

# Carida Avenged Part II: Purity Control

By PadmeLeiaJaina

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I don't own any of the characters except my O/C's Raven Solo, Marxx Racees, Tanella Racees, Krishta Racees, Krishtoff Starelli, Brukos Olissian, Nastya Chume'da, Shri Yarr, and Ahriman Soontis. Please do not use them in your own fics.

## *Story Parameters*

(EU/AU/Thriller/Action/Drama/Romance)

## *Cast of Characters:*

### **Original Film/EU Characters:**

**Han & Leia Solo:** Retired Galactic General, Leia Senate Representative to Jedi Council

**Luke & Mara Skywalker:** Jedi Masters, heads of Jedi Council, parents to Ben Skywalker Owners of *The Jade Saber II*.

**Lando Calrissian:** Friend to Solo family, loveable scoundrel. Married to Tendra, owner of Coruscant restaurant *Star Delights*.

**Chewbacca:** Han's co-pilot, Wookiee friend.

### **Solo & Skywalker Children:**

**Jaina Racees:** Senator for Naboo, Jedi Knight, married to Marxx Racees, has 3 year old daughter, Lymnia.

**Jacen Solo:** Jedi Master, head instructor Jedi Academy on Yavin 4, married to Raven Solo.

**Anakin Solo:** Jedi Knight, Prince of Hapes, married to Tenel Ka. Children, 3 year old triplets (all girls): Rowen, Ania, and Hana, Daughter Yssarri 1 ½ Year old

**Ben Skywalker:** Son of Luke/Mara, age 9, Jedi Academy Cadet

### **Racees Family Members:**

**Chariss & Rowlon Racees:** Parents to Marxx, Raven, and Tanella. Grandparents to Krishta and Lymnia.

**Marxx Racees:** Jedi Master member of Jedi Council, married to Jaina, twin of Raven Solo. 3 year old daughter Lymnia

**Raven Solo:** Jedi Master, head instructor Jedi Academy on Yavin 4, married to Jacen Solo, twin of Marxx Racees.

**Tanella Racees Starelli:** Older sister to Marxx & Raven, mother of Krishta, nanny to Lymnia & Jayanti. Parents are Chariss and Rowlon Racees.

**Krishtoff Starelli:** Estranged husband to Tanella Racees, father to Krishta Racees.

**Krishta Racees Starelli:** 11 year old, daughter of Tanella Racees and Krishtoff Starelli. Jedi Cadet.

### **Children of Solo Kids:**

**Lynnia Racees:** 4 years old, daughter of Marxx and Jaina.

**Jayanti Racees:** 1 year old daughter to Marxx and Jaina.

**Tahiri and Shanari Veila:** Orphans from the planet of Nebsca, both adopted by Raven and Jacen.

Tahiri 11, Shanari 6

**Zayne Kyp Solo:** 6 month old son of Jacen and Raven Solo.

**Ania, Hana, and Rowan:** 3 ½ year old Triplet daughters to Anakin Solo & Tenel Ka.

**Yssarri Solo:** 1 ½ year old daughter to Anakin Solo and Tenel Ka.

### **Solo Friends & Jedi Knights:**

**Tenel Ka Solo:** Jedi Knight, Queen mother of Hapes. Married to Anakin Solo, mother of 3 ½ year old triplets, Rowan, Ania, and Hana. Daughter Yssarri 1 ½ Year old.

**Brukos Olissian:** Gem Entrepreneur, multi-millionaire friend to Tenel Ka and Anakin Solo.

**Nastya Chume'da:** Cousin to Tenel Ka, fiancé of Brukos Olissian

**Lowbacca:** Jedi Master, Wookiee, friend to Solos

**Zekk aka Onyx:** Former Jedi trainee turned bounty hunter. Old friend to the Solo kids.

**Danni Quee:** Lead scientist at the Brukos Olissian Medical Facility on Hapes 8.

**Pugh Ta Li:** Medical assistant to Danni Quee.

### **Assorted Emerging, and/or Minor Characters:**

**Ta'a Chume:** Grandmother to Tenel Ka, Mother of Isolder. Former Queen Mother of Hapes.

**Teneniel Djo:** Mother to Tenel Ka

**Isolder:** Father to Tenel Ka, Prince of Hapes.

**Ahriman Soontis:** Supreme Chancellor of the New Republic

**Shri Yarr:** Senator from Drall in the Correllian System

**Mother Anica:** Mysterious spiritual leader of the Bu'Lar Nunnery.

**Master Tionne:** Jedi Master on Jedi Council, human female

**Master Rodersuin:** Jedi Master on Jedi Council, human male

**Kyp Durrone:** Former Jedi Master, heroically died in *Destinies Entwined: Unmasked Soul*, destroyed Carida and lived with the consequences of his guilt his entire life.

**Jedi Cadets:** Mee-Qui, Kynne, By'tna, Roodnick, Jannay, Too'la,

### ***What came before:***

[Destinies Entwined: Jaina's Journey, Nubian Son, Unmasked Soul](#)

[To Court a Queen](#)

[Legacy of Light](#)

[Carida Avenged: Unnatural Selection](#)

If you are interested in reading them without scrolling through many pages on TF.N you can visit my personal website, where I have all of my older stories posted – [Click here to view my site](#) 🌐

### ***Timeline:***

Return of the Jedi 0  
Jedi Academy books 11 years later  
Young Jedi Knights books 24 years later  
Destinies Entwined 28 years later  
To Court a Queen 30 years later  
Carida Avenged: Unnatural Selection 33 years later  
Carida Avenged Part II: Purity Control 34 years later

This fanfic is my continuing effort to rewrite/ recreate the EU as I believed it should have happened. I don't like the idea and premises behind the NJO where the writers killed off main characters simply for the sake of making things "interesting." When I write my stories, I try to always keep GL's original visions foremost in my mind and they loosely follow events from the YJK books. I also hold onto the things that I love most about the SW films, particularly the OT - which is that the main characters were all such good friends. My stories center around the Solos and Skywalkers being very tightly knit family unit and very protective of each other. When I write, I also base my stories on the ideals of mythology and they tend to follow the more fantasy element, rather than sci-fi. Usually, they do at least...

This story is set 1 year after **Carida Avenged: Unnatural Selection**.

As per how I normally write, I am taking liberty with writing canon characters. I knew nothing about Danni Quee from the NJO books and wrote her from scratch – if there is zero resemblance to her in those books- that is why. Zekk, I only remember briefly – and I don't believe I ever finished the YJK books- so again, I'm making things up as I go and based entirely on a faulty memory. Also, if you will note Tahiri Veila has had her past completely altered and she's now the same age range as Ben Skywalker.

Welcome to the EU universe through PLJ's eyes

Hold on and hang on...part one of **Carida Avenged: Unnatural Selection** was all set up for part 2. The title for this fic, *Purity Control* is my nod to my second favorite fandom...*The X-Files*.

Enjoy! All comments are welcome!

### ***Carida Avenged Part II: Purity Control***

#### *Prologue*

Moonlight cascaded through the large windows of the orphanage on Ord Mantell bathing the room in an eerie glow. Headmistress Nara nervously watched as the team of Galactic Special Forces Personnel silently marched towards the rooms of the orphanage. The moonlight gave their white hooded medical suits a ghostly appearance. Three days earlier a team of Medics had arrived under the protection of the Galactic Orphanage Bill and ran complete physical exams on all Orphans currently residing at the home. Nara's heart had thundered in her chest when the news arrived that four of her children were considered to be too ill to be adopted.

Commander Tizo stood in the doorway of the shaking woman's office, barring her from exiting the room or preventing his men from carrying out their duties as they carried two of the sleeping children out of the building.

Readjusting the sleeve on her robe, Nara confusedly said, "I don't understand, Commander. Those four children have never shown a single symptom that they're sick. In fact, I'd go as far as saying that they're extraordinarily lucky...highly gifted in fact."

The tall, gaunt man didn't bother to glance at the woman. "What we do is not for you to question. We are serving the New Republic."

"Yes, I understand that...I made sure that I fully read over the law last night, but..."

The man's icy pale blue eyes glared in her direction, silencing any further arguments. Two more troopers exited the building carrying the final two children.

"Are they contagious? Do I need to worry about the safety of the other children here?" Nara demanded.

"No. Their problem is genetic. Your other wards will not be affected," Tizo explained and peered out into the hallway, readying to leave. The last three personnel exited the building carrying boxes filled with the children's meager possessions. The man turned around and said, "Don't worry. Your children are in good hands, you have the Supreme Chancellor's word on that."

With a slight bow, the man left.

Nara felt an empty gnawing knot form in her chest. Somehow, she felt as if she had failed those four children, she should've fought harder to keep them here. However, she knew if she'd put up any argument that they might've found a reason to shut down her facility. With fifty other children under her care, she couldn't afford for that to happen. Those four were the brightest of all of her charges, in fact, if she didn't know any better she would've thought they were Force-Sensitive.

A cry from down the hall alerted her that the other children had just discovered that their playmates were missing. Shoving aside her own emotional distress she hurried down the hall in order to hedge off the emotional tide that was certain to rise when all of her orphans learned that four of their friends were gone.

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Pink electric light sliced towards Luke Skywalker's head. The Jedi Master ducked and attacked with his green blade, stopping the momentum of his opponent's thrust. Effortlessly, he spun and attacked. Steadily, his opponent perfectly countered each attack.

"Stop being so defensive and attack me," Luke ordered.

White teeth flashed a savage smile and the small woman leapt upwards, tucked into a ball and spun over his head. Landing effortless on her boot covered feet, she swung towards Luke's middle, and danced towards him, her pink blade a dizzying shield of light. Luke sunk deeply into the Force to call on its strength to heighten his reflexes. The training room in the Jedi Temple on Coruscant filled with

the electrical hum of lightsabers crashing, flicking off sparks. Luke felt his overall body temperature rise and sweat began to trickle down the back of his neck from exertion. His opponent surprised him with her agile movements and quickness at altering the directions of her thrusts and parries. He found it difficult to track her tactics...he was impressed.

“That’s more like it!” he announced, stepped back and pointed his lightsaber towards the floor indicating the end of the sparring match.

His opponent mirrored his posture and both simultaneously deactivated their blades.

Both were breathing heavily. She said, “I’m too old for this.”

“I don’t know, age seems to have actually strengthened your skills, Leia,” Luke responded.

Leia brushed a wet, stray dark hair out of her eyes and studied her twin. Grumpily she said, “Well I’ll admit that it IS a great way to burn off pent up frustrations.”

Both plopped down on the mat together and wiped the excess sweat off of their faces. Luke studied his sister and asked, “Why the sudden interest in lightsaber practice? You’ve never been interested in wielding your sword. You know that you don’t have to be a master at the blade to still be a Jedi Master. Your skills as a highly trained negotiator far outweigh the needs to be effective with the blade.”

Dark meaning filled her brown eyes as she replied, “You know why I’m practicing.”

Luke nodded in silent agreement.

For the past year the Jedi had been living on pins and needles. When Luke had killed Brakiss after he had released a bio-toxin into the Jedi circle, the Dark Knight’s dying words indicated that there was someone else masterminding the plot. So far, no one in the Jedi Order had been able to ascertain who that mysterious person could be. All sensed a cloud over the future and were completely unaware of what to do about it.

Since their enemy had yet to make his presence known they went about business as usual, happily inviting two new babies and two adopted children into their family, celebrating the union of an old friend, Lando Calrissian and his new bride Tendra, and anxiously awaiting another larger, grander wedding in the upcoming week of Brukos Olissian and Nastya Chume’da. Even through the celebrations neither Luke or Leia could shake off the feeling that something was terribly amiss in the Force. Leia often felt edgy and was highly irritable whenever she came out of the Galactic Senate sessions. When questioned, she could never pin point a cause or reason for her distress.

Slowly the Skywalker twins got up and exited the training room to shower and prepare themselves for their day ahead. All that they could do was wait and prepare themselves as best as they could, and trust that their efforts would not be in vain.

For people trained for action, waiting was even more unbearable than fighting a war.

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Chapter 1

*”You worthless Womprat! You’ll never amount to anything! Look at you, you’re weak! You can’t do anything!”*

*The jeering face loomed closer and closer to the shivering girl. Loud screaming filled the girl’s ears as the approaching abusive woman descended upon her shivering form. The huddled child instinctively reached out her hand and squeezed. The result was almost instantaneous, the noise silenced and the woman gasped as her eyes bulged and her face grew grotesque in appearance. The old woman clutched at her neck, attempting to gasp air into her burning lungs. The face exploded, showering the girl with blood and gore.*

Raven bolted upright in her bed, gasping loudly. Her eyes immediately flew to her hand and saw that her fingers were clenched into a choking grasp. Darkness clouded her mind as she realized that she was unintentionally drawing onto the Force. Shock and horror filled her senses as she heard a thud by her bedroom door. Throwing off her covers she saw her adopted daughter six year old daughter Shanari slumped to the floor. Her dark eyes wide were with fear as she gulped air back into her lungs.

Panic overtook Raven as tears burned from her eyes. She couldn’t believe what she had just done. Then an even more terrifying thought entered her mind and she raced over to her son’s crib. The child she had fought so long to give birth to, lay unmoving.

“No!” she frantically whispered. Pulling the baby out of the crib she laid him on the floor and checked for breath and a pulse. Not finding either she began to administer CPR to the tiny baby. After a minute of puffing air into his lungs, the child coughed and blinked back at her. She cradled her son against her shoulder and her heart burned with shame and terror.

Uncontrolled tears streamed out of her face.

She glanced over at her bed. Jacen peacefully snored on, completely oblivious to what had just transpired. The young woman shook from end to end as she silently cried. The young girl remained in the doorway, terrified.

Slowly the magnitude of her actions dawned on her; because of her nightmares and unresolved Darksider tendencies from her past, Raven had almost killed two of her own children. She whispered, “It’s not safe having me here.”

Silently she got up, kissed her son, Zayne, on the forehead and placed him back in his crib. After watching him take several breaths and feeling certain that he was fine, she threw some possessions into a bag. She glanced at her lightsaber, uncertain if she should take it or not, then decided that she’s better take it. She stared back into the crib, brushed tear covered lips over his forehead and then jerked herself reluctantly away. She stared at Shanari and squatted next to her. The girl had grown incredibly attached to Raven after her ordeals with abused by Brakiss, the girl only ever spoke to Raven. Now, as Raven stared into the girl’s brown eyes, she knew that fragile trust was shattered.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart,” Raven sobbed. She tried to reach out to the girl, but she recoiled in fear. Raven nodded her head. “I understand. I didn’t mean to hurt you or Zayne. Tell Daddy what happened. And please...tell him NOT to try to find me.”

Raven stood up and drank in the sight of her snoring husband. She looked down at her left hand and then tugged at the gold band that circled it. Sniffing back her tears, she kissed it and placed the ring onto his dresser. She felt naked without it around her finger. Before she could change her mind, she raced out of the Jedi Temple on Yavin 4 into the darkness of night.

Moments later the Academy's small supply vessel lifted off of the landing platform and sped off into the sea of stars.

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"I look like a chump," Brukos groaned, after examination of his reflection in the mirror.

"You do not," Anakin countered. The six foot seven inch tall Jedi reached down and smoothed out the fabric on the shoulders of his best friend's wedding jacket. "You look like a groom."

"This thing itches like hell," Brukos further complained as he twisted and jerked his neck about, attempting to get a more comfortable fit in his dress shirt.

Anakin laughed and smoothed back a pesky lock of dark brown hair out of his own blue eyes. He joked, "Well at least you don't have to worry about flyaway hairs messing up your wedding holoidimages."

Brukos stared at his own bald head and grinned. "Gee thanks, Tiny."

"And just think, those guys were caught selling combustible synthetic Glyrancythe, so you're back in the billions again," Anakin pointed out, reminding his friend of his recent return of fortune in his gem enterprise.

"And it's a good thing too, considering how much this damned wedding is setting me back," Brukos complained. The bald man studied his reflection and saw an olive skinned man with a long nose, bald head and hazel eyes gazing back. No one would call Brukos handsome, but when he smiled, his appearance was very appealing. He stared at his new hoverchair and sighed. Four years ago he had been injured attempting to help Anakin to rescue Tenel Ka from enslavement. The injury left him paralyzed from the waist down. Brukos had once been a big game hunter and after a nearly disastrous encounter with an army of giant Kinrath spiders on Kashyyyk last year, he was finally resigned to leaving a life of adventure behind him.

"Yeah well, it's the price you pay for making your girl blissfully happy," Anakin replied, unconsciously massaging his own wedding ring.

"So, how're your ten daughters doing?" Brukos asked, smirking.

Anakin boxed his friend's ear, causing Brukos to loudly laugh. "My *four* daughters are fine." He leaned forward and scrutinized his hair, he said, "I'm surprised they haven't given me gray hairs yet."

"Oh no, that won't happen until they're teenagers!" Brukos said and laughed as Anakin paled. "Yssarri still eating plant leaves that she shouldn't?"

Anakin groaned thinking about how his year and a half old daughter seemed to think her mission in life

was to eat anything that wasn't tied down. He smirked. "I bet you just can't *wait* to be a parent can you?"

"Nope, I can't," Brukos admitted.

Anakin smiled and said, "Alright, I'm giving you a few moments to yourself, I'm going to go check in on the enemy camp and see how things are going, ok?"

"Sure, thanks Anakin," Brukos said.

"Hey, that's the job of the Best Man," Anakin replied, grinned and exited the room. He stepped out into the brightly lit hallway of the Fountain Palace on Hapes and heard the happy twittering of guest's voices coming from the Main Hall where the wedding between his buddy and Nastya, Tenel Ka's cousin, would take place. He walked over to a door to the left and knocked on it three times.

"We are not ready yet!" Tenel Ka's voice boomed through the heavy door.

Anakin chuckled, and cooed, "No worries, darlin' it's not time yet. You've still got a good half an hour to panic."

The door flung open and Tenel Ka stood in front of him. Her fiery titian hair flowed in cascading rivers down her back. She wore a multi-layered gown the color of spun gold. Anakin caught his breath at the vision, she was stunning.

Ignoring his look of adoration, Tenel Ka said, "Well do not just stand there, get in!" She yanked him into the room and slammed the door shut behind him. His nose was immediately assaulted with the overpowering scent of fresh flowers. The air crackled with stress.

Anakin's blue eyes narrowed with confusion over what could possibly be the problem, when he saw Nastya in the middle of the room standing on an ottoman while a pair of Palace seamstresses frantically buzzed about her waist. Teneneil Djo stood off to the side barking orders at the busily working women. He thought Nastya's dress looked vaguely familiar.

"What's going on?" Anakin asked.

Tenel Ka folded her arms tightly around her middle and scowled. She flashed angry gray eyes towards him and said, "The bridal shop burnt to the ground last night, destroying Nastya's dress!"

"Oh, oh, that can't be good," Anakin replied.

"Look at your daughters – none of them are matching because their dresses went up in smoke also!"

Anakin saw his three and a half year old triplets sitting on the floor. Ania and Rowan, the titian colored darlings both wore their bright blue Life Day dresses, and dark haired Hana wore a pale pink gown. Yssarri, the plant eater wore a deep purple gown. His heart blossomed with love at the sight of his adorable little girls. "Awww but they're so cute! They look like a rainbow!"

He then realized that Tenel Ka's dress was one she recently wore at a Royal Ball this spring. His eyes then traveled back to Nastya's dress – it was Tenel Ka's wedding gown.



“Well, it looks like she’s got her ‘something old’ all squared away, right? And the twins are something blue!” he brightly stated, finding it very amusing that a clothing emergency was getting his normally sedate wife all riled up.

Tenel Ka glared at him. “My dress was supposed to be green to match your lapels, now we do not match!”

Anakin rolled his eyes at his wife. “Honey, I highly doubt after the end of the day that anyone will even remember or care that we don’t match. We’re all just holo-image filler, Nastya and Brukos are the stars of today.”

His wife drummed her foot impatiently. “I am the Queen Mother and you are my husband! Believe me, Anakin, people will care.”

“Well I don’t, and neither should you,” Anakin answered forcefully. He gently kissed her on the forehead and grinned. Tenel Ka huffed. He called out, “You look beautiful, Nastya!”

The brown haired, thin bride meekly smiled as she watched the seamstresses rapidly hand sew three rows of sheer silk around the slim dress’s middle. Nastya was so painfully thin that Tenel Ka’s slim-fitting dress made her look even smaller. The extra layers helped to make her appear fuller. She nervously replied, “Thanks.”

To Tenel Ka, Anakin said, “Let me know if you need a delay, alright. I’m sure Brukos would understand...”

“We will be fine,” Tenel Ka sternly said. Her words reached the ears of the two women and they rapidly increased the speed of their sewing, not wanting to displease their Queen Mother or her mother.

Anakin waved to the women and thankfully retreated from their estrogen filled sanctuary. The tall Jedi ducked his head and nodded confidently to the wedding guests as they passed. His eyes roved around the Main Hall seeking out his brother. Suddenly there was a tug on his left arm. Anakin saw Marxx Racees, his brother-in-law, staring at him with a grim expression.

“Come with me,” he ordered. Anakin and Marxx strode down the hall away from the festivities and towards the living quarters.

“What’s going on?” Anakin asked.

“Jacen’s panicking,” Marxx said.

“Why? He’s not the one getting married?” Anakin joked.

Using the Force, Marxx nudged open a door to a study and showed Anakin inside. The holo-emitter on the other end of the room projected a pacing image of Jacen Solo. Jacen looked like hell, his hair stood up on end, his clothes were disheveled, and his eyes were puffy from crying.

Worry immediately seized Anakin’s heart as he stepped within transmitter range, he asked, “What’s the

matter, Bro?"

"She's gone," Jacen croaked. "I woke up, found she'd hastily packed some stuff, took our supply transport ship, and left."

