

Star Wars

Day of the Jedi

The Jaden Korr Chronicles

Knight

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

Star Wars

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....

Gun Jedi

Chapter 6 of *Day of the Jedi: Knight*

by

R. P. Bird

www.rpbird.com

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 has been 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 Jedi Knight, along with her friend, the blue Twi'lek girl Rotherron. Jaden and Rotherron are chasing slavers across the Outer Rim. They think there is a connection between the slavers and the Ragnos cult. This adventure occurs after Jaden's meeting with Boba Fett and the battle with slavers on Fleghel. This is chapter 6 from *Volume IV: Knight*.

Knight, Chapter 6: Gun Jedi

1. Beginnings are Fragile Things

It began years before, on two planets far apart and greatly different, one from the other.

The first planet was Kashyyyk, Chewie's homeworld, the land of the wookiees. Fools who thought they could take from the sacred forests of that planet discovered their error when they met the ryyk blades of the wookiee militia. The wookiees cleansed the ship of almost all life. They found a young human child in a cage. One of them checked her with his EM detector and found the signal of a slave implant already in her. They used a focused EM pulse to fry the implant and took her as their own. Ten years among them and she was a wild young hunter, a human with the soul of Kashyyyk in her.

The second planet was Brommer. It was an ancient, peaceful agricultural planet, a complete backwater. The great wars of the age had passed it by. A teenage human boy named Pir Tranc lived there. Pir had a nice childhood with loving parents in a good sound house. Their streets were free of crime. No one ever went hungry. But the

planet was poor, it was an ancient agricultural colony with no orbital defenses or even a militia. One day the pirates came. Pir was sixteen when the New Republic strike team landed nearby. He led them through the forests and canyons above the farm country to the pirate landing site. The pirates had no comsat network to tap into, they had no idea the NR guys were there for them. Pir killed his first sentient during that fight. They adopted him after that. NR units were permitted to do their own recruiting up until just a year or two ago, it was a holdover from the Rebellion. They saw a boy with no home, no family, no town. The slavers had destroyed it all. So the soldiers gave him a new home with them.

Soldiers and wookiees, if they are the right ones, they travel in the Light. The rage that burned in two strong young hearts slowly went out under sound guidance. The Woryyshr Clan adopted the young girl. For weeks after they found her, the small human clung to the fur of her adoptive mother and cried. Wookiees may be fierce and deadly, but the Light is strong in them. They brought her back from her grief and gave her a wookiee heart full of righteous anger. They taught her to use technology, not to be used by it. They taught her to hunt. They taught her the mental toughness of the wookiees. They taught her duty and service and sacrifice in the best way possible, by example.

The boy rose to manhood in the company of soldiers. These were the hard core that had lasted through the long difficult years of the Rebellion. They trained him, taught him to calm himself on the battlefield, to fight without taint or hate. He learned the most important lesson a soldier can learn, to oppose an enemy without becoming the enemy.

They met on Polis Massa, the central station of the asteroid mining colony.

The CO glared at his company through the faceplate of his armored spacesuit. He clicked the comm. "There has been no comm traffic from Polis Massa for three days, ever since the Remmies took the place. Our job's to take it back. A wookiee assault ship is vectoring in as I speak. They'll join the fight from the docks on the other side. So if you see anything really large and really hairy strangling an Imp, don't shoot it, it's a friend."

Laughter came back him through the comm channel. "You know what it's about. We've done this before." He named the human and nonhuman members of his unit: "Abu, Des, Veleprun, you split from first platoon and take your units down the side corridors. After we get into the pressurized areas, shed your suits. This is a hunter/killer op. They don't know we're coming. We'll hit the docks where they're loading, then sweep in. Watch for hostages or captives. Pir, no heroics this time. I'm tired of explaining your constant presence in the bacta tanks to the colonel."

More laughter.

"You take the long corridors with that nasty long gun of yours."

"Yes, sir," Pir replied.

"OK? Everyone sealed? Lock and load!"

"Locked!"

"Loaded!"

The CO switched comm channels. "Bridge? We are green light here."

Five minutes later, the red light at the front of the assault port came on. After that, it was business.

— ◇ —

Pir dropped seven Imps from the other end of the corridor. It was a glistening white corridor. Their black uniforms stood out like targets at the range. He sent bright blue accurized plasma bolts

down the long corridor in three-round groups. Each Imp dropped with three holes in his head. His gun had started out its life as a BlasTech E-7 sniper rifle. Pir had been drawn to it from the first time he saw one. It had those attractive vent holes along the sides of the barrel assembly. But he felt it needed improving. So he tinkered with his. He built his own custom gas magazines, cuz five rounds just wasn't enough for the kind of shooting he did, especially since he had modded the rifle to burst fire. He ramped up the barrel's constrictor field to get tighter plasma bolts. More compacted bolts didn't dissipate as quickly in atmospheric use. He had changed the weapon around so much, it was doubtful anyone else could even use it. The next Imp out the door at the other end saw what happened, but insisted on charging into the corridor. They were more afraid of what was behind them than of the clean quick death at Pir's trigger pull. He heard the distant sound of beasts and the screams of men. It was the sound of wookiees at work. Pir should have stayed in his nice, safe little sniper station behind a bunch of crates and white plastoid storage cylinders. His curiosity got the better of him. He had never seen a Wookiee anywhere other than on the holo. He had certainly never seen one in action, up close and real-like. So he slithered his body and his immensely long rifle out and ran down the corridor. He picked his way through the bodies. He hesitated for a moment before taking a quick peek around the corner. Nothing. A smaller white corridor led to a lounge. Across from the lounge was a bar. Where were the wookiees? Their bellows were distant, they weren't anywhere around here. But someone was in the bar. Pir slid along the wall until he came to the entrance. He knelt and did another quick peek-around. Nothing but more dead Imperials and a few dead stormtroopers. Then he knew, just like that. He stood up and stuck his long gun in the crook of his arm. He swaggered into the bar.

"I know you're there."

He heard a giggle from behind the circular counter. A young woman's head peeked up at him. "I knew you were out there. I'm the one who chased them into your sights. Did you get 'em all?" Her accent was strange, as if she weren't used to speaking Basic to another human.

"What do you think?"

She stood up. One large blaster pistol was in each hand. "Oh, you got 'em." She smiled. "Are all boys as cute as you?"

Pir reached up to touch the scar on the side of his face. "No, most are cuter."

"You look all right to me."

"Just who are you?"

"I am Benezet of the Woryyshr Clan. We came in through the spinward docks."

"With the wookiees? I didn't know there were NR units with the wookiees."

"There aren't. I'm a wookiee."

Pir laughed.

The girl frowned. She was wearing an older assault helmet, one from the Rebellion era, the fabric and metal band type. Pir was wearing his lucky barracks cap. He'd probably get into trouble for leaving his helmet back with his pressure suit. The helmet got in the way of his sneakiness.

"I'm technically human, but I was adopted by wookiees when I was small." She smacked the counter with butt of one of her pistols. "Go ahead, schutta, make fun of me again."

Pir gestured at the bodies. "Who killed them?"

She was still a little mad. "Who do you think? I did!"

"Tell me another one."

She was really angry now. "Don't believe me? I'll tell you how. My father and my cousin taught me to hunt. They were clustered by the far doorway, waiting for my friends. I killed the two by this door

and got behind the counter. They couldn't see me. I'd stand up, shoot a couple, then duck down. I just kept doing it until they ran out. What is that?"

Pir had stepped up to the counter. He had gently laid his long gun on the top of the counter. She was speaking of his long gun.

"It's a sniper rifle. I built it."

"It's so fekking long. You don't have to shoot them, you can reach out and club them with the barrel."

"Ha, ha, ha. You should talk with those ancient pistols of yours, all cobbled together from junk."

"Are you trying to pick a fight? Is that your problem?"

Pir ignored her anger. He peeked behind the counter. "Is there anything left to drink? Or did the Imps take it all?"

She paused, then bent to look. Her voice came up from under the counter. "Buncha flasks of Corellian ale." She brought up a couple and cracked the seals. She handed one to Pir. They drank. "It's weak compared to the blood beer I've had in the clan hall, but not bad. Killing's thirsty work. You do much of it?"

"A little."

"More than a little if you can kill seven Imps one-two-three with that sissy long gun of yours."

"Keep it up. Maybe I'll get to like that foul mouth of yours."

"What mods did you make to that thing?" She gestured at his rifle.

"I machined a longer barrel, for one. The magnetic constrictors in the barrel make for more accuracy. I tinkered with the tibanna gas injectors to make for burst fire. And I made some custom mags that hold thirty gas cartridges. How about those clunky things? They look like you combined half-a-dozen different pistols to make two that don't work."

"They work fine! My clan's deep in the forest on the central continent. We have lots of unwelcome visitors. I built them up from stuff my family captured."

"Who'd be foolish enough to visit Kashyyyk without a friendly invite?" Pir was genuinely curious. They must have been brave to do so, whoever they were. There was another possibility. They might have been really stupid.

She laughed. "You'd be surprised at what lengths greed will drive sentients." She smiled at him. "My cousin will like you." She finished her flask of ale. "Let's go find him." She picked up her pistols. "I'll let you kill a couple."

— ◇ —

They worked their way forward, toward the sound of wookiee battle roars. The girl startled Pir by making a growling noise in her throat. His keen eyes picked out a black-clad Imp down at the far end of the corridor. He raised his long gun and fired.

"That was my kill," the girl complained. "Nice shot, though."

"Thanks."

An Imp trooper stepped out of a distant side door with a heavy repeater. Pir dropped him with a head shot.

"Stop that!" she told him.

"He would have killed us with that heavy repeater."

They slowly worked their way down the corridor.

"No, he wouldn't. I had him."

She ducked into an open doorway. No one was in the office.

Pir kept his eyes on the corridor. "With those pistols? I think not."

"Lot you know." She ducked into another room on the other side of the corridor. No one was there but a corpse. "I've made harder shots than that with my pistols," she said as she came out.

Pir didn't hear. He turned his head and fired as a large squad of Imps came into the far end of the corridor. Benezet crouched in front of him and opened up with her pistols. Red bolts from the Imp's return fire buzzed around them.

All seven were dead before they could fire again.

It was all business for Pir and Benezet as they cleared the rest of the rooms along the corridor. They worked their way up to the bodies. The cross-corridor they had come from led to the processing bays of the facility. Echoes of blaster fire roamed up the corridor to their ears.

"Let's go!" she said, and ran off in the direction of the noise.

"Wait, let's do - ah fek." Pir had no choice but to run after her.

Their feet hammered on the deck plating as they ran. She waited for him at the access door. When he got to her, she hit the cycle button. The door folded open to hideous noise and blaster fire.

They were on a catwalk high up along the back wall of an ore processing bay. Giant machines banged away at rocks, while Imps, NR, and wookiees shot it out around the moving parts.

Benezet began blazing away with her pistols. Pir ran down the catwalk for a better position, then opened up with his wicked rifle. Every three-round clutch of blue accuracy bolts knocked down an Imp or a stormtrooper. Tak-tak-tak it went, and an Imp officer in a brown uniform tumbled back into the giant hammers of an ore crusher. Tak-tak-tak, and a stormtrooper lost his head. Tak-tak-tak, and an Imp trooper fell forward, his body lying at the foot of a machine's control cluster.

More than one wookiee glanced up at him. Benezet stopped her firing and watched in wonder. Shouts from the men and women in his unit echoed up from the floor. "Kill 'em all, Pir. Gun 'em, gun 'em man!"

The wookiees roared and charged.

The Imps noticed Pir up there, and opened up on him. He jumped back to the wall as a stream of red bolts hit the edge of the catwalk.

Benezet went to work, hosing down the cluster of stormtroopers firing at her new friend. The wookiees got to them.

Pir had never seen the work wookiees did with their ryyk blades. He stared in horror as they dismembered the last of the stormtroopers.

Several giant wookiees clamored up the metal stairs at the back of the bay. They clustered around Benezet and howled. Benezet howled back at them. They ran by Pir, the catwalk shaking at their passage.

"Come on!" she said, grabbing up his sleeve. "They've barricaded the door to the shipping bay." They ran.

He followed the girl and her giant hairy wookiee friends. He heard stomping behind him. Other wookiees were following him, howling at him.

"You're not running fast enough!" Benezet shouted back at him.

The catwalk took a sharp left turn through the top of another processing bay. It went right, then it took an angle across another bay full of machines. He saw a senior Imp officer in black surrounded by Imp Regulars in dark gray. He paused for just a second and snapped off a shot. The officer fell. The wookiees behind him lobbed thermal dets down on the Regs. Pir wasn't moving fast enough for them, so the one right behind him snatched up Pir and carried him forward.

They stopped at another access door. The wookiee put him down and patted him on the head. The big creature growled at him.

"You're a great shot, but you don't run fast enough," Benezet translated.

