s assets, he could have taken us and made us his slaves, but instead, he set his free. He has given us a choice. He turned away from power. It’s something I wasn’t able to figure out how to do. Holding us responsible for our past is reasonable, but should Preston call us friends, it is not because he is associating with evil, but because we are choosing to associate with good. He sees something of value in us, something we ourselves don’t see, something we are going to have to accept on faith.”

Daphne seemed confused. “Once you start down the dark path…”

“It’s hard to turn back, but not impossible,” Preston assured her. “You yourself struggle with anger, but you also have a tremendous capacity for kindness.”

“I will go with you for now, but when this business is over, I’m through with you,” Daphne said.

Preston nodded agreement. Daphne picked up her blanket and retired to the cabin where just the day before she had lured Preston in deceit, using his love for her against him.

“So, that was tense,” Paolo said.

“It’s not over, yet,” Preston assured them.

“Take us up,” Alyth ordered.

“Yes, Admiral,” Paolo said and headed towards the flight deck.

The only way Corissa had been able to convince Ten that it was safe to sleep was to lay down with her. For a while, she babbled about the evil robots that her parents had told her would kidnap her if she misbehaved, and she wondered now if there was a connection to these Bloodhunter Droids. Though Corissa knew that many stories may have contained counrlns of original truth, the seeds were far from be a tree of truth. And kid stories were often brutal and graffic in the kinds of horrors that awaited children. It took an hour, but Ten did finally drift. Unable to join her in sleep, Corissa got up and returned to the main living area of the cabin she had chosen. Jordeen was there, sitting on a couch near a window, staring out into space.

“Not going to sleep?” Corissa asked.

“Could you?” Jordeen asked.

Corissa shook her head and joined Jordeen at the couch. The coffee table held a transparent tea pot, cut from a clear crystal, which was sitting on top of a pedestal, made from the same crystal. A candle resided within the pedestal, heating the tea. Jordeen poured her a cup.

“Whoever lived in this suite had good taste,” Jordeen said.

“This was the Ambassador suite. This is my first time being in it,” Corissa said, accepting the cup. She held it in her palm, fingers up, and sipped. “I’m surprised. My room was hardly a closet.”

Jordeen gave a faint smile. “Freya still searching the ship for signs of life?”

“Yeah,” Corissa said. “It’s a big ship. It should keep her busy.”

Jordeen agreed with that, but wanted to ask if Coirssa had alterior motives for running the Droid off. It was abig ship and lots of places for people to hide if someone really wanted to, so Freya could be busy for a long while. “You want to talk about your days of service?” Jordeen offered.

“Nope,” Corissa said.

Jordeen returned to star gazing.

“I never thought I’d be back on this ship,” Corissa said.

Jordeen suppressed a bemused, knowing smile. “I sensed there were some troubled memories for you,” she said, keeping her fix on the stars.

“Umph,” Corissa said. “Understatement of the day. Do you believe in fate?”

“Sometimes,” Jordeen admitted. “I think it’s complex. Like the physics thing, particles or waves. Maybe there’s fate and randomness simultaneously.”

“Or, because of the way our brain stores information in terms of our personal relationship to the experiences and knowledge sets, maybe it just seems like everything is personally unfolding in a specific direction,” Corissa said.

“Could be. And maybe when I died, that was just a brain malfunction. But during my ascension, I remember that everything that happens here is absolutely not personal. I still had a sense of I-ness, but that I wasn’t the ‘I’ that I am experiencing here and now,” Jordeen said.

From the other room, they heard Ten scream. They both got up and rushed to see what’s going on. Corissa sat on the bed and hugged her close.

“I’m here, Ten,” Coirssa said. “I’m not leaving you.”

“No. They’re back!” Ten said.

Alarm klaxons began blaring. They could see no evidence of enemy ships from their vantage point, only stars, but it was a big ship, with lots of directions from which to come at them. Corissa picked up her comm.

“What’s going on?” Corissa asked.

“Four incoming ships,” came Trimmer’s voice. “And our hyperdrive just went offline.”

“How could that be?! Everything was fine when I was down there last,” Corissa snapped.

“I don’t know! We haven’t been able to raise my people since it went offline,” Trimmer said.

“I’ll head down there as soon as I can,” Corissa said. “Ten, I want you back in that pressure suit.”

“You’re not wearing one!” Ten said.

“Ten, I need to do a job, and I can only do that if I am not worried about your safety,” Corissa said.

“Then take me with you to the engine room,” Ten insisted.

Corissa got down on her knees, making herself eye level with Ten. “No. There is obviously something wrong down there...”

Ten looked past her and Jordeen and screamed. A Bloodhunter had entered her room and was closing fast. It ignored Corissa and Ten, going directly for Jordeen. Jordeen retreated. Corissa put Ten behind her while going for her blaster. The Bloodhunter turned to the immediate threat, and with perfect precision and, surprisingly, exercising restraint, destroyed the blaster. It turned its attention back to Jordeen, raising an appendage tipped with a needle. Ten wanted to help but Corissa held her back. Preston appeared out of thin air, lightsaber bursting to life with resounding retort, and he dispatched the Droid.

“Are any of you injured?” Preston asked.

“I’m fine,” Corissa said.

“Scared,” Jordeen said.

“I’m hungry,” Ten said.

“Great, everything’s normal,” Preston said. “You’ve all got to hold on for five more minutes. Help is on the way. Excuse me, there’s another one on board.”

Preston disappeared before their eyes.

“Teach me that!” Ten said.

“You and me both,” Jordeen agreed.

The bedroom door opened and Corissa put Ten behind her. Freya arrived.

“Damn it, don’t do that!”

“I’m sorry, Master Corissa. May I serve you?” Freya asked.

“Yes, keep her safe. Ten, stay with Freya. That’s an order,” Corissa said.

Ten saluted.

“Come on, Jordeen,” Corissa said. “I might need you.”



The change in command had happened quietly, practically unnoticed as Alyth had called certain people in for a meeting, and they had been quietly shuffled off by her elite guard to a holding cell. Everyone on board, though, had noticed the extra guards at every post, as if they were on high alert and ready to go into battle. Preston and Daphne were on the bridge with her, watching the preparation to drop out of hyperspace. Preston seemed distant, distracted.

“You okay?” Daphne asked.

On realizing just how distracted Preston seemed, Daphne became more alert.

“We going to be a bit late,” Preston said. “I want you both on the Immanence ASAP. And, I am sorry. I will explain soon.”

“Sorry for what?” Daphne asked.

“I’m not actually here,” Preston said, and disappeared with an upward twirling of smoke. Daphne was perplexed.

“I hope he teaches me that trick,” Alyth said.

They dropped out of hyperspace directly above the Immanence. Several Bloodhunter ships were destroyed by the unexpected arrival resulting in collisions. The remaining scattered to regroup. Alyth gave the order to go hot.

“Launch fighters. Disable the transports if you can, but make certain nothing leaves this area,” Alyth ordered. “Harolds, have your angels meet me at the transport. Daphne, you coming?”

“Of course,” she answered.



After Alyth departed to secure a ship, Preston decided to practice a Force ability known as bi-location. Both Saints and Jedi’s had been known to be in two locations at once, but most people just assumed they were stories. He sent one doppelganger to retrieve Daphne, while he himself proceeded to Darth Torlin’s personal estate. It was there he found Torlin’s private ship, A Tie Hunter. Like the X-wing, its S-foils could pan out into attack mode. Preston felt like a kid in a candy shop. The only delay in taking the craft was that he couldn’t resist the urge to explore Torlin’s estate. Though he allowed the Force to draw him to things of interests, he did revel in some random ransacking, just because he had never had the chance to explore for sentient artificats growing up. The saddest thing he found was a handwritten journal, which he quickly browsed and surmised that at one time, Torlin might have been a Light Sith. There was an entry that read: “So, the old saying, when the student is ready, a Master will come. I met a guru today, who promised to include me in a ritual that would double my ability to connect with the Force. I am told it will be necessary to bring a Force sensitive friend, and intend to ask Tannika.” Preston closed the journal at that point. He would have to dive deeper to discover more, but he didn’t feel he had the time to give it the attention it deserved. As he explored the estate, piecing together a story based on abstract artifacts, he wondered if Torlin might have had a different life had the Jedi not fallen, or if he had an option to study a branch of metaphysics that wasn’t coerced by the Sith.

Preston chastised himself for such musings. Of course things might have been different if the Jedi hadn’t fallen, but that still didn’t mean Torlin himself would have wound up a force for good. Maybe he wouldn’t have been discovered early enough to be considered for Jedi training. Maybe he would have pursued his own interests regardless of being found. Maybe Kilmore would have still acquired him.

Preston held on to the book as he continued to explore. He found a container with Sith crystrals, which he couldn’t let go by. The next thing he intentionally set out to find was a pack to carry his loot. He found two Sith amulets, with no clue what they did; he was only certain they were imbued with Force properties. He puzzled over them, wondering if Force imbued objects were comparable to computer chip boards, but instead of micro-networks of wires channeling electrons, it was the Force. He put them in his bag to fathom later. In the box with the amulets, were six rings, made of material he couldn’t identify. He took them. He found an ornamental

staff on the wall, which was clearly imbued with the Force. It didn't fit in his bag, but he took it anyway. He found a safe and opened it. There were a variety of coins and a number of data chips. He took the chips.

There were things that surprised him. Torlin appreciated music. He had several instruments in a sitting room and a system that directed phenomenal sound to a holographic projector center of the room. He was a clean freak. He liked ancient, hard cover tomes. Preston might have taken them all, but he couldn't find one that had script that he could identify. He did take one, but it seemed random, as opposed to a Force selection. He amused himself with the idea that he may have taken one volume from an encyclopedia set, which would completely frustrate whoever inherited the remaining items.

With his stuff in the Tie Hunter, he gave one whistful look around, admiring the architecture and thinking this wouldn't be a bad home, then climbed up and familiarized himself with the controls. He loved the ship, maybe even more than the previous Tie he owned. Thinking about the loss, though, was both sad and amusing. The ship was something Fixit had given him. Amusing, because it revealed an attachment. No. Sentiment. He reminded himself he was human. If he did keep the Hunter, he would have to get a pressurized suit tailored to his specs, but for this short flight up, he was confident he would be okay. Indeed, he was given a direct path to approach and land without even requiring confirmation. He arrived on the Star Destroyer 'Kilmore,' the flagship of Kilmore's fleet. From there, he sent a text communication for the command staff to visit him in the hangar deck. He waited till they arrived before exiting the Hunter.

One of the officers drew a weapon. Using the Force, Preston took the weapon into his own hand and pointed it back at the individual who drew it.

"Anyone else want to play?" he asked. When no one volunteered, Preston continued. "Good. My name is Preston G Waycaster and I have defeated in battle Darth Torlin and Lord Kilmore."

No one was sure if he was joking or not, so, to prove his point, he did something Kilmore would do, and dropped them all to their knees. When he let go, they staggered forwards, but all remained prostrated.

"Sorry, I am not the harbinger of bad news, but of truth, whether the news is good or bad is a value laden judgement that reflects your bias, not the value of the messenger or message," Preston offered. "Clearly, I could take you and the ship and run you like the dogs that Kilmore trained you to be. Or, you can stand up and be counted like men. No, really, stand up. Please. I'm not going to kill you. Well, unless you try to kill me, and then, well the game is on."

They stood. Only one asked. "What are your wishes?" Most were still not sure what to make of the situation. Some were searching their mind for any lingering traces of Lord Kilmore. Some were wondering if this were some bizarre test to weed out those Kilmore doubted.

"I'm glad you asked," Preston said. As easily as manifesting a doppelganger, he created a holographic image of the Chiliad. "This is a mobile, Droid operated, Bloodhunter, manufacturing plant. I intend to take this Star Destroyer and take out that ship. I would like your assistance in this endeavor, but I am not going to compel anyone at threat to self or their families to stay in service. For those who stay, the only reward will be the satisfaction of knowing you have saved the galaxy from the very real threat of an Armageddon like catastrophe that the Emperor put in place in the event that he died just to spite those who survived him. The intel I have suggest there are ten thousand Droid operated anti-matter bombs with hyperdrive in this system, waiting to be

assigned targets. The mother ship, the Chiliad, has gathered enough raw materials to begin cloning itself, which means it will be at its most vulnerable.”

“There’s no way I am taking orders from a kid.”

