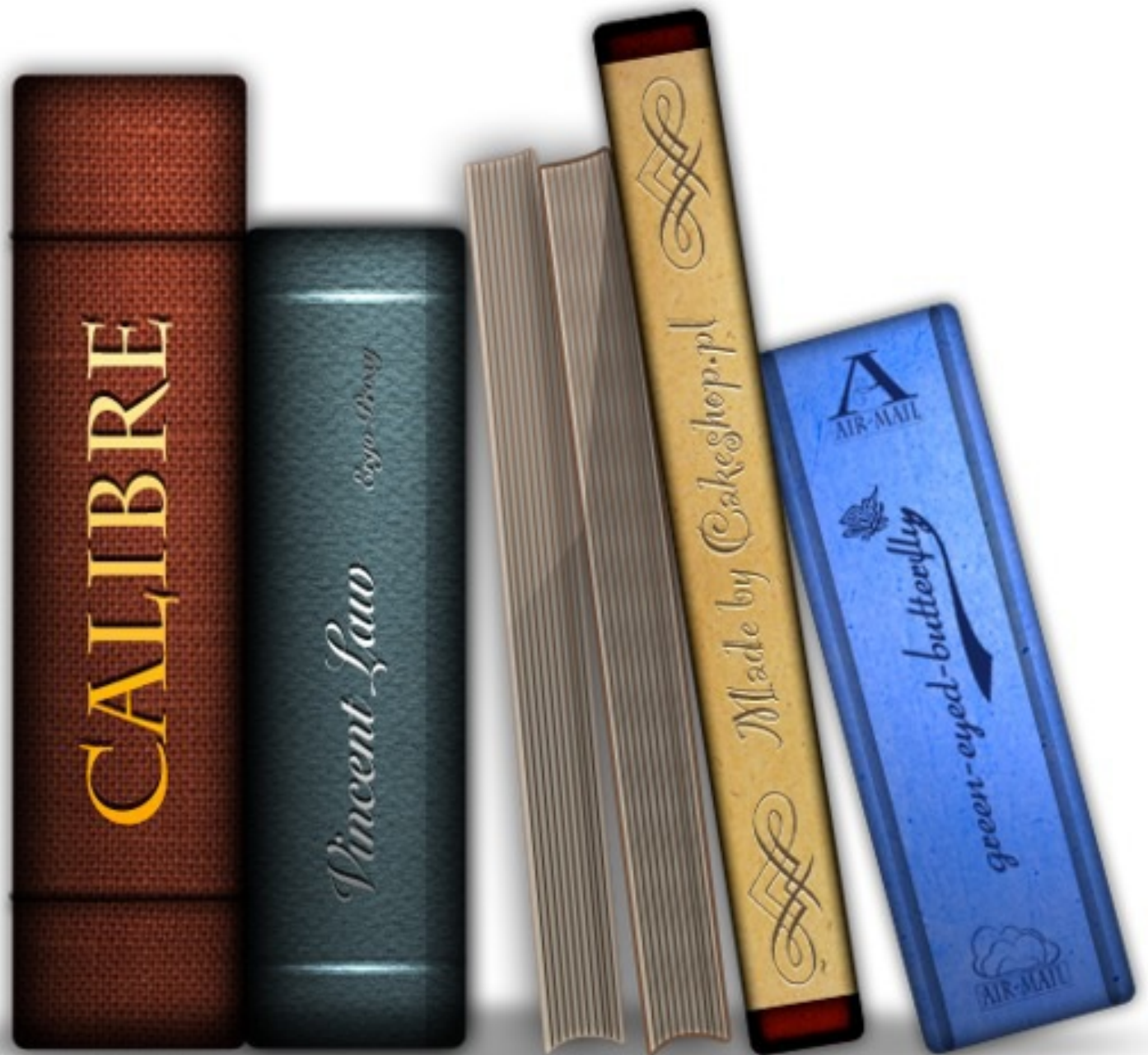


[Short Stories] - A Dark Path - Part 2

Striving for the Light (Ali Hadden)



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STAR WARS

Striving for the Light (A continuation of A Dark Path)

by Ali Hadden

Special thanks to Christine Bertz for her input and George Lucas for his, well, output! Also to ss@wpi.wpi.edu for allowing this on his archive. Note: This is in no way meant to be or follow “SW cannon” C 1994, layman’s copyright. Please do not distribute without this message.

I.

The usually perfect environmentally controlled biosphere of Coruscant’s Imperial City was a bit chill that evening. The Jedi Knight watched the city lights from atop the Senate Building, as blackly dressed as the wrought iron table at which he sat, detached from the hustle and bustle of the inhabitants below. He was detached because, for the most part, those beings enjoyed life, drank every bit of the essence it created, and busied themselves with the chasing of reckless dreams and adventure. Such was not his destiny. His destiny, it seemed more and more, was to grieve. Death had surrounded him ever since he’d chosen the way of the Jedi; his guardians, his mentors, his father, and recently the demise of Kayla Storm and his unborn child. These he had come to accept as the simple passing from one existence to another, from a life of individuality to one of unity, oneness in the Force. As a Jedi, perhaps touching that Force was an act of straddling both planes, leaving him not quite himself, not quite everything else. It was a confounding paradox that spent much time in his meditative thoughts, and surreal. The goal was to be one with the Force, even if it meant leaving behind certain elements of the self. He had never wanted to accept that before, just as he had not wanted to accept that it would be his burden to pass on this knowledge to potential Jedi. In a sense, he would be taking from them identity for the greater union in the Force, the balance, the all. Yet, in that balance, he had found a deeper sense of self than he could ever have imagined, but not without cost. He clenched his gloved hands where beneath the leather of one there was a false skin, billions of electronic nerve endings to simulate the human touch, and a metal skeleton; beneath the leather of the other was a scar that, in some ways, moved him more deeply. Of course, in the end it would be the students’ decision to accept or reject his teachings when the time came. To become a Jedi, to lose and then find oneself anew, or to cling to egoism in the belief that this intangible power was one’s own and fall inevitably to the Dark Side. Such was the folly of he and Kayla Storm not so long ago—pride. He sighed deeply and watched his breath curl in the form of cold vapor.

The frozen breath whisped through the air before him and began to take shape. Luke Skywalker blinked twice, then folded his arms across his chest against an all too familiar cold and watched, listened. There was a soft laugh as the shape darkened into a silhouette.

You thought you were finally rid of me

“How could I be rid of that which is part of the whole?” Luke replied quietly. “You are with me always, Kayla.”

Another laugh, though strained. *You’ve cheated me, my lord Skywalker. Soon will I take my*

vengeance.... It was as if she sought to go on, spewing idle threats that would torment his dreams, but there was a great milling of some potent tempest. The apparition shrieked his name and was engulfed by the chaos she had succumbed to, the path she had chosen in the end. Luke often wondered why her broken body did not vanish in death as Obi-wan and Yoda had. He had hoped that it was because she was unprepared for such a demise, but now saw he was mistaken. The Dark Side, in her last act of aggression, now possessed her in full. Kayla Storm was perhaps his greatest failure.

The Jedi listened at the strange silence that rang in his ears. Such was the way of the Force.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered to the air.

A new presence came upon him then, like an exact negative of what he had just witnessed. It shone brightly and he closed his eyes against the resplendent Light. Immediately he felt a peace that reached to his very core, and a long-forgotten contentment. The brilliancy softened and Luke opened his eyes to look upon an ageless face with eyes of green fire.

“Who are you?” he asked, enamored.

The voice, too, was beyond the definitions of time. *Father*

“Chala.” A gentle smile played across his lips. There had been moments when he longed to hold this lost child, ached to cradle her in his arms and hum some off-key lullaby. But the child was found only in the Force and not as she might have been had she experienced life.

Father, Kayla Storm has wronged us both. The time of your destiny has come

The image faded before he found the words to speak. Two spirits seemingly detached from the whole? How was that possible? Luke stifled a second shiver that was not completely from without and brought his Jedi robe close about him for warmth. A chill evening, indeed.

Behind him, a lithe figure stepped through the entry, her gown of exquisite silk whispering against her ankles as she approached, along with that whisper the scent of mild perfume. Luke turned his gaze from the city lights as his sister sat before him with grace, her hair wrapped in jewels, and he smiled.

“Leia, I think you’d better find Han, quickly.”

Perhaps in any similar situation she should have blushed, or retorted something a bit harsh, but Leia Organa Solo merely gave her chin a regal lift. “Even with Alderaan destroyed, I’m still her princess. If there is a time and a place for elegance and tact, now is one of them. This isn’t for Han.” She permitted a small grin and shrugged. “Besides, I’m a little tired of chasing around in battle fatigues.”

“It seems that time has passed,” Luke replied softly.

“Thank the Force.” The princess continued after pausing to collect her thoughts, self-assured. “The New Republic is doing well under Bel Iblis’ administration and the Senate. I’m not nearly as inundated with political philandering. Before, I was too busy to think about anything—Alderaan, Han

and the children, you. I've slighted all of you in one way or another. I beg your pardon."

"Princess..." Luke muttered and shook his head. Perhaps she had in her refusal to learn of the Force, but under the circumstances of the New Republic, he could hardly lay any blame. The time was not right. And he, it was discovered only later, was not prepared for the burden of a Jedi Master. Now he sensed a change for them both.

Her hands folded on the table but she did not fidget with her rings, and gazed straight into her brother's eyes. "I've spent a great deal of time thinking about where our lives may be headed in the future, with our peace nearly made with the remnant Imperial fleets and the Imperial governorships. Much of what I ask will depend on the results of the Senate's inquiry tomorrow. But if they find no reason to discipline you further... Luke, if the offer to guide me in the ways of the Force still stands, I wish to move forward."

Her brother's face was implacable. "Do you think you're ready?"

Her bejeweled hands flattened against the tabletop, reflecting a bit of light from the moons beyond the biosphere. "Are you?"

Luke nodded slowly. "I am. But you have to be careful to realize what you're getting into. As a Jedi, you must be prepared to make certain sacrifices—your career, perhaps even your family. You must learn the ways of the Force with a most serious mind and forget anything about the self-glorification that comes with a thirst for adventure. You must be devoted."

Leia stared at him, incredulous. "As if we haven't had our adventures."

"Becoming a Jedi will change you indelibly. You will never be as you are right now. Power brings with it an incredible burden. The weak, as I was weak, succumb to chaos while the strong, as I feel I am now becoming stronger, strive for the Light."

"You sound like some kind of preacher," his sister muttered under her breath. "All I wanted was to learn a few things..."

"I will not allow you to simply dabble for awhile and then shelve it until it suits your purposes. You must not allow your roles of Minister or wife or mother take priority."

"Luke, how can you talk to me like this?"

Her brother sighed deeply and trifled with the rings on her fingers. "I don't mean to be cruel, but I have to be certain you understand what you're getting into. Leia, again I have to ask you. Are you prepared?"

The princess of Alderaan had lost some of her color as she listened to him speak. Her lips trembled slightly, but her voice was sure. "I feel I must. Brother, I *must*."

Luke's nod was imperceptible. She rose and bent to kiss his cheek lightly, then left her brother in meditation.

The Scoundrel's Nest, a hijacked Super Star Destroyer that was now claimed as the prize of the Smuggler's Guild, circled the capitol planet of Coruscant like a mammoth sea creature casting shadows onto all it overtook. A small shuttle crested with the sign of a dragon dropped out of the cavernous docking bay and sped toward the central biosphere, weaving through the slower traffic as its pilot was anxious to reach her destination. Mara Jade had little problem finding a landing slip in the usually crowded spaceport and was greeted by Han and Leia Organa Solo as she disembarked. There were brief pleasantries.

"Has Skywalker been released?"

Leia nodded. "Actually, he's been free for the past month. The Senate is just now getting caught up in its affairs and can afford to ask Luke a few more questions about what happened."

They started to head for the Senate chamber at a fast pace.

"You would think they'd have been more thorough in the hearing," Mara grumbled.

"That would've taken months," replied Han Solo. "I think the majority were so incensed by the whole thing that they wanted to get him locked away."

"Can't say I blame them. I'm surprised he didn't receive a stiffer sentence. Hopefully today will remedy that."

"Luke has changed, Mara," said Leia. "In all honesty, I think he should have been acquitted altogether. He's made amends."

"We'll have to see about that, Minister."

Upon reaching the chamber, they parted ways as the Solos were expected to sit front and center and Jade was unceremoniously shuffled into the general seating. The entire amphitheater was filled to capacity, waiting for the last Jedi in existence to do a little more explaining of his actions. Another was destroyed. Coruscant, very nearly. And it had all been blamed on some Dark Side influence that quite suddenly no longer plagued him. The pointed questions were already being asked as Mara took her seat at the end of a row next to a smelly Twi'leck. What exactly was the nature of your relationship with Kayla Storm? How is it the Force could be used to do such a thing? How is it you allowed it? Why did you fail so utterly in your attempts to teach the ways of the Jedi? How is it you were suddenly cured of this presumed insanity? In the face of such questions, his replies should have sounded ludicrous. Yet they did not. Mara sensed the Senate committee was skeptical and a little bit afraid of the possibility of Skywalker using some kind of vocal manipulation. She didn't think he did; still, the Jedi had done unthinkable evil. She listened. As the Jedi's explanations droned on, she sat forward in her seat and really listened. The thoughts of those surrounding her became like a running commentary of the tribunal. With some, there was understanding. With most, anger. *How could he do this to us? I wonder if he speaks the truth What a terrible thing to happen to the boy Luke needs us now more than ever* Her brow furrowed as the commentary intensified, becoming louder than the amplified debates on the Senate floor. *I'm so sick of this. I have repairs to do on the Falcon. Why do I need to be here? Luke is holding his own. The Senators can't refute his defense He must be*

held fully accountable. The two years, the biosphere, isn't nearly enough for what he's done Skywalker is a traitor Who said that? Skywalker is a traitor. Who... She looked around, almost startled. The voices continued until they converged in a rambling scream. Who said what? Luke it's not your fault. Hang in there. You're doing well. Skywalker is a traitor. Why do I have to be here? Mama, I'm hungry. Just wait. Mama, I'm thirsty. I said, just wait. Why am I here? It's not his fault. But it is. It must be. Skywalker is a traitor. Skywalker must...Mara. No. Skywalker must... Mara, shut it out. I can't. I won't. Mara. No, I...YOU MUST KILLnonononononononononono She collapsed her head in her hands and bit back her own scream.

Luke's oath was barely heard. "To the Senate and the people of the New Republic, I vow this will never...."

YOU MUSTnononononononono i won't i can't we've already been through this, damnit i'm done i won't i won't nonononono

Mara

nonononononogetawayfrommedon'ttouchmeihateyouihateyouihateyou

Her body slumped forward into unconsciousness. With half heard shouts and a sudden lurch of motion, Mara Jade felt herself carried about as if by hypnotic waves. Yet, as she opened her mind's eye, the ocean was not comprised of water, but of sand. A tall plateau surveyed the endless Dune Sea while the Master and his Apprentice embraced near a flickering campfire.

He whispered into her ear, "I am the teacher, you are the learner. If you wish to succeed..."

She stared, lost in the blueness of his eyes. The words and feelings were hers and yet, not. "I love you with everything that I am. I will never forsake you."

"Then it is the dawning of a new age for the Jedi."

"Yes," she breathed as he savored her neck.

He softly murmured, "You and I will rule the stars hand and hand. You will be my Empress."

A slow, burning rage crawled into her heart then and, as Skywalker pressed forward in his advancement, she gripped his throat with both hands and squeezed with all her might.

Mara Jade awoke.

The pain of her throbbing skull forced her into consciousness, and she was nearly blinded by the bright lights of what she came to recognize as the infirmary. As her vision cleared, Jade gazed upon the object of her hate not only in dreams, but often in life. Skywalker grinned sympathetically and Mara's hands tightened into fists, restraining a sudden urge to throttle him as she had in her sleep.

"You," she hissed. "Why are you here?"

“I’ve been here a lot, actually. How do you feel?”

“How do I look,” Mara snapped.

Skywalker flashed that infuriating grin. “Not bad, for someone who’s been out cold for a week. The Em-dees can’t seem to figure out what’s wrong with you. I’ve been worried.”

Mara clenched her teeth. “Don’t bother.”

“I certainly will bother. The Force is with you, and anything unusual that happens to you is of my concern.”

“What are you, my guardian? My Jedi Master? After that fiasco with Kayla Storm, I should think not.”

Luke’s gaze did not shift. “Someday I will be, if you choose to further your talents. You’re walking on very dangerous ground to remain untrained, with your sensitivity. I sensed a lot of anger in that Senate chamber last week. The Dark Side of the Force was literally drawn to it. That’s what caused you to faint.”

“You’ve been acquitted, haven’t you? You no-good lying hypocrite. How could you sit there and lecture to me about refusing the Dark Side? Look what you’ve done! You were a fool to take up with that woman. I should never have listened to you. I should have killed you when I had the chance and saved us all a lot of misery. Not to mention a few thousand lives.”

“I know I’ve done terrible things. Mara, I’ve paid my dues as best I can...” But his words fell on deaf ears.

“I should have let your clone cut you to ribbons, at the very least. Why would Palpatine choose some two-bit Force-witch as his heiress? I was closer to him than anyone else, I should have been the chosen, not that I’d even consider it, but he should have come to me. I certainly would not have allowed you to foil his designs. I was the Emperor’s Hand!”

Luke sat back in his chair and shook his head disparagingly, jaw set. “As you are, you’re untrainable anyway. You have absolutely no control over your anger. I was mistaken to think things had changed. There’s no way I’m going to make the same mistake twice. The question now is what to do with you.”

“What exactly are you suggesting? How dare you threaten me, you half-witted womp rat...”

“I’m not threatening anybody. Besides, I’m sure the Smuggler’s Guild wouldn’t take too kindly to a liaison so prone to temper tantrums.” He paused then, distracted by something unseeable.

The admonition hit close to the mark and Jade pounced. “You have a lot of nerve. Get out of here or I’ll have you thrown out!”

Skywalker spoke distantly, as if his mind were miles across a great chasm, barely aware of her

presence, or the fury that so disturbed her. “Mara Jade, you must be very careful. Something of the Dark Side is close. I don’t want you to fall as I did.”

She swung about and gained her feet. “I’m not so gullible. So long, Skywalker.”

Mara slapped him hard across the face, a wake up call to bring him back to reality, and she stalked from the room. Luke remained where he sat and gingerly touched his jaw. The Dark Side had gathered close about her, it seemed. But that wasn’t it exactly. It was as if a third presence had been in their midst, keeping watch and a bit of influence over Jade’s behavior. This could not be explained as a simple Dark Side influence. He was tempted to label the presence as some spirit. When a soul passed on, it supposedly became one with the Force, completely integrated, and the images that occasionally showed themselves to the living were but revelations through the Force itself, not individual souls per se. Yet, he himself had encountered the spirit of Kayla Storm, a spirit that seemed to struggle for a distinctiveness from the Dark Side. That had to be it. But whatever, or whoever, he had sensed was gone with Mara Jade.

They thought it might be nice to ditch the kids with Leia’s assistant and go for a stroll in the gardens. Han was anxious to get back to work on the Falcon’s ailing repulsorlifts but he noticed Leia was troubled and put off the repairs yet again. The giant red sun was just beginning its dip down to the horizon beyond the central biosphere when Solo muttered, “So what’s on your mind, sweetheart?”

“Do I have to have a reason to take a walk with my husband?”