"Thanks, I guess. What's the plan?"

Benezet translated for the wookiee by the door. More machinery clanked away far below them. "My cousin says that you're to drop all the officers as fast as you can. The wooks with the bowcasters will stand by your side and provide cover while we close with the last of them."

"I'd rather you stayed with me," Pir said impulsively.

She smiled. "That's sweet." Then she growled something at her wookiee cousin, who howled and punched Pir in the shoulder. The blow almost knocked him down.

"No time for romance now," Benezet said, smiling.

"What's your cousin's name?"

"He's Lemnacka."

The wookiee opened the door and they rushed through. The plastoid crates and metal bins and shipping containers were stacked up almost to the catwalks. Lemnacka and his human cousin jumped over the railing and hopped from box to box down toward the Remnant soldiers below them. Pir stopped just inside the door and fired.

A Rennie commander fell.

He moved down the catwalk and shot again. This time his shots were bracketed by the green metallic bolts from wookiee bowcasters. Red blaster bolts sailed back up at them. Pir's eyes flickered from one target to the next, his mind totally on the task at hand, ignoring the danger buzzing around him. A line of wookiees now surrounded him, pouring bowcaster fire down into the jumble of boxes below them. The green bolts ricocheted around the enclosed place. A wookiee by his side fell to the blaster fire. Another stepped up and began to fire.

The counter fire from below let up. He allowed his eyes to roam. Howls and shouts echoed up from the boxes. He caught a glimpse of the girl as she jumped and sprinted among the Remies, her pistols firing pointblank into a stormtrooper's chest as she spun

about to fire at the head of another one. The wookiees at her side swung those wicked blades in a fury of blood and screams. She ducked under the aim of an Imp Reg with a blaster carbine to shoot up at his head. Pir aimed and fired at another Reg aiming at the back of her head. He ran forward on the catwalk, around wookiees firing their bowcasters or helping the wounded, following her path through the piles of boxes and crates, her guardian angel, killing anyone who threatened her from the back or sides.

The Remmies broke and ran for the far cargo doors. They managed to seal it just as the wookiees reached it. Lemnacka gestured to a wookiee demo squad. They ran to the door and latched a breech charge against it. The wookiees and his girl crouched on either side of the big door.

Pir reached the next access door, followed closely by a crowd of howling wookiees. They opened it and rushed through just as the breech charge went off.

Boom!

It was a loading bay on the other side. Several Rimmie dropships were at the far end, near the shield barrier. Vacuum and the blackness of the asteroid's surface were on the other side. Pir and the wookiees began to pump fire down at the Rimmies crowded into the bay. Pir's NR unit were coming through the far cargo door. The wookiees poured into the bay from their end. The Rimmies began to fall like wheat to the harvester. An image from Pir's lost past came back to him as he fired, of the harvesters on his home world roaming over vast fields of wheat and white grain, trimming down the ripe strands.

Then suddenly, it was done. One of the Rimmie dropships tried to escape. It pulled up and away, sliding through the shield wall into vacuum, only to be holed by the turbolasers of an NR frigate waiting outside. It began to drift out into the asteroid field, dead men at the controls. The frigate took it in tow with a tractor beam.

Pir shoved his way through giant wookiee bodies to the metal stairs and ran down to the bay. He looked around. He was surrounded by blood and bodies. The howls and screams of the wounded filled his ears. But his eyes sought out only one thing, and he saw her across the bay. She began to walk toward him.

The wounded were cared-for. Pir had only associated the wookiees with ferocity. He was surprised at the gentleness with which they cared for the wounded, all the wounded, even the Remmies. As often as not, he found Benezet by his side. The prisoners were released from the station's cargo holds. Then it was time to go. He was prepared to say goodbye to this wonderful young woman he had just met. The wookiees had other ideas. Some of them had been around humans, and they saw how Pir and Benezet looked at each other. They told Bene's wookiee cousin. She went with the rest of the wookiees to the airlock to their ship. Pir walked along with her. She found her duffle bag next to the airlock door. Lemnacka stood next to it.

<<Benezet, it has been decided. You will hunt with your own from now on. I will still be your cousin, your wookiee parents will still be your parents. You will visit us in years to come and tell us of your exploits. But you need to be with your own for a time, to find a mate, to discover what it means to be a human with a wookiee heart.>>

<<No one asked me what I wanted to do.>>

<<You are still young, some decisions are out of your hands. It is the way of our clan, as you well know. You are of age to find a mate. Find one whose heart burns like yours does. Perhaps this young human with the long gun, perhaps him, I think. When your children come, you will bring them to our village, raise them in the ways of our clan, your mate by your side in the hunt. Choose well who you would stand beside, both in your mate and in your friends. Your Aunt Fendreacca is busy with the wounded, but she told me to

tell you that she looks forward to feats of prowess you will send to her. You have our images in your datapad. We have a comnet connection in our village. Tell us of your travels.>>

<<I will go, but only if you tell me I must.>> Benezet's voice began to crack as she spoke in shyriiwook. Tears began to course down her cheeks.

<<Your parents left it to me as to where and with whom. These soldiers are brave, you will achieve renown among them. We packed your things for you. Come back to us one day with many stories.>>

<<I will.>> Benezet said through the tears. Lemnacka reached down and hugged her until her ribs creaked. She pulled at his fur.

<<Goodbye, Benezet.>> Lemnacka was out the airlock door. The wookiee assault ship detached. She was alone with her new human friends.

Pir stepped up next to her. "What did he say?"

She looked up at him. "He said 'goodbye.'"

2. Recruitment Drive

A year after that, Luke Skywalker received a text message from the CO of their unit. It took a couple days after that to establish a hyperspace communications link with their assault ship, but eventually the network worked out the nodes and a small flickering holoimage of the CO stood on Luke's desk.

"Hello, Commander. I read your message with interest. You have two soldiers you wish to have tested for Force-sensitivity?"

"That isn't what I wrote, Master Skywalker. I know the Force is in them, I knew since I saw the old vid of your assault on the Dominator. My new LT had a copy on a datasliver. He showed it to me after our last operation. That's how we know. Pir and Benezet are . . . of you. The Force, it makes us tremble when we're around them."

"Are you afraid of them?"

"Tremble as in shake, like a tiny earthquake follows them around."

"This is called Force Presence, it sometimes manifests itself in the untrained. What relation is there between my old exploits and these two?"

"It actually started from the moment they met, a year ago. Looking back on it, the Force in each of them called to each other. They were thick as thieves after that. I figured it was another soldier romance. We have several married couples on the ship. It's a nuisance, since married couples aren't supposed to go on missions together. But every time I confronted Pir and Bene, they blushed

and denied it. They were good together in combat. Together, they built a sniper rifle for her and a couple modded blasters for him."

"They taught each other what they had learned."

"Yes, is that important?"

"It is a Jedi trait."

"Well, um, okay then. They became our lead snipers. They could make shots no one else could, stuff that our formally trained snipers swore were impossible." He smiled to himself. "About six months ago, I was up on a ridge with them on Peltes, small unit action, we were chasing a group of stormtroopers, trying to catch them before they got to their dropship. Down below us was a thick jumble of asek trees. Stormtroopers are hard opponents, always full of tricks, they are."

Luke smiled at the bent sentence. Its structure reminded him of the way an old friend spoke.

"They had turned and ambushed our platoon chasing them. It was a bad firefight down there. I was next to a tall thin old asek tree, trying to organize a withdrawal to the ridge. Pir and Bene were beside me, bitching about not being able to get a shot. I wasn't paying attention, my mind was on the action below us. I was peering down at the forest with my electrobinocs, trying to see my people, trying to get them back to me. Blaster fire started up nearby, above me. I recognized the burst sound of Pir and Bene's rifles. Their fire drove the stormtroopers to cover and our guys withdrew. We found the bodies later, and every helmet had three holes. Anyway," the CO started to chuckle. "After our guys pulled back from the ambush, I hear Benezet's voice from high above me. "'Boss, um, we can't get down.'" I look up and these two are in the top of the tree, I mean way up there, like 12, 14 meters straight up. "'Come down the way you got up,'" I shouted back. "'We would,' Pir shouted back, 'but we can't remember how we got up here in the first place.'" The CO laughed out loud.

Luke chuckled. "Something like that happened to one of my knights when she was young. It scared her half to death."

"We fired a grapple line up to them and they slid down." The humor went out of his voice. "But that was only a bit of peculiar fun. The next time something happened, my new LT saw it, and there wasn't a humor in it. We had been following a Remie faction around, catching parts of them as they stopped to raid planets along the way. Remie factions with no planetary base of operations are the worst, little more than bandits. This time we had found their dropship in a nest of dry gulches on Yyyrein while they were off raiding a local city. So it was our turn to ambush them. But they broke part of our line, got up on the high edges of the gulch, and began to shoot up one of our squads. They were cooked, there was no way we could get to them, the blaster fire had cut them off. I was elsewhere or I would have stopped Bene and Pir from trying, but my green LT was at a loss how to extract them."

"How would you have done it?" Luke asked, genuinely curious. Luke had been a rebel soldier and pilot before he was a Jedi, and an old soldier's need to know made him ask.

"Oh, you know. Pop smoke, use nades and dets, launch a few rounds from pack mortars or use seeker missiles to push them back, rush in, grab 'em up, rush back before they can recover. But my LT is from our new military academy. Some things you only pick up from experience. He was frozen into indecision. I had put Benezet and Pir with him for the day as a confidence builder."

Luke shifted in his chair. He could guess what happened next. The Light makes those who follow it reckless of their own lives.

"Pir turned to him. 'We won't let them die, sir,' he said. He and Bene handed their rifles to others and said, 'Give these to worthy shooters if we don't come back.' They drew those wicked mod blasters and charged up the maze of gulches toward our people. The stormtroopers we captured later watched them come. They moved

faster than humans had a right to move. Pir made an immense leap up to the top edge of the gulch and ran along it, firing at anyone in his path. Benezet kept up with him, picking off any Imp head that stuck up to shoot at her. Fragmentation grenades rained down on them. They jumped and dodged among the explosions. Red bolts crisscrossed their path. They were in among the Imps and the supporting stormtroopers. Then they did what one of the captured Imps called 'a dance of death,' spiraling and twisting among them as they fired point-blank into black uniforms and white armor. Not all the Imp fire missed. Blaster bolts cut through their bodies, hot metal from repeaters ripped into them. They kept going. The LT and his men felt it then, something was happening, I mean in the minds of my men. Their fear and doubt went away. A power rose up in them. They charged. The Imp line crumbled. We got our people back. Pir and Benezet were lying in a pile of Imp bodies." The memory was harsh. The CO drew in a ragged breath. "They were so full of holes, the medics were amazed they were still alive. They should have bled to death. We evacuated them back to our ship. The bacta tanks kept them alive. It took them a month to heal." The CO took a deep breath. "I interviewed the captured stormtroopers before we sent them via a prison transport to Secundus Vaccans. One was a trooper master sergeant. 'We would have beaten you if not for the Jedi. I've fought them before. We didn't know you had a pair of them. The others I faced, a couple of female Jedi, they favored those horrid light blades. They cut my men down like ripe grain at harvest. I thought all Jedi favored those blades, but I guess not. I didn't know there were Gun Jedi as well.' I was taken back by his comments, so all I said was, 'Now you know.' During a drunken pillage while on leave last week, I told the story to my new LT. He showed me . . . they fell before you just like the sergeant said, like ripe grain at harvest." He paused for a second. "They will throw

their lives away one day soon if they stay with us. They need to be among their own kind, they . . ."

"They are Jedi, though they don't know it. There are those among us who will train them to realize who they are. We will welcome them. Do they wish to come to us, or do I need to convince them?"

"They are good soldiers, a little wild, but obedient and loyal. I am their commander. If I tell them to go to a place, they will go there. I am officially placing them on detached duty with the Jedi. Tell me where they should go, and they will be there. They are faithful to their duties."

Luke used his desk to call up a holoimage of that sector of the galaxy. "I have several knights trying to track slavers near you. Two are due on Weshlan in a few days. Several more Jedi are going to arrive there in the next week. That will be our base of operations. Send them to meet our people there." Luke hesitated. A door to the future opened up in his mind. "Are these two fit? Are they ready for action?"

"Yes, sir! They were released for duty two weeks ago. They've spent the entire time since in sims and at the weapons range. Benezet and Pir are ready and able, sir."

"Good. Warn them to expect combat. A Jedi's life is never dull. They'll find that out sooner than other new students have. Tell them to look for a tall twi'lek woman and her female human comrade. The twi'lek is called Rotherron. The human is Jaden Korr. They are very capable Jedi Knights. They will be the first of many Jedi to train Pir and Benezet. Warn them to keep their minds open . . ." Luke hesitated a little, the future intruding into his present. ". . . and their spare ammo packs close at hand."