“The ‘kid’ took your gun, Hosper. He dropped us all to our knees as if we were puppet Droids. If he defeated both Torlin and Kilmore together, then he has our ears.”

“Parlour tricks compared to Torlin. We can take this kid...”

Preston tossed the weapon back to Hosper. Hosper caught it, but hesitated. Preston closed both fists, squeezing them tight, waiting to see if Hosper would change his mind. The show down was on. Was Hosper willing to see if he could out draw the kid? He already had the weapon in his hand. All he had to do was point and shoot, at nearly point blank range. Hosper aimed and Preston opened his fists. Hosper collapsed into a brilliant ball of flame. When the light faded, a black diamond fell to the floor. The ‘clink’ could be heard across the hanger.

“To be honest, most of you probably deserve execution, but again, I am offering you a chance to bring balance to your lives and the galaxy simultaneously,” Preston said. “With or without you, I am taking this ship.”

“You’ll never get in close enough to take out the Chiliad’s hyperdrive systems,” Immerson said. “I know. I was on one of the ships that were part of the construction detail. As soon as we drop out of hyperspace, it will spool up its drive, then bolt if we intrude too close.”

“I have transponder codes that it will recognize as friendly, another code to transmit so that one person can get passage to board, and I have this computer key to access the main frame once I am on the ship,” Preston said, showing a facsimile of the key. He was pretty sure a perfect clone of the key would be sufficient, well, at least sure enough to bet his life on it. “Though I intend to board the Chiliad, your mission will be to destroy it. Whether I get off the ship alive or not is irrelevant. We will drop out of hyperspace here, you will maneuver close enough to extend a spacebridge, and as soon as I step onto that ship, you commence firing at the hyperdrive and then take out the main thrusters.”

“What’s to keep those Droid bombs from attacking us?”

“Really? These aren’t small anti-matter bombs. These do enough damage to wipe out all life on your average size planet, so assuming one got through your batteries and shields, it would certainly destroy you, but it would also obliterate its mother. They are programmed to protect mother at all costs. So, as soon as you open up on mother, you launch every fighter you have, and you take out those bombs.”

“We will probably be boarded by Bloodhunters.”

“Oh, yeah,” Preston agreed.

“This is a suicide mission.”

“Probably,” Preston said.

“So, besides the codes, and your access key, what else do we have in our favor?”

“If I successfully access the mainframe, I hope to shut down all the Droids, so, you have a fifty fifty chance that this fight turns into a fish in a barrel shoot,” Preston said.

“And if our whole crew disembarks?”

“I intend to ram that ship and hope the self destruct feature is enough to put the Chiliad permanently out of commission,” Preston said. “Look, I’m probably just this dumb kid who was raised in a cave by a Droid, who got lucky against a Sith Lord and his apprentice, who is going to go get himself killed. Or, I am sufficiently armed with the Force that I trust this will work out for the benefit of all. This is risky. And that’s why I am giving everyone a chance to bail. Update the crew of the mission parameters so they can make an informed decision, and if you aren’t going

with me, you'd best be off my ship in one hour, because it is going to happen. And don't even think about stopping me because, unlike Kilmore, I can and will drop the entire crew to their knees with one thought, simultaneously. I am that serious about this mission."



Preston arrived on the Dragon's Wake, picked up a tool, and began removing the restraining bolt attached to Fixit. An R2 unit approached him and whistled a sad salutation.

"Not your fault, my little friend," Preston assured it.

The whistled inquiry seemed uncertain.

"Oh, I am sure," Preston said. "But don't worry. All beings have faulty programs that tend to take over at the most inappropriate times."

The Droids question was short and decisive.

"Yes," Preston laughed. "Especially me. Just ask Fixit."

The restraining bolt came free and the Fixit's first words were: "It took you long enough."

"I'm sorry, Master," Preston said, hugging the Droid. "I've been really distracted."

"Females, no doubt," Fixit complained.

"Yeah, I was not prepared for how distracting that can be," Preston said.

The R2 whistled a long retort.

"Your help would be most appreciated. Plug into the hyperdrive and change course," Preston said, giving the Droid the coordinates. "My friends will need a Fixit Droid, Master," Preston said. "Are you willing?"

"I am always ready to serve, son," Fixit said.

"I look forward to seeing you in person soon. R2, as soon as you arrive, land on the Immanence," Preston said.

Fixit laughed. "Oh, the irony of the Force."

Preston put a hand on his Droid. "Fixit, just in case I don't see you, I want to thank you for my life. Thank you for the love and guidance, but most of all, for your patience with me. I love you."

"Preston, have you gotten yourself in trouble?" Fixit asked.

"No, it's more like trouble has gotten into me," Preston said. "I'm about to face the enemy. I know where the Chiliad is and I'm going to destroy it."

"Preston, no..." Fixit began, but Preston had already dissipated into thin air. The R2's whistling is what brought Fixit back into focus. It turned its main sensor to the small Droid. "Hurry, little one. Maybe we have time to prevent him from doing something rash."

The R2 was already plugged in. He executed the course change and locked out the controls. Jesser arrived shortly after, assumed that Fixit was still asleep and approached the R2.

"What the hell did you just do?" Jesser demanded.

The R2 answered with a nonchalant whistle that suggested it was unaware of doing anything, openly denying any culpability even though its hand was still literally in the cookie jar. Jesser put her hands on her hip, staring menacingly.

"Unlock the controls now," she insisted.

Fixit administered a sedative and allowed Jesser to fall to the floor. The R2 made a kurt little noise. Orlov arrived shortly to determine what was taking so long.

"Hello, Orlov. We need to talk about your son, Preston," Fixit offered.



The battle aboard the Immanence was now contained to the hangar deck, where Alyth, Daphne, Angels, and Myamar security fought side by side. Corissa and Nolasco arrived as the last Bloodhunter fell, then the two remaining groups aimed at each other. Alyth powered down her lightsaber and ordered the angels to lower their weapons. They obeyed. Daphne powered down her blade.

“Where is he?” Corissa demanded.

“We are not your enemies,” Alyth said.

Corissa pointed her blaster at Daphne.

“Go ahead,” Daphne said, offering no resistance.

Alyth stepped in between the two.

“Preston condoned her actions as necessary. I ask that you forgive her, just as Preston already has,” Alyth said.

“Yeah, well, then where is Preston?” Corissa demanded.

Preston arrived, a swirl of smoke condensing into his form, standing dead center of the two groups. “I’m here, Corissa,” Preston announced. “Please. These are my friends. They came to help.”

Nolasco lowered his weapon and the Myamar security followed suit. Corissa didn’t lower her weapon.

“You’re not here. This is some kind of phantom image or super hologram. Where are you really?” Corissa said.

“Daphne was correct. My presence here places you all in danger. I’m proceeding with my plan to end the threat,” Preston said.

“You need us,” Corissa said.

“Always. But I don’t want to put you at risk,” Preston said.

“We decide the risk. We, together, decide. This is a family and you can’t make arbitrary, unilateral moves without running it through a committee,” Corissa said. When she saw his tears, she holstered her new weapon. “What? Why are you crying?”

“You called me family,” Preston said.

Corissa stepped forward. “Where are you?”

“Not yet,” Preston said. “You will know soon enough. There’s a ship approaching. I’ve already cleared it to land.” He hugged Corissa to her and whispered in her ear. “I can’t be here to guide you in what happens next. I ask that you let go, Corissa. Trust in the Force. Trust that this is playing out the way it’s supposed to be.”

No matter how hard she squeezed, she couldn’t prevent Preston from dissipating. Angry, she steeled herself from crying, but it took Nolasco leading her to make room for the arriving Fury-class Tie Fighter. Alyth motioned her Angels to prepare for a battle with a Sith with just a wave of her hand. She invited Daphne to join her at the foot of the ramp. One man descended with his hands up to indicate surrender. They kept their lightsabers in hand, ready for duplicity.

“Dad?!” Alyth and Daphne both said simultaneously. They looked to each other and each echoed: “You know him?”

“Stop copying me!” Daphne said. “How do you know him?”

“I’ve never met him. I’ve just seen holo-images of him and my mother together,” Alyth said.

“Me, too,” Daphne said.

Daphne and Alyth turned their attention back to Orlov. The intensity was almost unbearable. His hands were visibly shaking.

“I think I can explain...”

“You think you can explain not being around all my life?” Daphne demanded. “Creating siblings I know nothing about?”

“I left money and Droids so I can that I could keep in touch,” Orlov said. “But, I don’t remember...”

“My mom gave your money and Droids to charity!” Daphne snapped. “She wanted nothing to do with you!”

“I took my Droid apart and was unable to put it back together,” Alyth admitted.

Daphne looked at her as if she was an alien, but the only thing she could think to ask was: “You didn’t ask for help reassembling it?”

“Are you kidding? My mother would have killed me for breaking the family Droid. I told her it malfunctioned and ran off,” Alyth said.

“Look,” Orlov pleaded. “There’s obviously a lot to talk about, but it’s imperative that I speak to Preston. I have information that could save his life.”

“What’s he to you?” Daphne demanded.

“He’s my son,” Orlov said.

Two things saved Orlov when Daphne went to strike him down. One was Alyth’s blade blocked hers. The second thing was as Orlov stepped back, he stumbled on the ramp and fell on his ass and elbows. Angels raised their weapons, waiting for the word.

“Daphne!” Alyth insisted, the light of their blades painted on her face. “Stand down.”

“You know what we’ve done?!” Daphne yelled.

“Oh, yeah, but this isn’t the solution. This is not his fault,” Alyth said.

“How the hell is this not his fault?!” Daphne demanded. “If he had kept to one family, kept it intact, this wouldn’t be! My mother would not have gone into a life of crime to keep food on our table. We wouldn’t have...”

“Slept with our half brother. Got that. But we should have known,” Alyth said.

“We should have known? You’re making this my fault?!” Daphne said.

“We were drawn together by the Force, we loved inexplicably, we’ve had a sense knowing him all our lives, we should have known,” Alyth said. “Further, no one forced you to break your vow of celibacy. That is on you.”

“I’m going to kill him!” Daphne said.

“You’re angry. Killing him will not ease your pain. I’ve been down this road and it only leads to more pain. Now, stand down,” Alyth said.

Daphne screamed, pushing harder into Alyth’s block, but when Alyth refused to retreat, Daphne eventually grew too weary to sustain her emotions. She turned off her lightsaber and tossed it to the ground. Alyth remained in a stance ready to defend Orlov. Daphne gave one last defiant look to Alyth, one last menacing look to her father, and then turned to walk away. She found her mother standing behind her.

“Mom?” Daphne asked, tears streaming down her face.

“Come here,” Keena said, putting her arms out.

“It’s a little late for comfort and guidance,” Daphne said, and stormed away.

Alyth powered down her lightsaber and stood out of her stance.

“Thank you,” Orlov said, standing.

“Don’t thank me. I didn’t spare you out of love or kindness,” Alyth said. “What information do you have for Preston?”

“Preston is going to try and interface with the Chiliad to remove his name from a registry, but he is walking into a trap. The Bloodhunters don’t want him. They want his mother,” Orlov explained.

“Harolds, check out the Dragon’s Wake for more crew. Angels, take him into custody,” Alyth told her Angels.

Orlov seemed frighten as Troopers took him by the arms. Nolasco stepped up.

“Now, hold on a second,” Nolasco said. “He’s my brother.”

“Nice. A family reunion,” Alyth said. “That ship he arrived on belong to a Sith Lord. Its registry number marks it as belonging to the Immanene. Until we figure this out, I don’t advise letting him roam freely.”

“My brother served on this ship, so he probably stole the Dragon’s Wake. Let me take responsibility for him,” Nolasco said.

“He is going in the brig or I will kill him,” Corissa said, matter of factly. She held a blaster rifle she had retrieved from the corpse of a Storm Trooper.

Nolasco was surprised by Corissa’s stance, but he knew her well enough to know she meant business.

“You?!” Orlov asked. “Brother, shoot her! She’s dangerous.”

“Shut up, Orlov,” Nolasco snapped. “Maybe you should spend some time in the brig until we sort this out. It’s for your safety.”

“I helped you establish yourself, introduced you to your wife, got you a sweet paying job, and you’re going to lock me up?” Orlov asked.

“Yeah, Bro, for now,” Nolasco said. He nodded to the Angels to lead him away. He turned back to Corissa. “You want to talk about it?”

