

Star Wars

Day of the Jedi

The Jaden Korr Chronicles

Childhood

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...

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Day of the Jedi

Ten years after the Battle of Endor, the power of the IMPERIAL REMNANT increases. Though the EMPEROR is long dead, his military continues to spread war, misery, and slavery across the galaxy.

Jedi Master LUKE SKYWALKER has moved to restore the JEDI to their rightful place as peacekeepers of the galaxy at his JEDI ACADEMY on Yavin 4. But the revolts of the dark Jedi JEREC and Luke's renegade student DESANN have undermined his attempts. Luke and the remaining Jedi spread out among the stars in search of others like themselves. The power of their enemies grows.

Meanwhile, far beneath the towering spires of Coruscant, a teenage girl named JADEN KORR feels a hidden power growing within her....

Dawn

Chapter 1 of *Day of the Jedi: Childhood*

by

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Preface to this chapter:

Day of the Jedi is a hexalogy, a series of six novels relating the adventures of Jaden Korr, a young girl from Coruscant's Undercity, who will be recruited into the New Jedi Order by Luke Skywalker and trained in the ways of the Jedi by her master, Kyle Katarn. She is now a teenage girl living in Coruscant's Undercity. This is chapter one from *Volume I: Childhood*.

Childhood, Chapter One: Dawn

1. Orbital Insertion

Everything was broken. Things break, either from old age or misuse - like a fundamental law of the universe. Everything breaks, everything needs fixing. This was especially true of the *Tasty Morsel*, now in orbit over Coruscant. Important things were now broken on the little cargo ship and there was no way of fixing them. The astromech repair droids were broken, too.

Which was why Nei Gunto was angry. His feet stomped as he walked up the corridor from the engine room. Echoes of his boots on the durasteel decking went ahead of him. He was a Zabrak, originally from the hill country on the southern continent of the planet of Iridonia, though now - now he was from nowhere and everywhere. His service in the rebellion had taken him far from home. His face and bald scalp were covered in red-line tattoos. They swirled around the small spikes that grew out of his skull, which made a natural crown on his head. Somebody who knew about Zabrak tattoos could read Nei's head like a datapad. It would tell

them where on Iridonia he grew up, who his ancestors were, and even his family members. A really smart person would know that Zabraks were near-humans. Either evolution or genetic manipulation had long ago set them apart from humanity.

The illumination bars along the corridor flickered. Nei frowned. More things to fix. Thumping and shouting came from his left, from one of the cargo holds. It was Joron's voice. He detoured to the left, down a side corridor. The bulkhead door to the refrigerated hold was open. His human friend Joron was inside, in a desperate struggle with food.

A nara squid had partially escaped from its crate. Tentacles waved in the air as it lashed out at Joron, who was banging away at it with a pry bar.

"Joron!" Nei Gunto shouted. "Stop it!"

The anger in his voice pulled Joron back from his battle. Nei almost cursed at him, but the puzzlement on Joron's human face stilled the anger in Nei's heart.

Nei was back at the Battle of the High Grass, the hot sun hammering on their heads and the dusty smell of the grass everywhere. The tall grass surrounded them, making it hard to see. It was so tall, it was up over their heads. Sulon's hot summer weighed them down. He'd look up and see the sun in the sky next to Sulon's parent planet Sullust. He remembered glancing over at Joron, to ask him for a sip from the human kid's water flask - when a blaster bolt blew a chunk of the kid's skull off. The bolt went right through those pathetic fabric-and-metal-rim helmets they used to wear. Nei jumped on the kid. He had a pulse, he had a chance. The Imperial ambush cut loose around him. Red blaster bolts filled the air, setting fire to the grass. Nei slung Joron's limp body over his shoulder and ran for the aid station. He had lost too much during the long war to lose his only friend. Running, running past

struggling figures in the high brown grass. Blood from Joron's head wound splattered his combat jersey.

Nei blinked. He was back in the hold with Joron. Cybernetic implants restored Joron's speech, but he was never the same after that hot day. Nei's anger went away. He smiled as he grabbed Joron by the arm. "Chefs and diners don't like it when you beat up their food, Jor. All right?"

"But . . . it's escaping!" Joron gestured back at the flailing squid with the pry bar.

"Did you forget what I said? Turn down the temperature, the thing will go to sleep."

"Oh." Joron frowned. "You told me that?"

"Yes." Nei laughed. It was either laugh or cry, Nei chose to laugh. "Turn it down, then pack it back up in its crate when it goes to sleep."

"Gotcha, Nei."

"I have to talk to Assk. Can you handle this?"

"Sure I can."

Nei made a mental note to check on his buddy in a few minutes, just to make sure. "Good. I'll be back in a minute." He left Joron watching the squid and marched forward along the rusty gray corridors. He reached the cockpit.

Assk Yorrs was there in the dark. He had turned off the interior lights to admire Coruscant. He did this every time they were in orbit over the planet. He was a Duros, big head, green skin, red eyes - an ancient spacefaring race. Nei thought that Assk was more at home in the blackness of deep space than on any planet. He was Nei's other friend from the war. He had been the pilot of the combat shuttle that usually took Joron and Nei into battle.

Their families were all dead. They only had each other. The Empire was fond of orbital bombardments and genocide. That's how his family had died. Joron's brother was shot by stormtroopers on a

nameless planet. Assk's family ran a space station, which was blown up by the Imperials just on the suspicion of contact with the rebellion. When their time to stop fighting came, they were at a loss. Joron wasn't up to much. They had to come up with something. Assk was sick of planets. Nei refused to leave Joron in that crappy hospital on Tarabba Prime. He wouldn't have left a kath hound in that place, let alone his friend. He had the idea when Assk took their money and bought an old Imperial cargo ship. Food. Everyone had to eat. So they went around the Outer Rim gathering up the tastiest strange stuff they could find. Then they hauled it to Coruscant, with the occasional side trip to Trantor. Upscale restaurants went nuts for crap even beggars wouldn't eat on Tatooine. They called it fine dining. Joron could handle the cargo - most of the time. Assk could pilot. Nei could argue with the chefs. Paradise. Until things began to break.

Dawn on Coruscant. Its sun was coming up over the planet's rim.

"Shhh," Assk said before Nei could speak. They watched the dawn in silence. Assk spoke when it was over. The day side was underneath them. "At this orbit, you can see that every 20 minutes."

"How long have you been standing here watching?"

"I've watched it three times now."

"Why do you like this planet so much? Did you know they have to use machines to maintain the atmosphere?"

"Yes. No forests, no plant life. Only a few tiny parks. It's beautiful."

Coruscant was the home of the first world-city. It glistened in reflected glory on its day side and sparkled with its own light on the night side. Parts of the world-city reached into space. Space vessels swarmed its star system, crowd into orbit around it. The other planets in the system, it is as if they did not exist. Flying craft

clogged its skies. It was the political and cultural heart of the galaxy. Glorious beings lived in its heights. Lady Leia Organa Solo, consul of the senate, called the Lady of Light by her admirers, lived at the pinnacle of this city.

The world-city's automated orbital traffic control had not yet given *The Tasty Morsel* an entry slot.

"We need to land soon," Nei said, pointing out the obvious. "Everything's broken. The last repair droid gave out a couple minutes ago."