"Yes, sir. It's been a pleasure, sir."

Only Luke's message to us about these two new recruits didn't get to us until we landed and our comm system interlinked with the little spaceport's hyperlink. The hyperlink interpreter on our ship was broken and no one, and I mean NO ONE had a replacement. The courier ship was just that old. But hey, it was free, so I shouldn't complain. Even then, I didn't read the message, because these two were standing outside the ancient courier ship, staring up into the cockpit windows.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Can you feel them?"

"Yes. NR soldiers, but strong in the Force. They must have sensed us. Let's go say hi, maybe we can convince them to at least visit Yavin 4."

Rothers glanced at the comm display. "We have messages. I need to check them. You go out and say hi."

I did just that. I dropped the boarding ramp and went over to them. "Hello . . ."

"We've been expecting you, madam Jedi."

"I wasn't expecting you."

The tall boy frowned. The girl grasped his jacket sleeve. They were untrained, their minds were as clear as glass to me. They were lovers, bound by affection and an affinity for the Force. It made me miss Derrn, seeing them together. But he would be here in a week. Master Kyle was due tomorrow. I'd ask him for permission to marry Derrn. It was time he and I were married. The New Jedi Order did not follow the ways of the Old Order, we followed a more ancient tradition that allowed for personal relationships, that permitted Jedi to retain their family connections. If Luke's grandmother had followed his father to Coruscant, would Darth Vader have arisen? Fears that were born in the Sith Wars drove the Old Order. We had

no such fear. We followed the more ancient teachings. I had the feeling, just the feeling, that something else would change in the future. Maybe we were going to emulate even more of the most ancient Jedi. It was just a hunch. Kyle felt it, too, a tremor in the living Force around us. Something it wanted, an inarticulate desire was echoing through the Force. Something beyond the plots of these cultists who plagued us. Something . . . standing in front of these two newest Jedi, it almost came to me. The echo continued, but its meaning slipped away from me. I would have to speak to Kyle about this. I had already asked Rothers, but she was Future Path, she did not feel it, and she only saw distant conflicting shadows when she looked into the future.

My shadow master appeared by my side.

"Can they see you?" I asked with my mind.

"No. They are powerful, but untrained. They sense something, but they do not know what it is."

"What does the Force want of us?" I asked him.

Qui-Gon shook his head. "I do not know. The Living Force hides its meaning from me as well. You, Kyle, and Jan are the only three trained Living Force Adepts in the galaxy right now, Jaden. Only a Living Force Adept can solve this puzzle. If you can solve the riddle of this echo, the rest of the Jedi Order will listen. The Master of Masters will only see once it has been revealed. It cannot be pried out of the Living Force. It will reveal itself in the fullness of time."

"I wish you could speak to Lon or Hansho. They are growing in their abilities."

"They will learn to hear me in time. Not every Jedi can see those from the netherworld, or hear us. It is a special gift, what your master and you have been given."

"Luke and Leia's boy Jacen, too. There are a couple others. The Force manifests itself in such peculiar ways."

"Like it wants diversity even in its servants. It wants us to have a diverse set of skills, each of us unique."

"Was this a failing of the Old Order?"

"Perhaps. I rejected many of their teachings. You have read and seen in the Great Holocron how many disputes I had with the Council."

"They almost kicked you out of the Order. Two times it came to a vote. Yoda always stood by you."

He laughed, as if at a pleasant memory. "You have to go now." He vanished.

Rothers stepped down the courier's ramp. "Jay, this is Specialist Pir Tranc and Corporal Benezet of The Woryyshr Clan. We're supposed to meet them and begin their training."

I turned to Rotherron. "We're training NR soldiers now?"

Pir spoke up: "We are on detached duty with the Jedi. Our CO gave us the orders himself before we left on the freighter."

I smiled. A moment of clarity passed through me. "Welcome. You are Jedi now. We honor your presence." I pressed my palms together and bowed my head in greeting. Rothers stepped forward to shake their hands.

"Jay's never been big on shaking hands."

They shook Rothers's hand, then they saluted us.

"Don't do that," I told them. "We don't salute each other in the New Jedi Order."

We stood there, staring at each other.

"Now what?" Benezet asked.

"Hmmm." Good question. Rothers had business with the local government's leaders, to make arrangements for the rest of the Jedi strike team's arrival next week. The slavers had hit a nearby system, but there was no indication of where they'd hit next. Kyle was in the next star system over in this little cluster, talking to the survivors and the local officials. Then I noticed, that nearby hill wasn't a hill,

it was a pile of ancient spacecraft. It was junk, a mountain of junk. I began to make plans for a salvage sortie.

A shrunken old man, happy as a songbird, ran toward us. "I fell asleep!" his happy old voice said. "Two ships in one week! We haven't been this busy in years!"

I laughed. "Anyone own that vast pile of junk over there?" I pointed.

"Well . . . officially it's property of the Spaceport Authority. We've been looking for someone to haul it away for, well, since I was a kid." He laughed. "You think you can find anything useful in that big heap, you go right ahead. I'd consider it a favor if even one tiny fragment gets taken away."

"The Spaceport Authority won't mind?"

"Uh, they haven't met in years . . . so I guess I'm the Spaceport Authority. Not much to the job, I gotta tell ya, or they wouldn't leave it up to an old man. Most I do, I order fuel stores and a couple repair techs will come if I ask 'em nice. Oh, and I chase birds off the landing field during nesting season."

"Very challenging work," the female soldier replied with a straight face.

"I need a lift to the government building," Rothers asked. "Are there any taxi stands nearby?"

The old man broke out laughing again. "Not likely. When I was a kid, yeah. Not now." He waved a hand at the old curved terminal building behind us. Several of its windows had been broken out and sealed up with wooden pressboards. "A couple of the public terminals inside still work. You call Veskli, that old zab'll send a droid speeder for you. If they don't work, use the comlink in my office. Come on, I'll show you." He turned back to me before he walked away. "You have fun looking for parts in that mound, girl. Heh, your little courier ship's older than I am. And I'm old!" Rothers followed him.

I looked at the two soldiers. They looked at me. "Jedi have to fix things just like everyone else. I know they don't in the old romances, that's been pointed out to me several times. But that was then, this is now. You want to help me find some parts for that old thing?"

First one shrugged, then the other. "Sure," the male soldier said. "We've got our duffles stuffed in a couple lockers in the main building. They even have refreshers and a shower that works."

"Just how long have you been waiting here?"

"Only four days. There are bunks in the staff section of the terminal, though the mattresses are rotten. We took those off and slept on the frames. Not that bad. It has been kinda boring," the girl replied. "We explored the town. This is a backwater of a backwater. There are lots of little villages and farms and ranches in the hills and mountains. Not much of anything here in the city. I guess it used to be a mining colony in the old days."

We collectively looked around. The city was the only flat place anywhere around here. I remembered looking at the extensive mountain chains on the way in. The city was built on a broad plateau right smack in the middle of the mountains. It was beautiful. The higher mountains still had snow on them, and the distant tall pines marked it as a place visited by the primordial planetary engineers. Many planets in the galaxy seemed to share related ecosystems. The colors of life surrounded us. The green trees of the distant mountain-side forests, the blue of the sky, even the white of snow, they were all gloriously linked to life and the Force. I went away from myself for a moment. The Living Force pulled me into the web of animals and plants that created and maintained the atmosphere and empowered the water cycle which put the snow on the mountaintops. My mind drifted among a pack of wild kath hounds stalking a horned elk on the side of a mountain. I felt the happy fish in high mountain lakes. And the people, mostly

human, but more than a few twi'leks and zabraks, busy and mostly happy. They were well-fed. They worked hard. Winds blew through valleys full of grain fields, the high green stalks waving back and fore. It was still early spring. Life was greening up for the summer months. The Living Force knew no time but the present. I drifted in it, lost and happy. I blinked. "Sorry. Sleepy I guess."

"There are like just four good places to eat," the male soldier said.

"I'm sure we'll get to eat at all of them before we leave." I looked at the distant mass of the government building. It was an elegant curving shape towering over the rest of the place. The place was once rich. They built to last, way back when, a thousand years or so ago. The thing was made out of duracrete. Mining was the original source of the wealth. But that gave out, and so the few people who stayed moved out into the hills and took up farming and herding. The system was a little off of the major hyperspace lanes, so there was no trade. There were a couple decrepit asteroid mining colonies and a mostly abandoned orbital platform. A couple shuttles were parked over in an open hangar on the other side of the landing field, but they were only in-system vehicles. Our little courier was probably the only hyperdrive vehicle in the system at the moment. If it weren't for the slavers who had been raiding nearby systems, we wouldn't be here at all. I had a hunch that the only working hypercom hub on the planet was in the old terminal building.

"Shall we begin?" I asked.

— ◇ —

The two soldiers were up in the vast mound of broken stuff at the far west edge of the landing field, poking at things with sticks. They wouldn't put up their pistols. The repulsorlift coils were still functioning, sort of. I used them to wobble the little ship over to the

edge of the pile. Unless Master Kyle got my wish list message and brought a whole bunch of parts with him, I figured we'd be doing repairs for days. I looked up the side of the junk hill. It was a really immense and really old pile of junk, though probably only about a quarter the size of Trash Mountain back home.

"Find anything?" I shouted up at them.

"A few things," the girl shouted back. She pointed to a small pile of stuff near them. Her name was Benezet. She told me that was all she remembered of her life before the wookiees found her. The wooks even tore apart the poachers' ship and did a deep slice of the ship's computer system. They found nothing. So she became Benezet of the Woryyshr Clan. I got along fine with wookiees, so if she was even a little like them, I knew I'd get along with her, too. I started to climb up to them.

I knew. I could sense Rothers's sudden worry. My datapad vibrated.

"Get down here, now! Move it! Now!" I screamed at them.

The tone of my voice caught their attention. They began to run down toward me.

I answered my datapad. "Rothers, where's the trouble coming from?"

"From orbit," her voice told me. "The city's going to be attacked in a few moments. I'm trying to get the government building evacuated. Take shelter. They're going to hit the hypercom and the spaceport."

"We're taking cover." I felt them then. Malice. "They're here, now!" I waved my arms at the two soldiers. "No time! Drop!"

They were just up the slope from me. I remembered the old man. "Fek!" I *jumped*.

I heard them gasp. My leap took me past the courier ship. I landed at a full run. *Speed* came on me. I flashed toward the old spaceport building.

Pir turned to his girlfriend. "Did I just see that?"

Benezet didn't answer. She was staring at my sprint across the field.

The old man came hobbling out. He stared at me as I skidded to a stop in front of him. "I just got a call — "

They were close. I threw him over my shoulder and ran away from the building. Fek, he was a heavy old load. I summoned *speed* again.

Pir heard a sonic boom. "Here they come!" He and Benezet curled up on the side of the junk pile.

Wham. Proton torpedoes hit the top of the building. The first hit turned the hypercom dish on the roof into tiny little bits. The second one peeled back the roof. Then . . . nothing. We had tumbled down on the permacrete of the old landing field. I had wrapped my lanky body around the old man's head. I heard more distant explosions. We stood up.

The old man dusted himself off. "You're strong for a human girl."

"It's the Force." The old man and I stood there watching a distant ship bombard the city. Something was familiar about the ship, but the distance was too great to tell for sure. The emotions were the same as all slavers: malice and greed.

"That's the old militia base they'd blowing up. Nobody's ever there except once a month."

"Except the ability to protect the planet."

The old man nodded. "Yep, bunch of old Imp stuff there, some Z-95 Headhunters, troop transports, bunch of hovertanks, a few T-Wings and B-Wings."

I looked over at the hill of junk. The two soldiers were digging themselves out. Part of the hill had collapsed from the concussion from the explosions.

"Take you days to dig your ship out."

"Yes, it will." The landslide of old broken junk had buried our little ship. "On the good side, they didn't blow it up." I looked at the old man. "We'll need a ride out into the country. That ship doesn't have enough slavers on it to take even a city this small. They're just making sure no one can interfere with what they have planned."

Worry painted itself across his face. "They're really slavers?"

"Yes." I turned to watch the soldiers. They were digging and tossing old junk out of their way with great energy. The young man was Pir. The woman was Benezet. I needed to remember their names, just in case. But they weren't afraid. The emotion was weird off of them, not the anxiety I'd usually feel in such a situation. There had been a background of that in their minds before. Not now. A kind of relief flooded them, like I sometimes felt whenever I returned to Yavin 4. Conflict was now their natural element. I smiled. I wouldn't have to worry about them. There was something else on their minds as well. Their thoughts turned on special weapons in the terminal building, stashed in one of the old lockers. Rifles? They had made them. They had made their pistols, too. They thought on their rifles and the extra ammo packs in their duffles. Oh, yeah. These two would fit right in. "When you're off the pile, Get your guns. We're going to a fight!" I shouted at them.