Anakin stared at Marxx. Jaina's husband raked his fingers nervously through his curly dark brown hair and said, "My twin."

"Well maybe she's coming here," Anakin brightly offered.

Jacen's eyes were full of pain as he added, "She left this."

Anakin gulped loudly, seeing Raven's gold wedding ring glittering between Jacen's fingers. "I don't know what to say...any idea what happened?"

His brother wrapped his arms around himself and shook his head. "I woke up to find Shanari in bed with me, you know, nothing new there. The poor girl nearly always sleeps with us because she's plagued by nightmares. When I asked her where Raven was, she shuddered and recoiled away from me. It took me ten minutes to calm the girl down. She kept looking over at Zayne's crib. I checked on him and he looked fine. He was sleeping. I didn't understand what was going on. He woke up and I just figured that Raven got up early for a jog or something, you know? So I bathed the baby and then saw something unusual."

"What?" Anakin asked, feeling his mouth go dry.

"His neck was bruised. When I got a good look at Shanari, she had similar marks," Jacen added.

Marxx shook his head in disbelief and turned his back on Jacen. An emotional conflicting sea of emotions moved over Marxx's face. He didn't know what to think, he knew that his sister was still a mess at times, but he couldn't imagine her hurting her own children.

"She must've had a nightmare, or something," Jacen said. "She didn't know what she was doing. It wasn't her fault!"

Marxx wheeled around and glared at Jacen. Tears started cresting in his blue eyes as he said, "You've got to stop making excuses for her, Jace."

Jacen looked like he'd just been punched in the gut. "How can you say that, you're her twin! You know what all she's been through!"

Anger flared in Marxx's eyes as he calmly said, "Yes, I'm well aware of her issues from her past. But it's high time that you start thinking about your children instead of always putting Raven first!"

Anakin wished he could melt into the background. The tension was so thick in the room that the smallest wrong word could ignite a war. He was shocked by Marxx's outbursts at Jacen. Calmly he advised, "Jacen, I think you need to talk to Shanari. Find out exactly what happened before we all start jumping to conclusions."

"I have to find her," Jacen said, massaging her ring.

Marxx opened his mouth to speak and Anakin raised a hand to silence him. To his brother he said, "You can't do that. You have to stay there for the students."

Raven's twin spoke up, "Jacen, if she took off on you without consulting with you first, she doesn't want to be found." He stepped closer to Jacen's projected image, his own eyes mirrored Jacen's pain. "I can't feel her, Jace, and I can always feel her." Panic flared in Jacen's eyes. "Don't worry, she's not dead, I'd know if that was the case. I think this has been building for some time. Raven needs some time to herself. She needs to reconcile with her past once and for all. She'll come back when she's ready."

"You expect me to just do nothing?" Jacen asked, with disbelief.

"Yes."

Jacen resumed his pacing. He shook his head and said, "She's self-destructive, you know that. If she's left to her own devices she'll harm herself or do something really stupid."

"I know Jacen. Don't think for one moment that I'm not worried, or terrified for her. She's a part of me. You're a twin you know what I mean by that! I'll tell you what, when the wedding's over, and I'm back on Coruscant I'll start hunting for her. You need to stay there with the students, and be at the Academy in case she returns or tries to contact you," Marxx offered.

"Again, you must talk with Shanari," Anakin advised.

Jacen snorted. "She doesn't talk to anyone, much less me."

"Well you're going to have to make her," Anakin replied.

"Alright, I'll do my best," Jacen said.

"She'll come back, Jacen. Don't panic," Marxx stated.

"I hope you're right, Marxx. I'm counting on it," Jacen darkly replied and severed the connection.

Anakin let out a deep breath and studied his brother-in-law. Marxx's eyes were shot through with red lines. He shook his head and met Anakin's eyes. "Jacen's got to prepare himself for the worst, Anakin. He's right about Raven being self-destructive. She lives for drama, I think. Just when everything seems to finally be going right in her life, something happens and she spirals out of control. My sister's like a faulty canon just waiting for an ill-placed spark to set it off."

The youngest Solo knotted his brows together and asked, "Jacen doesn't know this about her?"

"Jace lives in a happy land of denial. He spends his time being overly happy to compensate for her darker mood swings," Marxx explained. "My sister's a mess and regardless of what Jacen thinks, she's the only one who can fix herself."

"Do you think she'll be able to do so?"

“I hope so, I hate to imagine what would happen to your brother if she didn’t make it through this ok,” Marxx stated. “Come on, we have a wedding to get to.”

“Yeah, right,” Anakin sadly replied. Together they walked out the door. Thinking about the problems with the dresses and now this, Anakin had the worst feeling that this day, which was supposed to be joyous and full of love, might be doomed before it had even began.

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## Chapter 2

Jaina bounced her fussing year old daughter Jayanti on her knee as she watched Anakin walk up the aisle and stand at the front of the pew. His expression which should’ve been light and happy was marred with concern. She shrugged her shoulders at him and mouthed “What’s wrong?” when she caught his eye and he just shook his head.

She felt something stab her arm and turned around to see her mother poking her to get her attention. Leia’s nose was buried deep into a datapad.

“What is it, Mom?”

Jaya reached a chubby hand outwards attempting to snatch the datapad out of her grandmother’s hand. Distracted, Leia gave the little girl her finger instead. Jaya kicked and happily bounced as she tugged on her new prize.

“Why did you pass this bill?” Leia asked.

Politics. Jaina sighed, her eyes rolling up and staring at the glass covered ceiling that showered the hall with brilliant natural light. “What bill, Mom?”

“The Galactic Orphanage Bill.”

The bill had passed unanimously over a year ago. The most notable thing about the bill was that it was written by the man who currently resided in the Chancellor’s chair, Ahriman Soontis. Rolling her eyes slightly, Jaina said, “Because it was one of those rare bills that was actually created to *help* people, not line the pockets of special interest groups. Why?”

“Did you actually *read* this thing before you voted for it?” Leia asked.

“Mom,” Jaina said, flashing a tired expression. “Nobody in the Senate actually *reads* the bills that get sent into our office. If we did, we’d never get to leave the Senate Building.”

“So that would be a no, then.”

“What?” Jaina barked defensively. “I read the first section which outlined everything that was in the bill. It looked fine to me...”

“There’s something strange here,” Leia said, bouncing her finger to keep her granddaughter occupied. She highlighted a passage from it, and showed a part of the text to her daughter. “What does this mean?”

I've seen these words repeated through the entire bill.”

Jaina scanned the text several times. “What are you looking at Mom?”

“What exactly is *Purity Control*?” she demanded. The matriarch of the Solo clan’s hair might have been showing streaks of gray in it, but her eyes were as sharp as a hawk’s and they bore down upon her daughter’s face like that bird of prey zeroing in on a meal.

Knitting her brows together, Jaina truthfully answered, “I don’t know.”

“Well you should’ve known that before you helped sign this thing into law, shouldn’t you?” Leia snapped.

“What’s the deal, Mom? That was ages ago? And in case you missed the report, I’m no longer a Senator, so what does it matter?” Jaina asked, bewildered.

Leia chewed the inside of her cheek and said, “I don’t know. There’s just something sinister about it.”

“Sinister?” Jaina repeated, eyebrows leaping up in disbelief. “Really...you worry too much Mom.”

Any retort from her mother was cut off as Brukos appeared and buzzed by Anakin’s side. The worry from Anakin’s face immediately vanished as he put on a happy face for his nervous friend. Jaina studied the room, her twin brother and sister-in-law were still at the Jedi Academy, but Luke and Mara were here. Danni Quee and her assistant Pugh sat further back in the hall, as representatives of the Brukos Olissian Medical Center. Danni considered Brukos to be more a friend than just her boss. Zekk sat by himself five rows behind her. After losing his ability to use the Force, she was dreadfully worried that he was going to bolt on her and never see him again. Instead, he seemed very lost, having partnering up with Tanella’s husband Krishtoff and together they took on odd jobs to occupy their time. Her older daughter Lynnia sat at his side. When she caught her mother’s eye the curly haired girl frantically waved her arm in greeting. Jaina grinned. Teneniel Djo sat in the front waiting for her husband to walk his niece down the aisle. Movement caught her eye, Marxx hustled into the room and sat next to Jaina. He snatched his daughter out of her lap and cradled her in his arms.

“What’s wrong with Anakin?” Jaina whispered.

“I’ll tell you later,” Marxx answered right as the music began and a Hapan Priestess appeared at the front of the dais. Brukos looked positively ill. Jaina wondered if he was going to get sick.

Tenel Ka’s youngest brown haired daughter Yssarri slowly walked down the aisle, clinging fearfully to her older sister, Hana’s hand. Anakin beamed with pride as Hana threw flower petals all over. Red haired twins Ania and Rowan came in next throwing petals and arguing amongst themselves that they weren’t doing it correctly. Everyone laughed. When the children reached the end of the aisle they piled into the row next to their grandmother Djo. Tenel Ka then came in on Han Solo’s arm. Han proudly handed his charge off to Anakin who’d stepped down from his space next to Brukos and delivered her across from him.

Finally, Nastya and Isolder rounded the corner and entered the room. The seamstresses did a great job of hiding the fact that they had created the skirt on the dress in a spur of the moment. The two styles made the gown highly exotic looking which helped to turn the normally plain young woman into a

raving beauty.

Brokos beamed with pride and elevated his hoverchair so that he could be at eye level with his bride.

As Nastya reached the end of the aisle, the Priestess asked, “And who gives this woman away?”

“I do, Prince Isolder of Hapes,” Isolder said, flicking his long brown hair off of his shoulder.

“Very well, thank you,” the Priestess replied and Isolder sat down next to Teneniel. Gently he brushed a clump of fire-red hair out of her eye. She smiled back at him.

“We are gathered here today to join this couple in holy matrimony. Under the articles of Hapes, it is a privilege for a man to be allowed to marry a woman. What do you say, Brokos Olissian?”

“I am truly blessed, your grace,” he said, beaming at his bride.

“And you Nastya Chume’da, what say you?”

“I am many times blessed to have such a wonderful man in my life, your grace,” she answered.

The Priestess nodded her head and said, “I understand you have both prepared your own vows?” They nodded in union and the Priestess stepped back.

Brokos took Nastya’s hands and his thumbs gently caressed her very thin fingers. Nastya’s pale skin tone set against the creamy dress accentuated her large brown eyes. Brokos beamed with love.

He cleared his throat and began, “When I first met you, I could’ve sworn your name should’ve been either Mercy or Grace, for both terms fit you to a T. Nastya you are the kindest, most generous woman I’ve ever known. You’ve seen me for who I am and what I can be, not what I once was. You’re brutally honest, a point that’s almost maddening at times, but you’re everything I ever dreamed in finding in a soulmate. I can’t imagine my life without you in it. You make me a complete man, without you, I’m only an empty shell. Before our friends and family, I vow to treat you like the treasure that you are, never take you for granted, and NEVER let you forget how much I love you. You’re everything to me, I promise to protect you through tough times and share times of joy. I will always be there for you, forever.”

Nastya’s eyes grew wide and she blinked rapidly several times to fight back tears. She cleared her throat a few times and attempted to find her voice. “Before I met you, I was literally nothing. I had no purpose in life, I was invisible. Then I met you. Through your eyes, I saw that life had much to hold and I realized that I actually *existed*. With you I am a complete person, without you, I am nothing. I thank the stars every day that our paths crossed. You are the most amazing person that I’ve ever met, Brokos Olissian. I love you, and vow to spend the rest of my days helping you through good times and bad, rich or poor. Knowing you makes me the wealthiest woman in the Galaxy.”

The Priestess began a ritual of having the couple share a cup of wine and read to them from the ancient Hapan scriptures of the virtues of marriage.

From the side, Anakin genuinely smiled for his proud friend, knowing how he’d struggled over the past four years learning to live without the use of his legs. Nastya truly was a gift to him, she never saw him

as anything less than what he was – a generous and fiercely protective man. He couldn't have been happier for them. He snapped out of his reverie as Tenel Ka stepped forward and handed Nastya Brukos's ring.

She repeated the words of the Priestess, "With this ring I thee wed...I vow to honor, cherish, and love you until the day I die." Nastya's face beamed with pride and love. Brukos tightened his grip around her hand, encasing her ring over his finger. The gold glittered under the afternoon sun. As Anakin pulled Nastya's ring out of his pocket, he realized that a dark cloud had suddenly formed over the Palace, extinguishing the shine off of Brukos's ring.

As one, every Jedi throughout the room stood up and hidden lightsabers were in their hands as all eyes turned towards the vaulted glass ceiling of the Main Hall.

Blazing light caused everyone to shield their eyes, their ears throbbed as a roar, louder than anything that they had ever heard before, thundered through the building.

Smoke.

Fire.

Ground shaking explosions immediately caused mass panic.

Glass showered over the screaming retreating crowd.

Brukos's chair tumbled down the walkway.

Anakin gathered up his crying red hair twins and youngest daughter Yssarri in his wide reaching arms, while Tenel Ka snatched up Hana. With the Force, she righted Brukos and they all raced out of the hall.

Jaina and Marxx raced towards Zekk and gathered up Lynnia. The family charged towards the landing bay with Luke, Mara, Han, and Leia hot on their heels.

Danni and Pugh who were farthest in the back made it to their ship first, jumped in and punched in an evasive course set back to Hapes 8. Danni had to use evasive movements, something she was not trained to do, in order to make it past a large blockade of Imperial Star Destroyer sized vessels. Danni, who was a scientist and not a fighter, had never seen the style of ships before in her life. They looked new. She gulped and only prayed that everyone would get out of there alive.

The blockade ships continued to relentlessly open fire on the Palace.

Inside, the building the Solos, Skywalkers, and Djo's raced for dear life. Brukos had snatched his bride and placed her in his lap as he dodged falling debris with his hoverchair. A powerful blast threw her from his lap, right towards Isolder. Tenel Ka's father helped his niece to her shaky feet and then threw them both out of the way as a giant marble column and half of the eastern wall collapsed between them and Anakin, Tenel Ka, their daughters, and Brukos. There was no way over the debris.

Coughing, Isolder shouted to Brukos through the clouds of dust, "We'll get her out on *The Prince's Fury*."

Tenel Ka shouted back, “Meet us all at rendez-vous point delta beta niner!”

Her parents both nodded understanding. Brukos saw his bride through the rubble, her smoky dirt-lined face was streaked with tears. “I’ll see you soon, baby. I love you!” he called out.

“I love you!” Nastya shouted back, as Isolder and Teneniel pulled her back into the Palace to find an alternate route to get to the landing bay. If the noise inside the palace was deafening, the roar from retreating ships, and the canons being fired from the invading ships was ear-drum shattering.

Ahead of Anakin’s immediate family, Zekk backpedaled and relieved Anakin’s three daughter burden by taking Rowan. The Solos raced onto the landing platform, Luke and Leia immediately ignited their lightsabers and deflected small laser blasts, shielding the way for their family’s retreat. Mara and Han had two blasters out each and were firing at anything that didn’t look friendly.

Han sardonically shouted, “It’s a good thing we never go to these happy occasions unarmed, isn’t it? Anakin – Jaina – get to your ships, we’ll cover you.”

Jaina and Marxx raced with their girls towards their ship *The Nubian Hope*. Once aboard they quickly secured their crying daughters in their restraint seats and then raced for the cockpit. Outside a press vessel exploded thirty feet away from them.

“Shields up!” Marxx shouted as debris flew towards their window. As soon as the engines came online, Jaina jumped to the hyperdrive and plugged in the rendez-vous co-ordinates.

“I guess it’s a good thing we’ve been planning for something like this, huh?” she muttered.

Marxx didn’t respond and engaged the engines. As the ship lifted into the air and activated the holomatrix. Immediately, their vessel mirrored the appearance of the strange attacking smaller range vehicles in the sky. Jaina carefully studied them and felt the hairs on her arms stand up.

“I recognize that design, Marxx,” she whispered. Then her eyes lifted upwards and fell upon the larger sleek, flat, silver base ships. She gasped, “I know those too.” Before she could elaborate any further, their ship jumped to lightspeed.

Anakin, Tenel Ka, Zekk, and Brukos raced aboard Anakin’s Jumpmaster5000 called *Punishing One*. Without being told Zekk helped Tenel Ka to strap the children into their seat restraints. Then she, Brukos and Zekk all gathered into the cockpit. Brukos strapped himself to a special restraint that Anakin had designed to accommodate his best friend’s chair.

As the engines roared to life, Tenel Ka jumped quickly aboard the computer and laid in an encoded message to Palace Security. Over her shoulder, Zekk watched with puzzlement as she punched in “Execute order QMR1.”

“Get us out of here!” she advised. Anakin lifted the ship into space. From their elevated perspective they saw Tenel Ka’s parents and Nastya emerge from the south side of the Palace and under heavy guard race safely aboard Royal Dragon, *The Prince’s Fury*. Han and Leia climbed aboard the *Falcon* and Luke and Mara raced on board their new ship *Jade Saber II*.



“Are the co-ordinates set?” Anakin asked. Tenel Ka punched them into the hyperdrive and nodded her head.

Their ship quaked as a barrage of laser fire pummeled their forward shields. To their left the Royal Dragon flew evasive maneuvers and fired upon the approaching enemy vessels.

“What are those things?” Zekk asked.

“Don’t know, and at this moment, I don’t care!” Anakin said, laying in his own stream of laser fire to clear their path to freedom.

The hyperdrive beeped its readiness. “Hang on, we’re ready to jump,” Anakin happily said.

As the lights on the ships control panel all flashed green, a brilliant explosion off of their left side momentarily blinded their vision. As *Punishing One* jumped into hyperspace, both Anakin and Tenel Ka felt a shockwave of terror and agony roll through the Force.

From the back of the ship, the four younger girls all screamed at once, having felt the pain as well.

*The Prince’s Fury* was no more.

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### Chapter 3

Ben Skywalker, Tahiri Veila, and Krishta Racees Starelli walked a well worn path into the jungle of Yavin 4 towards the main jungle practice field.

Ben lazily flicked a bug off of his nose and glanced at Tahiri, who only came to the Academy last year, and was their class’s star pupil. For many years she had used the Force without knowing what she was doing. Upon being taught how to properly channel her abilities, Tahiri was putting her classmates who had been at the Academy for several years to shame with her levitation and concentration skills. The girl who had a somewhat wild nature and quick temper was fiercely loyal to Ben. His parents had been the ones who had rescued her from a life of hiding in holes on her home planet of Nebsca, and they helped to bring her kidnapped sister home. Both she and her sister had been adopted by Jacen and Raven, making the two non-blood related cousins.

To his right, Krishta, Ben’s cousin through marriage, irritably wrestled with her thick dark curly hair attempting to shove it all into a hair clip.

“Why’s it always so sticky and hot here?” she complained. Tahiri and Ben both rolled their eyes. Ever since her father, Krishtoff Starelli, had escaped from a life of enslavement and then was happily accepted back into her family fold by her mother, Tanella, Krishta was constantly bitter and irritable about everything.

Tahiri quickly changed the subject, and asked, “I wonder what Master Solo has planned for us today?”

\*SNAP\* “Kirffing useless clip!” Krista shouted, showing both of her friends the broken pieces of the device in her hand. Unceremoniously, she wheeled around and stormed back towards the Temple.

“What’re you doing? You’re going to be late for class!” Ben scolded.

“What? It’s not like Master Solo ever assigns homework for our Nature Appreciation courses,” she snapped. Holding her thick hair up behind her head, she added, “I’ll only be a minute.”

Ben sighed as he watched his cousin stomp away back towards the Temple. He raked his fingers through his bright red hair and continued towards class beside Tahiri. He said, “I just don’t get her. You know, she used to be fun to be around. Now she’s more like...like...”

“A starving rancor being teased with fresh meat?” Tahiri quipped, tossing her kinky, curly blond hair out of her eyes.

“Something like that,” Ben agreed. “I mean, she should be grateful to have her Dad back, not be all mean about it.”

Tahiri didn’t respond, having lost both of her birth parents, she couldn’t agree more with Ben’s statement. They walked along the path in silence, listening to the exotic birds of the tropical planet chirp and twitter amongst themselves, their feet bouncing easily off of the fragrant composted soil. Suddenly, Ben felt a sharp pain in side, his right foot gave out from under him and he fell to the ground, painfully scrapping both knees and the heel of his right hand. He glanced up and saw fellow classmates Mee-Qui and Kynne walk past him.

Mee-Qui, who’d grown four inches over the past year, had a satisfied smirk plastered over his face. “Sorry SpewWalker, you’re so short that I didn’t see you standing there.”

Ben ignored the pain at his knees and palm and got to his feet. He balled his fists angrily at his side.

“Don’t look at me like that, it’s not my fault that you’re a klutz,” Mee-Qui snorted.

“I saw you hit him in the back. Apologize, or else. NOW!” Tahiri demanded.

“Ohhhh, I’m shivering in my boots, being threatened by Beggar Girl!” the dark haired boy further insulted.

Tahiri frowned, knowing that charming nick name of his referred to the fact that she hated wearing shoes. “You have no tact, Mee-Qui.”

“Better to be tactless than be tacky!” he jeered.

Kynne, the mousey brown hair girl beside him looked slightly embarrassed by her friend’s insults and tugged on his sleeve. “Come on, let’s go.”

Mee-Qui looked as though he wanted to insult his friend, thought better of it and stormed away, throwing one final insult back at them, “At least I don’t need a girl to finish my fights for me.”

Cheeks burning bright red, Ben wiped soil off of his tan pants. He groaned, “I’m a wuss.”

“Better a wuss than an idiot. You just haven’t found your voice yet, when you do, you’ll be able to

squash him like the bug that he is,” Tahiri said, confidently. “I just don’t understand why he’s still here. He’s too mean to be a Jedi.”