Assk swore like the commandos he used to ferry around. "Fek, schutta pudu, dext sweat!" The green-skinned Duros had learned Basic as an adult, so his deep voice was heavily accented with faint deep clicks. "We can afford to get the hyperdrive repaired. We can afford to get the life-support system fixed. We can't afford new droids."

"I've been thinking about that. You know the Southsea Spaceport Guy?"

"You mean the fat bald human who talks too much?"

"Yeah, the one with all the bad jokes."

"So?"

"We were drinking at the bar before we left last time - or was it the trip before last?"

"Does this detail matter?" Assk asked it as if he were genuinely curious. The Duros did not do sarcasm well.

"You remember. Joron got lost and you went off to find him?"

"Yes, I remember. Friend Joron gets lost on a regular basis. We should put a tracker in his datapad."

"The bald human told me about - "

"His name is Bakklund."

"That's him! He told me about these two repair techs. Incredibly talented, could fix anything - "

"We can't afford them. I've gone over the budget, no way. I mean it, Nei."

Nei put up a hand. "No, wait. They aren't legal, no resident permits, no money. Mostly it's no money. They live down under there." Nei pointed at the planet.

"Billions of people live there."

Assk could be so thick sometimes, almost as if Joron's mental deficit were a communicable disease. "No. Down under all that."

"Down there, down there?"

"Yes. They work really, really cheap. That's what the fat bald human guy told me. They can fix anything - brother and sister. Only no certifications, no tech licenses, so they can't work on warranty stuff or at spaceports. I mean, they could do the work, but no one up top would let them. The sister's amazing with droids, but she's wild."

"'Wild?' What does that mean?"

Nei made a smoking motion with his fingers at his lips. "Even high as a hawkbat goes, she can still fix any droid made."

Assk turned back to the cockpit window. "We either fly without repair droids, or we trust a drug-addicted girl."

"We can't fly without repair droids. It's too dangerous. If the girl or her brother can't fix them, we can try to get an advance from one of the restaurants for a licensed repair shop. It only costs us time to try."

Assk held up his hands. "Why not?"

2. Down Below

That's me they were talking about. My name is Jaden Korr and I live down there, under all the pretty stuff. Not above the surface, in the clouds where the glorious Lady Leia lives, not anywhere near there. "There is a root to every mountain," my dad would say, "a basement to every tall building." It was his nice way of describing our place in the order of things. I wish he were still alive, but he and my mother died in the last years of the Empire, when I was a little kid. My brother and I live in the Undercity. It is the impoverished dark heart of a golden world. At that moment, while Nei Gunto and his friend Assk hung in orbit over Coruscant, I was on Trash Mountain.

There is a road that passes between Jumble City and our shop. It comes from a giant tower that contains ramps and lifts to the upper levels. The lift shaft goes up and up, about 4000 meters into the ceiling of our world. Long ago this used to be a valley. Not anymore. It was sealed off from the sky forever by thick slabs of duracrete. Towering skyscrapers were built on that. So the valley was forgotten, except as a convenient place to recycle the trash from those immense buildings. So a road leads from the lift shafts to ramps that spiral up and around Trash Mountain. Whoever designed the project liked big things. Giant droid trucks filled with the junk of the surface dwellers rumbled by on that road every hour of every day without rest. They travel to the tall spiraling ramps that crawl up the sides of Trash Mountain. Then there was the mountain itself, immense and brooding, full of discarded treasures. Broken things in a pile so vast, it reached almost to the ceiling, almost two kilometers high, as wide or wider than Jumble City. There are many Trash Mountains in the Undercity. The droid trucks, both ones with big fat tires and the repulsor-lift haulers, they drive up ramps to the top of

the mountain to dump their loads. Great waves of beautiful things discarded by the city above wash down the mountain. Then the trucks head back down the ramps to the giant transport towers for another trip up top. Inside each tower, surrounding the lift shafts inside each tower are spiraling ramps that go up to the daylight world. The trucks rumble up and down those ramps without stopping. Important trash, the kind that can't wait, comes down on one of the immense lifts, elevators big enough to hold even one of the big haulers. All of it illuminated by the faded yellow light from ancient luminescence panels. The most precious things could be found on the mountain. Things to repair a droid, fix a vehicle, repair a speeder bike, bring food to the table. I'm the tall skinny girl far up the south slope of the mountain, poking in the junk for something I know is there.

One of the street boys I hung out with picked his way through the junk. He slowly made his way up the slope to me. "Hey, Jay, wanna hook up tonight? I found a power converter yesterday, enough left for a bottle of juma wine and a couple deathsticks. Wanna split 'em?"

My eyes shifted back to the junk at my feet. Something good was near, something I'd need. I didn't know what it was, but I knew it was there. "Naw, not tonight."

There was no real day or night in the Undercity. The ancient light panels high up on the walls and ceiling were lit all the time. But by common agreement, most people in and around Jumble City went to bed and were awake at the same time. It made business easier.

Luuma frowned. "We have fun. Didn't you enjoy yourself last time?"

"Yes. It was a little more fun for you." My eyes were still busy on the tangle of junk around me.

He laughed.

My older brother didn't like it that I went with boys. If he knew I smoked deathstick, he'd chain me to the floor of our shop. We already had enough trouble feeding our family - Wahn helped, but Brother's wife was busy with their two children, my niece and nephew. I loved them very much. But The Bad Thing would always creep out from the back of my mind to torment me. At times like that, I had to block it out any way I could.

So I wanted to go with Luuma. What little fun I got out of boys washed away that hurt inside me. It was strong today, that hurt, The Bad Thing. "Work comes first, Luuma. Brother needs me this week."

"A few days, then?" he asked. Luuma was always anxious for me.

"Yes. You make me happy, I'll make you happy."

He smiled at that, before wandering away down the side of the mountain. He tripped occasionally on little pieces of trash.

I stepped up onto the soiled white bottom of a large plastic bin jutting up from the slope. There was something here

Someone whispered to me.

"What?" I spun around.

Nerves. I had been nervous a lot lately. Something was over there . . . a small mound of broken wheel rims drew my attention. The mound began to quake. I watched it in complete astonishment as the mound twitched and heaved. I ducked at it exploded. The little sonic boom scattered old rims and other bits and pieces all over.

I jumped down and ran over to the small crater. It lay right at the center. It was a small laser emitter, a core element in some vanished micromachining tool. I scooped it up and hid it in my pocket as others came running.

The Mystery Woman was the first to arrive, along with her insectoid friend. She was older, probably my dad's age if he were

still alive, with thin scars on her face and neck. She stood at the rim of the little crate and looked down at me. "Find anything interesting, Jay?"

I lied about the laser emitter. I don't know why I lied, it wasn't valuable. "No. Just started to look."

The Vessesxx was next to her. It clicked its mouth parts. No one, not even Mystery Woman, no one could speak to it or understand it. Mystery Woman told us it was a Vessesxx, so that's what we called it.

"Hi, Vessesxx."

It clicked again.

"Got room down there for me, Jay?" She was shivering a little from the cold.

"Sure."

She hopped down to help me pry away junk. "Probably a methane explosion."

"Or an old cracked power cell that got wet."

"That, too."

"What's your name, Mystery Woman?"

She laughed. It was about the thousandth time I had asked that. "That's for me to know and you to find out." She rubbed her hands together.