Corissa simply walked away.

Alyth didn’t have anything to say to Nolasco, but was saved from trying by taking an incoming call from her ship. She pushed a button on her bracer: “Admiral, you want to hear this.”

“Pipe it down to me,” Alyth said.

It was a mayday from the Kilmore. “We have sustained heavy damage and casualties. Please, if anyone can hear us, we are in severe distress...”

“Preston!” Nolasco and Alyth said together.

“I will take my ship,” Alyth said.

Nolasco grabbed her wrist. Alyth nearly fought, but his hand slid down to take her hand. “We will take both our ships.”

“Very well,” Alyth agreed.



Jordeen pursued Daphne off the hangar deck and managed to catch up to her without having a turnover, but she was struggling. “Daphne, slow down, please,” she hailed.

Daphne stopped. “Perhaps you weren’t paying attention in there, but I don’t want to talk,” she said.

“I get that, but I need you to listen,” Jordeen said. “I need you.”

Daphne bit down on her emotions and pulled Jordeen into the nearest room for some privacy. As she focused, she could see the tells that Jordeen was resisting a turnover, suppressing a smile which made it generally impossible to believe she was serious. In contrast, her eyes were sad and moist enough to allow Daphne to connect on an emotional level, even though the visual incongruity of the emotional signals was disturbing. It was a practice of letting go and trusting the Force, not her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Daphne asked.

“You have to hear a story. It’s the only way I know how,” Jordeen said, waiting for Daphne to accept this caveat before proceeding. “During the Clone Wars, after the invasion on my planet, life was extremely tough for the majority of my people. Even after we were liberated, food and employment was scarce because the infrastructure was destroyed. More than eighty percent of our food supply was imported and even that wasn’t enough.”

Daphne was growing impatient. “Does this story have a point?”

“Tell me when I am finished,” Jordeen said. “Without family or friends, my mother made a decision to survive. In exchange for services, she was given a small sum of money. She used it to invest in an orchard.”

“Well, I am so happy you had a great a childhood,” Daphne said.

“No, I didn’t. The reason my world imported food was that all the pollinating insects were made extinct and the food manufacturing plants were destroyed during the Clone Wars. My mom bought a huge orchard for practically nothing because people thought the land was worthless. In fact, many believed she was crazy. And maybe she was, but she invented a manual tool so that she could pollinate tree flowers by hand. At first it was just a couple trees and only flowers she could reach by hand, but it wasn’t long before her efforts produced enough fruit that we could sell it. With that money, we hired people to help pollinate. In time, we were able to afford to buy a colony of pollinating insects, and with one colony, we more than tripled our harvest. Her experiment became a success. She taught others how to make the pollinating tool so they could emulate her process. She even gave away insect queens so others could have their own colony of insects. The insects flourished because of the trees and a lack of competition. The health of trees improved because they required the symbiotic relationship to thrive, and we had food.”

“Again, yay for you. Your mom is a saint...”

“No, she was a social outcast because of what she did. She was an outcast because of me. She got the money because she agreed to participate in an experiment. She agreed to the experiment because she was hungry. I was the result of that experiment. Everyone knew what she had done. Everyone knew who my father was. Who our father is,” Jordeen said.

Daphne found herself on the tipping point again, falling back into anger, feeling manipulated. She grabbed Jordeen by the arms and took her to the wall, slamming her hard enough that Jordeen started laughing.

“You’re screwing with my emotions?!” Ten asked. “You want me to sympathize with him?”

“No, I’m not trying to make you do anything,” Jordeen said. “I don’t know what kind of man he is. I don’t even know who he was. But I am grateful that he chose my mom, gave her money, and a chance for a better life. I am grateful that he and my mother gave me life. I am grateful to learn that you are my sister. I am grateful that our brother has brought us all together. That’s got to mean something! Because had you succeeded in killing him, I would have never been able to tell him ‘thank you.’ I would have never got the chance to know who he really is.”

“His deserves to die!” Daphne insisted.

“Are you sure? Because I’m not,” Jordeen said. “During wars, people make all kinds of decisions. They’re all just trying to survive.”

“That is not an excuse for bad behavior,” Daphne snapped.

“You’re right. People should be held accountable. And so, I am asking you, slow it down, be accountable for your own actions, because you seem to be on the verge of making some really bad decisions,” Jordeen said. “Orlov’s life belongs to a group, to a committee, not an individual, and definitely not to you. You’re biased. I am biased.”

Daphne let go of Jordeen and she came back down on her heels. Jordeen put a hand on her sister’s arm, wanting to impress compassion. Daphne pulled her arm away, then departed the room.

The rescue operation was mostly over. Alyth's crew took on the bulk of the work, while the Myamar crew assisted their endeavor. Alyth personally approved many of the Kilmore's crew to supplement the Immanence's crew, just in case there happened to be an additional skirmish. When Commander Rosh was brought to the conference room, he had bowed to Alyth.

"I was surprised you came, considering our history," Rosh said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Can I assume Preston put you in charge?" Alyth asked.

"He did," Rosh said, choosing not to explain what had happened to Hosper. "He explained the mission parameters and gave us a choice."

"Sit down, Commander," Alyth said.

Tgether, they reviewed the data logs of the battle. There was a clear record that Preston had boarded the Chiliad via an extendable space bridge. No sooner than he had signed he was on board, the Kilmore began its attack. It was not known if the Chiliad had expected duplicity, but it had definitely been prepared for the contingency. Commander Rosh said it was pure luck that they had managed to take out the Chiliad's hyperdrive. The moment they did, the Chiliad had turned on them with a fierceness they hadn't expected, like a wounded animal fighting for its life. At some point in the battle, the Bloodhunters all stopped dead in their tracks and self destructed. Thousands of anti-matter Droid bombs, scattered throughout the asteroid ring simultaneously detonated, taking with them anything within their sphere of destruction, including many of their sister Droids and half the Kilmore's tiefighters. What was difficult was that many of the Fighters would have been completely annihilated so it was difficult to account for them all, but there was still an ongoing search effort to make sure there were no fighters at the edge of the blast radius that were simply crippled, with pilots hoping to be rescued.

One single ship launched from the Chiliad before it finally succumbed to the Kilmore's experienced crew. It jumped to hyperspace and was gone, presumably with Preston on board.

The agonizing silence in the conference room was palpable. Rosh was not privy to much of what was discussed prior to his admittance. Alyth, Daphne, Jordeen, and Lestelle Re were all confirmed to be half sisters. No one else who was present at the conference and who had been intimate with Preston were biologically related, which included Corissa, Isho, Shade, and Keena. Daphne nearly bolted when she had seen her mother raise her hand when someone asked, "So, who else has been intimate with him?" Alyth had put a hand on Daphne's hand. She sat back down and endured silently. Corissa also endured her pain silently. She had refused to explain her connection to Orlov. All that was known was that they both served together on this ship.

"Maybe we should focus on the problem at hand, which is finding Preston," Nolasco said. "If the Bloodhunters want his mother, there would have to be a trail for her to find him. If we can find that trail, we can rescue him."

"Why don't you sibling meditate and allow the Force to draw you to him?" Shade asked.

"It's not our talent," Alyth explained.

"I've tried, but I'm not getting through," Jordeen said. "It's as if this is a Force challenge necessary for our growth, a test that we've all agreed to take together..."

"I didn't agree to any of this," Daphne snapped.

"Jordeen is right," Alyth said. "We have all been drawn together by the Force. This is not an accident. The significance of our solution will affect all of us profoundly."

"But what's the solution?" Lestelle Re asked.

“I have one. Why don’t we put a tracker on Orlov and find a Bloodhunter to give him to,” Daphne said. “The droid takes him and we follow. There is bound to be at least one Droid floating out there that we can reassemble.”

“We are not giving my brother to a Bloodhunter,” Nolasco said.

“Oh come on, they won’t kill him. They will just make him wish he was dead,” Daphne said. “You agree with me, don’t you, Corissa? Corissa?!”

Corissa dialed her eyes back into focus, present to here and now. “What?”

“You and Orlov had a relationship, right? He broke yor heart?” Daphne asked.

“No,” Corissa said. She pushed her chair away from the table and stood up. “Please, excuse me.”

There was an uncomfortable silence as Corissa crossed over to the egress. She paused before departing the room. She returned to the table, approaching Nolasco while simultaneously drawing her weapon from its holsters. The Angels leaning against the wall went to attention, but they didn’t draw as Corissa simply laid the weapon in front of him.

“I am a mother and I have daughter to raise. I will no longer be a combatant in this war. Whatever you decide, I will accept,” Corissa said, and she left.



There were guards outside Corissa’s door and Freya was inside the room. She nodded politely to the Droid. The Droid acknowledged her. Corissa touched the Droid kindly before heading into the bedroom, her first expression of kindness towards her. Corissa found Ten sleeping, fetal position, facing the exterior wall and window bay. She gently eased up next to her and lay down, putting her arm over her. Before long, her breathing had deepened, and she felt herself slipping into sleep. Part of her resisted, wanting to stay alert, but pure exhaustion took her down faster than she imagined could happen.

She found herself in a nondescript corridor of the Immanence. Preston was there, trying to hide a hole in the wall by hanging a picture.

“That’s not going work,” Corissa said. “I will still know there is a hole there.”

“So, what should we do about it?” Preston asked.

“There is nothing to do about it. I’m broken,” Corissa said. She leaned on him, laid her head on his shoulder. “I am so broken.”

“Oh,” he replied softly. He separated from her, gently lifted her chin till their eyes met. “We all are. That’s how the Light gets in.”

Corissa seemed confused. “You’re not broken.”

“Just because you don’t see it, doesn’t mean that I am not. But I think being broken doesn’t mean what you think it means. With each level of education we feel incomplete and so we set additional goals and we struggle to arrive, and yet, with each new layer, we discover there is always another level, another challenge, so if you imagine that I have no flaws or that everything is just peachy with me, it’s only because you presently lack the altitude to see the interrelatedness of all things. I see you and I know you are safe, you are loved. By extension, I am convicted that I am equally safe and loved, even when I can’t see the solution.”

“You see me?” Corissa asked, tears rolling.

“I see you,” he affirmed.

“And you still love me?” Corissa asked.

“I will always love you, Corissa Fite,” Preston said.

“And, what is your solution?” Corissa asked.
“The same as it is for you,” Preston said. “Love.”
Corissa was awakened from the dream when Ten suddenly sat up, crying out.
“What’s wrong?” Corissa asked, embracing her.
Ten cried, holding her tight.
“Shhhh, I am with you,” Corissa assured her.
Ten laid back down, facing Corissa. “I’m so tired of these nightmares.”
Corissa held her hands. “Would you like to talk about it?”
“Not yet,” Ten said.
“When you’re ready then,” Corissa said. “When you’re ready.”



Corissa had not been able to return to sleep. Once Ten had drifted, Corissa decided it was time. If she was going to help Ten with her nightmares, then she was going to have to face hers. She got up and went straight to the brig. Orlov and Jesser were in separate cells, illuminated by the forcefield that kept them imprisoned. Orlov was sleeping on a hard slab that extended from the wall. Corissa stared at him, wondering how he slept at nights. Jesser was sitting on the floor. She got up and approached the forcefield.

“I remember you,” Jesser said.

“Good for you,” Corissa said, otherwise ignoring her.

“Wow, some things never change. You were a screw up then, and you’ve obviously aligned yourself with a whole crew of screwups. You probably still cling to the lie that it was an accident,” Jesser said.

“It wasn’t an accident,” Corissa admitted.

“I knew it! We should have executed you for attempted desertion,” Jesser said.

“It wasn’t an accident,” Corissa admitted, but her eyes met Jesser’s “But it wasn’t desertion, either. I was stunned, raped, and jettisoned like so much garbage.”

“And why should I believe that version over the previous version you shared?” Jesser asked.

“I’m not asking you to believe. You know as well as I do that military courts never serve the victim. At best, I risked humiliation and discharge, at worse, I risked being found guilty of lying, gang raped and then executed,” Corissa said.

“You are so full of excuses. You are weak. You are a coward,” Jesser said.