“Me either,” Ben agreed.

They stepped into the clearing and saw Mee-Qui pantomiming puking motions at Ben again.

Ben found himself thinking back to the time a year ago that he and Krishta got caught in this meadow being chased by two massive Frayt Lizards. When he landed on the back of one, he got so dizzy that he threw up all over it. That event inspired Mee-Qui to create his favorite nickname.

Tahiri grabbed Ben’s arm and directed him to a space on the ground far away from the rude boy. Ben examined the new holes created in his pants and saw that small blood marks had appeared where he had received his cuts. Even though they stung and burned, he wasn’t about to give Mee-Qui the satisfaction of seeing him return to the Temple to get them bandaged up.

“Who’s he talking to?” Tahiri asked, pointing towards the opposite end of the meadow. Ben craned his neck and saw his cousin, Jacen Solo, wandering aimlessly in circles, wildly gesturing and talking to thin air.

“I don’t know, I don’t see that he’s carrying a compact holo-emitter,” Ben said.

“Should we go talk to him and ask what’s up?” Tahiri asked, tentatively. Even though Jacen and Raven had adopted both she and her younger sister Shanari six months ago, Tahiri still felt somewhat shy around her new father. She had felt very close to Ben’s parents, Mara and Luke after they had discovered her in hiding on her home planet of Nebsca. However, Shanari would only speak to Raven and wouldn’t even look at Luke or Mara. Tahiri didn’t want to leave her traumatized sister’s side, so she agreed to be adopted by the younger couple for her sister’s sake.

The younger boy chewed on the inside of his cheek and said, “I guess so. He hasn’t even noticed that we’re all here ready for class.”

Quickly they got to their feet and headed off across the field. Mee-Qui made a rude comment and behind their backs as they passed him. Tahiri snapped her fingers in his direction. A small rock on the ground near her left foot sprung into the air and flew towards the side of the bully’s head. Laughter from her fellow students informed her that the rock had hit its mark. She smiled.

“...Where would she go? If she went to her parent’s on Naboo, Chariss would’ve told me...she can’t ever keep anything from me. And she’d be too concerned about her leaving Zayne alone.” Jacen laughed, “She certainly wouldn’t go back to Nephron. It took great willpower to go back there. She hates Tatooine...”

“Uh, Master Solo?” Ben asked, interrupting his cousin’s ongoing, one-sided monologue.

Jacen stopped pacing and concentrated upon a fixed spot on the ground while grabbing his lower lip. Slowly, he turned and stared at his students. His eyes were heavily streaked with red lines and they were puffy.

“What’s wrong?” Tahiri asked breaching her usual wall of tongue tied silence around her adopted

father.

He sighed and said, "Raven's gone."

Ben furrowed his brows in concern. "Did she leave a note or anything?"

"No," Jacen answered. Desperately he stroked his out-stretched fingers through his hair, and then clasped his hands together behind his neck. "I don't know what happened. I think Shanari knows, but she's run off...and well, you know Tahiri, she's not saying anything."

"I'll talk to her, Jacen," Tahiri promised.

He forced a smile at his adopted daughter and gently squeezed her shoulder in thanks. His large brown eyes looked over her head and registered his students. Thinking about what Marxx had said about needing to take care of his kids made him realize that he had to get to work. He cleared his throat and said, "Guess I've got a class to teach."

"You going to be alright?" Ben asked.

Jacen ruffled Ben's wild bright titian hair. "No. But I can fake it."

Together the three walked off together back to class in heavy silence.

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Rock...rock...rock...rock.

The small girl sat curled in a ball, staring out the window of the top observation room in the Jedi Temple. Unconsciously, she stroked the smooth skin under her chin and loudly gulped in air.

*I didn't mean to hurt you or Zayne.*

Large round teardrops splattered onto the rough cobbled stone floor. Shanari kept hearing her new mother's words repeat over and over in her head. Yet no matter how many times she listened to them, she didn't believe their meaning.

Shanari had awoken in the middle of the night with her heart racing and unable to breath. The bad man was there again in his big red suit, taunting and terrifying her dreams. When she finally realized that she was awake and safe, she felt her bed was wet. Shame had filled her senses – she's wet her covers again. Deep down, she knew that her mommy had smelled her and had punished her for being bad.

She didn't know why Momma had hurt Zayne though, he probably wet himself also, but he was just a baby and didn't know any better.

Her tiny hand angrily shoved a clump of stringy brown hair out of her eyes and she rocked harder. She knew she was too big to be wetting her bed. She also knew that Master Tionne was going to be angry with her for skipping another of her story-telling lessons today. In the last eight months that she'd been at the Temple, she'd learned every hidey hole and secret passage that this ancient sculpture possessed. She preferred exploring the Temple to hearing stories about dead, heroic, fallen Jedi.

The open window carried a light rustling wind that went through the tropical trees, showering the room with the calming melody of tinkering leaves. Suddenly two voices carried in the wind. Shanari crawled on her knees and peeked out the window. She saw that mean boy, Mee-Qui and the quiet yet mean girl Kynne re-emerging from the jungle. The wind carried their voices upwards.

“Look, he’s obviously out of it for some reason. I’m not wasting my time listening to him ramble on about how a flutterbug’s wing stroke can cause the winds to change. Master Solo’s off his nut!” Mee-Qui said.

“But you just walked out on class. You know that he’s going to remember that you did that,” Kynne said.

“Yeah? Who cares? This is a dumb program anyways. Raven’s the only semi-interesting instructor around here and apparently she took off last night. Maybe she got tired of her goody-goody husband,” Mee-Qui spat.

Kynne looked scandalized and unable to come up with a snappy comeback. Her jaw dropped even wider and she suddenly pointed towards the landing bay.

“Who’re they?” she squeaked.

Shanari’s eyes grew wide as dozens of helmeted men carrying guns suddenly raced into the courtyard.

Large rings of blue light shot towards both Mee-Qui and Kynne and the two older students collapsed onto the ground. The soldiers rounded up all of the students who were still at the Temple between courses and shot them down.

Tahiri’s sister watched in horror as Krishta re-emerged from the Temple fixing her hair, when two guards turned and fired point blank into her chest. The girl flew off of her feet for five feet and collapsed into a motionless mass on the stairs.

Men who were not carrying weapons began gathering up the fallen children and carried them back towards some unseen source at the landing bay.

The terrified girl shoved her fist into her mouth to silence her screams. Visions from her past of fire and looming men entered into her subconscious. Her nightmares suddenly came back to life. She exploded to her feet and ran across the room towards the observation room’s broom closet. There she slammed the door tightly shut behind her and wiggled loose a large stone in the wall that revealed an access port to the Temple’s ventilation shaft. Shanari wormed her way inside and tugged the stone back in place. Then without waiting, she crawled her way deeply into the metal tubes that re-circulated the air throughout the Temple. Screams of terror and the sounds of blaster fire carried through the ducts to her delicate ears.

Sobbing, she threw her hands tightly over each ear and rocked harder than before, hoping that she could will the maddening sounds to cease. Time lost all meaning to the frightened girl as she prayed that the bad men would not find her. She’d rather die than ever be held prisoner again, by anyone.

Silently, she hoped that no one would force her to make that choice.

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## Chapter 4

“... We must always respect the creatures around us, even those that you might deem worthless, annoying, or those that are dangerous...”

Jacen stopped speaking mid-sentence. His hand flew to his belt and grasped his lightsaber hilt.

“What’s wrong, Jacen?” Ben asked, bounding to his feet.

The Jedi Master looked at his class of unarmed pre-teens and ordered, “I don’t want any of you moving from this spot, do you understand me?”

Tahiri and Ben’s eyes widened as Jacen sped off without another word towards the well traveled path back to the Temple.

Unanimously, all of the students leapt to their feet and the class of twelve silently pursued their retreating master. Ben and Tahiri fought their way through the jungle forest and slowed down as they approached the jungle barrier to the Temple. They crept towards the closest trees and peered around the massive trunks. They couldn’t see anything amiss, nor could Jacen be seen anywhere.

Quickly and effortlessly, Tahiri climbed her tree to gain a higher perspective of the area. When she’d reached the half way mark, she crept through the branches and looked out over the area. Her eyes widened as three large vessels lifted themselves into the air from the landing bay area and quickly ascended into the sky.

The ships strongly resembled those that carried the men who kidnapped the children on Nebsca. Her heart raced with fear, remembering how she’d spent months hiding underground from them. In the center of the landing bay, Jacen raced across pavement with his lightsaber lit. As the ships vanished into specks in the sky, the Jedi Master deactivated his sword, collapsed to his knees and hung his head in defeat.

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Ben and Tahiri were hot on Jacen’s heels as he frantically dashed into the Temple.

“Where is everyone?” Ben demanded.

Knowing all too well the horrors of children being snatched up in the middle of the night, Tahiri felt a large worry knot squeeze painfully in her gut.

Not listening to his cousin’s queries, Jacen charged down the hall towards the nursery. He slammed the door open and stopped dead in his tracks.

Zayne’s crib was empty.

“No,” he whispered. The shocked Jedi staggered forward and pulled Zayne’s favorite blue blanket out

of his crib and rubbed it against his cheek. The warm fabric still contained his son's scent. His heart swelled with pain. He thought that his wife's disappearance was the worst thing that could possibly happen: he was wrong.

Sniffling could be heard in the deafening silence. Cowering in a corner was Too'la, Krishta's Twi'lek friend who'd been in charge of the daycare center today.

Her large black eyes stared fearfully up Jacen, her entire body shook as giant tears dropped from her eyes.

Holding tight to the blanket, Jacen squatted in front of the girl and softly asked, "What happened, Too'la?"

"I...I w..wa...waass only in the 'fresher for a second. When I came out I saw m...m...men come in, grab Zayne and leave. I...heard shots outside and I froze," she stammered. Her voice pitched to a wail as she shouted, "It's all my FAULT! I'm so SORRY!" The young girl collapsed, sobbing beyond reason.

Jacen took a hold of her blue skinned shoulder and cradled the inconsolable girl close to him. Her tears immediately soaked his khaki flight suit.

"It's not your fault, Too'la. If you'd tried to go after them, you'd have been taken as well," Jacen said, assuredly. It took every ounce of willpower not to burst into a round of fresh tears.

Tahiri leaned inside the doorframe and stared at her new father. She asked, "You think they're alright?"

"I felt their life-force energies when the ships were taking off. The men must've stunned everyone," Jacen dully stated.

Ben observed his cousin and noted with sharp clarity that something was different. The sliver of joy and mirth that always lurked in Jacen's eyes had extinguished.

"Come on, we need to see if there's anyone else around here still in hiding," Jacen ordered.

"Then what're we going to do?" Ben asked.

"We're going to find them and bring them back," Jacen stoically said, his fingers tightening around his son's blanket. "All of them."

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One by one the band of Skywalker and Solo ships fell out of hyperspace and hovered over the icy planet of Hoth. Marxx, Luke, Han, and Anakin dipped their vehicles into descending patterns and laid in the co-ordinates for the small former Rebel Base. Each ship flew into the once collapsed hanger, when all four vehicles were safely inside, Luke activated the shield doors, sealing the group underground.

The flight hadn't been an easy one for those aboard *Punishing One*. Brukos had immediately detached

his chair upon entering hyperspace and sped off to silence the girls. No matter how many times Anakin or Tenel Ka had tried to broach the subject of what had happened, the groom utterly refused to let them speak or listen to their news.

After realizing that her childhood friend wasn't going to immediately be a consoling source, Tenel Ka retreated to one of the chamber rooms to digest the magnitude of her loss. Her mother, father, and cousin were all murdered in an instant. Her mind spun wildly with worse case scenarios: What if her children had been aboard that ship? What if she and Anakin had been separated? What if they'd lost Brukos also? A part of her knew that such thoughts were pointless and did little to make her feel any better knowing that everyone else had survived.

Whoever had fired upon the Fountain Palace had killed the Prince of Hapes. At least there was one bright spot from the day Tenel Ka knew that her system would now be at war with the cowards who murdered her parents.

Anakin and Tenel Ka had bundled up their four daughters and given Brukos and Zekk winter jackets and the crew walked down the gangplank to meet with the rest of the family. Leia immediately smothered her daughter-in-law in a fierce hug. Tenel Ka sniffled into Leia's arms, realizing that her mother-in-law could've been her real mother if fate had turned out differently.

Brukos rapidly zipped his hoverchair away from the crowd, as if retreating away from the grief-stricken family members would bring back his bride.

Anakin's heart felt for his friend. Trusting that his family would take care of Tenel Ka for a while, he handed over Hana to her grandfather and quickly followed Brukos into the cold depths of the cavernous hideaway.

The towering Jedi located Brukos sitting in the middle of the dust covered remains of the Base's ancient Rebel control center. Anakin absently looked around and saw the control panel that powered the base that he and Lowie had worked on rehabbing six months ago. It had automatically activated when their ships entered the landing bay.

Large puffs of condensation rose from Brukos's mouth. Anakin reached into his pocket and extracted a knit hat that he placed on his friend's bald head.

In a thick, voice, full of emotion, Brukos complained, "You know, I'm not one of your kids that needs bundling up." He made no move to remove the hat.

Anakin wrapped his Jedi robe tighter around himself and walked in front of his friend. Brukos's eyes were streaked with red lines and his lower lip was slightly quivering. The groom stared at his shiny new wedding band that he had forgotten Nastya had placed on his finger moments before the attack.

As he studied his friend's horrified expression, Anakin suddenly felt Nastya's smaller ring still secured inside his pocket. Something told him that if he gave it to Brukos right now that his friend would completely fall apart.

"Who could've done this?" Brukos asked, in a strangely small voice.

"I don't know. None of us know. Uncle Luke was warned that someone was out there who wanted to



destroy us. We all sensed trouble coming ahead which is why we spent the last year preparing a series of bases for us to escape to. I promise you though, none of us foresaw this happening,” Anakin stated.

Steadily, Brukos asked, “How’s Tiki doing?”

“As expected, she’s a mess. Who can blame her? Her parents and cousin are gone, and she basically had to abandon her throne,” Anakin explained.

“She’ll be ordering counter attacks though, won’t she?” Brukos wondered.

Anakin shrugged. “She said that Hapes was left ‘in good hands’ – whatever that means. Do you want to be alone? Or do you want to get back out there and try and help us all to figure out what happened?”

“Give me a minute and I’ll come out,” Brukos said, twisting his ring around his finger.

Rising to his feet, Anakin grabbed his buddy’s shoulders tightly and said, “I’m so sorry, Brukos.”

“I know Anakin. Thank you,” Brukos responded. “Oh, Tiny?”

“Yeah?” Anakin asked mid-step towards the door.

“You can give it to me now,” Brukos advised and held out his hand. Silently, Anakin dropped Nastya’s ring into his outstretched palm and then quickly exited the room.

The doors hissed shut and Brukos stared at her ring. It was so small that it didn’t even fit on his pinky finger. A flurry of visions of his bride flashed before his eyes, her beauty when she spoke her vows, the look of horror on her face when they were separated, and that final fearful look on her face before she climbed aboard the doomed *Prince’s Fury*.

He couldn’t find the tears to cry...the pain that lurked in his chest was too intense to recognize and accept. Numbly, he slipped Nastya’s ring into his pocket, tugged his cap down tighter around his cold ears and headed out to meet with the others.

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\*Bang\* \*Bang\* \*Bang\* sounded the electronic gavel.

“We shall have order!” Yuulu Volst the Senate’s Quarren chairman shouted about the roars of outrage that brought the noise levels in the Senate Chamber to a deafening level.

From the shadows, the stoic leader of the Senate, Chancellor Ahriman Soontis appeared. The black haired man with a dark tan, black eyes, and a large crooked nose looked defeated and depressed. Ahriman was the youngest Chancellor ever elected to the Senate after Jaina Solo had forfeited the title and quit her Senate seat a year ago. Upon seeing the Chancellor, everyone silenced.

Ahriman’s intoxicatingly deep masculine voice softly spoke to the Senate, “I have called this special session because of a tragedy that our Galaxy experienced today. Earlier in an exchange of fire, the royal family of Hapes was killed. We all greatly feel for this loss, for it wasn’t that long ago that the normally reclusive Hapans had finally agreed to become members of the New Republic. We will all miss their

special representative Prince Isolder and his family. They were good people.”

A voice cried out across the chamber demanding, “WHO MURDERED THEM?”

Murmurs of agreement could be heard.

Soontis took a deep breath and said, “We did.”

He waited for the angry cries of protest to ebb.

“Certainly, we never wanted this to happen. Our troops were sent to the Palace on my orders, to simply ask that Prince Isolder to return to Coruscant to answer some questions for me. Recently, I came across some data that indicated that the Hapan delegation had been filtering military funds to the Jedi Order. When the fleet’s commander asked for the Prince to come quietly, he ordered his fleet to open fire upon our ships,” Soontis explained, his expression bland.

Another roar of disbelief greeted his explanation.

“Again, when we get more information, we will share it with you. Please know that we did everything appropriately and had no intention for this tragedy to occur. Thank you,” Soontis said, ending his speech. Without addressing the barrage of angry questions, he turned heel and exited the chamber.

The man flicked his fingers to Yuulu Volst, informing him that he wanted to be alone. Over his shoulders to his mousy assistant, Dorme he said, “Let in Senator Yarr when he comes by. If anyone else comes, deny them entry.”

“Yes, Chancellor,” Dorme said, her dark eyes wide with horror, having listened to the holonews who’d just reported the Chancellor’s special announcement.

Soontis immediately chucked off his ceremonial robes and paced in his office wearing a simple dark blue long sleeved shirt and tan pants that were tucked into Dewback leather boots. His heart raced in his chest. Luckily with the Royal family destroyed there would be no one left to dispute his claim on how the Chume’da’s were killed.

A happy smile spread over his lips, the first step in discrediting the Jedi was in place. Of course the Senate would be shocked, but even they would eventually accept his truth about things.

The office doors hissed open and Senator Shri Yarr entered. The man was short with greasy dark hair and a teeth gratingly annoying high-pitched voice. “I guess that went well?” he asked.

Ahriman waved him off and planted his fist on his hip. “I didn’t expect them all to calmly accept the news. Once the initial shock is over they’ll go over the facts again. I’ll send out the documents that show Isolder was stealing funds for the Jedi and soon they’ll back me up.”

Yarr nervously disagreed, “Perhaps they will accept that...eventually. But what about snatching up the Jedi students on Yavin 4?”

“Oh you know, we were worried that the Jedi were getting too dangerous, didn’t know what they were doing with those extra funds, and the government just had to protect the children. Yarr...think of the

CHILDREN! We can't have them suffering at the hands of the Jedi, now could we?" Ahriman giddily chortled.

"You have to be careful, Ahri. You don't want people to overhear you," Yarr warned.

"You worry too much Barri, I'm the model of remorse to the people. Besides, I employed the use of our friends who used to fetch up orphans in the outer rim – nobody will be able to link their disappearance back to me," Ahriman said. His eyes flickered over to the holoimager and saw it was flashing with an incoming message. He activated the device. A shimmering figure of Imperial Commander Tizo towered over the stand of the device. All merriment vanished from Soontis's face as he asked, "Commander, what's the news?"

"We've examined the wreckage of the Dragon, Your Excellency. It appears that twenty-seven souls were lost in the explosion. We found two females and twenty-five male bodies," the Commander stated.

His stomach dropped at the news – if there were only two females, there was a chance that some of the royal members might've survived. "Were any of them children? Have you been able to identify the remains?"

"No children, sir. All we've been able to determine is that Prince Isolder and his wife were aboard. Their corpses were identified by the Prince's royal crest on their rings," Tizo reported.

Ahriman tried to control the worry lines that threatened to crinkle his forehead. "And the other female?"

"We're not sure yet. It could be the Queen Mother, or someone else. Her remains were barely recognizable, she must've been close to a fuel source at the time of the explosion," Tizo stated. "She wasn't wearing a royal crest ring, however."

"Alright, well keep me in the loop," Soontis dismissed.

The Commander bowed and vanished.

"This isn't good news. It's highly possible that Queen Mother Tenel Ka and her brood of young heirs survived," Yarr said.

"Yes," Soontis hissed. "I'm well aware of that. I don't understand this. Our men knew that everyone would be in that ceremony chamber. How did anyone survive that blast?"

"Perhaps the Jedi are still buried under the rubble in there?" Yarr hopefully offered.

"Doubt it, Commander Tizo would've reported that good news right off," Soontis dismissively responded. He glared out the window at the passing traffic.

The shorter man licked his lips nervously and asked, "What do we do next?"

"The Jedi will hear that we were the ones that attacked the Palace. My guess is they'll retaliate. We make certain that their actions are splashed all over the news. That'll paint the Jedi in an unfavorable

public light,” Soontis said.

“And if they don’t retaliate?”

Dark eyes bore down in his direction. “Then we’ll make it *look* like they did.” Soontis stared thoughtfully out the window, his mind churning. “Didn’t Tizo say that they’d recovered the main computer from Brakiss’s ship?”

“Yes.”

“Any word on if they’re done analyzing the data on it?” Soontis asked, striding over to his desk. He activated his computer terminal and scanned through his personal, encrypted mail until he located the report. He then opened it and quickly scanned the files.

“What’re you looking for?” Yarr inquired, peering over Soontis’s shoulders.

“Brakiss’s personal files...there we go,” he said, and scanned through the deceased Dark Jedi’s communications files. He saw a green Falleen woman appear on the screen several times. Curious, he listened to several of the conversations. Soontis leaned back in his chair with his eyes narrowed. “Why was Brakiss sending her to the Medical Center on Hapes 8?”

“You mean the Brukos Olissian Medical Center?” Yarr asked, incredulously.

“Why is that name familiar?”