It was always cold in the Undercity, at least around Jumble City it was. Everyone got used to it, even new people, people who had failed up above or were running from something up there.

Vessesxx clicked again. It had four legs on a central body, with the chest - if it was a chest - and the head and two arms upright. It was taller than me. The hard outer body, it was called an exoskeleton, I looked it up. The exoskeleton was in iridescent shades of bright green and blue. Its large compound eyes glistened. I saw it use tools on more than one occasion, it had hard thin fingers on its arms. I was always nice to it. The creature seemed so sad

most of the time. I don't know why I thought that, it had no expressions on its face.

"Others are coming," Mystery Woman said.

"I thought you said you couldn't understand it."

She smiled. Half her teeth were missing. "After a while, I could make guesses. He's really smart, you know."

"He's a he?" We lugged a chunk of duracrete out of the way.

"I decided the other night that he's a he, not an it."

We heard others and looked up. Orbaol peeked in at us. He was a golden-skinned human. Orbaol only had one arm, the other one ended in a stump just below the shoulder. "Hi Jay. Find anything?"

"Like we'd tell you, Orbaol," Mystery Woman shot back.

"You'll just give it to your boss Dehit to sell to topsiders at ten times what we'd get."

"Still mad about that trade, Woman?"

"Yes."

"Look, that's between you and Dehit. He's my boss, not my friend."

"Nice of you to say," I replied. "Come help us move these duracrete blocks. Something good's underneath." I was sweet on Orbaol, but he didn't seem to feel the same way about me.

"Yeah, Jay." He jumped down.

The dim yellow light from distant light panels gave no warmth. Nothing was ever easy to see in the twilight. I was born down here, so I hardly noticed the cold or the dark.

Mystery Woman noticed the Imperial field jacket Orbaol was wearing. "Is that one the jackets Jay's brother sells?" We pushed at the duracrete boulders. My hand slipped, I cut my palm on a sharp edge.

"Yes," he replied to Woman's question. "Watch your hands, Jay."

"It's okay, it's not deep." I dug a bandage roll out of a pocket in my jumpsuit. It was one of the nifty little bandage rolls Wahn made for Brother and I. I wound it around my hand. Wahn was good at taking care of our hurts. Maybe it's because I liked her so much, but wounds always seemed to heal a little faster when she took care of me.

Mystery Woman shivered again. "How much does your brother want for one of those jackets? I have three deathsticks."

"Those things will kill you, Woman."

"Shut up, Orbaol. I won't let you visit my shack again if you don't shut up. And my next trade with Dehit better be fair."

I blinked. I had not known that Orbaol and Woman were friendly in that way. They were so angry with each other most of the time. It hurt a little to know that. "Brother won't trade for deathsticks."

"You would. I know you smoke now."

Orbaol glanced at me. I lowered my head a little.

"Only a little, not much."

"Pudu, Jay. Don't get into it. I keep telling Woman not to smoke. Don't you start. 'Bad habits end badly.'"

I changed the subject. "Ten creds for a jacket. You find any Imperial field ration packets, we'll take twenty of those."

"I have the deathsticks and three creds. Vessesxx found some melons over the other side of Jumble City, where the topside restaurants dump their organic waste. But we're going to live off those for a couple days."

"You're good at finding things. Give us everything you find for four days and we'll throw in one of these jumpsuits, too." I tugged at the collar of my jumpsuit with the hand that wasn't bleeding. It was an Imperial Army jumpsuit. No one above us wanted to wear Imperial gear, so it ended up down here. The nicest stuff, too: dress

uniforms, insulated suits, jumpsuits, flightsuits, jackets - anything with the Imperial insignia was thrown away.

"It's a deal. I'll start tomorrow."

"Okay."

We heaved the last duracrete boulder out of the way.

Celhir showed up just then. He was another of Dehit's men. Old, and I don't mean middle-aged old like Mystery Woman, I mean old old. Gray hair, so many wrinkles. He puffed as he slid into the crater to help Orbaol. The Cerean also tumbled in. He was tall and spindly, almost like me, except for that big tall bald head of his. Nobody knew the Cerean's name. He couldn't speak. The scars on his face and hands, so much like Mystery Woman's scars, they were signs of torture. I imagine if Mom and Dad had lived, they'd have scars like that, too. Brother never told anyone what they did to him. Not even me. Because I was so young, they just used electric shocks on me. I still sometimes dreamed of the harsh faces of the female interrogation officers. Funny the things that stuck in my mind. I was only five when it happened. Momma and Dad never came back. The shop was so empty for so long after that. Brother and I almost starved. Sometimes the Imperials released people to spy on their neighbors. So no one brought us stuff to repair and no one bought the things we found on Trash Mountain. Then one day, it didn't matter anymore. People began to talk to us again.

"This crazy Cer's been following me all day," Celhir complained.

"You did give him a fruit bar the other day," Orbaol said.

We were all down on our knees, pulling away shattered plastic bits and small chunks of permacrete.

The Cerean grunted. A hole opened up.

"Jay!" Mystery Woman warned me, but I had already slid into the hole. My forearm caught on a sharp shard at the edge, ripped

through the cloth and into my arm. It wasn't deep, it only bled a little.

"I'm fine," I shouted up from the darkness.

"What's down there?" Orbaol shouted.

"See anything?" Celhir shouted at the same time.

I heard the Vessessxx click and the Cerean's concerned grunts. My uninjured hand found the flashlight in the leg pocket of the jumpsuit. It was something I made from salvaged light emitting diodes and batteries, wrapped in tape. I clicked it on. It was the pot of creds by the golden pond. "It's a large airspeeder!" I shouted up.

Something was wrong. I waved my flashlight around the interior. There was dried blood on a couple of the posh leather seats. Bad things had happened here. Menace radiated from the vehicle. I shook my head. It didn't matter now that the airspeeder was down here. It was wealth to all of us - meals, shelter, and survival. I looked back up through the hole in the speeder's roof - punched by a wrecking claw by the look of it. Some trash haulers were big enough to hold two or three speeders, even longer special ones. Something - someone bad was in this speeder - no. Someone bad made the bad thing happen. This luxury speeder was the focus of his thoughts, his desires. It was a he. My mind was rotting. How could I know things like this? It was either too little deathstick or too much deathstick. I wasn't smoking the right amount to stay sane. It was a man, a human. His lust for something - something hidden and corrupt - it filled my head. I stumbled in the wreckage. It was hard to move around, I was in a crouch. I put out my hand, my good hand, and a ragged piece of plasteel from the speeder's body cut it. I cried out. Like it didn't want me to see what I had seen with my mind.

"What?" Mystery Woman shouted down.

"Nothing. I cut myself again." I pulled another bandage roll from a side pocket and wrapped it around my cuts.

"You okay?" Orbaol asked. "How old is it? If it's too old it won't be worth the trouble."

"Don't know," I shouted back. The evil was old, dusty, dead old. He must have been something when he was alive, that lusting, hate-filled shadow I sensed. I laughed. My imagination was running away with my common sense. I pushed around the junk on the speeder's floor. My foot turned over scraps of paper. My home-made flashlight's beam picked out an old symbol. They were government documents, printouts. I could read a list of senators there on the floor. "Old Republic, before the Empire. Thirty, maybe forty years old. Maybe a little younger than that."