“I have acted cowardly,” Corissa said, nodding with agreement. “In hindsight, I wish I had said something, even if it had led to a military tribunal. I know I would not have won, but I would have not spent the rest of my life running in fear. The officer that raped me was by my side from the moment I was recovered to the moment the spore induced psychosis wore off. He was responsible for the delay in our schedule and the search effort, though I doubt he really expected me to be found. Still, he was going to push that delay till Byrne had had enough and called it quits. He came off as a hero. That would have made accusing him all the more difficult. But the bigger battle was overcoming my fear, the fear that he put in my heart. Every night as I lay there in medical, he would whisper in my ear, ‘if you ever turn me down again, it won’t be a life pod in which I jettison you.’ Execution might have been better than the subsequent submissions, the ongoing physical and emotional abuse. But then the discharge orders came. And I was free.”

“Even if your story is remotely true, you joined a service primarily of men, fighting men, and you don’t have the sense enough to use your femininity to make alliances, to control others? You didn’t learn how to fight in basic training? You’re a loser. A huge crybaby. Poor you, everyone takes advantage of you,” Jesser said.

“Yeah. I have lived with those sort thoughts in my head for a long time. That language started in basic, and ran my entire military career. I’m sure the intentions were to make me stronger, to make everyone stronger, goal oriented, subservient, but I’m beginning to believe there might be a better way. The way of forgiving, the way of letting go, the way of love. I’m not quite there yet, but I’m getting better. I’m moving in the right direction, actually have been moving in the right direction since being discharged from service, but it has been small steps. And if I get through the day today without killing anyone, well, I will have made a huge leap forward in my progress,” Corissa said.

“Whatever, loser,” Jesser said. She went and sat down, drawing her feet up on the wall bench and hugging her knees. “You should hear your own lies. Your new story doesn’t even make sense. I remember what happened very well. Orlov was responsible for your rescue. Orlov was responsible for influencing the decision to not have you court martial and executed for incompetence. Orlov was there...”

“Yeah,” Corissa said. “I know.”



Nolasco arrived at medical, looking for who might have summoned him

“Hello, Commander,” Fixit said.

Nolasco seemed surprised. “You summoned me?”

“I did,” Fixit said. “I have an ethical dilemma that requires a human participant to resolve.”

“Explain,” Nolasco said.

“Both Alyth and Daphne have asked if there are any ship records that might indicate the number of children Orlov fathered, who their mothers are, and if so, if they could have the names and locations,” Fixit said.

“So, what’s the problem?” Nolasco asked, leaning against a med table.

“I have access to all the files requested, even the most recently updated,” Fixit said.

“So, provide it to them,” Nolasco said.

“Therein lies the problem. These are medical files. I have duty to secure confidentiality,” Fixit said. “However, if I was to surrender the files to the highest ranking officer in my charge, and that human dispersed the information, well, then, I would not have broken protocols.”

“Then, why did you call me?”

“Because you are the highest ranking officer in my working memory,” Fixit said.

“I am no longer an officer,” Nolasco corrected.

“Perhaps, but you are the only one I can confirm was an officer at the time of my service, and who is not presently in the Brig, or is not complicit in creating the situation we are discussing,” Fixit said.

“I don’t seem to recall working with a Fixit Droid,” Nolasco mused.

“Most humans fail to remember Droids in their service, especially when they are unconscious at the time services are rendered,” Fixit said.

“You’re the Droid that patched me up?” Nolasco asked, standing up. “I owe you my life.”

“It was my programmin, Commander,” Fixit said.

“Okay, well, fine. Just transfer the files to my reader,” Nolasco said, turning to leave.

“Well, I have one other ethical dilemma I need help sorting first,” Fixit said.

“Of course, you do,” Nolasco sighed. “What can I do to help?”

“I need to know if you are prone to impulsive behaviors or are quick to anger,” Fixit said.

“Alright, enough of the games. Track to the bottom of this dialogue and tell me what you’re presently dancing around,” Nolasco demanded.

“Your wife and kid’s name are on the list,” Fixit said.

Nolasco blinked. “Excuse me.”

“Per the DNA evidence I have on file, you have been raising your brother’s biological children,” Fixit said.

“That’s impossible,” Nolasco said. “There were only two times he ever visited me at my home and that...”

Nolasco trailed off, turned and exited medical without saying another word. He practically marched all the way to the Brig, playing in his head all the things he was going to say to his brother. Corissa was exiting the Brig as he arrived.

She hesitated, as if getting caught doing something wrong.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I am ready to speak with you, if you are willing to listen,” Corissa said.

“You want to speak to me alone or with family?” Nolasco asked.

“Family?” Corissa asked.

“Look, I know you aren’t married to Preston, but you share custody of Ten, and he is my nephew, and though I have come to consider us friends, it seems to me that we have surpassed that and become family,” Nolasco said. “And knowing what we already know about my family, I don’t see any reasons to keep any more family secrets.”

Corissa deliberated over the offer.

“Alright,” Corissa said.



Corissa told her story starting with the initial sexual assault, followed by her ejection in a life pod. She included the details of her first encounter with Preston, who in ghost form had healed her and rallied her to a discovery point where she was subsequently rescued and returned to her crew, and the nightmare of the daily continued assaults that went on for a period of several months before her on the job performance had deteriorated so much that her colleagues could no longer tolerate her presence. It was sheer luck that she was not executed. She was declared mentally unfit for duty and discharged from service, without pay or benefits. They even kept all her previously earned credits, leaving her to fend for herself.

After about a week on Axilla, she found herself on the lowest levels, eating spoiled food out of rubbish cans, when the director of the orphanage took pity on her. In exchange for room and board, she would cook and clean. She found a modicum of health returning as she served, repairing Droids and anything else at the orphanage that required fixing. The director noticed her aptitude for repairing things and got her a job placement at Bio Enc as a mechanic, but she continued to serve at the orphanage until the day she met Preston and her world turned upside down.

“You’re conflicted?” Lestelle Re asked. “Is that why you excused yourself from the deliberation?”

“No, there is no conflict,” Corissa said. “I am completely bias and unwilling to contribute to either Orlov’s loss or gain in any manner.”

“Indecision in itself is a decision,” Daphne said.

“Recusing herself was not indecision,” Jordeen said. “It is actually a mature, loving response.”

“It was ethical,” Lestelle Re agreed.

“What did he say when you faced him?” Nolasco asked.

“He was sleeping,” Corissa said. “I still haven’t faced him. I don’t know what my response should be, but I know I can’t decide his fate.”

Nolasco had been listening intently, his elbow on the arm of his chair, his mouth against his fist. He lowered his hand. “I can’t apologize for the pain my brother has caused you, Corissa, but I am willing to do anything that’s in my power to help you heal.”

Ten entered the room.

“I know where Preston is,” Ten said.

“How do you know?” Alyth said.

“He told me,” Ten said.

“Why didn’t he tell us?” Daphne asked, clearly perturbed that this child got the message instead of her.

“I’m paraphrasing, but basically he says you guys are too emotionally charged to hear anything outside of yourselves, but that he sends his love, and by the way, if it’s not too inconvenient, would you mind coming to rescue him,” Ten said.

“That sounds like him,” Corissa said.

Nolasco got the coordinates from Ten and entered it into the computer. A holographic image of the sector appeared above the conference room table. There were no known inhabitable planets in the system. The survey came from the time of the Old Republic, and it had been deemed as having no intrinsic value. If the information was accurate, it appeared they would find Preston on the fourth planet from a red giant star. It was an hour away at best speed.

“What do you think?” Nolasco asked Alyth.

“Even if he’s there, we can assume it’s meant to be a trap for his mother,” Alyth said. “I’m going.”

“We’re all going,” Corissa said.

If anyone disagreed, it was not verbalized.

“Corissa, were you aware that the Fixit Droid that was on the Dargon’s Wake was the one that raised Preston?” Ten asked.

“No, I wasn’t. Is it important?” Corissa asked.

“Preston requests that we bring him,” Ten said.



Preston arrived outside the Chiliad wearing a pressure suit. Entering the sequence opened the door as expected. When the door opened, he expected the pressure in the air tube to be greater than that on the Chiliad, but there was no movement of air and he wasn’t swept inside the ship. He looked back down the narrow length of spacebridge to the Kilmore and saluted the troopers that were watching. He saluted and stepped inside the Chiliad. The door closed

automatically. As expected, he lost the ability to communicate with the Kilmore, but it didn't matter, as the signal to execute the attack was the salute. He proceeded along the corridor, wondering why the Droid ship had kept the ship pressurized with breathable air.

He noticed Bloodhunters watching, but they didn't advance.

There was a rumbling through the ship. No doubt, the war was on. According to the emeter on his wrist, the ship depressurized, whether by design or because of the battle was hard to say, but Preston was glad he had the suit on. He picked up the pace. The Bloodhunters attacked. It took more effort than he imagined, but using his and Torlin's lightsabers, he made it to one of the designated computer consoles and activated a forcefield. Outside the field, more and more Bloodhunters gathered, each firing at the Forcefield, trying to bring it down.

The audio in his helmet kicked on.

"You can not win, human," came a voice.

"Hello, Chiliad," Preston said, placing his key onto the terminal.

The terminal came to life. He removed the glove from his right hand. His hand tingled in the vacuum, but the pain was tolerable. The sleeve tightened around the wrist to prevent the suit from venting air. There was a small aperture, in which a bar could be seen. Preston reached in and took hold of the bar, knowing full well that it would either cut him or stick a needed in him to collect the required blood. He didn't expect the electric like shock that forced the muscles in his hands to lock in the closed position. He also didn't expect the aperture to close up to his wrist. He was pretty sure it hadn't cut his hand off, but only because he assumed if his hand had been removed it wouldn't hurt as badly as it did.

"Preston G Waycaster, son of Admiral Alarna Byrnes," the Chiliad said. "Tell me where your mother is."

"She died a long time ago," Preston lied, using his free hand to punch in commands on the computer terminal.

"You do understand that you can not remove your name from the registry. That was a rumor I personally designed to ensnare the fools who thought they could beat us," Chiliad said.

"I think you're lying," Preston said, searching through the command list. "You know why I think that? I believe if that were true, you would have shut down the terminal and forcefield and captured me already."

"You are already captured. All interaction from this point is part of the interrogation process," the Chiliad said. "To minimize your own suffering, I recommend you cooperate. Where is your mother?"

"I don't know. I never met her," Preston said. "Assuming you are telling the truth about the registry, and this being part of a process and all, you wouldn't be willing to negotiate, would you?"

"No negotiations," the Chiliad said. "You will eventually give us what we want. All organics eventually succumb. Your ship and your crew will soon be destroyed and you will suffer for your insolence."

"I'm sorry we couldn't come to an agreement," Preston said. "I'm rather fond of intelligent Droids. I was raised by one. I even have a Droid girlfriend."

"That is a distraction. Human and Droid are incompatible," the Chiliad said.

"Distraction? And I thought I was already captured," Preston said.

"You are," the Chiliad had insited. "Where is your mother?"

Preston selected hyperspace communications and saw that all the Bloodhunters in this solar system were already in conference mode with the Chiliad, which explained how they were

coordinating their defense. He hijacked the conference call and sent a Force command to the Droids, verbally convincing them they had been caught while simultaneously sending an abort signal that would immediately cease any physical mechanism which added to the illusion they had indeed been subdued by a superior force. Ninety percent of Bloodhunters followed through with their protocol for not being captured alive and self destructed. The remaining had somehow realized the information had been false and avoided the self destruct.

Chiliad screamed as if it had been mortally wounded. It had not been lying to Preston that he was indeed caught. No longer wanting to play, it increased the energy going into Preston's hand. Completely incapacitated, Preston fell to the console and slid off. His hand still locked in the aperture, he hung there, unconscious. The shields eventually did fail, due to the Kilmore's continued bombardment. When they did, several functioning Bloodhunters swooped in and took Preston hostage, taking all the precautions necessary to secure a Jedi Master. Not only was he drugged, he was hobbled and cuffed with active energy currents, and then speckled with tech that pushed through his suit and inbedded in his body. The inserts would spike energy into various muscle groups, causing them contract and spasm. Had he been conscious, he would have been in severe pain, completely subdued by his own muscles.

He was quickly escorted him to a ship and was launched.



“Oh, hello, my boy. Finally awake?”

Preston found himself quite unable to move, bound physically at the wrists and ankles, as well as immersed in an energy field. The room he was in was as dark as Lord Kilmore's room had been, with no differentiation in the shadows to even guess at the architecture. The man in front of him laughed. It was evil.

“Do you know who I am?”