“Because he was the groom at today’s doomed wedding,” Yarr answered.

Hope blossomed in Soontis’s chest. “He’s friends with the Jedi.”

“Probably, and it’s also very likely that the Jedi went there to receive treatment for your father’s virus,” Yarr guessed.

A dark smile curled the corners of Ahriman’s mouth. “Looks like we just found the break we’ve been looking for. I’ll get someone out there right away. I’m sure that the medical physician in charge of the treatment of the Jedi will be easy to locate, he’ll probably be considered a hero there.”

Yarr remained silent, waiting for Ahriman to reveal more of his ingenious plan.

“We take away their magical doctor and the Jedi will be vulnerable again,” Soontis murmured.

“But the virus...they found a cure for it...”

Soontis flashed his dark eyes angrily in Yarr’s direction. “Father’s virus is still viable. I’ve got a crack team of scientists working on mutating it. If we can get our hands on their doctor, we can discover how he cured the Jedi and then figure out how to re-infect them.”

“It shall be done, Sir,” Yarr said, snapping to attention.

Soontis raised his eyes and met his old friends. “Failure is not an option,” he warned.

“Don’t worry, I know better than to fail you,” Yarr answered and smartly left the office.

Ahriman lazily spun in his chair and smiled contently. After only a partially successful execution of his plans things were looking up.

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## Chapter 5

Jedi Master Lowbacca roared his approval as Jedi Knight Konda wove his starfighter into a perfectly executed evasive turn. The new aerodynamic J-Wing Starfighters were the best in the fleet. It could turn on a dime and behaved more as an extension of the Jedi fighter’s body than his ship. Each vessel was equipped with high-tech micro-chips, allowing the pilots to mentally interface directly with the craft’s computer. The result was that the single-pilot ships could react as quickly as thoughts entered the pilots mind.

The Wookiee smiled broadly knowing that the eight Knights were ripe and ready for battle. After quitting the Senate a year ago, Jaina Racees had rejoined the Jedi Order after having been granted the title of Jedi Master. Promptly after giving birth to her second daughter, she worked with her former Intel contacts to produce and design the current fleet of J-Wings. Using Senate funds allocated to the Order and donations from the public, the ships were worth the cost of each of their hefty price tags.

Nine of the fifteen ships stayed at the Temple on Coruscant. The remaining six had been scattered throughout the Galaxy in hideouts, per Jaina’s insistence.

Lowie watched as his fighters chased each other in mock combat. Suddenly, a fleet of eight X-Wings melted out of the atmosphere.

“Blue leader, this is Gold leader, acknowledge,” a voice chimed in Lowie’s communit.

He barked back his acknowledgement and greeted Rogue Squadron.

“Master Lowbacca, we’re here to escort your team to the rendez-vous point.”

Lowie’s heart thundered in his chest, something had told him when he woke up today that their time of waiting was over. The Jedi Master knew that commlines could be compromised, intercepted, or hijacked, and without another word he accessed the main computers for his entire fleet of fighters and entered in the secret co-ordinates for the rendez-vous point.

He barked an order for his fighters to disengage their mock combat and told them to prepare to jump to lightspeed.

Then in a blink of an eye, Rogue Squadron and the Jedi Brigade vanished into hyperspace, heading towards Hoth.

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Jaina walked past four of the J-Wings that sat in the hanger at the Base on Hoth. Lovingly she caressed

her ship's outer hull. She never thought she'd find a ship that would replace her beloved X-Wing fighter, but she'd learned to respect the adaptability of the J-Wings. The ships were sleek, with their tail jutting over the canopy. The hook provided the home for the ship's main canon. The ships were also equipped with guns located on either side and laser canons on their backside giving the fighters firing access from nearly all angles. With the micro-chips in place, all a Jedi needed to do was acknowledge where the next level of attack was coming and the weapons would fire on their own accord.

"We could've used you out there today," she muttered as she patted her ship. Marxx walked up behind her and wrapped his arms protectively around his wife's waist.

"We were outgunned out there, even with our entire fleet, I don't know that we'd have been able to save them," Marxx said, inhaling the fruity pallenberry scent of Jaina's shampoo.

"I guess we'll never know," Jaina answered, as she took her husband's hand in hers and together they followed their family towards the main meeting room. When the doors opened, C-3PO and R2-D2 were busily distributing drinks and plates of food to the depressed and weary group.

Lynnia raced up to her parents and wrapped her arms around Marxx's right leg. He dragged her along until they sat down on a couch. The room's walls were triple re-inforced with durasteel for protective strength. The heaters had brought the room up to temperatures just warm enough so that they could no longer see their breath.

The door hissed open and Brukos entered the room. His eyes didn't rise to look at anyone. Slowly, he removed his hat and held it in his lap. Finally when he'd collected his nerves, he glanced around the room and saw everyone politely trying not to look in his direction.

"Would you care for a lunch plate, Master Olissian?" C-3PO asked.

Although he wasn't much in the mood to eat, Brukos's stomach growled in response to the scent of the warmed food. "Thank you," he said taking the plate.

After everyone had nibbled on their plates, Luke stood up and took the center stage. In the room he saw Han and Leia. Leia had granddaughter Jaya in her lap, while the miserable looking red haired twins Ania and Rowan sat at their feet. Tenel Ka and Anakin sat together with Yssarri and Hana in their laps. Mara and Zekk sat together, Jaina and Marxx sat with Lynnia, and Brukos sat by himself in the far corner.

The Jedi Master cleared his throat, and began, "Brukos and Tenel Ka our hearts go out to you both. All of us felt this loss. Teneneil Djo and Isolder were always the greatest allies and close friends to us. We will greatly miss them. I think the worst loss of the day has to be Nastya. Nobody deserves to be killed, but to die on one's wedding day is the cruelest fate that anyone can dish out to a person. Brukos, I promise you that we will uncover who was responsible for this travesty and they will be properly prosecuted for their crimes."

Everyone in the room nodded their heads in agreement. Brukos was unable to speak, for a lump that must've been too large to possibly exist had formed in his throat. He simply nodded his head in thanks.

Luke continued, "I'd understand if you hated us...or blamed us for your loss."

"I don't blame you. But I do HATE whoever did this!" Brukos said, his voice boomed throughout the room. Seeing the rather shocked expressions on everyone's faces he whispered, "Sorry."

"Do not be sorry, Brukos. I am experiencing the same feelings that you are," Tenel Ka replied, her face ashen white as she held back her tears.

"So do we have any idea who was behind this?" Han asked, wanting to spare Tenel Ka and Brukos from being the center of attention in their time of grief.

"I might," Jaina said. All eyes turned curiously in her direction as her wavering was filled with guilt. "I know those ships. When I was on the Military Appropriations Committee in the Senate I oversaw the creation of those ships. They were to mark a new era in security for the New Republic. The ships are ultra-high tech. The new base ships are vastly more maneuverable than the ancient Star Destroyers of the Empire." Her brown eyes were filled with sorrow and regret. "Their hulls are nearly indestructible and they have five different layers of shields to protect them. Their firepower is powerful enough to take down a Class 1 Star Destroyer in a single hit."

No one spoke as they digested that startling piece of news.

Finally, Anakin asked, "Who designed those things?"

Jaina's eyes were wet with tears. She replied, "I did."

Leia groaned.

"What? It was for the safety of the New Republic?" Jaina defensively retorted, and crossed her arms over her chest.

Marxx flashed his turquoise blue eyes sympathetically in her direction and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "It's not your fault, hon."

Thoughtfully scratching his head, Han asked, "So who was behind the attacks? I mean, it's not like Jaina's old friend would attack the Hapans, right?"

Jaina gazed across the room and met her mother's eyes. Leia's question *What exactly is Purity Control?* kept crowding into her thoughts all throughout their journey to Hoth. Chills ran down her spine...if Ahriman was responsible...Defiantly, she said, "No! He wouldn't hurt us. He was always my ally in the Senate. Someone must've stolen the fleet."

"Don't you think we would've heard something about that?" Anakin asked.

"Do you really think that Chancellor Soontis would've openly advertised that he lost his new, highly advanced fleet?" she shot back.

Before Anakin could reply, the communications station beeped, alerting them to an incoming message. Mara sucked some sauce off of her right thumb and strode over to the device. Expertly she entered the access codes to bring up the incoming message.

Wedge Antilles' worn face appeared in a shimmering blue spectral image. "Mara, we successfully

gathered up Master Lowbacca and the Jedi fighters. We're on our way to the rendez-vous point. We should be there within the hour."

"We'll be waiting for you, General," Mara replied, nodded and signed off. She turned to stand up and the comm. signal blared a new warning. Her brows knitted together, wondering why Wedge would risk opening the comm. channel twice. Her green eyes widened with surprise as Jacen's face appeared.

"Aunt Mara, I guessed you all were there. I should be there within the hour. I have much to tell you," Jacen ominously stated.

Panic seized Mara's heart. Everyone in the room ceased talking, their ears focused on Jacen's every word.

Reassuringly, he said, "Ben and my girls are fine. We'll be there soon. Jacen out."

Jaina and Marxx exchanged a look of horror, realizing that he would've mentioned if Krishta, Marxx's niece, was fine as well.

"His girls? What about Zayne?" Leia breathlessly asked.

"I have a very bad feeling about this," Han stated.

For once, no one commented on Han's overuse of his favorite catch-phrase, because all of them felt the exact same thing.

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Danni Quee twisted her long blond braid into a haphazard bun and stuck a pencil through it to get it out of her face. She depressed a button and the doors hissed open to the vast greenhouse, located in the far north of Hapes 8. She crept into the muggy room and inhaled the familiar, sweet aroma of the yellow lilies from Kashyyyk. The lilies contained a particular healing property that allowed her to create a cure for the bio-terrorist drug that had infected the Jedi the previous year. The flower was very likely irreplaceable, after a small party that included her boss Brukos Olissian, her assistant and good friend Pugh Ta Li, Han Solo, and Chewbacca had effectively burned and destroyed the only known field of the plants.

After much testing, it was determined that the drug had preventative measures, and all of the students at the Yavin 4 Jedi Academy and Jedi Knights on Coruscant had been inoculated. The flowers loved the greenhouse environment and flourished. Taking the advice of the Jedi's warnings to heart, the plant was distributed to four different nurseries that were spread out all over the Galaxy for their protection in case someone attempted to re-infect the Jedi.

Danni browsed through the rows of plants, stopping to examine their leaves and growth pattern. Gardener droids zipped around the nursery misting and pruning the flowers. The doors hissed open again and her frazzled looking friend Pugh entered the nursery. She nervously wove her fingers through her short black hair and chased after Danni.

"I still think you're wrong," she flatly stated as Danni bent over and picked a beetle off one of the plants.



She brought the wiggling insect closer to her eyes and barked a warning to the closest droid, “You! Come here! See this? I don’t want to see any Tatu Beetles in here! Look at this plant? It’s chewed up the new leaves. See this sticky residue? They’re leaving their young sacs all over the plants. If you don’t destroy these sacs now, this whole room will be filled with these bugs! We’ll lose the entire crop!”

“I profusely apologize for the oversight, Doctor Quee. We will get right on it,” the droid stated and took the bug from her fingers. After recording a digital image of the bug, it telepathically forwarded the order to the rest of the droids. Promptly they began scouring each plant looking for the invasive beetles. The droid next to her squashed the beetle in its fingers then sprayed and neutralized the pollen.

Heart racing, Danni began sifting through the plants looking for more of the beetles.

“Didn’t you hear me?” Pugh asked.

“I heard you,” Danni said, closely scrutinizing one of the plants. She put the plant down and then forced her eyes off of the plants and stared her friend in the eye. “We can’t tell anyone that we were there and what we saw.”

“But those ships *attacked* the Fountain Palace without provocation!” Pugh stressed.

“I know,” the medical doctor agreed. She sighed, “Look, nobody knows our part in all of this, right? We had all personnel who were involved with the virus last year sign gag orders, they’re not to talk to anyone over what happened. Jedi Master Skywalker warned me that we very likely hadn’t seen the end of the attacks on the Jedi. It’s why he was so insistent that we farm out this flower and spread it out over the Galaxy; in case someone does find this greenhouse, we’ll have more flowers to fall back upon.”

“Don’t you have enough of the processed drug made now that you won’t need these plants any longer?” Pugh asked.

“Come on, you know drugs go bad. And what happens if whoever was behind the original bio-terrorist virus mutates the thing? Our current cure would likely be ineffective,” Danni stressed.

Pugh exhaled a frustrated puff of breath. She sternly crossed her arms over her chest and said, “I still think we need to tell someone. The way the holonews is explaining things, they’re saying that the Hapans were given a choice before the invaders opened fire upon us. That’s just wrong. We saw the Royals moments before the attack, if they’d received any kind of a warning they would’ve been moving about and nervous or excited. They weren’t any of those things. I saw that look of panic and confusion on Queen Mother Tenel Ka’s face – she had no idea what was happening.”

“I know,” Danni softly said. Tears filled her eyes as news of the deaths aboard the Hapan Dragon had hit the airwaves. Gut instinct told her that the unidentified woman aboard the Royal ship was the bride, Nastya. She and Nastya had been good friends. The girl was warm and kind, and certainly didn’t deserve to die in such a brutal and senseless manner.

“Pugh, we have to keep our identities secret. Nobody can know of our parts in this. If those behind the attack knew who we were...”

“They’d kill us,” Pugh said, finishing the sentence.

“Or worse,” Danni said, returning to her flower hunt.

Pugh rubbed away a cold rise of goosebumps over her arms. “I just think we should do *something*.”

“Trust me, I don’t like being passive either, but it’s what will keep us...HEY! Here’s another beetle! Why don’t you all start on this end, since this is where I’m finding them?” Danni hollered to the droids. Three raced over the greenhouse and immediately proceeded in scouring the area.

“Come on, let’s go,” Danni ordered, squishing the bug between her fingers and dropping it’s carcass to the ground.

Pugh briefly looked at the remains, then raced after her friend.

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“You understand your orders?”

“Of course I do, I’m not an idiot.”

“Good. The last thing that you want is to tick off the Chancellor. Now get in there and find the information that we need.”

The male Clawdite snarled at the small, greasy haired Senator and abruptly, his leathery green face shape-shifted into an alarmingly handsome brunette human male. Quickly he snapped shut the stolen white medical robe, slipped a forged ID badge for the Brukos Olissian Medical Center into his pocket, and stepped out of the hover van. He hailed a cab and ordered the driver to deliver him to the medical center where he had nurses to charm and information to locate.

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## Chapter 6

Raven dropped the small freighter out of hyperspace and hovered over the tiny moon of Delaluna that circled the planet of Rathalay. While suffering from some of her worst bouts with depression during her miscarriages, Raven’s mind had often wandered to this mystical place that she’d read about on the holonet. She knew that the tiny moon was owned by a group of nuns who ran the small but profitable Bu’Lar Nunnery.

From what she’d read, the women who worked there had very little contact with the rest of the Galaxy. The moon’s enriched soil allowed crops to grow year round and the nuns worked toiled the land growing their wheaten that they sold to nearby planets. The profits from the crops went entirely back into their facility. The only reason Raven ever noticed the sect at all was that their crops supplied two percent of the Galaxy’s wheaten – quite a sizeable amount for women serving the Gods.

The confused Jedi Knight needed to get away from her life and she had hoped that perhaps the nuns could help her come to terms with her past.

She located a faint landing beacon signal and pointed her ship on an intercept course.

Twenty minutes later she readied herself to exit her ship. She briefly glanced at her reflection as she passed a mirror and smiled at the image. During her flight, she had dyed her signature white curly hair back to its natural color of chestnut brown. For the first time in ages, she felt like she actually recognized the person looking back at her. She felt the oppressive presence of Branwen vanish from her identity and she was just Raven again.

She then opened the hatch and walked down the ramp. There on the landing platform she saw six figures wearing amber colored robes. Their heads were bowed and hands were tucked inside of their sleeves. The air was pleasantly warm and it invigorated the tired Jedi.

The nuns did not speak, nor raise their faces. Uncomfortably, Raven said, "Hello. I'm here to speak with whoever is in charge. I'm interested in joining your sect."

As one the hooded people turned and rapidly glided across the landing bay. Raven closed her ship's ramp and then jogged after them. The group broke off into groups of three and she stopped, uncertain of whom to follow. One of the nuns crooked a finger and Raven chased after the rapidly retreating pair of figures. The Jedi Knight had only the briefest of moments in which she was able to visually take in her surroundings. The women of the gods wove her through well worn forested paths, past an elegant structure that Raven assumed to be the Nunnery, and then deeper into the cooler woods.

Birds chirped and bugs buzzed as they guided her farther and farther away from her ship. The young woman connected with the Force, but sensed nothing sinister about the pair. Suddenly bright sunlight flooded the edge of the forest and vast fields of tall wheaten stretched out as far as Raven's eye could see. Hooded nuns were working throughout the fields carrying large baskets of wheaten on their backs. Raven thought they looked like orange jewels sprinkled over a sheet of golden fabric. One of her guides stamped her foot, and Raven dove back into the forest, following the orange shrouded forms.

There seemed to be no end to their walk. Before long, Raven realized that her legs were burning from exertion and she was sweating. On board she had changed into a pair of flight pants and a turtleneck to protect her from the cold of space. Now the high necked shirt was drenched with sweat. She began to wonder how much longer they'd be walking, but she knew better than to ask the two figures any questions.

Then abruptly the guides stopped. One pointed her finger towards a leafy path, indicating for Raven to proceed on her own. Slowly, she entered the small path and then spun around. Her two guides had retreated, leaving her alone. Raven grumbled under her breath and noticed that the path was filled with night jasmia plants. Their heady aroma tickled her nostrils and tempted her with their delicate fragrance. She gently crushed one of the flowers in her finger, releasing its scent onto her skin. She smiled slightly and then headed down the winding trail which ended at a body of clear water.

With a sharp intake of breath, Raven took in the beauty of the lake. Large willowy plants rose out of the lake creating small pockets of shade over the glassy water. The angle of the sun had cast the lake in warm light making it look like a smooth disk of gold.

Fifty feet out from the shore was a large rock and standing atop the smooth boulder was a statue of a nude woman holding her palms upwards towards the heavens. Suddenly, Raven jolted with shock as

she realized that the unmoving statue was alive. She could tell very little about her beyond that her dark hair was short and her body was taut and muscled. The woman stood with her face towards the sun and remained unmoving.

Raven assumed the woman was praying and quietly sat down to wait for her to finish. If she knew Raven was there she did nothing to acknowledge her presence. From out of the shadows a hooded figure appeared on her left. The girl glanced at the new arrival and smiled.

The girl was young, probably not yet twenty. Her skin was dark as coffee and her teeth sparkled white in the hidden depths of the fabric. She whispered, "High Priestess, Mother Anica will see you now."

The Jedi arched a brow inquisitively and pointed her finger towards the woman on the lake.

The girl nodded, her smile widening. "Leave your clothes, they will be safe here." As quickly as she arrived, the girl melted back into the bushes. Raven's heart hammered nervously in her chest, she wasn't certain what to think of being ordered to strip and join a naked woman out on a rock in the middle of a lake.

When Raven made no move to undress, the girl's voice said, "Do not worry, there are no men on our world, if you are worried about prying male eyes. Women do not judge."

Raven hunched under her breath, keeping her own beliefs to herself that women were far more judgmental about the physical form than men. She took a deep breath and decided if she didn't want to be turned away that she'd better do what she was asked. Quickly, she unlaced her boots and removed her sweat-soaked clothing. She lay her belt on top of everything and stared at her lightsaber, reluctant to leave it unattended. A cool breeze kissed her hot bare skin and she tentatively approached the shoreline. The water that tickled her toes was deliciously warm and inviting.

She took a deep breath and entered the lake. With controlled, even strokes she swam across the smooth lake. Water that entered her mouth between breaths was clean and crisp tasting. As she approached the rock, Raven plunged under the water and resurfaced allowing the water to slick her curly hair out of her eyes and off of her face. She felt around the rock and discovered a series of footholds that were chiseled into the smooth surface. Awkwardly she navigated her way up the stone and then found herself standing behind the meditating woman. Raven didn't dare speak and break the silence. She felt a sensation of awe from this position it felt like she was standing on top of the lake. Suddenly her cheeks burned from the invasive noise of the water dripping off of her body that dared to disrupt the idyllic scene.

Raven jumped as the woman spoke. "More than half of the women who come to Delaluna don't even make it to the stone. To brave the swim out to me proves that you possess the desire to learn more about us."

For some reason, Raven had expected the Mother's voice to sound exotic and heavily accented; instead it was common, yet her cadence was strong.

The woman's hands lowered to her sides and she turned to face the soaking young lady behind her. Raven felt the strongest urge to wrap her arms around her body but fought to keep her arms swinging loosely at their sides. The Priestess placed her right hand on her hip and massaged her lower lip with her left hand's fingertips. Her eyes traveled up Raven's body from toe to hair.

Raven in turn studied the woman, her eyes were brown and her narrow face ended in a pointed chin. Embarrassed, her eyes went no lower than the woman's face.

"Who are you running from?" Mother Anica asked.

Startled by the directness of the question, Raven stared squarely into the woman's eyes. She gulped and answered, "Myself."

"So no one will be looking for you? No husband, boyfriend, girlfriend, mother, father...child...?"

The young Jedi's eyes widened in alarm at the list.

"You have fresh stretch marks on your stomach. You've given birth recently," The holy woman stated and arched an impatient eyebrow, demanding an answer.

"I have a husband who might be looking for me..."

"Does he know that you might come here?"

Raven shook her head. "No. He has no idea that I even know of this place. I've...I've kept it from him."

"You consider it to be a place of escape? We are not a vacation resort here, nor are we here to help you get past some mental breakdown. We are not head medics. Those who come here, come in order to find peace with their lives. The women of the Bu'Lar believe that only hard work will allow us to achieve acceptance into the open arms of the Goddess and her sisters."