"This is gold, Jay," Orbaol shouted back. "The parts will still be good - resale value Topside will be high."

Mystery Woman laughed.

"Don't tell them that!" Celhir said.

"Yeah," Woman agreed. "Cuz now we want full shares."

"See?" Celhir replied. "Never tell true value."

"Pudu," Orbaol replied. "We know these people. These aren't strangers. Woman, Jay, the Bug, you, and I, we'll be seeing each other here every day for the next ten years, maybe longer."

"And they'll be fleecing you every day," Celhir said.

"I won't," I shouted up from below.

"Okay, maybe not Jay," Celhir relented.

Orbaol peered down at me. "What does Jay want?"

Someone whispered to me. I moved the light around the interior. Nothing but old murder and junk. I looked up at Orbaol. "The Cerean gets a share. Woman and her bug get shares. My brother and I take one quarter in exchange for the speeder's computer, the droid, and four repulsor coils."

"I can tell you now, Dehit won't go for that. Shares for everyone, fifth for you, two repulsor coils, and the computer." I pretended to think about it. "We get the droid, too?"

"Agreed."

"Deal!" I began pushing at the side door. Its emergency release pull clicked when I yanked it.

"Jaden!" Orbaol bellowed down at me. "Come on up. If you get yourself killed, your brother would never forgive us."

"I'm all right," I shouted back up. "Just poking around. We're gonna winch out the engines, right?"

"Yeah."

I heard Orbaol and Cehir talking.

"Cehir's going to get Dehit and the rest of our crew," Orbaol shouted down at me.

"I'll see if I can tunnel back to the engine compartment. Tell me when he gets back, I'll come up."

"Fek, Jay. Wait till the crew gets here. Celhir's stopping by your shop to tell your brother. So don't worry. He'll know you're here."

Brother would be relieved to know I wasn't off getting myself knifed over a packet of death sticks.

Whispers again. I spun around, casting my light into the speeder's far corners. Nothing was there.

Orbaol could see my light moving around. "What? Burrower rats?"

"Naw. Thought so," I lied. "But no."

— ◇ —

Dehit himself walked up the mountain to see our find. The aged Quarren, his face tentacles all quivering, offered me a job. Dehit wasn't his real name, of course, anymore than Korr was our real family name. We don't know what Grandfather's real name was. Dehit had known Grandfather, he had known my father, he knew us. We got along well with him.

"Are you sure, Jaden?" he asked in slightly accented Basic.

"You asked me two weeks ago."

"I did? I thought I asked your brother."

"No, it was me."

"You're not Mendian pretending are you?"

"She's the girl, Boss," Orbaol said.

"Yes, Jaden's the female human." His blue Quarren eyes peered at me. "All my life among humans, and I still have trouble telling male from female. I know from your voice and smell that you are Korr. There is a small touch of your grandfather in your voice, Jaden. Him I remember well. Ask your brother if you will work for me."

"I already did. Brother said 'Not right now. Maybe when the kids are older.' Remember, my brother has children."

"Ah, human familial units. I forget. Very well, Jaden. Your help for one fifth share?"

"Yes."

"Good human you are. Talented." His old HK droid handed Dehit a wet sponge. It was an old protocol droid he had scrounged from somewhere. I think my grandfather had something to do with its existence. Quarrens dried out in the cold dry air down here. Dehit wiped down his reddish-white scalp with the sponge. An old man on Leaning Street in Jumble City once told me that he had seen the protocol droid kill a human. He was a silly old man, protocol droids don't have the combat programming to do such things. The air was dry and cold in this vast tall cave we all lived in, and filled with dust. It was bad for Quarren skin. "Celhir, how do we start?" Dehit asked.

"Let's tunnel," I suggested.

"What Jay said," Celhir replied.

So we started. My tall skinny body was perfect for tunneling. I'd done it many times, digging deep into the mountain for a precious something buried within, those things only I seemed to know about. I had to be careful. Brother once had to dig me out. I was careful not to let that happen again.

No one was interested in getting the entire speeder limo out of the mountain. It was old, no one wanted a blood-covered interior anyway. But the parts were pure cred. We'd strip it down from under the trash, hollow it out. The engines were the main problem, that's why Dehit sent Cehir back for more of his people and a portable winch stand. I'd seen them use it before, nothing like the cobbled-together things Brother and I used. It had the look of something someone built up above. It had three adjustable poles that were used to set up a tripod, with the winch on top. It could put out just about anything.

I guided the digging. Most of these guys knew me. I had been drunk or high with several of them. They also knew me from the mountain. They knew that Brother and I could find things others couldn't. So they let me boss them around. We dug the hole out, made it wider. They started a couple more holes further down to get at the engine compartment.

Orbaol stuck his head a little deeper into the hole I was in. "Have you seen Teeka, Jay? I thought Celhir might have, or Dehit. They haven't seen her for days."

"I haven't seen her, either." I hesitated, but he should know. "She's kinda young still, but she sometimes goes with Lower City guys. Maybe she's up there with one of them."

"The next time you see the guy who hangs out at the tower, ask him if he's seen her."

"You mean Tegges the Bithian? Ceeriia's friend?"

"Yeah, him."

"I'll ask Nomine, too. She's the twi'lek who runs the snack stand by our shop."

"Thanks, Jay."

"Uh, Orbaol? Are you, um, sweet on Teeka?"

"A little maybe. But mostly cuz I know her from the mountain. You've got your brother and I've got my boss, but she doesn't have anyone."

It came flying out of my mouth just then, before I could stop it. "You're sweet, Orbaol." I blushed a little. Fortunately, it was dark down in the hole, so he didn't see.

"Thanks, Jay."

I returned to pulling and prying things out. The Cerean would reach down occasionally to pull stuff out of the hole. Then I went back into the limo. The evil feeling was a little less now, like maybe it had festered by itself all those years. I blinked and fell down. But with exposure, the evil was drying up. Like it finally sensed that the man who left this feeling behind was dead. It was ok now. I got back up. "Send down the tools. Let's break this thing up!"

— ◇ —

Mystery Woman helped me carry the droid down to my cart. The repulsor coils, the limo's computer, and the other stuff would be carted back to Dehit's shop along with the rest of it. Brother would drive the big cart over and pick the stuff up tomorrow. After I told him about it, of course.

She leaned over to whisper to me. "What do you want for including me in this deal?"

"One of your deathsticks."

She smiled as she put one of them in my pocket. "Enjoy it, Jay. I know the seller if you want more." She glanced at my hands.

"You're dripping blood."

"The cuts aren't deep. I'm not worried."

She leaned in even closer. "You've been smoking too much. Cut back, Jay. You'll last longer that way."

3. High Tek

Wahn bandaged me up, frowning at me while she did. She was a little shorter than me, with lighter hair. She knew the healing arts. I asked Brother once. She had only told him that she had learned them as a small child from her mother Wen. Wen died a long time ago. Brother would see Wahn on the mountain. One day she came to visit Brother and she stayed. That was fine, she was kind to Brother. She used to be kind to me. I was there the night she gave birth. We had been such a close family before, when Nerram and Ala were tiny. Then the Bad Thing happened. Mostly now she was angry with me. She was angry with me all the time. She bandaged me up and I went to bed.