Preston weighed the dangers of speaking to his host. Communicating with him would allow more pathways into his psyche. On the flipside, the presence in his psyche was already there and interaction would ease some immediate frustrations. He knew of no way to effectively block hearing, so either way, there would be a slow trickle into his brain. Should he hold out, he wondered, or open the faucet, so to speak, and allow the conversation and simply deal with the fallout?

Fixit's voice was clear: “change is inevitable. Resistance to change will never preserve what was, it's already gone.”

“I know who you appear to be,” Preston said, committing. He was no longer who he was.

“Not appears. I am Emperor Palpatine,” he said.

“You're looking pretty good for someone your age,” Preston said.

“This is how I want you to see me,” Palpatine said.

Preston considered his thoughts outloud. “On the Astral Plane, regardless of physical age, most beings appear as they feel, so your projected age would make sense, except, I'm confident that I'm presently on the Physical Plane, so your explanation does not correlate with my experience.”

“Yeah, I can certainly see Fixit's influence on you,” Palpatine said. “Umm, perhaps you can give me insight to the Droid. He has not always delivered. No matter how many times I've had technicians insert instructions, it was always hit or miss. I assumed your mother kept reprogramming it, but I get the sense from you there was more to it.”

Preston focused on Palpatine's intuition as opposed to the answer to Palpatine's musing. "Yeah, I'm not sure how you're sensing. I don't feel Force probing. There is a pressure gradient to get in, but it's not telepathy. It's nothing like what I experienced when Lord Kilmore tried to insert himself into my mind."

Palpatine's anger shook the foundations of his face, bringing out scars and malformities. "Kilmore was a fool! His selfish petulance and indulgence in self gratification limited his usefulness."

"Really? It sounds just like you," Preston observed.

Palpatine flung his hands out and poured energy into Preston, racking him with pain. "I brought order to this galaxy!"

"You brought pain," Preston said, after recovering from a multitude of muscle spasms.

"I brought peace," Palpatine said. "A peace that I can provide you."

"At what cost?"

"No cost. This is not a negotiation. You will give me what I want because I already own you, just like I owned your mother," Palpatine said, holding up one hand to give him a sampling.

Preston revulsed over the forced imagery. It was accompanied by a multitude of physical sensations, as well as emotional textures, and imagery. He relived his mother's suffering, as perceived by Palpatine. Though it was just a sampling, a recording played back at only a tenth of the normal volume, it was amplified by the Emperor's imagination, as opposed to being flat, direct stimulus. That did not invalidate what his mother suffered. What his mother endured at the hands of the Emperor would have driven most people to madness.

Palpatine laughed at physical reaction to the onslaught of imagery. "I see I got a reaction from you, boy. Or should I call you a man?"

"It doesn't mean what you think it does," Preston said, finding it hard to breathe. "All you've done is stimulated a particular nerve complex that resulted in an automatic reaction while simultaneously providing physical stimulus. It does not mean the stimulus was desired or that it caused the reactions."

"So says the boy who slept with his sisters," Palpatine said.

"I don't have any sisters," Preston said.

Palpatine laughed and named them.

"You're lying," Preston said. "You're just fucking with me."

"Oh, I haven't even begun to fuck with you, boy," Palpatine said. "But genetics don't lie. If I don't capture your mother soon, your sisters will join you." Palpatine laughed, pointing a finger at him. "Oh, don't be so distraught. I promise I will let you have more time with them. In fact, I might just join in. Perhaps we should start with your mother when she arrives. Even if she can no longer have offspring, I would love to see her reaction to you on top of her. Ahh, I just so love family reunions."

Preston laughed. "You will not get a foothold in my brain by baiting me to anger, Sheev. May I call you Sheev, seeing how intimate you're hoping to be with me?"

"I will have respect! You will address me as Palpatine, Darth Sidious, or Master," Palpatine said, sending currents of energy coursing through his victim.

Preston took several moments to recover. "Interesting," Preston said. "Though clearly that was an anger response, I didn't really believe it. It was as if it was a reflex response to an automatic trigger."

"You will never comprehend my mind!" Palpatine said. "You know nothing about the intricate workings of the universe, much less your own simplistic part in it. You are a cog in the

wheel, a cog that I created in order to bring forth a Sith Army. Considering your strength, your mother has provided me with exactly what I was looking for. You will be my first, and I will breed you like the dog you are, with your mom, with your sisters, with whomever I think is suitable. And with my family of Sith warriors, I will have total, absolute dominion of the galaxy!”

Just for the pleasure of it, he zapped Preston with bolts of lightening from his fingers, while running his hands down his chest.

“But first things first,” Palpatine said, patting the boy’s cheek. “The Bloodhunters report that you’re capable of manifesting doppelgangers. Is this true?”

When Preston didn’t respond, Palpatine zapped him again to bring him back into focus. “It’s a Force ability anyone sensitive to the Force can learn to do,” Preston said.

“True,” Palpatine said. “Which also means a person skilled enough in the ways of the Force can also manifest a doppelganger for someone else, even bring back the dead.”

“Absolutely,” Preston agreed. Though he hadn’t considered the logistics behind the request prior to the question, he was confident that anything was possible with the Force.

“No doubt, growing up without people telling you that you can’t do something has influenced your abilities. Still, I would like a demonstration. Prove to me you can do this. Bring me back to life,” Palpatine said.

“I think the fastest way back into the game for you will be reincarnation,” Preston said.

“I’m not going to incarnate and give up all that I’ve learned,” Palpatine said. “I’ve worked too hard and too long to bring this galaxy together. I groomed your mother to discover all the pathways to immortality, and the easiest, fastest way is to create a Sith capable of conversing with Force ghosts and manifesting doppelgangers for them. Clearly, that is you. Your purpose is here. You were destined to be my portal back.”

“I am not a Sith,” Preston said.

“Nor are you a Jedi, which makes it easier to possess you, but regardless, I will have you,” Palpatine said. “I already own you. As long as there is one cell alive in your body, I will keep you entangled here. The only escape from the torture will be submission to my will. You have not suffered long enough yet to believe this simple truth, but eventually you will break and you will give me what I want, and together you and I will rule the galaxy, man and dog.”

“You sound like a broken record,” he said, chuckling.

Palpatine’s amusements diminished. “You will not laugh at me!” he said, sparking Preston with energy.

Preston cried out, but since the Emperor didn’t want him unconscious, he backed off. When he could breathe again, he decided to conduct an experiment. He continued to chide the Emperor: “My mom played you even better than the Skywalkers did.”

“What do you mean by that?” Palpatine demanded.

“You are telling me that you never suspected that the Skywalkers were plotting against you from the very beginning? You don’t think it was a coincidence that Leia ended up with the blueprints to the Death Star? Just so they could conveniently end up in Luke’s possession? Do you really believe that Vader actually missed that shot, allowing Luke to destroy your Death Star? Or how about Vader failing to catch Luke at Cloud City. Just slipped right through his fingers. But, oh, how I would have loved to see Vader and Luke double teaming you on the second Death Star. If only we had video surveillance of that to go with the rumors on how they dogged you...”

Palpatine raged, his appearance distorting and twisting before Preston's eyes. He blasted Preston with so much energy that he quickly lost consciousness.



Preston found himself on the Astral Plane. He was certain of that because Ashia was there to comfort him. She was sitting in a meadow, his head in her lap. The sun was warm and she was massaging his temples.

"Im hurting," Preston said.

"You're doing awesome. Just hang in there," Ashia encouraged.

"I don't know how much more I can take," Preston said.

"Yes, you do," Ashia reminded him.

"What should I do?" Preston asked her.

"What is your mission?" Ashia asked.

"I don't know. I don't know why I'm doing this," Preston said, his voice sounded tired and whiny even to his own ears.

"Imagine you did, what would the answer sound like?" Ashia asked.

"I don't know. Why do you think I am asking you?" he demanded. He realized this was the only time he had ever raised his voice to her.

"None of this is an accident. You're an old soul. There is a purpose even if you've forgotten," Ashia said.

"An old soul," Preston echoed. "Does that mean there are new souls?"

Ashia laughed. "Alright, you got me. All souls are the same age, as we all came into being at the same time, nestlings, siblings... the only difference is the continuum of experience. So when I say you're old, I mean advance in that you have traveled more paths and forged more ground than most," Ashia said.

"So there are no new souls?" Preston asked.

"There is one Force, infinitely divisible, so new is relative," Ashia said. "We all still emanate from the same source."

"But you don't know for sure," Preston accused.

"I do not," Ashia admitted. "It is my belief based on my present perspective. I acknowledge I only see what I see, and infer the rest."

"He says I can't escape," Preston said.

"No one can hold back the Power of the Force. He is trying to move an ocean with an eye dropper. You can end this. You could separate permanently from this incarnation or you could stick it out. You could call for help, and I know an army of Angels that would come to your aid. You have certainly earned it. You have friends," Ashia said.

"If I surrender, let the physical die, what will happen to my friends, my family?" Preston asked.

"You have already brought people together for an opportunity to heal, you should let go, trust them to do what they need to do," Ashia said.

"But can you show me what it would be like if I am not there?" Preston asked.

Ashia seemed sad. Placing her hand on his head, he was given a complete scenario, as if he were a computer receiving a data packet that opened and revealed itself in its entirety. He saw a version of history play out that was full of pain. Corissa would die alone, homeless, easing her distress with street drugs which she paid for with her own body. Daphne would become Sith

Lord, destined to hunt down Skywalkers. Jordeen returned to Minder and domestic violence would end her life. Orlov would kill Nolasco in a bar fight. Lestelle Re would complete suicide. Ten would become Daphne's apprentice, physically limited due to self inflicted and battle wounds. Daphne and Ten would kill Alyth... Preston had to stop watching.

"You understand," Ashia said, gently, lovingly. "That is just a fiction based on probability waves, but it isn't absolute, and it has no bearing on what you choose to do for your own growth."

"I have to endure. You have to help me endure!"

"Showing you this has only made this harder for you, because now you are fixated on being the agent of change, as opposed to allowing self advocacy and trusting the Force. What you saw was just the most likely path, not the absolute path. If you stay in the game to impose your will and make things a certain way, then you will have failed to trust in the Force. If you love your friends, you must not rob them of their own ability to decide and face the consequences of their decisions," Ashia said, reminding him of his purpose.

"But I love them," Preston said.

"I know," Ashia said.

"Why am I afraid," Preston asked.

"Because you can't see past your present limitation. Fear is a recognition that you love who you are and where you are right now. If that were not true, you would not resist changing. Fear is loving others for who they are now, so much so that you are willing to oppose their own evolution. Your fear will depart when you let go and allow love to flow, embracing the change that is inevitable. Only by letting go of the love of now can you become aware of your future love, which is usually substantially larger than any memory of love you might be clinging to," Ashia said, kissing him, enfusing him with love.

"Are we siblings, too?"

"Isn't everyone?" Ashia said, playfully.

"We come from the same source. But I don't want to have to gouge my eyes out," Preston said.

"I'm not your mother," Ashia said, laughing. "Seriously, G, there is only love. We're all consciousness."

"Why do I feel alone?" Preston asked.

"You wanted to know what it feels like? You wanted to remind yourself what the delusion of being alone feels like, so you could relate to those who are still stuck? Who knows? Maybe you choose to feel it because it's fun," Ashia offered.

"Fun?" Preston asked. "This is not fun."

"Really? You never wanted to be Darth Vader?" Ashia asked.

"No?!" Preston said, disgusted. The kids at the costume shop returned to his mind. He had entertained what it would be like to be Vader. Though he was unsure about his feelings on the matter, for the kids to play Vader was actually healthy, as it allowed them to explore paradigms and feelings from a safe vantage point. Being able to exercise righteous vengeance on the wicked had a significant appeal.

"There are lots of people who want to be Vader," Ashia said. "And just as many want to be Palpatine. If you imagine for a moment that that the Midi-chlorians are vehicles for consciousness and that every soul owns at least one, then you can understand why Anakin had the highest count ever recorded. Not only do lots of people want to be him, but everyone actually got a chance to be him! Everyone, eventually, wants to rage against the universe and be angry

and then, in the end, when we are spent, we simply realize we were just raging against ourselves. It is truly the only way we can realize the futility of rage. If people understood this one thing about the Universe, very few people would ever choose celebrity status in their life times, because the constant scrutiny can be unbearable.”

“I remember wanting to be Luke,” Preston said.