"We know!" the girl shouted back.

"Going to war?" the old man asked.

"We are Jedi. There are only four of us, but we will do our best to stop the slavers. More Jedi are on the way." I looked up at the black smoke in the distance. "But we can't wait on them. We'll do what we can without them."

The malice and greed refocused itself. Smoke was rising from four different areas of the city. The elegant curves of the government building were still there, nothing short of a small

thermonuclear bomb could drop the duracrete structure, but its vast sparkling windows were all gone. Smoke poured from the interior.

I knew Rothers was still alive and very busy. "You know the people around here, old man. When my friends get down from the junk pile, they'll help get you into your office. If your terminal still works, start calling people. We'll need whatever militia can show up, lots of guns, and vehicles."

"I thought the Jedi were all gone."

"Not anymore. The Force has called us back. Tell your friends we are here. The slavers will strip every village of its children to feed the unending appetites of brothels, whorehouses, and the spice planets of the Hutts. We can stop them. We'll need help doing it. If landline communications are still up, get as many people as possible to warn the villages and towns in that direction." I gestured to the northwest. I took out my datapad. The local network was down. Some comlinks and datapads showed up on the little screen as point-to-point links. Rothers's device was on the list, but she was still busy with the wounded. My eyes went up to the mountains. "If they don't believe you, tell them how I just rescued you. Tell them about this."

My lightsaber sprang into my hand. Its long golden blade flamed into life. I spun around and *threw* it at a jagged steel beam sticking up from the wreckage. The blade sliced it in half and snapped back in my hand. The kick of its return rocked me back a little. I felt all their eyes on me. "The Jedi have returned. We will give our lives in this, if you will stand with us."

"We will, Madam Jedi." He ran off toward the smashed terminal building. A few moments later, the soldiers ran in after him.

— ◇ —

On little isolated worlds like this, they were used to doing things themselves. There were no cops to come when they called. And even if the worlds were part of the New Republic, the New Republic's military was a long, far way away. A huge crowd of grim-face men and women had formed up, though the zabraks in the crowd, being zabraks, were outwardly much more angry than the humans and the twi'leks. A small contingent of skrillings were in the middle of the bunch, armed like the rest. Their families must have been stranded here years ago when the mining operations closed. Skrillings had a tough, gray-green skin and large three-fingered hands, no hair, and a very non-human face. They were armed with slug-thrower rifles modified for their big hands. One of them had an immense ancient blaster rifle. The rest of the crowd was similarly armed. A few of them were clutching vibroblade daggers. Even the government showed up, what was left of it. The militia, what could be gathered, had pulled up in several old mining trucks. The chancellor of the planetary government was with them, an old blaster pistol strapped to his waist. They all formed a circle around us.

The old man had done well. It had taken only a little over three hours to form this first group. Jammers had started up in the hills to the northwest, but the old landlines still worked. Reports of battles and massacres were pouring in. Distant plumes of smoke rose from the hills. Just our luck, the slavers brought hovertanks to the party. Behind the crowd were parked a strange array of vehicles and beasts. Long-legged noggem deer waited patiently, saddles on their backs. There were landspeeders, old gravtrucks, and lots of wheeled vehicles.

"More Jedi are on the way," Rotherron told them. "Our first task is to protect the people. Reports indicate that this slaver captain is a cunning one. He's dropped his men off and lifted. His ship is hiding in somewhere in-system. He'll come back to pick them up when they've captured what they need." She looked at me.

"Jaden and I may be responsible for that. We captured several slaver ships recently."

"Just the two of you?" someone in the crowd asked.

I was in a grim mood, probably picked up from the crowd and the distant fear and horror echoing down from the hills. My lightsaber flew into my hand and ignited. Everyone stared at its long golden glowing blade. "Just the two of us," I replied. "The Force fights with us."

The little soldier girl was standing next to me. "Be brave! The Jedi stand with you. We were sent to aid the Jedi, you have us, too. We are NR Regular Army and we have seen combat many times. We are here to help you free the captives!"

Rothers spoke. "We know their ship landed in a place called Broad Meadows. The slaver column is proceeding northwest, from village to village, taking whoever they can catch. The more children they capture, the slower they move. We know about where they are. We have to catch them before their ship returns. That's our job. Your job is to restrict their movements."

"They'll have to come back to the Meadows, there's no place up there to land a big ship."

The old man was standing near us. "Ain't so. All of you have forgotten about the old Three Peaks mine. I remember it from the old days. They sheered off the top of a mountain and put a landing field up there. I haven't been up there in twenty years. Most likely it's still usable." He stood there and told us about the place. Many of the crowd were irritated at the rambling story, but the four of us paid special attention.

"We'll find some way of getting to that place first and block them," Rothers said. "By then, the rest of the Jedi will be here. You will close in from the rear. They should surrender. Their captain will not risk his ship. He won't land. That's fine, we're just after the children." She put her hand on the old man's shoulder. "He has

your assignments. The sooner we get going, the more people we can protect."

3. Mountain Road

We were right behind the landspeeder when it blew up. Rothers had waved her arms at them a moment before in an attempt to get them to slow down. A large jammer was nearby, our comlinks didn't work anymore. The afternoon sun was in front of us. The zabrak driver hit the thrusters, but the wreckage tumbled back and smashed into us. We slid out of control right into the path of the speeder behind us. It slammed into us. The two speeders slid off the path into the rocky side of the canyon. We ground to a halt in a vast cloud of dirt and dust.

"Mines," the soldier Pir said.

"Thanks for the bulletin, boyfriend," Benezet replied, somewhat cattily.

I put my hand on the zabrak's shoulder. "You all right?"

There was a cut on his forehead. "I'm fine. The speeder's toast."

We got out and began to pull the others from the wreckage. There were lots of broken bones. The others began helping them out of the second speeder. One who hadn't been hurt, a young human, walked up to me. I was staring up at the slope on the other side of the canyon.

"You OK?" he asked me.

I didn't take my eyes off the opposite slope. "I'm fine. Sorry we couldn't see the mines. Being simple electronic devices, we can't sense them too well."

He was puzzled by that. "Uh, shouldn't we check the guys in the first speeder?"

The remains of the one that hit the mine were smoldering a short distance from up. Several bodies were sprawled on the rocks. "No, I'm sorry, they're all dead."

"How do you know?"

"We Jedi are hardwired into the life of the universe by the Force. I felt them die. Slavers are up in the rocks on the other side. They're getting ready to shoot at me. Get back with the others and take cover."

His eyes got big. He ran back toward the others. I drew my lightsaber and ignited it in one smooth motion, my feet taking the first steps of Shien as several blue accuracy bolts came flying in.

"Tell her to take cover!" our zabrak driver said, rising.

Rotherron pulled him back behind the speeder. "She's doing what she needs to." Rothers looked at the girl soldier, Benezet. "You and your boyfriend always carry a few dets, don't you? Hand them over."

She did as Rothers asked. "They're up too high, you can't reach them with dets. We'll make a run over to the speeder and get our rifles."

Rothers just smiled from where she crouched behind the wrecked speeder. She clicked the det's slide. She tossed it in the air and punched out with her open right palm. A focused *push* slammed it up in a high ballistic arc toward the opposite slope. "Jedi artillery. Keep them coming." They tossed another into her hands. Her head-tails curled themselves into an imitation of a braid as she chucked one after another into the air and slammed them up with her mind. Her head-tails always curled up that way when she was having fun or showing off. "Get ready to dash for your rifles. There are a couple speederbikes off in the bend, near some boulders. Look

for the two pointy boulders. You'll only get one brief shot before they're around. The survivors will be running down in a moment."

They were so focused on me and my Shien dance, they didn't notice the thermal dets hurling down on them. It was as I wanted it to be. Mind Trick isn't always about fooling someone or redirecting their attention away, sometimes it can be used to focus attention on a person or object. I used it to focus their attention on me. It was also a sign of my confidence in Shien, which had been taught to me by two ghosts, a holocron, and three masters. Its steps and saber movements came naturally to me, without thought. My mind sought out the future moments and the minds of the shooters and moved my body in response. I was an emptiness into which Shien curved and danced.

My eyes noticed the streaks of incoming dets. The opposite slope up high began to explode. I rolled sideways, to the left.

Rothers nodded to the soldiers. "Go!"

They sprinted to the other wrecked speeder. I was directly in front of them. There were two more explosions on the mountain. Blue enemy accuracy bolts began to rain down on us. I danced for them, my golden blade sweeping up the deadly messengers.

The soldiers were right behind me, as if on the rifle range. They honored me by trusting my skills so much. I felt their minds at that moment, as they sent their thoughts out through the Force in search of their targets. They timed their shots to the steps of Shien. Whenever my golden blade dipped down to catch a low bolt. They fired five times. Each time was a kill. They *jumped* over the speeder and up the slope a little. They waited, their long guns raised. They fired. Two three-round bursts. They walked back. We looked at each other, a new knowledge of what we were in our eyes.

"I'm a lousy shot," I said. "I look forward to your training."

"That dance thing you do," the boy said, "that would come in handy. You'll teach it to us."

It wasn't a question. He knew. She knew.

Rothers walked up to us. "Welcome to our ranks, Gun Jedi."

They bowed their heads slightly in recognition of the fact.

Damn Rotherron and her smarty twi'lek brain of hers. I should have been the one to name them.

— ◇ —

We left the wounded in the care of the zabrak and the kid. The zabrak asked me for a date. "If you date zabs, I'd be honored to take you dinner. I'm a good cook."

I patted him on the shoulder. "I already have a boyfriend," I said. "But hey, if you're that good a cook, don't lose hope. I'm a sucker for a good meal."

One of the wounded laughed. "Shot you down."

"Did not," he said.

That was our goodbye. We ran for the two speederbikes. Rothers and I drove, Benezet behind me, Pir behind Rothers. We hammered the throttles forward. Time was slipping away on us.

— ◇ —

Lucky for us, the old man had remembered some of the old roads and trails to the Three Peaks mine. His dad worked there when he was a kid. His grasp on recent memory wasn't what it was supposed to be, but he remembered that mountain into the tiniest detail. The four of us knew what we would do from the moment we heard his story. His voice echoed in our minds still. "I used to skip out on my studies and run to the top of the crag across the deep valley from the mine. I'd watch dump trucks and droid mining rigs go up and down the road on the other side."

"That's our spot," Benezet whispered to me. Pir heard and nodded in assent.

"Then there was the back way, a small elk trail that splits off at the bottom from the main road. Why, I'd rush up that thing and head right to the machine shop where my dad worked."

Rothers and I exchanged a glance at that.

We pulled up the bikes way back from the rear of the slaver column. This would only work if we caught them by surprise. It wouldn't have been a problem if we had the other people with us, but most of them were cracked up from the crash. It was time to split up. At that moment Rotherron felt worry for these two new allies.

"There are many of the enemy," Rotherron told us. She looked at Pir and Benezet. "You aren't trained yet. I ask you to be especially careful. Help is on the way. Master Katarn will be here soon."

Benezet was unconcerned. "I was raised by Wookiees, head-tail woman. My body is human, but my heart is of Kashyyyk. It burns. I am not afraid of death in battle. My soul lusts after the hunt. Do not worry about us. We have seen many battles. We met in the middle of a battle."

"I'm with her," Pir said. "We always get the job done."

"My people were fodder for slavers once. I was a slave as a small child. I would live in shame if my clan found out I had ever hesitated in the face of slavers. Slavers are the natural prey of the hearts of Kashyyyk."

"You can rely on us," Pir said.

"Let's do this," I said. "My speed is a little better than Rothers's. I'll take the old man's trail to the top."

"You'll know where we'll be," Pir replied.

"I'll take the back of the column." Rotherron looked at me.

"How will we know when to start?" Benezet asked.

"Listen to that wookiee heart of yours. You are Jedi now. What is in us echoes in you," Rotherron told her.

"Yes, Boss."

"You are a good friend, Jay. See you after." It was the little thing Rothers and I said to each other, just in case.

"See you after. Give my love to Derrn."

We broke in three directions and ran. My feet sped over the crooked old path upwards. This country was rocky, the almost vertical side of the mountain was next to the path. The other side was a hard long drop. The path slanted upward sharply. Everywhere were small scratchy bushes and clumps of hardy grass. *Speed* came on me. I rushed forward, faster, faster, faster yet. I hopped over small rocks on the narrow path. Faster. My feet threaded their way through a jumble of boulders. Faster. I sucked air into my lungs. Faster. My lungs couldn't work as fast as my arms and legs were moving. Faster. I did not stumble. My mind knew where the rocks were before I reached them.

Pir and Benezet didn't have as far to go, but it was mostly up in a steep climb. Maybe because they had met us, the Force began to flow through them as well. They *jumped*, bouncing upwards through a field of boulders. They weren't trained yet, so they were a little clumsy. Pir rested for a moment half way up to the crest of the crag, which stuck out into the canyon like the prow of a ship frozen in stone. Bene plopped down by his side. They were cradling their long rifles like babies.