Raven said nothing and waited for a sign on how the woman wanted her to reply.

"You said you were running from yourself. Explain."

Her tongue felt heavy in her mouth. Raven said, "I have problems."

The Priestess stared sternly at Raven and crossed her arms beneath her ample breasts. "Ah, but who among us doesn't?"

Raven whispered, "I hurt the people who I love the most."

"Intentionally?" the woman pressed.

"No," Raven firmly stated. "It is beyond my control."

"Nothing is beyond your control," Mother Anica insisted. "Are you running from the law? Did you murder your family?"

"NO!" Raven emphatically stated, appalled by the question.

"Good because we don't harbor criminals here," Mother stated. "How exactly do you hurt the ones that you love?"

Chewing on her bottom lip Raven decided to hide her Force abilities from the Mother, feebly she explained, “Horrors from my past interfere with my present...they wreck havoc in my life.”

Mother Anica frowned and knitted her brows in confusion. After a few moments the wrinkles on her forehead smoothed and she nodded her head. A brief haunted look crossed over the Mother’s face as she said, “The mind is a mysterious thing. It holds onto the hurtful and shameful things that we consciously would like to forget. It makes us relive these things over and over.”

Excitement coursed through Raven’s body, this woman seemed to understand exactly what she was going through. “Yes! Exactly!”

Mother Anica circled the younger woman and asked, “Are you hoping to find relief to this suffering here?”

“Yes.”

“And you believe that somehow it’s safer to inflict your pain upon strangers rather than your family?” Mother Anica demanded.

“Err...” Raven paused, digesting her question. Meekly she answered, “I didn’t think about that.”

“What exactly did you do to your family? What are you so afraid of?” Mother Anica pressed.

Tears bubbled to the surface of Raven’s eyes. “I...I...can’t tell you.”

“If you wish to become one of us, there can be no secrets.”

“I’m just not ready yet,” Raven stated, lowering her eyes.

Mother Anica studied the young woman closely. There was something about her that she couldn’t quite put her finger on. Normally if a new woman appeared on her moon wishing to become one with the Order and she refused to answer a question, Mother Anica would be dismissed off of the planet. A stirring within herself told her that would be an unwise course of action with this one.

“We have a three month probationary program here. In the first three months you will be able to leave here at any time, no questions asked. While here, we expect you to work hard, go to prayer sessions and follow the daily schedules. Acolytes do not speak to anyone who outrank them. The only exception to this rule is that you will be able to speak with your guide whom you’ve already met on the shore... Sister Felicity. If on any occasion I were to call for you, you may speak with me. You will not speak to others, if you do they will not respond to you. By agreeing to your position of Acolyte, you vow to be celibate, respectful, and silent. You will use your spare time thinking hard about the decision that you’ve made by coming here. If by the end of the three month cycle you wish to remain on, your ship and all of its contents will become the property of the Bu’Lar Nunnery.”

The prospect of not speaking for three months was daunting to Raven. “Why can Sister Felicity speak?”

“She has just passed her 90 days and is in her first year. It is her reward for staying on that she can

speak to you,” Mother Anica explained.

An uncomfortable silence fell between the two as Raven weighed what she’d been told. Slowly she nodded her head. “I’ll do it.”

“Good, go back to the shore, Sister Felicity has a new robe waiting for you. Your possessions will be taken aboard your ship,” Mother Anica answered, calmly turning her back to the young woman and resuming her position of worshipping the sun. “Sister Felicity will fill you in on everything that you need to know. You are dismissed, Acolyte.”

“I beg your pardon, but don’t you want to know my name?” Raven asked.

“From this moment on, you have no name. You must earn your identity. You are dismissed,” she sternly repeated.

Quickly, Raven dove into the water and swam back to shore where Sister Felicity handed Raven a towel and then a blue robe and sandals.

From her rock, the Priestess gazed out at the calm water. In the center of the lake a porpusk erupted out of the water and then crashed back down into its depths. Large rings stretched out over the lake and lapped against her stone. She frowned, not liking the omen.

Calmly she turned, dove into the lake and swam back to the shore. When she surfaced she grabbed the towel left behind by Sister Felicity and dried herself off. She then climbed into her golden robes. The Priestess’s eyes studied the pile of the new acolyte’s possessions. Mother Anica immediately zeroed in upon the smooth, tubular shape of Raven’s lightsaber. Her heart hammered excitedly in her chest. Dropping her towel she bent over and lifted the weapon in her hand. She drank in the vision of the metallic device. With slightly trembling hands she activated the blue blade with a *snap hiss*.

Wrists quickly snapped back and forth and a bough of jasmia fell to the sandy beach, the end of the limb smoking. Her hands slightly trembled as the small vibrations from the electronic device hummed in her wrists.

“Blue,” she whispered, gazing deeply at the color. “Not red.”

As her heart thundered in her chest, Mother Anica grinned. She stood on the beach and with fluid movements spun and parried with the blade, all of the while her grin expanded into a broad smile. Very happy that she listened to her instincts and didn’t turn the girl away, Mother Anica extinguished the blade and dropped it into her robe’s pocket.

She then exited through the path of Jasmia and a half a mile back towards the Nunnery she ordered to her ladies in waiting who melted out of the dark shadows of the forest, “Go pick up the new Acolyte’s possessions and take them to her ship.” The two sisters dashed back towards the beach.

Gently patting her new possession, Mother Anica headed back to the Nunnery to prepare for sundown prayers.

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## Chapter 7

An eerie sense of déjà vu spread over Han's senses as Rogue Squadron and Lowie's Jedi Starfleet landed into the old Hoth hanger. As his aging hazel eyes scanned the area, he could almost hear phantom calls from his past, back when the hanger was used as a launch point for the rebellion.

A hand brushed lovingly over his back. Leia said, "Sure brings back memories, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, all we need is Chewie up there working on the *Falcon's* starboard shields and I'd swear it was twenty years ago," Han stated. "Course can't say I miss that alluring scent of Taun Taun dung though."

Leia smiled, knowing her husband missed his co-pilot who was back home on Kashyyyk. Her lips curled into a frown as she watched a sleek silvery ship entered the landing bay. Without being told, one of the Jedi pilots raced over and shut the hanger doors, sealing them all tightly inside the landing bay.

With her husband in tow, Jaina anxiously raced towards her brother's ship *Serenity*. The closer he got to the Hoth system, the more that she'd felt his anguish. As the ship's thrusters blasted out billowing clouds of steam, the gangplank lowered and Ben raced out, right past his cousin and into the outstretched arms of his mother. Tahiri followed closely behind and attached herself like glue to Luke's chest.

Leia counted sixteen students exit the ship. The Twi'lek girl who exited the craft looked utterly miserable.

Finally, Jacen descended the ramp, cradling his youngest daughter in his arms. Her head was nestled against his shoulder.

"Jacen, what happened?" Jaina and Leia both demanded at the same time.

"Where's Zayne?" Jaina asked, peering back towards the gaping, empty door of the ship. Her senses already told her that no one remained on board.

Jacen's eyes were completely bloodshot and he looked like death warmed over. He asked, "Can we all get warm first?"

Alarmed by the defeatist sound of his voice, Leia ushered Jacen and the children to the main meeting room where the droids again descended upon their new guests with refreshments and blankets. Wedge and the Jedi Squadron also entered the cramped room.

Jacen stroked Shanari's hair and was suddenly aware that he was the center of attention. He cleared his throat. "As you all probably know, my wife up and left me this morning. I don't know why, nor do I know where she went." He absently soothed his daughter and he continued, "The attack came around noon. I was teaching in the practice field...in the middle of the course, I sensed panic from the Temple. I raced out to find three large vessels ascending...ascending to the stars.

"They'd taken the children...all except a few who were smart enough to go into hiding. The cowards took even those who couldn't defend themselves...including Zayne."

Everyone gasped in alarm. Leia stilled Han from rising angrily to his feet.



“Oh, Jacen,” Tenel Ka said, her voice thick and heavy with emotion, knowing full well what he was going through.

Jacen could barely look at his always stoic Academy friend. “There’s more.”

“How can there possibly be more?” Jaina asked.

“I’m assuming you all haven’t been hooked up to the holonet? Has Wedge here filled you in on the news?” Jacen asked.

Everyone shook their heads and turned towards Wedge for further information. Seeing that Jacen was an emotional mess, the Galactic General addressed the room, “Shortly after the attacks, Chancellor Soontis addressed the Senate regarding the attacks on Hapes.” Wedge scanned the room and rested his eyes upon Tenel Ka. “He claimed that your father was siphoning funds for the Jedi. He took responsibility for the attack.”

No one could speak. Marxx wrapped his arms protectively around his wife’s waist, knowing that her heart was breaking wide open.

“He says that the fleet came to Hapes and tried to ask Prince Isolder to come back with them to Coruscant for a hearing. He told everyone that the Prince refused and made the first attack on the New Republic fleet,” Wedge stated.

Tenel Ka’s heart raged with fury. “There was no such request. They fired first without provocation or explanation.”

The heat of betrayal burned inside Jaina’s gut, scrambling her insides. Hoarsely, she said, “So he was behind it all. He ordered that attack knowing that we’d all be in the hall at the wedding. He wanted us all dead.”

“But why?” Luke asked. “Why would Ahriman Soontis hate us all so much?”

Forgotten in his corner of the room, Zekk offered, “Remember he and Yarr did grow up together at an orphanage on Wayland. Perhaps there’s something there that could tell us why?”

Leia’s mind went into overdrive. She stood up and began to pace. “He was an orphan himself and created this Galactic Orphanage Bill...he used Shanari to experiment on...”

In a thick, angry voice, Jacen interrupted his mother, “And he just kidnapped most of my Jedi students.”

Not at all liking where this line of thought was going, Anakin asked, “Jaina, did Soontis ever tell you anything about his past?”

Slowly, she shook her head. “He always seemed to expertly dodge my questions about his past. All I knew was that he was an orphan.”

The room fell silent.

Han jutted his jaw defiantly, and declared, "I'm going to murder that kidnapping son of a Sith with my bare hands!"

"Han..." Leia warned.

"NO Leia! I won't calm down! That lying, worm ridden, filth of humanity kidnapped our only grandson! I'm not going to sit by and do nothing!" Han shouted. Suddenly, he realized that he'd charged to his feet and everyone in the room was looking at him. Han met his son's eyes, sizing up Jacen's opinion.

The Jedi Master calmly said, "Sit down, Dad."

Puzzled, Han plopped himself back down on the couch and stared at everyone with disbelief. "Don't you all want to do something about this?"

Mara caressed her son's hair and said, "Of course we do, Han. We need a plan though, there are many things that we need to worry about and decide."

"If we assume that Soontis was the one behind Brakiss and the virus then we know that he's not afraid to use Dark Jedi to do his work for him," Luke stated. "If he's got Jedi agents out there, they'll be able to sense our presence here. There're too many of us in one concentrated area to not light up the Force."

"I'm going to find my students," Jacen flatly announced, the absolute lack of emotion in the normally jovial Jedi was startling to all in the room. Jaina studied her twin, sensing fury was boiling under this flat emotional façade.

"I want to hang Soontis by his thumbs and hear him scream for mercy," Brukos calmly said. Anakin was startled by the calm coldness of his buddy's voice.

"What about Hapes? How will you respond to the attack?" Leia asked Tenel Ka.

"The wheels are already in motion," she said. "At this point, it is best for our enemies to believe that I am dead."

Luke and Leia studied the young woman closely; the normally stoic and battle-ready woman tenderly stroked her daughter Yssarri's hair. Tenel Ka's large grey eyes were brimmed with tears. She appeared small, a ghost of her normal self. Luke never knew Tenel Ka to back down from a fight in her life, but he realized that everyone had a breaking point. He thought about how grief affects people differently. For Leia, the destruction of Alderaan only further bolstered her drive to defeat the Empire, yet Tenel Ka seemed to want nothing to do with battle, but instead just wanted to hide. Then again, Tenel Ka had four children to think about whereas at the time of the rebellion Leia was childless.

Anakin stood up and walked into the center of the room said, "Alright, we have three things to consider. First, the Yavin students must be located and rescued. Given Soontis's history with abusing kids, I think it's safe to say that their lives are probably in peril. Second, we need to get the remaining children to a safe location where his men cannot find them. Finally, we need to figure out why Soontis wants to destroy us and we need to discover his agenda."

“And get him out of power,” Jaina added, her jaw jutting defiantly.

Mara cleared her throat and said, “Since I’m no longer Force sensitive and no one will sense my presence in the Force, I will remain here on Hoth. Hoth’s in the perfect orbital location in the Galaxy and will be able to act as the communications center to get messages back and forth to everyone.”

Han massaged his chin and surprised everyone by offering, “I’ll head the group to protect the children.”

Luke met his brother-in-law’s eyes and nodded his head. “Alright, who’s going to help protect the children?”

Tenel Ka said, “I am.”

Jaina piped up, “Me, Lowie, and my fighters are going after Soontis.”

“I don’t think so,” Leia sharply responded. “You’re too close to this, Jaina. And you are the one person he’d probably expect to come after him.”

“I’ll go after him.”

Everyone turned and stared at Zekk. The young man nervously ruffled his jet black hair and said, “I’m no longer Force sensitive so I’ll be undetectable.” A dark current rumbled under his calm voice as he added, “I’m sure they wouldn’t view me as a threat. Besides I’ve still got a vast network of contacts from my bounty hunting days.”

“I’ll go with him,” Brukos said. “I’ve got the capital resources that we’ll need in order to gather information.”

“You need a Jedi with you,” Luke stated.

Lowie immediately offered his support. The ginger furred Wookiee further explained that once he removed his Jedi robes, dyed his fur, no one would recognize him as the Jedi Master.

“You can’t fly your J-Wing then. You’ll stand out in it,” Jaina said.

“I’ll use it,” Anakin answered. “It was designed for his larger form and I will fit in it fine. I’m going to protect the remaining students.”

“We’re going to help Jacen,” Marxx said, including his wife in his comment. Jaina reluctantly agreed, knowing that her parents would protect her children with their lives.

She said, “The Jedi Fighters will come with us for air support.”

“Me too,” Luke added.

“Rogue Squadron will protect the children,” Wedge offered. “We’re already past our check-in so we’re most likely considered AWOL. There’s no way we’re going to serve and protect the Galaxy under the rule of that kidnapper and murderer.”

A broad, lopsided grin plastered over Han's face. "Thanks, buddy."

Leia gathered her red haired granddaughter Ania in her arms and said, "I'm going with Han."

Han stood up and stretched. "The rescue group will need time to gather information. With the Jedi number cut in half here, you can still remain here until you find out where the kids are being held, right?"

"I wouldn't think it would be a problem," Luke replied. "Alright, to those protecting the children – you know where you're going right?"

Han, Leia, Anakin, and Tenel Ka nodded their heads, recalling their hours of planning that had taken an attack on Yavin 4 into consideration.

Abruptly, Han clapped his hands together and said, "Let's get going then."

Slowly they all got up and huddled together in their groups, planning their missions.

Jaina approached Zekk and Brukos and said, "I may have a way for you two to gather information on Soontis. But, it could be very dangerous."

"Don't worry, I live for danger," Zekk answered.

"Me too," Brukos replied.

Jaina shook her head and responded, "No, not dangerous to you." The two men leaned in and listened to her plan. They decided upon hearing her news that they would wait until she'd had time to communicate with her contact. They all agreed that the risk might be too large and worked on developing another plan in case this one fell through.

An hour later after many tears and long reassuring hugs, Jaina and Marxx watched as their two daughters Lynnia and Jayanti were shuttled aboard the *Falcon*.

Before climbing aboard after the children onto the **Falcon** Tenel Ka pressed a datadisk into Jaina's hand.

"What's this?" she asked.

"It is a gift from my father," her sister-in-law stated and then enfolded her in a bear-hug. "Use it well."

Anakin shook Brukos's hand and handed over to him the access codes for his ship *Punishing One*. The two friends then parted and wished each other the best of luck.

One by one, Anakin in Lowie's J-Wing and each Rogue Squadron pilot followed *The Millennium Falcon* out of the hanger on Hoth, up towards the sky, and then jumped into hyperspace towards the Maw.

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Imperial Commander Tizo walked into the Queen Mother's chambers. Somehow in the attack on the Palace, her main throne room had remained undamaged. His boot heels clanked against the marble floor in a slow, even stride until they stopped in front of the Queen Mother's high throne. He thought back to the hours of footage that he'd watched of the young queen sitting on that chair, how her titian hair always seemed to glitter like gold under the overhead lights.

"Such a pity that something that beautiful was so fragile," he said.

Behind him the doors hissed open and immediately his nose was assaulted by the scent of ozone and soot. "Yes, Captain, your report?"

Captain Monray cleared his throat and said, "We've finished clearing out the main hall, Commander. There were no bodies under the debris."

The Commander's slate eyes flashed with fury towards the vacant chair. "She escaped then."

"We are not sure of that yet, Commander. There are still many places where the debris is thick and could be hiding bodies," the Captain said.

"Do you really believe that you will find them?"

"Yes, Commander. If the Queen was alive, would she not have ordered an attack on us?" Captain Monray asked. "Would she not have called her fleet back from the Core and had them deliver her back home?"

Tizo narrowed his eyes and listened to the gnawing doubt that did not allow him the luxury of believing they'd succeeded in their mission. He'd spent thirty years living in the outer rim hoping for a day to return home. Could it be that the Captain was right?

An ears-shattering boom cracked through the silence, reverberating through the Palace walls like giant cymbals being crashed directly over one's head. The sounds were repeated in rapid succession. Both men covered their ears and pulled them away to find blood pouring out from where their ear drums had burst inside their heads.

Not bothering to say a word, the men raced out of the throne room and stared out at a gaping, broken wall of the palace over the ocean. Flying in attack formation a dozen Hapan Dragons melted into the atmosphere and concentrated all of their firepower upon the new Republic vessels.

Tizo watched in horror as they expertly dove under the Republic attacks as if sensing and feeling where the attack would come from.

Captain Monray offered, "They'll never get past the shields."

A giant flash of light as the first of the Republic's eight Destroyers burst into flames and was reduced to a sea of burning debris. The hungry Dragons immediately flew through the mess and onto their next target. The older Commander watched in horror as the fleet picked off and destroyed each Republic cruiser, one by one.

As the last one exploded in an impressive show of fire, Tizo mumbled, “This isn’t possible. Those cruisers are indestructible!”

“Nothing is indestructible, Commander,” a hard voice called out from the Throne room.

Together the two men turned around to find themselves surrounded by a squadron of armed Hapan guards. Quickly Soontis’s two men were disarmed and shoved towards the chamber and forced onto their knees.

Inside, the throne room chair now contained an occupant. The woman’s hawk-like eyes coldly examined her prey and she sneered. Her hair was shorn nearly to the scalp and her wrinkled and old skin had weathered during her three years spent on the desert prison planet of Hapes 11.

She glared at the men with burning hatred. Calmly, she unfolded her legs and stood up to examine the two prisoners. “It seems your boss underestimated my son. For years Isolder paraded his pretty face in the Senate and seemed to take very little interest in anything other than attending parties and voting the Jedi way.” Queen Mother Ta’a Chume flicked a long nail under Tizo’s chin, forcing his aging eyes to stare into her own. “All the while my son secretly read over every document concerning the security of the Republic...and passed that information to his dear daughter. She in turn...told me.”

“Hapes is not without a Queen Mother. In the event that the current Queen cannot reign for fear of her imminent death, the spare will be allowed to rule even if she has been in prison. Before fleeing for her life and saving her family, my granddaughter issued a full pardon to me and handed over her leadership of our system back into my hands,” Ta’a Chume icily announced. “Your little Chancellor had better hope that she comes to no harm. For if he thinks that knowing how to destroy his new toys is the only trick I have up my sleeve...he has another thing coming.”

She flicked her hands dismissively at the two men, and ordered, “Send them to Hapes 11.” Coldly she ordered, “Before they go however, I want their hands and tongues removed.” Both prisoners stared at her with horror.

“Yes, Queen Mother, it will be done,” one of her officers said and made to walk them out of the chamber.

“Did you not hear me?”

“Your Excellency, I just wanted to spare you from such a brutal sight,” the officer stated.

“Like they spared me from the knowledge that they incinerated my son and daughter-in-law?”

Ta’a Chume’s steel eyes flashed with hard victory as she watched the officers be dismembered with vibroblades before her eyes.

“Wrap those in a package and express deliver it to Chancellor Soontis. Make sure you include my highest regards,” she stated and then closed her throne room doors on the faces of her startled men.

Alone in her chamber, the old woman seated herself at Tenel Ka’s desk, activated her computer terminal, and began to make a list of everything that she needed to accomplish within the next twenty-four hours. She had to be ready, when Soontis received his package, he would unleash war upon her

system.

The Queen Mother grinned. After three years being locked away on that forsaken desert planet, Ta'a Chume was thirsty...for blood.

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## Chapter 8

Ahriman Soontis sat in his office's chair scanning through the weekly budgetary reports, sipping a steaming mug of caff. Behind the Chancellor, traffic buzzed by in a constant stream of moving vehicles that were utterly oblivious to the battle brewing inside the Senate's Main Hall.

As he stared at the reports, Soontis remained stoically unaffected by or curious about the rumblings between the different caucuses in the great chamber. Casually he thumped his mug onto his desk and hit his buzzer.

"Yes, Chancellor?" Dorme's small voice echoed in the spacious room.

"Can you please key in for me the budgetary planning notes that I had you dictate the other night?"

"Certainly, Sir. Right away."

He flicked off his comlink and promptly his computer chimed as the report appeared before him. With his large sloping nose glued to the screen, deeply concentrating on his number-crunching, Soontis failed to hear his office doors slide open.