“In some ways, you were a lot like him. Watching sunsets and stars while delving into a melancholy trance, moved by enigmatic music that only you could hear,” Ashia said, amused. “And, like you, he kissed a sister.”

“I did more than kiss my sisters,” Preston sulked. There was no denying the truth from this perspective.

Ashia projected another outpouring of love into him. “Would you have done so if you had known?” Ashia asked.

“I should have known,” Preston said.

“Maybe,” Ashia agreed. “And maybe not knowing gave you the urgency to bring all the players together when they needed to be. Or maybe, it doesn’t matter at all.”

“Everything matters,” Preston argued.

“Nothing matters,” Ashia said.

“Nothing?”

“I’m saying, it is okay,” Ashia said.

“But it’s not all good,” Preston said.

“Of course it isn’t all good,” Ashia said. “Things suck for a reason. It is what it is and it will change. The only thing that separates a victim from a survivor is their own thoughts. Victimized thoughts take you down, solidifies the evil, while surviving thoughts take you up, gives you hope that things can be different. People have survived some horrendous things. Some do it better than others, but everyone can choose how life affects them. You have a choice. You’re making one every moment.”

“I love you,” Preston said. “Will you stay with me?”

“We are one in the Force,” Ashia reminded him.

“Yeah, but I’m struggling. Would you hold me, tighter? I feel like I’m floating,” he said.

“Preston, open your eyes!”



“Ahh, welcome back,” Palpatine said. “Any pleasant dreams you want to share?”

Preston didn’t answer.

“Still doubt that I’m here?” Palpatine asked. “Maybe I’m just a figment of your imagination?”

“Whether you are here or not is irrelevant. Subduing you is a metaphor, a symbol that my family can be liberated, but the trick to conquering you lies in mastering myself,” Preston said. He considered where his previous conversation with Palpatine had concluded. He had been surprised just how easily Palpatine had been goaded into torturing him into unconscious. Perhaps if he did that several more times, he would die of exhaustion, or be blessed with another round of sleep. The constant barrage of muscle spasms prevented him from staying asleep, but even a few minutes of unconsciousness was better than his present existence.

“I can see you are struggling with the pain,” Palpatine said. “Let me help you, son.”

“You’re not my father,” Preston said.

Palpatine laughed, knowingly. “I got you,” he revealed. “Your sense of identity is conflicted because of your abandonment issues. It is true, I am not your biological father, but I was going to be. I had such plans for your mother on Endore, whether young Luke joined me or not. Your mother was always the key to my next step, since Vader could no longer provide me with children.”

Preston didn't respond, but it wasn't certain to Palpatine if he was struggling because of the physical pain or emotional.

“In a way, you're still my offspring. Your mother was my creation. I can feel how my influence shaped you through her. And your father, I also owned him. He thought himself so smart, but I was in every detail of his research, just as I had my way in the Clone research. But you don't have to take my word for it. You can find bits of my DNA mixed in with yours, which would make me what, sort of like your grandfather?”

Preston laughed so hard he set off his own series of spasms. Palpatine fumed, but he didn't unleash a volley of pain to correct or seek submission.

“You are so predictable,” Preston said, feeling some relief. “It's like you're reading a script. In fact, the more I think about it, I get no sense of your presence at all. All the Force ghosts I have ever interacted with, their presence was tangible, very real, very scary, but you... But you, you're a one-dimensional caricature. You're empty.”

“You are mistaken!” Palpatine snapped. “How's this for real?!”

When Preston recovered from the attack, he nodded. “That certainly feels real, and feels physical,” Preston admitted. “Clearly, I am in my physical body. So, if you're here, as a Force ghost, maybe the disparity between past and present experience is explained by my preconceived ideas. My brain's filters are blocking your full expression into my physical reality, which means, I can't give you what you want.”

“And what is it do you think I want?” Palpatine asked.

“I suspect you want what Kilmore wanted,” Preston said. “You want me to create a Doppelganger for you to possess, one that matches your perceived youth and vigor.”

“Is this possible?” Palpatine asked.

Preston tried to shrug, but the binding was too tight to express movement. “All things are possible with the Force,” Preston said.

“And you can make this Doppelganger permanent?” Palpatine asked, practically drooling.

“Sure, but once you've taken possession of it, I wouldn't have to give it any thought. It would become your responsibility for maintaining it,” Preston said.

“You doubt I have the power?” Palpatine asked.

“No,” Preston said.

“But I intuit there is a caveat, something you're hiding from me,” Palpatine said. “You're trying to trick me.”

“That's just your years of paranoia being expressed,” Preston said. “I know I can create a doppelganger. I know I can be in two places at once. I know that I can permanently express a doppelganger, so it doesn't dematerialize if I withdrawl consciousness. I know that I can create a vessel for you to possess. What I don't know is whether or not you are actually here to take possession of it. If I can't feel you, I can't link you,” Preston said.

Palpatine increased the torture with a rasing of hands.

“Again, that feels real,” Preston said.

“You will create a new body for me,” Palpatine said, using a Force command.

Preston laughed. “I am willing to do that for you,” Preston said.

Palpatine seemed uncertain. “You’re trying to trick me. You have not suffered enough. You are not submissive enough.”

“I would gladly create a body for you and let you own it,” Preston said.

“Why?” Palpatine asked.

“As long as your consciousness is localized to a body, I will know where you are,” Preston said.

“If you think you can control me, you are sadly mistaken,” Palpatine said.

“I don’t think I can control you. I don’t think you’re here,” Preston said. “Which is problematic. Because if you aren’t, then I wonder who I am actually creating a body for? Are you another entity trying to gain entry to this realm without being born into it? If so, you might find a body I manifest rather limiting. But sure, if you want to know what it is to be human, I’ll grant you that. Are you a creation and utilization archetype of the collective unconscious necessary for social functioning? That would be interesting. And probably scary for the general public knowing that I have manifested into one body everything that society fears the most about you. You must understand, if that’s the case, what I create would never really be the full expression of you, but rather a gestalt of all the ideas that people held about you. You inspired a lot of fear, a lot of hate, a lot of greed, and jealousy, but you also inspired an equal amount of love, even hope for peace and prosperity. Putting all of that in one body would cause such emotional conflict that you probably won’t be able to function.”

“You let me worry about my functioning. You just make it happen,” Palpatine said.

Preston heard ‘open your eyes’ and realized he had been in so much pain that he was squenching his eyes shut. He opened his eyes. His eyes stung and they closed out of reflex, but he forced them open and allowed his vision to settle. Part of his brain still had visions of Palpatine standing in front of him, but with his eyes open, there was another reality super imposed upon this one. He was floating in a bacta tank, breathing air through a regulator. His tank was surrounded by Bloodhunters, at least seven. Directly in front of him was a dark pedestal that projected light upwards. Directly on top of the pedestal was a perfectly cylindrical crystal that contained a holographic image of a human brain, including optic nerves, eyes, and brain stem proceeding down to at least the 3th cervical vertebra. There were flashing LEDs on the pedestal that blinked in unison with a halo device Preston was wearing. He knew this because if he shifted his vision just right, he could see his own reflection in the wall of the bacta tank. Suddenly, things were a lot less scary.

Beyond the pedestal, it was hard to see, because the entire room was in darkness. His bacta tank was illuminated and the light barely painted a circle on the floor around his tank. He was confident, though, that he could discern the outline of other bacta tanks, maybe a dozen in a grid like fashion, perhaps waiting for his siblings, or just other targets in general. There seemed to be only one pedestal and crystal with a holographic image of a brain, and that was in front of Preston. Just aside from the Pedestal was a control panel, which the Bloodhunters used to control the Bacta tank and the pain settings. When he blinked, he felt as if he were bouncing between realities.

“You’re an artificial construct!” Preston announced.

Palpatine raged, driving energy into Preston. Preston constricted his lungs and neck to enable himself to breathe, as if he was taking on G forces. He needed to endure the muscle spasms, needed to stay awake. There was more yet to understand.

“I want a body!” Palpatine demanded.

“Not a problem,” Preston said. “That’s a recorded image of your brain at a time you were still alive, right?”

“That’s correct. Periodically, I took snapshots of my brain, so in the event that my Bloodhunters got wind that there was a force sensitive person who could create doppelgangers, I could be brought back,” Palpatine said.

“That makes so much more sense,” Preston said, practically relieved that his mystery was solved. His experience of the young Palpatine was a virtual reality program which was no doubt being shunted directly into his brain via the halo. It wasn’t telepathy. It was tech! A dream tech, very much the same way Fixit had interacted with him when he was a child. His experience was physical, because his brain was interpreting the signals as if they were coming from physical sense organs. He laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Palpatine insisted.

“Oh, I am sorry. Forgive me, Master. I must be giddy from all the pain,” Preston said. “I have clarity now.”

“Let me in share this newly found clarity,” Palpatine insisted.

“Okay, that holographic snapshot of your brain will be an exact virtual image of your brain from the time it was captured. It will have captured details from the entire organ down to just above the quantum level. Every cell, every chemical and electrical signature, every atom in your brain at that moment, every active thought, conscious or subconscious, and every memory up to the point this was taken, will be perfectly preserved and could be examined from a computer. But the brain image itself is static! Not learning, or relating. You don’t exist. The ‘you’ I am experiencing in my head is a virtual image, with that brain being the basic template.”

“I am alive!” Palpatine said.

“I am sure every brain scan you imprinted into crystals that are currently connected to Droid intelligence believes that,” Preston said. “But the memory of our conversation, of everything you’ve experienced since that particular snapshot was recorded, is being held in virtual memory. So if I create a body for you, using that brain as a template, it will be as if you were reset to that starting point. You won’t retain anything that’s happened since this construct became operational.”

“You can infuse the virtual memory into the body,” Palpatine said.

“I could add a data port and you could upload your virtual memories, but it would take time,” Preston said.

“How much time?” Palpatine asked.

“How long did it take to generate it? And that’s not even adjusting for computer processing time, so you could theoretically have spent ions in processing time, unless there was a buffer that down stepped you to normal human brain processing time,” Preston said. “If you don’t mind a recommendation, I think you’re better off in that machine than you are in a body.”

“I’m not asking you to think! Give me a body now,” Palpatine demanded.

“Using that brain?” Preston said.

“That brain and tech so I can influence it,” Palpatine said.

“Alright,” Preston agreed. “But you’re going to have to lighten up on the pain.”

“No, you will escape,” Palpatine said.

“I give you my word, Master Sidious. I will not escape,” Preston said.

Palpatine took a moment to process the statement, examining all the biodata for any evidence of duplicity. It found none. It dialed back on the pain. Preston created a doppelganger

for Palpatine, a youthful version of himself. It was wearing a halo, similar to the one Preston was wearing, and it quickly synced to the rhythm displayed on the pedestal.

The virtual image of Palpatine rubbed his hands in anticipation, repeating, “Yes, yes, yes!”

The physical Palpatine took a deep breath, technically its first, but the brain and the memories kicked in, and resumed normal body controls. And then there was the shock of transition. From the brain’s perspective, Palpatine was sitting in a chair having Super-functional magnetic resonance image being taken, in a laboratory chair, some 25 years ago, on a planet extremely removed from where he was presently. His first impulse was to run, but he managed to get a hold of himself. He started laughing.

“It worked?!” he said, triumphantly.

That’s when the virtual Palpatine tried to hijack the body.

“The hell you will!” the physical Palpatine shouted, reaching out with the Force to attack the pedestal.

The crystal of the brain flew across the room and shattered. The pedestal melted. Bloodhunters hesitated. Not sure which Palpatine to listen to at first, but they ultimately chose the physical one.

Palpatine took a deep breath in, reveling in his new, youthful body. He never remembered feeling this good. He orientated on the man in the bacta tank.

“You and I have a lot to talk about my new friend,” Palpatine said.

“Son, what have you done,” Alarna Byrne said.

Palpatine turned to the intruder. He ignored the lightsaber in her hand, but studied her face intently. Then he smiled. “Awww, my little puppet. You’ve grown old?!”

Byrne’s eyes were wide, her breathing becoming shallow, more rapid.

“Did you say this is our son?” Palpatine asked, his hand rising towards the bacta tank.

“Well, done, puppet. You exceeded my expectations!”

Byrne activated her lightsaber. Palpatine laughed.

“Oh, you want to play? Just like old times, eh? You and your mum must have missed me terribly. You remember what I get when I win?” he asked, stepping forwards.