The next morning, I came running up the stairs to the common area. Sleep still clung to the edges of my brain. Wahn was in the little kitchen cooking up something grainy. Ala was playing on the floor. Brother and my nephew Nerram were still asleep in the small rooms on the other side of the common area.

"Did the message come?" I asked her breathlessly.

"What message, Jaden?"

"Um, I don't know. Someone I know is supposed to leave a message."

"Not one of those creepy drug addict boys you run with? I wouldn't let them past the front gate."

"No! Someone . . . someone I know . . ." It had been a dream. I could remember him clearly, the one who wanted to leave me a message. He was tall and had the longest hair. He wore goofy-looking robes. But it was a dream. I turned around and went back down the stairs. "Never mind," I said quietly.

I asked about Teeka before heading up the mountain. No one else had seen her either.

— ◇ —

There it was, a droid torso sticking out of a ridge line of junk right above me. My brain came alive with the possibilities of its use. I stared at it, unsure how to pry it out. The slope was steep, a truck ramp was off to the left. Its support pylons stuck up through the trash as if they had grown out of it. The eternal rumble of droid-operated trash trucks echoed down from the ramps.

I was high up, higher than I usually got. Further up was the mountaintop, where the Circle was. That's where the ramps met, up near the roof with its faintly glowing light panels. Such a long way up, hundreds of meters from the ground of the Undercity. Our roof was their floor. The vast duracrete foundations of the world-city encased us, encased me in a vast artificial cavern. My mind went away then, like it sometimes did when I got up this high. I could feel the life above me, distant through thick layers of duracrete and plasteel. And I saw this place as it once was, long, long ago. A stream with clear water ran over there, down to the right of Jumble City. There was a forest and bright green leaves. Birds, birds were everywhere.

I blinked. The moment was gone. Far above me, droid trucks drove up the ramps to the Circle at the top. They dumped their loads, and Trash Mountain grew a little more. Over the months and years, the mountain was picked-at, processed. Metals and plastics and usable things were pulled out for reprocessing, recycling, or resale. And the mountain shrank a little. I wondered what the first trash was, that lay down in the middle, at the mountain's heart. How long had it been there? Another load was dumped above me. I could hear it. My music, it could be heard everywhere - in Jumble, in our compound - the faint crashing of metal and plastic.

My eyes sought out the droid chassis in the ridge wall. The head was still attached, though it was missing its arms and legs. It began to tremble as I watched it. A shudder passed over and along the ridge, like a big hand was yanking at the junk. A different rumble came to my ears. I stood there watching in horror as the ridge bucked and jolted back and forth. The invisible hand shook it, squeezed it, thrashed at it. My mouth fell open. I stood there and stared. The ridge line exploded out at me.

"Ak!" I squawked and ran for my life.

A great rumbling wave of trash chased at my heels. I ran as fast as I could as it chased me down the mountainside. It was chasing ME, I knew that, it wanted ME, almost as if I were pulling at it with invisible ropes.

I ran and jumped, bounced up and ran somemore, howling incoherently. Others further down looked up, then ran for their lives.

The wave caught me, knocked me over. I tumbled end-over-end, the junk cutting and hacking at me.

It settled after that. I pushed my way through broken plastic tubes and fractured packing crates to the surface. My face was covered in blood from a cut on my scalp, but I was smiling. The droid chassis was in my arms.

"That was fun, let's do it again!" its head shouted at me.

"You're active, how's that?"

"Don't use much power just watching, do I?"

"I guess not."

Drops of my blood fell on its face. "You're hurt."

"No much." I looked around. The wave had chased and carried me all the way to the base of the mountain. Our little motorized cart was sitting nearby. Orbaol was running toward me, shouting my name.

I smiled again.

"Gods, Jay," he said. He put out his one hand to grab my arm.
"Gods!"

"I'm okay, Orbaol, just cuts. I've been cut before."

"Drop that junk and sit down. Let me have a look."

"Who's junk?" the droid chassis asked indignantly.

"Help me put him in the cart," I asked. "Then I'll sit down."

We loaded the chassis, then I sat on the edge of the cart while Orbaol pressed a rag against the biggest cut on my head. "Here, you hold this on and sit there. I'll drive you home."

"Shouldn't you get back to work?"

"Dehit would fire me on the spot if I left a member of the Korr family bleeding on Trash Mountain. Press hard on the rag, Jay." He let go and jumped into the front of the cart.

Wahn was horrified when she saw me, but Brother understood. He saw the chassis and he understood.

My head was still bleeding, despite pushing on it with the rag. She dragged me over to a stool by one of the benches and pried my hand away.

"This one went all the way to the bone, Jaden." She pulled back to look into my eyes. "Are you dizzy?"

"Not really." I blinked rapidly.

"Liar." She turned to her husband Mendant. "Get my basket, sweets. Your sister needs stitches." She turned back to me. "Let me see if I can stop the bleeding. Hi Orbaol."

Orbaol had been by the shop before on business from Dehit. He sat the droid torso down on the bench next to me.

"Everyone's worried about her, what about me?"

"You're a droid, droids don't bleed," Orbaol replied.

"We still have feelings."

"I can delete those for you," I said.

That shut it up.

"Shush, Jay. And put down that dirty rag, you'll get an infection."

"It'll bleed all over my face."

"Listen to me, Jay. Be still. Keep your hand down."

Wahn put one hand on either side of her head and closed her eyes. The big gash stopped bleeding. In fact, all my wounds stopped bleeding. She opened her eyes and took her hands away. "There. Jay, you won't feel any pain when I stitch you up. Say it back to me."

"I won't feel any pain."

"That's my girl."

Orbaol had watched it all in astonished silence. He knew my sister-in-law was a healer, because Wahn had made a salve for the stump of his left arm. She grew most of what she needed in a fungus and mushroom garden she kept behind the repair bay, by the back fence. It was in a dark place sheltered from the dim lights of the cavern ceiling and damp from condensation rolling off the roof of our repair bay. Sometimes we'd trade for things she could use. I kept promising to build her a proper mushroom-growing shed, but I hadn't gotten around to it yet. Smoking deathstick took up a lot of my time.

"How'd you do that?" Orbaol asked her

"My mother was Wen, you never met her. She taught me. It takes great discipline to perform certain healing tasks. The mind is the key to all healing. 'Properly centered, a talented healer could cure a rock of its cracks.' That's one of my mom's little sayings. She had many of them."

"Where did she learn it?"

Wahn glanced over at him while inspected my wounded arms. "I don't know. I was born down here."

I knew it was a lie. She had told it so us, to others, and each time she said it, I knew it was a lie. So did Brother. But she was so nice

to him, he ignored it. Sometimes, when I hated her, I'd almost throw it in her face. I didn't. Something inside me held back.

Mendian was back a moment later with Wahn's big basket of tricks. She made her own bandages. She took out a long curved needle and threaded it with black string. My niece Ala had crept down the stairs. My nephew Nerram stayed at the top, peering down through the railings from the common room. Grandfather started out just with the shacks on top of a tall chunk of ancient concrete. It was unassailable by local thugs once he pulled the ladder up. He and Dad built the metal walls around the place and the big repair bay later on. They cut up metal bins from the dumpster forest for the material.

My niece and nephew were named after my parents, my mom and dad.

"Close your eyes, Jaden," she commanded. I did. I felt a distant tugging on my scalp.