"How could you possibly have known, Ahri?"

Soontis started slightly at Senator Yarr's question. He raised his head and took a drink of his cooled caff and answered, "Why do you doubt me, Barri?"

The smaller man unconsciously slicked his hands through his already plastered greasy hair and pressed, "Come on, don't skirt this with me."

Soontis leaned back in his chair and wove his fingers tightly together over his chest and then swung his heels up onto his desk. "People hate the Hapans. No, it's true, trust me. I spent all of my time as Senator chatting up the other Senators and the general consensus was that they unanimously thought Prince Isolder and his know-it-all daughter were both Royal pain in the asses. The only thing people liked about them was that they offered military assistance when needed."

With a smug grin on his face, Ahriman polished the Chancellor seal on his desk and said, "I just knew that they'd never impeach me for my actions."

"That was an awfully big risk, Ahri," Yarr stated.

Soontis shrugged and casually stood up. "Well that's behind us now, we won't have to worry about them going after me again though, will we?"

"I guess not," Yarr carefully answered. "There are now talks of secession."  
"From those who failed to impeach me?" Soontis inquired.

"Yes."

He waved his hand dismissingly, and replied, "Trust me, they wouldn't want to sever themselves from the teats of the New Republic monetary Shaak."

"I wouldn't be so certain. It wouldn't be unheard of for Civil War to break out in the Republic," Yarr pressed.

"Trust me, I'm not worried." The Chancellor started, ending the line of conversation as he walked over to the window. He squinted into the mid-afternoon sunlight. "Any word from your man?"

"Yes, actually. After a day of pumping nurses for information, he discovered the name of the medic who assisted the Jedi in their recovery...hold on I have it here..." The shorter man dug into his puffy silken pants pockets and flipped through his datadisks until he found the one he was looking for. "Ok... here we go...Danni Quee."

Ahriman's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Really?"

"You know this person?"

The man massaged his lower lip contemplatively, and answered, "Not personally, no. But her skills are that of legend in the medical community. She's found more cures for tricky ailments and viruses than most teams of medics gather leads on in a lifetime. She's only in her late twenties, I believe." He stared out the window and shook his head with a laugh. "Why didn't I even make that connection? Of course she's the one. Do you know that I even tried to recruit her to originally create my father's virus?"

"No, I didn't know that," Yarr answered. "What happened?"

"I never got to actually broach her with the subject, it appears her contract with that Center she works at forbids her to sub-contract out," he stated, his voice bristling with annoyance.

"If she helped the Jedi, she probably would've turned you down," Yarr started.

"Possibly. Who knows?"

"What should we do, Ahri?"

Soontis furrowed his brows tightly in concentration. "She's a highly decorated member of the medical community. We can't just up and kidnap her, it would create too big of a stir. We need to lure her to us, spring a trap for our prey. When she comes in, we'll find ways to make her help us...creative ways if she's not smart enough to take my offer flat out."

A sly, nasty grin plastered on Yarr's features as he entertained visions of the 'creative ways' that they could make the woman do what they wanted.

Soontis's comlink chimed. "Yes, Dorme?"



“There is a box out here for you. It has passed security.”

“Who’s it from?”

“Commander Tizo.”

“Bring it in!”

The doors parted and his dark-haired assistant scurried in carrying a medium sized box. She quickly delivered it to his desk and asked, “Is there anything else I can do for you Chancellor?”

Ahriman massaged his chin and asked, “Did you hear the outcome of today’s hearing?”

His assistant’s cheeks lifted into a small smile and she bowed her head. “Congratulations, Sir. I never doubted that it would amount to nothing.”

Narrowing his dark eyes, Soontis’s sharp vision registered that the smile never reached her eyes. “And how does that make you feel, Dorme?”

She seemed somewhat confused. “Relieved, Chancellor, Sir. I knew that the charges against you were false.”

The nervous woman held her eyes high and maintained eye-contact. Slowly, Soontis nodded his head. “Thank you for your support.”

“Of course, Sir.” She curtsied and slowly took a couple of steps towards the door.

As her hand hovered over the controls, Soontis called out, “Hold one moment for me.”

She stopped and turned to face him, her face was white. “Yes, my Lord?”

Calmly, Soontis walked around his desk and approached the slightly shivering young woman. His taller frame hovered over her as he trapped her near the wall. Lightly he reached over and flicked an eyelash off of her cheek. She puffed her cheeks up in a weak smile again as he lightly traced the outside of her face with his index finger.

His eyes turned coldly towards her as he squeezed her chin painfully between his fingers and warned, “Don’t think for one minute that I’ve forgotten how you came to me, Miss Dorme. I know all about your family’s past and your devotion to Ms. Racees’s lineage. She’s a traitor to the Republic. If one ounce of sensitive information that originated from this office should magically show up in her hands...I certainly will know where it came from.”

The smaller woman’s dark eyes grew wide and she stammered, “Nooo..sirrr. I am devoted to working for you...and the New Republic.”

With a snap, he released his vice-like grip off of her face, leaving two bright white spots behind that turned deep red. “That’s good to hear, just remember there are worse things than death my sweet Dorme.”

Lower lip trembling and tears threatening to spill over the surface, she gulped. “Can I go now?”

“Yes, of course,” he agreed and opened the door politely for her. As quick as her dainty feet could take her, she bolted out of the chamber.

When the doors closed again, Soontis said, “While we’re at it, let’s heighten the security on my assistant there. I’m thinking Jaina will try to make some sort of contact any day now.”

“Absolutely,” Yarr agreed.

“I’ll trust you to figure out a way to bring Doctor Quee to us. And do it soon, Barri,” Ahriman said.

“Absolutely,” he agreed again and then exited the chamber.

Sighing deeply, Soontis walked across the room and his eyes fell upon the box from Tizo. He thought it odd that Tizo would send a package without alerting him to its arrival. He would have to remind the Commander of the break in protocol. Carefully he cut open the box and upon lifting the top, his nose was immediately assaulted with the stench of rotting flesh. Fighting with his gag reflexes not to vomit he stared into the package and saw to his horror that the box contained four human hands and two tongues. He slammed the top back on and quickly re-examined the labeling – Hapes, Fountain Palace.

Careful to hold his large nose tightly he peered back inside the box. On one of the right hands he spied a ring. Gently he jiggled the box so that he could see the front of it – it held the Imperial Commander insignia. Violently his gut churned as a single name sprang to his conscious – Queen Mother Tenel Ka.

“She’s definitely alive,” he seethed. For the first time a sliver of doubt and worry pierced through his soul over the complete execution of his plan. If they had successfully captured his commander then they most likely had control of his ships. He suddenly realized that they had missed their last three check-ins.

Ignoring the foul package he sat back down in his chair and contacted his fleet’s Admiral Greenway. “Admiral, has the fleet at Hapes reported in?”

*No Chancellor. In fact they’re overdue for check-in.*

Soontis scowled and a flash of panic overtook him as certain realizations began to dawn. “Anyone else fail to report in?”

*Yes sir.*

“Who?”

*Rogue Squadron appears to be AWOL.*

The Chancellor did his best to hide the look of fury that darkened his face. “Thank you, Admiral. Contact me immediately when you have an update.”

*Yes, Chief.*

Soontis slammed off his comlink and growled. "So Jaina's gathering her forces." Coldly he flashed a glance towards the door suddenly grateful that he'd asked for tighter security on Dorme.

As he glared at the package, his victory against the Senate forgotten, rage blared through his soul like a blinding sandstorm on Tatooine.

"I will get her," he vowed.

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Quickly, Dorme finished up her duties. A wave of intense relief filled her heart knowing that the Chancellor had stormed out of the building two hours earlier taking a rare early day off. The last thing she wanted was to have to ask him if he wanted anything else for the evening.

Wrapping herself up tightly in her jacket she exited the chamber and keyed in the six security codes to lock down the Chancellor's chamber. On her way out of the building she alerted security to double verify that the codes had been properly set before finally departing the Senate building.

The evening air had a slight nip to it and she brought the collar of her cloak closer around her neck. She was still conscious of the dark marks that Soontis had left on her chin that were now hidden under six layers of thick makeup.

She'd always felt somewhat uneasy working for the dark man. He seemed so secretive and after spending so much time working with Senator Racees she had an intense dislike to Jaina's former bitter political enemy Senator Yarr. She could never understand why the short, foul man spent so much time visiting the Chancellor.

Shrugging Yarr out of her thoughts she rushed to the curb and hailed a taxi-cab. None appeared. The wind picked up and she suddenly felt a chill up her back that had nothing to do with the temperature; she sensed someone was watching her. Dorme darted a glance behind her and spied no one out of the ordinary, but the feeling remained. She raised her hand higher as a registered cab pulled up alongside the road just in time to belay her mounting paranoia.

The hovercab darted forward and immediately blended into the oncoming traffic. She entered the coordinates for her address into the meter and sat back to relax.

"Tough day, Miss?" the driver asked.

Dorme glanced at the man's thick black hair and green eyes peering back at her through the rearview mirror.

"Yes," she said.

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"No," she quickly answered, wrapping her arms around her chest.

The man's eyes flicked back to the mirror and he said, "It's a nice night to smell moonflowers don't

you think? You sure you don't want to talk?"

Dorme's heart hammered in her chest immediately recognizing the code words that she and Jaina had set up long ago. She bolted forward and pressed herself against the glass partition to get a closer look at the driver.

"My name's Zekk. I'm an old friend of a common acquaintance. Hang on, you're safe with me," he replied and smiled.

"No, you have to drop me off. I...I don't know if I've been bugged or what. You have to let me out – NOW!"

"Sorry, can't do that. We're forty feet above the ground. I don't think you'd like to take that step now would you?" Zekk answered playfully.

"Look there's a station – let me out!" she ordered, frantically pointing to a floating taxi platform that blurred out of sight.

"Relax, Dorme. This isn't your average hovercab. When you bounded through the door there, it immediately scanned you from top to bottom for bugs. You're clean."

"I find that hard to believe," she huffed and threw herself back in the seat. She watched as Zekk abruptly darted through six rows of oncoming traffic. Her heart leapt in her throat as he merrily replied, "It's true. You're safe."

"Are you crazy?" She scowled deeply and massaged her chin where she could still sense phantom traces of pain on her face and the ice cold threats issued by her boss from earlier in the day.

"Sorry, I'm taking evasive maneuvers in case we're being followed. So far, it looks like we're clean," Zekk answered, peering into his rearview mirrors.

"I *can't* talk to you. Look, I'm under surveillance, I know it," Dorme began, spinning around and staring at the sea of sparkling hover cars pursuing them from behind.

"Nobody's following us, Dorme," Zekk repeated.

Panic seized her chest, causing her heart to thunder, her breath to quicken, and her hands and brow to dampen. "I'm dead."

"Look hon, all we need is a few minutes of your time. If your place is being watched, we'll make it look like you made one extra stop and picked up dinner for the evening. Ok?"

Before she could further protest, the cab dropped into an underground parking structure, vaulted up four levels and then abruptly stopped before a door.

Zekk darted out of his seat and opened the passenger door, snatched his reluctant charge's hand and ushered her towards a turbolift. The small woman glanced nervously at the tall man.

"Are you a Jedi?" she meekly asked.

“I used to be,” Zekk said and was grateful that the doors opened before she could ask him to further elaborate.

They moved to the third room on the left and it hissed open to reveal an ordinary, non-descript, pre-furnished small apartment. The long blinds were tightly shut and a lone figure sat in the center of the room surrounded by computer monitors. The door shut behind them and a tall, lean man with blond hair blockaded the door. His hands calmly rested upon the hilt of a blaster.

“Hello, you must be Dorme. I’m Brukos Olissian, have a seat,” Brukos said, never taking his eyes off of the screen. “Jaina said you’re trustworthy which is why we went to such great lengths to bring you here. She also said you’d probably be reluctant to help us and that Soontis had most likely threatened you.”

Dorme gulped. “She was right on all accounts.”

“She also said that your family has spent a lifetime being loyal to hers, that your grandmother protected her grandmother, is that correct?”

“Yes,” Dorme admitted.

A portable holo imager burst to life and a shimmering image of Jaina filled the room. The recorded message began. *Dorme, I’m so sorry to frighten you like this. Please know that I would never have put you in this situation had I ever suspected that Ahriman Soontis was anything less than noble and kind. I was blind to his true intentions and again, I apologize for putting you in the middle of this mess.*

*Please know, regardless of what you hear from Soontis, we are being set up. We come to you in a time of dire need. Two days ago a band of armed men infiltrated the Jedi Academy on Yavin 4 and kidnapped over forty of our Jedi trainees. We are now convinced that Chancellor Soontis was behind this plot as well as the virus that was unleashed last year against the Jedi Knights. We are deeply disturbed by his actions and need to know where he took the children. We need your help to discover where Soontis is hiding our students. He has some sort of agenda against the Jedi Order and we fear what will happen to the Force-Sensitive kids that are now in his clutches.*

*Please help us Dorme. I know you remember our secret code that we created long ago. Any hint, no matter how small can assist us in our quest to rescue our students. This quest is dire and affects all of us greatly. Dorme...you’re our only hope.*

Jaina’s pleading eyes and shimmering form vanished and were then replaced with a rotating wave of holographic images of each of the children who were abducted. Dorme’s knees quaked as one smiling face after another stabbed her heart. The man behind her involuntarily fought back a strangled noise that caught in his throat as an image of a brown haired girl rotated through the cycle. The final image was a family portrait of Jacen, Raven, and their son Zayne.

Dorme’s eyes opened wide with concern.

“They took Jacen’s son, Dorme,” Zekk quietly said, his green eyes burning with meaning.

“But he’s just a baby,” she whispered, knowing full well how difficult it was for Raven to conceive and

how blessed the couple felt with the birth of their only son.

Zekk towered over her, his black clothes and robe made the scarred features on his alabaster skin pop out in the low lit room. Dorme studied the man; his eyes were honest, imploring, and full of sorrow.

The former Jedi tilted his head and burned his gaze into her uncertain eyes. He explained, "Once upon a time I was a Jedi Knight. Then last year I came in contact with Soontis's virus and I can no longer communicate with the Force." Dorme gasped. "Just look at me. If someone as strong and big as I am cannot defeat a microscopic enemy – think of how difficult it will be for the children."

Forcefully, Dorme released herself from Zekk's powerful stare. Her mind reeled she knew that by agreeing she'd probably be signing her own death sentence. However, a face surfaced in her mind that she could not shake from her consciousness. Her grandmother's strong brown eyes were filled with pride when she learned that Dorme would be serving Senator Racees. It was the last time she had spoken to her grandmother before she passed away.

*"I served her grandmother, did you know that? Padme Amidala was everything you could ever long for in a politician; she was resolute, strong-willed, and honest. I resembled her greatly which made me her perfect handmaiden. I would've gladly traded my life for hers," Dorme senior said, with a small smile cresting her tired lips.*

*"Why would you do that Grandmother?"*

*"Because, dear Dorme, messengers of the Force sometimes need protection in order to complete their life purposes. Padme was the epitome of everything that was good in the Galaxy and I would've gladly given my life so that she could live another day to protect Democracy for all. This responsibility has now been passed onto you."*

*The younger girl looked confused. "But I'll only be acting as her aid, Grandmother, I'm not her handmaiden."*

*"Perhaps, but one day, fate will lead you to a point where you will be asked to make a decision. It is in your blood to serve this family...I am confident that you will make the right choice, my love. Perhaps you can succeed, where I had failed." Dorme's grandmother then drifted off to sleep, leaving a restless feeling in her granddaughter's soul.*

In a small voice, Dorme said, "I'll think about it."

Zekk nodded his head, walked over to a small coolator and removed a bag containing a carry-out dish of food. "Here, Jaina said that this was your favorite. As far as anyone who'll be watching you will know you just took a long drive to your favorite restaurant." He dropped the bag into her stunned hands and pointed towards the now open door. Zekk pointed to the blond man and said, "He'll drive you home – it'll look less suspicious with another driver. Don't worry, he's completely trustworthy."

Dorme climbed into the backseat of a second hovercab and stared at the tall driver. His face was haunted and riddled with worry.

She sat her food on the seat next to her and gruffly said, "I'm sure you're now going to try to convince me to do this, right?"

“I wasn’t planning on saying anything, Miss.” His pained eyes however, said otherwise.

She leaned forward and slowly released a breath of air. She then spied a paper image of the driver and his family. As she closely examined, her heart skipped a beat. The girl in the photo was one of the children from the slideshow of kidnapped students.

Slowly she slid back into her seat, her knees suddenly shaking. They flew in silence and finally landed in front of her modest apartment building. Dorme absently reached into her bag and gathered her fare credits. When the driver let her out, she quickly pressed the funds into his hands and fled from the scene.

Krishtoff Starelli’s heart sank. He knew she’d seen the pictures of his daughter Krishta and had hoped that she would change her mind. Slowly he began to close the passenger door and spied something left behind on the seat. He leaned in and saw it was the bag that had held her food. On it, in hurried scrawling text, Dorme had written: *Moonflowers only bloom under the pale light of Naboo.*

A sliver of a smile crested Krishtoff’s lips. He slammed the door shut, jumped into his cab and hurried back to the guys...he had good news to report.

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## Chapter 9

Two days after their conversation in the nursery, Pugh’s head was still filled with Danni’s warnings. She’d been out there, in the thick of the Kashyyyk jungle, attempting to recover the flowers that meant the world of difference between the Jedi holding onto their abilities or having them vanish forever. She certainly didn’t need her friend lecturing her on the importance of maintaining silence. Pugh often felt like a child being scolded by her mother whenever she was around Danni. In her heart, she knew that Danni never meant anything, however it didn’t make her sometimes belittling comments less hurtful.

She ran her fingers through her dark short hair as she juggled a pile of Danni’s mail which consisted of a huge stack of datadisks that precariously fit in the crook of her left elbow. She absently stared out the window at the central garden. Patients were being wheeled around the lush garden green, enjoying a moment or two of fresh air. Her thoughts a million miles away, Pugh didn’t realize trouble was afoot until she crashed head first into it. Thrown to the floor, disks flying in all directions, pain exploded in her front lobe where she’d smacked right into the elbow of a passing medic. She groaned loudly as a meaty hand reached down to offer her assistance. Reluctantly standing up, Pugh’s vision swam and she saw six faces dancing in circles before her.

The medic quickly gathered up her disks and asked, “Are you alright?”

Tightly Pugh clamped her hands on the sides of her head in an attempt to stop the visions from moving. The dizzy woman focused on one of the faces and eventually they all crashed together into a single point.

“I deeply apologize, Miss. I didn’t see you there. Are you alright? Come here, sit down,” the man offered, directing Pugh to a nearby empty chair.

Pugh dropped into the seat and massaged her throbbing forehead. The man's eyes were full of concern. "I wasn't watching where I was going. I'm so sorry."

The man was exceedingly good looking. "Do I know you, Medic Swarnon?" she asked, studying his name badge.

"Probably not, I'm on loan from the Northern Coruscant Medical Center," the man explained, handed over her disks. "Do you need me to get you anything?"

Pugh's head still throbbed and she could already feel a giant goose-egg rising in the center of her forehead. "No, I'll be ok. I just need to get to my office my colleague will fix me right up."

Medic Swarnon grinned and offered, "Please let me walk you there, just to make sure you're ok?"

She nodded her head in agreement and slowly climbed to her feet. Quickly she scanned the floor for errant disks, seeing that the medic had gathered them all, they headed down the hallway towards Danni's offices. When they reached their destination, Pugh thanked the man for his assistance, took back her disks, and entered the office.

As expected, she found Danni multi-tasking hunched over a microscope and jotting down observation notes at the same time. Pugh dumped the disks onto a small, clean spot on one of the lab tables and plopped herself down in a chair, massaging her forehead.

"What's wrong now?" Danni asked, not looking up from her work.

Pugh didn't answer, forcing her friend to rip her eyes from her project and glance in her direction. "Good night! What happened to you?" Danni demanded, leaping to her feet to grab a cold-press pack. She snapped the pack to life and immediately placed it against the giant throbbing lump on Pugh's forehead.

Pugh let out a small smile of relief as she could feel the medicine leaking through her skin as the cool pack numbed her pounding skull. "I crashed into a medic, neither of us was watching where we were going," she explained.

Danni pulled up a lab stool and slid next to her friend. Absently she began fiddling with the disks that Pugh had brought in, scanning the file names on them. "How did she fare in the collision?"

"Fine. He hit me not the other way around," Pugh reported, twitching her nose as her face grew colder.

"Humm," Danni replied. She picked up a disk and asked, "What's this?"

"It was in your mailbox, how should I know?"

Danni pushed off on her stool and sped across the lab and slammed the disk marked "Urgent" into her computer.

Immediately a vid file opened and revealed Jedi Master Tionne's face filling the screen. *Medic Queen, I send this message to you in hopes that your response will be quick. The virus appears to have mutated and many of our students are now suffering from the effects of the virus.* The white haired Jedi Master



moved aside to reveal a large white room filled with beds of children. Danni leaned in closely and noted that the children were thrashing about in their beds, feverish. She saw that beyond the room was a clear partition and many other younger students had their fingers and faces plastered to the transparent wall and were helplessly watching their friends.

*Danni, you must come to help them...you will find the co-ordinates in the text file located on this disk. Hurry.*

The image cleared. Pugh had risen rapidly and stood behind Danni to watch the strange file.

Twisting one of her long blond braids between her fingers, Danni played the video over and over again, enlarging and enhancing the feed looking for possible file manipulations. She sighed. "I don't know anything about videos – this looks legit to me."

"We need to get it to a specialist for verification," Pugh warned. "It could be a trap."