He mentally shrugged and supposed he could be as romantic as the next guy. Women liked a little smoothness, and he conceded his edges were still a bit rough. At least he wasn’t an oil slick like Lando. “Just thought maybe you wanted to talk.”

“I guess I do.” She paused for a moment and Han was content to wait, scraping his boots along the stones as they went. Leia took a deep breath. “Before that mess with Kayla Storm, Luke asked me if I would learn the ways of the Force.”

Han stopped and looked at her warily. “And what did you tell him?”

“That I wasn’t comfortable with breaking the laws of physics, and far too busy to be taking up witchcraft.”

Han nodded his approval and they continued their walk in awkward silence.

After a while, she added, “He seems to think it’s my destiny. And the children’s.”

Her husband frowned and pointedly said, “No.”

“I had my own reasons for declining, but why are you so set against it?”

Han’s face became clouded. “Before, I thought all that Force stuff was a lot of hooey. Now, I think it’s deadly. Luke may not be a Dark Lord, but he’s still a little crazy. At least, he’s not the way he used to be.”

“He’s just been through so much,” Leia defended.

“Yeah, I know, but...” Han shook his head, frustrated by his inability to explain. Well, she usually knew what he thought anyhow. “I just don’t want you and the kids getting into something that dangerous. I mean, Luke can’t force you to do anything you don’t wanna do, right?”

“Of course not.” Leia hesitated. “I’ve just been having a lot of dreams.”

“Just remember that’s all they are. You’re just thinkin’ too much.”

Leia nodded absently. “What if...what if I did want to become a Jedi?”

“Come on, don’t talk crazy. I’m not gonna let you weird out on me like Luke did.” He watched her gaze shift away to the flowerbeds. “Wanna help me and Chewie out with the Falcon?”

“Always a wild romantic,” Leia mused.

“It’s just gotta get done, honey. I know it’s bad timing.”

“At least we don’t have an Imperial fleet on our tail.”

Han smirked. “I dunno, that might make things a little more interesting around here.”

Instead of laughing, or sending back a smart comment, Leia slipped into his arms and sighed deeply. “I guess I deserve this after spending so much time away from you and the kids.”

“Well, the Inner Council did make it kinda hard. But things are letting up now, right? We’ll have *eons* to spend together after I get that bucket up and runnin’.”

This produced a small grin, and content with that, Han kissed her smartly before waltzing away. Leia sighed again; it seemed as if she had to remind the heaviness of her chest to lift and breathe. So Han would have none of it. But the dreams that plagued her sleep nightly were important. The images in the fog reaching for her, dragging her downward into a void. The voices that whispered of a nexus of destinies. Of who? That was beyond her. She knew they were important. She realized she had to find a way to control the dreams before she lost her senses. Or maybe it was simply time to quit sleeping. Leia Organa Solo watched the sky deepen from a bloody crimson to a blanket of purple velvet, lost in thought, before finally turning homeward.

“I’ll be back this evening,” Leia called as she rummaged through her bureau for the hidden implements. She found the metal and crystal and shoved them into a pouch. She also reminded herself to “forget” the project with Luke today; better her unfinished lightsaber be left undiscovered.

“Where are you going?” Her husband asked from another room.

“I have another meeting today,” Leia responded. It was not easy to keep this from him. But it was not necessarily a lie either; she was, if fact, going to meet someone and to learn from him.

“What kind of meeting?”

“A seminar of sorts.”

“About what?”

Leia pretended not to hear and focused her attention on the three children playing on her bed. Jaina was decorating the two boys with bobbles of jewelry and make-up, much to their chagrin. “Let’s put these away now and wash up. It’s time to go with daddy.”

“Huh?” The smuggler appeared in the doorway while the boys rushed past him to escape. Jaina remained to help her mother replace the stolen treasure. “Well, *I* can’t watch them. I have repairs to do. What if they get into somethin’?”

“I’m sure See-Threepio would be more than happy to assist you.” She kissed her daughter and left the room.

“Hey!”

“Hey!” Jaina echoed and followed her father to the main entry. Jacen and Anakin converged on their mother with hugs.

“I love you, sweethearts, but I have to go.” Leia gently disentangled herself and looked plaintively to Han.

There, she found no help. “I thought things were finally letting up. How come you’re always at some political conference? I oughta have ol’ Garm’s head for running you so ragged.”

“We’ve just been very busy. Please don’t say anything to him, all right?” Leia bit her lip. The hole she was digging was beginning to collapse around her.

“So, what’s goin’ on? Why’s everything so hush hush?” Han questioned. “More Imperial trouble?”

“No no, nothing like that. It’s just very important. Han, you’re making me late,” she flustered.

“Can you at least tell me where I can find you? Or who you’re with?”

“No.” She flushed, backing a step toward the door. He wouldn’t understand, but there were things that just had to be done.

Somewhat defeated at this, Han folded his arms and smirked. Impishly, he cracked, “That’s it, isn’t it? You’re *with* somebody. Yup, I shoulda known a princess like you was too good for a low-down scoundrel like me...”

“Don’t be silly!” Leia retorted and kissed him smartly. “I’ll be home soon.”

“Sure,” he muttered, “like in twelve hours.”

“Bye, mom,” the kids intoned as she left, then rushed back to her room to scavenge.

The Jedi Master watched his twin sister-turned-apprentice move the newly constructed lightsaber over in her hands and tightened a final clasp. It was hastily built, he thought. The configuration was all wrong. Still, he had kept his silence although every instinct wanted to direct her work, even to do it for her. Yet her destiny was separate from his, he knew. Leia would have to learn much on her own, even if under gentle guidance. Strangely, he felt as if a benevolent presence was with him, offering *him* guidance, and immediately recognized it as his daughter. Chala watched over them both, and there was peace for a time as he muddled through the paradox of her and Kayla Storm, answers coming up empty every time. Perhaps it wasn't worth the headaches. Some things just *were*.

Leia fingered the power stud on the hilt of the sword and it emitted a loud crack. She dropped it immediately and jumped back while, on the ground, the lightsaber sputtered crazily and spun in showers of sparks. She stared at the conflagration, then at her brother who only shrugged. Irrked by his lack of assistance, Leia bent to retrieve the botched weapon but it rose up and hissed at her like something alive.

She caught Luke's slight grin and rolled her eyes. “Oh for cryin' out loud.”

The Minister of State removed a small wrist blaster from her pouch and blew the project she had spent a number of days on to smithereens. “There. What do I need a lightsaber for anyway? I think we can pass over this lesson, Luke.”

Luke waved at the smoke. “Master Yoda used to tell me ‘Do or do not. There is no try.’ I think we can assume you definitely ‘did not’.”

“Well then?” Leia demanded. “Do you want me to scavenge around for more parts and build another one? Those crystals you use to power the blade are pretty scarce.”

Luke shook his head. “It can wait.”

“Right,” she huffed. “What now.”

“Patience.”

“Fine.” She sat on the rocky outcropping and surveyed the biosphere some sixty kilometers to the East. She coughed and motioned to the speederbikes. “This air is horrible. Can we go back soon?”

“Patience, Leia,” the Jedi Master repeated, and sat next to her. “There's no need for you to be in such a hurry over every little thing. It's your impatience and your constant short-cuts that causes your failure.”

“Bel Iblis wanted to meet with me this afternoon, my family needs some attention, I just don't have time...” She received a disapproving look and sulked. “I'm sorry. I know how much this means to you.”

“To me?” His eyebrows rose. “Then that's it. You're a diplomat through and through, trying to

negotiate terms and please the masses. That's got to be the first thing to go, sister."

"What are you talking about?"

"How serious are you about becoming a Jedi Knight? Or is all this an effort to appease a demanding twin brother?" His grin disarmed the sharp edge of his tone. "You know what I'm talking about because we've talked about this a number of times. Priorities, Leia."

Leia looked at him hard. "It's easy for you to say when you have no other entanglements."

"True. Still, you can't give your training any less attention than you would any other responsibility. I'm worried you won't finish what you've started."

"Didn't I give you my word?"

Luke nodded and lapsed into silence as he was prone to do. Leia glared at her rings and spun them about her slim fingers, not through fidgeting with her hands, but simply by pushing them through the Force. It was something of a habit that struck a note of irritation in the mind of her twin. The game of button-pushing had become a dangerous habit as well. One her brother dealt with as only a brother can.

"You've always been headstrong," he surmised.

Leia snorted. "You've always had a propensity to whine. What of it?"

Her brother grinned sheepishly. "I do not."

"Do too."

Luke covered his mouth with a gloved hand, and hid a broadening, although slightly exasperated smile. "Leia, you just need to relax. There's no need to rush. I really don't see what the problem is if..." A realization came upon him and leaned forward a bit, propping his elbows on his knees. "You haven't told Han."

"After everything that's happened, he's terrified of the Force. If I told him what I was doing, he just wouldn't allow it. He just wouldn't understand."

"So certain are you?" Luke questioned, and smiled in reflection. Did Masterhood consist of an inclination for backwards grammar?

Leia sighed heavily. "Yes, I am. I can't tell him. Not yet, anyway."

"But you realize you will have to, someday. Just by the fact that you've hidden this will make the situation more difficult. It may not go well."

"I know it won't. I just...I just can't tell him yet."

He clasped her hand in his own. “Meditate on this, Leia. Let the Force guide you and you will do what needs to be done.”

She sat before the vanity and removed the string of jewels that decorated her hair. The hair itself spilled over her shoulders and down her back, nearly touching the carpeted floor. Slowly, she began to brush through it with long, careful strokes, ignoring the man that leaned heavily against the door frame.

“I should’ve known. Garm was talking about going on some leave of absence. It just didn’t jive with your story. Why did you lie to me?” Han asked. It was nearly a demand, but somehow his voice lacked the needed intensity. He sounded haggard. “Why couldn’t you talk to me about this?”

Leia continued her brushing. “I didn’t think it concerned you.”

“How could it not concern me?”

“My decision to become a Jedi has nothing to do with you,” she stated flatly, but the brush strokes quickened.

“Think again.”

“Han, you don’t understand...”

“No. Look. We haven’t had two minutes together since we got married and you got tangled up in the Inner Council, then Minister of State. Now you’re off to become some sort of...of Jedi or something. I know...” He ground his teeth on his bottom lip, trying to put things right. “I know you have to do it *someday*, but why now when things are just starting to settle down? Leia, I know you and Luke have this incredible connection but...” He straightened and swallowed hard. “Princess, you are my wife and I want your time. More than that, I want to keep you sane and alive.”

Leia bit the inside of her cheek and yanked viciously at a persistent snarl. “You do not understand.”

Han exhaled sharply, as if he’d been punched to the ribs and withheld his own retort. He glared at his boots and shoved his hands into his pockets. He listened to the rustle of fabric as she slipped out of the silk gown and into a nightdress. She approached and eased into his arms.

“I don’t mean to hurt you,” she whispered, and sought his fallen gaze. “But I have to do this. It’s my destiny.”

Han’s expression became bitter and he slowly shook his head. Destiny again. “I think maybe you just don’t care anymore.”

“Han.” She tilted his chin to face her and kissed his frown. “You know I love you.”

Han remained silent, gaze downcast, shoulders slumping. She heard his thoughts as if they were spoken. *Then why, your worship, is it that I always come in dead last?*

Leia gently bit the lobe of his ear. “Not tonight.”

His frown deepened to a scowl. “No, not tonight. So long, Leia.”

The smuggler grabbed his jacket and holstered blaster as he left.

“Hey!”

The Jedi Master’s eyes opened wide, suddenly awakened from a half-dream. There was a hard pounding at the door of his small apartment. It may have been going on for many moments though, he had been so deep in sleep. Nearby, Artoo-Detoo whistled questioningly, and his master sat slowly in his bed, somewhat disoriented.

“Hey!” the voice shouted a second time, and Luke recognized it.

He moved through the dark apartment and disabled the security lock at its entrance. The door slid aside to reveal Han Solo and his Wookiee companion.

Luke rubbed a hand over his face. “Han, it must be two in the morning...”

Artoo, trailing him, whistled an affirmation.

The smuggler was agitated and slightly drunk. “I’ve gotta go, Luke. I mean really. I’m not coming back.”

Luke stood aside and gestured for his friends to come in but they remained motionless. He folded his arms. “Han, I wasn’t aware that Leia hadn’t discussed her decision with you. We can talk about this. We’ll postpone the training.”

“No.” He scratched the rough stubble of his chin. “Kid, the more I think about it, it’s not the time apart that bothers me. It’s this whole...Jedi thing.”

“Please come in, Han.” Again he gestured. Again they refused.

“She’s not gonna be Leia anymore once you’re through with her, is she? Just like you’re not really the Luke I used to know. Already she seems like some kind of stranger. This Force of yours wrecks people. Am I wrong?”

“Yes.” Luke paused gravely. “But nothing I can say will change your mind. You have to come to terms with it on your own.”

Han stared at the Jedi’s flat expression. “You are strange.”

Luke changed that flatness to an amiable grin. “You’re just scared of the unknown. Look, like I said, we can postpone...”

“And I said forget it. I’m not putting up with anymore of this.” He turned to leave.

Chewbacca wuffed as Luke gripped Solo's arm, and the Jedi lifted his other hand for peace.

"Your children need you, Han."

Solo tossed him a bitter look. "Which brings up another point. When are you planning to drag them into this?"

Luke withdrew his hand as Han shrugged his arm free, answering slowly, watching him carefully. "Not until they've reached an age of reason. Perhaps another five years or so, depending."

"So they'll be eight and ten standard years, levitating junk in the air and whippin' around lightsabers. I don't think so."

"It's not so simplistic."

"I've had it with this hocus-pocus chicanery. Chewie?"

He turned to leave but the Wookiee stood where he was, quietly rumbling an explanation to the Jedi.

Luke patted his arm. "I know, Chewie."

"Well?" Han asked impatiently.

"Be sure to look after the old pirate. He's gonna need it."

Chewbacca howled, "Arrrrrrrw!" and followed his friend.

Luke stood silently before the doorway as it closed, wondering what he should have said differently. His ears rang slightly from his friend's intense anger. No, not anger. That wasn't quite it. Disdain. And dread. He wasn't positive as to what Han and Chewie had planned, but thought he had a pretty good idea. The Jedi walked through the reception chamber, his eyes readjusting to the lack of light, and stopped before a small shelf of artifacts he'd collected on his journeys. It was perhaps a vanity, as a Jedi ideally has no desire for material goods, but still he enjoyed the collection of rare, fragile books. His gaze and his hand came to rest upon the lightsaber, a relic in itself, and disturbed the fine coat of dust on its pommel. Artoo voiced an inquisitive chirp.

"I haven't used this in nearly two years," he muttered in response, though almost to himself. It struck Luke, as he grew closer to the Force, how little he actually called upon its service. As he recalled his Master Yoda, he thought this was best. While the office of a Jedi Knight was to defend, the office of a Jedi Master was to contemplate and teach. Leia had not the patience as yet, but at least showed a willingness that Mara Jade so completely lacked. She might berate him for interfering, but the private matters of a Jedi-in-training were not private in regard to her teacher, nor her twin brother.

"Stay put, Artoo. I'll be back shortly."

He left the lightsaber behind.

Leia bolted down the corridor in a flat run, her bare feet pounding against the cold, metal deck plates, her hair a disheveled mess, the nightdress billowing crazily in her wake. She had been asleep, dead to the universe, when a crawling sensation came upon her.

She half-heard a groggy, “Where are we going, daddy?” and tossed onto her side, passing it off as a dream. Then the apartment had become much too quiet.

She sat upright with a start, then had searched the empty rooms of Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin. Now she bolted, impervious to the stares and wolf-whistles of a few drunken citizens. She bolted for the Millennium Falcon.

“Han!” she screamed at the smuggler as he scrutinized a port side repulsorlift. Within, the children had already bedded down in the hold and Chewbacca was starting the preflight sequence. “Han, you can’t take them!”

“These are my kids and I’ll be damned if I’m gonna let you and Luke turn ‘em into something inhuman! You seem to have made up your mind, sweetheart, and so have I,” Han snapped.

“Han, you can’t do this to me! Please stop!”

The smuggler turned away from her, eyebrows knitted together. “I have to go. I have to take care of our children because you won’t. You’re just...lost.”

“Han, you know that’s not true!” she hollered, as if volume would somehow make him understand what words would not. “It’s not true! I need my family!”

“You’ve got Luke,” he muttered softly and, after a brief hesitation, gained the landing ramp in two long strides.

“Han!” she screamed as the Millennium Falcon rose into the air.

It seemed her brother appeared at her side from nowhere and she collapsed in his arms. She groaned as if an immense weight pressed down onto her chest and was unable to resist tears. He stroked her long hair and held her close, willing all that he was to be some aid, some comfort. And he was.

Luke whispered, “Leia, I never could stand feeling your pain. If you must go, go now. The training can be continued later.”

A moment elapsed as she wept silently in the comfort of her brother’s arms. In the times when her own strength failed, he was her greatest help.

“Leia,” Luke prodded, now assuming the position of Jedi Master, “you have to choose.”

The tears stopped almost immediately and she looked at him bitterly. “The choice has been made

for me, Master Luke.”

She gathered her nightdress about her and walked back to the apartment, absent to any other thought but the emptiness that awaited her.

Leia sat in the corner of her apartment, clutching a cup of hot beverage to her chest, trying with all she was to ward off the coming half-light of morning. The dreams had become horrifying and echoed even in her waking moments. Her fear was growing steadily of the confrontation that someday awaited her, and death. In memory, fog enveloped her with choking thickness, and again those hands, reaching for help, or striking to hurt, or groping to steal. Her brother was killed by one of those hands, thin and pale bearing expensive rings imbedded with crystal. Hands of nobility. Hands of a princess. Leia closed her eyes against it and shivered violently. Han had finally left her. Her children were lost. She was alone. In that aloneness, she found fear and self-pity, and began contriving excuses to avoid the continuing lessons of Jedi knowledge as its burden grew. She imagined the Senate required her presence to deliberate some internal matter. President Garm Bel Iblis required a meeting of some administrative nature. Short diplomatic missions had been embarked upon personally when they could have been shifted to the lower-downs. And now, running empty of the legitimate variety of alibi, she felt an illness coming on.

Luke entered without announcement, as she knew he would, and turned the lights up to their full intensity. Leia squeezed her eyes tight and clutched the blanket about her, curling into a tiny ball.

“Get up.” The order was spoken softly, but carried the full power of a barked command.

“I’m sick, Luke,” she lied. “I can’t today...”

“You’re making yourself sick,” her brother quipped. “I want you to snap out of this.” He moved through the apartment as he spoke, finding garments to clothe her. “There’s no use in you wallowing.”

“I-I’ve failed,” she broke off and stifled a pitiful sob. “And now you’re disappointed in me!”

“Actually, I’m irritated.” Luke returned and tossed the clothes at her head. “You gave me your word that Jedi training would take priority over politics. I gave you your choice to chase after Han and you refused only to continue with your administrating. I’m irritated.”

Leia sat up, bundling the clothing on her lap, and whispered, “Luke, I’ve been having terrible dreams. I’ve never been so afraid.”

At this, the Jedi Master softened and sat beside her. He smoothed her disheveled hair. “Leia, you’ve always been strong. Help me understand why that’s changing.”

“It’s easy to be strong when you’re ignorant.” She spoke to her hands, unable to meet his gaze.

“Tell me about your dreams.”