“In solitude, I have found clarity,” Byrne said. “I will not be the vehicle that allows you passage back into this life.”

“Too late,” Palpatine said, putting both hands up to prove ‘here I am.’ “Even if you strike me down, the fact that I am standing here proves that I will return, and I will be even stronger!”

“Then I will make it my sole purpose to hunt you down, in this life and any others to come,” Byrne said. “Get use to looking over your shoulders!”

Byrne advanced. Palpatine blasted her with lightening from his fingers, causing her to shrink back in pain and self defense. Her lightsaber was up, but she was using the Force to shield herself as best she could from the lightening.

“Take her!” Palpatine yelled at the Bloodhunters. She had never held him at bay so long, which meant she had grown in strength, or he had not fully recovered his powers. “Alive.”

It was compulsory for Byrne to fall back as the Bloodhunters advanced on her. Most of the room was dark, which made the eyes of the Droids seem like demons. As she retreated up against an empty bacta tank, the Bloodhunters blocked her in. With a sweeping arch behind her, she cut a gaping hole in one tank, unleashing a torrent of bacta fluid. Two of the Droids were knocked back while another that was advancing tripped on the now slick floor. Byrne severed its head and a leg, before removing the arm of another Droid that tried to come towards her at an angle. The Droid that lost an arm kept coming. She threw herself down on the floor, sliding on her back, in the bacta fluid, severing its leg as she went past. She got up, hiding behind another empty bacta tank, using the Force to dry herself to keep from slipping, while getting her bearing.

Palpatine laughed, taunting her. “Obviously, I’ve been away too long, Puppet. But you will submit to me once more, and with your son, we will just be one happy family.”

“I will not submit! I will die before I allow you to have me again!” Byrne said, pushing out with a force wind that drove the Bloodhunters back. She used their surprise to target one specific Droid and take it out of the game. Now there was one less.

“Then go ahead and die. I will just have my son here resurrect you, too!” Palpatine said. “I could never be without my puppet.”

Byrne threw her lightsaber. It took a trip around the room before it came back to her, causing the Emperor to duck, and severing the head from one Droid before it returned to her hand. Palpatine clapped and laughed.

“You missed! You’re getting old, puppet,” Palpatine said.

“You weren’t the target,” Byrne said.

Confused, Palpatine looked around to see what he might have missed. The bacta tank’s air hose had been severed. Preston had drifted to the bottom of the tank, the severed breathing hose filled with bacta fluid. Unable to swim due to being bound and his muscles spasming out of

control, unable to remove the regulator which was now drawing water in and forcing it into his lungs, he quickly drowned.

“Ohh, no, no, no,” Palpatine cried, moving towards the tank.

The Bloodhunters turned to him when they heard their master in distress. Byrne took two out, before the remaining decided they had had enough, and came at her with full force. Their escalated attack drew Palpatine’s attention away from Preston.

“Don’t kill her!” Palpatine said, destroying one of the Droids himself.

With Palpatine attacking from behind, the Droid became even more confused as to what to do, which gave Byrne an advantage. She took the remaining out and again advanced on Palpatine.

“You won’t be coming back,” Byrne assured him.

“You mean, I won’t be holding back!” Palpatine said.

Palpatine launched a volley of lightening that drove Byrne to her knees. She was forced to drop her lightsaber to increase her Force block, but it was not enough. Palpatine then picked her up with the Force, slammed her against the wall, and then threw her against an empty bacta tank. She slid to the floor, dazed. He picked up her lightsaber and slowly advanced on her.

“I don’t need your life, just your body,” Palpatine said. “I can clone you and your son to get my army of Sith, but I do so enjoy your company, puppet. I guess with your arms broken, you won’t be able to resist me...”



Alyth put her hand near the engine of the A-wing. It wasn’t necessary to touch the engine to know it was still too hot to touch. She signaled her angels to increase their sight vigilance. Daphne caught up to her.

“There is a building just over this rise. Two destroyed Bloodhunters are at the door, and they’re still smoking,” Daphne said.

“Alright, Angels, let’s secure that building,” Alyth said.

Troopers approached the building, blaster rifles at ready. Alyth and Daphne simply strode right up behind them. They entered the building together, one by one, Troopers first. There were more deactivated Bloodhunters just inside the door. There was an open trapdoor and a stairwell leading down. Troopers went down two by two. The first two split at the bottom while the next two pushed forwards to what looked like pillars in the limited light. The pillars turned out to be bacta tanks. On the far side of the room one bacta tank was illuminated, with a person slumped at the bottom of the tank. There was a Sith lifting a woman by the Force, laughing as he choked her, taunting her.

Daphne charged.

“Go, go, go,” Alyth said.

The Sith dropped the woman and turned to greet the attack. The closest Trooper got tossed. Daphne slid in, her lightsaber baring down. The Sith parried with Byrne’s blade, and pushed her back with the Force.

“Coordinate the attack, all together!” Alyth yelled.

All the Troopers fired their weapons simultaneously, advancing. Palpatine deflected with the lightsaber, and Daphne and Alyth reflected those ricochets back. One blast hit his arm. He began to retreat. Byrne drove a boot knife into Palpatine’s leg, and he stumbled, crying out. The troopers finished him off, but kept advancing, kept shooting until they were pummeling him with

energy at point blank range. When they were certain he was dead, they turned their weapons to the wounded female.

Daphne cut a hole in the tank with her lightsaber, allowing its content to drain. Bacta fluid flowed around their boots. Alyth didn't wait. Using the Force, she lifted Preston's body up and out of the tank, and then set him gently on the floor. She fell to her knees beside him, taking off the mask. She turned his head sideways so bacta fluid could drain from his mouth, and then she started giving him mouth to mouth.

"Paolo, go get the med kit," Harolds ordered. "Arms, make sure Trent is okay."

Paolo took off on a run. Arms went to check on the Trooper that got flung.

"Don't revive him," Byrne begged.

"Shut up!" Zaira said. "He's your son. How could you say that?!"

"Because he's evil! I had to kill him," Byrne said. "He brought the Emperor back to life." Harolds looked to the dead Sith. "He does kind of resemble Palpatine."

"Your son is not evil," Daphne said. "How could you think that? You don't even know him!"

"I was raised by Palpatine. I am evil. By extension, anything I create is equally evil," Zaia explained. "You'd be doing the galaxy a favor if you just kill us both."

Alyth stopped to feel for a pulse. "Harolds, chest compression," she said, giving more breath.

Harolds and Alyth synchronized their efforts. As Harolds performed chest compressions, Alyth encouraged Preston to return.

Byrne was in tears. "Please, don't. He is too powerful. We won't be able to resist the darkness that will come, that always comes," she said.

Paolo dashed back in, hit the bacta slick floor and fell on his ass. He recovered and joined Harolds. He opened the kit and pulled out the pads for the defib.

"No, wait," Harolds said. "We got to take these tech pins out. We hit him the the defib and those things kick back, we're likely to kill him permanently."

"How long was he out?" Zaira asked Byrnes.

Byrnes mumbled something incoherent: "I needed him out. I can't let the Emperor find out."

"Doesn't matter, we're not giving up," Daphne told Alyth.

"We're not giving up," Harolds said. "We've all done this at least once. The bacta water may have bought us a few extra minutes."

Daphne tested the halo before taking it straight off, in case it was pinned into place. Paolo was using a tool to remove the pins that were imbedded into the flesh.

"I think I got him all, but we need to flip him over," Paolo said.

After Harolds did a round of compressions, they flipped him. There were a dozen more tech pins needing to be extracted. Alyth used the Force to retrieve the one from Preston's neck. Harolds took one out with his knife, but the consequential cut was much deeper than it needed to be if the proper tool was used. Alyth took one more out, while Paolo removed the final four. They flipped Preston back, and Alyth gave him air while Paolo hooked him up.

"Okay, clear," Paolo said.

They let the defib kit take over. Preston's body convulsed with each spike.

"Come on," Daphne said. "You can't just bring us all together just so you can check out. Preston G Waycaster! If I have to live with this indignity, you can sure as hell live with it, too."

The defib stopped the procedure and announced that a faint, but steadily sinus rhythm had been detected. Preston coughed, trying to clear the rest of the bacta from his lungs. Alyth rolled him over, while Harolds hit his back. Preston gagged, vommitted clear liquid, gasped, and collapsed back to the floor.

“Can you stand up?” Alyth asked.

“Help me,” Preston asked.

Preston was shaking and nearly fell when he tried to stand, but Harolds and Alyth had him. He looked down at Palpatine. Preston sighed.

“Stand up, Sheev. I know your feigning death, hoping to escape, but you’re done,” Preston said.

Palpatine rose from his horizontal position to vertical as stiff as a board, his arms coming up, and lightening firing from his fingertips, screaming. Preston pulled free of Alyth while she was going for her lightsaber. Preston managed to grab the Emperor’s wrist, channeling a burst of energy into him even as he himself was illuminated to the bone with lightening. Even Harold was being bombarded by lightening, but he did not drop Preston. The Emperor collapsed into a ball of light. A red diamond fell to the floor.

Harolds and Preston both went to their knees. Preston put his hands out to the floor, to keep from going all the way down. Alyth went to pick him up. He waved her off. His hands were shaking when he picked up the diamond and handed to Alyth to hold. He crawled over to his mom and sat down, taking her hand.

“The galaxy is not safe with us in it,” Byrne said.

Preston thought about how he should respond to such a statement. This was not the conversation he expected to have the first time he met his mother.

“Maybe you didn’t find me to kill me. Maybe you found me, so I can help heal us,” Preston said.

“There is no healing from this,” Byrne said.

“Intellectually, I can imagine why you think this way, how you came to be where you are, but emotionally, I have some abandonment issues, and I would like you to be in my life because I think we can help each other,” Preston said. “If I heal you, will you promise not to kill me?”

“No,” Byrne said.

Preston laughed. “I love your honesty. Would you promise not to kill me today?”

“Okay,” Byrne said.

“With a promise to renew the option each subsequent new day?” Preston added.

“I already accepted the prior deal,” Byrne said.

“I know, I’m sorry, but I thought the addendum necessary,” Preston said.

“I will consider the addendum tomorrow,” Byrne said.

“My friends are off limits,” Preston added another.

“Oh, just kill me now and be done with it,” Byrne snapped.

“Thank you,” Preston said, and healed her.

“What just happened?” Daphne asked. “I thought he needed her permission to heal her.”

“She gave it,” Alyth said.

Byrne seemed surprised. “You healed me, for real?”

“I love you,” Preston said.

“You don’t even know me, or the things I’ve done,” Byrne said.

Preston nodded.

“You’re just going to let me walk out of here?” Byrne said.

“You could come home with us,” Preston said.

“No,” Byrne said.

“I’m keeping the Immanence and the Dragon’s Wake,” Preston told her.

“I’m done with those things,” Byrne said, standing.

Preston used the wall for support, made it to full standing, but his knees gave. His mother didn’t reach out to help, but Harolds was there. Alyth picked up the Byrne’s lightsaber and offered it to her.

“I’m done with those things,” Byrne said, and departed.

As soon as she was out of sight, Harolds had to support Preston’s full weight.

“You alright?” Daphne said.

“Everything is cramping and I’m tired,” Preston said.

“Let’s get him home,” Alyth said.



With the help of Engineers from the Deterrent and the survivors from the Kilmore, the bridges connecting the three sisters were well on their way to being up and running. It had been a good evening for watching, as Preston could view the operation without clouds obstructing his view. As the sun set, the construction process began to wind down. The Immanence rested on the pylons that jutted out from the three sisters. Looking down on it from his vantage point, the Star Destroyer looked like a flaw in the Diamond Lake. A bridge extended from the Immanence to the Second Sister, allowing the crew that was now assigned to the ship to return to their posts or quarters. Many had taken up residence at the Three Sisters.

Preston sat on the edge of the mountain, looking down. He had already tucked in Ten, using a doppelganger, and then withdrew back to his summit, the place he was considering making his permanent resident. Until the trams were up and running, he was not likely to have much company, unless someone arrived by flying car.

Mace Windu appeared out of thin air, semi transparent, aglow with a purple aura.

“Your friends are worried about you,” Windu said.

“Interesting,” Preston said.

“Interesting?” Windu questioned.

“I’ve been worried about them. There is clearly a giant ranchor in the room, but no one wishes to address it,” Preston said.