"This being a Jedi is turning out to be a lot of work," she huffed.

"A large proportion of their training must be pure cardio."

They stood and continued the climb.

The task before Rothers was harder. She had to get up close to the back of the slaver column while mostly in plain view of the slavers. This was the power of the Inner Art. She used the Force as a cloak, pulling it over the minds of the slavers at the back of the column. She leapt up into the rocks along the inner slope next to the road, only to leap down and sprint forward a little more. Her mind

could sense when a slaver's head turned toward her. She hid sometimes. Sometimes the Force hid her from the slaver's mind. Though I had originally learned it and taught her, she was the master of Teacher Yesh's Enfolding in the World. The closer she got to them, the less likely they were to see her.

A landslide had wiped out the trail ahead of me. My feet did not slow, I did not hesitate. I *jumped*. The Force infused my limbs with new power as it lifted me up into the air. I rolled when I landed on the far side. The roll took me back to my feet. On I ran up the mountainside.

The path led up to a rusting fence. I jumped over that and sped across an ancient landing field strewn with old junk and weeds. Past buildings with empty frames for windows. Past echoing hangars. I slowed to a walk as I came to the end of my journey. An old road came up to the top of the mesa just to my left. I walked to the right, until I was at the place. Qui-Gon waited for me there. He was only a ghost, but his Jedi robes appeared to flutter in the wind.

He smiled. "My treasure. You are where you need to be, when you are needed."

— ◇ —

I stood on the ridge above the road. Sweat poured off of me. I gasped for breath. I had made it. The front of the slaver column was below me. I walked to the edge and watched as the leading elements marched below me. Sweat covered my face. One of the hovertanks had a jammer, so we couldn't call for help even if help could come in time. It was up to us. I pushed a few stray hairs out of my face. A calm wind blew up from the canyon to cool my skin. I felt it then. The Force was . . . pleased with us. Something, something the Force greatly desired was about to take place. A hidden multitude stood by my side. "Fear nothing," Qui-Gon

whispered in my ear, "not death, not the threat of death. If you are struck down, you will become more powerful than they could ever imagine."

— ◇ —

My master felt us. Kyle looked back at Lon and Hansho, who were sitting in the rear seats of the Raven's Claw. They had just come out of hyperspace. He slammed the throttle all the way forward. "This will be a bumpy ride. Jay's going to have to start without us." He smiled his best reassuring smile. "We'll get there in time, don't worry."

Lon was worried for me, it showed on her face. "I'm so proud of her," she replied.

"So am I, kid," Kyle replied.

Young Hansho was more than a little scared.

Kyle shifted his gaze back to the controls. They were nearing the planet. "Don't worry, Hansho," he told the boy. "The best part of us stands by her side." He glanced back. "Recite it, please, Hansho."

Hansho closed his eyes. "There is no emotion; there is peace."

— ◇ —

Pir and Benezet sat huddled among the rocks at the top of the outcrop across the canyon from the road. I could feel them both, as they could feel me. He popped the magazine out of his rifle, checked it, then jacked it back in. He glanced at Benezet, who was impatiently fiddling with her long gun. "This is the tall one's party, let her start it."

— ◇ —

Hansho said the second line: "There is no ignorance; there is knowledge."

— ◇ —

Rothers crept along the rocky side of the mountain, just above the slavers at the end of the column. They had not seen, they would not see her unless she wanted them too. She drew her saberstaff from where it was clipped to the belt at her hip. My friend's confidence in us was a glowing fire in her heart.

— ◇ —

He said the third line: "There is no passion; there is serenity."

— ◇ —

If we failed, the 4000 boys and girls marching dejectedly below me would go into a living hell of brothels across the galaxy. Many we would never find, ever. If we failed. I could feel my master distantly. If he beat their ship here, then we might have a chance. But now, now we had to keep them from the abandoned spaceport behind me. We had a chance while they were on the road. The armored mercs at the head of the column had marched up under me. One of their armored vehicles was right behind them.

— ◇ —

Hansho recited the fourth line: "There is no chaos; there is harmony."

— ◇ —

Rothers watched the last of the column. She held silent as three of the mercenaries beat a girl into unconsciousness and threw her into the back of a speeder van. Her mind was a calm emptiness, her spirit was immersed in the power of the Force. It coiled itself into her, filling her mind and body with the power of the living universe.

— ◇ —

My young friend recited the fifth and last line: "There is no death; there is the Force!"

— ◇ —

The late-day sun was behind me now. Their boxy repulsor-lift armored carriers were spaced at regular intervals along the column of slaves. Most of the slavers were walking. They could keep the vast number of children from running away only by walking along with them. One at the front, a human in bulky hardshell armor, saw my silhouette against the afternoon sun.

He shielded his eyes with a hand as he looked up at me. "Zeck! One of your girls got away!" He gestured at me. "Girl, you'd better get down here if you know what's good for you!"

My saber was in my hand. I wanted them to know who they faced. I raised it up high over my head. Its golden blade roared and hissed as it leapt into existence. I slashed it down through the air.

His eyes got big. "Jedi!" he screamed.

"Now is the time, my treasure," Qui-Gon whispered.

I leapt down upon them.

4. Children's Crusade

Kyle sighed. "It has begun." He hammered at the throttle. Hansho covered his face with his hands.

Lon patted Hansho on the shoulder. "Remember what she's like in the training arena. Have confidence in her, Hansho."

— ◇ —

Pir and Benezet rose up and fired. Clusters of burst-fire blue accuracy bolts flew across the canyon. The slaver's shouted warning reached those on the top of the first hovertank at the same time as the Gun Jedi's burst did. Their heads exploded.

— ◇ —

Rothers spun up her deadly double blade and threw it into the slavers at the rear of the line as she jumped. They died as they turned to face her. The deadly blue blades snapped back into her hands as she fell among them. They fell like long grass to the mower. Red bolts began to buzz around her.

I cut one down as I landed. He was a rodian and I parted his arm from his body at the shoulder with my golden blade. A reverse cut took his head as I spun to face his comrades. We Jedi were playing for keeps today. The lives of the children demanded it. My life-giving blade had been put aside. I only carried the death-giving sword. The red bolts flew. I began the ancient Shien dance taught to me by Atton Rand's holocron. Except, this time, the red bolts did

not hum off harmlessly into the sky. I reflected them back at their senders. Men, rodians, weequay, and trandoshans screamed as their own weapons fire came back at them to burn big holes in their bodies. I jumped and was among them. I sheered off another head as I landed, then brought my blade up and forward in a sweeping motion that sent it through another man's midsection. He grunted as the two halves of himself parted ways. I lunged at the third one in my way, the saber speared him all the way through. I whipped it out and threw it, which shocked everyone standing nearby. It sliced off the weequay's head and snapped back into my hand. Three trandos and a human in big black hardshell armor had run up around the stalled tank on the outer edge of the road. I *pushed*, and they sailed off the cliff road into the canyon. They screamed as they fell.

One of Pir's three-round bursts took the head off the trandoshan behind me. I leapt up on top of the lead tank. It was something old, from the early days of the Empire, like the gravtrucks back further in the line. It was called a Firehawke and it had a small blaster turret below the main plasma cannon. My gun friends had killed the guy in the main hatch and the driver, who had left his hatch open. The driver's hatch was under the small blaster turret. The girls behind the first tank had screamed and were now running back into the slavers trying to run up toward me. A big traffic jam was occurring just a few meters behind the tank, helped on by the random head explosions of the slavers. I took advantage of the chaos to hop onto the sloping front of the tank. By bending and stretching, I was able to reach the driver's control stick. I moved it into a curve that smashed the front end into the inner cliff wall of the road. A click and the thing settled to the gravel. I stabbed and slashed the controls with my saber, turning them into a sparking mess.

The road was blocked, if only temporarily. Now we had just a little more time.

Things were getting more complicated just behind me. A little girl picked up a fallen slaver's blaster pistol and killed another slaver. She was immediately shot by the slavers, but another girl picked up the pistol and shot back. Pir was my guardian sniper. Bene was covering Rotherron's attack. He saw and picked off a couple more slavers. I jumped over the top of the tank and down into the chaos on the other side.

The girls saw me and began to scream the same thing as the slavers, except to them it had another emotional meaning: "The Jedi are here! The Jedi are here!" They continued to snatch pistols and rifles from the ground and blazed away indiscriminately at anything that looked like a slaver. I had to spin and deflect a couple misplaced rounds. Those went sailing harmlessly into the sky.

"Watch it!"

"Sorry, Miss Jedi! Sorry!" one of them shouted, firing away at a gravtruck pushing forward through the crowd. A screaming chaos of waving hands and arms, red blaster bolts, blue accuracy rounds, and curving yellow lines of repeater fire surrounded me. I threw a couple rodians and another human up into the sky. Girls died by my side, cut down by a repeater. I jumped again, spiraling high into the air. Little girls far below me gasped at the sight and took heart. The yellow and red lines of death sought at me. Pir killed them as they rose to track my descent. A song with no words was in the air of the canyon, voiced by an immense unseen multitude. They were behind me, in front of me, at my side, and behind my eyes. Words were put to it, words I had first heard back in the Undercity, taught to me by the ghost of a red twi'lek padawan. The multitude stood with Rothers and the Gun Jedi. They heard the words.

"Jedi! Rest on the day

"When the task is far behind!"

"On your feet, my friends,
"Come with me."

My hard breathing made the words difficult to understand. But the girls near me heard and formed up in an informal squad. We rushed forward, from boulder to boulder, behind stalled speeder vans and gravtrucks. The further we went, the more of us there were. I used *grip* to crush a door and pull it from the side of a van. The girls swarmed in, guns blazing. Some had grabbed up knives and daggers from fallen slavers. They stabbed and screamed just as the slavers they swarmed did. The back doors of the van flew open and the slavers inside tumbled out, the center of a stabbing, scratching mass. More girls and the few young boys joined our ranks. The next one, a gravtruck, a slaver popped out the top hatch. I pulled the long Imp repeater from his hands and hauled him into the air with *choke*. Pir shot him in the head before I had a chance to throttle him.

"We are Jedi.
"We stand for all."

Pir said it to Benezet just as he fired at the man I was choking.

"Calm your fears and take your place.
"Strive until the work is done."

She responded as she killed a weequay leaning over the back of another hover tank, trying to get a shot at Rothers.

"We are wild and free, so follow me.
"Time to hear the inner voice, to heed its call."

I said to the girls around me, right before the Force came to my aid and caved in a gravtruck's front end just as it and three others accelerated toward us. They careened out of control into the cliff wall, forming yet another barrier.

"Be calm. We rise, we fall, we are the same.

"We are always the faithful ones."

"Hear it now.

"It echoes through us."

"The Force is in us.

"We are Jedi!"

Rotherron shouted to girls crawling over a stalled hovertank.

"Jedi!" they shouted back at her as they pried weapons off the slaver corpses stuck in the tank's hatches.

— ◇ —

"Stay here!" I shouted at my girls. "Kill anyone who tries to get by!" And I jumped over the three wrecked gravtrucks. The pile of vehicles behind them formed a protective barrier from the hell of blue accuracy bolts that rained around the slavers. Seven men, four weequays, and a rodian stared in surprise when I landed in the middle of them.

"Orlag! Orlag!" the rodian merc shouted as I cut him down. The others ran for it, back toward the bulk of the slavers, where they were beating and whipping the children in an attempt to keep them under control. I thought it was some rodian word I didn't know, until I heard deep laughter come from the dark interior of the gravtruck behind me. A giant squirmed out the open crew door. I

had never seen a Dorgan, near-humans from a heavy-gravity world near the rim. He was huge. When he stood up, my head went almost straight back. We were in the area boxed by stalled vehicles, so he was safe from the long guns of Pir and Benezet.

He looked at me and laughed again. It was a deep and mocking sound. Two sword handles stuck up from his back on either side of his head. He reached up and drew them from sheaths strapped to his back. My mouth fell open. They were the longest, largest vibroswords I had ever seen. He roared and charged at me, swinging the blades before him.

I ducked and rolled, the giant blades swishing over where I had just been standing. He was big but he was fast. I rolled again to dodge another slice of those blades and then jumped high above him. A couple blaster bolts buzzed around me. I deflected them as I descended. The jump had been too high, he had already turned to face me, stabbing with one sword while hacking with around. I spun about and swung my lightsaber at his swords. A big spark flashed when they connected and my blade kicked back in my hand. I hopped back. What the fek? His blades were intact. He laughed at me again, in that deep mocking voice of his.

The Dorgan crouched low and swung his right sword in a forehand slice at my midsection. I cartwheeled over the blade and struck out at his head. But he had pulled his left-hand weapon back in an overhead parry. There was another spark. His blade was still intact. They must have been made of a substance resistant to lightsaber blades.