Leia shook her head. “I can’t. I don’t want to remember...”

Luke paused thoughtfully. “Fear kills the mind, princess. You can’t turn away from what you’ve learned. You can’t deny who and what you are. If you continue to sit here paralyzed, the Dark Side will consume you.”

“Oh, Luke!” She threw her arms around her neck and wept.

“Stop it.” He quietly chastised, “Stop this and find your strength.”

“I’ve lost my husband. I’ve lost my children. The nightmares keep coming,” she whispered tersely. “How can I possibly find strength when everything around me is so shattered?”

“Please talk to me.”

The sister sighed heavily in his embrace. “I dreamed you were killed. I dreamed I killed you. I don’t think I should continue the training if it’s going to cause you harm.”

“There are many possible futures and you saw but one. You must not let such visions dictate your destiny.” His gaze bore into her soul. “Leia, you have to move forward.”

Sudden anger came upon her and she shouted into his face. “Then teach! How do I stop these dreams, Jedi Master? You’re just full of talk! You never help!”

He answered in a whisper that sought to calm. “The help must be found within yourself.”

Leia’s hands rose fiercely to strike at him but he gripped them tightly and locked his eyes to hers. His sister gasped, staring at him, then at the ringed fingers that had moved to harm by virtue of their own will, a will that was suddenly not her own. “Luke, what is happening to me? I’ve never been cross with you like this. I’ve never wanted to hurt you.”

“Just hold on.” But Leia continued to tremble.

“Luke,” she repeated, “what is happening?”

“We are not alone,” he replied, solemn. “Just hold on.”

They held one another in twinship, and in silence, until the passing spirit was gone.

“Somehow, Kayla Storm has influence on the living Force-sensitive. First it was Mara Jade, now you—and both through dreams. It seems mild enough.”

Leia shook her head. “It’s not, Luke. It’s really not.”

“It’s not possession, in any case. Keep on with your meditations; they’ll be a great help.” He watched Leia’s silent nod and continued, “I wonder if leaving Coruscant might help. Can you get away from the Senate for some time?”

“The Senate has called a recess. I have no pressing engagements.”

He kissed her forehead. “Tell me, sister. Where do you feel most at home? What place gives you the most peace?”

She thought about this now, the echoes of her nightmares fading into a background. Her trembling ceased, and she began to feel something like hope warm her spirit. Warm sun and cool air, trees that towered even to the stars...”The moon of Endor. In many ways, it reminds me of Alderaan. And the Ewoks were so kind to me.”

“And hungry for a certain Wookiee, smuggler, and Jedi-to-be.” Luke grinned softly. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She paused. “I’d like to be close to our father.”

The Jedi Master’s grin faded. When would she learn the Force was everywhere? He decided to withhold his correction and tightened his embrace. They would not be able to simply escape the ghost that harassed her but, at the very least, they could find a sanctuary to bolster her energy.

The stakes were escalating faster than Chewbacca could keep track. But then, he was no Sabacc player. He watched the holographic cards shift in an ever more rapid succession. As his ice blue eyes stared, his keen ears listened to the breathy rumblings of disgruntled gamblers. Some cursed openly and loudly. Many left the table, and their money. Soon it was apparent that only two players would remain to scrutinize the holos and each other from opposite ends of the glassy black gaming table. One was a dark skinned, bald-headed cutthroat by the name of Eklon P’har, backed by an ancient assassin droid, IG-29. The other, of course, was Han Solo, behind whose chair the Wookiee stood guard, bowcaster cradled almost lovingly. He was worried though, because his friend was playing with credit that was not necessarily theirs.

“Half a mill,” Solo statedly flatly. The cards shifted and he scowled at the new, less appealing hand.

Eklon narrowed his eyes into black pinpoints and spoke with the thick accent of a Nachti. “Raise another half. The pot stands at one million, four hundred thousand and sixty credits, Solo.”

For the first time in the two hours of gaming, Solo cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. *Not a good sign* Chewbacca silently thought. Still, Han remained cocky. “You’re just askin’ for trouble, my friend.”

The other only smiled with gold teeth and changed the subject in an effort to distract him from the game. “So what brings a respectable guy like you to this rathole side of the quadrant? I thought you were wrapped up in some damned fool idealistic crusade, instilling a new regime and all.”

Solo hesitated, then grumbled, “Left the wife. Raise another half.”

“See it,” P’har nodded, then leaned forward. “Solo, are you insane? Do you realize the goldmine you’re forfeiting?”

Han slouched in his chair. “Yeah, well, money isn’t everything.”

Chewie couldn't believe the words even as they were spoken. He wuffed a gentle warning which was promptly ignored. Eklon saw his chance and pounced.

"It is now. I call."

The shifting cards froze and Han glared hard at his abysmal hand. After an equally abysmal sigh of defeat, he reached into his left pocket and withdrew a miniature datapad. He punched in a memorized code, a desired amount, and slid it across the table to his opponent.

"I have access to her worship's credit line with the New Republic," Solo bragged. "The pot'll be transferred in a matter of seconds."

Eklon let a slow, sliding whistle. "Have to admit, I'm impressed, Solo. You've done well for yourself."

"I've done more than well." Han smirked. It was true. Even in the service of the Rebel Alliance, he'd lived in a smuggler's luxury.

"I was a bit worried for you after those botched dealings with Jabba," P'har rumbled. "You're too talented to be wasted on a Sarlacc's digestive tract."

"Well, Jabba's history. I am a free man now."

The Nachti scowled at the datapad and retorted, "You're a dead man." Yet, he didn't move for his weapon.

Solo raised an eyebrow. "Pardon?"

The cutthroat slid the datapad back to Han. "You've been denied access, pirate. Seems your princess has taken the necessary financial precautions in your absence. Very wise."

Han stared at the useless pad. "I can't believe she did this to me. How are we gonna eat? How are we gonna fuel the Falcon?"

Chewbacca groaned. *Of course you can believe it. Leia's no fool. I tried to warn you*

Eklon smiled grotesquely. "That's too bad, Solo. Really. I'll have to take your ship instead."

The pirate frowned and let his hand trail down to the blaster at his hip. "Over my dead body."

"That's another alternative," P'har acquiesced. IG-29 lifted a mechanical armful of laser turrets.

That was enough. Chewbacca roared furiously, shaking his fists, and cuffed his friend across the head.

"Ow!" Han complained, "Hey!"

The Wookiee continued a long rant and, curious, P'har motioned his droid to retreat.

“What gives, swindler?”

“Uh...Chewbacca's got a point here, P'har. Killin' me ain't gonna make you any richer.”

“I don't know about that. There are still some kingpins anxious enough to put your head on a platter.”

“But they won't be willing to pay the two mill.”

“Two million, four hundred thousand, and sixty,” P'har corrected.

“Whatever. I *am* respectable, after all. Maybe we can cut a deal.”

Eklon scoffed. “The only payment I'll accept is straight credit, your ship, or your head.”

Solo folded his arms. “Straight credit then. But it's gonna take some time. I need to find work and I've got three kids to look after.” As if struck by a sudden stroke of genius, Han dug through his pockets for a holopad, and activated it for P'har's inspection. “You wouldn't orphan such a good looking bunch, would ya? The youngest one there, Anakin, he's got my eyes.”

“Oh yeah.” Eklon scrutinized the holo. “Cute brats, all right. Still, I've done a lot of orphaning in my day...”

“Then for the sake of credit. This is the only way you'll see a scrap.”

“For the sake of credit?” P'har echoed, grinning from ear to ear. And Solo knew he had won.

Still, in this game, it was a matter of giving what was due. “Come on, Eklon, I've never crossed you. You know I'm not a cheat. An intelligent guy like you should know by now that I'm a man of my word.” He bit his tongue against a bold ‘Trust me’ and the accompanying smirk, looking as painfully subjugated as he could muster without collapsing in stitches.

After the obligatory pause of tense silence, even though his mind had only fleetingly rested on an intent to kill, Eklon watched for the first squirm and finally said, “Then we need to get you employed, first off. There's a certain someone I'd like you to meet. And my sweetheart.”

“I thought you might be the one running this circus.” Han smirked, only mildly surprised to be escorted into the company of Talon Karrde and Mara Jade. “Hello, Karrde.”

Eklon stepped enthusiastically to the side of Mara. “Solo, may I introduce my...”

“Business associate,” Jade finished coldly. “We are all well acquainted, Eklon.”

P'har scratched his bald head. “I didn't realize...”

“Please, Captain, have a seat.” Karrde offered a much too comfortable chair and, as Han slipped into it, remained standing. He began a slow pace and Han winced inwardly—the superiority strut. “What brings you to my little casino among the stars?”

“Left his wife,” P’har blurted and Han shot him a withering look.

Mara raised both eyebrows. “That so?”

“Just takin’ a break,” he growled an answer. “I owe P’har quite a lump of money which I don’t have.” He hastily added, “But I can get it. I just need work. I was thinkin’ maybe...”

Talon cut him off. “Where’s Chewbacca?”

“He went back to the Falcon to keep an eye on the protocol droid and my kids. I told them to blast out of here within the hour if I don’t make it back.” The Wookiee, given the lifedebt he’d taken for Solo, had not liked the proposition one bit. But after haranguing Chewbacca about the greater importance keeping the children safe, Han finally extracted a disgruntled woof that basically meant, “Fine, have it your way”. Content with that, Solo took on this meeting alone, for better or worse.

“I don’t think death is at issue here, Captain,” said Karrde as he twirled his goatee, “unless you continue to dig a grave deeper than you already have. Then P’har and IG-29, in that case, might be obliged to fill it.” Eklon folded his arms too casually and leaned against his massive assassin droid.

“That’s why I intend to pay back every cent as soon as I can,” vowed Solo. “I was the best smuggler in the business...”

“At one time,” replied Mara. “You’re over the hill, Solo. And too clean. We need someone who’s not worried about getting their hands dirty.”

“Haven’t washed my hands in weeks, sweetheart,” cracked Han.

Jade was about to retort when Karrde softly inquired, “How do you feel about glitterstim?”

“Spice?” Han felt his left eyebrow raise and tried to mute his reaction. If the law-and-order New Republic ever found out about the Smuggler’s Guild’s involvement in the spice trade, Ackbar would be smashing heads all over the quadrant. “Nasty stuff. I’d never touch it.”

Talon moved to the giant window and watched a myriad of civilian, New Republic, and even a few brave Imperial craft dart through and around the spokes of his Starlight Casino. “Do you realize what a market we have waiting for us? A good thirty percent of this quadrant uses spice on a regular basis. Just like these poor, deluded Sabacc players, ready to shell out millions all in the name of entertainment.” He paused and half-turned to Han Solo. “There is a phenomenal amount of money to be made here. Let me revise the question, Captain. How do you feel about running glitterstim?”

“Well...” Han leaned forward a bit and smirked. “You are talking to the man who made the Kessel Run in under twelve parsecs.”

Eklon snorted. “Bantha Fodder. I made it in ten just last week. And made delivery safe and sound, not needing to dump cargo at the first scan of an Imperial Star Destroyer.”

“Parsec is a measure of distance, you dimwits,” snapped Mara. “Talon, I really don’t think Solo will be able to pass muster...”

“Now wait just a doggone minute!” cut in Solo. “Things were a lot tougher back in my day. Now you’ve got all this new-fangled equipment I only *dreamed* about! You can always use another good pilot. Right, Karrde?”

Karrde paused briefly and took stock of his company. All were renowned in their areas of expertise and Solo’s flying abilities were beyond compare. Having such a legend in his service would be quite the status booster, so long as certain aspects were not called attention to. Finally, he sat at the conference table in order to bring himself down to Solo’s level, not just physically. “Right you are, my friend.”

“So, how much am I getting paid?”

Talon raised an eyebrow at Eklon P’har. “To work off a two and a half million credit debt? I think it’d be safe to say you’ve got yourself a lifetime career opportunity, Captain.”

Chagrin, Han stretched his hand across the table. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

“Under one condition,” said Mara, interrupting the handshake. “This is no place for children, Solo. I want them gone.”

He slumped back and folded his arms. “Out of the question. The kids stay with me.”

“And what if you, by some unforeseeable stroke of genius, get blown to spacedust? Are you willing to take them with you?”

Solo grumbled, “It’ll never happen.”

Mara scoffed. “That’s right. I forgot I’m in the presence of the great Captain Solo, smuggler extraordinaire and galactic mush-head.”

As Han leaned forward to reply, Karrde interjected, “Mara is right, Han. We have a certain responsibility to our employees but we simply do not have the resources, nor the desire, to care for your children here. You would be foolish to bring them along with you.”

“Then no deal.” Han rose to his feet and met the blaster arm of IG-29.

“You’re not getting away with my winnings, Solo,” P’har stated. “If you go now, I know damn well I’ll never get paid.”

“What, you wanna go jobhunting with me?”

“Tell your droid to back off,” ordered Jade. “Solo, you are not going to find a better deal than what the Smuggler’s Guild is willing to offer. It’s a temporary situation. You can visit the brats in between jobs and have Eklon paid off before you can blink.”

Han blinked. “Yeah?”

Mara placed her hands on her hips. “Yeah.”

The ex-pirate sighed heavily and shook the hand of Talon Karrde. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Karrde grinned pleasantly. “I’ll have a contract ready for you once the children are off station, then Mara will go over details with you. Welcome to the Guild, Captain Solo.”

“Jaina please put those back...Jacen come away from there...Anakin...Oh dear!”

The protocol droid See-Threepio chased after the smuggler’s children for all his servo-drivers were worth, saving them from disaster after disaster. Captain Solo and Chewbacca were arguing again, a situation that was growing more and more frequent since their departure from Coruscant some weeks ago. Threepio only vaguely listened to the dispute, having his attention completely distracted to the task of controlling the youngsters. He emitted the equivalent of a human sigh and wished desperately that Mister Solo would come to his senses and bring him back to Coruscant and his Mistress Leia. He was her property, after all, something the man didn’t seem to comprehend. He blithely noticed the entrance of Mara Jade as he clutched the toddling Anakin out from under the Falcon’s hull.

Han nearly shouted, “Listen, Chewie, I don’t like it either but it’s not like I have a choice in this!”

The Wookiee growled angrily, gesticulating to no end.

“No. Eklon’s gotta be paid or he’ll kill us all. Is that what you want?”

Chewbacca huffed noisily. *What do you think?*

“I think you’re blowing this outta perportion. We can’t just blast out of here like the good ol’ days, buddy. I need to work with these people or my hide is toast. They’re much better organized than Jabba ever was. Do you think I wanna get us into a mess like that again?”

Defeated, Chewie questioned what to do.

“Take the kids to Kashyyyk for a spell, just until I can get P’har paid off. Then we can get out of here without a price on our heads.”

“Oooooorrwa arrrh ahrrrw,” Chewie responded, consenting grudgingly, and stomped off to collect the brats.

“P’har says he wants to tag along to make sure you don’t bow out on the deal,” said Mara as she approached the pirate. “Seems to me you might need a mediator to make sure you don’t kill each

other. Eklon and I have a certain rapport.”

Han nodded slowly. “Good point. Besides, with Chewie gone, I’m gonna need a good co-pilot. That bonehead can’t fly for beans. You game?”

“Absolutely. We’ll run you brats off station and come back for your first assignment. After so many years, Solo, you’re bound to be a bit rusty. I wouldn’t wanna see you fall on your face.”

“That’s good of you, Mara,” Han muttered.

A small throb began at the corner of her skull. “We’d better pick up P’har or we’ll catch hell.”

“Fine.” Solo gestured to the Falcon. “Shall we?”

Jade nodded shortly, brow furrowed, and began to walk with Solo toward the landing ramp. She raised a hand to her head upon reaching the ship, moaned, and had to lean heavily against a hydraulic fitting.

“You all right?” Han asked and steadied her. “Jade?”

Mara squeezed her eyes shut against the urge to swoon. “Yeah. It’s these damned headaches. Just need to rest on the way out and I’ll be fine.”

Unconsciously, her hands lifted to her face to ward off that which came from within.

A scream, though not her own. “Father!”

The girl ran from the tiny shack on some faraway desert planet where laserblasts reverberated through the night. Skywalker followed closely and slashed her down with a quick movement from his lasersword. A second scream in death was never uttered. There simply was not a chance. The Jedi smiled as his sister stepped close to his side, laser rifle in hand. Mara Jade found herself running from the scene, cursing her own cowardice. The sand beneath her feet shifted to hard, metal deck plates and echoed much too loudly with every booted footfall.

“Young fool,” hissed Skywalker through the darkness. “Only now do you see the power of the Dark Side. You will pay the price for your lack of vision!”

Jade whirled to face the voice, disembodied as it was. She was unable to discern its location, unable to see clearly in the unlit chamber, hearing only a deep mechanized respiration.

“Where are you, coward?” she called.

As if in answer, bolts of electrified Force pounded into her body like fingers seeking to crush her spirit. She immediately collapsed. The cavernous chamber was illuminated by the attack and her strained mind recognized Skywalker towering above her with demonic wrath, and beyond Lord Vader and Emperor Palpatine watched in implacable silence.

Palpatine. Her hand stretched toward the ancient figure. “Father,” she gasped. “Help me.”

Skywalker’s visage darkened as he scowled hideously. “Now, my young friend, you will die.”

“Father, please!” she agonized, writhing beneath the intensifying currents.

In that instant, Lord Vader clutched Skywalker with an iron grip and hurled him into a gaping chasm, a mere ragdoll in the hands of the Sith Lord. His lightsaber ignited crimson as he stepped forward to complete the task of his son.

“No!” To the Emperor’s despair, the Force storm resulting from Skywalker’s death engulfed them, destroyed them, annihilated even the planet itself—Anoth.

Jade awoke with a start to find that she still lived although her skull sought to rip at its seams. She pressed the heels of her hands into her eye sockets in an effort to confine the pounding. It only intensified.

“Why?” she groaned.

You are but my shadow, Mara Jade a soft voice echoed through her thoughts.

Mara startled so violently that she tumbled from the sleeping palette, cracking her skull against a stand and lay sprawled in half-conscious agony. The apparition took on a barely human form in whispered coils of black smoke and bent before her.

Palpatine raised you as his own, yet you are so ill-trained in the ways of Darkness

Mara pushed herself to a sitting position and collapsed her head in her hands, swimming in a sudden vertigo.

“I am my own,” she croaked. “I always have been.”

Yet you could not resist his commands. In the end you destroyed the clone of Luke Skywalker. You have failed our Master, my friend

“I have no quarrel with Skywalker,” she protested. “The Emperor is dead. There is no need for me to obey him. If I should chose to kill it will be of my own will, not anyone else’s.”

The spirit laughed quietly, but without humor. A sharp jab of pain lanced through her temples, accompanying the disembodied reply . *Only the most gentle nudge will send you down the correct Path. One day, you will comply*

Mara groaned dumbly. “Gentle? What?”

She removed her hands from her face to find the Falcon’s sleeping chamber suddenly devoid of visitors. Her right hand brushed against cool metal and it took some strength to coerce her gaze to follow it. A weapon rested near her feet. Her breath caught in her chest as she touched it. The

lightsaber of Anakin Skywalker. Mara Jade sat motionless for what seemed many hours.

II.