Windu sat next to him and looked down at the ship. He smiled seeing the Emmanence. “I told you those were landing pylons. I remember when the precursors to the Super Star Destroyers would land on planets,” Windu said... Without looking to Preston, he changed the topic. “Would you like to address the ranchor?”

“Sleeping with my sisters, or raising the Emperor?” Preston asked.

“Yeah, lets start with the Emperor,” Windu said. “What the hell were you thinking?!”

“I admit, that didn’t quite go the way I expected...”

“The galaxy is just now starting to mend and you wanted bring back Palpatine?!” Windu demanded.

“I was hoping if my mother had an opportunity to confront the evil that subdued her, perhaps she could heal enough that we could spend time together,” Preston said.

“Fixit warned you about trying to heal her,” Windu said.

“I still had to try,” Preston said. “I don’t know why you’re so angry. I don’t remember you ever ranting about how Luke nearly threw away the galaxy trying to redeem his father.”

Windu sighed. “You love your mother, I see that, but even Luke wasn’t bringing something back from the dead. He was confronting that which already existed.”

“Evil always exists. Maybe if we stop tap dancing around it, talk about it, revisit it, we can reduce its impact. Maybe that’s why society sells Vader masks to kids?” Preston asked.

“Maybe,” Windu said. “But really, bringing back Palpatine?”

“We bring him back everytime we think about him, or discuss him, or are reminded of him. You say his name and he is as good as with you. The only difference was I gave him a body,” Preston said. “And it’s not like he was going to return to the life he had. Even as charismatic as he was, he would never be able to sway that many people to join him a second time round. Not starting from scratch.”

“Let’s change the subject,” Windu said.

“Because you don’t have an argument, or because you find me unrepentant?” Preston asked.

“Both?” Windu said, angry but with a touch of humor. “Maybe we should talk about your friends.”

“I would really like to talk to you about relationships,” Preston said.

Windu rubbed his forehead. “Obi Wan, did you have this much trouble with Luke?” Windu asked no one in general.

“No, really Windu.”

“It’s a bit late to have the sex talk,” Windu said.

“Windu,” Preston pleaded. “I am serious. I love Corissa, but she can’t be with me because I will always remind her of my father,” Preston said.

“She told you this?” Windu asked.

“No, that’s the ranchor no ones speaking about, and she already thinks I’m clingy, so how do you talk about a feeling that only reinforces the other persons belief that you’re something that you not, or at least, I don’t think I am. At least, not as clingy as some folks suspect, cause if someone says ‘no’ I don’t stalk them. Except for Alyth. Okay, and maybe Leselle Re. Alright, and Daphne, but that really isn’t stalking, cause they’re like family, right? But, take Isho, for example. I could easily love Isho and she’s not related,” Preston said.

“And, yet, you aren’t engaging her because...” Windu said.

“Because, she doesn’t want to be runner up. She knows I didn’t choose her,” Preston said.

“She told you this?”

“No, that’s the ranchor,” Preston said.

“Or maybe you’re avoiding because you know you didn’t choose her and the reason is you would never really choose her,” Windu said. “Or, you’re avoiding her because she is willing to be with you, and you can’t be with her because she’s not related?”

“Nonsense. I love Keena, too, and she isn’t related,” Preston said. “But again, she won’t be with me out deference to Daphne.”

“Um, so you’re attracted to people who don’t want you?” Windu said. “So it’s not about them, it’s about you, and probably relating back to the initial abandonment of your parents. You’re trying to engage the initial nurturing bond.”

“Exactly. I had the wire monkey, Fixit. I wonder if fixit had come in flesh tones and human shape, like Freya, would I better adjusted? Hell, I have even thought about just being with

Freya, seeing how I am partial to Droids anyway. I am happy with her, but there is conflict there, too. I'm concerned that maybe I am choosing her to avoid the pain of rejection with a biological person, which again, takes me back to this clinginess and when I think of that, I want to run to my mountain and hide, because that would prove I'm not clingy. I could disappear for years without wanting to be with people. I probably wouldn't even be missed! Irony! I am afraid of being alone, but, I also don't want to be around others."

"Do you know why Jedi's are supposed to be celibate?" Windu asked.

"Because it's a rule," Preston said.

"Yes, it's a rule, but why?" Windu pushed.

"Enlighten me."

"Because when it comes to sex, it's very difficult to sort out if a person is serving themselves, or others, as opposed to the act being implicitly wrong," Windu said. "So far, everything I've heard from you is how their perceived reactions are going to affect you and how they relate to you. Love has to be mutually rewarding for it to not be selfish."

"You're saying I'm being selfish?"

"In the last month, you've been intimate with how many people?" Windu asked.

Preston returned his gaze to the horizon. The first stars were pushing through the sky. A moving light caught his attention. It was CU2 bringing up a hot beverage, which it delivered with a courteous whistle, explaining Jordeen insists that he drink it. He took the drink and thanked the droid. Windu pursed his lips.

"Gresh tea," he mused. "It's been awhile since I had any of that."

"Master Windu," Preston said shortly. "I don't think I have it in me to be celibate, unless I go live on a deserted planet, like Yoda did."

"Or a mountain top?" Windu asked.

Preston smiled. "I do like it here."

"I wasn't asking you to become celibate. I'm just asking you to slow down and be aware of your interactions," Windu said. "As a Jedi Knight, you will need to be aware of your vulnerability, because others will try to exploit it. Take Doya for example."

"Oh, I forgot about her," Preston said. "She was fun."

"That's the way she sells it, but there is always a price with her," Windu said.

"Did you just label me a Knight?" Preston said, backing up.

"Yeno wants to declare you a Jedi Master, but we've convinced him to make you spend some time as a Knight," Windu said.

"I don't want to be Knighted," Preston said.

"You have to be. We need you to perform a task for us," Windu said.

"Oh, no, no, no," Preston said. "That's how these wars start. This is my home. I'm not leaving this mountain again. Not for anything."

"You may not have a choice," Windu said.

"Why? Because of the Bloodhunters? I've devastated them. The few that remain are isolated and hiding, and they know I've made it my life's mission to eradicate them," Preston said.

"The Sith Lord that raised Lord Kilmore to Sith-hood is still alive," Windu said.

"Pfft. Not likely. Kilmore must have been pushing what, a hundred? He was barely able to keep his body going. Whoever taught him must be dead and gone by now."

“Unless they weren’t human,” Windu said. “We know very little about this Sith, but what we do know frightens us, even over here, from where I’m sitting. Even the Emperor was afraid of this Sith.”

“Really. The Emperor was afraid of another Sith?”

“This Sith was always stronger than the Emperor, but fortunately for Palpatine, this Sith was much more self absorbed, pursuing more academic pursuits than seeking to consolidate power,” Windu explained. “There was evidence that this Sith was allowing the Emperor to do all the leg work and then would take over in his absence. This was the real reason the Emperor created the Bloodhunters. They were looking for this Sith. Thanks to you, there will be little incentive for this Sith to stay hidden.”

“You keep saying this Sith. What’s his name?” Preston asked.

“We don’t have a name. We don’t even know if it’s a he,” Windu said.

“And you want me to find him, or her, and do what?”

“Take him out of the game,” Windu said.

“If the Jedi couldn’t find him, if the Emperor and all his Bloodhunters couldn’t find him, what makes you think I can?” Preston asked.

“When Lord Kilmore touched your mind, he may have passed on enough information for you to intuit your way to him,” Windu said. “If you can’t go straight to him we want you to find his current apprentice, kill the apprentice, and then wait for this Sith to recruit you. We suspect you will actually have to become an apprentice and journey a dark path before you get close enough to this Sith to take him out.”

“I doubt I will be able to impress a Sith Lord into making me an apprentice,” Preston said.

“There will be rumors that you raised the Emperor from the grave for your own pleasure, and killed him when you tired of the sport. There will also be rumors linking you to the destruction of the Chiliad. This may be all you need to entice the apprentice into finding you,” Windu said. “That and the Force.”

“If I didn’t know any better, I might think the Force is conspiring against me,” Preston said.

“Get some rest, Preston. Yeno will be visitng you tomorrow. Good night,” Windu said, away faded away.

Preston lay back. Looking up, he contemplated the stars.

Word from the Author,

This particular story started as a dream. It was a complete story, so full of details that I could not capture it all fast enough. I think I caught most of it, but as this is the first draft, I am certain there will be some issues and mistakes. I think there are a few really strong scenes that may capture the essence better than the whole, so I am considering this still a work in process. As with all my work, there may be grammatical errors, which I apologize for, as I do not yet have an editorial staff. I merely needed ‘this’ out of my head. I was ten years old when I first saw Star Wars. I saw it dozen times in the first week, a dozen more the second week, and on the third week I was a little disturbed to discover they had cut some of the film. And it wasn’t even big cuts, but the most disturbing thing was no one else at the time seemed to notice, but I went years convincing myself I wasn’t crazy, and it wasn’t until the re-release that that footage was reinserted and was I like yeah! Told you. Then went back to “WHY...”

Star Wars is so huge in terms of social impact, I am certain that this story will not please everyone. Just know, it is not my intent to offend the fans of Star Wars; I am a fan. It has sustained me on a number of different levels, and so some of this work (work equals this trilogy) will be drawing on the rich fantasy of my youth, some of it will be me exploring themes, and whatever dreams may come. As Star Wars, the films, evolved, there were clearly tangents that I did not like. Mind you, I never lost love for Lucas, and it is still my hope that I might visit the Skywalker Ranch, but I would be dishonest if I say I liked all the choices. Even early on, in my youth, there were things that disturbed me about the originals. Torturing of droids is the best example. I thought it ridiculously silly and was asking myself, what is this? Comic relief? They what, really wanted to torture people to impress us about how evil they were, but you can torture Droids on screen without censors? Imagine it had been people, how dark would Star Wars have become? Isn’t that the real reason why we have Droid armies and Storm Troopers hidden by mask, so we can down play the fact that our ‘heroes’ are war heroes and they are killing other beings? Well, it is Star WARS. Not star peace. I get that. But don’t hide it. Let evil be in your face so that when Yoda says something profound like, “Wars don’t make one great” it means something.

So, exploring that, it is my intentions to explore the darkness. Star Wars has the potential to be really dark, if you consider that it wasn’t just the violence of wars that was common place, but also the reampant slavery of intelligent creatures.

It also interested me that Star Wars had only two female characters in it: Luke’s Aunt and the Princess. The Princess was not ‘sexualized’ in that first film, but by the time we get to Return of the Jedi, there has been some change. Not only was she looking pretty good, from a teenage boy’s perspective, but she was a slave and... What the hell was wrong with Jabba the Hut? Why would any non humanoid species be interested in a human? Was this, again, a method of mitigating distasteful human constructs, such as lust?

As a fan of Joseph Campbell, author of the book “Hero with a Thousand Faces,” in his interview with Bill Moyers, and another with Lucas, Moyers really opened up the flood gates as to the underlying mythos in Star Wars. Oh, how I would have loved talking with Doctor Campbell, but at last, I am left with his writings and my musings. Star Wars was ultimately a redemption story. The son saves the father. I’m pushing boundaries here in my story, wondering is there anything that is beyond the power of redemption, but then I am dealing with a very real thing that happens to lots of people in our society, even today, even in America. This story is ultimately not about Preston Waycaster, but the saving of an abused child, Ten, and the

recognition that all the adults in this were once children, and as their stories continue to unfold, you will find tht they too were also clearly hurt. Does anyone survive childhood unscathed? Pain may be an unavoidable attribute of life, but how we deal with it, how we deal with others who are dealing with it, is clearly part of the war we are all in. Star Wars is about pain and it's about hope.

Most agree that the underlying philosophy of Star Wars is rooted in Asian culture. Even some of the scenes, such as Naboo have Eastern images, like ruined temples. 'Dakini' is an Eastern concept which comes to play here and in the next book, but I thought it interesting to share that Dakini in Sanskrit translate 'sky dancer.' I am sure it's probably just a coincidence that Luke is a Skywalker, but then again... Lucas isn't dumb.

To those familiar with my Trek series, yes, there will be another... Skywalker... Sorry. Couldn't resist. I have not forgotten you. I'm working on it.

May the Force find you all happy and healthy. Until next time, Travel Light.

john erik

PS, I would like to thank David for the grammatical corrections he sent me to help this story, Version 2, flow even better. ☺