A Jedi is not a mere fencer, Master Kyle's voice said from the past. The lightsaber is the weapon of a Jedi, but it is not the primary weapon, it isn't the first device in our toolkit. The Force is. Are you helpless without your blade? No, you are just as powerful, just as dangerous with a stick in your hand as a saber.

The Dorgan pounded at me with his vibroswords. I slanted my golden blade to deflect most of the power of each blow. Still, each blow knocked me back. I punched him with the focused form of *push, The Fist*. It slammed him back against the side of a stalled gravtruck. He stared at me in disbelief. He had not understood the nature of a Jedi until that moment.

"I bring more to this fight than you could ever imagine," I shouted at him. I wiped sweat from my forehead with a sleeve. He charged me. *Force Fist* hammered him back to the van. His back hit the side of the vehicle so hard, it rang like a muted gong. "I am a Jedi! The living universe fights at my side! There is no dishonor in surrendering to me. You are outnumbered."

All he saw was a tall skinny girl with a golden lightsaber, someone he should have been able to snap in half. He did not listen to me.

Speed came on me. I ducked under his slashing blade and grabbed his immense wrist. I leapt as its momentum pulled me toward the Dorgan. I pulled my legs up tight as I flew over his arm and into his chest. The point of my golden blade went through his body, piercing him right below the neck, right above the breastbone.

I could see in his dying eyes that he understood at last. My golden blade flashed out of his body and spun around me as the others sent red blaster bolts down on me. Shien, the Way of the Krayt Dragon, once again preserved my life. The bolts bounced off my saber blade and up into the bright sky. The Dorgan's body fell into the dust of the road.

One of the multitude who stood with me in my mind shouted out at them using my voice. "No one can oppose the will of the Living Force! Submit and be judged!" My words echoed through the narrow valley. Every slaver heard them, and they all shuddered in fear.

Jedi. They now knew what the word meant. The Force was pleased with us.

— ◇ —

Benezet stopped firing for a moment. "Pir, look!"

Across the valley, Rotherron was trapped between a hovertank and the cliff edge. Gunmen were on the other side of the tank. Pir watched as the young blue Twi'lek girl he had just met stopped and waited. The tank groaned. Its thrust fans roared in an attempt to pull forward. Something held it in place. The day became brighter for him just then, his vision clearer, his mind sharper. A door of perception opened inside his head. He *saw* the Force wind its protective strands around Rotherron. Rothers gestured. The big tank shuddered and flipped on its side into the air, to come crashing down on the screaming mercenaries who had been sheltering behind it. The blue Twi'lek girl leapt up and over the overturned vehicle. It hurled itself into the chasm, followed by the crushed bodies of the mercenaries. Rotherron sprang up into the rocks on the mountainside, then down on another group of gunmen running toward her.

Pir and Benezet snapped out of the startled moment and began to fire their long rifles.

"They are Jedi," Bene said to reassure her man. "They do things like that."

"No," he said as he fired. She didn't understand. "We're Jedi, too."

She paused for a brief moment, then began to fire down at the slavers. Other vehicles were pushing through the child prisoners toward their new friends.

The slavers ran from Rotherron, but she did not chase them. She *pulled* them back onto her blades. A group of children followed after her, just as they did with me. Each little boy and girl snatched up a weapon from the fallen slavers or grabbed up rocks by the side of the road to throw. Rothers was the lightning, they were the storm. They washed over another cluster of stalled vehicles, screaming rage in tiny childish voices. They stopped and stared as Rotherron did not jump over the gravtrucks. Instead, she sat in the shade of one and closed her eyes. Rother's mind began to sing. It echoed among the hidden multitude that stood by my side. Strength from outside myself surged into my limbs. Pir and Benezet felt it, too. Our souls rose up in response to that song. The children heard it. They ran forward to confront the slavers. Those ahead of them who were being whipped and beaten rose up to grapple with their captors. The slavers seemed confused. They stumbled, their movements were hesitant.

Another mind added itself to her song. My master! He had come at last. His mind sang with Rothers and the Force roared. This song, it was one of the ancient arts, died out among the old Order, who feared it and allowed its practice to slip away. This was the Battle Meditation of the ancient Jedi. It summoned the Force to our aid.

Thought of my aches and bruises disappeared from my mind. The multitude began to echo the wordless song. I flashed forward, my body moving among the red blaster bolts. One moment I was far up the mountain road, the next I was among them, spinning and cartwheeling around them. My blade licked out to separate a trando from his head. *Push* sent another one howling over the edge. I rolled into a lunge, which put the point of my lightsaber through the heart of the third one.

Rothers had to interrupt her part of the song and spring away as their last hovertank opened up with its plasma cannon on the stalled vehicles she was behind.

Thumba! Wham! The big sounds echoed through the canyon. One of the blocked gravtrucks jumped up in the air, pushed by the explosion from a plasma round. It somersaulted once before crashing down. Slavers were standing on the top turret of the old hovertank. One of them aimed something at me and the children around me. My eyes got big, it was a Merr-Sonn rocket launcher. The slaver fired.

— ◇ —

The other two had the Gun Jedi locked. Like all young Jedi, they had been careless of their own lives. They had ignored the men on the tank, preferring to put their fire on the ones shooting at the kids. Pir shifted his gun to see them launch at him. He got off one shot. A slaver tumbled off the tank, but another one grabbed the rocket launcher and clamored up.

"Bene!" he shouted. They rolled to the back of the rocky shelf. The rockets hit.

Benezet saw her man pushed up into the air, to tumble over the edge.

— ◇ —

"Scatter!" I shouted to the children. I *pushed* the rocket up in the air, where it exploded over our heads. "Into the rocks!"

A few of the children ran up into the boulders on the inner edge of the road. Most of them dropped to the gravelly surface of the road. I was surrounded by cowering children, so I had no choice. I stood there and took it. My mind *pushed* another set of rockets

away. One would eventually get through to me. I knew that. But I am Jedi, I had to give the girls a chance.

— ◇ —

Rothers signaled with her hand. The kids by her didn't have to be told, they ran down the hill away from the tank's shells. Another stalled gravtruck went up in a ball of flame. Rothers *jumped* into the falling debris to snatch up a fallen child. She ran, and the big barrel of the tank tracked her.

— ◇ —

Bene was covered in small cuts from the rock fragments that had been thrown up from the explosion. She crawled up to the end of the rock shelf and peeked over the edge. Pir was hanging on for dear life just below her, his legs dangling over empty space. He was clinging with one hand to a rock outcropping. She reached down to him.

— ◇ —

I could see them in the distance. I had *pushed* several rockets up and away, but they were determined to kill me. All three of them on the top of the tank now aimed at me. My feet shifted in the gravel of the road. Its turret was rotated away from me, spitting death after Rothers. A multitude sang to me. I readied myself.

A large shadow passed over them. They looked up.

Kyle and Lon were falling toward them. Kyle's lightsaber was burning bright blue in his fist. Lon had hers out, its violet blade was raised over her head.

A massive invisible hand came down on them from above at a gesture from Kyle, smashing them off the top of the tank. The Force

blow was so powerful, it hammered the tank down onto the road. A vast cloud of dust pushed up around it. Two of the rocket men were hurled over the edge into the canyon. The third one was smashed against the inner canyon wall next to the road.

Their wild jump from the bottom hatch of the Raven's Claw carried Kyle and Lon down to the top of the hover tank. Lon crouched low as her master extended his free hand. The canyon echoed to thunder as Force Lightning poured out of him into the mercenaries below him. Bright burning white lines of static electricity crawled and danced over the surface of the hovertank. Lightning smashed into the slavers. They screamed and were thrown down. The tank's repulsorlift coils blew out with small explosions along the sides. It sank back onto the old road and ground to a halt. Kyle Katarn, Battle Master of the New Jedi Order, was now in the fight.

— ◇ —

"Did you see that?" Benezet shouted down to her man as she clung to his sleeve while he clung with one hand to the rock wall. "Did you see that?"

Amazingly, he had. "Yes! Pull me up, girlfriend!"

She pulled at his sleeve while he clawed at the rock of the canyon wall. Badly aimed blaster bolts ricocheted off nearby rocks.

"You have a grip?" she shouted down at him.

"Yes, yes. I won't fall."

She let go and disappeared for a moment. Benezet appeared above him a moment later, with one of her pistols in her hand. "Sorry, my rifle was wrecked in the rocket explosion. I can't find yours."

Another red bolt hit the rock wall near his legs. "Mine's on the canyon floor. I'll be joining it unless you can get them to stop shooting."

She stretched out above him, her hands extended in a double grip on her pistol. Multiple shots spouted from her gun. The bright red bolts cut across the canyon. Men fell from the top of a speeder van. Their guns clattered to the old road. Young girls snatched them up and began to fire into the van.

She grabbed at his clothing as he clamored up the rock wall and into their aerie. He tumbled in. They looked back across the narrow canyon. The fight was flowed up and down the old road. Men and children were jumbled together in conflict. Shouts and screams bounced among the canyon walls. They caught the flash and gleam of lightsabers.

"Come on," he said. "It's a long run, but we'll be needed. We're no good over here." They hopped up and ran down the narrow path.

— ◇ —

Kyle jumped, to spiral down next to me.

"Hansho was worried about you."

"I was worried about me," I lied.

He smiled. "Were you really?"

I moved my golden blade to reflect a blaster bolt back into the rodian mercenary who shot at me. He gave out an involuntary grunt as the reflected shot took off most of his head.

"No, Master. I have been in the moment."

"That's my girl." He leapt far up into the rocks by the road to cut down the men trying to set up an e-web gun emplacement. I *pulled* another rodian slaver onto the point of my saber.

Lon jumped over the heads of the slavers between her and Rothers. Her bright violet blade licked out to take a few heads as she hopped around them. They screamed random advice to their comrades as they fired wildly in the air. She landed in the middle of small mob of gunmen, but ducked and squirmed through them to leap upwards again. They were so anxious to kill her, a couple shot each other in their haste. She trimmed the legs away from another one before jumping. Lon landed near the edge of the old road. Her mind *pushed* several of them over the edge. She had to jump out of the way of a gravtruck. It had been taken over by some of the children, who rammed it into the mass of gunmen behind Lon. Several of the mercs jumped over the edge in an attempt to get away from the swerving vehicle. It crashed into the rocky inner wall of the canyon, pinning several men. They screamed in pain. The children piled out the back of the stalled vehicle and ran back down the road. Lon was good at Shien, too. She reflected away the bolts meant for the children.

They formed up just around a bend in the mountain road, the children hugging the rocks along the inner edge, huddling behind Rotherron. Lon calmly walked back to her, occasionally spinning her violet blade in a reflection arc. The reflected bolts would hum out into the canyon.

She smiled when she met Rotherron. "Hi Rothers. You get Jay into such trouble."

Rothers smiled. Her blue skin was dusty. There was the blood of dead men on her coveralls. "I thought it was the other way round."

Lon gestured. "I don't suppose there are any down that way?" Her blade spun to reflect another bolt.

"No." Rothers made an echoing gesture in the other direction with a blue blade from her saberstaff. "They're all up that way now."

Lon frowned. "And I just came from that direction."

Rothers turned to the children. "Please, young ones, give the weapons you hold to the older children and teenagers." There was a shuffling of stolen weapons in the young crowd. Rothers turned back to Lon for a moment, then back to the children. "Let's finish this, shall we?"

The children screamed in anger.

I felt fear travel through the last of the mercenaries as that sound rushed over them.

This was the end of it. My girls formed up behind me. We charged. Kyle hopped down from the cliff face to run forward by my side.

"And here we thought you were in trouble."

"Not anymore."

The last of the slavers were bunched together on the inner side of the road, their backs pressed against the rock wall. We hit them from both sides. It rapidly became hand-to-hand as the fierce children grabbed and grappled with them. My saber flashed as I cut down any slaver with a heavy weapon. I saw a small group of girls drag one to the far edge and throw him into the canyon. It was hard for them to fight back, the slavers were pushed up so close to each other than they could barely resist. It became the thing of the moment for the children to drag them off one by one and throw them into the canyon. Angry children's voices and the screams of men filled the air.

At first I couldn't hear Kyle. He began to shout. I put my hand out to touch the shoulder of the nearest girl. She stopped plunging her knife into the belly of a slaver and turned to touch another girl. Soon all was quiet.

Several girls were dragging yet another slaver to the edge.

"Stop that!" Kyle shouted.

They let him go. He crawled back to the others. They all dropped their weapons and raised their hands.

"It's over!" he shouted. "It's over."

The girls listened to him. But they didn't put their guns down. They kept them aimed at the fifty or so slavers who were still alive.

"Who here can drive?" Kyle asked loudly. A few of the teenage girls raised their hands. "Good. Get in any vehicles that can move, load up the wounded, and get them up to the old spaceport."