Leia was anxious to leave, it seemed, and had spent most of the day arguing with members of the Senate to authorize her absence. It shouldn't have mattered since they were not in session anyway, but there were certain political issues concerning her traipsing off with the infamous Jedi. She was over an hour late and night was beginning to fall over Imperial City. Jedi Master Luke Skywalker waited patiently near the entrance of Docking Bay 14 for his sister-apprentice, unaffected by any of it. His mind touched briefly on the issue of the ghostly Kayla Storm, knowing now what she was, what she was trying to accomplish, but at a loss as to what could be done. Kayla Storm sought her vengeance through manipulating those around him. His lips tightened in a grim smile. Manipulation had always been his old lover's strong suit, and tragic flaw. He thought perhaps it was a losing battle for Storm, to fight so constantly against that which was destined, for her soul would be consumed by the Dark Side in totality. It was, in fact, inevitable. They needed merely to wait it out until she was diffused into the Force. As it might be a long wait, he concentrated on bolstering Leia's strength through meditation. He also wanted to develop in her some control over the dreaming state, as it became more apparent that was the medium through which Storm was most likely to appear. Leia's spirit was greatly wounded by her husband's leaving and he worried a bit over how that might play out in her training. She was becoming stronger now that the shock was passing, and more susceptible to anger rather than despair. He hoped silently that Han would not return until her training was complete, if at all. Han could bring about a wrath that might rival even his in the final confrontation with Darth Vader, and then Kayla Storm. Love and hate were but flip sides of the same coin. Leia needed patience and control to deal with such matters. Something she lacked.

"I'm sorry, Luke. They didn't want to let me go but after a little political arm-twisting, I managed to get an entire standard month."

Skywalker looked at his sister and the work-droid who hefted probably a metric ton of luggage. "A month won't be nearly enough time. What's all this?"

"Personal items. Clothes, data pads, foodstuffs, medical supplies...you'll never know what we might need. It *is* a primitive moon, after all." Leia raised her eyebrows, fully expecting him to concede.

Luke absolutely did not. "No. One change of clothes, one medpac, and one blaster. You will need nothing else."

"But..."

Her brother shifted through the items until he found the required materials, then ordered, "Droid, take these things back to her highness' chamber and put them away. Thank you."

Leia shifted her gaze from her Jedi Master to the retreating droid and back again, exasperated. "Luke, I *need* those things. What are you doing?"

“A Jedi needs only the Force,” Luke told her. “Those things we require for survival will be provided.”

Before she could argue further, he turned abruptly and entered the docking bay. Leia swore under her breath and followed.

Endor glowed emerald-like in the stillness of space, finally at peace after the historic battle that turned the tide of the Galactic Civil War. The Empire was all but crushed and hid well out of anybody’s reach, not that anybody much cared now. What mattered was that they were gone, for the most part. And, also for the most part, peace reigned where terror had so recently flourished. Still, in synchronous orbit above the forest moon, a dark shadow loomed like a desperate imprint of the past, demanding its memory be kept alive. Luke shuddered and was compelled to wake from his dreamless slumber. His skin felt cold and he stared at the even colder space, the haunts of his near loss and his father’s victory echoing through his mind. *This is not so much a Dark place* he reminded himself *but the place of our father’s redemption. We must always remember that*

Beside him, Leia cried out in her sleep, perhaps reliving her own recollection. He placed her hand in his and woke her.

“Luke, the Emperor...” she gasped.

“It’s only a memory,” he assured her. “Better ones await us below.”

“Look there! Look there!” Massagi cried and waved his black-furred arm toward the heavens.

Two other brash young Ewoks, like himself, dropped everything and craned their necks to see what was falling.

“A bird!” One called Thuti gasped. “What a tremendous bird!”

“It shines like the sun!” exclaimed Soona. “We must catch it for Ivaloo’s Soul Tree!”

“No no!” shouted Massagi. “It is as the Elders say, the metal bird brings death! We must kill it and make a feast!”

Yes, indeed. The Elders spoke of a tremendous feast when the Star of Death was destroyed. The Allians had left quickly, almost ungratefully, to another war and had missed the days of gorging and full tummies. For it is always good to eat one’s enemy to be sure its spirit would not harm one, or many.

“Get your spears!” he barked. “Come! Come! Get your spears!”

At once they were full of activity, sharpening the well-used points and fashioning only the very best feathers for their bone and leather hunting caps.

“Eee-yi! Yiii!” they shouted and traipsed through the village. “Get the pot ready! We hunt the metal bird!”

The women busied themselves for the festival.

The band of scouts came quickly to see what had come from the heavens, armed to the teeth with spears, clubs, and maces. The bird was indeed tremendous, bigger even than some of the young trees, and they approached with caution. The Oolo bird burst out with song overhead, much too loudly. Thuti hushed at it and waved his spear, fearing the metal bird might be frightened from its resting place. The metal bird moved not, perhaps exhausted from such a long journey. That was good. It would be an easy kill and they would eat for many seasons.

It was not good when the bird opened its beak and regurgitated perhaps the two ugliest creatures any of them had ever seen. They were stringy giants with no fur except some sparse stuff upon their heads, perhaps as tall as three Ewok standing on the others' shoulders. The hunters screamed out oaths to the wicked Night Spirit and fell back, holding their weaponry before them to guard against the creatures.

“What are you!” Massagi demanded, immediately regarding himself as leader.

The taller one with straw hair looked to the other and spoke under its breath. The other creature shook its head, slowly.

“Quit your whispering! What are you!” he demanded again.

“Perhaps they are deaf?” offered Soona.

“Perhaps they are dumb,” replied Thuti.

The short one, perhaps only two and one working in height, and with long hair the color of mud, stepped forward and made noise. It was liquid like song, but still made no sense. Just noise.

“Can’t you speak right!” Massagi hollered. “Speak!”

Meanwhile, brave Soona went to the metal bird and attempted to run it through. The spear snapped. “This one, we can’t eat. The skin is too tough.”

Thuti retorted, “You just have a weak spear.”

“No, it is like rock.”

“It’s no rock, mooka, it’s a bird!”

“I’m no mooka. It’s a rock with wings. See?” Soona thrust his broken spear toward a giant wing

“Ahhhh,” Thuti realized and bowed low. “My pardon to you, Soona. You are indeed no mooka. I’ll give you my bowl at the festival tonight.”

Soona patted his friend’s shoulder. “We share our bowls.”

“Thuti! Soona! Enough!” barked Massagi. “We cannot eat the bird so we will eat what comes from its insides. Chief Warrick will be pleased.”

This seemed to reach the ears of the creatures and the short one began to make more incomprehensible noise, but the Ewoks recognized a snatch of it. “....Wicket?....Chirpa?Allians....Death Star...”

“They know the stories,” gasped Soona.

“Tie them!” Massagi shouted, waving his spear fiercely. “It is not good. Come!”

The short one shook its head in defeat and made noise to the other. Massagi coerced his two companions forward with rope and, to their amazement, the alien creatures surrendered without argument. The one with yellow hair made noise then and bared its teeth, however dulled and ugly white. The leader of the group didn’t like the look of the fangs and gave the creature a poke with his spear. The teeth vanished and they moved on with the captives, unaware that a third creature, made of the same stuff as the bird, lurked within its maw.

The Ewok village that crested the towering forest was much as it had been several years before, as nothing changed very rapidly in backwater worlds like these. The aliens were poked and prodded into the central courtyard, where a giant black kettle awaited its ingredients. The hunters were welcomed like heroes and strutted through the square to show off their catch. The water was ready and tummies were empty. The short creature began to squirm at first, then made soft noises like running water. The noises grew louder though and its face strained and blushed angrily. Thuti poked it and told it to shut up, but it suddenly stopped short before the kettle and shouted loudly, clearly incensed, and waved its bound paws in the air. The taller one only stood and seemed to disapprove. Again, they recognized the names of Chirpa and Wicket and wondered about it. But they were also hungry.

A hush came upon the village, stunned by the creature’s outburst. The monotonous pounding of drums soon echoed through the treetops to announce the entrance of the tribal chief and the captives turned in the direction of cheering and hollers. A middle-aged Wicket W. Warrick stepped into the village square, followed closely by his wife and wokling, and the Council of Elders.

“Wicket!” the short one called. How dare anyone call the great Chief by his given name?

Upon seeing her, the chief leapt high in the air and jigged to and fro among his subjects, chittering and chattering his excitement. “Oh, beautiful! The Allians has come! Oh, beautiful! It is good! Our lost tribe is home! It is good!”

He rushed upon the aliens and swept his arms about the short one in a tight hug that nearly sent them both tumbling to the ground, then barked orders to the scouts that the humans were to be set free at once, for they were indeed members of the tribe.

One of the Ewoks pinched at the tall one’s arm and twittered disparagingly to Massagi. “What good is this? There is no meat on him! Do you wish us to starve?”

Thuti agreed heartily, “They are no meal, these two. I’m glad we did not eat them.”

“It is good we have not,” muttered Soona quietly.

“Still, our tummies are empty,” growled Massagi.

“Then go hunt, mooka!” ordered Warrick. “We must feast! Go hunt!”

The three rushed off and Wicket turned his attention to the Princess of Alderaan and the Jedi in full. The Jedi, Sky Walk, made soft noises to his sister and she, Ley’ah, tried to speak correctly, but could not.

Wicket scratched his ear and muttered to the Council. “She tries to talk, but what? Where is the Goldenrod?”

“Wicket, do not be so rude.” His wife gave him a sharp jab and stepped forward to be introduced.

He gestured excitedly. “My wife Asiak. My wokling Ivaloo. We are feasting not only for you but for the planting of my wokling’s Soul Tree, as we have just returned from it. We will share bowls with one another and you will tell more stories of the Allians long into the night.”

Ley’ah bowed her head and repeated the names honorably.

Wicket spoke again, gesturing to both her and Sky Walk. “What brings you home, my brethren?”

The two looked at each other hopelessly. They simply did not know the talk. They made their own noises which the chief could not remember, so many long seasons had passed. He nodded in polite mock-understanding and the Elders followed his lead. He asked again, raising his voice a bit, but received the same non-response. It would not be good manners to shout, so he licked her paw in friendship and became quiet.

A tense silence fell upon the entire tribe as they just stood there smiling, a few of the braver woklings darting in and out and around the human legs. Ley’ah smiled back. Sky Walk smiled. They were getting nowhere fast.

After a moment, Wicket clapped his hands together and shouted. “The hunters will bring us good meat! Let us be happy! It is good!”

The drumming started up again but in a more frenzied rhythm and the Ewoks ran and tumbled and danced through the village. Ivaloo leapt into the arms of the Jedi and played with the folds of his black cloak. Asiak watched him make disgruntled noises to the princess, who smiled and returned the noise with chiding. The chief’s wife was glad to see her twirl and dance into the throng of fur and spears. It was good, indeed.

“Go on!” she goaded Sky Walk. “Be happy!”

Sky Walk chuckled as the wokling tickled at him and removed her from his cloak. He passed

Ivaloo off to her mother and quietly joined the festivities. A banquet was about to be prepared.

It was amazing how little the humans would eat. At first Asiak thought it rude, but then realized that their tummies must have grown small from starvation. Poor creatures! She huddled near Sky Walk and watched him resolutely eat his fill of beautifully tough, tendony meat, tremendously sweet berries that were the size of her head, and attempted slow progress through the communication gap. The meat was called blope, she told and showed him. The berries blumfruit. He nodded thoughtfully at her repeated shouts and gesticulating. The milk came from a tree goat and Asiak pointed out the monkey-like goat creatures that hung further up in the branches. Another female Ewok pushed him to take on more food, pinching his arms to indicate he must be almost dead, so thin.

“Gunda! Yes? It is good!” Asiak approved, trying her hand at their speech.

“Yes, gunda,” the Jedi replied and leaned over to whisper to Ley’ah.

Ley’ah had been thoroughly enjoying herself up until that point. Asiak frowned and folded her arms. It was not good to spoil another’s happiness, even if one was not happy himself. They made noise about Jedi this and Jedi that until finally Ley’ah brushed him off and smiled at the curious Ewoks.

“What did they say?” Oomiak, the village shaman, began questioning over and over about the Jedi. Ley’ah tried to explain, but her restricted vocabulary fell short and plunged their company into frustration.

Wicket jumped in immediately to her defense and came up with his own definition. “The Jedi is he who guards the Tree of Light. And the Tree of Light keeps the Night Spirit from our woklings when the sun is gone.”

Sky Walk sat forward and gestured to his sister. “My sister...Jedi...wokling.”

The Ewok whispered among themselves.

Asiak giggled to her husband, “Sky Walk talks funny.”

“I am the shaman here!” bellowed Oomiak, “Then I am Jedi also! The Night Spirit doesn’t dare fight such a warrior as me!”

Chief Warrick shook his head. “Sit down, Oomiak, before your old back snaps in half. The Jedi tries to make the talk. Let us hear him.”

They tried to listen to the broken tongue but could not. They heard only of the importance that Ley’ah learn, and not rest until she has done so. Finally, Wicket laid a gentle paw on the paw of his beloved human princess. Oh, beautiful! “You are my brethren, Ley’ah. My tribe is your tribe, my hut your hut, even my bowl your bowl. Enough of your noises. Sleep on comfortable mats and go when the sun comes. The Tree of Light is forever. The Tree of Light can wait.”

Ley’ah nodded her thanks and looked at her brother, sighing relief. Both sides had come to at least

a partial understanding.

Morning came far too swiftly after the late night of carousing, but Luke Skywalker was awake at first light. He peaked in on his sister and decided against rousing her just yet. A few of the Ewok were groggily stumbling about the messy courtyard in an effort to clean up and prepare the communal breakfast. One offered Luke a sticky-sweet blumfruit which he promptly accepted and offered thanks. He slipped quietly downward and away from the village through a maze of bridges, ladders, and ropes. There was a visitation Luke felt compelled to make.

The funeral pyre was still intact and, amazingly, undisturbed by the creatures of this place. Luke came upon it almost by instinct, rather than memory, and stood in silence to feel out the company that surrounded him. Wildlife were everywhere, some carnivorous, and one of the young hunters was stalking a blope not far away, somewhat disturbed by Luke's intrusion. The Force bound them all into one entity, but of Darth Vader, there was nothing.

"Father," he spoke beneath his breath, "I think of you often. Know that I love you. Don't let what I am about to say make that seem any less." The Jedi drew in a deep breath and plunged ahead. "I could have brought this out at anytime, in any place because you are one with the Force. Yet my sister was right, the memory of your presence here is especially strong, for me at least. Father, I feel you, or rather the Force, led me astray in regard to Kayla Storm. First, you advised me to take her as my apprentice when I was not prepared. Then, when I'd nearly killed both her and myself, you wished me to turn her away from the Dark Side when it was destined to be a futile attempt. She is dead now, but her spirit is rebellious. Why did any of it have to happen? Why did you bring me through that pain?" He paused, listening to nothing. "Father, will you not answer me?"

Silence answered him. Luke bowed his head lower and felt the depth of an agony well hidden, an agony of betrayal and death that followed his portion so intimately.

An arm wrapped about him and his sister whispered, "Luke, I don't think it was because of our father that those things happened."

He lifted his gaze and waited for his apprentice to speak further.

"I think..." Leia tried to collect her thoughts, and spoke delicately in the presence of her brother's pain. "...the Force does things according to its own design. I wonder...how much of it is good and evil, and how much of it is just...the Force? We all must change what we can and simply accept that which is unchangeable. Even with those who are still alive."

This produced a small, satisfied grin. "You are learning, sister."

"Wicket says he'll meet us at the shuttle within the hour with some supplies, and a gift from the shaman Oomiak. He's anxious for us to be on our way so we can return all the sooner. I spent most of the night talking with these people. I wish...I wish my children could have been here."

"I know." He met her gaze and extended his love in silence. Luke placed her arm across his elbow. "Onward, apprentice."

A coldness surrounded her. Surely it was just a bad dream, like all the others she was so prone to in life. Palpatine had used this as a means to his own end, but she had won. Had she? In killing Skywalker's clone had she really won? Or did she only put off the inevitable? Tangling with destiny was a serious thing. Mara traced the activation stud of the ancient lightsaber. If it had all been a dream, how is it she received this? She watched the bluish beam of energy materialize and illuminate the sleeping chamber. It hypnotized. It drew her closer. Beyond, she saw a reflection in mirrored steel that should have been hers but was strangely unfamiliar. The hair was black as tar while her own was fiery red, the face ghastly pale and hollowed, the eyes sunken into tiny emerald pinpricks. Listless, she moved her stare back to the humming lightsaber, drawn to it like a moth to a flame. *You are but my shadow, Mara Jade* Is that what the voice had said? A shadow of what? Mara shivered and tried to pull herself out of this bizarre stupor. Her headache had left but she felt oddly unattached to life, oddly indifferent to any of it. Transfixed, she moved her free hand closer to the glowing blade. It emanated no warmth, only light. Her hand moved closer still until the tip of her index finger touched the light and crisped. Mara hissed sharply and dropped the lightsaber, deactivated. The fingernail was blackened char and burning pain shot up her spine to bring her to what she believed to be her senses.

"Skywalker must have done this," she murmured and sucked hard on the throbbing wound. *Why?* she wondered and silently answered herself, *Because of everything else he's done* It was not a satisfying response, but Mara had to turn her thoughts from him lest she lose her mind.

When Jade finally ventured into the hold, she found the Millennium Falcon devoid of life. Natural light spilled onto the flooring from various ports and cast surreal shadows throughout the ship. A lump stirred somewhere beyond her field of vision; she sensed it before seeing it, and whirled with deactivated lightsaber clutched in both hands. Not quite devoid of life. An easy mistake. Eklon P'har was but a rung lower in the gene pool. What was worse, he had a certain interest in Mara that was not all business. He was the best assassin in the Smuggler's Guild since she, of course, had retired that service. But if it weren't for Talon Karrde, P'har would be lucky to make it to his next Sabacc game. The man was good at his job, though unfortunately somewhat lacking in genius. Eklon snored loudly and shifted in the corner of a padded bench while IG-29 sat stoically beside him, either deactivated or oblivious to the weapon Mara possessed. Jade inhaled deeply and slipped the lightsaber into her jumpsuit, out of sight.

"Please, sir!" shrilled Threepio, "Please don't leave me on a planetful of flea-bitten mopheads!"

One of the surrounding Wookiees growled dangerously but Chewbacca held her in check, muttering his own soft explanation of the talkdroid's temperament. Mara Jade stepped down the landing ramp, barely noticed.

"The kids are gonna need someone to translate Wookiee." Solo frowned. "It might be some time before I get back. Chewie's gonna need your help."

"But, sir, I simply cannot tolerate any more of this outrageous behavior," the droid complained.

"You wanna see outrageous?" Han threatened half-heartedly. Goldenrod just wasn't allowed to get in the last word. It was a given.

“Please take me back to Coruscant, to civilization! I am the property of Mistress Leia, after all!”

“No.” The smuggler glowered until Threepio fell into silence, then crouched before the three young children. No tears through this whole ordeal, and not one question. It may be they were trying to be strong, but in a way, it was frightening. Had Luke twisted them already? “I love you,” he said.

“We know,” they responded and enveloped him in tiny hugs. Han kissed them each and rose to face Chewbacca and his countrymen. “You’ll take good care of them, right?”

Chewie snorted affirmatively and smothered Solo in a crushing embrace.

“Ow!” Han gasped, “Take it easy...”

His friend retreated and whined plaintively about life debts.

“I know, I know. But like I said before, keeping these kids safe is more important, and they need someone around that they trust. You’re just gonna have to sit this one out.”

Chewie whimpered, softly now.