"Oh, gah!"

"Look away, Orbaol, you're not helping."

After she was done, I was sent upstairs to change into a fresh jumpsuit. Clothes weren't a problem down here, not since the Empire fell. Enough Imperial uniforms, coveralls, jackets, jumpsuits, and other gear was around to equip an army. It probably had equipped an army.

When I came out, Orbaol was sitting around the round table playing push-me-pull-you with Ala and Nerram. Mendian and Wahn were over at the counter fixing our second meal.

"What about me?" the droid shouted up from the floor of the repair bay.

"I'll repair you in a day or two," I shouted back.

"Not much to look at down here," it complained.

I ignored it. Orbaol smiled at me.

"How do you find things in the mountain, Jay?"

I sat down across from him. Ala came over and shoved me.

"Don't do that, Ala. Jaden's been hurt," Wahn said from the counter, her back to us."

"Sorry, Jay," Ala said in her child's voice, and went over to torment her brother.

"I can't say," I replied to Orbaol.

"You're afraid I'll compete too much?"

"No. I mis-said it. I don't exactly know. It's a gift. I went with Brother to the mountain as a kid, and his knack rubbed off on me."

He smiled at me again. "I'd never compete against you, Jay."

"Thanks, Or."

We chatted about minor things.

"Oh, no one's seen Teeka. Maybe she found a friendly sort up there? It's happened before."

"Maybe."

Wahn sat a big hot bowl of diced protein gel and white grain in the middle of the table. Some of her mushrooms were nicely chopped and spread over the top. Mendian brought over the bowls and spoons, along with a small box of flavorings and salt packets taken from old Imp emergency ration packets.

"How you getting along with Dehit?" he asked Orbaol as he spooned the hot food into a bowl. He handed it to Orbaol.

"Fine, except he calls me by the wrong name half the time," Orbaol answered as he took the bowl.

"Nothing prevents you from trading with us. Dehit won't mind." Mendian glanced over at me. "Come by more often."

Orbaol glanced at me.

Just then, the Bad Thing rose up inside me. Something about Orbaol's eyes called it up from the depths. I looked down. Mendian put my bowl in front of me. I couldn't eat, I couldn't speak, I couldn't move. The Bad Thing had me.

Wahn stood up. "Jay's wounds are beginning to hurt. Excuse me. She went over to the shelf where she kept her things and found the little brown bottle of fungal distillate. She poured a little in my spoon. I swallowed it. She knew it wasn't a physical hurt. Both she and Brother knew and thought it was the Other Thing. I hadn't told anyone about the Bad Thing. I put my head on the table next to my bowl and fell asleep.

Everyone was done eating when I woke up. My appetite had returned, I gulped my food down. Orbaol smiled at me during his long conversation with Mendian about droid arm actuators.

I walked him to the bay doors. When we stepped outside, he looked up at the always-on light panels on the distant cavern ceiling. "I wonder who they were, the ones who decided to seal us off down here."

"That was so long ago, they probably had no idea that people would live down here."

He didn't shift his gaze away from the dim lights. "They knew. It was cruel and they did it anyway." He looked at me. Thanks, Jay. Not everything down here is harsh."

I blushed. "Thanks, Or."

"See you on the mountain, Jay," he said to me before I closed the outer gate and latched it.

4. Ripples in Water

"Why do they smash up these droids, Brother?" I asked, my head inside the cleaning droid. "They do a good thing, keeping things clean. Why do that?"

"I don't know, Jay. Luck for us. I just wish he'd pay us instead of trading our work for his food."

"It's good food."

"Yeah, I guess so."

Brother wore out before I did. Something . . . something I didn't understand fueled me, made my mind a focused sharp blade of thought. My fingers moved quickly as I reattached the command-wire junctions to the internal hub. My head was down inside the droid, my eyes dancing to the rhythm of my fingers. I had my homemade flashlight strapped to my head with an old elastic cord.

"Jaden," he said from the other side of the repair bay, by the stairs. "Jaden, stop and get some sleep. Even you can't fix them all in one night."

"Yes, Brother," I shouted from inside the droid case.

"Night, Jay. Wahn will be angry with you if we find you asleep at the bench again."

"Yes, Brother. I'm going to bed soon."

He went upstairs. Brother knew he'd probably find me asleep at the bench. Work, like deathstick, made The Bad Thing fade away. So when I worked, I was all in for the work. Sometimes I thought about Mom and Dad dying at the hands of Imperial interrogators, that made me sad. But thinking about The Bad Thing hurt. When The Bad Thing came to my mind, that dirty pain inside my head started. I'd want to jump into a cesspit. Sometimes I dreamed about

my parents, and that made me happy — then I'd wake up and remember The Bad Thing.

The shop was quiet. The never-ending rumble of trash haulers was a low backdrop to my work. My rewiring of the tall boxy G series droid was done. I moved over to the other side of the center bench where Brother had left off with the aged R5 droid. I took off my flashlight headband and began the work of changing out the head's rotation motor. Brother had already removed the concave head. I rummaged on the bench for an extractor, then carefully placed it around the data coupler, which was the metal ring that matched the one on the R unit's head. They acted to transfer data and instructions from head to torso and back. Couldn't use hardwiring on his model, since the head was made to rotate freely. It was centered on the drive spoke for the head. The long extractor's outer arms folded down to lock onto the droid case, while the delicate inner grippers slid out to hold the ring itself. I clicked it, but nothing happened. After a look, I realized the ring had been forced down into its holding bracket, I'd have to take the bracket out, too. My hand reached out for a flat pry tool. It came into my hand. I didn't think anything of it at first, since I was busy trying to get the ring assembly off. I laid down the pry tool and picked up a socket driver to loosen the bracket connectors. They were on too tight. I needed the power driver. That's when I realized that I had left all these tools on the other side of the bench. I stared down at the driver in my hand. How did it get there? I glanced across the table at the small power driver. It began to shake and bounce on the bench top. Pure horror filled me as I watched it slowly shift around on its own, scooting slowly toward me. I backed away from the bench, dropping the socket driver. It moved toward me a little faster. I squawked and ran. It bounced off the table and rolled at me. I ran across the repair bay, the power driver in hot pursuit. It leaped up on the far bench when I hopped up to escape it. I shouted

out at it to stop. It circled me as if it were alive. I ran back the other way. It bounced off the bench to pursue me, clanging as it hit droid parts and other junk. I crashed into one of the droids, knocking it over. It landed with a loud bang. I jumped on top of the far bench.

"Jaden?" Brother shouted down from upstairs. "Are you all right?"

"Stop it!" I shouted at the power driver. It flew into my hand. I blinked.

"Jaden?" Brother had come to the top of the stairs, a slug-pistol in his hand.

"Sorry, Brother," I shouted back, my mind on the power driver. "Got carried away with repairs."

"Go to bed."

"I think I will." Was I crazy? I gently put the power driver down. It didn't move. I was crazy.