"Yeah, I know that," Danni agreed. She kept studying Tionne's face. The Jedi Master's features were drawn, her lips tightly pressed together. Her eyes seemed very concerned, however, there was a trace of something else there that Danni couldn't put her finger on.

Pugh pointed to one of the children who were staring into the room and said, "Zoom in on that girl."

Danni did as directed and felt her heart stop. "Krishta."

"She doesn't appear to be feverish," Pugh said. Quickly Danni blew up the faces of the children in the beds – none of them looked like the children that she'd inoculated from the Academy.

"I don't recognize any of these other children," Danni said.

Pugh, who'd accompanied her to the Academy wracked her brain for any sign of recognition of the sick children. She shook her head and said, "Me neither."

She then tapped on Tionne's image. "Look at her, she's tapping her finger."

"Yeah? And?"

"Master Tionne is the mellowest person I'd ever met in my life, she never fidgets," Pugh mentioned.

"She's giving us some sort of a coded message," Pugh said.

Danni curled her fingers up under her chin as her brows furrowed in deep concentration. "Yeah, but we don't know how to break it."

"We need to get this to Master Skywalker," Pugh said, slapping the relief pad back on her forehead.

"Yeah, but he's gone underground, I don't have a way to contact him," Danni said.

"You guys didn't work that out?"

“Nope,” Danni replied, and sighed. She flicked on the other file on the disk and studied the co-ordinates. “This just seems sloppy to me. Why would they just up and provide me with co-ordinates for where these kids are being held?”

“It’s a trap. That’s probably a drop site. You’d arrive there, someone would jump out, crack your skull open and then drag you off to that place and no one could find you again,” Pugh guessed. Her mouth then dropped open and her hand fell from head. Quickly she bolted out of the lab and into the corridor, looking left and right for any traces of the man who she’d crashed into.

Her blond friend stopped behind her and squeezed Pugh’s shoulder. “He’s long gone by now.”

“We have to get in touch with Master Skywalker,” Pugh whispered emphatically. “He knows where your office is!”

“Right,” Danni agreed. She cocked her head and they re-entered the lab. Danni gave Pugh a complete look-over and asked, “Did he touch you – other than smacking you in the forehead?”

Pugh scratched her black hair and tried to recall anything through the fog of her pain. “He took my hand and helped me to my feet and then walked me to a chair. He might’ve touched my left side... why?”

“Take off your clothes,” Danni ordered.

“Why?”

“He might’ve bugged you,” Danni explained and grabbed a pair of scrubs. “Make sure you completely cleanse yourself from top to bottom. I’m heading to my office for a few and will be back – don’t follow me in there.”

Pugh nodded her head in understanding and headed to the lab’s refresher to shower and to change. Danni then grabbed the disk and charged down the hall, expertly weaving in and out of the crowds.

As she rounded the corner towards her office, a tall man blocked her way and quickly grabbed her hands. “He warned us that you were smart.” Before Danni could react the man jammed his ring against her wrist and she felt a sharp prick as some sort of toxin entered her bloodstream. She tried desperately to cry out for help, however, her throat muscles had constricted shut and then everything turned black.

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Pugh stepped out of her shower and scrutinized her body in the mirrors. Not seeing anything unusual she sifted through her clothes. Her dark eyes widened as she spied a tiny black fleck nestled into the weave of her shirt. She brought it up close to her face and saw that it was mechanical.

“Oh no,” she said, threw on her scrubs without bothering to dry off and bolted out of the refresher. Bare feet slapping against the cold tile floor with panic gripping her senses, she knocked over two nurses, didn’t apologize, and then rounded the corner to Danni’s office. She slammed in Danni’s private entry code and the doors slid open to reveal an empty room. Pugh howled out in anguish. She sealed the office and then dashed back to the lab. There she banged on the computer and groaned, the disk and Danni were gone.

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The Clawdite strapped his charge tightly into a restraining harness and then entered a series of jump coordinates into the hyperdrive. A smile spread across his lips as Pugh's order to stop all outbound traffic blared over the Medical Center's official airwaves. His ship hit Hapes 8's atmosphere and then vanished into hyperspace.

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Krishta narrowed her brown eyes as the armed men entered the infirmary on the opposite side of the glass wall again. They did a single circuit around the sick children and then left the room. Two medical doctors then appeared and fiddled with the IVs.

"What do you think they're doing?" a voice asked at Krishta's left.

She frowned and then raised an inquiring brown at Kynne. The girl shoved out her lower lip and wrapped her arms tightly around her chest. "Look, I know we're not exactly friends..."

Krishta snorted. "That's an understatement. Where's Mee-Qui?"

"I don't know," Kynne said in a small voice. "He tried to get the guards attention and demanded to know what was going on and they took him away."

"How long ago was that?" Krishta asked, her normal annoyance at the girl began melting away.

"Two hours," Kynne said, a blanket of light brown hair fell into her eyes.

The young Racees girl bit back a sharp retort that she wanted to spit back, after seeing the real concern in the girl's eyes. Instead, she answered Kynne's original question, "They're administering more of the virus to those kids."

"How do you know that?"

"I recognize their symptoms...remember I got infected with that thing last year," Krishta said. She began to pace along the glass wall and looked at each of the children closely.

The girl flicked her hair out of her eyes and asked, "Where did they come from? Doesn't Master Solo somehow magically know where the Force-Sensitive kids are in the Galaxy?"

Furrowing her brows together, Krishta replied, "No. Most of the kids who show up at the Academy are discovered after Jacen and Raven spend hours pouring over public school records. They look for exceptionally gifted students and then ask them to be tested. That's why we get students of all ages that show up at the Academy – some may be late coming into their abilities."

"How do you know that?" Kynne asked, impressed.

"Because they've had Ben, Tahiri, and me help them out at times," she answered and shrugged her shoulders. "We can sometimes catch things that they can't. Usually we only get to look at the student's

after school activities and clubs.”

“So who’re all of these kids?”

Krishta leaned over and stared at a face of a young Quarren and then changed her gaze to a Twi’lek girl. “I don’t know. Maybe they’re from the outer rims.”

“They’re pretty skinny,” Kynne commented.

“Huh,” Krishta grunted and then looked at the rest of the children a bit closer. “You’re right. Perhaps they’re from the poorer districts, places where my Aunt and Uncle wouldn’t necessarily look?”

“I don’t know,” Kynne replied. “Why was Master Tionne in there earlier?”

“I think she was forced to make a message or something. There were two battle droids behind the door out there and had their guns aimed at her while she was talking,” Krishta remembered.

“Maybe they’re going to ransom all of us,” Kynne said.

“Maybe,” Krishta said. Her head began to pound and she realized she was thirsty. The room that the students from the Temple had been dropped into only had one small refresher that only had a waist high privacy door on it, and no sink. She slowly slid to the floor and stared at a small rhodian first year who was shivering with fear.

Kynne sat next to her and asked, “Can you sense the Force?”

“No, you?”

“No.”

“They must either be using Force dampening material in the walls of this place or this building is full of ysalamiri,” Krishta guessed.

“You don’t think they’ve sucked the Force out of us?” Kynne asked.

Laughing, Krishta answered, “No.”

“Maybe they perfected that virus thing and we’ve had our midi-chlorians destroyed?”

Krishta flashed an annoyed look in the girl’s direction. “Doubtful we aren’t sick. When I woke up I simply couldn’t feel the Force, they’re dampening our ability to use the Force, that’s it.” She tapped on the glass and pointed to the children. “They haven’t been given the virus-fighting stuff that we have, that’s why they’re sick and we’re not.” Her blue eyes scanned the hallways and landed on a clump of medics who were wildly gesturing and arguing with each other. A small smile lifted the corners of her lips. “And they aren’t happy about it.”

The doors to their room suddenly flew open and a person was thrown inside. Mee-Qui growled as the doors rapidly slammed shut, locking him in with his fellow Academy mates. Kynne grinned and shouted, “You’re back!”

Mee-Qui shrugged his shoulders, straightening his shirt and shook his mop of dark hair. His piercing eyes immediately registered where his friend was standing and he snarled, “Why’re you hanging with that looser over there?”

Krishta felt her blood boil and glared at the boy. Quickly, she quipped, “She was telling me all about how you still wet your bed on particularly cold nights at the Academy.”

Kynne’s eyes opened wide with horror as Mee-Qui’s face contorted into a mask of rage. “I...I didn’t tell her that!” Kynne protested as the other children in the room snickered.

The boy raced towards Krishta, his hands outstretched. Roppla, a Quarren cadet quickly stuck out his foot and tripped the older boy before he could reach his target. Mee-Qui’s body skidded painfully across the floor and he stopped short of his goal. Krishta balled her hands on her hips, and hopped onto the bully’s back. She bent down and twisted his arms painfully out of his reach. Close to his ear, she whispered, “Being friends with the hired help around the Academy has its benefits – Sithspit!”

The girl then released his arms and climbed off of him. To the whole room she announced, “If we’re going to get out of here, we have to work together. No matter how much we may loathe one another, we have to put aside our feelings.” Glaring at the still prone boy she demanded, “Where did they take you? What did they do to you? Did they ask you any questions? Did you see any way out of here?”

His lip curled into a sneer. Mee-Qui climbed to his feet and asked, “Why should I tell you?”

“Because, even though I’d love for them to use you for their tests, we need could use having a bully on our side to help us escape,” Krishta said, flipping her messy brown curls over her shoulders.

Mee-Qui glared at her and the whole room collectively held their breath. Finally, he said, “Well, I see you’re finally recognizing your superiors.”

She balked and laughed out loud. The boy grinned victoriously.

“So, what happened?” Kynne asked.

His smile faded and he stared at the floor. He said, “They took me into a room down that hall and left me in there.”

“So you didn’t see anything?” Krishta pressed.

“Nope,” he replied and plopped down on the floor.

“Great, that was helpful,” Krishta snarled.

A cry emerged from the other end of the room. Krishta stepped over Mee-Qui’s extended legs and looked into tiny Zayne’s crib. The baby’s face was red and he was violently kicking. Gently she picked him up and made cooing noises to calm him down. Rocking him up and down she looked into the other room and realized with horror that there were six other babies all being given the virus. Zayne howled angrily right into her ear.

“Can’t you shut him up?” Mee-Qui demanded.

“He’s hungry! And in case you haven’t noticed there’s nothing to eat in here! Particularly nothing fit for babies!” She bounced Zayne more and then gave him the tip of her index finger to suck on. The baby responded and suckled deeply. His little face curled up in anger though when he realized the finger wasn’t giving him anything to eat.

Krishta groaned as the child continued to scream, rattling her nerves. She stared at the uncaring people who hurried down the halls and found herself feeling completely isolated and terrified. The young girl stared at the white walls and began wondering if there was a way out, but she didn’t see one. There were no air vents and the ceiling appeared to be solid – they wouldn’t be able to move aside any ceiling tiles to escape that way. A thought struck her numb as a dawning realization crept into her mind, Krishta felt a swell of tears rising in her eyes; she now understood her father’s helplessness when he was enslaved for so long.

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” she whispered, thinking about how she’d spent the last year giving the man a cold shoulder and refusing to warm to his hopeful desires to begin a relationship with her.

She stared at the crying baby in her arms and a faint, teary smile formed on her face. Krishta knew that because of her behavior, her father would never attempt to rescue her from this prison. A glimmer of hope bloomed in her heart, knowing that at least Zayne’s parents would come for him...Solos never leave their kin behind...never.

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## Chapter 10

Slumped in front of the control center terminal, Mara sighed as she endlessly surfed the holo-net seeking any bit of news that might cast new light on their current situation. The newscasts seemed to all be glossing over the threats made by the Chancellor to the Jedi. Any mention of the Order was tainted with tones of disgust.

“Political corruption at it’s finest,” she muttered. She endlessly flicked through the channels and abruptly stopped on an image of the Jedi Temple that was surrounded by armed guards. Mara pitched forward in her chair and turned up the sound on the report.

*For the past two days the Jedi Temple has been kept under the Senate’s control. No official word has been released on what may have happened to the Jedi who might have been inside at the time of the take-over; however, the Chancellor has confirmed that there were no deaths.*

The screen abruptly changed to another news story. Mara threw down her headset in disgust, stretched and vacated the comm-center. Briskly she headed down the icy corridors seeking her husband. She barked out a query of his location to a tech working on fueling up one of the J-Wings. The tech shrugged his shoulders and went back to work. She growled, before her abilities were ripped away from her, all she would’ve needed to do was lightly penetrate the Force and she would’ve been able to pinpoint his emotional signature anywhere within 50 clicks. Now she had to rely on visual scanning.

Mara wandered around the facility and abruptly stopped when she came upon her husband. She discovered him sitting on the icy floor of one of the old Taun Taun stalls. His erect back was to her as

he obviously was in a deep meditative state.

She waited a minute and when she realized he couldn't sense her, Mara cleared her throat. "I couldn't find anything on the news that might've given us any sort of indication on where the children might be."

"I wouldn't expect there to be," Luke calmly replied. "We're going to have to wait and discover the location from non-government controlled sources."

"Do you think Dorme will have any luck?" Mara inquired.

"I don't know. Jaina believes in her," Luke replied.

Mara shivered and vigorously rubbed her arms. "Isn't your butt half frozen by now? Get up and let's go in where it's warmer."

A small grin spread over Luke's face and he eased himself to his feet. He spun around and swept his wife up in his arms, enveloping her in his cloak along with him.

"Ben's safe, Mara. You don't have to worry about him," Luke whispered into her hair.

"Is he? Are any of us? Why would someone want to do this to us? We don't hurt anyone, we protect the innocent, none of this makes sense Luke!" Mara stated, nestling her cheek against his chest.

"I don't have answers to those questions, Mara. I just have faith that things will work out," Luke said.

"So no helpful future flashes from the Force?" Mara asked.

Luke grinned and quipped, "Try saying that fast ten times in a row."

"I'm serious, Luke."

"I know. No I didn't see anything."

Suddenly someone cleared their throat. Both Mara and Luke looked up to see one of Mara's lab techs nervously standing in the wings.

Mara unfolded herself out of Luke's robes and asked, "Yes?"

"We just received an encoded message from Yavin 8. It was marked as urgent. I think you'd better come see it."

Both Mara and Luke raced towards the control center. Mara flew into her chair and entered the twelve encryption protocols needed to decode the message.

"It must be bad," Mara muttered. "Danni wouldn't contact us unless the need was dire."

They waited anxiously for the codes to cut through the encryption and were both shocked by the face that loomed in front of the camera, it was Pugh.

“Master Skywalker, I apologize that it took me so long to get this message to you, however, I had to enlist help from others in order to break into Danni’s files and her highly encrypted system in her apartment to figure out how to contact you.

In a nutshell, Danni’s been compromised and is missing. We received a transmission from Master Tionne giving us co-ordinates of a place to meet. She was being held against her will and was in a room full of children who appeared to be infected with the virus. None of the children were from the Academy. Danni didn’t recognize any of them. Master Tionne indicated that they were Jedi children. The transmission seemed to be scripted. Master was signing something with her fingers – we thought she was trying to pass along to you an encoded message. I had been bugged and Danni went to her office to try to figure out what Master Tionne was saying when someone snatched her. She’s gone and the man who took her slipped through the traffic block that I called for upon discovering that she was missing. Danni had the disk with Tionne’s message on it and the co-ordinates. I had my most trusted computer friend help me and we managed to locate a copy in the computer’s stored temp files – I’m attaching it to you. I’m also forwarding the co-ordinates. I don’t know if the co-ordinates will lead you to anything or anywhere, we assumed that they were meant to lure Danni there and then she’d be whisked away. Because of the bug on me, they must’ve realized that we figured out their plans and just snatched her instead at the Center.”

“I’m sorry, Master Skywalker. I let you down. Please find her and if there’s anything I can do to help, don’t hesitate to contact me,” Pugh pleaded and then her image faded.

Mara and Luke raptly watched the attached, choppy copy of Tionne’s transmission. They watched it several times and interpreted Tionne’s secret message: The Jedi Temple was attacked by Senatorial guards. Those of us left behind were sedated and woke up in a location unknown. We’re on a ship, I can tell by the movement and the smell of the re-circulated air. I don’t know who any of these children are Luke, but many look malnourished and all seem to be infected with the virus. I’m sorry I can’t provide you with more details.”

Tionne’s message ended as the code shut off.

Both Mara and Luke recognized their students in the background and sat in cogitation over the video.

“So what did we learn from this thing?” Mara asked.

“That we’re running out of time, Mara,” Luke said and sighed.

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Marxx gritted his teeth as Jaina pushed the snowspeeder’s throttle into the next gear. He felt the g-force rise even inside the nice pressurized cockpit of the ship. The snowspeeder devoured the icy landscape below and soared over frozen lakes and over cavernous rocky pits that made up Hoth’s frigid and rough terrain. Marxx watched a herd of Taun Tauns running in formation across a vast expanse. He assumed they were heading towards a small batch of hills a couple of kilometers away from them.

“I wonder what they eat here?” he muttered.

“What?” Jaina shouted.



“Nothing,” Marxx barked back. His brows knitted together and soon he felt a familiar tingle in the Force. They were about to arrive at their destination.

Jaina expertly banked the speeder around a small hill and then approached the north eastern side of the natural structure. Marxx craned his neck and spotted another snowspeeder parked on the ground. His wife gently lowered their ship beside the speeder and vented their engines. When the upset snowy powder settled, Jaina opened the cockpit, they both unhooked their harnesses and threw off their helmets. The couple jumped out of the ship and looked around.

A strong wind billowed Jaina’s long brown hair around her face. She raked it out of her eyes and connected with the Force. She pointed her finger to a crevice in the mountain some thirty feet over their heads.

Marxx sighed and followed his wife. Together they carefully climbed their way up the slippery mountainside to the opening. Jaina felt her ears pop as the wind abruptly ceased once they climbed inside the small hillside opening. The cavern was somewhat warmer. The couple looked around as Marxx pulled out a glowlamp and illuminated the darker corners. Jaina pointed towards a narrow opening in the wall on the left and they found themselves winding their way deeper inside the hillside.

“Just don’t upset him, alright? He already feels bad enough without you getting all in his face,” Marxx said.

Jaina sighed and rolled her eyes and picked up her pace, her eyes following a trail of footsteps.

Marxx felt a slight feeling of claustrophobia set in as the irregular tunnel sides would occasionally shrink in around them.

After wandering for ten minutes through winding passages the tunnel opened up into a smaller chamber. There they spotted a figure wearing an orange flightsuit slumped over with his forehead in his hands.

Jaina walked behind the figure and gently started to massage the man’s shoulders. “You know it’s not your fault, right?”

Slowly Jacen lifted his head out of his hands and turned around. His eyes were completely streaked with red lines and the lids of his eyes were sagging. In a thick voice, he answered, “I know. That doesn’t make it hurt any less though.” He half smirked. “Should’ve known you’d find me even way out here, damned twin thing.”

“What, you didn’t want me to find you? You planning on staying out here and freezing to death? Who would that have helped?” Jaina spat.

Her twin narrowed his eyes and glared at her with a look that echoed their father’s appearance. “Don’t get smart with me, I’m not on a suicide watch. Remember, I have two kids to live for.”

“I remember that, but do *you*??”

“Yes, I do sis.” Jacen turned his back to her.

Marxx placed a calming hand on Jaina's shoulder and pulled her out of the way before she could pounce on her twin. Marxx walked over to his brother-in-law and pulled him out of earshot from his wife. Jaina watched her husband whisper pointedly at Jacen. The two men gestured to each other as they continued their soft spoken conversation. Jaina hugged her arms around her body, sighed, and wandered around the room looking for anything to hold her attention. A wave of guilt washed over her as she pressed on her forehead.

"Why did I do that?" She muttered. She had spent the entire flight planning out in her head how she would reason with her brother, instead of being supportive, she attacked him. "Why do I *always* do that?"

Finally, she heard Marxx thump Jacen on his back and the two men turned in her direction.

"I'm sorry for being a pain, Jaina," Jacen said.

She shrugged her shoulders and grinned broadly. Trying to lighten the mood she quipped, "Don't worry about it, we Solos have tough skins. Besides, it's not you, it's the Solo DNA, remember?"

"So what's our course of action?" Jaina asked her brother when he didn't even slightly grin back.

Jacen paced the room, stretching his legs. "I've been thinking about that. Sitting out here away from everyone I did some deep mediating. I don't know why, but I think my son's on a ship somewhere." He planted his fists on his hips, his brown eyes piercing into the walls. "I can't get a lock on his life-force energy. He's out there, unharmed, but I can't centralize and locate him."

"You're not strong enough for that, Jacen," Jaina said.

"I may not be able to swim around in the Force like Marxx here, but trust me, the parent bond is just as strong," Jacen coolly answered. "I can feel him out there."

Marxx walked next to his friend and asked, "Can you sense him?"

Jacen frowned.

"Just try, open yourself up to the Force and try to locate Zayne," Marxx asked. "Trust me."

Reluctantly, Jacen closed his eyes and sunk into the Force. With his feelings he stretched out, seeking the sweet innocence of his baby boy. In his mind he heard his son's strong vocal chords calling out to him, piercing through layers of fog in space and time. The voice was elusive and was always jumping just out of his reach. Suddenly, he wasn't alone in his quest. Jacen felt the very strong presence of his brother-in-law as he connected with the Force. Marxx's soul melded with Jacen's thoughts. At first Jacen resisted the intrusion, but Marxx coaxed and soothed his friend reassuringly. Marxx linked himself with the love bond between father and son. Gently Marxx hooked a ride on it and felt himself swelling into the Force. His life energy lifted out of the hill, into Hoth's frozen atmosphere, through its stratosphere and into the darkness of space. There he pin-wheeled and reached out with his heart again. Sensing the bond his conscious mind left his body and soared through space, past planetoids, through debris fields, over moons, and dangerously close to suns.