“I said I’d be back, didn’t I?” Solo frowned, his words sounding false even to his own ears. He scratched Chewbacca’s neck. “Go on and get them settled.”

Mara heard the conversation only distantly as she stared at the Wookiee metropolis. The city was enormous, comprised of wood and metal intricately woven from the treetops, the trees themselves serving as the foundation that stretched on as far as the eye could see. The trees also were enormous and plummeted ever downward into the fog and nothingness. Yet, somewhere below, there had to be ground in which the roots of these giants could find nourishment. There just had to be.

“These trees...” she muttered. “It’s like I’ve seen them before. But not here...not this planet...”

Solo didn’t hear her, staring after his children as they climbed into a far off transport, to be taken to a far off place. “Here I am trying to do right by my kids...”

“Endor...” Mara whispered, feeling as if she were dreaming again. “But...I’ve never been there.”

“...and here I am shuffling them off to a bunch of scraggly fuzzballs.” Han passed a hand across his face and turned his attention to Mara for the first time. Crys, was she pale! Last thing he needed was the Falcon to be quarantined indefinitely. “So, you back from the dead or what?”

Mara shook her head slowly, “I’m not sure. Something...”

“Something,” Han echoed. “Great. All I need right now is another *something*. C’mon, sweetheart, let’s get this show in lane.”

The Starlight Casino drifted weightlessly in space, its immense size not needing a planet’s gravity to keep it relatively put. It was located nowhere. That’s just what Karrde, and the bulk of his clientele

liked about it. He strode quietly through the rows of canvas bags and paused occasionally to check the contents. The supplier, a green-skinned Rodian with large eyes of unreadable black, followed him closely.

“The spice is the finest quality I’ve had yet to find.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” replied Karrde, quickly silencing any conversation. He stopped before one of the bags and pulled on his gloves. Quite carefully, he dipped one hand into the spice while covering his mouth and nose with the other. He scrutinized the texture and the crimson properties of the glitterstim. It sparkled subtly. “Yes, this is finer than the Kessel Spice we’ve received thusfar. Where did you get it?”

“It is not in my interest to divulge such information.”

Karrde scowled and brushed his gloves off compulsively. “You’re trying to carry a monopoly on this? Do you really think the Guild has an ounce of patience for such tactics?”

The Rodian folded his arms casually. “Your only alternative is to traffic substandard spice.”

“There is another alternative,” replied Talon, eyes narrowing. “I could bring the New Republic into this and force your house to its knees.”

“Then all spice traffic will fail. You cannot afford that. Nor can you afford an investigation into your organization.”

Karrde considered. “All right, Merk. I’ll play along for the time being. House Cedes will receive shipment within the standard week and you’ll receive payment shortly after. Let me warn you. If this domination over the market continues, I may have to become less lenient in my dealings with the Rodians.”

“That will only be your loss. Who is smuggling the spice into the Cedes’ quadrant? I wish to give specific instructions in regard to its handling.”

“No one you know. All of my employees are well versed in the proper management of spice transport.” Karrde fiddled with his goatee. Han Solo’s name brought with it a certain liability. Ever since the death of the bounty hunter Greedo, the Rodians had been pretty anxious to hunt him down. But Solo was unhuntable, only the late Boba Fett with the assistance of an overzealous Dark Lord was able...

“Well?” Merk tapped his feet impatiently. “Who is it?”

“Eklon P’har.” It wasn’t a complete lie, was it? Talon slid into that mode easily. “P’har has shown interest in broadening his horizons a bit. Mara Jade is accompanying him. Your shipment will reach House Cedes undisturbed.”

Satisfied, Merk voiceprinted the contract held out to him and took his leave. And not a moment too soon. Within moments of the Rodian’s departure, the Millennium Falcon arched toward the space

station.

“Hurry up,” Solo barked at IG-29. “We’ve got a deadline to make, scrap.”

Eklon P’har lifted both eyebrows. “Scrap? Need I remind you IG-29 is the finest killdroid in the galaxy?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Han waved him off. “I’ve heard it all before, Eklon.”

P’har grumbled as he hefted a bag of glitterstim over his left shoulder, “Seems to me *you* should be the one breaking your back over this stuff. You are the loser, if I remember.”

“Well, ya know, memory’s kind of a funny thing. Maybe you’re the one that owes money, huh?”

“I don’t see you putting much sweat into this deal, Solo. That ain’t right.”

Han straightened proudly and placed a hand on his chest. “Me? I’m doing plenty. I’m orchestrating. The port cargo hold will do just fine, pal.”

The cutthroat noted Talon Karrde’s watchful gaze and leaned toward Solo to speak low. “One day, Solo...”

“Don’t give me that. I know deep down, you really like me.”

Chagrin, P’har left the threat unfinished and followed his droid into the Millennium Falcon. Karrde immediately approached.

“You’d better watch yourself with him, Captain,” he warned.

Han smirked and sat on the landing ramp. “I’m not worried about Eklon. He’s got about the intelligence of a Gundark in heat.”

Karrde continued, grave. “P’har may not be bright, but he is dangerous. I’m not quite sure how much control I have over him.”

“Not my fault, not my problem. Got a contract for me?”

“Yes.” Talon handed over a datapad and watched Han scan the contents. “Once you’ve paid off your debt, renewal of your position is voluntary. The Smuggler’s Guild could really use someone with your renowned talent.”

“Aren’t you worried about word getting out? There are a lot of people who might not take kindly to me being a part of your organization. Could be bad for business.”

“Depends on how estranged you are from the New Republic,” Karrde shrugged. “There’s nothing wrong with being a nominal citizen. Fighting for a bunch of politicians, on the other hand...”

“I’m not fighting for any politicians,” Han quickly put in. “Just so long as the Empire stays put in its place.”

“Well then?” Karrde gestured to the datapad.

“Everything seems in order,” Han muttered, then pressed a button.

“Voiceprint requested,” intoned the computer.

“Han Solo.”

“Contract certified.”

Karrde accepted the pad with a wry grin. “The contract is now binding, Captain.”

“One thing.” Solo kicked his heels across the ramp. “I don’t want Mara Jade coming along. Something’s wrong with her and the last thing I need is to be quarantined.”

“You won’t be quarantined if you do your job right.”

“Even the finest can be caught,” he replied soberly. Ten years ago, Han would never have stated such a blasphemy. But maturity and experience brought with them some painful truths. “If I am, the spice can always be dumped. But I don’t wanna risk quarantine because of some nauseated dame.”

“Why, Solo, keep this up and I might get the idea you actually give a damn.” Both men raised their eyes to watch Mara Jade as she closed the gap between her and the Millennium Falcon. She looked refreshed, full of life even, and grinned broadly. “Now do I look like some ‘nauseated dame’ to you?”

“But just a few minutes ago...”

“I’m fine. Shall we?”

Han’s brow furrowed. “Something’s screwy here. Just a few minutes ago this dame was pale as a ghost, flat on her back, and mumbling like some kind of psychopath. Karrde, I do not want her coming along.”

“If I don’t come along, you and P’har are liable to rip each other to shreds, and that’s not going to get the spice delivered, is it?”

“Agreed,” stated Talon. Karrde pointed a finger in his face as Solo rose to his feet. “Now you listen. Under no circumstances are you to dump the spice. Not *this* spice. Do you hear me?”

“Yeah, I hear,” Solo grumbled. “Must be worth quite a lot...”

“Due to the quality and the amount that is being shipped to House Cedes, let’s just say you will have your debt paid in full if you succeed. If you don’t, you’ll be with me for the rest of your life.”

Han whistled softly. Spice trade was disgusting, but lucrative. Very lucrative. The sooner he could pay off P'har, the sooner he could be with his kids, the sooner he could let himself think about Leia. Until then, there was work to be done.

“All loaded up, Solo!” P'har called from the hold.

“Start preflight!” he called back and shook hands with Karrde. “I'll be back with the credit transfer within the week.”

“Good luck, Captain,” nodded Karrde. He watched the veteran gain the landing ramp and turned to Jade. “Mara, you take care. You're a valuable ally and I'd hate to lose you.”

“I'm touched by your concern, Talon.” She kissed him lightly. “Good-bye.”

“Uh...good-bye.” He stared, shocked, as she left in a slightly teasing gait, and had to remind himself to step a safe distance away as the Falcon ignited its hot repulsorlifts. Jade was tough as nails, not some flirt. Something was wrong. Maybe she really was ill. She was definitely not herself, in any case.

The cargo ship lifted majestically into the air for but a moment, then bolted for space.

“Why did you leave her?” Jade asked out of the blue.

Han blinked hard. Not much took him by surprise these days but Mara was quite the exception. With all these constant mood swings, it was difficult to anticipate much of anything from her. “Wha...? That's none of your business.”

“It's all my business, Han,” she answered smoothly. “Something's troubling you and that may interfere with your job performance.”

“I don't mix business with personal matters,” grumbled Solo. “Since when did you start on this first name basis anyhow?”

“Does it bother you?”

“No, it doesn't bother me. Just a little surprised at you being so...nice.”

Mara smiled softly at this. “You're more than my business associate, Han.” She rested a hand on his knee. “You are my friend.”

Solo glanced at her hand, then at her eyes. They were the deepest green he had ever gazed upon. He didn't remember them being so green, although he also didn't remember taking much notice. Now he did and hated himself for it.

“Was it because of Skywalker?” she ventured and hit way too close to the mark.

He inhaled and exhaled deeply, glancing back to make sure Eklon and his tin man weren't

eavesdropping near the cockpit entry. “Yeah. He wanted to make her and the kids Jedi. She decided that took precedence over her family and I decided keeping my children sane took precedence over her.”

“You’ve done the right thing.”

“I’m not so sure,” Han replied and wondered why the hell he was being so open with her, and why the hell it felt so comfortable. But it was. The hand resting on his knee was warm. He watched the mottled vista of hyperspace. “It’s just...I can’t...Luke’s just changed so much. You should have known him ten years ago.”

“I did,” she whispered, but Han didn’t hear.

“I just can’t stand the thought of her *changing* like that...” A knot tightened in his throat and he was forced to stop, angry at it.

“These spicers,” Mara said with disdain. “They think it’s so grand to indulge in this addiction. To see as they think a Jedi must see. But for them the spice wears off. For me, the Force has brought me nothing but pain. It’s not something I can simply leave behind. I wish I’d never discovered it. I wish he’d never taught me.”

“I know what ya mean,” Han murmured. Then he stopped short. “He...taught you? When?”

She spoke distantly. “We had an affair. For a time, I carried his child. Then the child died because he refused it.” Her face paled, as if she struggled with some dark emotion that plagued her. “It happened while we were on Myrkyr.”

“What?!” He raised a hand to his forehead and shook his head in disbelief. “Oh for Crys-sake, Luke. No wonder you’d given him some death mark.”

“It seems like forever since it happened. It seems like it’s still happening.”

“Mara, I’m sorry I misjudged you. I always thought you were a little bit nuts for hating him like you do, but you have good reason.”

She moved from her seat to kneel beside the pilot’s chair. “And you? Have you come to hate Luke Skywalker as well?”

Han rubbed his head to confine a headache that was starting to split from the temples. “Luke and I just don’t see eye to eye on some things. I don’t think you can call that hate.”

“He stole your wife,” Mara whispered. “In the end, it was he that won the girl.”

“I can’t talk about this, Mara,” he grumbled, throat tight. “If I can’t get her off my mind, I’m not gonna be able to fulfill my contract. If I turn into some basket-case, that’s not gonna get this spice delivered. P’har’ll kill me, or some damned Imperial remnant, or some law-and-order Ackbar crony...”

Mara touched his rough cheek. “I’ll get her off your mind.”

“No, don’t...”

She kissed him lingeringly and the smuggler was, for once, silenced. “Think about that for a change, pirate.” Jade touched his lips with a finger and left the cockpit.

Han squeezed his eyes shut and smashed his head back against the seat. “Leia,” he breathed. “Leia, I’m sorry...”

Beyond the cockpit entry, Jade turned pallid and cupped her mouth as if she might vomit.

“Mara?” Eklon rushed to her side. “What did he do?”

She pushed him away and ran.

In the lavatory on board the Millennium Falcon, Mara Jade hunkered over the washbasin and splashed frigid, recycled water over her face. She propped her elbows on the basin’s edge and stared at the reflection in a mirror.

“The hell was all that?” she whispered. “What’s wrong with me? What...?”

Skywalker She listened to the nearly audible thought and was stunned by the sense that it made. Skywalker was an enemy. Skywalker carried her death mark even when they were at peace. It was because of him that Emperor Palpatine, the man who had raised her like his own daughter, was dead. It was because of him that Talon Karrde’s organization on Myrkyr was discovered and destroyed. It was because of him that Coruscant, the Smuggler’s Guild’s only link to respectability, was nearly destroyed. It was because of him, then, that all of this was happening to her. What of this spirit? What of its lies? Somehow it had relation to Luke Skywalker and therefore he was responsible for this, her nightmares, her headaches, her loss of self-mastery. He, at the very least, knew what was transpiring and raised not a hand in help. It was so typical of Skywalker, to withhold knowledge. The reflection shifted, ghost-like, to one she had seen before—gray, dark, skeletal...vampiric. It laughed at her goadingly.

You cannot fight this, Mara. We are too alike

Mara caught her breath and plunged her head into the basin entirely. Instantly she sprung out of the near freezing liquid, drenched and gasping for air that burned her lungs. She glared hard at the mirror and found her own image glaring back.

“Bitch!” she hissed. It was time to act while she still had her wits about her. It was time to find the hypocritical Jedi Master.

“What did you do to her?!” P’har demanded.

“I didn’t do anything to her!” bellowed Han.

“Don’t you *ever* touch her! Mara is mine!”

“Oh, is that why she hasn’t said more than two words to you?”

“Solo, you leave her alone or I’ll take your worthless head off!”

“You’ll take my *worthless* head off? Moron!” Han stalked from the cockpit, closely followed by the dark-skinned assassin. “You’re not gonna get paid *that* way, buddy.”

“Having your head is worth the price!”

“Oh, yeah?” Solo bumped into IG-29 and glared at it. “Outta my way, scrap.”

As he turned to further the argument, Eklon P’har curled a fist and hooked it across Solo’s jaw. Han tumbled to the ground and found his assailant was all over him, his large hands finding his throat with deft skill, and strength.

“P’har,” he choked, “we can cut a deal…”

But Eklon had reached his limit. The hands tightened and Solo felt bones crack before his breath could even be stopped. There was a faint hum before the assassin collapsed in a stinking, burning heap on top of him, dispatched by the blue-glowing lightsaber of Mara Jade. IG-29 took aim and almost finished what P’har had begun. Han shoved the body into the first bolt and rolled aside. Mara parried and deflected the laserblasts with an agility that rivaled that of Luke Skywalker. She moved in and severed IG-29 through its middle with a quick slice. It belched black smoke and crashed downward, scrap.

“Where did you get that?” Han gasped and stared as she approached him, only managing to prop himself on one elbow.

“From a friend.” She pointed the blade at his throat.

“Mara…”

“Solo, I want you to dump the spice and set course for the Endor moon.”

“I can’t dump the spice, I signed a contract.” Han gestured hopelessly. “Why do you gotta do this to me? Every spicer in the galaxy is gonna be after me not to mention the entire Smuggler’s Guild…”

“Solo.” She moved the blade closer so Han dared not to move. “The debt is finished. Dump the spice and set course if you ever want to see you wife again.”

The pirate swallowed audibly and nodded only once.

Native creatures stirred restlessly as they settled in for the evening slumber. The planet Endor was just beginning to rise as its yellow sun dipped to the opposite horizon. Leia Organa Solo scanned the treetops with a pair of electrobinoculars and saw nothing but deceptive tranquility. These woods

were dangerous, as they'd already found out in confrontations with certain predators. She dropped down to her brother's side as he bandaged a gash on his right forearm. The bearlike creature smoldered nearby, run through with his lasersword, a heap of claws and teeth and hair. It would be food enough to last them a week, in any case. Leia kicked a rock into the campfire and crouched next to her brother.

"I couldn't see any others in the trees. I can't believe they just drop out of the branches like that."

"Very resourceful," Luke muttered, and pulled on his torn shirt.

"Are you all right?" she asked, concerned.

Luke waved it off. "Fine. You really didn't need to scramble up there. I can sense the creatures for miles around."

"Then why...?"

"I wanted to see if you could as well. And if a future Jedi Knight would come to the defense of her teacher."

Leia lowered her gaze. "These tests of yours may get us killed, ya know."

Her brother smiled wanly. "It may be the only way I can get you to learn, ya know." Leia looked at him, almost hurt, but caught the smile. "I'm kidding. You're doing better than I ever could have hoped. Endor's moon really seems to agree with you. Perhaps this is where I should set up an Acedemy, if the Ewoks wouldn't mind."

"Really?"

Luke shrugged. "Maybe in a few years. We'll have to see." A cinder jumped out of the fire and he kicked it back in with a black boot, becoming subdued. "Leia, have you sensed anything out of the ordinary in your meditations? Have you been troubled by the spirit of Kayla Storm?"

"No. The dreams have stopped completely ever since we left Coruscant." Leia frowned. "I'm not very good at sensing anything beyond your presence, Luke. Why? What have you seen?"

"Something that is not my destiny, but yours."

"If it's mine, why haven't I been able to see it?"

"I think that perhaps being a good brother and a good Jedi Master don't necessarily coincide. I've tried to shield you from it until I thought you were prepared," he admitted. "And now that you are, I still don't want you to discover it. You of all people know how far I am from perfect. I'm sorry I interfered."

"What is it, Luke?" Her eyebrows knotted together.

The Jedi Master sat back, his very sense pulling away from her as well. Something undefinable was suddenly not right. Leia reached out to him impulsively but he rose to his feet. “I want you to think of Han. I want you to feel the anger, for you have every right to it. Then I want you to move past it and discern what is truly at work. This may be one of your greatest tasks, and one you must perform alone.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll be back by dawn,” he assured her, gathering some food, a few belongings, but left his lightsaber. “In the meantime, I fully expect you to meditate.”

Leia stood, brushing dead leaves from her clothing. “Luke, there are all sorts of predators out there. If you think you can waltz around without getting another scratch, fine. But I don’t exactly feel safe.”

“Trust in the Force and don’t worry.” He gazed into her eyes. *It’s better for you to learn on your own now. I wish I could keep you safe but you need to find safety for yourself* She nodded her understanding and he kissed her cheek, then left her with her own thoughts.

Leia settled in close to the fire and stoked its embers with a long stick.

“Han,” she muttered. “Why would I want to torture myself thinking of you?” After a moment, she stopped fidgeting and whispered tightly, “Because I love you.” She bowed her forehead to her knees and wept. He was so far away, it seemed, and her children even farther. She extended her presence to them through the Force as Luke had taught her and touched upon each child in turn. They were on Kashyyyk, the homeworld of Chewbacca, safe and sound, happy even. They felt her presence enter their dreams and clung to it with all their tiny might. Their might was strong enough to hold the most powerful mystic. Leia smiled through her tears. “I love you.”

We know was the obvious reply. They let her go gently and returned to childish fantasy.

She sighed deeply and shifted her sense to a less tranquil scene. “You’re in debt again,” she whispered. “You’re...you’re smuggling....” Leia lifted her head and glared at the fire. “You’re smuggling spice?!” Her teeth clenched and she angrily threw a stick into the flames. “And with Mara. Mara....” Her jaw dropped open as she envisioned an affair. “How dare you? How *dare* you?! Stang!” She jumped to her feet and began to pace furiously, shouting at the trees, shaking her fists, pulling her hair. “How can you do this to me? Han! I should have known! I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN!”