The Bad Thing did not torment my sleep that night. I was in a wonderful place, an immense room that stretched out into the distance, into green plants and water. I was in a corner of that giant room, near tall windows that let in the bright light of Coruscant's sun. I could see blue sky and white puffy clouds when I looked out the windows. Mostly I sat by one of the many small fountains crowded into that part of the room. I ran my hand through the cool water and listened to the rustle of brown robes as many people passed by. The stones were white in this part of the room, and they turned the afternoon glare of the sun into a soft warm light. I stroked the water with my hand. I heard people come and go on the nearby path. I heard distant voices, but all was quiet near me. I was in the still center, with only the gentle splash of the fountains around me to keep me company. I was content. My eyes watched the ripples move in the fountain's pool. I ran my hand through them, watching as my passage reflected them. New ripples were

formed by my hand. They echoed out to cross those already in the pool.

Brother did not have to wake me. I was already at work when his wife Wahn came down to get me for morning meal. She looked at me, and, for a reason she wouldn't say, touched my cheek.

"What?" I reached up to take her hand away from my face, but instead, I took her hand in mine and held it.

"Nothing, Jay." We went upstairs, hand in hand.

— ◇ —

I sucked the smoke into my lungs. The chemicals in the smoke did their work on my nervous system. I went away to a cloudy happy place. I smiled at the streaks of rust on the walls of the big bin I was in, I laughed at the echo of my breathing, and those echoes made me laugh even harder. I was swept away into a land of dreams. The Bad Thing disappeared, as if it had never happened.

The deathstick smoke took me to that wonderful place, the temple in the clouds, the room of fountains. The sky was blue and full of white clouds, I could see them through the narrow tall windows. I sat on the rim of a fountain, watching water fall into the pool, each drop setting off ripples that interacted with other ripples and on and on. The water was clear and clean. I put my hand in it and stirred the ripples. It was cool and soothing to my skin. Men and women, humans and nonhumans, children and adults, they all walked and talked. I could hear their voices but I did not understand their words. Many wore brown robes and long white tunics. A man in such a robe sat next to me at the fountain. We watched the ripples in the water. He had long brown hair, so long it reached below his shoulders. I had never seen a man with hair that long. He smiled at me. I smiled back. He was the one who wanted to leave me a message. He spoke, but I could not hear his words. He gave up after a while, but he didn't leave my side. We watched the ripples in the water.

"That was a good smoke," I said to myself as I woke up. I was standing somewhere, a strong wind in my face, my back against a wall. There wasn't much wind in the Undercity, except near the big vents on the other side of Jumble City. "I ought to lock myself in when I smoke." I opened my eyes. I screamed.

I was at the edge of nothingness, nothing but blue sky and aircraft hurling by in front of me. The tops of highrises stuck up through a cloudy mist that hung a few hundred meters below me. Giant towering skyscrapers reached up into the blue. I was on the side of one, on a narrow ledge. I screamed and screamed.

The wind tried to snatch me away into the emptiness. Or maybe it was trying to throw me out into the rushing line of airspeeders and cargo transports in front of me. The horror of it drove me to my knees. I couldn't stay there, the wind pulled at me, it would eventually pull me off the ledge. I began to crawl.

The building was a blank white wall that stretched in every direction forever. I could see no break in it, either in front or behind, up or down. A repulsor-lift droid flew by as I slowly crept along the ledge. The wind tugged at me. The wind was trying its best to kill me. I flattened myself out. My fingers searched the smooth polymer surface of the ledge for something to hang onto. The droid flew back to stare at me. It had a smooth aerodynamic case and control vanes on either side of its body. Its manipulator arms were tucked up underneath it.

Floating over the bottomless canyon that gapped just millimeters away from me, it whined and beeped its displeasure at finding me there.

[[Error. Biological presence without safety devices is not advised.]]

"I know, I know. Can you help me get down?" The wind tried to pull me off the narrow ledge.

[[Your mass exceeds my lift capacity. Your presence is unexplained: there are no hatches or maintenance ladders in this area. You are an anomaly.]]

"Please, please shut up and call someone to help me." I closed my eyes against the terrifying blue emptiness around me.

[[Summon emergency services?]]

"No! No. I'll be arrested." I thought, my eyes closed, the wind grabbing at me. "Call your biological counterpart. Does he have an airspeeder? Please call him now."

[[He has been summoned. Nice human, very good at repairs. Keeps my software updated. Not abusive to his droid counterparts. Not like the old one, he was rude to nonbiologicals.]]

"Please stay with me."

[[Of course. My programming demands that I save you.]]

"Thank you."

[[Polite biological in strange place.]]

"Gah, stating the obvious," I replied, my eyes still closed.

We waited. The little droid whined at me occasionally as I lay stretched out on the ledge, trying my best to flatten myself. The wind lashed at my body. I kept my eyes shut against the horror.

Time passed. The droid asked me how I got up there. He asked me again and again. I didn't know. I never figured it out.

Something big moved up next to me. I heard a door slide open just centimeters away from my head. "Girl?" a male human voice said. "Girl, I'm right next to you. Open your eyes and look at me. It's all right, just look at me, nothing else."

I opened my eyes. A well-kept guy in company coveralls was in the open side door of a speeder van. He had a safety belt around his waist and he was tied in. I heard the droid. It was hovering right over me.

I reached out a trembling arm. He snatched me inside and closed the door.

The comm system whined. A droid was in the driver's seat.
"IK-895 wishes to know the state of the human female."

He eased me down onto the floor of the van. We were surrounded by tools and parts - enough stuff to feed my brother's family for years. I blinked and looked up at him.

"How are you? We can take you to a medical clinic if you need it."

"No, no, I think I'm fine."

"Nothing broken? Move your arms and legs for me."

I did as he asked.

"Look at me."

I looked at his clean face.

"Can you focus? Do you see me clearly?"

A tear trickled down my cheek. I wiped it off. "I can see you. I'm fine."

"Then how in fek did you get out there?" he shouted.

"I don't know."

"IK wants to know her status," the droid asked again.

"She's fine, B8. Tell IK thanks from me and - "

"I'm Jaden."

"Jaden thanks her, too." He looked back at me. "Why are you wearing an Imperial flightsuit? That's not funny, you know."

"I'm sorry, sir."

He frowned. "Dress-up party, wasn't it? Those bloodshot eyes of yours, you had a little too much didn't you?"

I was undocumented. From grandfather to me, we didn't belong. Prison waited for me for this strange stunt. I might not get back to Brother for months. Something in me knew this man's mind. I could feel his emotions, his thoughts were open to me. How could I see inside him like this? It frightened me, but I used it.

One, he wasn't angry at me. He had already assembled a story in his head. I repeated it back to him.

"My friends had a dress-up party." I started to cry. The tears were real even if my story wasn't. "Someone brought juma wine to the party. The last thing I remember was taking a drink."

He patted me on the shoulder. "Rich boys and their speeders. Gak, I hate 'em. They crammed you into a speeder, they left you on the ledge. Big joke. They could have killed you. Do you know their names? We should call the cops."

"Please no. I'm in enough trouble as it is. Could you just drop me at a public landing?"

"You sure? Those boys, someday they'll hurt someone."

"They were . . ." I tried to think of a girl's name. "They were Leia's friends. I didn't know them."

He sighed. "Take more care in your friends, Jaden."

"Yes, sir."

"Your friend Leia doesn't take much after her namesake, does she?"

"Sir?"

"She was named after Lady Leia. Lots of kids out there named Leia, Han, Akbar, Dadanna."

"Oh."

They dropped me at a public landing close to a lift shaft. I thanked them as I got out.