Jaina slowly approached her non-moving and barely breathing husband who sat on Jacen's favored large stone seat. Her husband's fingers were rapidly moving across the icy surface. Quickly she pulled out a datapad and recorded the letters that his fingers spelled out.

She jumped as Marxx let out a huge breath of air and his piercing blue eyes flew open. Jacen looked on with confusion as Jaina punched in the last characters and realized that Marxx had been spelling out coordinates. Her brown eyes widened with surprise and a hint of fear as her pad calculated the points.

"Where are they Jaina?" Marxx asked.

Slowly she turned the datapad around for them to see. Gulping, she said, "They're in the middle of a highly radioactive wasteland...they're in what's left of Carida."

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Raven woke up drenched in sweat. Her right hand, she discovered, was tightly gripping her own throat. She relaxed her fingers and stared around her unfamiliar surroundings. Where was Jacen? Where was she? The disorientation vanished as she remembered she was with the Bu'Lar on Delaluna. Fleeting images from her nightmare began to dissipate. Hurried footsteps echoed in the hall and Sister Felicity poked her head into the room.

"Are you alright?" she asked. "I'm afraid your cries have alarmed all of the sisters in the building."

"I certainly didn't mean to disturb anyone, Sister Felicity, I'm sorry," Raven answered.

Suddenly the young sister flinched and jumped as Mother Anica entered the room. Her blue eyes swam like dark murky waters in the moonlight. "Come with me Acolyte."

Raven threw back her covers, slipped into her night-shoes and dashed after the retreating mother. She darted down three stairwells and fought to keep up with the short haired woman. Finally, Mother Anica stopped at a door, slipped a key into a lock and opened it. Panting slightly, Raven waited to see if she was supposed to follow, but the sect leader waved her inside first.

Immediately, Raven's ears tingled with the sounds of windchimes and the room was heavily scented with incense and exotic herbs. Large plants filled the room giving it a very serene and homey feel.

Mother Anica sat down on a floor mat and pointed to Raven to sit across from her.

"You've been here a few days, I'm curious over your thoughts," Anica stated.

"I like the hard work. I forget how working with your hands can make you stronger," Raven answered.

"And yet you still scream each night in your bed," the mother coolly replied.

"It is difficult to escape the ghosts of my past who've haunted me my whole life," Raven simply stated. "I would've thought that all of the hard work would've chased them away, but even exhaustion can't clear them out of my head." Raven fretted. "I don't know if this will work for me Mother Anica, I think I need to be able to talk to people to work things out, I can't just keep living in silence like this, its not in my nature to be quiet so damned much."

“And that is precisely why you need to stay put. You need to learn to channel that energy inwards and learn to recognize your demons, face them, and defeat them by yourself. Others might be able to sympathize with your plight and even offer you good advice, but ultimately if you are to win this battle, you must do it entirely on your own,” Mother Anica said. “The Bu’Lar Nunnery is filled with women who were once just like you, their own lives were in complete shambles when they first came here. After quite reflection, they have learned to let go of those worries that made their minds race and realize that nature, beauty, love, and peace are the only things that have real meaning in this universe. All else is just noise and is there to distract you.”

Raven rubbed the arms of her sweat soaked nightgown and shivered.

“I fear sleeping,” Raven said. “I always have nightmares. Sometimes I recognize them in time and can push them aside, but usually I get sucked into them.”

“Why did you come here, Acolyte?”

“I hurt my children and lost their trust. I can’t be around them without it,” Raven answered, looking away. “They’re better off without me.”

The image of the blue electric blade flashed in Mother Anica’s mind’s eye. She hesitated for only a moment and then smiled at the young woman. “Your troubles will pass in time. The longer you stay here, the sooner that you will learn to let go of your former self and will learn to be in harmony with the planet. Until that time, I can help to take away your pain. In fact, I can help you to sleep easier each evening. All you’ll need to do is come to my door and knock three times.”

Rubbing her chin inquisitively, Raven asked, “How are you going to do that?”

“Come here, child,” Mother Anica said, rising to her feet. She walked across her room and opened a drawer and pulled out a small spray bottle, two large feathers, a small bag of herbs and then walked over to a small fountain that was billowing out steam.

“What is that?” Raven asked suspiciously regarding the spray bottle.

“Nothing illegal, do not worry Acolyte,” Anica replied with a small smile. “I will perform a small ceremony called the Bal’dram it is a very old technique used by the original founders of this sect to eradicate demons from people’s souls.” Anica laughed at the scandalized and skeptical expression that traveled over Raven’s face. “Do not worry, I don’t believe that demons are taking over your soul. The women of old had no understanding of medicine and how it worked. Basically these are a powerful mixture of mild sedatives and herbs that will clear your mind and allow you to rest more comfortably. Would you like to bathe before going back to bed? I have an extra night robe that you can borrow. I generally find that the herbs work best with steam and hot bath water makes it work that much faster. Come, let me show you the bath.”

Raven followed the mother into a large private bath. The older woman turned on the water and the room immediately filled with steam and hot water poured into a large tub. She gently poured exact amounts of the herbs and sprayed oils from the mister into the running water and soon it was foaming over. Mother Anica turned away and allowed Raven to strip in peace and slide into the wonderfully hot water. As soon as she hit the water, Raven felt all tension leave her muscles. Anica stood over her and

began softly chanting while she swirled the rising steam with her feathers.

Closing her eyes, Raven inhaled the heady aroma of the herbs and felt all tension leave her body. Calmly she held her breath and dunked her head under the water allowing the herbs to soak her hair. She came back up and out of the water and relaxed again. Mother Anica continued to chant in the background, her barely audible voice nearly lulled Raven into deep sleep. Right before she would've nodded off, the mother softly called to her Acolyte and offered her a large towel. Raven reluctantly climbed out of the tub and dried herself off and slipped on her new nightrobe and felt refreshed and wonderfully tired. Mother Anica smiled through the steam, gently took Raven's face between her hands and lightly kissed the top of her wet head.

"Go to bed now, you will rest dreamlessly," Mother Anica stated.

"Thank you, Mother," Raven replied, and left the room.

When Anica heard the door shut behind the young woman, she lifted her finger and with a flick locked the door to her outer chamber. She couldn't believe her luck that Raven had dunked into the water. She watched as the water below began to thicken due to the mixture of herbs left in the bath. Quickly she disrobed and climbed into the bathwater. She held her breath and slid under the thickening substance. Then she opened her mouth and inhaled. The liquid now infused with Raven's essence had congealed into a hot liquid not too dissimilar from bacta or embryonic fluid. Anica began to breath with the fluid in her lungs. The chanting that she performed was not for Raven's benefit, but for her own. She had cast a spell over her prey to allow her to connect with Raven's mind and to open it completely. Under the control of the spell she disconnected her soul from her body and smothered Raven's deeply sleeping form. She then tested her subject's mind to make absolutely certain that she was asleep. When Raven was fast asleep, a ravenous part of Anica's soul descended upon that sensitive spot towards the back of the girl's mind that held her Force abilities.

And with unchecked hunger, she began to feast.

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## Chapter 11

Danni's eyes flew open and immediately she shut them against the blinding glare of the overhead light. Her head pounded as the effects from the sedative wore off.

"Doctor Quee, so nice to see that you are awake. Here drink this, it'll settle your head," offered a voice.

The captive woman glared at the cup and forced herself up onto her elbows. "Where am I?" Danni immediately demanded.

"You're right where you're needed most," the smiling woman replied.

Danni growled and glared around her non-descript room. All four walls were white with a small bed, refresher, and sink being the only items in the confined space.

"So I'm a prisoner?" she spat.

“No, not at all, in fact you have one of the largest rooms here,” the stranger answered again with a smile.

Danni wanted nothing more than to smack that phony grin off of the woman’s face. “Why am I here? Where am I?” she repeated.

The woman’s smile faltered as she stood holding the tray in front of her charge. “I already told you, you’re where you need to be.”

Angrily, Danni flung her legs over the side of the bed and powered to her feet, both fists were immediately balled at her sides. Immediately, she realized that she couldn’t sense the Force and dug into her anger for energy.

“I promise you, you’ll feel better if you take this. It’s a mild pain reliever, nothing else,” the woman stated, her insipidly sugary smile swam across her face.

Lightning fast, Danni’s arm flew out and knocked the tray out of the woman’s hand. With a mighty slam, she cracked it against the nurse’s head and yelped as she felt a sharp pain blast into her arm. While distracted with hitting the nurse, the woman had pulled a syringe from her coat’s sleeve and shoved it into Danni’s exposed forearm.

The tray clattered to the floor, and Danni massaged her smarting arm. She glared murderously at the woman. The nurse stepped out of the room as the protection door hissed shut behind her. She rubbed at the lump forming on her forehead and growled, “You just had to do it the hard way, didn’t you?”

Danni pounded on the door and demanded, “Who’s in charge here? I want to speak to who’s in charge!”

The sugary smile returned. “Oh he’s nearly here, hon. And don’t worry, you are his reason for coming here.” The woman turned on her heel and disappeared out of site.

“Hey! Hey! LET ME OUT OF HERE!” Danni shouted and pounded on the glass until her fists were throbbing with pain. Full of rage she overturned the small table in her room and ripped the sheets off of her bed. Adrenalin pumping in her veins, a horrified thought entered her mind and she immediately started patting down all of her pockets. *Where’s the disk? I have to get that information to Master Skywalker fast!* she thought.

“Looking for something?” a masculine voice asked from the other side of the door.

Danni immediately recognized the voice. She forced a cordial smile to her face and spun around. “Chancellor Soontis.”

The black haired man smiled broadly at the famous medical doctor. “I see you’ve done a bit of redecorating, I don’t blame you the accommodations here are rather plain, aren’t they?”

Danni breathed in deeply and held her tongue. “What do you want with me?”

“Oh I should think that’s obvious. I know you received your message earlier today. I was very disappointed that you refused to assist the New Republic to stamp out this terrible disease.” His large dark eyes stared at her in a patronizing way. “How can you call yourself a doctor and live with yourself by allowing those children to suffer so?”

“How can *you* live with yourself for *infecting* them in the first place?” she snarled.

A look of sly triumph flashed over his face. “I knew it was you who cured the Jedi last year. Thank you for confirming my inspired supposition.”

A pang of self loathing squirmed in Danni’s gut as she realized that she had allowed herself to be manipulated by the political womprat.

He stood so close to the glass that his breath condensed against it leaving billows of fog. “How did you do it, Danni? How did you thwart my efforts?”

Slowly, she folded her arms across her chest, cocked her head and stated, “Guess your virus wasn’t constructed as well as you thought it was.”

Soontis’s face contorted into an ugly mask of rage. “Don’t you DARE insult that virus! It was pure genius that created it!”

Danni didn’t flinch at his outburst and simply studied his reaction rather like she was examining a bug under a microscope.

Realizing that he’d shown too much of his hand too early, Soontis backed off and cracked his neck to either side and straightened his robes. “I demand that you show me how it was that you broke the virus.”

“Why?” Danni challenged.

The Chancellor stepped aside and activated a holovision and it showed the room filled with the cadets from the Jedi Academy. Danni the Jedi trainees.

Soontis purred, “You’re going to give me what I want, or every hour on the hour, our staff have been ordered to kill a cadet. And we will start with that one.”

Danni saw his finger land on Krishta’s head and felt her gut writhe in panic. Fighting back tears of frustration she could only hope that Pugh somehow got a message to Master Skywalker and that a rescue party would be on its way. Hating herself for it, she gulped and nodded her head.

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The Aqualish riding the antiquated and rusty hoverchair waited as the security detail verified his credentials as an Empire war hero. The being scratched his large tusk and snarled out an annoyed grunt.

The guard handed back his papers and waved him inside the Senate Building. The walrus faced creature navigated his way through the crowded halls until he reached the elevators for the Chancellor’s

chambers and punched in the codes to access his floor. The doors zipped shut and a long sigh of relief issued between the creature's teeth. The lift soared up to the 30th floor and then abruptly stopped. He exited the lift and zipped down the empty Executive corridors. The chair stopped in front of the Chancellor's doors and he noticed that the lights were purple, indicating that he was out of the office.

He pounded on the door control with his large finger and entered into the Chancellor's waiting room. Dorme glanced up from her desk and felt her heart hammer in her chest. Smiling, she asked, "Can I help you?"

The alien creature zipped up beside her and began grunting and gesturing towards the Chancellor's office, he had a datapad in his hand.

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't understand you," Dorme said.

A barely audible mechanical noise sounded and the alien's eyes dilated. He pointed to his chest then slammed on his chair's arms.

"I'm sorry, sir...I..."

The walrus man leaned forward and threw everything off of Dorme's desk. The assistant yelped in surprise. "Get out!" she shouted. She saw that his hand was empty and his disk was sitting in the mess. Falling to floor she handed it back to him. With a discontented grunt the alien spun around in his hoverchair and tore out of the office.

Two security guards entered the room and asked, "Do you want us to press changes, m'lady?" "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Thank you. Just let him go he's harmless," Dorme answered, feeling sweat trickle down her back inside her heavy gown.

The guards smiled both left the room. Nervously she picked everything off of the floor and rearranged her desk. Her fingers flitted onto a strange datapad and absently placed it in her outbox. She let out a small sigh of relief and went back to work.

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The Aqualish climbed into the backseat of the cab and waited for the driver to collapse his hoverchair and throw it into the trunk of his speeder. As the cab roared off into traffic, the driver asked, "Did you get it?"

With a mighty tug, Brukos yanked the very expensive and now very sweaty and stinky prosthetic, electronic aqualish mask off of his head and threw it onto the seat next to him. Off next came the bulky gloves. Brukos beamed, "I think so."

Krishtoff handed back to his fair a laprecorder. Brukos slipped the datapad into the slot and waited for the recorder to decode the data.

"I don't think anyone was suspicious. That girl can be quite devious, I have to say," Brukos absently said as his hazel eyes bore down on the screen. "Her plan worked beautifully."



“We’re not being followed, so I have to agree with you,” Krishtoff answered.

Suddenly the recorder beeped and streams of data filled the page. Brukos scanned the entire page and began capturing information and sent it off to his private mail account. “I think she got us some good stuff here.”

“Any co-ordinates?” Krishtoff anxiously asked.

“I can’t tell yet, everything’s encrypted.” Brukos looked up and saw their shady hotel looming already ahead. The taxi stopped in front of the building and Lowbacca was waiting for Brukos with his deluxe hoverchair. Krishtoff had already bagged up the disguise materials and carried it as well as the cheap chair and brought them back inside.

Brukos sped into his room and immediately powered through the ten levels of security protocol before opening the files onto his system.

“They’re virus free,” he muttered, rubbing his bald head as he examined the data. He handed the original datapad to Lowie and said, “See what you can make of the middle section.”

Lowie growled happily at the challenge and plugged the pad into his terminal. Krishtoff walked over by a lump in the corner and sat down next to him. “What’s shaking, Zekk?”

“Just working on my rock impression,” he sarcastically replied.

“Don’t be too anxious, Zekk, remember you’re the fancy flier in our group, you’ll have plenty to do soon enough,” Brukos muttered.

Zekk just rolled his eyes and glanced at his companion. “You don’t look so hot.”

Krishtoff nodded his head. “I’m worried about my little girl. I have the worst feeling that something terrible is about to happen to her.”

“I thought you weren’t Force sensitive,” Zekk said, bristling with annoyance.

“I’m not. Call it father’s intuition,” Krishtoff answered.

Lowie barked excitedly causing Zekk and Krishtoff to launch to their feet. The Jedi Wookiee explained that he successfully broke the coding.

“What’s on the disk?” Krishtoff demanded.

A smile burst over Zekk’s face as a large map filled Lowie’s screen. “Militia co-ordinates!” He grabbed Krishtoff’s arm and said, “Looks like your daughter might be safe yet, come on, we have to get this to Jaina.”

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The two snowspeeders softly landed in their docking bays. Jaina tossed aside her helmet and noticed that her Jedi warriors were either meditating or working on their J-Wings.

Marxx grunted, "There must still be no word."

"Come on, Uncle Luke and Aunt Mara need to know what you saw," Jaina said, as the snowspeeder's hatch hissed open. The couple bounded out of their craft and fell into step with Jacen as they headed towards the control center.

The trio burst into the room and discovered a flurry of activity. Mara's fiery red hair swung like roaring waves of lava as she kicked her chair back and forth between three different terminals.

"What's going on?" Jacen asked.

"Zekk and Brukos just sent us some amazing intel from your friend Dorme," Mara explained and pointed to one of the monitors.

Jaina examined the map closely. "Are those what I think they are?" She asked, pointing to the red blips on the screen.

"Yes, current readings of the placement of the Republic's military forces."

Marxx scanned the screen and asked Jaina, "Where are the remains of Carida?"

"There," she said, pointing right outside the core planets of the Galaxy.

Luke appeared out of the shadows. "Why do you ask?"

A loud *snap hiss* filled the room as Jacen's emerald blade sprang to life. He said, "My son and the children are being held there."

Jaina and Marxx watched warily as Jacen chopped his saber angrily in circles, his eyes were filled with fierce, brooding determination.

"That would certainly explain their positions. Look, they moved their fleet from Hapes to around Talasea," Mara said.

A large beaming grin spread across Jaina's face. "Look They're around Zeltros also!" She happily punched Marxx in the arm and said, "This is going to be easier than I thought. Sound the alarm and gear up folks, I'm briefing in ten minutes and we want to be in the air in twenty. Move it!"

Jacen's blade extinguished at his sister's mark and everyone in the room sprang into action.

After the Solo children left Mara's breath inhaled in horror.

"What is it?" Luke asked, coming to his wife's side. His eyes followed her pointing finger and a sliver of fear pierced his heart. "Oh god. May the Force be with you buddy."

He tightly squeezed his wife's hand as they both stared at the unnatural red hue on the map that pinpointed the location of the Maw.

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“We’ll be coming out of Hyperspace in four minutes, ready the front shields, we’ll be in for some chop,” Han said.

“You know, this isn’t the first time I’ve ever flown, Han. I think I know the protocols for exiting Hyperspace without the reminder tips,” Leia barked from the co-pilot’s seat.

Han raised a brow in annoyance and opened his mouth to speak, but was silenced by Leia’s rigid finger appearing under his nose. She continued, “I know you may be more comfortable with Chewie here, but I would’ve thought that you’d finally be over your insecurities of having me co-pilot your beloved ship. You know I’ve even flown pilot on this wreck a few times so I really do resent the implication that you think I need refresher courses every time I take a seat...”

A deep scowl furrowed over Han’s brow as he barked, “Princess will you shut up you’re starting to sound like Goldenrod!” Leia’s mouth snapped angrily shut, her eyes blazed with annoyed fury. “You know, I wasn’t worried about you or your skills as a pilot, but I have to say that I am in fact terrified of having you sitting there!”

“What? Why in the Galaxy would you...?”

“Because, I wasn’t talking to you, Doll, I was muttering to myself to remind me of my own damned procedures,” he growled. To further prove the point, he reached up and flicked on the control for the front shields that were located directly over his head.

A look of utter sheepishness crossed over Leia’s petite features as she dropped her hand into her lap. “Sorry, Han.”

“What’s the matter with you? You’ve been on edge this whole ride,” Han said. “We haven’t seen any signs of pursuit. Everything is going exactly as planned. Just relax will you?”

Leia frowned. “In case you’ve forgotten, every time that things go *as planned* things always seem to backfire on us.”

“Not this time, Hon. We’ve been planning this for months, the kids are safe with us,” Han confidently remarked. His lopsided smile drooped into a frown and he waved a finger in her direction. “Wait now, you didn’t see anything did you?”

“No Han, the Force didn’t guide me just call it women’s intuition if you need to qualify my feelings. Things just don’t seem to be going our way lately. First the wedding fiasco, then the kidnapping, there’s just no way that this horror can be over.”

“Pessimist!” Han spat as he turned on the scrambler and spoke out to the ships in the party. “Prepare to exit Hyperspace on my mark...three, two, one...MARK!”

One by one the small fleet of refugees sparkled into existence over the giant space anomaly known as the Maw. Wedge’s voice came over the comm, “We’ll make a sweep just to make sure that the way is clear.”

“Affirmative,” Han replied. He and Leia watched as Rogue Squadron spread out in search formation and scanned the region of empty space in front of the Maw.

Three minutes later, Wedge answered, “The way’s clear, nothing out here but vacuous gases.”

“See, I told you, nothing to worry about,” Han replied and advanced towards the Maw.

“I still don’t like it,” Leia repeated. She flipped on the comm. to the *Punishing One* and asked, “Tenel Ka, what’re you feeling over there? Should we go in?”

Static crackled and Anakin’s voice jumped in from his J-Wing. “We’re clear, Mom, let’s go.”

“Tenel Ka?”

“We are prepared for what lies ahead,” came Tenel Ka’s chilling reply from the remaining Hapan Royal vessel.

“What does that mean?” Leia demanded, not liking the cold sound in her daughter-in-law’s voice. “Remember Tenel Ka, we have children here. If you sense anything, we should order a retreat right now.”

“It is fine, Jedi Master, let us proceed,” she answered. Tenel Ka flicked off the comm. system and pointed her ship towards the Maw with half of Rogue Squadron leading the way.

The energy of the Force crackled around her, disrupted by the explosive pulsations of the Maw. Yet through it, she sensed hidden danger ahead. Before they reached the Maw’s lip she transmitted her father’s report on the new starships to all of the members of the party. She flicked on her comm. again and simply stated, “Leave none alive.”

With a ferocious grin on her Warrior face, Tenel Ka dove into the Maw. “Mother, Father, I promise you, I will avenge you...right NOW!”

One by one the ships reluctantly followed the grief stricken Queen Mother into the swirling gaseous creation and prepared themselves for possible battle.

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