The Jedi Master made his way through a tangle of fallen trees and paused to listen to his sister’s anger. He could not have kept it at bay any longer. The anger was hers and she would have to find a way to deal with it. He hoped she would succeed in that. He hoped she would do it quickly before Kayla Storm made an appearance. Maybe he had better return and offer some calm, he thought. Luke shook his head slowly. That destiny was not his own. He clutched a small leather pouch that hung around his neck and slowly, evenly, made his way to his destination. The Tree of Light.

The shaman Oomiak had entrusted him with that pouch as they embarked on their journey. He said that since Sky Walk and Ley'ah were both lost members of the tribe, they ought to be guarded by a Soul Tree just as every other Ewok was. In fact, it was imperative for their very salvation. Without a Soul Tree, the Tree of Light would be unable to protect one from the ravages of the Night Spirit, and the shaman presumed the two Jedi had been ravaged relentlessly from the start. If only Oomiak knew how right he had been. There was no use arguing over ideology. The shaman was insistent and extracted Luke's promise to plant the seeds as soon as he had a chance. In his travels across the galaxy, Luke had come across many strange, wonderful, even frightening creatures who all worshipped the Force in one way or another, both Light and Dark. Perhaps it didn't really matter in what form the worship took place, whether through sacrifice, or meditation, or simple acknowledgment, just so long as these people were aware. Neither did it matter what form the Force took, whether as god, or demon, or Tree of Light. It was everywhere, feeding life, and consuming all. Since Leia had her own puzzles to contemplate, the Jedi Master thought this might be an interesting, if not enlightening, pilgrimage.

The Tree towered above all the others and seemed infested with glowing bugs that swirled about its branches. The bugs hummed softly and as Luke craned his neck to catch a better glimpse, he found them to be not insects at all, but tiny humanoids with fluttering translucent wings. He remembered a few stories about these creatures when they came here for the first time, but hadn't cared since so much else had been in his thoughts. Now he was at peace, as were these Firefolk. They buzzed around him in their own native, gleeful chatter, perhaps sensing that the Force was with him, and that it was the part of the Force which was good.

"Hello," he greeted. Luke removed the pouch from his neck and poured two large seeds into his palm. "I was told to plant these for my sister and I."

The buzzing heightened in excitement and the Firefolk grew bolder in their flight, tugging at his sleeves and his tunic to show the way. Luke allowed the fairy creatures to take him along, hundreds of them now clinging to him and batting their wings for all they were worth. His feet left the ground, but only briefly. *What I wouldn't give for a flyswatter* he thought mundanely and smiled. But these creatures were highly sentient, and drawn to anything that was close to the Light. He noticed, as he was swept along, that rows of trees circled the Tree of Light. The oldest were close to that center while far back were the youngest saplings. The Firefolk took turns pushing him along as passed among the Soul Trees, sprinkling one after another with glittering pixie dust that seemed to nourish, even bolster the presence that was inexorably linked to that particular tree. They brought him to the tiniest sapling and gestured wildly at the rich soil beside it.

"I know, I know," Luke told them and scooped two small holes of equal distance apart. "There once was I time when I had a plant, you know."

They seemed to question this as he dropped the seeds into place and his smiled broadened. "No, I forgot to take in from the suns one day. That was the end of that."

The Firefolk twittered joyously and Luke was reminded of Artoo-Detoo. "Well, I trust you'll take good care of them for me, even when I'm long gone." He packed them in soil and rose to his feet and the Firefolk converged on his work. "Oh, come on. You stick a seed in dirt and it grows. Isn't that

how it works?”

But they weren't digging it up, they were coating the place with their nourishing, sparkling dust. Luke felt a tingle on his right forearm and felt through the tear in his tunic for the recent wound. The bandage had been torn away. There was no blood, not even a scab, and the skin was new. He look at his left palm which had been gashed wide open and scarred, healed by Kayla Storm just before her death. The scar had vanished. His hand touched his face where he carried scars from the Wampa ice creature's attack so many years ago on Hoth. Now it was unmarred. He felt stronger than he ever had been, not only in body but in spirit. Only his prosthetic hand remained as it was, as if a cool reminder of what he might have become. The Firefolk buzzed crazily around it, infuriated and perplexed. Luke turned his gaze to where he had placed the seeds. They had grown already by several inches, the one closer to him slightly taller than the other. He crouched before it and touched the leaves of his Soul Tree.

“Thank you,” he whispered, and looked about to see the Firefolk had fled back to the Tree of Light for protection. It had become quite dark, although morning had to be drawing near. Somber clouds rolled overhead.

“Father,” someone whispered audibly into his ear, “my mother comes.”

Luke glanced quickly over his shoulder and caught the ethereal afterimage of Chala as she disappeared. He felt a chill, but did not recoil from it.

“So she does,” he replied simply, and with deliberate quiet made his way back into the dense wood.

III.

A gentle rain had begun to fall and Leia grumbled expletives, rummaging through a storage compartment for parts of a makeshift shelter. This wasn't a very *royal* thing to be doing, finding cover while swearing at the rain. It splashed mud on her clothing and made her long hair flap wetly against her face every time she stooped. Two more of the long-clawed tree-creatures had flung themselves from the branches in attack. Leia evaded them swiftly and dispatched each with her hand blaster. Now they smoldered near the corpse of their counterpart felled earlier. As she left the speederbikes with her loot, Artoo twittered, mentioning that perhaps this was not the peaceful place they'd once thought.

“The Ewoks warned us, Artoo,” agreed Leia. “We should have stayed at the village, but Luke wouldn't hear of it. Where is he anyway? It's almost dawn.”

The astromech offered to begin a search.

“Not until first light,” she answered. “I sense he's fine. I just don't like being left here.”

Neither did Artoo.

The slow work of putting together the shelter was finally finished and Leia crawled inside,

drenched and cold, angry. Han. The very mention of his name made her clench her teeth every time. Smuggling. And with Mara Jade. Beyond that, Luke had kept it all from her, albeit with good intentions. She'd quit her ranting once she realized the noise only attracted predators, and now simply fumed, trying to cap the boiling of her blood. How? Why? It was useless. Leia curled on the floor of the shelter and felt the squishy mud beneath the plastic. They would have to move to higher ground if the storm didn't let up.

"Another test, brother?" She grumbled and rolled onto her back, uncomfortable and too cold to sleep. I want you to feel the anger, he had said. Then I want you to move past it and discern what is truly at work. This may be one of your greatest tasks, and one you must perform alone. "Yes," Leia whispered and closed her eyes, shutting out the cold, the rain, the disgruntled sighs of the R2 unit outside, shutting out all but the Force, and thoughts of her estranged husband.

All in all, Han Solo was not a complex man, even narrow-minded at times. A sharp jab of anger nearly shook her concentration as she probed his sense, even from many light years away. That damned Smuggler's Guild, she swore in silence. Peddling weaponry to underground forces with Imperial ties; peddling spice to wealthy addicts who might otherwise throw their gauntlet in the favor of the New Republic. Leia inhaled deeply and pressed further, stretching out through the Force with gentle tendrils of power. There was a deep concern for that woman Jade. It wasn't unlike Han to show compassion to beautiful women in distress, so long as they weren't of sovereign breeding. Aristocracy had always been a thorn in her husband's side and Jade was certainly no princess. Leia steeled her defense and locked her seething rage up tight, refusing to let it control her yet not sure how to be rid of it. Jade. She had told him so many...lies. Surely they were lies. Luke would never have done such a thing. Luke had no children, illegitimate or otherwise; he would have surely told her. And certainly they were not spawned from Mara Jade. Leia caught herself. Not Mara but...what exactly had occurred between him and Kayla Storm? Even after all of the questioning, the exact nature of their relationship was ambiguous. Her own nightmares had left with their flight from Coruscant. Had Mara Jade experienced a similar horror? Had Kayla Storm found some way to touch her as she had touched Leia? Leia bolted upright, eyes wide as saucers. Something was wrong. Something terrible.

She scrambled out of the tent and scanned the sky. The downpour nearly blinded her. It was impossible to see even the tops of the trees.

"Artoo, give me some radar."

The astromech warbled compliance and a revolving dish emerged from his blue dome, scanning. After half a moment, he blatted loudly.

"What is it?" Leia asked as she knelt beside him. The droid whistled a series of bleeps. "The Falcon?" The Jedi apprentice rose to her feet and scanned the heavens, unable to see any sign, but quite able to feel. "Han!"

The dappled expanse of hyperspace flooded past the converted cargo ship, but Han Solo no longer dwelled on such ethereal beauty. He barely noticed it in passing, then ducked down into the port payload compartment, declining to notice also the snag that had torn a small hole in his workgloves. Smuggling spice had always been a nasty business and he was glad to be done with it sooner than

later. Yet the business was sure to get nastier when Karrde caught wind of Eklon P'har's murder. Neither house, the delivering Rodians nor the consuming Cedes, were bound to be pleased when this very expensive commodity was scattered along the hyperspace lane. Han scowled. Great. Another death mark. If he had any sense he'd get rid of Mara Jade and go through with the delivery, take the credit and run. If only Chewbacca were around.

Grumbling a few choice words under his breath, he continued with the work of packing full canvas bags into an ejection capsule when the smell of potent spice stung at his nostrils.

“Oh no...” he muttered and peered through the dimness at the bag clutched in his hands. How he'd torn it, he didn't know, but nearly half the glitterstim had poured down onto his boots, coating them crimson. Then he finally took heed of the throbbing in the fleshy part of his palm beneath his right thumb. His hand was red, a mingling of blood and spice. How the hell...? Han suddenly felt faint. “Oh blast it.”

The smuggler wobbled over to a wall and slumped into a sitting position, watching the cargo hold spin to and fro. Nasty business, smuggling spice. You really gotta be careful. Wasn't he always careful? It's just a really nasty...

Han, you can't do this to me! Please stop!

Solo startled physically until he realized it was only memory. Leia chasing him to the Millennium Falcon in a nightdress; what a sight.

I need my family! I love you!

And that was the reason he didn't kill Mara Jade straight out, wasn't it? She was taking him to Leia, and Leia needed him...he hoped. And it wasn't exactly Mara's fault. She was sick. Something was wrong with the dame.

You are but my shadow, Mara Jade

The smuggler bolted upright. Why was it so dark? What were these voices?

“Damnit, Mara,” Solo growled. He groped along the walls for the hatch, and hopefully not the one that lead outside into a vacuum. The gentle pinging of a reentry alert shifted to a longer, higher frequency of alarm. Han scrambled into the cockpit to find Jade sleeping at the controls, the immense shadow of Endor's moon looming directly in their path. “Damnit, Mara!”, he shouted, and pushed her out of the pilot's chair. He felt her dagger-eyes stab into his back, but her sense twisted immediately to dumb fear when she realized their position. Sense? The hell does that mean? He grappled the controls.

Travelling through hyperspace ain't like dustin' crops, boy!

Amazing how good his memory was because of this stuff. But he had to think in the now, not in ancient history. Han blinked hard as the stars snapped into focus and the Falcon dove toward the emerald satellite.

“We’re coming in too fast!” Mara nearly screamed, but she was too tough a dame to scream. Damn it. Solo gritted his teeth against the intense g-force.

“Strap in!” he barked. “Helluva time to take a nap, Jade! All power to the shields! We’re goin’ down!”

The Falcon plummeted through the atmosphere like a flaming meteor.

“Damnit!” shouted Han. “We’ve got a fire! We’ve got...!”

Leia bent down over the steering rods of the speederbike, dodging trees as before, squinting against the wind and rain that hit her. It caused her slow down to nearly a kilometer a minute, but she would still reach her destination in time. The rain hurt, but she concentrated on that which she decided must have been her destiny. To save her husband, to confront Mara Jade.

She approached a burned out clearing and eased the throttle down to a snail’s pace. A giant crater had been made from the crash and perhaps 200 feet below, a metallic wreckage smoldered in the downpour. Speederbikes weren’t made for such a decline, but Leia adjusted the repulsors and dove into the steaming cavity. She dismounted the bike upon reaching its base, and felt the heat of the ground seep through the soles of her boots.

“Han?” Of course there was no answer. How could anyone have survived? She stepped closer the wreck and touched the landing ramp. Her fingers crisped and she pulled away with a sharp outcry. Nearly molten. She wouldn’t attempt going aboard with the metal nearly glowing hot. No, there couldn’t have possibly been any survivors. But she had seen it coming. Something caught in her throat and she fought back an urge to scream. Was any of this worth it, Luke? If she’d only been content with politicking, or simply joyriding with her husband the pirate, would any of this have happened?

The Millennium Falcon belched and groaned as if she experienced her own death pangs. Despite the intense heat, Leia shuddered and unsteadily backed away, clutching Luke’s deactivated lightsaber that was still hooked to her belt. He’d left it behind for her. Surely he’d known something Dark awaited her. Surely he could have better prepared her for this.

The landing ramp blew open wide and a lithe figure jumped to the ground.

“Mara Jade,” breathed Leia. “What happened here?”

The figure straightened. “I happened here. Jade no longer exists.”

Leia, with brows knitted together, stepped forward to take a closer look. It was Mara only in body. The same figure, the same fire red hair; but the mannerisms, the inflection of speech, were foreign. Then she recalled her recent past and the plaguing nightmares, and gasped. “You...you’re the one...”

Kayla Storm laughed softly and stepped with Jade’s body into clear sight. “You excellence, if it had not been for your intrusion, Luke Skywalker would be mine, as would be the Emperor’s throne. If I cannot have him, then I will have you, just as I have Mara Jade.”

“Not alive, you won’t.” Leia swallowed her fear and ignited her brother’s lightsaber.

“Of course not alive.” Again she laughed, tossing back Jade’s head in twisted glee. “It’s the soul that matters most. Kill her, Mara, then I will take what’s left.” The second lightsaber ignited even as she spoke.

Leia circled the other warily.

The astromech droid squawked, agitated, as Luke Skywalker finally returned to the little camp. The Jedi Master was drenched but not entirely aware of it.

“Where’s Leia?” he asked.

Somewhat exasperated, the droid whistled a brief explanation.

“Ah.”

Luke moved slowly through the camp, taking note of what was taken, what was left behind. His lightsaber was noticeably absent, just as he thought it would be. Artoo made a demand.

“Well what?”

Unable to contain his electronic fury, Artoo shrieked and wobbled side to side, nearly jumping off the soggy ground.

“Leia doesn’t need to be rescued. Leia’s nearly a Jedi Knight...”

The droid complained loudly.

“It’s not my place to interfere with her destiny, for better or worse.” Luke took cover within the shelter but left the flap open for his droid to peer inside. “No, Artoo. What?”

The astromech repeated himself, leaning into the tent.

“No. I’m tired. Give me an hour’s rest and then we’ll go looking for her. Would that make you happy?”

Artoo blatted negatively.

“It will have to do. Leia’s quite capable of taking care of herself now.”

The droid continued to argue, and as Luke reached out to shut the flap, Artoo extended an appendage and pinched his wrist.

Luke raised an eyebrow. “You are a droid, remember? If you’re losing some basic programming, maybe I’d better do a wipe.”

Artoo cooed apologetically and released his master.

“It’s all right. I’m sorry.” Luke sighed heavily, not exactly sure why he had to explain himself to a mechanical. But Artoo was a friend, perhaps more loyal than any organic could ever hope to be. “It’s just...If I’m to be a Jedi Master, I have to give my students room to learn on their own. Leia and I are too close at times. She could become very dependent on my knowledge, on my power. That’s not how it should work.”

The droid warbled a tentative question.

Luke’s expression clouded and he gazed down at his gloved hands. “If Leia dies, then it’s over. There will be no Jedi Master, there will be no more of this ‘passing on what I have learned’, and the Jedi will eventually be extinguished. If I cannot teach, I will cease before any more apprentices fall to the Dark Side.”

And finally his mechanical companion lapsed into silence, processing unit whirring softly in “thought”, leaving Skywalker with his own haunts.

“But maybe I was wrong,” he muttered after a moment, bringing a hand up to his chin. “Maybe I haven’t seen things as clearly as I should have.” He looked hard at Artoo. “When she left here, was she furious?”

The R2 unit bleeped a definite affirmative.

Luke chewed his lip. She had to face her demons but what if she could not conquer them? Was he willing to pay that price all for the sake of destiny? He shook his head slowly. His twin sister would need him at her side. It was premature for her to go alone, but perhaps Leia never would be ready. Rules of fate might dictate that only the most adaptable would survive, and Kayla Storm was adapting like mad. He had to help. To do otherwise would throw everything he’d ever believed to the wind.

“I can’t deliver her up like this. Let’s go, Artoo.”

It did not take Leia Organa Solo long to discover she would soon be overcome. She was a negotiator not a cutthroat, a talker rather than a fighter, and it seemed apparent that this swordplay could only end in disaster. Perhaps it was too late for talk, especially when fear or anger or both had moved her to attack. Now she regretted that action as she backedpedaled from Mara Jade’s onslaught, driven by the specter of Kayla Storm, and found herself pressed against the still hot hull of the Millennium Falcon. Jade’s movements became less fluid then, while the other waited for an inevitable death blow. Finally she hesitated long enough for Leia to escape, if only temporarily.

“You couldn’t do it, could you?” she accused. “Mara is trying to regain control.”

“If only you knew how wrong you...No!!!” Mara screamed and collapsed on the charred ground. She crumpled into a ball, covering her head with her arms like a beaten child.

Organa Solo stepped closer, unable to catch the tremor in her voice. “Jade...It’s over.”

Jade laughed far too softly as she sat upright, her face turned away. “Solo, it is nowhere close to over.”

Leia saw nothing but a blur, a sharp pain, and a quite sudden blackness. Her own body collapsed while she felt her spirit float freely in an impenetrable void. It was surprising. She had always thought death would bring some kind of unity with the Force, some warmth. Here was nothing. No order. No chaos. Just the dark. Faintly, she heard her brother weep but could not console him. She heard Kayla Storm laugh that deceptively gentle laugh and reached to reclaim her physical form. There was none, she discovered in horror. She was gone from it. She was hidden. Trapped in silence.

Skywalker rushed through the broken foliage atop the speederbike, Artoo-Detoo strapped feebly to its back. The pursuit did not take long at the break-neck speed he was racing. Over a rise in the landscape, under a fallen tree that bridged a narrow stream, straight through a cluster of bushes that ripped their branches across his face. Luke blinked away the sting of pain and bent closer to the steering rods, listening to the resentful whine of the bike. Why such haste? As he approached the crash site, he stretched out for a sense of what life remained there. There were four, all in agony, and one that overshadowed the other three like a malignancy. He angled the bike into the deep crater and came to a halt, accosted by the pains of his sister. She lay prone near the base of the Millennium Falcon, and above her stood Mara Jade.

What have you done? he thought and stared, dismounting the bike.

What I had promised to do

Luke shifted his gaze to Jade, and put his entire being into a calm. “Kayla, enough.”

She backstepped, terrified, and responded with Mara’s voice. “No. Never enough.”

He watched a struggle take place as Mara’s true self fought for control. Luke extended his right hand. “Mara, let me help you.”

“No!” She shouted, “Stay back, Skywalker!” But the Jedi Knight took in a deep breath and stepped forward. “Kayla Storm cannot remain detached from the Force forever. The Dark Side will eventually consume her. You can resist.”