"It's all right. Be more careful at parties, Jaden. And stop wearing Imp gear. It's offensive."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

"Take care, Jaden." He closed the van door. The van flew off.

— ◇ —

I pretended that I had been on Trash Mountain. Brother accepted the lie, but I didn't fool Wahn. She frowned at me. I went away from her accusing gaze.

5. Water Falling

The next day I saw Luuma on Trash Mountain. We made a date for that night in the Dumpster Forest. He had a bottle of juma wine. "The wine's okay by me," I told him. "No more deathstick. I've been smoking too much, gotta cut back."

He smiled. "I like the wine better anyway."

The term "night" was really meaningless in the Undercity, the distant yellow light fixtures stayed on all the time. But by consensus everyone in Jumble City did their trading during certain hours. Most of us slept at about the same time. I really meant that I'd meet him after Brother and Wahn went to bed. We met in the big empty bin next to the hill of rusting barrels, deep in the forest of old dumpsters. He and I had done this before. He wasn't the best to be with, but it was better than being alone all the time. I kept an old military-issue blanket in the bin. We spread it out, then took turns on the bottle. When the wine started to take effect, that's when I started to take my flightsuit off. I pulled down the zip fastener. That's when I heard the voice.

"You impertinent girl! Have some dignity for yourself!"

The voice startled me so much I jumped. My head hit the top of the bin, it rang like a rusty bell. "There's someone here!" I shouted.

Luuma stuck his head out the side. "There's no one here."

"I heard him speak." I pulled the flightsuit back on, zipping it closed. "He had a strange accent, like . . . I've never heard an accent like that before. He's an offworlder. Let's find him."

So we searched, Luuma and I, until Luuma got bored and left. I spent another hour looked through that part of the Dumpster Forest for him. He wasn't there. "Too much deathstick," I said to

myself. First the fekking power driver, then the weird pudu on the side of a building, and now this. "Too much deathstick." I walked back to the shop. Wahn caught me sneaking back in. She drew breath to shout at me, but stopped when she saw my face. "Go to bed, Jay. I'll make you noodles tomorrow."

I was so shocked, the most I could say was, "Thanks, Wahn." I went to my little room at the other side of the repair bay, the former storage room that was still mostly a storage room. I took off my flightsuit and put on the robe Wahn had made for me, back when she still liked me. I was asleep just a moment after I laid down on my mat.

The big bright room with all the fountains was quiet. I sat next to my favorite fountain. The dance of ripples caught at my eyes. I tried to trace all the connections they marked in the water. The tall man with the very long hair sat down next to me.

— ◇ —

"Each drop sends out ripples," he said to me. "Each ripple interacts with the ripples of other drops until they are all tied together."

This was a dream, so it did not surprise me that he had the same voice as the hidden one who had interrupted Luuma and me. "What have you got against Luuma?"

He smiled. "Nothing, Jaden. There are great challenges waiting for you, greater than getting drunk with boys, greater things than running wild in the streets."

"Like what?"

He gestured at the ripples in the fountain's shallow pool. "Imagine if those drops of water were living things, and the ripples between them were their connections to each other. All life is connected then, isn't it?"

"Yes?"

"Imagine beings able to control those ripples, to aid life in its diversity, to nourish it, to protect the life of the universe. Wouldn't that be a good thing? Wouldn't that be a worthwhile thing to do?"

I stirred the water with my hand. "How could that be done? To make things better for people?" I looked up at him, straight into his eyes. "Do you know?"

"Yes, I know."

"What are you?"

"You have called to me, and I have come to you, to help you."

I turned my eyes back to the ripples in the water.

He continued to speak. "Those ripples between living things? That is the Force. The ripples you sent out, I saw them, they drew me to you."

"What do I need to do?"

"Open your mind and listen."

The sounds of life slowly overtook me. I could hear the anger, the fear, the joy, the sadness, the love, everything, every mind telling me its desires, its worries. Even the primal thoughts of animals and tiny plants in the seas of Coruscant spoke to me of their needs. The life of the planet poured down into me. I lost myself in its majesty. One song seemed clearer than the others. It was high above me, and its voice was sweet. It resonated, as if it felt my presence. All of it resonated, its noise trickling through me - and I heard myself in the giant sound that was the world.

"This is the Force, Jaden. This is your ally, your friend, your hope. Listen to it. You are part of that sound. You belong to it, too. As we are apart, so we are also together, one in the Force. Listen to it. Life creates it, makes it grow. It surrounds us, penetrates us. It binds us one to another."

The sound filled me, it echoed into every cell of my body with its loving song. It claimed me as its own.

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The Lady of Light stirred in her sleep at the touch of my mind. She awoke and smiled. She reached out to her husband sleeping beside her. He awoke as she wrapped her arms around him. He rolled over to look at her. Her eyes glistened with moisture. His hand touched her cheek.

"Bad dream?" he asked his wife.

"Someone - " She closed her eyes for a moment in an effort to regain her composure. "Han, it's beautiful." She hugged him. "I felt it just now, someone has awakened to the Force. I felt her mind touch mine."

He put his arms around her. They held each other.

"It was like my awakening, when my brother took me to Yoda's cottage on Degobah. We sat in that tiny place, next to the cold hearth, the rain pouring down outside, and the life of the universe poured into me. We have to find her."

He was used to talk like this from both his wife and her brother. "Where do we start?"

"Hard to see. Down below us somewhere."

"That's a lot people down there."

"There will be trouble, lots of trouble over her. She is so sad!" She stroked Han's graying hair. "You will play a central role, you must stay ready for even the smallest sign. Han, my love, she teeters on the edge. One false step on her part, and she'll plunge into the dark side." Force Prophecy came on her then. She held her husband tightly. "There are two paths for this one, she's just a girl. So young to face such challenges! One leads her to us, to the Light. The other leads to darkness and shadow. I do not want to kill this one. Right now she's just a match lit in a cave. Soon she'll be a bonfire. So hard to see, so many minds, so much desire, so much life here."

"What can you see of her?"

"She is young, a teenager. She is poor. She is a human. She is sad. Danger will surround her soon. She is definitely below us, physically beneath us, here on Coruscant."

Han looked in her eyes as he stroked her cheek with his fingers. "No problem, sweets. Find one person on a planet of 50 billion people? Just a snap, that's what it is."

She laughed. "The children are coming," she whispered to him. They sat up.

The door to their room cracked open and their five-year-old son entered.

"Momma, did you feel her?"

"Yes, Jacen."

"She'll need your help, Momma. You, too Dad. She'll need Daddy's help a lot. She's wild, but she'll get better." He ran over to the bed and hopped up on it. His father wrapped him up in his arms. "You'll help her, won't you Daddy? Won't you Mommy?"

"Saving people is my specialty," Han Solo told his young son.

"Here comes Jaina," little Jacen announced. "She's helping Anakin." Two other small children came into the bedroom. They sought out their mother's arms.

Someone knocked on the door.

"It's Aelesa," Leia said. "Come in Apprentice."

"Master Leia?" the young woman said. She had wrapped herself in a long robe. Sleep was still in her voice. "Did you hear her, Master?"

"She's sad," Jacen said. "Will you make her happy, Daddy?"

"Don't worry, Jacen," Lady Leia Organa Solo answered for her husband. "We'll do our best."