We extinguished our sabers. For no apparent reason, I started to cry. Kyle grabbed me and hugged me to him as fiercely as he could. Lon came over and grabbed me. Rothers came up, turned off her saber, and hugged us all.

The girls who weren't covering the slavers embraced each other and started to cry as well.

Kyle looked at me. "Close-run thing!" He hugged me briefly again before letting me go. He grabbed up Rothers and hugged her. Lon didn't let go of my hand. We smiled at each other.

After that, we went back to work. Hansho spiraled the Claw back and hovered it over the road. He chucked out a couple medpacks, then went up and landed the Claw in an old hangar. He had the gravtrucks park in there and set up a little emergency infirmary for the wounded girls.

The Gun Jedi ran up about then. I tried to fuss over their scratches, but Benezet would have none of it.

Kyle came over to look at them. "Luke told me about you two. He called you 'Gun Jedi.'" He used a foot to nudge a slaver corpse with most of its head missing. "I see why."

Several little girls came up, grabbed the corpse, dragged it to the far edge of the road, and chucked it over.

"Be sure you strip their armor and weapons," Kyle told the girls. "Throw the gear in the back of one of the working gravtrucks." He paused, thinking. "We might need it."

They nodded.

Pir introduced himself. "I am Specialist-Sergeant Pir Tranc and this is Specialist-Corporal Benezet of the Woryyshr Clan, sir. And who are you?"

"Don't call me 'sir.' I'm Kyle Katarn, Jedi Master and the teacher of these two loons." He gestured at Lon and I. We laughed. "This is Lon, one of my current students. You'll meet Hansho in a little while. He's up top."

They saluted. "A pleasure to meet you, um....Mr. Katarn," Pir said.

"A pleasure to meet you," Benezet repeated.

5. A Cook's Tour

Something was on my master's mind. Lon and I could both sense it. We followed him around while he supervised the clean-up on the road. Rothers picked out the oldest girls and together with them, marched the captured slavers up the road to the abandoned spaceport.

The Gun Jedi trailed after me as I trailed after Kyle.

Every body was checked for life. A lot of the children were found alive, none of the slavers. The girls continued to chuck the slaver bodies into the canyon.

We worked our way up the slope, stopping occasionally to help with first aid to the injured kids. Kyle stopped to inspect the Drogan's body.

"This is your work, Jay." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, Master. I tried to give him a chance. He wouldn't have any of it."

He nudged at the vibroswords with his foot. "What do you make of those?"

"They are made of a lightsaber-resistant substance."

"Didn't help him much." A small group of girls were trailing after us. He turned to them. "Take off the sheaths before dumping the body. Be careful when putting the swords back in their sheaths, they are very sharp. Toss them in one of the trucks. I'll look at them later."

"Yes, sir," one of the girls replied.

"Don't call me sir."

"Yes, Master Kyle," another of the girls said. They swarmed the body.

"What did you make of that, Jay?"

"He knew how to swordfight. He had been trained."

Kyle nodded. "It's all thanks to your little dream-friend, Eo Veyy. He used a couple on a bounty a few months back. Made a real mess out of a whole bunch of mercs and CorpSec executives. It was very impressive in a gruesome sort of way. Ever since then, vibroblades have been making a comeback among the criminal classes.

"Why doesn't anyone tell me about these things?" I asked no one in particular.

"Because you're always on the move?" a little girl nearby suggested.

I stuck out my tongue at her. She giggled before getting back to work on the Dorgan's body.

We made our way up the road to the old spaceport.

— ◇ —

After inspecting the wounded in the infirmary and helping out a little, we wandered out to look at the captive slavers. The children clustered around us, all dirty and bloody. They acted just like trained soldiers. The big guns were held ready in their tiny hands. They watched us, every one, even the busy ones had their attention on us, in the center of the cluster. Hansho handed us bottled water from the Claw's emergency stores.

Kyle ordered a few of the girls to search the old buildings for any working faucets or cisterns. Every Jedi could feel help coming up the road. The militia would have to work its way through the minefield. They'd be here after nightfall. The gravtrucks also had a few supplies. But that wasn't what was on his mind. The older girls set about distributing them among the rest of the children.

"These," Kyle gestured at the slavers cowering a short distance away, "these are replaceable in just about any port on the Outer Rim. The true wealth of a slaver captain lies in his ship." He didn't say so, but he was explaining himself to Pir and Benezet.

The fire was in her eyes. Benezet did not feel any pain from the minor shrapnel wounds in her arms. "What's next?" Both she and Pir clutched those big wicked blaster pistols in their hands.

Kyle smiled. The fire was in him, too. It was in all of us. "We take their ship. Does that sound like fun to you, Gun Jedi?"

The Force shuddered just then like a giant awakening to shake off the dust of ages. It roared in delight.

"Yes," she replied. "My wookiee heart burns. I am of Clan Woryyshr, I will be able to stand in the great hall of my people with pride after this day. I stood with the Jedi against slavers!"

We all felt the pulse of the Force quicken, strong and loud. "Their ship is coming soon," Rothers said.

Kyle nodded. "If I know them, and I do, they'll abandon their little friends if they see what we have done. As long as that ship flies, others will suffer. We can't stop them all, but we can stop this one right here, right now. If I tried to catch it in orbit, it would slip away." He turned to the children clustered around us. "If we allow the slaver ship to slip away, if we do not stop them here, other children will suffer like you. It's a tiny thing I ask you, to pretend to still be captives? Can you pretend?" he shouted to the children.

"Yes," the nearest one said. "They killed my mommy in front of me." She started to cry. Another of the children came over to her and held her. "Make them all stop!" the second one said. It became a chant, passed from one to another, every childish voice began to shout it. "Make it stop!" Courage sprang up in those little wounded hearts.

"Then let's dress the part!" Kyle ordered. Every little hand went to work.

Rothers crouched at the edge of the group, wrapped up in stinky weequay rags and a long cloak. She held a long rifle.

"It isn't the latest style, Rotherron, but it fits you perfectly."

"Mockery is not befitting of a Jedi," my Twi'lek friend shot back.

The two Gun Jedi were wearing the outsized body armor of dead men. They laughed. "Are they always like this?" Benezet asked Master Kyle.

"Hold fast," Kyle told the captive slavers clustered around us. "When the ship lands, stay put. Do what the children say after we are gone, and you might live through this day." Kyle glanced down at the older girls who were sitting nearby. They wore captured armor and held their blasters low, ready to shoot. The others pretending to be slaves had thrown rags over their weapons. "Look in their eyes," Kyle told the slavers. "Think what you did to their parents, then tell me if they'll shoot you or not."

I had seen those eyes before, they were the hard eyes of survivors, not those of children. They were the same eyes that sometimes looked back at me when I looked in the mirror. It hurt me, the thought of four thousand childhoods stolen away. I felt the grief for my parents, for Orbaol, for Rosh, for everyone we had lost, rise up in response to their pain. I had to put it aside for the fight ahead. I closed my eyes.

Qui-Gon's voice whispered in my head: "They are not gone, my treasure. They still exist in Oneness with the Force. And one of them still lives. Quiet your thoughts now. Contemplate on the stillness that lies at the center of everything."

The ancient words came to me. "Emotion, yet peace," I whispered to myself.

Lon was standing nearby. She heard me and put a hand on my shoulder. "Emotion, yet peace. Ignorance, yet knowledge."

Hansho was standing next to Kyle. "Passion, yet serenity."

A calm wave passed through us. Rothers spoke the next line: "Chaos, yet harmony."

"Death, yet the Force," Kyle said. He nodded to himself, then turned to Pir and Benezet. They were wearing old Bogwon hardshell armor, the ones with the red lines along the outer edges. "You two, repeat after me."

"However innumerable all sentient beings, I vow to protect them."

"However innumerable all sentient beings, I vow to protect them."

"However diverse Life, I vow to nourish it."

"However diverse Life, I vow to nourish it."

"However inexhaustible the passions, I vow to calm them."

"However inexhaustible the passions, I vow to calm them."

"However immeasurable the Force, I vow to serve it."

We all said the last line together. "However immeasurable the Force, I vow to serve it."

"Welcome to the New Jedi Order. You are now Initiates."

"Thank you, sir."

"Yes, sir."

"You are on the path of the Jedi now. Mind how you act." He looked up into the late afternoon sky. "They have entered the atmosphere, they'll be here in a minute or two," Kyle told us. A sonic boom echoed among the mountains as a large fast ship swept by above us at supersonic speeds. They'd cut a loop and swing back to spill off their speed. It would be a big ship, maybe almost half the size of a Star Destroyer. It would come in on repulsors. Its giant cargo doors would open to take the 'cargo' in, to be hustled into holding cells further back while the armored vehicles drove up into

the hold. The entire loading would take about four or five minutes. Just like last time, except Rothers and I weren't late.

A large shadow went over us. It was an immense SosenShipping R-Class, the one with the side-loading cargo holds. A little fire sparked in my otherwise calm mind. This was the one that got away from us on Jujict.

"Say hello to old friends," Rothers said, just before the engine noise drowned out any conversation.

The big ship lowered gently to the cracked permacrete of the old landing pad. One of the big ramps lowered as we approached, wearing dead men's armor. Eight of them came down to greet us. We walked toward them, pacing ourselves, moving our feet in calm, slow steps. We walked with our heads down against the late afternoon sun. Rothers had a cowl pulled up over her head. I wore an old Imp helmet and a breath-mask. The Gun Jedi had the visors down on their helmets. Kyle had a cloth wrapped around his face. We drew closer. Their steps slowed. I could see the confusion in their minds. They didn't quite recognize us. We stopped and let them walk the last couple meters to us.

One, a scarred twi'lek, looked over the children sitting in the shade of an old hangar. "Looks like a good haul," he said.

"That's what we said," Kyle replied as he pulled the cloth away from his face.

"Who the hell are you?" the human in the group asked.

Our sabers lit up.

Kyle's powerful mind picked three of them up and threw them into the distance. I cut one down, Lon cut the other one. Rotherron and Kyle chopped down the others. We sprinted toward the ramp. I threw off my helmet and mask. The others ditched their disguises. Hansho beat me onto the ramp, but I was second. Lon was third. The students of Master Kyle Katarn, Battle Master of the Jedi, were the first to board.

"It's a trap! Jedi!" one of the crewmen screamed into a comlink as Lon sunk her glowing violet blade into the man's chest.

The engines roared as the ship boosted away. But it was too late. The Jedi were on board. Pir closed the ramp. We charged toward the front of the cargo hold, five lightsabers flanked by the pistols of the first two Gun Jedi. A boarding siren rang, summoning them to their deaths. We heard the engines whine as the ship boosted up out of the planet's gravity well. If they had been smart, they would have switched off the cargo hold's gravity plating and let us tumble back against the ship's acceleration. It wouldn't have stopped us, but it might have slowed us down. But they didn't. Lon, me, and Pir slipped through the bulkhead door just as it sealed itself. Kyle's blade punched through the durasteel of the door and began to cut upwards through the locking bars.

"Here they come!" I shouted.

The first three were armed only with pistols, a rodian and two humans. Lon crouched and blocked the low shots. I reached over her with my sword arm as my blade rotated around to trap the bolts aimed high. Pir leaned around me and fired. Three short bursts. They were dead, head shots. We ran forward. Kyle's blue blade withdrew, the door was bent open out of its frame by a massive Force *push* that rang the ship's metal like a bell. Kyle and the rest slithered through the breach.

The alarm continued to howl.

Lon, Pir, Benezet, and I headed right. Kyle, Rothers, and Hansho headed left.

My little group was right behind me. I pulled to side of the corridor. Red bolts from the Gun Jedi buzzed right by me and down the long length of the main starboard corridor. It dropped the three slavers at the other end, just as they stepped out.

"This isn't good, gotta get out of here," I shouted at them and pointed at a door a few meters away. One heavy repeater at the far end of this corridor could kill us all. We slipped into the side corridor. I smelled something and let my nose lead me. The deck grating clanked under our feet. A trando with a Tenloss disruptor rifle stepped out of a side door. Lon *threw* her lightsaber at him. It speared him in the heart.

She crouched and I jumped over her, rolled, and came up as two more rounded the corner just ahead of us. I brought my point upwards in an evisceration cut. The twi'lek merc I sliced open began to scream. I brought my point down in a thrust over his shoulder into the chest of the human behind him. They both tumbled down.

Her violet blade snapped back into her hand.

Pir and Benezet spun and fired at the sound of feet running behind them. Two more went down.

The Gun Jedi and Lon ran after me as I led them around the corner and through a door. It was the mess hall kitchen. Someone had been making plenock soup. It smelled delicious.

"Not a good time to eat, Jay," Lon said.