“No!”

There was a blur of motion and she was gone, as was one of the speederbikes. Luke huffed a loud breath, and glanced back as Artoo thumped heavily to the ground, having disentangled himself from the restraints. The Jedi paused to calm his racing pulse, and to feel out what was left of this terrible confrontation. Han was hurt, but not too badly, and trapped within the Falcon. Leia was slipping away. Of course this had been premature. What a fool he’d been to give her free rein. Would he never get it right? If only he had arrived sooner...Egotistical thoughts, he realized, and pushed them aside to go to his sister.

Artoo bleeped his concern. Luke hushed him and knelt before the prone form, checking for vital

signs. It was worse than he's first thought. Her very presence felt faint, and that should not be, even in death. But the agony was gone. All he felt in his twinship was a chilling numb that dulled his mind and made his fingers fumble as he loosed her clothing.

"Leia," he whispered. "No."

It was so unnatural, this demise. Mara had done something. No, Kayla Storm had. He embraced her, finding they both shivered at death's closeness. How could she be so far from him?

"No," he breathed again. "Not my sister."

Father_

He trembled fiercely as Leia's presence dwindled incomprehensibly. Clutching her hair, he pressed her forehead against his own. "NOT my sister."

Father, fear kills the mind

Luke did not release his hold to face his ethereal offspring, but rasped, "This is Storm's doing."

It is not your fight

"Child, this is my sister!" He hesitated, suddenly struck, and hissed, "She dies."

You must give of yourself, Father. As my mother gave to you

Luke wanted to ignore the voice and simply clutch Leia's body to his chest, will everything away but their closeness that was so completely severed. But Chala's voice was compelling, echoing over again in his mind. What had Kayla Storm given him but death and grief, insanity? He recalled their final meeting, how she had removed a blood-stained rag from his left hand; how her deceptively gentle fingers had traced the deep gash, leaving but a thickened scar in its place. Now that scar was gone completely thanks to the Firefolk. But they had to be hundreds of miles away. Leia would never survive the journey. It was no help.

"How?" he demanded.

The little astromech unit twittered his confusion.

You must give of yourself

Leia skin was becoming cold, its color holding a sickly gray tinge. The Jedi Master fought back against his grief, his horror, and closed his eyes. He was calm almost at once, the tumult of his emotions washing back into an infinite sea. The world around him became more vivid with sound, smell, touch; had he opened his eyes, hue. The Force flowed with ease. With a sure and quiet method, the Jedi narrowed his perception until all he saw in his mind's eye was the fallen sister embraced so closely in his arms.

He whispered, "I give myself to you, sister. I give *of* my self."

It was as if essence flowed from his body in a river, a transfusion of life's energy. Perhaps Yoda would not have approved, an unnatural solution to an unnatural problem. Yet this was right. The Dark Side had taken her away. The Light Side would simply restore what had been interrupted, through him. The veil was torn away. Luke smiled softly as the presence returned. Then a heartbeat, then a breath. The breath gasped as it realized pain. Pain was good. Pain meant you were alive. The pain reached a peak and Leia uttered a stifled scream, but it ebbed as tissue regenerated in old wounds, restoring her strength, restoring who and what she was. Luke weakened and fought to stay conscious, smiling as his sister propped herself on one elbow over him, completely disoriented, completely stunned.

"Luke..."

"I feel weak," he whispered, and lay his head on the charred surface.

"Don't, Luke. You're killing yourself." She paused, struck by the memory of her nightmares. So this was how it came to pass. This was how she'd bring about her brother's death.

"You must be strong," he insisted. This would be her only second chance, and his third.

"I'm fine," Leia insisted in kind. "Let me see if Han's ok and we'll set up camp, start repairs on this hunk of junk."

"No." The life energy continued to ebb. He muttered softly, "You must face Mara Jade."

Leia's pallor whitened. "But I've already failed."

"Because anger was your guide." Luke paused, nearly slipping into a comfortable slumber, but forced himself to speak. "Remember it is the Dark Side, the Force-spirit, that drives her. That spirit must be put to rest."

"How? Luke, tell me how you did this. Let me return your strength and we can face her together. I need you with me."

"You were not prepared before, but now you must find the way. Leia, this destiny is yours alone. At times we are a help to one another, at times we must walk the path in solitude."

"Luke..."

His hands raised to touch her lips, then brought her close so that she might hear his barely audible words. "Go, Leia. If you fail, it's better that I die. If you succeed, you'll become a Jedi Knight, and return what I have given."

And he had given so freely. Leia kissed him gently. "I love you, brother."

He smiled wanly. "How could it be otherwise?" He breathed, "Let me sleep."

Leia watched him lapse into unconsciousness and kissed his forehead. Her gaze shifted as Artoo-Detoo sighed electronically.

“Artoo.”

She gained her feet and went to the droid. Her hands moved over his blue dome and a spring release opened a compartment. Leia removed a small blaster from her wrist and fastened it to an appendage inside.

“Will you be able to finger the trigger?”

Artoo bleeped affirmatively.

“Your master needs you, little one.” Leia gazed intently into his blinking red lense. “Guard him well.”

The droid whistled a good-bye and, suddenly lonesome as the Princess-Jedi sped away on the remaining speederbike, sidled closer to his sleeping master.

“Ahhhh-oooooow,” Han groaned loudly and rolled onto his side. As he approached consciousness, he began to notice several things. First off, it was blistering hot, and he had, in fact, suffered some severe burns that screamed at him when he moved. Secondly, his nose-hairs, or what he imagined were left of them, curled from a notably *spicy* reek. Finally, he discovered, blinking hard, wherever he was it was a dark place. He listened carefully to the moans of his ship. She wasn’t doing too well, he guessed and moaned himself. “Ah, hell. Good thing the shields held out.”

Yeah, that was a good thing

The smuggler writhed frantically until he scooped to an upright sitting position and stared wildly into the dark. “Who’s there!”

Me

Han recognized the voice immediately. But it wasn’t a voice, was it? It didn’t echo through the wrecked ship as his did. “Luke...where are you?”

Flat on my back about ten feet away from the hatch

“Flat on your...Wait.”

The glitterstim mimics sensitivity to the Force in some ways

“You mean...I’m going nuts?”

No, Han. It’s the spice

Solo shook his head, grinning crookedly. “Hearing voices, telepathizing...I am going nuts. Shoulda

known it'd happen one of these days. Just didn't think..."

Han, shut up and listen to me

"Nuts." He peered through the darkness and found a stream of faint light slipping under the cargo bay door. Everything seemed so unnaturally vivid. The feel of his burns, the poignant smell of spice, the touch of the hot metal, the choking thickness of the air. Han stared at his fingers, reddened by spice and blood, entranced by how unreal they suddenly felt. "This is completely nuts."

Han, you have got to listen to me. That stuff is toxic

Han blinked. His ears were buzzing. His entire mind was buzzing. His pulse raced and his stomach churned. He was no fool. Of course he knew this kind of exposure to glitterstim meant certain death. Solo had done his homework on the dangers of running spice years ago. If exposed long enough to large enough amounts, he'd either suffer a nervous breakdown or die of heart failure. In the dim, he saw canvas bags scattered through the hold, emptied completely.

"Luke." He swallowed hard. "I think I'm in trouble here."

You have to get out

"Tell me something I don't know, farmboy."

I just...can't....help The voice trailed away.

Leia peered through the drizzle at the possessed woman she'd been tracking for the past hours. The rain had lessened some, but never stopped. It was a damp cold that sunk through her skin to the center of her being, but there could be no trembling, from fear or otherwise. With her brother's strength, and the gradual return of her own, she moved with confidence and finally had some clarity to her thoughts. It was as if some of Luke's own memory merged with her own through that transfusion of energy, and she discovered some things that had been impenetrable before. For one, Luke indeed had a child, though unborn, by this Kayla Storm. The child was like Storm in one aspect, an individual spirit, not diffused into the Force as his mentors were, or even their father. Remembering her own pregnancy, it was altogether possible that the two were somehow linked. So, what good would that do her? It was something to think on. Before her was Mara Jade, back turned, standing before a gigantic tree swarming with tiny glowing creatures.

"This must be the Tree of Light," Leia whispered, remembering snippets of Chief Warrick's tales. The creatures seemed terrified, clinging to the higher branches to get as far away from Storm's spirit as they were able.

"No need to be afraid, simple Firefolk," she soothed, amused. "A spirit needs food to exist is all. You will suffice."

Mara shook violently at this, throwing herself to her knees. Rivulets of rain streaked her face, or perhaps tears. It was hard to discern.

“You know better than to fight me on this, Mar...” the spirit warned but was cut short as Jade bit down on her tongue until it bled.

“You need a body, don’t you?” Mara rasped, “You’re nothing otherwise.”

“When I am weak, yes. I do need you. But when I take this Tree, and the Firefolk, I will give you a respite.”

“A respite?” Mara’s eye glinted insanely. “Storm, I have a better idea.”

The lightsaber snapped to life and turned inward, singeing the wielder’s flesh.

“No!” Leia cried and lunged forward. Immediately, the lasersword of Anakin Skywalker lashed outward, Kayla fully regaining control.

“I was wondering when you’d come out of hiding.” Mara smiled grotesquely. “I see Luke has found his way clear to once again interfere with destiny.”

“Mara...”

“I told you, Mara doesn’t exist!” Kayla shouted, and her host lunged with the lightsaber. Leia backstepped out of its path, parrying with her brother’s. “You’re not very wise, being a politician. Not very wise at all.”

That struck a cord. Politician. Negotiator. That was where her talents lay, not in this senseless fight. Still she kept her defense and looked hard through the crossed beams at her adversary. “What is it you want, Kayla? What can you possibly stand to gain from this?”

“Existence!”

The lightsaber whirled close to Leia’s head, but she ducked quickly. It felt good, right, natural—as if Luke’s strength and agility flowed through her veins. “You will always exist in the Force. Why this struggle?”

“I will not be consumed,” she hissed, drawing closer.

“And so you consume others.” Leia shuddered. Horrible. Had she always been so twisted? “Luke was in love with you. Have you forgotten that? Have you forgotten gentleness? He would not have loved you otherwise.”

Mara seemed to collapse in on herself with strained laughter. “Gentleness! You wish to see Kayla Storm’s gentleness? Mara! Your respite!”

In the hours that followed Leia’s awakening, Luke Skywalker concentrated on himself, his breath, his heart rate, all those things that a human body took for granted, each one a chore. Does a martyr ever regret his martyrdom as it happens? He bleakly remembered the passing of his mentor Obi-wan aboard the first Death Star. Perhaps that was restitution for his failure with Anakin Skywalker, Darth

Vader. Perhaps this now was Luke's restitution, for his failure with Kayla Storm, for his own crimes, for the possible fall of his own sister. What kind of Jedi Master lets his twin sister run off to confront an evil alone? Ah. He smiled inwardly. That was the crux of it. Leia should have been thought of as his apprentice, not his sister. Just as Kayla Storm should not have been thought of as a lost love.

He lapsed into sleep again, for a time, then chastised himself. It was something Luke had decided to try and avoid since sleep could so easily bring death. How much time had passed? You are weak in more ways than one, Master, he thought. But then, humanity is weak. Maybe the best Jedi come from races that are not so human. Maybe it is as Han would have liked to believe, that Jedi are monsters in human form. He held the capacity for monstrous acts, when the Dark Side moved through him. Certainly Mara Jade had that capability as well, being so coddled by Palpatine. Had Leia? Had Yoda been a monster in his early years? Or have we all been mere fools. Luke breathed purposefully, told his heart to pump, and wondered what this power really meant, until a bone chill reached down and touched his soul. His eyes opened.

“Kayla.”

The spirit was more than apparition this time, almost tangible as it moved over his prone body and leaned close to breathe in his left ear. “I’ve come to gather you in my arms.”

The cold of her touch was almost unbearable. Luke shivered and closed his eyes. Lungs; breathe. Heart; beat. But he realized, in a split second, that if Kayla Storm was here, she could not be with Mara Jade. To coddle with Darkness...”How is it you’ve become...this.”

“Everything that I am, I am because of you,” she replied in a whisper, as if that was the extent of her—barely palpable, but there.

Close to the truth, Luke decided. He forced his eyes open and looked upon the gray, vampiric specter, no longer a beauty of any kind. “I loved you blindly. I just could not see.”

Storm lifted her gaze, a greenish-silver, to lock on his own. Another wracking shiver he couldn't control. “And now that blinded love will consume you, my lord Skywalker.”

Luke groaned softly as her lips brushed his neck, his whole dwindling essence drawn to her, to the strange immortality she'd found apart from the Force. No. That was a wrong assumption. A spirit needs energy. Therefore a spirit fed. In a sense, she was more chained to the Force than he ever would be.

“No,” he hissed sharply, but only managed enough strength to turn his head. “Love will bring a Light which drives away the shadows.”

The Light blinded him. Kayla screamed and whisped away. Luke cried out and shielded his eyes with a limp forearm.

He gritted his teeth and yelled, “Stop!”

Father

Son

The two voices echoed united in his tumultuous mind, one high-pitched as a child's, the other resonant.

“Stop,” he whispered, losing his final strength, slipping.

A small human figure stepped out of the vision as a tiny vessel fleeing a too-near star. The Light seemed to coalesce about her, dressing her slim body in shimmer. Luke half-opened his eyes and watched her kneel close to his side.

“Father.” She whispered just as Kayla did, seemed to have the same almost-tangible quality, but with benignity.

“Chala,” he murmured, touching the white porcelain of her face. “Rain goddess. The fire is almost out.”

His ethereal daughter smiled gently and lifted his head onto her lap, stroking drenched hair from his face. “You’ve done well, father. You have.”

Luke kissed her fingers and closed his eyes, relishing the closeness, fully accepting whatever the Force had intended for him.

Han was about to write himself off as Bantha fodder when, quite suddenly, and quite literally, the bottom fell out. In a flood of glitterstim, the smuggler crashed through the flooring of the cargo hold, through severed pipes and circuitry, through the breached outer hull of his ship, and finally onto the muddy ground below amid noisy electronic squeals. As the spice settled crimson over everything, Solo blinked hard and winced at his soreness. Artoo-Detoo whirred his roto-cutter a final time and retracted it into his now red dome.

“That must’ve taken you a good two weeks,” he grumbled. Artoo whistled what he thought might be a correction, to the second. “Well...thanks. But how am I ever gonna get her spaceworthy?”

The astromech twittered and started to roll away.

“What,” Han demanded and scrambled after, pain firing lightning bolts through his back. Hadn’t Luke experienced something like lightning? An image flashed through his mind. But the Emperor was dead, Vader was...Ah, this damned spice. “Luke!”

As he emerged from under the Falcon’s hull, rain pelted his face with a brisk wind. He felt cleaner then, more in control of himself, until he beheld the stunning girl that cradled the Jedi in her arms. She lifted her gaze placidly. Her hair stark white, her eyes fiery green.

Han groped for his blaster. “Who are you!” he shouted.

The girl raised a finger to her lips. “Shhh, Father sleeps.”

Solo huffed and leaned hard against a landing strut. “Father...”

“Shhh.” The spectral figure leaned close to kiss Luke’s forehead.

His eyes blinked open. “Chala?”

“Mother is calling; I have to go,” she whispered and stroked his brow. “Father, I will never see you again. At least, not as I am.”

“I understand.”

“But I, the Force, will always be with you.”

Luke touched her cheek and, at the moment he did so, his daughter vanished. He closed his eyes as Solo approached.

“The hell was that?”

Skywalker deigned not to answer, and instead concentrated again on the business of staying alive. Callused hands took hold of his tunic and shook hard.

“Luke, what happened here? Where’s Leia?”

The Jedi only moaned softly.

“Damnit, Luke, Mara Jade is a killer! Where’s my wife!”

Stone silence.

Disgusted, Solo dropped Skywalker back into the mud and stood up. “I’m gonna find her with or without you, Jedi.”

Something dropped out of the trees at the nearest edge of the crater and tumbled downward, snarling. The pirate was barely able to squeeze off a shot before the snapping jaws reached him. He fired again, stumbling under the creature’s mass, and collapsed under its deadweight. Artoo screamed and dragged the hairy thing away. Han sat up and blinked at it. The only other creature he’d seen move so fast was a Wookiee with worms. All teeth and claws and hair, the thing stunk. Another, possibly its mate, howled at the top of the crater.

“I cant leave you here,” Han muttered. Artoo twittered a suggestion he didn’t understand. “What?”

“He said get me in the ship,” Luke whispered. “Those things...they’ll tear us and the Falcon apart if you don’t stand guard.”

“Oh, so now you’re awake,” Han grumbled and hefted Skywalker over his shoulder. “What about Leia?”

“Leia will be fine.” Luke grunted as Solo flopped him through what had once been the hatchway of his cargo ship.

“Fine.” The smuggler climbed up beside him, disgruntled. “I’m glad you’re so confident.”

“You’re angry,” the Jedi breathed.

Han chuckled softly and shook his head. “You don’t have a clue. Listen, Skywalker, should anything happen to her, I’m holding you responsible.”

Perhaps his estranged friend was saying more, but Luke could no longer listen. He collapsed in on himself once again. Heart; beat. Lungs; breathe.

Mara Jade stooped close to the ground and trembled from an intense inner cold. Leia crouched next to her and touched her shoulder. The Firefolk ventured out and fluttered around them, whistling their concern and confusion.

“Are you all right?” asked Leia and winced at the poor choice of words.

“No,” retorted Mara, voice trembling. “I’m not all right. She’s coming back. She’s...”

“Resist it, Mara. I have an idea.”

“I can’t. Maybe before I could, but not anymore. Leia...” Jade shuddered violently but managed to cast Organa Solo a glare. “Palpatine raised me to have a certain sense of pride. This isn’t it. I’d rather die than have that demon in my head again. Leia....kill me.”

“I’d rather help you.”

“I took your husband. I hunted your brother. Kill me.”

Leia shook her head.

Mara collapsed to sit down and muttered, “Then you really must hate me, to condemn your enemy.”

“I don’t hate you, Mara. And you are no enemy of mine. What’s done is done.”

Mara froze suddenly. “She’s coming...”

“Resist,” Leia warned her and straightened. “I have an idea.”

As she spoke, the Tree of Light rustled from what one might attribute a strong gust, save the fact there was no wind; the rain fell straight from the sky with unending drear. Some of the Firefolk winked out and dropped to the ground like hail pellets. Mara scrambled and clung to one of the surrounding trees, bracing herself for some kind of collision.

“Storm!” Leia called out, listening to the name’s irony. “Mara Jade is nearly spent! I would that you come to me instead. Feed on fresh life!” Mara’s terror and now incredulity were almost tangible. She tried to ignore it, and Leia’s surroundings dimmed. Had she fainted? That would be the end of it then.

“Why, thank you.”

She blinked hard. Everything around her was fog, chokingly thick. A figure walked towards her, following the disembodied voice. As the specter of Kayla Storm drew palpably near, Leia made out the features of an emaciated creature, a mere skeleton covered in flesh. The emerald eyes were deeply sunken into pale gray skin. The Jedi apprentice swallowed her revulsion.

“In my dreams, you were powerful. Now you only feed on that which brought your own existence. To feed on the Force, doesn’t that also make you one with it?”

“It makes me the Master of it.” Kayla smiled sickly. “Just as I am the Master of you, the woman, and your brother.”

“You are a slave. Look what it’s done to you. This is not mastery.”

“You taunt me, Solo.” Storm hissed and turned her back. “I leave you to return to that one who doesn’t argue.”

“No!” Leia grabbed for her shoulders, then immediately recoiled as the skin very nearly flaked from its bone. She stiffened and took in a deep breath. “What of your daughter? I know she exists. I know she has guided Luke. Is she as you are?”

“She is resplendent,” Kayla whispered. “I have this hunger that drives me to feed, and that starvation never seems to cease. Yet the more I feed, the more powerful she becomes. It’s a bond I cannot sever. This pregnancy...”

“Of course,” Leia murmured. That was it. Chala had never been born. Kayla was feeding not only for her own existence, or through her own atrociousness, but for the nourishment for her only child. Still... “You know I have had children. It’s joyful for me, but it can be exhausting.”

“Chala drains me of everything.”

“Then why not let it go?”

“I will not be consumed. I will not let her...”

Leia felt her pulse race. “You will not let Chala...?”

“She would have me destroyed. She would push me back into the chaos.”

“But there is more to the Force than chaos,” the Jedi began.

“That is a side I will never see. I died with anger and fear, and am destined to pay a price for it.”

There was a sadness about this spirit Leia had spent so many nights fearing. But Storm was no longer terrifying, just pitiful as a hunted beast. “You’re weary, you’re starving. Just let it go.”

“My daughter...”

“You are afraid.”

The sunken eyes widened and Storm stumbled raggedly, screaming, “My daughter! Rain goddess!”

Leia also stumbled, for a moment taken to fear as she shielded her eyes from a radiance. Another figure stepped through the fog, this one a beautiful, perfect, young child. What was there to fear in this?

Chala stepped forward and thrust an accusing finger at her mother. “You have not done well by me, mother! Leave her!”

“No!” Leia insisted and stepped between them. “I won’t let her leave. Your mother is frightened. She is afraid of you, and what the Force might do to her if she desists.”

“And well she should be,” Chala retorted sharply. “It is not wise to toy with destiny, mother.”

Storm dropped to her knees, covering her head. “Chala, enough! The price of this is too high. Don’t make me do anymore!”

Leia stared from one phantom to the other. So much was happening that she didn’t understand. But one thing was painfully clear. “You are not a kind spirit,” she whispered to the girl. Could she tell him? Would she be able to tell Luke this spectral child was not all the goodness he’d believed? Suddenly she recalled a story she used to tell the children, the moral being that there are many people from many many places, but we must always remember that “nice” is different from “good”. It turned a blade in her heart.

Chala grinned impishly, seeing her thoughts. “I am my father’s daughter. No more and no less. I wish only to have my father’s justice served. My mother speaks of a price. Yes. To rebel against the natural order, the price is indeed a great one.”

“This isn’t just. Look at her!” She gestured to the gaunt spirit. “Luke has given up his anger long ago. He seeks no revenge. She is your mother.”

“She is my monster,” Chala corrected. “I am her goddess. Alter egos, we will never be apart and we will never be one.” Kayla Storm curled into a fetal position, wisps of moisture curling about her. “Good, for you to die as I died.”

“I am hungry,” Kayla sobbed quietly as her daughter approached, stepping through Leia’s body. Leia whirled to follow her movements.

“If you let go, now, there will be no more hunger,” urged Leia. She glanced at Chala, feeling the spirit’s vengeance. “If you let go, you can escape your daughter’s wrath, and she will be diffused as well. She will have lost to her own revenge.”

“Justice,” Chala corrected and knelt before her mother. She softly touched her torn cheek. “It will be dealt with, either way.”

The deadened eyes found tears. Her hand lifted to touch the hand of her daughter. In a quiet whisper, Storm replied, “It is dealt with now.”

They vanished. The forest returned. The rain ceased.

Leia staggered into the Tree of Light and gripped it for support, breath ripped from her lungs. Around her, the Firefolk fluttered and hummed happily while above, sunbeams filtered through the branches of their Tree.

“It’s all right,” she gasped, listening to the soft buzz. She looked around. Mara sat at the base of the nearest Soul Tree, her knees clutched tightly to her chest, still trembling. “It’s all right,” Leia repeated, louder, and approached.

Jade didn’t respond.

“The spirits are gone, Mara. It’s all right.” She just couldn’t help saying it again. It *was* all right. There was a warmth from Endor’s sun, and through the Force. There was certainty.

“Leave me alone.”

Leia offered her hand. “Come with me.”

“I said, leave me alone.” Jade scowled.

The Jedi hesitated before withdrawing her hand. Kayla, Chala, or both, had done wrong to Mara Jade. There were scars, inward scars, that would need time for healing. Perhaps those scars would be best healed in silence, alone, and she carefully nodded.

“Someone will come get you when we’re ready to move on. I trust you’ll still be here.”

“Go!” Jade shouted.

Organa Solo lifted her chin and quietly retorted, “You’re welcome.” She made her way to the camouflaged speederbike.

Mara looked after her and, after Leia was well beyond earshot, whispered, “Thank you.”

As the speederbike dove into the still-smoldering crater, Leia slowed her approach. Beside the dilapidated Millennium Falcon rested a sleek civilian ship (though undoubtedly with some illegal upgrades) that she recognized immediately as the Wild Karrde. As she rounded its hulk, the

smugglers, who held her husband at blaster-point, whirled in surprise.

“Leia!”

The Jedi ignored him and eased the speederbike around to point it at Karrde’s ship. “I really don’t mind this Endor moon so much. Blast my husband and I’ll blast your ship.”

“Point well taken,” replied Talon Karrde and motioned for his thugs to step away from Solo. “Your Highness, I’m sure a woman of your stature can appreciate my predicament.”

“And what predicament is that?”

“Your husband is a thief.”

Leia cast Han a cool look. “Is that something we didn’t know before?”

“He has stolen my property and murdered one of my employees.”

“Then it sounds like you have a valid case, but I beg you a few moments to tend to my brother. He’s badly hurt.”

Talon nodded politely, “A few moments then.”

“Han?”

Solo went to her and took her hand as she gracefully dismounted. He muttered lowly, “I love you. Leia, I’m sorry.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You’re sorry because you got caught. That’s all.”

“No, I...”

“My brother needs me,” she interjected.

“I need you.”

Impulsively, she kissed him and patted the seat of the bike. “Keep ‘em in your sights, pirate.”

“Aye, princess.” He smirked and jumped onto the speederbike as she climbed into the wreck. He aimed carefully at Talon’s chest, dead center. “Ok, boys. Let’s make a deal.”

Surely and slowly, Luke regained those senses he was so used to, and felt strength course through his veins while petal lips touched his cheek.

“Leia!” He flung his arms around her, perhaps a bit impulsively, and she straightened to help him sit. Luke wouldn’t release her. “Tell me what happened.”

The great negotiator stammered, remembering the second face of his daughter Chala. “I-I’m not

exactly sure. Mara resisted Kayla Storm's possession while I invited her in. I convinced Kayla to find her rest in the Force and when she let go, both she and Chala vanished together."

"Chala," Luke murmured. "What part did she play in this?"

Leia averted her gaze. "I think there's a lot we don't know about them, about the Force in general. But I am a Jedi now. I can feel it."

The Jedi Master smiled softly. "So you are." Something struck him as vitally important and he pulled back only inches. "When Kayla took you, when you were gone from me...it felt as if a part of me had died."

"It hurt, Luke," she replied and combed his hair with ringed fingers. "And it hurt to accept your energies. But I couldn't have done it without your strength, and the knowledge you gave me."

"I love you," he whispered in her hair. Was that an explanation? He studied the deck plates. "Sometimes that feeling's so strong, I wonder if it's right."

Leia quickly masked her reaction with smugness, but not before Luke sensed a flinch. She shrugged and stepped back to clasp his hands. "I guess we've never had a twin before."

"But you're alive," they spoke in unison and snickered at it.

"Getting as bad as Jaina and Jacen, I think," Leia pronounced and paused, feeling a pang she hadn't felt in awhile.

"You'll be with them soon," Luke assured her. He looked through a viewport. "Very soon."

She gave him a confused look, then moved through the room to gather some clothing. "You'd better get dressed."

Her brother grinned mildly and accepted the robes, brown and tan, like those of Obi-wan. He was reminded. "Leia, I had the most incredible dream..."

"Tell me some other time. We, or should I say Han, has a little problem with Talon Karrde."

Luke raised both eyebrows. "Here?" His sister nodded. "Where's Mara Jade?"

"Sulking in the woods," Leia responded.

Luke pulled on a shirt. "I'll go find her. Use some diplomacy, Leia."

"I know."

Mara Jade listened to the drone of an approaching engine and lifted her throbbing head from trembling hands. Skywalker. Of course. How could this life get any worse? She stared hard at the Tree of Light as his footsteps slopped through the mud and stopped a few yards away. Blessed space.

He stared at the Tree as well, thoughts implacable, as usual. A number of seconds ticked away and she could no longer stand it.

“What did you come here for, Skywalker,” she demanded, “to gloat?”

“Actually, I thought I’d ask you a favor.”

Mara scoffed. “A favor!”

“I think you owe us a little help...” Luke avoided her stinging glare.

“I don’t owe you anything,” she retorted and rose to her feet. “Do you really expect me to apologize?”

Luke resisted the urge to roll his eyes and faced her squarely, voice even, “I don’t *expect* anything.”

“It wasn’t my fault!” she cried and turned her back to hide her emotion.

Luke kept his distance. “I know.”

Mara shook fiercely. “I-I can’t stand it anymore. These headaches, these dreams, the possession... I can’t control anything.”

“Yes, you can,” replied Skywalker. “If you learn the ways of the Force, then you can control it as well as be guided.”

Jade gritted her teeth. “I don’t have a choice, do I?”

Luke shoved his hands into the deep pockets of his robe and wandered a bit closer. “Well, the alternatives may not be as pleasant. You’re leaving yourself open to all kinds of dangers.”

It made sense. And Palpatine would roll in his grave, if he had one. Look, “Father”... “All I know is I can’t go on like this,” she muttered and turned to face him. “What do you want me to do?”

“For starters, it seems Talon Karrde has tracked down your smuggling partner. Leia’s trying to coax him out of doing anything foolish, but maybe you could lend us a hand?”

At this, Mara seemed to regain her composure, since the ball was now in her court. She took his prosthetic hand and examined it. “Don’t you have a spare?”

Luke winced at the remark, but laughed, having walked right into it. “Mara Jade has a sense of humor. That’s a start.” He led her toward the speederbike. “You know, I had a dream about you as this was going on.”

With this she felt a sense of control. Mara smirked. “That’s not uncommon in the men I meet.”

“I dreamt you became my greatest student and...” He watched her climb up into the driver’s position and hesitated. Would he be able to say it?

“And what? Spit it out, farmboy.”

And my wife But instead he shrugged. “...and...you had a great deal of talent, that’s all.”

“Don’t have much of an imagination, huh, Skywalker?” She gripped the controls as he jumped into the rear passenger’s seat.

Skywalker shrugged again, mildly, and they sped into the wood.

There was an uneasy truce between the two as they stood on the crater floor to negotiate. Talon Karrde had called off his goons, and now only one stood in the hatchway of the Wild Karrde with rifle in arms. Han imagined her cannons were fired up and ready to go. He leaned against the remaining speederbike, toying with the intensity controls for its forward guns. It was a ludicrous story he’d just told; all about demon possession and Force-sensitivity via glitterstim, but he’d told it with a certain flair that only Han Solo could. Given enough time, he figured he could talk just about anyone into just about anything. After all, Leia had married him, hadn’t she? He passed a glance to her and wondered how much she regretted that day.

Karrde stroked his goatee, grinning softly. “Quite a thread, Captain. Now how much of that is truth?”

“I can vouch for the condition of Mara Jade,” said Leia. “As for the rest...”

“But the...cargo...is lost.” Talon glared at Solo. “You owe me double what you owed Eklon P’har, Solo. And as for his murder, I refuse to believe Mara Jade would take the life of an ally. I would wager you were responsible, just as you are responsible for this lost commodity.”

“For cryin’ out loud, Karrde, just call it spice.” Han muttered to Leia, “I was running glitterstim to pay off a Sabacc debt.”

“I know,” she replied. “Keep your mouth shut, all right?” With mock surprise, she stepped toward Han’s adversary. “Talon, I wasn’t aware the Smuggler’s Guild was involved in illegal activities. I’m sure Admiral Ackbar will find that enlightening.”

“Not if you don’t make it back.”

“You can’t afford to kill us,” said Leia. “People know where we are. When word gets back that we’ve been murdered, Ackbar will personally hunt down your organization and have it wiped from the face of the universe.”

Karrde’s eyes narrowed to pinpricks. “I only wish to be compensated for my loss.”

“Which is no doubt understandable.” Leia folded her arms, allowing a moment’s pause until he shifted uncomfortably. “I have certain influence with the New Republic. If you agree to forgive

Solo's debt, I will do everything I can to loosen restriction on the spice trade."

Talon laughed out loud. "You want me to accept a political promise? Your highness, please spare yourself the humiliation."

The whine of an engine overtook the dialogue and Luke Skywalker joined the group with Mara Jade on his arm.

"Mara, please explain this to me..."

"It's as the pirate told you, Karrde." She flipped her long crimson hair out of her face. "I killed Eklon P'har. I coerced Solo into dumping the spice. But we didn't have a chance before crashing on this forsaken rock heap. I would imagine the entire load's been tainted."

"You...?" Karrde shook his head. "I can't believe you'd betray me. We've been partners for so many years, Mara. How could you...?"

Han swore under his breath. "Look, Karrde, we have Mara Jade. Not only can she back up my story, but if you don't get off my case..."

"You'll what, Captain?" the other man questioned. "You'll kill her?"

Solo's tone lowered dangerously. "Anything's possible. I know she means more to you than credit."

Mara's hand drifted towards her lightsaber but Skywalker clamped her wrist. Was this what it was all about? She was nothing but a dispensable pawn? She shot the Jedi Master a furious and frightened look. Luke shook his head imperceptibly, but didn't release his grip.

The leader of the Smuggler's Guild extended his palm to her. "Mara? I believe we have a few things to discuss privately."

"She's not going anywhere," Luke snapped. His companions looked at him, surprised. He stepped front and center, half-dragging Jade along. "Not until you forgive Solo's debt."

Karrde scowled. "You pay what you owe me, pirate. We are far more organized than Jabba the Hutt. I have bounty hunters that move like shadows. I can reach you anywhere. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you," Han rumbled. "Now let us alone."

Something struck Talon as hilarious and he nearly doubled over laughing. "What am I thinking? I must be out of my mind! You have no comlink. You have no ship." He gestured roughly at the ruined Falcon. "You won't be leaving Endor anytime soon! I have all the time in the universe to toy with a few ideas. Maybe I'll pass on your whereabouts to Houses Rodian and Cedes, I'm sure they'd be intrigued enough to pay a visit. You're as good as dead here anyway! So long, my friends, Mara."

"Karrde!" she shouted after him. "Karrde, don't leave me, you bastard! You'll pay for this!"

Karrde!”

Talon waved without so much as a backward glance, and soon the Wild Karrde was gone from sight. Luke released her and she shook a fist towards the sky, then the thought occurred to her and she whirled to pummel Skywalker across the jaw. He staggered back into Solo and his wife.

“Don’t you touch me, kidnapper! ‘Learn the ways of the Force’, you say. When are you going to quit lying to me?”

“Talon Karrde was going to kill you once you got onboard his ship,” Luke murmured, voice barely above a whisper, and rubbed his aching cheek. It was getting to be a nasty habit. “I wasn’t about to let you walk into that.”

Mara raised an eyebrow at Leia.

“It’s true,” she agreed. “I felt it.”

Solo touched his wife’s shoulder. “Sweetheart, look.”

“There’s our ticket out of here,” said Luke. “Right on time.”

Mara turned to see what Skywalker was pointing at. The Ewoks, the Wookiee, the children, and one glistening protocol droid whooped and hollered and screamed as they slid down the sloping wall of the crater. Artoo shrieked hysterically and trundled as fast as his wheels would allow. Han and Leia overtook him and greeted their children with desperate embraces. The Ewoks chattered happily around them. Chewbacca waved frantically at the Millennium Falcon and howled his lamentations.

Han straightened. “Ah, come on, Chewie. We can fix it. Can’t we?”

Chewie whined petulantly and shrugged.

“How did you ever find us?” asked Leia.

See-Threepio straightened, brimming with electronic relief. “Oh, thank goodness we have, Mistress Leia! Chewbacca was growing unbearably restless keeping us all on Kashyyyk with his relatives, so it was decided we would follow Captain Solo on his journeys.”

“You what?” Han exclaimed.

“We witnessed the crash, but landed some 300 kilometers away near the Ewok village where we came across your and Master Luke’s shuttlecraft unfortunately picked apart by scavengers. I thought it imperative that we start a search but this carpetbag *insisted* on gorging himself on blope and blumfruit for nearly three days straight!” He shook his golden head disdainfully. “Typical Wookiee behavior.”

Jaina pulled back a little from her mother’s embrace and demanded, “Are you still mad at daddy?”

Leia sighed heavily and glanced up at the pirate. Of all the messes he’d dragged her through, this

had to be ranked near the top. “Yeah. But we can fix it. Can’t we?”

Han grinned sheepishly and crouched to gather the boys in his arms.

Luke and Mara watched the reunion seated just outside the Falcon.

“How did you know?” she asked. Before he could respond, she shook her head. “Never mind. Dumb question. I’m sorry I misunderstood you with Karrde.”

“S’okay,” Luke grumbled, studying his folded hands.

She smirked, but the cracked mask leaked with real images of pain. “Palpatine raised me to be ruthless, even from my earliest memories. It’s hard to shake it.”

“I meant what I said...”

Mara interrupted. “I don’t understand you, Skywalker. You’re the only person in this galaxy who refused to back down from ‘The Emperor’s Hand’. You’ve always had faith in the enemy; as if there was something redeemable, as if...maybe I’m not some mindless assassin droid. You had hope where there shouldn’t be any. Why?”

“Part of it’s the lesson I learned with Vader, and Storm,” Luke replied, then faced her directly. “Maybe some of it’s because of my dream. I’m willing to teach you, if you’ll let me.”

There was more to it than that, Jade thought as a fortified barrier within her eased. Instinct shifted her gaze away from his cool azure eyes, and in a second she rebolstered. Someday I’ll be rid of these masks, but not yet. “You mean you’ll lend me a hand?” Mara jibed and took his right.

Luke withheld the laugh. “Let that one die, ok?”

She shook her head. Mara paused, sensing a tremor she couldn’t quite place. “What’s the matter?”

“I’m not sure,” he muttered. Here she was, a new apprentice, much as Kayla Storm had been in life. Could he trust himself now? Could he guide her without being led astray himself? There was success with Leia. It was possible Mara’s training would work out fine, but how would his vision weave into their destiny? He grinned softly and shook his head. Fanciful dreams.

“Luke.”

His gaze lifted, somewhat taken back by her use of his first name, for the first time.

“I’m not Kayla Storm,” she told him in earnest.

Skywalker lightly kissed the back of her hand. She yanked it away.

“You are a lady,” he told her, “and soon a Jedi. I think that will make you stronger than you were before.”

He rose to his feet and wandered into the reunion, hefting Anakin Solo onto his shoulders. Mara Jade stared after him from a distance, wondering what to make of it.