"I wasn't. We went through another door into the mess hall. It was at the center of the ship, a long rectangular room with five doors. There was the door behind us, the one we had just come through, that was the door to the kitchen. A long serving counter with an open window into the kitchen was next to it. There was a door in at the back of the portside or left wall, two in front of us, one to the left side of the forward wall and one at the far end of the starboard or right wall. There was one more door behind us, at the back of the starboard wall. I waved my hand and the tables and benches ripped themselves up from the deck and crashed against the fall wall. My *push* had partially blocked the forward doors. "We'll need room to fight."

"Fight who?" Bene asked.

That's when they hit us.

Benezet pivoted and shot the first one through the forward right door. The rodian had tried to rush in on us, but had been blocked by an up-ended table. Benezet shot him right between his eyes.

I went down on my knee, my lightsaber twisting and spinning in the air to catch the red bolts coming at us from the left side door. They tripped over the broken chairs and tables in front of the door. Red bolts from Pir's guns buzzed right over the top of my head. Two men dropped. Two others tried to push by the bodies, but I slammed them back with another *push*.

Lon was behind us, twisting her violet saber in the glowing arcs of Shien. Pir turned and dropped to the deck, shooting up from beneath her moving blade.

I rolled to the right to protect Benezet. Violet and golden lightblades danced.

Pir crouched and fired toward the front at another slaver pushing his way through the left forward door.

At that moment, two gunmen charged through the kitchen door. Lon did a reckless thing. She *threw* her saber into the first one's chest and leapt forward. The second one took a step to the side and raised his light repeater toward her. She *pulled* the blade out of the first one's chest back into her hand. She spun as she landed next to the other one, cutting him in half. Another couple came through the left forward door as Pir was killing the last one. Lon cartwheeled over Pir to land in front of him. The Way of the Krayt Dragon guided her movements. Benezet dropped to the floor to fire at them, as several more came in behind the others.

I sensed something. I turned and dove forward into a roll, coming up into the last three as they charged through the aft right-hand door. I came up from into a lunge, killing the first one. My left hand pushed away the weequay's blaster pistol as I withdrew my

blade and chopped it across the weequay's neck. The first one's body was falling back into the third one, a guy wearing old Corellian Bronzium armor. I skidded forward and plunged my blade through his forehead.

We were all breathing hard. I looked over at Lon, who smiled her little "Hey, I'm fine" smile at me.

"These two are fun to work with," she said.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Pir replied

Bene was so winded, she just nodded.

Another one, a trandoshan, kicked the kitchen door open. The long thin blue blade of Kyle's lightsaber thrust through him, coming out his chest. Master Kyle withdrew his saber and let the body fall. "Lon, come with me. Jay, you and the Gun Jedi clear the lower port side. Go!"

"Where's Hansho?" I asked. I could feel him in combat nearby. Rothers was also somewhere close. He was just an Initiate, I didn't want him to get in over his head, and that was always a possibility with Master Kyle. Normally Lon kept an eye on Hansho, but she was here.

"He's with Rothers. Go!" he repeated.

We ran.

— ◇ —

The boarding alarm stopped, to be replaced by a man's voice. "Break out the heavy weapons! They're in three groups now. Krez, cut them off on the crew deck. Urrel, take your men to the aft upper corridor by the service bays. Maurand, get back to the bridge! They'll be going for the bridge, protect the bridge! If they get behind you, fall back. Max, stay put in the engine room."

Why weren't they using comlinks? Ah, we came on them too suddenly to equip themselves properly. Not everyone carried

comlinks and datapads all the time. It was a Jedi thing to do that. They thought if they could keep us out of the bridge and the engine room, they could pin us, then control the game, hunt us down. They had never fought Jedi before.

I was startled to hear Benezet growling. She shot up three of them as they came up the narrow stairs from the lower deck. We jumped over the bodies and down the stairs.

It was a big ship. I got twisted around in my head for a moment on the lower level. "Wait, this way. No . . . it's this way." Pir and Benezet frowned. I stopped and closed my eyes. The Force revealed to me where it wanted us to go. "The slave cages. Let's go!"

We ran down the corridor. I could sense the slaves up ahead. I could also sense trouble. Two of the slavers had given up hope of winning. They were going for the slaves. I could see the plan in their minds, take hostages, get to an escape pod, eject from the ship, and try to hide on the planet below. It wasn't well thought-out. We went down a ramp.

I gestured to the left. "Pir, get the cells open."

He headed down the left-hand turn. I stopped and grabbed Benezet. "Give me a second, then come in. You'll know what to do."

She nodded, still out of breath.

I ran down the right-hand turn into one of the slave pens. They were pulling a twi'lek girl out of one of the pens. I stabbed the nearer one in the back. He screamed. I didn't really want him to scream, but sometimes that's out of my control. The other one spun around.

"Stay away!" the human merc said. He stepped out of the open cell, a young twi'lek girl in his grip. His blaster pistol was aimed at the girl's head. She was a white twi'lek. He glanced down at his dead friend and then at me standing there with my bright golden blade. "Stay away! Take me to the escape pods or I'll split her skull open. Do it!"

I saw his plan lying at the front of his mind. "You will not take her with you. That will never happen." I felt a presence behind me. She learned quickly, this little human wookiee. She did not have to say what she wanted me to do.

I dropped to the floor. A short three-round burst echoed in the corridor. The merc dropped back, a look of surprise still on his face, the top of his head gone. The twi'lek girl turned to look, then kicked the body. She looked up at us.

"I can open the cells. I watched them, I memorized the key-code just in case I had a chance. My name is Messeretherith, and all I want to do for the rest of my life is fight them."

We heard assenting voices from the other cells.

"That might be possible," Benezet told them. Perhaps it was the proximity to other Jedi, perhaps her realization of what she was that opened the doors of perception in her mind. She caught a tiny glimpse of the future. "One day all of you will fight by the side of the Jedi. But that's the future, now, let's take this ship!"

Young Messer — I called her Messery from then on — punched in the code on the wall panel. The green-tinted containment shields dropped and the girls poured out. They pushed us up the ramps. Some of them split off down to the other cell bays, to free more slaves. I heard a voice then, calling out in the dark.

"Come on." I led Pir and Benezet up toward the main corridor and the bridge.

— ◇ —

It was the captain's quarters. That's what the sign said next to the door. Benezet pushed open the door on the other side of the walkway. I put a hand on Pir's shoulder. "No one in here will threaten us, but we must go in." He followed me in. The bunkroom was just off of captain's office. She was curled up in a far corner.

The little teenaged green-skinned twi'lek girl had wrapped her naked body in sheets from the bunk. She shivered in fear and pain. I walked over and knelt next to her. My mind reached out to hers and sang a silent healing tune. She reached out to me. I took her in my arms and hummed to her. This had not surprised me. *Know your enemies*, Kyle would often say. Besides, I had talked to Neerna on many occasions about her early life. It's one of the prerogatives of slaver captains. Benezet came into the room then, back from checking the quarters across the corridor.

"What's wrong with her?" she asked Pir as I hummed and rocked the little twi'lek girl back and forth in my arms.

"The captain raped her," Pir said, ever so quietly.

A bomb went off in Benezet's brain. She ran out of the room.

"Catch her," I told Pir. "Hurry." The little girl whined and clutched her little green arms more tightly around me. "Shush. I have to go in a second, to prevent something from happening. But I'll be back. I promise." She buried her head in my arms and cried.

"Don't leave me," she finally said.

I looked around the room. A cheap pair of coveralls had been tossed in a corner. I *pulled* them into my free hand. "Do you think you can put on the coveralls? Can you be strong and follow me? My friend's about to make a mistake. We need to follow her."

She clutched at me for another moment before relenting. "I'll try to be strong. I heard them on the ship's speakers. You're a Jedi, aren't you? My momma read me some of the old romances when I was little. I prayed that you might be real." She raised her head to look at me. "And you are real. I can be strong now, knowing that. I want to fight for the Jedi forever."

Every Jedi on the ship could hear the rage in Benezet's heart. Rothers and I recognized it. The short young woman really was a wookiee under the skin. The hearts of Kashyyyk burn the brightest. We were all drawn to it. I was last in the chase, because the little

green twi'lek girl insisted on coming with me. Her name was Yethhhereserin. Like Messer, I came to call her Yeth. Their families had been destroyed by slavers. Like many of the others, they came to Yavin 4. She ran as fast as she could, but that wasn't quite fast enough.

As Bene ran, the Force poured into her. All the doors in her mind were thrown open. *Speed* came on her. New strength gushed into her body. Her sight suddenly went beyond the physical. She ran past Rothers and sprang forward in a long shallow leap. She began to fire those big pistols of hers while she was still in the air. The slavers wore startled faces as she flashed by them, filling their bodies with holes. She rolled into a crouch at the cross-corridor and aimed both her guns at the startled man waiting there. She put half-a-dozen red bolts through his face and chest. She was up again, sprinting forward, and as she ran, she swept the Jedi and the freed girls up in her wake.

She cut to the left, down a side walkway. Her mind was free of any restrictions, questing forward, she *saw* the slavers running at her up intersecting corridors. Red bolts came from her as she turned. Red streaks came at her. She crouched as she turned. Dead men fell to the deck.

Still she rushed forward. Behind her, those caught up in the rush crashed into the slavers trying to catch up to her. Lightsabers gleamed in the narrow walkways. Men and nonmen screamed and fell.

Yeth and I came upon the first of the bodies. "Keep your eyes always on me," I told her.

"I'm not afraid, not anymore." She looked at me and I saw those eyes, the ones that stared out at me from the mirror. It made me sad when I saw her eyes. They told me that I had another ally until the end. How I wished that were not so.

She was ahead of the small war going on behind her. My master, Lon, Rothers, Pir, and Hansho were sucked away from the path by the battle. A wave of angry girls splashed around them. Red streaks of blaster bolts cut the air. Lightblades cut through flesh in quick flashes. One of the walkways led to the ready room behind the bridge. Seven of them waited for her there. The honored dead of her clan roared their savage delight in her mind. She could not stop. Benezet dove into the room, spinning in the air, firing as her body flew low into the room. *Speed* was still on her. Two trandos died in the first second of her entrance. She rolled up to her feet in front of a tall weequay, right in his face. She put her guns to his chest and fired. She jumped into a back summersault, her arms extended. Red streaks cut the air where she was. She put holes in two more heads. She landed on her knees in front of a rodian and filled his body with holes. She stood and turned, her arm extended as if at a target range, and shot the last one right between the eyes. The ship's second stared at her in horror. He was just inside the bridge entrance. To his eyes, blind to the Force, he had seen seven slavers die in an instant. He slammed his palm against the big red emergency blast door release. Red lights flashed as it crashed down. She rushed toward it, but it slammed down before she could get across the room. She screamed in rage and frustration. As she smashed against the blast door with the butt of her pistols, so too did a massive fist of Force energy hammer on the door.

Yeth and I ran past many dead men. Little Yeth kept her eyes on me and was not afraid. The last of the crew ran for their lives, fleeing the bright gleam of lightsabers and the angry fists of the children they had stolen. Yeth and I made our way forward. She understood that I had to save Benezet.

Wookiee rage poured out of Bene's human body and into the Force. She stood back from the blast door and hammered it with her mind as she screamed incoherently. The heavy blast door bent,

cracked its frame, and in a mighty crash, blew inward into the bridge. The wave of Force energy pushing it slammed through the compartment, bashing slavers to the deck, blowing them up into the overhead. One was crushed to death by the blast door as it flew across the bridge. They all lay moaning wrecks on the deck when she stepped inside.

Just this once I wasn't late. I held up my hand as we stepped onto the bridge, a signal to keep little Yeth back. I very carefully and very softly walked forward until I stood next to her.

"No, Benezet," I said. "You are Jedi now. Calm that wookiee heart of yours."

The captain stared up into the twin barrels of her blaster pistols.

"He will meet justice on the planet below us. Do not deny them this chance." There was something . . . I looked at the captain. "Do not deny him this chance at redemption."

We were frozen, waiting for her to pull the trigger. A couple of the bridge staff whimpered from where they lay on the deck. I could hear Kyle's boots on the metal grates of the ramp as he ran up to us.

He spoke very softly to Benezet. "Kid, you have no training, but even you can see into this man's mind. Even you can see the spark there. Think about ways to bring out that spark in him. Killing him would extinguish it."

Benezet was breathing hard. The worst impulses in humanity and the rage of the wookiees who had raised her fought with the Light.

Pir went over to little Yeth and whispered to her. She walked up to Benezet and put her arms around Bene's waist. Just like that, the Light won. She holstered her pistols and put her arms around the little twi'lek girl. Benezet raised her head and shouted, fierce and proud, "I am Jedi. I am Jedi!" She looked at the last of the crew. "And you, you will be judged, and maybe that experience will awaken something in you that you have kept buried. Remember us,

remember that the Jedi think there is something worth saving even in you!"

It was done. They were one with us at last.